

AMERICAN AMNESIA

AMERICAN AMNESIA

a novel

by

michael a kominsky

AMERICAN AMNESIA

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Dedication

*“History is not the past. It is the present. We are our history.
The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, and
history is literally present in all that we do.*

- James Baldwin

AMERICAN AMNESIA is the first in a series of three novels contained in the AMERICAN ENTROPY TRILOGY. It is a cautionary parable: A long day's journey in to light from FANLANDIA.

It is humbly dedicated to the great apologists and fearless advocates past, present and future, for social justice, the rule of law as embodied in the U.S. Constitution, and protecting the endangered, and ever more fragile American democracy from enemies, foreign, and increasingly domestic.

The AMERICAN ENTROPY TRILOGY, through fictional depiction, attempts to remind and reinforce the lessons of history, replete with inspirational, courageous acts of heroism, oftentimes against great adversity including extraordinary personal sacrifice and physical harm, to advance the cause of freedom, justice and equality.

To name just a few cited herein, Harriet Tubman, Rosa Luxemburg, Emma Goldman, Rosa Parks, and Mario Savio.

A Special Homage to those who have made the supreme sacrifice, including Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Robert F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, and Medgar Evers. And, countless others of common, but far from ordinary folks, for untold acts of courage and personal grace, in the cause of justice and equality through peaceful non-violent civil disobedience.

Lest we forget, to flourish, indeed survive the vagaries of the future, history is a living, breathing entity—one that requires constant scrutiny.

Special thanks to Dr. Shoshonna Zuboff “The Age of Surveillance Capitalism”(2019), Andrew Marantz, “Antisocial”(2019), Kurt Andersen “Fantasyland”(2017) and “Evil Geniuses”(2020), Edward Snowden “Permanent Record”(2019), and Jon Meacham “The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels” (2018).

Because I have significantly relied on the above non-fiction texts as source material, while not customary in works of fiction, out of deference and my profound gratitude to the authors I have footnoted credit as the source, where and when applicable.

For a more comprehensive understanding of the topics/issues and thesis explored in AMERICAN ENTROPY, I heartily recommend those books along with others contained in the Bibliography.

Many are also available as audiobooks as well as print, and eBook.

Preamble

The AMERICAN ENTROPY TRILOGY, is a series of three sequential novels:

| | |
|--------------------|---------------------|
| AMERICAN AMNESIA | Book 1: 1900 - 2000 |
| AMERICAN ALGORITHM | Book 2: 2000 - 2004 |
| AMERICAN ANARCHY | Book 3: 2008 - 2024 |

In AMERICAN ENTROPY, the term Entropy is used in the context of a measure of the disorder or randomness in a closed system, in particular, the gradual, not necessarily inevitable, steady deterioration of a system or society to collapse.

Admittedly, a literary primal scream, it is my hope that in some small way I may have contributed to an awareness and better understanding of the tremendous positive potential of the internet for promoting socially beneficent innovation, and empowering and promulgating democratic ideals.

But, that it must not go unsaid, it's well past time to break the glass, sounding a shrill siren, warning of the long-term pathological consequences of:

- Existential global threat to humanity of widespread deliberate distortion of facts and disinformation promulgated on the essentially unregulated, uncurated internet¹ through opaque social media algorithms and artificial intelligence;
- Unregulated/unfettered corporate surveillance capitalism², aided, enabled and abetted by the U.S. Government³;
- Existential global threat of neo-liberalism/fascism to democratic forms of government;
- Radical right nativistic nationalism and alarming rise of populism and domestic violent extremism in America; and
- Anthropogenic Climate Change causing catastrophic Global Warming.

The origin of the title AMERICAN AMNESIA, in this context as a metaphor for the failure of contemporary American society to be cognizant and indeed, heed the lessons of history. History is unkind to those those who abandon it, and can be especially unkind to those who make it ignominiously.

While as a novel it strives to entertain, it's primary *raison d'etre*,

1 Kurt Andersen "Fantasyland"(2017) ; Andrew Marantz, "Antisocial"(2019)

2 Shoshonna Zuboff "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism"(2019)

3 Edward Snowden "Permanent Record"(2019)

: : AMERICAN AMNESIA — m.a.kominsky : :

frankly is to inform. It is inspired by the eternal literary verity:

Fiction is the lie through which we tell the truth.

- Albert Camus

So in someways, this is my Russian Novel—a dark, Slavic melancholy morality play, panoramic in scope with lots of characters over an ambitious time line. My contemporary take on Leo Tolstoy's epic novel “War and Peace”...as may have been told by Mel (nee Kaminsky) Brooks.

Grandiose? Perhaps. Middlebrow? Probably. Pedantic? Sure. It's a gift.

This is not a drill...

Etymology

Entropy [en'tro-pe]

noun: pl. en-tro-pies

- A measure of the disorder or randomness in a closed system.
- A measure of the loss of information/facts in a transmitted message.
- Inevitable and steady deterioration of a system or society.
- e.g., Global warming and irreversible pathological consequence of the destabilization and destruction of ecosystems and its inhabitants.

Amnesia [am-kneez-eya]

noun

- A defect in memory, esp one resulting from pathological cause, such as brain damage or (internet induced) hysteria. In this context as a metaphor for the failure of contemporary American society to be cognizant and indeed, heed the lessons of history.

Algorithm [al-guh-rith-uhm]

noun:

- Any method, procedure, or set of instructions for carrying out a task by means of a precisely specified series of steps or sequence of actions;
- The hierarchical sequence of steps; in a typical computer program; in automating a manufacturing process to replace human labor; and/or to execute a detailed comprehensive political/social re-engineering long-term strategy.
e.g. As in the gradual, long term relentless and comprehensive cabal by radical right Libertarians/neo-liberals to gradually erode government regulation and taxation favoring political and economic policies that promote free-market unfettered capitalism and further concentration of wealth of the Dynastic wealthy.

Anarchy [an-er-kee]

noun

- A state of society without government or law.
- Political and social disorder due to the absence of governmental control:
- Lack of obedience to an authority; insubordination: confusion and disorder:

Fantasia/fantasy [fan-tuh-see, -zee]

noun, adjective: plural fan-ta-sies.

imagination, especially when extravagant and unrestrained.

- *A capricious or fantastic idea; a conceit.*
- *An imagined event or sequence of mental images, usually fulfilling a wish or psychological need.*
- *An unrealistic or improbable supposition.*
- *e.g., A fantasy conspiracy theory that Donald Trump actually won the 2030 presidential election.*

Fan [fæn]

noun:

- *An ardent, sometimes bordering on fixation, admirer of a pop star, film actor, celebrity worship.*
- *A devotee of a sport, hobby, political doctrine, etc.*
- *e.g. A fervent supporter of ex-presidential candidate Donald Trump and the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement.*

Landia [lan-de-uh]

noun, adjective:

- *A fictional or metaphorical place relating to the person or thing being suffixed*
- *e.g., FANLANDIA*

Artificial intelligence (AI) [ahr-tuh-fish-uhl in-tel-i-juhns]

noun:

- *Intelligence demonstrated by machines, unlike the natural intelligence displayed by humans and animals, which involves consciousness and emotionality. The term "artificial intelligence" or AI is often used to describe machines that mimic cognitive functions that humans associate with the human mind, such as learning and problem solving.*
- *Using complex sometimes self-generating sophisticated computer program code, or algorithms, to facilitate machine learning to perform mental to highly complex mental and physical tasks like manufacturing, formerly performed by humans.*

Cabal [kuh-bal]

noun:

- *A small group of secret plotters, as against a government or person in authority.*
- *The plots and schemes of such a group; intrigue.*
- *e.g., Since the 1970s, the efforts of American Political Action Committees (PACs) of the far right neo-liberal political faction executing a cabal using precise comprehensive long-term algorithms and massive infusions of "dark" money to lobby/influence congress to promote unfettered free-market capitalism.*

Neo-liberal [neo 'lib rl]

adjective:

- Favoring political and economic policies that promote free-market unfettered capitalism, governmental deregulation, and reduction in government spending including social programs like Social Security Insurance (SSI) Syn. Libertarianism)

noun: neo-liberal

- Also a somewhat pejorative term of art used by progressives for adherents of neo-liberalism.

- e.g., Under neo-liberalism the growing extreme disparity of wealth in America.

Surveillance Capitalism [ser-vey-luhns][kap-i-tl-iz-uhm]

noun:

- An economic system centered around the commodification of personal data with the core purpose of profit-making, by advertising companies, led by Google, using personal data to target consumers more precisely. While industrial capitalism exploited and controlled nature with devastating consequences, surveillance capitalism exploits and controls human nature with a totalitarian order as the endpoint of the development.

- “Behavioral surplus” of detailed personal meta-data intentionally collected about users of the internet by Google, Amazon.com, Facebook.com, Instagram, Twitter, Reddit and other social networks⁴.

4 Shoshonna Zuboff “The Age of Surveillance Capitalism”(2019)

Prequel

“I’m mad as hell...and I’m not going to take this anymore!”
– Howard Beale

Wednesday, November 9, 2016 1:15 AM

“I’m mad as hell...and I’m not going to take this anymore!” shouts Howard Beale erupting during the middle of his newscast in a beige rain coat, his wet, gray hair plastered to his forehead.

Because I was so disgusted by the flagrant demagoguery, the outright mendacity and obfuscation during the rancorous national election campaign I was desperately seeking some touchstone of reality, some validation of the legitimacy of my anger, indeed rage, that I was not just being consumed by some hormonal mid-life meltdown. Not just a fleeting moment of rage...but a Whole Howard Fucking Beale Year...of a steaming pile of equine excrement.

So, I was about half way through the timeless political parable for about the 10th time, the 1976 film *Network* brilliantly written by Paddy Chayefsky, when I paused my DVR to check on the lopsided margin of victory Hilary Clinton (D) held over Donald Trump, the (R)epugnant nominee for president of the United States.

In the film, Beale, the anchorman for the UBS Evening News, struggles to accept the inequities of the world he reports. It concludes with the murder of Beale on national television; a voice over darkly proclaims him “the first known instance of a man who was killed because he had lousy ratings”. It is the beginning of his transfiguration into a mythical cult hero, now an enduring totem crying out against social injustice. A film classic—both a commercial and critical success winning four Oscars. Good stuff and my go-to balm when I begin to doubt my grasp on political reality.

I had just finished viewing this eerily prescient scene, now more relevant than ever, which perfectly captures and distills the algorithm if you will, of the theology of neo-liberal corporate hegemony. Arthur Jensen, President of UBS is reciting the Sacred Scripture of the Holy Corporate Gospel to Howard Beale, giving him his marching orders⁵:

JENSEN

You have meddled with the primal forces of nature, Mr. Beale, and I won’t have it, is that clear?! You think you have merely stopped a business deal...that is not the case!

5 Film—*Network* (1976): Directed by Sidney Lumet; Written by Paddy Chayefsky
Produced by Howard Gottfried and Fred C. Caruso

The Arabs have taken billions of dollars out of this country, and now they must put it back. It is ebb and flow, tidal gravity, it is ecological balance! You are an old man who thinks in terms of nations and peoples. There are no nations! There are no peoples! There are no Russians. There are no Arabs! There are no third worlds! There is no West!

There is only one holistic system of systems, one vast and immane, interwoven, interacting, multi-variate, multi-national dominion of dollars! petro-dollars, electro-dollars, multi-dollars!, Reichmarks, rubles, rin, pounds and shekels! It is the international system of currency that determines the totality of life on this planet! That is the natural order of things today! That is the atomic, subatomic and galactic structure of things today!

And you have meddled with the primal forces of nature, and you will atone! Am I getting through to you, Mr. Beale?...

(pause)

You get up on your little twenty-one inch screen, and howl about America and democracy. There is no America. There is no democracy. There is only IBM and ITT and AT and T and Dupont, Dow, Union Carbide and Exxon. Those are the nations of the world today. What do you think the Russians talk about in their councils of state Karl Marx? They pull out their linear programming charts, statistical decision theories and miniMax solutions and compute the price-cost probabilities of their transactions and investments just like we do.

We no longer live in a world of nations and ideologies, Mr. Beale. The world is a college of corporations, inexorably determined by the immutable by-laws of business. The world is a business, Mr. Beale! It has been since man crawled out of the slime, and our children, Mr. Beale, will live to see that perfect world in which there is no war and famine, oppression and brutality.

One vast and ecumenical holding company, for whom all men will work to serve a common profit, in which all men will hold a share of stock, all necessities provided, all anxieties tranquilized, all boredom amused. And I have chosen you to preach this evangel, Mr. Beale.

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HOWARD

(humble whisper)

Why me?

JENSEN

Because you're on television, dummy. Sixty million people watch you every night of the week, Monday through Friday.

So, I tuned to the election coverage on lefty MSNBC to check on the overwhelming, indeed humiliating Electoral College margin of victory Hilary Clinton, America's historic first female president, held over Donald Trump—Putin's Poodle, the Buffoon with the Bottle Blonde Bouffant.

At last, the demonstrable triumph of truth over demagogic trope! *Hurray and Halleluiah!*

Hillary Clinton (D): 227

Donald Trump (R): 304

Donald Trump is projected to be the
45th President of the United States!

W-T-F! That's right...*What The Fuck!*

A NOTE TO THE READER

The AMERICAN ENTROPY TRILOGY is a series of three books, intended to be read in chronological sequence starting with the first book, AMERICAN AMNESIA. The manuscript was originally written as one, very large, and frankly rather unwieldy *magnum opus* of over 1000 pages. Basically a door stop.

Because of the technical limitation of publishing-on-demand of a maximum of about 800 pages, after some reflection, I have decided to create three separate books, to enable and facilitate the publication of the print copy in trade paperback, for those of you who still enjoy the traditional method, the tactile sensation of actually holding the book in hand. I get it.

The Kindle eBooks offered on Amazon.com are essentially virtual copies of the print versions of the books, and have no such page count limitations, and have therefore been consolidated into one eBook, that includes (eventually) all three of the titles, which of course has the net effect of being able to offer the entire AMERICAN ENTROPY TRILOGY as an eBook at a lesser price than if sold as a print *la carte*.

However, to facilitate the reader who may elect to begin reading the individual eBook or print series either at the second book, AMERICAN ALGORITHM, or perhaps at the third book, AMERICAN ANARCHY, I have included the same Preamble, Prequel and Intro in all of the books to provide background and context to enable the reader to have a more comprehensive understanding of the prior books, which the storyline, plot and characters are built upon and referenced in subsequent books.

Please note that in the print versions, and individual eBook titles, chapter headings in the Table of Contents of AMERICAN ALGORITHM and AMERICAN ANARCHY, have two chapter numbers. Beginning with AMERICAN ALGORITHM, the first number is the chapter number for the particular book.

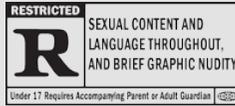
In the following example in the individual eBook title, and print copy Table of Contents of AMERICAN ALGORITHM, the number in parentheses represents the next chapter after the last Chapter, or Chapter 43, of Book One, AMERICAN AMNESIA:

- Chapter 1 (44) –

It is my hope that this chapter naming convention, and repetition of the Preamble, Prequel and Intro I have utilized, will not cause any unnecessary confusion, and will in fact facilitate the reader in providing better continuity and comprehension of the overarching thesis of the AMERICAN ENTROPY TRILOGY.

Thanks. mak

Intro



This content contains scenes that some readers may find disturbing...which hopefully may make them “mad as hell.”

Reader discretion is not advised. Intended for mature, thinking and empathetic audiences.

It contains scenes of a graphic nature, strong language and depictions of wanton social and political deceit and obfuscation by some very rich, very smart, and very evil people—Evil Geniuses⁶.

I go by Koz. Michaelangelo Kozlov—to my close friends, Mickey, or MAK. To my Ex, ATM.

I'd like to tell you a story, more of a parable really, the true facts of which are so unbelievable, as to defy even fictional plausibility.

Sorry, but it's not a feel-good story with a Capraesque *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* ending....not yet anyway—that's where you come in. Because only you and other percipient, willing and proactive voters ultimately may get to re-write the dark denouement from the current horrific seemingly inevitable apocalyptic ending. Or not...

It is a story that needs to be told as if the very survival of *our* planet ecosystems(ain't no planet B) and *our* democracy, indeed the soul of America⁷, depended on it...because it does.

Now, obviously I'm no Melville, but Herman and I do have a few things in common—one *very big* thing in particular, an exceedingly large, and *very angry*, hairless albino mammal, *Hawkus Shapirus*. More later on the corporate ship of fools of the doomed Pequod Inc. and my inevitable collision course with its tyrannical monomaniacal Captain.

It's a Long Day's Journey into Light, so let's get on with it.

6 Kurt Andersen “Evil Geniuses”(2020)

7 Jon Meacham “The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels”(2018)



But first, some background for context: My dubious gene pool is half-Italian, from the neck up, half-Russian, and the third half, according to my barely over 5 foot tall Russian Babuska, *zhiraf*, or giraffe. Christened after Michelangelo Caravaggio, the great Renaissance painter and rascal of Milano, Italy, by way of my maternal grandfather, Michael Caravaggio of South Philly. Also, birthplace of *moi* and the Italian Stallion, Rocky Balboa, Patron Saint of Philadelphia. *Yo Adrian!* On the paternal Kozlov side, the Cossacks of the Don region of the Ukraine and Southern Russia, the pre-revolution Tzar's barbarous mercenary militia.

Both branches of the rather tall family tree sprouting inveterate Philly Philanderer, begs one of life's more persistent questions. Does a uh...*bad* apple always fall not very far from the tree, to perfectly mangle a metaphor?

Since my internet *nom de guerre* is the *portmanteau* kozmick, naturally it's Kozmick Productions. Yea I know, a little too cute by half. Just about what you'd expect, from a narcissist.

If all fiction is essentially, a lie, then it would seem to me that a good storyteller, must first be a good liar. If that's the requisite *bona fides*, standing at six and a half feet, uniquely qualifies me to tell tall tales. After 1985, I had been a professional propagandizer—a *fixer*; at times, I admit bordering on the pathological. First producing banal "soap" commercials for the top 10 Broadcast TV markets, including The Big Apple and *El Lay*, then evolving into the highly lucrative infomercial political "documentaries". Selling soap or political lies, the process is all the same. It's all about branding.

But the Big Bucks had flowed into Kozmick Productions on two year cycles from campaign ads for so-called elections. Since the Kennedy-Nixon era, TV had become the increasingly dominate medium for political advertising—from the 70s, exponentially so. Why? Because it works. Big time. Statistically, the best ROI, Return on Investment, per dollar spent per vote bought. Nationally, about sixty percent of all advertising and marketing \$\$\$\$ are spent on TV, mostly negative attack ads. Predominately on broadcast networks, but increasingly on satellite networks, like CNN and from 1997, obscene ad revenues in particular for ultra-right wing Fox "News" Channel, and now mostly the internet.

Which, in turn creates an inherent moral hazard for content purveyors to create and encourage "news" fraught with rancorous polarizing conflict which drives up viewership ratings and the CPM (cost per thousand viewers for ad time), and the new gold standard, the precisely granular metric of internet mouse-clicks. Not only do the Networks make huge profits, but Google, Microsoft, Twitter and especially Facebook have their snouts deeply buried in the trough at the obscene profit pig pen of ad revenue.

In my past life, representing mostly Fortune 500 clients, like Big Oil,

Big Tobacco and Big Pharma intent on shaping the discourse of the *vox populi*. A merchant of doubt, I had specialized in the dark art of manufacturing consent, creating hundreds of poisonous position campaign ads and “documentaries” with a tendentious, often polemic political Point of View.

With no small degree of hypocrisy, like 60s radical leftist activist Jerry Rubin, one of the Chicago Seven...Yippie turned stockbroker, we had sold-out. Hanging a hard, very right turn in the 80s, drunk on Uncle Milty Martinis—an Endless Happy Hour of Milton Friedman free-for-all economics. First, reinvented as Reagan Democrats, then by slow accretion, like many of the increasingly prospering counter-culture Rads, the more money we made, the more Republican we became.

That was how we had made the big bucks all those years, and we had made no excuses for the obscene wealth and luxury that we had enjoyed that accompanied our dubious moral transformation.

The Big Ad and PR Agencies, could charge exorbitant rates for the "creative" and on top of that, receive about a 15% commission on all media placed, on radio, TV and print, on millions of \$\$\$\$. So about six months before the actual election, during primaries, because we had become *very* good at what we do, we had started getting calls from the Big Five national ad agencies, cueing up for production work. Mostly writing and producing :30 TV ads, our niche, the specialty of the house—nuanced euphemisms for borderline slanderous, but still exceedingly effective; *"Are you lying now...or were you lying then? Do you still beat your wife?"* kinda stuff.

My job description: Hitman for the Media Mafia—assassin of character. A mercenary paladin—have camera will travel. With the rationalization *'Just responding to the invisible hand of the market'*, like the rest of media we've had our snouts deeply submerged in the trough. We justified our Piranha participation with, *Hey...if we don't, somebody else will pickup the obscene amounts of money just laying on the table*. And by the way, it had made us a *very* comfortable living.

That is, until about a month after September 11, 2001, when a spectacular petroleum pipeline explosion causing multiple deaths and millions of \$\$\$\$ in damage to a pristine place less than a mile from my home, literally rocked my world. At the time, I had absolutely no idea of the cause or origin. My first impression was, because of the magnitude and the obvious involvement of some kind of petroleum accelerant, perhaps it was the aftermath of a commercial jet crash. But a gas-filled time-bomb-pipeline? Impossible you say? Out of the realm of possibility? *Ha!*

Home is Moody Seaport, situated on the Puget Sound in the Northwest corner of Washington state, nestled up against the border with British Columbia, Canada. Formerly a blue tarp, duct tape logging and commercial fishing town, like many other affordable working class coastal communities, was now involuntarily being invaded and gentrified into a tony maritime enclave, forcing out working class families with spiraling real estate

prices and property taxes.

The country was still reeling, financially and emotionally, with an acute collective case of PTSD. The bottom had fallen out of the economy overnight. My pal and business partner Ad Hoc, “Hawk” Shapiro and I were just finishing up the final cut on a client's video, one of the few projects that hadn't been canceled, in our post-production suite when the big

KA-B-O-O-OM!

overnight literally exploded my mundane priorities. Near death experiences do have a unique way of focusing the mind. More on that later.

Up to 9/11, I was still very angry, bitter and had grown gratuitously cynical, from having lost everything I thought mattered most, including some people very dear to me—brutally murdered back in the 80s, when I was sucker-punched by Ms Kismet. *Okay, got the memo, enough already mit da Karma.*

But as the chaotic aftermath of 9/11 unfolded, frankly, it was the genesis of my epiphany, the opening of my eyes to the reality that I was nothing more than a propaganda pimp—a dissembler and purveyor of the same skewed, unreality that was driving the collective paranoia and fear mongering of the masses.

9/11 had more than cratered the economy and demolished the Dual Phallic Monuments erected to American Capitalism, massacring 3,000 mothers and fathers, sons and daughters on our home court. We were all now orphans in a cruel turbulent sea of capricious precarity. Violated in the unsuspecting super-saturated cyan morning sky of normalcy, in the sanctity of our own house.

Now and forever held emotional hostage by stochastic *jihad*. A testosterone laced attempt at a Grand Emasculation, a *macho* kick in the gonads, to render the Great Satan impotent. Was God asleep? Even Allah must have wept.

A Day of Infamy 2.0. The date now belongs to history as, *A Tuesday Mourning, the eleventh of never*, forever dismantling American Invincibility. The Western Deity of technology had empowered the powerless, the ignored. New rules. Welcome to the world of asymmetric warfare, the new equalizer against 'superior force'. The delivery of blow back with no small irony through the democracy, the off-the-shelf availability of technology. A technological Frankenstein released into the wild, against its Western Creator, inviting and inciting a simplistic Cineplex reality of Rambo revenge—the commodification of fear, paranoia and desultory payback. Big time.

Evil as a brand is created, competitively marketed, inanely sold like soap, non-stop on competing cable *news* channels—in the process paralyzing our humanity, resurrecting the Crusades and spawning wholesale Islamophobia. The new normal.

Almost immediately, CASMO, Corporate Advertising Subsidized Media Octopi, began inflicting massive sensory mayhem through a constant

24-7 carpet bombing of our senses. Great Balls of Fire, over and over again, shamelessly appropriating the solemn and sacred into a vulgar obscenity—all on the pretense of *news*. And in some perverse twisted way, those flying silver marvels, monuments to Western innovation, on 9/11 became the guided missiles of misguided Muslim misanthropes. Delivering Air Mail, a mega-business opportunity Special Delivery—a pandemic of fear and paranoia in perpetuity. Creating a windfall of profane profits to the sacred bottom line of Corporate Media and bogus justification for the unconstitutional mass surveillance of its citizens by U.S. Corporations⁸ and the American Government.⁹

Which, after a decade and a half, eventually created the perfect launching pad for the slow-motion *coup d' etat*, aka “election” of pretend president Donald Trump, reinforcing and pulling into painfully clear focus that I was a charter member of the Unreality Industry Incorporated. That I had personally contributed to stoking the fear, anger and collective sense of grievance of an emotionally supercharged essentially white male middle class that had been skillfully and cynically manipulated over the past several decades by neo-liberal puppet masters.

And, that “deep state” government was not the solution, but the problem—the cause for *all* of their problems and misfortune. I and my fellow propaganda practitioners had not only amplified that deafening, ubiquitous and incessant media cacophony, but had become expert enablers for cynical political advantage and power. And yes, money...lots and lots of \$\$\$\$\$. Big time. Eventually, making it pretty damn hard to look myself in the mirror. So to attempt to assuage some guilt I had now assumed the more lofty euphemism of “filmmaker”.

Driven by greed and avarice, thanks in no small part to my consummate Denialists accomplices, the once omnipotent American Arcadia, was now blithely teetering on the precipice of the 6th Mass Extinction from Climate Change.

To ascribe this devolutionary sea change in the culture, almost four decades in the making solely to Donald Trump, would be like attributing the existence of a national crime syndicate to a walk-on wannabe, a petty grifter(or a mutt—a Mafioso term of art).

More a symptom than a cause, like a gaudy Rolex knockoff, Carny Barker Trump was just a cheap shiny imitation of a Mussolini, a mugging self-aggrandizing caricature of a caricature. Fortunately for the world, not very bright but nonetheless like many charlatans, endowed with some serious NYC *chutzpah* and street-shrewd. And as also can be said of cockroaches, a hard coded, hard-shell self-preservation instinct.

Psychologists and theologians tell us that many if not most of us innately yearn for a heroic figure, a savior like a Christ, to lead and comfort us

8 Shoshonna Zuboff “The Age of Surveillance Capitalism”(2019)

9 Edward Snowden, “Permanent Record”(2019)

as we deal with the inevitable vagaries and vicissitudes of life: *yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. I will fear no evil for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

A recidivist arsonist, Trump instinctively knew where all the latent, highly combustible emotional buttons of the disillusioned, left-behind white working class were...just begging to be punched. Billed as the “Billionaire of the People”, a rich oxymoron and even richer irony, as the draft-dodging sybarite doused an accelerant of populist vitriol and divisiveness on the already smoldering embers of real or imaginary grievance. Rekindling the hard-wired intrinsic need for humans to avoid pain, seek pleasure along with a yearning for simple binary answers to increasingly complex and persistent moral and legal questions.

Thanks predominately to the acceleration and sophistication of digital electronic media technology and the exponential growth of internet penetration over the last three decades, the door of opportunity had swung wide open for the unhinged, rabid Christo-Libertarian right. Now, indefinitely stuck ajar inviting the vulnerable masses, including the leadership of the putative persecuted, aggrieved Christian Nationalists to not walk, but sprint into the waiting open arms of the increasingly radicalized faction of the Republicans.

This set the stage to propel the Wizard of *Ooze*, initially as a pundit punch line, formerly a political agnostic and notorious hedonistic heathen, now reinvented as a born-again Christo-conservative and right to life advocate, to strut on to the national proscenium from stage right.

Showtime! The self-anointed most improbable Armani Messiah, was the demigod avatar, more an Orange Golden Calf, the evangelical Millennialists had been patiently praying for. So much for the First Commandment. The rest of the Commandments distilled and repurposed into the first two Amendments of the U.S. Constitution with a simpler, more pragmatic, transactional emphasis on the First—Religious freedom contorted into a Christo-Political hegemony of national and state government and judiciary, and the Second—Armed Christian Soldiers in preparation for the wishful, self-fulfilling prophesy of an Armageddon and with the help of a little divine destiny, The Rapturous Apocalypse.

The seductive appeal of a charismatic bad-boy celebrity, his vulgar anti-hero persona and bombastic demagoguery, was an ominous portent of the nascent “new normal”. Cynically and relentlessly marketed as a counterweight to the elitist latte liberal left, including “mainstream media” as the “enemy of the people”. Forget the fact that he had the dubious morals and business scruples of a Mafioso Don, ironically in this case “The Donald.” (No disrespect intended to *paisano* Dons like John Gotti)

So how, and more importantly, why in this purportedly hyper-democratic Information/Internet Age, are America, indeed *tout le monde*,

inexorably creeping seemingly unimpeded toward E^2 —Existential Entropy, environmental and social oblivion—and a nightmare of neo-liberal/neo-fascist global hegemony?

Whether we choose to acknowledge it or not, we are all now swimming in a sea of the surreal—and just below the surface a raging riptide, a lethal undertow of pervasive counter-factual FANLANDIA¹⁰.

But, before there can be any cogent, durable remediations proffered, the first step is to unwind just how in the hell we ended up stuck in this endless loop, non-stop horror movie, AMERICAN ENTROPHY.

To that end, we'll have to hit rewind all the way back to the opening screen credits of this uniquely American horror flick, as the cast of nefarious characters and malevolent machinations of the Evil Geniuses¹¹ first begins to unfold:



10 Kurt Andersen “Fantasyland”(2017)

11 Kurt Andersen “Evil Geniuses”(2020)

Index of Main Characters

Michaelangelo Kozlov (Koz, Mick and MAK):

The main character, narrator and main protagonist throughout the entire trilogy of novels.

Ad Hoc Shapiro (Hawk):

Koz's best friend, confidant, business partner, and non-biological brother. Co-protagonist also present throughout the entire trilogy of novels.

Maria Caravaggio Kozlov (Pia):

Koz's mother, an artist, present throughout much of the entire trilogy of novels.

Annette Trudeau (Annie):

Love interest of Koz, who reappears multiple times throughout entire trilogy of novels

Byron Brawley:

Close friend and fellow student at UC Berkeley, and student social activist.

Charles Washington (C-Wash):

Close friend and fellow student at UC Berkeley, and leading student social activist.

Mario Savio (as himself):

Close friend and fellow student at UC Berkeley, and a leading student social activist.

Sora Eagle Feather:

Love interest and biological mother of Koz's son, Michael.

Michael Ahiga Eagle Feather Kozlov (Mikie):

Son of Koz, born out of wedlock to Sora Eagle Feather. An ancillary protagonist who reappears multiple times throughout entire trilogy of novels.

Chief Leonard Eagle Feather: (Chief)

Chief of the Navajo reservation, father of Sora Eagle Feather, and grandfather to Michael Eagle Feather, who reappears multiple times throughout entire trilogy of novels.

Marla Dyson (Marly):

VP at ACT Inc. and love interest of Koz, who reappears multiple times throughout the entire trilogy of novels.

Jason Mahoney (Jace, Captain Ahab):

President and CEO of ACT Inc. and main antagonist of Koz present throughout the entire trilogy of novels.

Trey Mahoney:

Teenage gay son of Jason Mahoney, young friend and mentee of Mick.

Ernest Porter (*Negrato*, *Blackie*):

Ancillary main antagonist and foil of Jason Mahoney who appears throughout much of the trilogy of novels..

AMERICAN AMNESIA 1900 - 2000

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it...”
- George Santayana,

- Chapter 1 -

1900 - 1930 - The Roaring Twenties - Philadelphia PA

Michael Caravaggio, a first generation Italian who had immigrated from Sicily even at the age of sixteen, was an ambitious cocky chancer. Despite the fact that he was the son of an immigrant barber, and that he never went past a grammar school education, while working in the barbershop as a child, eventually learning the trade, he had studied the manner and dress of the rich who frequented the barbershop. At twenty-two, a working class barber by day, by night, impeccably dressed, he was a man about town, affecting the persona of wealth and station of a "real estate developer". Michael is swarthy with a thick mane of jet black hair to accompany his Byronic rugged, somewhat pugilistic, good looks. He is tall, well-built with a certain primal appeal that some women devour, the consummate rake.

A natural born actor, his gift for mimicry serves him well in his nightly masquerades, hobnobbing with the rich. Because of his flamboyant, sensual style on the dance floor, he is a much sought after dance partner.

In 1915, he meets Teresa Lauria at a party—a woman, an innocent, naïve girl really, four years younger, who comes from a cultured second generation Italian family with class and money. He decides to pursue her. He needs a classy arm-piece, a woman who would reinforce and give credibility to his charade. And he needs someone with elegance, aristocratic manners and asset that could entertain his wealthy prospective real estate clients. Despite being naturally shy and diffident, she is a beautiful and talented musician, an accomplished classical pianist, who is smitten by Michael's charms.

Although Teresa's father saw through Michael Caravaggio from their first meeting, she is powerless to resist his every impulse, including pre-marital sex. She becomes pregnant, not by accident by the cunning seducer, and to avoid a family scandal, they are married. Seven months later, a "premature" Maria Pia Caravaggio is born. By 1928, there are five children, who Michael Caravaggio delights in showing off, on Sundays when he, Tess and the children get all dressed up, and parade down the street to attend Sunday Mass at Saint Francis Catholic Church. Like Italian aristocracy strolling the *passeggiata* around the *piazza*, he would take great pride in "*fara bella figura*" making a good impression, or self-consciously 'looking good'.

Maria Caravaggio, the oldest child, at an early age, shows interest in music and art. The family is doing very well financially; her father ostentatiously indulges the family in cultural activities, including the symphony, opera, and the frequent trips to museums in his new touring car with polished brass handles, especially art museums, like the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where the proud Italian patriarch would assemble his suitably

sartorial children for exhibit around the paintings by Michelangelo Caravaggio. Ever the showman, he would proclaim loudly, for everyone in the room to hear, that he, Michael Caravaggio is a direct descendant of The Great Michelangelo. Then pointing to his then 5 year old duly impressed son, gesturing flamboyantly, "There...that *magnifico* work of art is by your famous ancestor, your namesake, Michelangelo CARA-VAG-GIO," pretentiously exaggerating every syllable for his hapless captive audience. The spelling of his only son's name, vulgarly amended to "Michaelangelo", to satisfy his monstrous ego and proclaim ownership of his chattel children.

It turns out that the painting was only a 17th century copy of the painting "The Incredulity of the Apostle Thomas". But the pompous patriarch was never known for his modesty, or to ever allow the facts to interfere with his shameless self-promotion. But Maria, or Pia as she was called by her family, was quite smitten by the painting, the dramatic *chiaroscuro*, the brilliant colors of the palette, the spiritual sentiment that reached down to her very soul. So at the age of 9, she begins to draw incessantly. From then on, something within the very core of her DNA compels her to make art.

The Roaring Twenties, was a feeding frenzy of speculation of stocks and bonds, and real estate, and Michael Caravaggio was roaring with the best of them. It was post Gilded Age; the Robber Barons retained unfettered free-reign over the unregulated economy. Real estate speculation was rampant as the bubble continued to get bigger and bigger, no one believed that it could ever burst. He and his partner leveraged many real estate properties by what amounted to a pyramid scheme. He would identify greedy, yet gullible investors who wanted to cash-in on the real estate boom, and draw them in with his boundless self-confidence and charm. But, Michael's carefully cultivated persona of success and money, like most things Michael Caravaggio, was all facade.

Recognizing that his greatest business asset was his looks, his irrepressible charm and his flashy sartorial splendor, his main target was the many older, usually widowed or divorced lonely women who possessed money, "more dollars than sense" he would joke to his partner. They are smitten by his practiced pretense of elegance and class, but mostly by the attentiveness and indulgences he pays to the forlorn women. He had an uncanny nose for vulnerability. He could sniff it out, often with the first encounter, a bow, and a kiss on the hand his entrée. He had developed a finely honed sense just in this brief first encounter. If the woman is receptive—whether her hand lingers, and when he releases it with a gentle squeeze if it is reciprocated.

He is a shameless libertine, who delights in the thrill of the conquest. It devastates Teresa, that many nights he does not come home, and when he does it would be for a change of clothes, some clean starched shirts which she has dutifully laundered, and then be gone again for several days at a time, with

no explanation. Often in social situations, he would humiliate Teresa, with brazen overtures to other women. When she confronts Michael about his dalliances, he patronizingly dismisses her as being overly-jealous. Once a beautiful young woman, after over ten years of constant emotional degradation and five children, she begins to lose her looks, further eroding her plummeting self-esteem.

Fall 1930 - One year after The Great Crash

In front of a large expensive home in an upscale neighborhood in Philadelphia, a large moving van, with several men in uniforms and hats ironically emblazoned with "Brotherly Love Moving" are busily carrying furniture and belongings, obviously hastily packed, into the large moving van.

Huddled against Teresa Caravaggio on the front porch, are her five children: Maria 15, Renata 13, Rita 12, Michaelangelo 11, and Marcella 9.

The Sheriff, holding an eviction notice, is gently trying to console and restrain a crying Teresa, now 2 months pregnant, as the Steinway piano, an icon of bourgeoisie prosperity, is now exiting the front door into the moving van. All the furnishings, fine china and silver, are being auctioned off to pay off the personal debt of the family.

"Mrs Caravaggio, I'm sorry, but you'll have to vacate the premises *now*. Do you have any place, like family where you and the children can go?" says the Sheriff.

Teresa, in shock says, "No place...no one."

"In that case ma'am, you and the children will have to spend the night at the jail, until we can make other arrangements. Come on kids, get in the car," the Sheriff says.

In a house across the street, a young boy about 11, is kneeling in front of the mother and father, staring out the front window, watching the eviction unfold.

"Serves that show-boat son-of-bitch right. Caravaggio...Mr Big Shot Real Estate Developer. Should put the bastard in jail...deserting his family like that, with her pregnant and all," the man says.

Maria Pia Caravaggio, the eldest child is stoically standing next to her hysterical mother with a single suitcase, which now contains everything in the world she owns. Next to her, younger brother Michaelangelo, standing impassively, staring out across the street making eye contact with his pal and playmate in the window, he slowly raises his hand and waves good-bye.

Fighting tears Maria says, "Mikie, I will *never* allow myself, our family, to be humiliated like this again...*ever*."

"Now with Papa gone, I guess it's up to you and me, Pia to take care of the rest of the family, to keep the family together," says Michaelangelo.

Teresa, Maria and the children are herded into the police car only to suffer the additional humiliation of having to spend the night in a rat infested jail cell of the police station. As they pull away, Maria's tear stained face pressed against the rear window, like many other innocent victims of the Great Depression, they were considered mere write-offs by the plutocrats—unfortunate but unavoidable collateral carnage of Darwin Capitalism. As the police car turns the corner, the life of an upper middle-class abundance, slowly vanishes into the distance for the Caravaggios. And, for generations of many families, never to return to their lives again.

Winter - 1932

A small two bedroom apartment in a ramshackle neighborhood in South Philadelphia - late afternoon

It is two years later, Christmas Eve—Maria is now almost 17. Teresa, growing increasingly unstable emotionally from the stress and duress of their extreme privation, out of sheer desperation with few legal medical alternatives available, has self-aborted the fetus with a metal coat hanger. Being a devout Catholic, the unassuaged guilt only compounds her fragile emotional state, as she sinks deeper and deeper into the dark abyss of depression.

They are now living in a walk-up 3rd story cold water tenement on public assistance. Renata, Rita and Marcella, like a litter of neglected puppies are huddled together trying to get warm under an old heavy quilt on a mattress thrown on the floor. The cast iron stove for heat, is now cold to the touch as they have had to choose between buying coal for heat, or buying what little food they can afford. The children are emaciated, unrelenting hunger is their constant companion.

Maria has suddenly become a stunningly beautiful woman. She is quite tall, slender with ample breasts, long raven hair, penetrating green eyes and exotic, gypsy looks. She is briskly walking in circles about the room, in a heavy coat trying to stay warm. Michaelangelo, now 12, has assumed the role of the man of the house. He is tall for his age, fair with blond hair and blue eyes, but skinny from undernourishment. He has fashioned an old beat-up wagon out of found materials—painted it red, with white letters on the side, "Mikie's Delivery".

Mikie is standing behind his mother, Teresa, sitting on a chair at the window, bending down whispering to her, while massaging her neck and shoulders, laughing and joking with her, which brings a faint if seldom, smile to her gaunt face.

"Mommy, I've just got one more delivery to make, down the street, then Mr Kelly said I could take a wagon full of coal and a bunch of groceries for wages. Tonight we'll have a real Christmas dinner...and a fire in the stove," Mikie says.

Teresa, sitting impassively, shows a glimmer of emotion, and patting Mikie's hand on her shoulder, looks up at him and smiles wanly.

Maria says, "Mikie, can you be back in hour?"

"Sure Pia, count on it. I'll leave right now," irrepresible can-do Mikie says.

"Yeah...Christmas dinner!" Renata, Rita and Marcella yell in chorus.

Mikie puts on his tattered, dark much-too-big man's overcoat, a dark knit cap and threadbare gloves, picks up his little wagon and the proud little provider swaggers out the door singing "Jingle Bells".

About an hour and a half later, it is now dark and snowing very heavily. As the snowfall increases, the evening is punctuated with the frequent sound of honking horns and wheels of cars and trucks spinning futilely on the icy street below. Everyone is in a hurry to get to the safety of their home for Christmas Eve.

Maria is getting concerned, *it's been over an hour, where are you Mikie? If I'm late, they'll fire me.* Because of Teresa's growing emotional unpredictability, Maria does not dare leave Teresa with the younger children, without her or Mikie present.

Maria is stirred by the faint reflection of her mother's face in the window pane, expectantly looking down at the street below waiting for her one and only son to rescue them from the gnawing hunger. Somehow that fleeting motherly expression of love and concern momentarily comforts her and gives her hope that her mother may still be capable of some semblance of maternal protective instinct. Maybe even toward her, who since the past two years at the tender age of 15, has been forced to become the adult matriarchal figure and surrogate mother to the four other children.

Teresa suddenly spies the white letters on the side of Mikie's red wagon in the darkness, but can barely make him out in the dark clothing. His pale white face, like a saintly apparition, suddenly appears out of the darkness as he looks up to the window at his mother and smiles broadly, waving to her wildly, proudly pointing to the contents of the wagon. He's in a hurry.

"There's Mikie! He's got a wagon full of goodies!" yells Teresa.

Maria, rushes over to the window behind Teresa.

Seeing her mostly sad mother, smiling happily, admiringly, warms her heart, giving her a rare moment of joy in an otherwise bleak winter of constant cold and privation.

While Mikie is still looking up, he steps off the curb to cross the street.

"Mikie! Lookout!" they both scream. But of course, he cannot hear them.

Mikie does not see the big A&P delivery truck until just before the impact.

Mikie's reverie is interrupted by the frantic blast of the truck's loud horn, but it is too late. He then looks back up at the window at Teresa and Maria, his expression calm and resigned, just before the impact violently thrusts him out of view.

The little red wagon explodes on impact spraying groceries and coal everywhere. The truck bumper catches his overcoat waist tie, dragging him under the truck for fifty feet. Finally, it comes to rest. Neither the front of the truck, nor Mikie are visible from the window. Teresa is frozen in the chair, paralyzed with fear and dread.

Maria races out the door, flying down the three flights of stairs to the snowy street below, yelling, " *Mikie! Mikie! I'm coming Mikie. Oh God. No!...please God! Hang on Mikie.*"

Maria is the first to get to Michaelangelo. The truck driver, speechless in shock, is staring down at the twisted rag-doll body. In the huge black overcoat, Mikie looks so tiny, a mere *bambino*. He opens his eyes, he is still alive, barely. Maria, sobbing, does not feel the cold icy slush on her bare knees as she kneels down, lifts him up to her bosom, slowly, maternally rocking him like a distressed infant, with a soothing whisper. "It's okay Mikie...you're going to be okay. Just hold on!"

"Somebody call an ambulance! Oh Mikie, why didn't you look!" Maria cries.

"Pia, I'm sorry. I was late...I just wanted ta get...I'm so cold. Pia, please hold me," Mikie whispers.

"Shh...Mikie, don't try to talk now," says Maria, tears streaming down her face as she holds him even more tightly against her. The nearing ambulance siren normally the sound of help, of hope, now a wailing death knell. Mikie's eyes tell Maria that he knows that it will be too late.

"Pia...tell mommy I love her...take care her for me," says Mikie as the life slowly ebbs from his emaciated little body.

Rocking back and forth, sobbing hysterically as Maria cradles his lifeless contorted body in her arms, Mikie's lifeless eyes, piercing her very soul.

"Oh Mikie...my little man!" cries Maria.

Maria senses someone slowly inching closer. She looks up to see Teresa standing there motionless. She is shivering from the cold, with an emotionless, blank stare. Without so much as a word, or a tear, she pivots slowly and shuffles away into the darkness.

One week later—Saint Anthony's Catholic Church, Philadelphia

The small very modest casket is laying in state in the transept, in front of the altar. The church is full with those who have come to pay their

final respects to Michaelangelo Caravaggio, age twelve. In his short life he has left a large imprint on everyone that ever came in contact with him, including Father Patrick O'Connor, the pastor of Saint Anthony's. Father O'Connor is a large, voluble and virile man in his early thirties. He is classic Irish handsome, with intense piercing robin's egg eyes, with shining thick black hair, ample black eyelashes and a strong pugnacious Irish chin. After graduating from the University of Dublin, Trinity College, founded in 1592, a classmate and friend of Samuel Beckett, with such distinguished literary alumnus as Oscar Wilde, Father Patrick had immigrated to America from Northern Ireland just after the Irish War of Independence, in 1922.

Irish Poet and revolutionary W.B. Yeats best captured the tremendous paradox of his homeland in his iconic poem Easter, 1916...as *a terrible beauty*. And like Beckett, Shaw and Wilde, and most Irish, deeply imbedded in his DNA is an eloquence—a passion for the music of the spoken word.

He grew up hearing the horrific stories of starvation and privation of the Irish people, during the "Great Potato Famine" in Ireland in the mid-19th century and the ensuing great Irish Diaspora to America. In the grand literary tradition, the Irish, notoriously never allowed the facts to interfere with the telling of a good story—known for their embrace of the ancient Irish custom of always leaving a story better than when they found it before passing it on to the next generation. By the time Patrick O'Connor had heard it many, many times, it had swelled into a cabal by the British government at Irish Genocide. It was then a widespread view, bordering on mythology, that the treatment of the famine by the British was a deliberate murder, a genocide of the Irish and discussions often contained the mantra, "The Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the Famine."

Having experienced the terrible injustice and inhumanity visited upon the Irish Catholics of partitioned Northern Ireland by the British first-hand, has imbued him with an imperative of social justice. These profound injustices contributed to his deep and abiding sense of fairness and egalitarianism, which impelled him toward the priesthood, relieving his reservations, temporarily at least, for taking the vow of celibacy, that is until he encounters one Maria Caravaggio.

During these difficult times, the Catholic Church is one of the few remaining sanctuaries for many families who were the innocent victims of the excesses and vicissitudes that caused The Great Depression. The Church was oftentimes the only institution left for the poor and infirmed, that could provide spiritual, emotional and economic sustenance, often the last resort for many, in providing the bare necessities for mere survival, including food and clothing.

Father O'Connor has a particularly close connection to the Caravaggio family. Mikie had served mass on Sundays, as an altar boy. Because Mikie's father had deserted the family, Father Patrick had become a surrogate father for Mikie, as the irrepressible Mikie had more or less adopted him. "You have no choice, Father Pat," he had said with that impish smile. He

idolized Father Pat, and often discussed joining the priesthood himself.

But there was another more compelling reason for his connection to the family—a deep physical attraction to Mikie's older sister Maria. Being afflicted by the 'curse of the Irish', on many a long lonely night in the darkness of his of room, after single-handedly consuming almost a fifth of Irish Whiskey after dinner, he would often fall asleep, involuntarily indulging in sexual fantasies toward the beautiful much younger Maria Caravaggio, the next morning leaving him with a massive hangover, but far worse, with a feeling of unremitting guilt.

Watching Maria, kneeling while praying in the dim flickering candle light, he is reminded of the Madonna, The Mother of Christ. Sometimes the temptation to act on his erotic impulse toward Maria was so overwhelming, it would take all the self-control that he could muster, not to reveal his feelings for her, calling into question the very vows of celibacy. The most difficult part of the situation was that he knew Maria could sense his attraction to her and that it was mutual. And when just casually talking with Pia, as her family called her, her natural musty scent intoxicated him—just her mere touch, innocently, playfully on his arm, would instantaneously awaken his manhood.

Father O'Connor has just finished saying Mass for Mikie. The comforting organ music is now winding down with the pleasant soothing scent of incense and votive candles omnipresent. He then takes the pulpit. Seated in the front row pew, is Mikie's mother, Teresa, wearing a tattered black dress, with a black pill-box hat with a drawn veil tragically askew. Next to her, is Maria, also in black, then the rest of the children Renata, Rita and Marcella. All of them are sobbing, except the mother, Teresa, sitting impassively, staring catatonically straight ahead, seemingly oblivious to the moment.

Conspicuously absent is the father, Michael Caravaggio.

As Father Patrick looks out over the congregation himself fighting the tears...*Dear God...please, give me the strength...*he mounts the pulpit. He is then joined by the congregation as he recites, while moving his right hand to the sign of the cross, "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen."

Now, sufficiently composed he starts, "Michaelangelo Caravaggio the loving son of Teresa and Michael Caravaggio, and loving brother to Maria, Renata, Rita and Marcella." He pauses, allowing the grief to wash over him, he is hoping for some divine inspiration, to bring the right words not from his mind, but his heart. Then with a faint fleeting smile, he remembers the words of the sagacious, old Irish priest in Ireland. *The best way to help yer flock, laddy is to get yer head out of yer uh...pulpit.* He then steps down from the pulpit to stand beside the casket.

Closer to his flock now, and to Mikie, steadying himself with his left hand resting on the casket he continues, "While the Good Lord has allowed us to borrow Mikie's joyful company for only a short twelve years, even though Mikie's body has left us, the living, behind...his kind and loving spirit will

always be with us. He was good laddy...always willing to help others less fortunate, and always with that mischievous smile that could light up this church...indeed a whole cathedral.

So let the death of Mikie not be in vain. Let it serve as a cautionary parable for future generations of Mikie's. Poor little Mikie. Twas not the A&P truck that killed him on that fateful Christmas Eve. No...tis older than the Scripture. The Seven Deadly Sins, rapacious greed, gluttony and pride...feeding the other sins, that senselessly took this young, hopeful unfinished life," he says, gently caressing the casket.

It is not Father Patrick speaking now. It is as if he is a vessel being channeled for some much larger narrative, for victims of the Great Famine, the Great Depression and poverty and privation everywhere than the single tragic death of a twelve year old boy.

He continues, "A profound hubris fueled by the perverse priority of productivity and prosperity...at all social costs. Huge factories of inhumanity...sweat shops, that deplete the human spirit and deprive men of a decent living wage for them and their families. The unbridled worship of this ethic of *more...more...always more*. To them, an indomitable, invincible force, stronger than Nature...or even God.

The casualties of The Great War will be well-documented in history, the so-called War to end all wars. But, as horrid as they were, they pale in comparison to The Great Depression. While the actual wartime dead and wounded may be more readily assessed, The Great Depression has killed something far more difficult to measure—something sacred...the robbing of countless multitudes, generations of men, women and children of the ultimate measure of humanity, their self-respect and dignity. And for many, the worst casualty of all, the death of hope.

The scars, the incalculable damage to the human spirit, caused by staggering disparity of wealth, the hunger and privation visited on the victims of the Great Crash will be with us forever. I will leave it up to God himself to forgive them...for I can not. But, let us never forget the *what*, and more importantly the *who*, that caused all this unnecessary human misery. Only God knows the *why*.

The ghosts of the same war profiteers, industrial tycoons that cause needless, unjust wars, are still with us today. They have learned *nothing* from the wanton death and destruction of The War. For in the end, all wars never decide who was right...but only who is left. Indeed, as it has been said, only the dead have seen the end of war. And when they were confronted then, as they are today about the catastrophic consequences of their colossal arrogance and avarice, that caused, not just the death of the economy, but far worse, of compassion...the justification is always the same. The survival of America, indeed all democracies depends on the dictates of social...indeed economic Darwinism, that only the strong *should* survive. The depraved perversity that democracy has now become the servant, the handmaiden of Capitalism.

For countless millions...families were destroyed, the flickering flame of human potential extinguished. The mass emotional carnage and the impoverishment of generations to follow...were and are, considered simple write-offs, merely the cost of doing business in the perpetuation of their Deity, known by the innocent sounding euphemism of Capitalism.

To them, the death of this beautiful twelve year old child, tirelessly working for scraps, heroically trying to feed his starving family, was nothing more than an unfortunate but necessary modern day equivalent of a human sacrifice...on the altar of Capitalism.

May God have mercy on their souls. I tremble for them...for the God I know, is surely just."

Winter - 1932 - about two months later

A small apartment in a ramshackle neighborhood in South Philadelphia - late afternoon.

Renata, Rita and Marcella have been sent to the bedroom. Maria is leaning against the wall by the bedroom door, suspiciously monitoring a discussion at the kitchen table. Teresa is at her customary place by the window, staring blankly, seemingly oblivious to what is going on, perhaps still searching the darkness for the return of her only son.

Michael Caravaggio, dressed in his usual dapper manner, is sitting at the kitchen table in the sparsely furnished flat—his expensive perfectly blocked fawn fedora, in stark contrast, resting on the water stained primitive table. The impeccably tailored double-breasted beige pinstriped umber suit accentuates his broad shoulders. He's dabbing his eyes, and blowing his nose into an expensive silk handkerchief while he talks to a man in a business suit, seated across from him at the table, Mr Mario Garabaldi the lawyer for the A&P market.

Mario Garabaldi says, "Mr and Mrs Caravaggio, first, please allow me to express the deepest and most profound condolences from A&P Market for the loss of your son. A most unfortunate, and I must add, unpreventable accident. I am here today, to help your family in time of need, even though we feel we have absolutely *no* legal liability. As a token of our sympathy we are prepared to..." he is interrupted by Michael Caravaggio.

"He was my one, my only son. I was grooming him to take over my real estate...uh conglomerate. I loved that boy...such a good boy. His mother...she may never recover," the bereaved father rants, giving the performance of a lifetime.

Maria is listening intently, while Teresa, impassively continues to stare out the window.

"While that *might* be the case...as I started to say, we are prepared to

offer you eight hundred dollars...in exchange for a full release," Mr Garibaldi says.

"That is an outrage sir! Just look at this poor grieving mother, not to mention myself...an insult sir!" screams the father wildly waving his impeccably manicured hand toward Teresa.

Undeterred, Mr Garibaldi forges on, "I am empowered to write a check right here, right now...if... "

"Okay, *scusi signor* Garibaldi. Can we speak man to man, here as two *paisans*, unh? Despite our great loss, there is no reason to be adversarial here, is there uh...Mario. We both know what would happen if I get an attorney...unh? *Very* expensive for the A&P and very drawn out. So your best offer...how mucha today?" the vulpine Michael Carravagio says.

"Mr Caravaggio...Michael, I think we understand each other perfectly *Si, paisano a paisano*," Mario Garibaldi says, "one thousand...today, right now in exchange for a full release of all claims, from you *and* the mother."

"Well, then...even though it is much less than we think is fair, to spare my family a long drawn-out ordeal, especially his poor distraught mother, we reluctantly accept your offer," Michael says with an appropriate measure of reluctance.

"Wait just a minute here! What about mother? Mikie was *more* her son. Mother, what do *you* think?" says Maria.

"Now, now Pia, don't get excited. I'm just looking out for the interests of the family. With this money we can start over, and be a family again," pleads the concerned father, apparently struck by the first bolt of paternal pangs of responsibility since he abandoned the family two years earlier.

"Where the hell were you when your *family* was starving to death? Living in this hell hole. Why do you think Mikie had to work, just a kid...scrounging for scraps to feed us? You deserted us...you *bastardo!*" Maria cries.

"The Crash wiped me out. I...we lost everything, all the real estate investments...worthless, overnight. And now, I'm staying with...a benefactor, until I can get back on my feet financially, and come and take care of all of you," Michael says.

"You mean Mrs Moneybags? Living the *la dolce vita*, while we're starving here? You gigolo! You're such a selfish *bastardo*, you couldn't even show up to your own son's funeral. Now, all of a sudden you're the grieving father. You louse!" Maria screams.

"Maria! Listen to your father! Don't you dare be disrespectful, he wants to take care of us now. That's all that matters," Teresa says.

"But mother...how could you *even...*" Maria says.

"*Vuoi stare zitto!* That's the end of it! Where do I sign?" says Teresa. Mr Garibaldi, seizing the moment has been quietly filling out the check and the release form.

"Mr and Mrs Caravaggio, please sign here. After you both sign, here is the check made out to you jointly," Mr Garibaldi says.

Teresa comes over to the table and signs the release after Michael. Mr Garibaldi slides the check across the table. Michael's hand immediately seizes upon it.

Mario Garibaldi, quickly places the signed release into his brief case and says, "*Grazie.* There is nothing more for me to do here. I'll just let myself out," says Garibaldi, as he hastily retreats out the door.

"Tess, *cara*, why don't you just endorse the back of this check so I can deposit into the bank right away," Michael implores.

"Don't do it, Mother. I'm begging you, please!" cries Maria.

Teresa, looking at Maria spitefully, endorses the check. Michael, immediately places it in his billfold from his suit vest pocket. He stands up, and adjusts his fedora to a rakish angle, straightens his tie, and hurriedly pulls on his expensive camel hair overcoat.

"Oh, Michael, now you can come back home. We'll have a big coming-home party. The children are always hungry...they need winter clothes, when are you coming back with the money?" Teresa says.

"Well now...I'd better get to the bank before it closes. Tess, *dolcissima*, I've got some expenses to take care of. I'll be in touch," says Michael as he gives Teresa a quick peck on the cheek, and a patronizing pat on the head. He then begins backing toward the door, reaches for the door handle behind him, opens the door, and leaves, then as an afterthought sticks his head through the half-open door, and says with his trademark charming smile framing his perfect white pearls, "*Arrivederci...*give the children a big kiss from their father."

Maria follows him out the door, and confronts him in the hallway. She grabs his arm, spinning him around.

"What about Mom's share of that? When are you returning with it. I'll go the bank with you," Maria says.

"That will not be necessary...I'll be in touch. Well, well, well...while I've been away trying to regain my lost fortune, my little Pia has become quite the beautiful woman I see, yes..." he says with a lecherous grin, squeezing her arm, and then stroking her cheek with the back of his hand.

Maria pulls his hand way, and slaps his face, hard.

"Go to hell! You *bastardo!*" Maria yells.

Michael Caravaggio, unfazed, just shrugs his shoulders, and with a breezy laugh, turns and walks down the stairs, chuckling all the way down the stairs and to the bank.

One month later

Maria has just returned from the futile exercise of looking for a job—she has been gone all day. She often leaves early in the morning, spending hours waiting in line to fill out an application for some menial job, only to find out after several hours of waiting with fifty or sixty other applicants, that the job has been filled.

Entering the front room she finds Teresa alone, the room darkened with the drapes pulled, sitting at the chair by the window, rocking back and forth. She is mumbling to herself, unintelligibly then suddenly yelling, "Mikie! Lookout! Lookout!"

Maria, is now in front of her, bending over to her. "Mother, please try to eat something, you're wasting away...you're going to get sick. You can't go on this way...you're starting to scare the children with these outbursts," says Maria.

Teresa just glares at her, with complete disdain.

"We're living like rats in this hell hole with nothing but garbage to eat! I send you out to bring back some food...to beg or do *what ever you have to do*, to feed us and you come back empty handed! Again!" Teresa screams.

"Mother, I...I just can't do it. I rather starve than become a common beggar or worse...working the streets like a common...whore. I can't. I won't do it! Please mother, *never* ask me again to beg...or to sell my..."

"This is all your fault! First, you tell Mikie to hurry up. He'd be alive today. Then you run your father off. Mikie was the only man to ever take care of me and you killed him!"

Without warning, Teresa springs up, lightning quick, and with both hands, digs her fingernails into Maria's face, barely missing her eyes. Maria manages to fend her off momentarily, pushing her away, but Teresa, wiry and manically strong, recovers and is all over her again, screaming hysterically.

"You killed him! You killed him!" Teresa screams, wildly scratching and punching Maria.

Finally, Maria manages to break free, with blood streaming down her cheeks, crying hysterically, she bolts out the door down the stairs, to the street below.

She collects Renata, Rita and Marcella, playing jump rope on the street corner. Maria with girls in tow, half-walks half-runs to the house of Aunt Rose.

Maria frantically knocks on the front door. The front door opens to Aunt Rose, a short, slight woman in her early fifties with a kind face and lively dark Italian eyes. She is Teresa's older sister, by eight years. Aunt Rose, is shocked by the appearance of Maria, in a full sweat with dried blood on her face, her blouse torn, still trembling and panting frantically. Renata, Rita and

Marcella, are in tears.

Hearing the commotion, Aunt Rose's son, Anthony comes to the front door just as Maria and the children are entering the house. Anthony, is about five years older than Maria. He's a short, wiry, compact young man, with a receding hairline. They are very close. Anthony is about the same height as Maria, and an excellent dancer. They enter dance contests together where prize money is awarded, a national past-time diversion for many during the Hard Times, occasionally even winning few bucks. But it is mostly for the chance to get away from her terrible home situation, the heaviness of the immense unceasing responsibility of taking care of her mother and the children. It is a way for her to lose herself, in the music when she is out on that dance floor, doing the *au currant* dance steps to a full live orchestra, of a Duke Ellington songs like "Doin' the New Low Down", she is lost deep within herself, giving her a brief respite from the weight of her worries.

"Pia my God, you look terrible! What's happened, are you and the children alright? Come in, come in," says Aunt Rose as she herds Maria and the children into the kitchen, the most important room in every Italian home, where the scrumptious aroma of the ever-present big pot of tomato sauce simmering on the stove arouses pangs of hunger in Maria and the children. The smell of fresh baked rosemary bread permeates the kitchen and the rest of the house. It has been so long, since the children have had a complete meal where they felt satiated.

"Oh thank you Aunt Rose! Mother attacked me again, if I hadn't gotten away, I think she might have tried to kill me this time," Maria says on the verge of tears, restraining herself, trying desperately to maintain her image of strength and resolve in front of the children.

"Oh, Pia I'm so sorry dear. Here, you and the children sit down at the table. It must be over 20 blocks from your flat. I want to hear what happened but first, let's get you cleaned up," says Aunt Rose.

Anthony comes over to Maria, and placing his hand gently on her chin and turning it slowly toward the light, he just shakes his head, and says, "I don't think you'll need any stitches. You were lucky this time. And I don't think you'll have any scars...physical ones anyway. How do you expect us to win a jitterbug contest with you looking like you've just been mugged Pia, that mother of yours, is nutso. One of these days she's going to *really* hurt you...or the kids," says Anthony.

"Teresa has finally gone over the edge...poor dear. She had problems before Michaelangelo died...abandoned by that, *bastardo*, then losing the *bambino*...but losing her *only* son," she says tilting her head from side to side, while gently applying a damp washcloth to the cuts and abrasions on Maria's otherwise beautiful unblemished olive skin, causing Maria to wince. But somehow she remains stoic, and does not cry out. Aunt Rose continues "well, now she is a danger to you, the children, and herself...we must do something. My nephew Nicky is an attorney. I'll call him right now!" says Aunt Rose.

Aunt Rose leaves the kitchen to the hallway to make a call on the hand-crank phone.

"Hello, may I speak to Mr Nicholas Lauria, please? Thank you." About 10 seconds later, "Nicky, this is your Aunt Rose. I'm fine...*si, bene*...how's your mama? Good. Nicky, we need some advice from a *concigliori*. Maybe you could stop by here on your way home from work tonight? About six? *Oh Grazie*. I'll have a plate of cannelloni waiting for you. *Ciao bella*," says Aunt Rose.

While Aunt Rose is talking on the phone, Maria and the children are sitting around the kitchen table. The girls are drinking a bottle of Coca-Cola with a straw, a rare treat.

Aunt Rose comes back in the kitchen, "Nicky's going to stop by in about an hour. In the meantime, Pia you and the girls have a plate of pasta, we'll have to get you home, soon, Anthony will drive you. Teresa, should NOT be left alone. Here Pia" handing her a long hat pin, "just in case *tuo padre, il bastardo* comes around again," says Aunt Rose.

After Maria and the children have consumed as much rigatoni pasta, Italian sausage and green and red marinated bell peppers and fresh hot bread with butter, as they can possibly hold, for the first time in a long time, they experience the contentment, that only a full stomach of Italian comfort food can bring. They adjourn to the parlor.

Anthony has put some jitterbug music on the Victrola, and Maria and Anthony are dancing wildly. Marie, Marcella and Rita are dancing with each other. Aunt Rose, is sitting in her rocking chair, crocheting, her head bobbing from side to side, tapping her toes. The door bell rings, Anthony turns off the music and leaves the parlor to answer the door. Aunt Rose gets up and puts another record on the player—a hauntingly lyrical aria from Puccini's *Turandot*, *Nessun Dorma, None Shall Sleep*, sung by the now departed legendary Italian tenor Enrico Caruso, and returns to her embroidery. Anthony returns to the parlor with Nick.

"Pia...cousin Nick. Tell him what's going on with your mother," Anthony says.

Nick Lauria, is in his late 20s. Tall, handsome well-dressed, with the poise and confidence of a young professional.

As he motions her toward the sofa, Nick says, "Hi Maria. I'm a lawyer, Aunt Rose tells me that your mother is behaving erratically and she might be capable of harming, you or the children. So tell me what's up and I'll see if I can help."

Maria joins Nick on the sofa. Opera music in background overwhelms the conversation. Maria, is gesturing wildly, crying while acting out the incident with her mother earlier in the day, pointing to her face. Nick's face changes from incredulity to sympathy. He is comfortingly stroking Maria's hand.

Finally, Nick says, "Involuntary commitment to a State Mental Hospital, can be a difficult but not impossible task."

"I have such mixed emotions about doing this Nicky. Committing her to a mental institution, but I just don't know what else to do. She could hurt herself...or worse the children. She has lost complete touch with reality," says Maria, starting to sob.

"Well, Pia I can't help you with the decision process, all I can do, because you are family, is give you my best counsel...the rest will have to be up to you. If you decide to go forward, stop by my office next week, and I'll prepare the documents to petition the court and tell you exactly what you'll have to do to have her committed. It won't be easy," says Nick.

Nick pats Maria's hand again, and stands to leave. Aunt Rose approaches him with a covered dish of her legendary Cannelloni, Nicky's favorite. Standing on her tip-toes, she reaches up to caress his face, and says, "*Grazie...grazie mille, cara,*" and pulls his head down and gives him a tender kiss on the cheek.

Later that night in Saint Anthony's Catholic Church, just around the corner from her flat, Maria is lighting candles, fighting off the tears. Father O'Connor is quietly observing her in the warm glow of candle light—the Virgin Madonna. Her vulnerability stirs his loins, fueling his passion for her. She sits down in a pew, and begins sobbing hysterically. Feeling a hand gently on her shoulder, she turns to see the priest, standing there.

"Is there something wrong Maria? Would you like to talk about it?" says Father Patrick O'Connor. Facing him, searching his kind compassionate and inviting eyes, overcome by the complex emotions of her problem and her attraction to him, she throws herself into his arms, embracing him, her body trembling with emotion and desire against him. He is taken aback. He knows if he returns the embrace, there will be no turning back. He reluctantly, gently pushes her away.

"Maria, I...I wish. I can't...I'm so sorry..." he stops abruptly.

She is searching his eyes for some kind of affirmation. But, she only sees confusion, then painful resignation in his piercing blue eyes. Did she imagine his strong feelings for her? Maria now feels overwhelming confusion, then rejection and humiliation. For the first time, she realizes that they can never be together. Straightening her dress, she tries to compose herself. An awkward, moment. Both are frightened to acknowledge or even infer that there is something more to their relationship for fear of where it might lead.

Finally, regaining her dignity, again as a member of the flock, Maria says, "Oh, Father Pat...I feel so all alone, I don't know what to do. My mother's is so very sick. She is tormented with visions of the death of her son, her only son...she blames me. She desperately needs help. I am just so tired all the time. I have become afraid to even go to sleep at night for fear she'll attack me...or

her young children."

It is the priest talking now, "Well, indeed a difficult...and a lonely decision, lass. You must pray and have faith and you'll receive your answer. But when ya pray...do not forget to move yer feet, lass," he says smiling faintly, "and *never* allow yourself to become a victim...*noli timere*," Father O'Connor says.

"*Noli timere* Father?" Maria says.

"Latin. Be not afraid."

Three months later

A Saturday—it is a sunny, exceptionally hot day. Philadelphia can be unbearably humid in the summer months. The humidity in the flat is enervating—everyone is in a full sweat. The air is still and suffocating. Teresa's condition has deteriorated significantly—she has now lost touch with reality completely. All day, she sits by the window, rocking back and forth—she is skin and bones, looking out the window waiting to glimpse the apparition of her son, Mikie.

Maria is busily working in the kitchen, placing sandwiches in a picnic basket. The girls are in their swimsuits, cackling about going to the shore for the day.

"Mother, Anthony will be here in just a few minutes to drive us to the shore. Why don't you come with us...it is so unbearably hot in this flat. I don't know how you can stand to be in here," Maria says.

"Mother, please come with us...it'll be fun...a picnic," says Renata. "Yea, mommy...please come, *please*. It'll be so much cooler at the beach near the water," says Rita. And Marcella, the youngest chimes in, " Oh pleeeeeeze, mommy!"

There is a rap on the door, Anthony lets himself in, " Everybody ready? Aunt Tess?"

Maria picks up the picnic basket, "Com'mon kids, let's go. Mother, please come...it'll be the first family outing we've had in ages. It's such a beautiful day."

"Let's get going, I'm double parked. Are you coming, Aunt Teresa?" Anthony says.

Teresa has now turned around in her chair, and is eyeing the expectant children—she is uncomfortably hot and sweaty from the oppressive heat and humidity. She pauses, then stands up, hesitatingly, "It's so *damn* hot and humid in here. Okay...I guess I'll go," Teresa says.

Hearing this, Maria picks up the large heavy folded quilt she had purposely placed there, next to the mattress in the front room and places it under one arm, holding the picnic basket in the other hand.

"Yippee...mommy's coming," Renata and Rita gleefully scream.

This brings a wan smile to Teresa's face.

They all go out the door—the girls run out first, skipping and singing, with Teresa in between Anthony and Maria. She firmly locks the door behind her. The children are singing, "*She'll be coming 'round the mountain when she comes, when she comes, she'll be coming round the mountain.*"

They pile into Anthony's 1929 four-door Ford Model A sedan. Rita and Marcella are in the front seat with Anthony. Teresa in the middle of the rear seat between Maria and Renata—the quilt at Maria's feet. The front door windows are all the way down, the rear windows only half-down. Anthony is driving for about 5 minutes, when he spies a gas station with a pay phone and pulls in. As he gets out, he says over his shoulder, "I've got to make a quick stop for the little boys room...be right back."

Anthony gets out, goes to the restroom, then to the phone booth. It had been pre-arranged that if they could get Teresa out of the house, he would call Doctor Badgely at Bayberry State Mental Hospital and alert him to prepare for their arrival with Teresa. He makes sure that he is out of sight from the car, and calls the number. He talks animatedly on the phone, then quickly hangs up.

Anthony returns to the driver seat, and without saying a word, quickly drives off. He looks in the rear view mirror, making eye contact with Maria, and nods.

"Can't we roll down these windows back here, it so hot," Teresa says.

"They don't go down any further, they're broken, Aunt Teresa, " Anthony says.

Teresa now senses that something is not quite right. She looks first at the left rear door, then the right, and sees that the window cranks and the door handles on the doors have been removed. Seeing this she begins to get suspicious and agitated.

"Turn around Anthony, I want to go back! I want to go back!" yells Teresa.

"Everything's alright Mother. Just relax...we'll be there in about half an hour," says Maria while stroking her hand.

"Stop the car! Now! Let me out Anthony. Stop the car!" screams Teresa.

Anthony, stoically continues to drive without saying a word.

Teresa leaps for the door over Renata. She screams, as Teresa is on top of her frantically grasping at the removed handles, beating on the door, screaming, "Let me out! Let me out!"

Maria quickly reaches down to floor, and in one motion, unfolds the heavy quilt, and pounces on the back of the outstretched Teresa, throwing the quilt around her. She pulls her off of the screaming Renata, and wraps the heavy quilt around the front of Teresa. Anthony, following all of this in the rear view mirror, pulls over, jumps out and opens the door on Maria's side. He

quickly pulls off his belt, and wraps it around Teresa over the quilt. She is still slightly dazed and in shock, as he cinches the belt up tightly—a makeshift straitjacket, immobilizing her arms and dagger-like fingernails.

Teresa, now realizing that the outing is a ruse, is screaming and kicking frantically with Maria laying on top of her, Teresa's body and face pressed against the seat.

"Let me out...Pleeeese! Let me out!" Teresa screams.

Anthony jumps back in the driver's seat and speeds off.

"Mother, calm down...please," pleads Maria trying to stroke her head, "shh...just try to relax...don't fight it. We'll be there soon. Step-on-it, Tony! I don't know how much longer I can hold her."

The next half-hour is an eternity—a living hell. Teresa is madly flailing and screaming the whole time. Maria is in tears. The children are crying hysterically. In the rear-view mirror, sweat is pouring down Anthony's forehead.

"There's the sign to the hospital," yells Anthony.

"Thank God!" says Maria.

Anthony swerves into the driveway at the sign Bayberry Hospital into the long circular drive up to the front entrance. He jumps out and runs inside, returning momentarily with a doctor, a nurse and two orderlies dressed in all-white. The orderlies and the nurse come around to Maria's side of the car and open the rear side door.

Things have calmed down somewhat after the interminable half-hour drive out in the country-side of Philadelphia to the hospital.

Teresa, is now totally spent, sweating profusely from trying to resist, and being wrapped up in the heavy quilt straitjacket in the sweltering heat. Teresa cannot see out the window—she is quietly sobbing now.

Maria, releases her hold on Teresa, as the orderly reaches in and gently helps Teresa on to her feet. Seeing the orderly in all white, she half-heartedly rallies, but she is totally exhausted, her lank hair drenched with sweat, she surrenders—her body goes limp. The orderlies and nurse gently walk her to the front entrance where the doctor is waiting. Maria is unsteadily following right behind her with Anthony. The children stay in the car—the only sound is the sniffing girls, crying, in the background.

Doctor Badgely, mid 50-ish Jungian looking, is holding a file in his hand. He calmly assesses the situation, and in a tranquil, reassuring voice, "I'm Doctor Badgely. You must be the eldest daughter, Maria? You have some documents for me?" he says to the orderlies, "Please remove that belt and quilt from Mrs Caravaggio. Now, that must feel better, eh?" consulting a file, "Tess is it? Everything's going to be fine...just try to relax, we're going to take good care of you here."

The belt and quilt removed, the orderlies are now holding Teresa up

on each side by her emaciated arms. She looks so small, so pathetically frail and defeated now—a threat to no one. Maria on the verge of tears, hesitant, registers indecision—she is desperately trying to keep her composure. Wiping her eyes and nose with the back of her trembling hand, with her other hand, Maria produces a thick stack of documents from her purse.

"Doctor Badgely, the papers, that you required. The finding by the judge, that my mother's mentally incompetent with a strong likelihood for violence, and poses a danger to her children and herself to do grave bodily harm," Maria says in a quivering voice. "If you have any questions, you can contact our attorney, Mr Nicholas Lauria," she says handing papers to Doctor Badgely.

Quickly reviewing the documents, "Yes, everything appears to be in order. Now it would probably be best for your mother for you to say goodbye for now. You'll be able to visit her as often as you like."

Maria, now bending down in front of Teresa, puts her face close to her mother's to give her a goodbye kiss, tears streaming down her face, "Mother...I'm so sorry. I..."

Teresa, somehow manages to free her right arm from the grasp of an orderly, and slaps Maria, very hard, across the face, and says with bone-chilling slowness to Maria, "I *never*...want to see you *again*. *Ever!*"

"Oh Mommy...please, I had no choice, I...I..." says Maria, overcome with emotion.

Teresa, is now staring through Maria, totally impassive. Maria buries her face in Anthony's chest, and sobs uncontrollably, as the orderlies and nurse slowly walk Teresa Caravaggio into the entrance of the hospital, for the last time where she will live out the rest of her tormented 52 years, warehoused until her death at the age of 97.

Christmas Eve 1943 - A Catholic Hospital in Philadelphia

Maria's in a ward with two other recovering new mothers. After a very difficult three day delivery ordeal, she has just given birth to her second child. She is exhausted. Her hair is drenched in perspiration, her color ashen from loss of blood. She is sitting upright in the bed, waiting expectantly to see her newborn son.

The maternity nurse, Sister Mary, a Catholic Nun in a white habit enters carrying a bundled up baby. The maternity nurse blithely places the infant in Maria's outstretched arms, in bed.

"Maria, here's your baby boy. He's a long one. Doctor Swanson will be in soon," says Sister Mary.

Maria, beaming with joy, smiles and unsuspectingly folds back the swaddling clothes to reveal her son's face. Shock and horror—one eye is

bulging out its socket—the other completely swollen shut, with the angry red imprint of forceps going across his left eye, imbedded in his nose and forehead. The baby's breathing is very labored. He is whimpering like a sick puppy.

"Oh my God! My baby's eye...is it? Doctor! Doctor!" Maria screams.

Hearing the screams, Doctor Swanson, runs through the doorway. Seeing Maria with the baby in her arms, yells, "Nurse, this baby is supposed to be in the incubator! I left instructions *not* to show the baby to Mrs Kozlov, before I talked to her," then to Maria, "Mrs Kozlov, please calm down, the baby has a few problems...it was a very difficult delivery, let me..."

"A few problems...*what* kind of problems!" Maria shrieks.

"Your O-B was not available when the labor started, so the on-call doctor had to deliver him. We were very busy with 4 deliveries going on at one time. He said he had to resort to forceps to get him out," says Doctor Swanson.

"Oh Doctor...his eye...is it?" says Maria her lips trembling.

"We'll have to monitor that eye, closely. Frankly, I don't like the look of it. I think we can save it...there is one other thing Mrs Kozlov, your son was born with some sort of thick mucous in his lungs. Very unusual...we're going to have to take him from you now and put him in an incubator," he says feeling the baby's forehead "Nurse, he's burning up with fever. Please take the baby from Mrs Kozlov, and put him in the incubator...*now!*"

The maternity nurse reaches for the baby, but Maria refuses to give him up, studying her baby's face she is crying hysterically, worried that if he is taken away, she'll never see him again. Doctor Swanson intervenes, with a comforting, kind voice, "Let me have the baby. He'll be okay. Please Mrs Kozlov...it's for the baby's welfare. We *must* place him in the incubator...as soon as possible."

Maria reluctantly releases the baby, and watches as Doctor Swanson scurries out of the room with the baby. The maternity nurse, Sister Mary, hesitates, "I'm so sorry. No one told me about the incu..." She leans over Maria, grabs her hand and places a Rosary in it, and quickly exits the room, leaving Maria crying, and alone.

About 10 minutes later, Nikolai Kozlov, the father, strolls through the door, smiling. Seeing Maria's emotional state, he rushes up to her, "Pia, are you alright, dear? What's going on here? How's the baby?" Nikolai says taking her hand while holding their 5 year old daughter Nancy, with the other arm.

"Oh, mommy what's my little brother's name? Where is he? Can I play with him now...huh?" cries Nancy.

Maria, still in considerable pain and emotionally wrung out, smiles wanly, "Soon...I hope dear. I think we'll name him, Michaelangelo."

"That's a funny name. Mic...Mica...I can't even say it. Why'd ja name him dat, mommy?" says Nancy.

"He'll be named after my dear brother Michaelangelo, your uncle.

You can call him Mikie," Maria patiently says.

"Mommy I didn't know you have a brother. So I have an uncle?" says Nancy

"No dear, your Uncle is not alive. He was tragically killed at age twelve...on Christmas Eve...in an accident," Maria says.

"Oh..." says Nancy, her brow momentarily registering consternation, then almost instantaneously back to her normal, happy five-year-old expression of innocence.

"Oh Nicky, baby Michaelangelo...his left eye. They don't know if they can save it...and he's having problems breathing with a very high fever. They took him away from me. They *took my baby...away!*" Maria says sobbing.

"Now, now Pia, I'm sure..." Nicky starts to say.

"Nicky, I hope you don't mind me naming him after my brother. He has exactly the same coloring, blonde hair, blue eyes. Long and skinny, he is the reincarnation of my brother Michaelangelo...and it's Christmas Eve," says Maria.

"If that will make you happy, Pia. That's an okay first name...after all, I guess he is half-wop," says Nicky.

Two hours later in the darkened maternity ward, after Doctor Swanson has given Maria a mild sedative to help her sleep to rejuvenate her body ravaged by the difficult delivery and the revelations about the baby's ill-health, she's slipped into a restless, fitful sleep.

Images of her mother Teresa, smiling, in happier times before the Great Crash, holding, a smiling, always happy Mikie as an infant.

Maria and Michaelangelo, laughing together, even in the face of all the adversity they had faced together trying to keep the family together. The awesome responsibility that had befallen them to care for their siblings and their mother, who had become totally dysfunctional as a parent after the desertion by their father.

How close they had become. Michaelangelo, irrepressible, always smiling, even in the face of terrible adversity. And when Maria was exhausted, and didn't think she could go on, for another day...or an even another hour, he'd crack a joke, and make her laugh. That beautiful impish smile, that could light up a room, and it would be enough to keep her going.

Maria, running down several flights of stairs to the street below, yelling, "I'm coming Mikie! Hold on!" Then finding him laying in the cold wet snow under the truck. Holding her dear sweet brother

Michaelangelo in her arms as he lay dying, "I'm so cold Pia...please hold me..."

The images of her dying brother abruptly awaken her, "Don't go Mikie...don't leave me! Without you...I don't want to go on."

She is now wide awake, sitting upright in the hospital bed, drenched in perspiration.

"I can't lose him...again," Maria cries.

Maria is clutching the Rosary given to her by Sister Mary, "Oh God, I can't do this alone. I'll do anything you ask, just tell me what to do to save him."

Then the echoes of Father O'Connor, years earlier, "*Noli timere.*"

"Yes, Father. *Noli timere...be not afraid,*" Maria whispers making the sign of the cross.

April 1945:

Michaelangelo is back in the hospital, one of countless times that Maria has kept an all night vigil over her gravely ill son. Miraculously, his eye has been spared—his face is almost back to normal. Maria is physically and emotionally drained, working all day and staying at the hospital every night, she is monitoring his most recent crisis. It is always the same. The frantic wheezing—struggling for every breath as if it were his last. Sitting in a chair beside the hospital bed, about 2 AM, she has dozed off.

A hospital orderly Ella, a large matronly black woman with a kind face, enters the room emptying trash baskets—she is crying. The clanging and rustling sounds and Ella's sobbing awaken Maria.

"What's wrong Ella? Why are you crying?" says a drowsy Maria.

"Oh...I'm so sorry I woke you...hope I didn't wake the baby. Didn't you hear? FDR died tonight," says Ella between sobs, "He was such a great man...he cared for all of us...I feel like my own father just died."

With tears in her eyes, "Oh God, I loved him *more* than my own father...his kindness and empathy for us little folk. That WPA job kept me and my family alive," Maria says. The room is perfectly quiet, except for the sound of them both quietly sobbing, when Maria suddenly realizes—no wheezing sound. Michaelangelo is not breathing! She screams, "Ella, get the Doctor! Quick! He's stopped breathing!"

Ella runs from the room, screaming, "Doctor! Nurse, come quick...hurry!"

The doctor and nurse run into the room. Michaelangelo's face and tiny body are a dark gray, the color of death. Doctor Johnson rolls him over on his stomach and starts slapping on his back. A big green glob of mucous squirts out of his mouth—he is breathing again. His fragile little body heaving for air.

"Nurse, he's burning up with fever...we've got to get this fever down. Throw some ice in a basin with cold water...*now!*" Doctor Johnson screams.

Doctor Johnson scoops up Michaelangelo, running down the hall, with Maria trailing right behind him. The nurse is standing next to a large stainless steel basin, full of cold water and ice. He quickly, yet gently submerges his skinny little body. As he is screaming from shock of the freezing temperature of the water, his lungs begin to clear, spewing enormous amounts of yellow and green mucous.

"Oh Doctor, what's going on? Is he okay? *Is he going to be alright?*" Maria pleads.

"We got to him just in time, but if we don't get his fever down, but quick, he could sustain brain damage," Doctor Johnson says above the screaming, shivering Michaelangelo, now turning blue from the icy water. After about five minutes, Doctor Johnson, removes him from the basin, handing him to the nurse, "Please dry him off...put him in some clean pajamas and put him back in his bed. And stay with him, until I or Mrs Kozlov return."

"Oh, Doctor, what's wrong with my baby? How much more can his frail little body take?" Maria cries.

"Mrs Kozlov, sadly, I've seen cases *like* this before...while doing pathology autopsies on young children...1938, Med School at Columbia," Doctor Johnson says with an alarming air of gravity, "Doctor Anderson, Director of Research there, dubbed this horrible disease, Cystic Fibrosis. "

"Autopsies? But Doctor...isn't there a cure?" Maria pleads.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs Kozlov. If it is CF, there is no known cure. We don't even have reliable diagnostic tests. About 1 in 200 white babies are born with it," he says.

"Nothing can be done? How...how long...would he have Doctor?"

"I am going to be honest with you...so you can prepare yourself for the possibility of... The life expectancy varies. Maybe, ten years. Most die before they reach five. We can't even be sure if your baby has it, but one thing *is* for sure. Get him to a warm dry climate, like California. He won't survive another winter here. I'm so sorry," Doctor Johnson says, then gently patting her on the shoulder, he turns and dejectedly walks away.

Maria returns to the bedside of her son. The nurse gives her a faint, forced smile of encouragement that they are taught in nursing school, and leaves. From the exhaustion of the near death episode, he has lapsed into a fitful sleep. He is now breathing on his own, but still wheezing and fighting for each breath, his lungs still filled with mucous. She reaches into her purse beside the bed, and pulls out the Rosary, given to her by the Nun, Sister Mary at his delivery. She grasps his skinny little hand, and wraps the beads of the Rosary around the long fingers and says a complete Rosary, "I won't let you die...not this time...my little man," all the while stroking his feverish forehead, *And when you pray, don't forget to move your feet, lassy.*

- Chapter 2 -

1955 - The San Fernando Valley - near Los Angeles, California

In 1946, to prolong Michaelangelo's life, the family moves to the more temperate climate of Southern California.

Maria, young Michaelangelo, now almost 12, and daughter Nancy, now 17, are living in a run-down rented house in a lower middle class neighborhood. The father, Nikolai, has left the family about 2 years prior, being chased by his emotional demons compounded by his alcoholism, he has returned to Philadelphia.

Maria works two jobs, a clerk in a Hobby Shop, and a sales girl at J.C. Penny—both at minimum wage. Life is hard, but they are making it—barely. In between jobs, in the evenings and weekends, she paints commission portraits, for not much money, but it helps to satisfy her creative compulsion to make art.

Nancy, now in high school, is tall, and starting to develop into a beautiful young lady, with the dark dancing eyes and coloring of Gina Lollobrigida the sensual Italian actress. Michaelangelo, now entering puberty, has grown very tall, and very skinny. With blond hair and blue eyes, physically and in temperament, he is the incarnate of Maria's deceased brother, his namesake. Through lots of exercise, fresh air and sunshine of the temperate California climate he has "outgrown" his condition. He is relatively asymptomatic.

Since birth, mother and son have forged a very special bond. Michaelangelo's now about the same age of her brother when he was tragically killed. Maria has proactively treated his respiratory maladies, using intuitive, unorthodox methods all through his childhood. She fashions a rawhide necklace with a small sack of ground up Eucalyptus leaves and oil, which she makes him wear around his neck. He smells like a cough drop and is teased mercilessly by his contemporaries. But he is able to diffuse the taunting and disarm his antagonists with his quick witted sense of humor and good-natured but barbed retaliation—always with that 1000 watt smile.

On a Friday night Maria, Mikie and Nancy are sitting at the dining room table, just finishing up dinner. It has become the family Friday night ritual for Maria to make a big Italian dinner, pasta, fresh baked rosemary bread, complete with candlelight, and wine. In the background, opera is playing on the record player, an aria from Puccini's tragic tale of an oppressed artist, Tosca. In the opera, Floria Tosca is singing the classic aria, *Vissi d'arte, I Lived for My Art*, now accompanied by Maria Caravaggio while sitting at the table,

the candlelight flickering in her sad, luminous eyes...

Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore,
I lived for my art, I lived for love

non feci mai male ad anima viva!
I never did harm to a living soul!

While singing Maria gets up from the table, walks over to the record player, and abruptly lifts up the turn table arm, turns and gazes pensively at the children.

Finally, she says, "Kids...there's something we need to talk about. Your father has been writing me long, emotional letters for the past six months...he wants to come back home. He insists that he's okay now, that he's worked through his problems, that he has stopped drinking and womanizing...and that he misses me and you kids terribly. He's very lonely...he says he's driving out to California, regardless. He'll be here probably by tomorrow afternoon."

Nancy says, "Mother...do you *really* think he's changed? I love daddy and I miss him, but I don't know *if* I can be around that sullen, negative attitude. He's so off and on...especially when he drinks. I don't know, mom."

Upon hearing the news of the possibility of his father's return, Mikie's face darkens, "This is starting to look like a 'B' as in Bad, movie that just keeps playing over and over. Leaves...comes back...leaves...comes back. We're managing okay without him. It ain't paradise, but I don't know if I could deal with that abuse again. Yea, I know he had it tough as a kid, growing up in a Catholic orphanage and all. But...if you do take him back....if he comes after me again after few shots of vodka, I'll just take so much of his bullshit."

Nancy chimes in, "Mom, you've worked so hard to make this place so homey and comfy, fixed it up out of almost nothing, used furniture...and your beautiful paintings. For the first time in my life, I don't have a knot in my stomach, when I come home from school."

Maria says, "Well, kids, I feel the same way. I'm very torn...I guess I still love your father, that's why we're having this family discussion. I just don't know what to do. But, I do know this. How much longer I can work two jobs at minimum wage...I just don't know. Sometimes, I'm so exhausted, I can barely get out of bed in the morning. At least your father...when he's working can contribute some income, but..."

Mikie interrupts her, "Top ten...Fugitive Father of Year the last two years, running. Okay mom, I know it sounds horrible, but if he can contribute a paycheck it might give you a chance to catch your breath a little, maybe even start painting seriously again," he says with that big smile. "I say, give him one last chance. If the Prince of Darkness doesn't get it, he's outta here. And if he even lays a drunken finger on you again, I'm only a little skinny kid...but he's

gotta sleep sometime...and I gotta a big Louisville slugger to help remind him."

"Mom, you just look so tired all the time. Okay, mom...one last chance. We love you mommy," Nancy says tearing up.

Maria reaches out with both her arms and draws her children toward her, with tears in her eyes, she gives them a big hug and a kiss on their foreheads, "Thank God for you kids...I don't know what I'd do without you," Maria says burying her face between the heads of her beloveds.

Nikolai Romanovich Kozlov was a classically trained, good but not great violinist. They had met at a Federal Art Project which was the Humanities and Arts arm of the Great Depression-era New Deal Works Progress Administration. It operated from August of 1935, until June of 1943 to provide employment for qualified artists, musicians, actors, and authors on local relief rolls. Reputed to have created more than 200,000 separate works, artists-created posters, murals and paintings. Some works still stand among the most-significant pieces of public art in the country. Maria and her family lived off her wage working as an artist—she became a very accomplished painter, mostly painting large complex murals depicting the plight of the working class, often with fifteen or twenty life-size images of toiling men and women.

She was smitten by Nicky's considerable charm, charisma...and his seductive violin playing. He was insufferably arrogant—a shameless poser who promoted himself as a Russian Prince with Royal Blood. He declared himself a third cousin removed of Nicholas Romanov The Second, who had been the Tzar of Russia, until ignominiously dethroned by the Russian Revolutionaries. In 1918, he and his entire family were executed—unceremoniously in a dank basement by the Bolsheviks, their bodies then destroyed by fire, the ashes buried.

Maria and Nicky were married in early 1938. When the children were growing up, they were constantly exposed to classical music and the arts. Maria stayed home to raise the children, and pursued her art, while Nicky the father pursued his "career" in music, and women in equal measure, performing as a member of the local symphony, playing second violin while incessantly fiddling around with its female members.

Most nights he was gone until late "rehearsing". With the temperament, and libertine morals of the infamous 19th century violinist Niccolò Paganini, his melancholic dark Slavic charm and tall, brooding good looks, was found very attractive by women. He was the Ruskie edition of Maria's own father who instead of Chianti, drank copious amounts of straight vodka. A "mean-drunk", after three or four shots, he would often mete out emotional and physical abuse to his family. It is a well-recognized psycho-sociological phenomenon that children often end up marrying a facsimile of their parent, including personality and temperament, despite the abuse and often, the alcoholism they were subjected to. And like Maria's father he was an unrepentant and unabashed womanizer, often in front of Maria and the

children. With his various jobs as a musician, they made enough to get by...just barely. Every month it was a struggle to pay the rent and put enough food on the table.

When the family relocated to Southern California because of Mikie's poor health, the entertainment business in Hollywood was flourishing and there were many open positions for mega-studio orchestra musicians for film scores. The money was better, and work more plentiful.

With Nicky's exposure to the new-found '*la dolce vita*' in Hollywood, he was gone most nights, again "rehearsing". By the time she finally realized her mistake, and that Nicky was never going to change, she had two children, and as a devout Roman Catholic could never be granted a divorce. Coupled with the fact that she still deeply loved the charming and handsome Ruskie reprobate. Like most post-war women, she had few options to leave the marriage and support herself and her children. So she stuck it out, all the while honing her skill as an artist, eventually developing a non-intimidating method of teaching oil painting which would later propel her to international fame as teacher of painting on Public Television, "Paint Along with Pia."

Nicky would often be gone for several days at a time for out-of-town "location work". But like a bad dream, he always came back. When confronted by Maria about his obvious dalliances, he was always dismissive and accused Maria of being an overly possessive, jealous '*wop*'. He would then play the victim, act offended until she would threaten to throw him out of the house, in a rage sometimes piling his beautiful Italian suits and shoes in a heap by the living room door. The arguments were often, loud and violent. But Nicky, in his own self-centered way loved Maria and the children. Wanting to keep his family and home, he would always try to charm his way out of it—act contrite and promise to reform his behavior. They would go to bed and make up. And all would be okay for month or two, until the next volcanic eruption.

Saturday afternoon

An old beat-up Dodge sedan with Pennsylvania plates, freckled with red rust from years of Philadelphia road salt, pulls into the driveway. Nancy is washing dishes at the sink, looking out the window, when she sees her father pull up in the driveway.

"Mom, Daddy's here!" yells Nancy.

Nikolai Kozlov gets out of the car, unfolding his tall frame. As he begins to stretch his arms outward, the front door opens and Maria, Mikie and Nancy, come out to greet him. Nicky smiles, and walks over to them, and throws his arms around Maria. He gives her a kiss, and a hug. Maria tentatively reciprocates.

"Hi Pia...put on some weight, unh? Hi kids, didya miss your daddy?" he says.

"Welcome...home Nicky," Maria says tentatively.

Nikolai then gives his daughter and his son, awkward hugs.

"How was the trip, Dad?" Mikie says.

"Geez...getta loada dem ears on dat kid, looks like Mickey Mouse...an' wit dem blue eyes and blond mop, you sure he's my kid, Pia? Yea...the drive was real long, especially in this slow old beater, about a week of driving. I'll get a newer one first thing...maybe a Caddy, something more suitable for a Prince," says Nicky without a trace of irony.

"Come on inside, we can get your things later," says Maria.

"Sure...here Mickey Mouse, catch," Nicky says tossing his toiletry case at the now Mickey. Nikolai and Maria walk through the front door into the living room, with Nancy and Mikie behind. From then on his father will call him Mickey Mouse, the Mickey which will stick with rest of the family replacing Mikie...for the rest of his life.

The living room is nicely decorated with used furniture that Maria has refinished, paintings she has done, and curtains she has made. Through her ability to make something beautiful from almost nothing, the home is comfortable and cozy for her and the children. She has placed fresh cut flowers in a vase, in anticipation of his arrival. The now, Mickey is standing next to his mother.

Nikolai walks into the room, looking around contemptuously, at the furniture and the curtains. He then walks up to one of Maria's paintings and eyeing it critically, with a smug expression, he shakes his head side to side "I see your paintin' hasn't improved since I've been gone," then waving his hand in the general direction of the furniture, "Where'd ya find all this junk?"

Mickey drops the toiletry case. Maria grabs her son's hand, as her knees buckle momentarily. He and his mother exchange glances, he is the same arrogant, egomaniac. "*Bastardo!*", mutters Maria just loud enough for only him to hear. But it is too late now to reconsider. Maria must bide her time. Her son Michaelangelo just hangs his head, downcast. Shit! It's already started.

"I'm hungry...whatta ya got to eat? Got any vodka in the house?"

- Chapter 3 -

Summer 1964—Burbank, California

Maria and Mick are busily moving furniture and placing plastic over the carpet of their modest apartment. Setting up 4 folding easels and stools, Mick now about 6'6" is still very skinny.

"That ought ta do it, Mick...I think we can squeeze 4 students in here today," says Maria

"Yea...if you stand outside and yell through the open window over the traffic noise. You'll have to coordinate your lecture with the red light at the corner or the primal Picassos won't hear a word," says Mick

"Hmm...color coordinated lessons. I like it. Thanks for helping Mickey. Oh...this just came in the mail today for you," says Maria handing the envelope to Mick, who opens and reads it.

"Well, how about that," says Mick smiling broadly.

"What is it? Is it anything serious? You didn't get drafted, did you?" Maria says.

"It's from the head coach, at the University of California, at Berkeley. It's an offer for a full basketball scholarship. I can't believe it, but there's an if...a very big *if*...I can gain enough weight by the time the semester starts. Well I know what I'm going to be doing this summer...pumping iron, and eating like a fat boy. They also want physical exam to make sure I'm not damaged goods, I'd better get in to see Doctor Dave."

"Oh, Mickey, congratulations! How wonderful! I'm so happy and proud of you. Maybe you can write your father with the good news, I'm sure he'll be proud of you too," says Maria.

"Yea...he'd never admit it, but I guess in his own way...too bad isn't it. A guy with his talent and potential. He just could never make the right moves on the board," say Mick.

"Your poor father...so self-destructive. I'm so sorry you kids had to live under that dark cloud. You're *so* different from him, you can do anything you set your mind to," says Maria.

"Ya know, my high school coach, took me aside at the end of the season and said, *Kozlov, gain some weight...and the only thing that's missing in your game is a belief in yourself, you can be as good as you'll let yourself be.* Now that I've got a shot at a Division One University...I gotta admit, I'm a little intimidated by it. All those years of abuse...belittling us, you, me and Sis. My fate...to fail? Like I inherited a loser gene from the ol' man," he says.

"Oh Mickey, sometimes I wonder if I did the right thing, taking him

back. I used to lay awake nights agonizing over it...what it did to you kids, I'm so sorry," Maria says choking up.

Mick walks over to his mom and gives her a big hug then holding his outstretched hands on her shoulders, with gentle shake for emphasis, "Hey mom...don't you ever even think that. We had our backs to the wall. We had no options...survival remember? I was the one who told you to give him a chance," says Mick trying to console his mother.

"Okay, son. Since you're going away, maybe we should talk about the painting classes. Can't use the apartment anymore...too crowded, and I'm getting more students, every week. It's kinda fascinating...almost everyone interested in learning to paint, feels so intimidated by the process...by the art elite. You don't have to cut off your left ear to learn to paint. It should be fun and accessible to *everyone*, and that's what I intend to do...to share the joy of the creative experience with everyone and anyone. It's what has kept me going all these years. Mickey, what do think about renting a space to start a painting school, you know, sort of Sunday painters' classes. Fun, but without the academic orthodoxy?" says Maria.

"Hmm...Sunday Painters. I like it...I think the business could take off, and I like the idea. Democratize the process...give 'em a taste, and let them take it from there. Just remember there's a lot of art teachers out there, but, your special gift is not to teach art per se, so much as simplifying, and communicating it in a fun, non-intimidating way. For your mostly mid-life students, your success is as much about the social element—think social director on a cruise liner, ensuring everyone is having a good time. Hopefully as long as they're enjoying themselves, many may be content enough to stay with just your *hors d'oeuvre* art.

If we can find a place early this summer, maybe we can put it all together before I have to leave in September. I say let's go for it, mom," says Mick

"Great. We'll start looking this week," says Maria.

"Okay mom, tomorrow afternoon, after I get in to see Doctor Dave for the physical for UCB," Mick says.

A Doctor's examining room

Mick is sitting on an examining table, leafing through a Sports Illustrated Magazine, the swimsuit edition, smiling when Doctor David Gardner walks in the room wearing a white coat and usual medical regalia. Doctor Gardner is an upbeat, 40-ish ex-jock.

"Hey Mick, how ya doin? Congratulations on your season. I saw a few of the games. You guys had a killer team," says Doc Gardner

"Thanks, Doc. Yea...we did okay, won league and almost won the Regional CIF Championship," says Mick

"So...where are ya goin' to go to college?" Doc says.

"Well Doc, I just got a recruitment letter from UC Berkeley. They've offered me a full ride...if, I can put on about 20 lbs. to bang the boards with the big boys...and they need an okay from you. Can I pull it off in 3 months?" says Mick.

"20 pounds? Honestly, Mick? 10 good pounds...maybe," Doc says.

"Doc, I eat like a piranha, but I am *so* damn tired of being skinny...the catcalls from the stands, the tired old Ichabod Crane jokes," says Mick.

Doctor Gardner smiles, "Mick...stick out your tongue, and say ahhh," Doc says inserting a tongue depressor.

"Sure Doc...my impression of a human zipper...ahhh...ahhh..." Mick says standing up sticking his tongue way out, arms at his sides.

"Okay...okay, you got me on that one," says the grinning Doc.

"Mick, there is one thing we *could* try, some geriatric anabolic steroids," Doc says.

"Anything Doc...I'm desperate."

"Okay. Mostly for old folks, who can't retain muscle mass. Here's the deal. I've heard that the Russian Olympic athletes have been popping these little white pills, Dianabol...huge muscle mass and strength gains off the charts," Doc says while stethoscoping Mick.

"You've definitely got my attention...tell me more," says Mick.

"*But*...there are two known immediate side effects. One, *extremely* aggressive, sometimes antisocial behavior...and two, spontaneous copious nose bleeds," Doc says.

"Not surprised...antisocial behavior...bloody noses, one usually follows the other," says Mick.

"And frankly, because these anabolic steroids are relatively new, we don't know much about the long term possible deleterious health consequences, if any. Harmful side effects often don't reveal themselves, sometimes for years, or even decades...so I'd advise you to go slow. If you start experiencing nasty side effects, back off...okay?" Doc says.

"Hey, Doc...that's it? Just a little white pill? So I grow a mono-brow. I'm desperate...no gain, lotsa pain. No scholarship to UCB...no basketball and no school of architecture," says Mick.

"Okay then, here's a prescription. I'll get a letter out that you're good to go. Refills...give me a call. Good luck, Mick," says Doc handing him the prescription.

"Hey, thanks, Doc...really appreciate it. Hopefully, my new moniker, Mick the Mauler," say Mick shaking hands with the Doc.

Later that day

Mick is driving the older family used car. Maria has the classified newspaper rentals on her lap.

"Well, Mom...so far we're oh-for-four...you want to keep looking some more today?" Mick says.

"Every time I tell them that I'm divorced...*sorry, no husband, no lease*. Let's call it a day. I'll cook you a nice pasta dinner," Maria says.

"Sounds good to me. Starting today, I am the galloping gourmand," Mick says.

As the car rounds the corner about two blocks from the apartment across the street from Saint Ignatius Catholic Church, Maria screams, "Stop! Mick stop the car!"

Mick slams on the brakes.

"What?!" Mick says.

"Did you see that "For Rent" sign in the window back there?" Maria says.

"*Jezzuz*, mother, you scared the hell out of me. I thought we ran over a flock of Nuns," Mick says.

"Back up...quick!" Maria yells.

Mick, shaking his head, smiling, backs up to the front of a commercial building with four offices with large picture windows in each. Before the car stops moving, Maria jumps out and runs to the unit, peering into the front picture window. Mick joins her at the window.

"It's perfect! Plenty of room...good light, and just a short walk from the apartment. Let's go talk to someone," says Maria.

"Yep...and conveniently right across the street from Saint Obnoxious," says Mick nodding toward the Catholic Church.

Maria and Mick enter the office with "Fogerty Real Estate" painted on the window.

Mavis Beatrice McCoy, 40-ish, with big beehive hair, and movie make-up is sitting at a desk—day-glo pink lipstick about a half-inch above where her lips used to be, with permanently surprised penciled arched eyebrows. She's touching up her long fingernails with bright red polish, totally oblivious to Mick and Maria. The second, make that the first thing a healthy 18 year old male with a fertile female fantasy quotient notices, is the considerable cleavage. They are definitely the 'real McCoy'. Once drop-dead gorgeous, she's "still got game". With a cigarette dangling from her lips, eyes squinting from the wafting smoke, she's blithely singing along with a Hank Williams country music ballad, playing loudly on the radio:

Your cheatin heart, will tell on you-ah-ooooo...

When tears come doooooown, Like falling rain...

A desk nameplate reads "May Bea McCoy", then in smaller letters underneath... "May Bea Not, Buster."

"Excuse me...*excuse me!*" Maria yells over the music.

Mavis looks up. She's startled to see Mick's looming tall frame. She scans him up and down, then turns down the radio. "What kin I do fer ya? My yer a big-en. You're going to be quite a man...if in y'ever grow into dem feet," says Mavis looking up at Mick, smiling warmly.

"Well, May...you know what they say about men with big feet don't ya? Maybe...maybe not, only one way to find out," Mick says.

"Ah...*excuse me*. I'd like to talk to someone about the office rental," says Maria.

"Sure, honey," says May Bea smiling mischievously at Mick looking him up and down. Then looking over to Maria, "and just who shall I say isuh, callin?" She asks.

"Maria Kozlov...and this is my son Mick," Maria says very business-like.

"Pleased to make yer 'quantence, Mick...and Maria," says May Bea.

May Bea struggles up, wearing a skirt maybe ten years too tight, and spike-heels her way with a nice side to side saunter to an office in the back, returning with the landlord. Ed Fogerty, is middle-aged round, very short, with a W.C. Fields whiskey nose and a body to match, preceded by a cloud of smoke from a huge stogy grafted to sausage turquoise-ringed fingers. Wearing some kind of reptile skin boots with two inch heels, a country and western shirt with opalescent snaps just about ready to blow out at the waistline, and a turquoise boulder bolo-tie. He looks like a walking 50s Sears and Roebuck catalog...for dwarfs. All this stacked under a comically out-of-scale ten gallon Stetson.

"Ed, this here's uh...Maria...Ko...uh Koz...and this here long drinka watta is her son Mick," she says.

"*Missus*...Maria Kozlov," says Maria.

Ed Fogerty shakes Maria's hand, then Mick steps up to him, dwarfing him, engulfs his hand with his huge mitt. Fogerty, immediately uncomfortable with the size disparity retreats.

"Uh...so, yer interested in the rental? What do you want to use it for? Ya know, we're pret-ty part-icaler around here," warns Ed Fogerty.

Mick, looking around at the very pedestrian decor, spies on the wall, a cheaply framed Remington print, a landscape of a hunched cowboy on horseback somewhere in the plains. Trying to make small talk...cowboy to cowboy, "I can sure see that...you have a Remington," Mick says.

"Yeap...keep it in the back...loaded and cocked...just in case. Never

know when them *damn* Commies are going to try invade the good ol' U. S. of A," says Ed Fogerty.

As Mick starts to respond, Maria jabs him in the ribs with her elbow.

"Uh...Mr Fogerty, I'm an artist and a teacher. I'm looking for a place to teach students how to paint and..." starts Maria.

Ed Fogerty interrupts, "*No* goddam Beatnik Commies...with them beards, hanging around here. No siree."

"No...no...all my students are very established members of the community, like the wife of the Mayor of Burbank and the wife of Congressman Robert Resnick," says Maria.

"Hmm...so, where does your husband work?" says Ed Fogerty

"Uh...he's on the road most of time. I doubt that you'll *ever* see him," Maria says.

"Well, I don't know..." he says hesitatingly "But what's he do?" Ed Fogerty asks.

"Vanish...uh...Vanishing Man, a very uh...*manly* magazine, you would of course know what I mean, about the rugged Western-John-Wayne types...sadly, a disappearing breed of man...in the ol' U S of A. He's the CEO, I'm sure you've heard of it," says Mick.

"Uh...well of course. Yea I've...heard of it," says a bemused Ed, mustering his most manly voice.

"Hmm...well, Okay. First and last, security deposit...let's see, \$650, up front. Fill out the lease...you and your husband sign it, along with a check, and you can move in," he says.

"Thanks. I'll have everything back to you in about a week...my husband's...*away*," says Maria.

They leave the office and get into the car.

"Well, congratulations, mom, looks like you've got yourself a studio!" Mick says as May Bea removes the "For Rent" sign from the window of the unit.

"Thanks...one minor detail. I haven't a clue how we're going to come up with the \$650. CEO of Vanishing Man?" Maria say with a giggle.

"Yeap, Chief *Escape* Officer," Mick says with that same impish grin of her dearly departed brother, Mikie, as he starts the car and pulls away from the curb.

That same evening, Maria and Mick are sitting at the candlelit dinning room table. Opera music is playing softly in the background. Mick pours some Chianti into the glasses.

"Mom...a toast," he raises his glass, "to life...no insurance...so always

eat dessert first," Mick says. Maria and Mick raise their glasses to toast.

"Mickey...that's it!" Maria screams as she slams her glass down, jumps up and runs to the credenza in the dining room, wildly pulling drawers open, throwing papers into the air. Mick is incredulous.

"Mom...have you lost it?! Have you been like secretly stashing some Tiramisu?" Mick says. Finally, she finds a large brown accordion envelope—opening it, she sits down at the table.

"Yes...here it is, a life insurance policy. Remember when I won first prize for the Toastmistress National Speech Contest? I had a choice of a European cruise...or a life insurance policy. I got it for you kids, in case anything happened to me...with your father," she's reading out loud now "Death Benefit \$1000...Okay...okay, surrender cash value...\$850. But I'm so torn. Should I cash it in? I was saving it for you kids," Maria says.

"Well, that cruise...one way would've done you a whole lot more good getting away from the Prince of Darkness. Mom, the best thing you can do for your kids is for you to be happy and independent, doing what you love. *Of course*, you should cash it in," Mick says.

Maria picks up the lease from the dining room table and signs it. "Okay then...it's settled. Now, I've just got to cash it in...probably take about a week or so to get the money. By the way, Mickey, sign your fathers name, 'Nikolai Kozlov', right under my signature on the lease," says Maria.

"So...you want the Prince's autograph? Ironic...impersonating a person, who is impersonating...a person. Okay," with great flourish and fanfare, he signs the lease mimicking his father's glowering expression. "This is probably the nicest thing he *never* did for you," Mick says.

"Not a bad impression of the Prince, except the expression needs a little work...not quite dark enough," Maria says.

"Now how about some pasta. All this 'creative financin' sure makes a Manly Man hungry," Mick says.

"Yeap...pasta power...comin' right up. It's going to take a ton of work to get that place ready. We've only got a month and about three hundred bucks. Unfortunately son, The Sunday Painter's School will have to defer your compensation. Can we pull it off?" Maria says.

"Sure...count on it mom. As long as my compensation package includes all the pasta and meatballs I can eat. By the way, we'll have to work around my afternoon weight room workouts...and my painting and sculpture classes at UCLA Extension, two nights a week," says Mick, again with the same can-do irrepressibility of Maria's brother Mikie.

While Maria is in the kitchen, furiously whipping up a big pot of pasta, Mick opens a pill bottle labeled Dianabol and shakes out one small white pill, hesitates, then another, and downs them both with wine.

About two weeks later

Mick is working out with weights, doing bench presses. He is experiencing incredible gains in strength in just one week. Bill, a very muscular friend, working out with him, is spotting him.

"Jeez man, what the hell's got into you all of sudden, you're lifting a 75 pounds more than your best," says Bill.

"One more rep!" he grimaces, as he places the bar on the bench press rack. "I've got just 10 weeks to get strong enough to bang wit da big boys," Mick says, panting heavily.

Suddenly, Mick's nose explodes—blood gushing out all over his shirt. He grabs a towel to his nose to stem the bleeding.

"Hey Koz, that's like the third bloody nose you've had this week. What's going on, man?" Bill says.

"I told you, man...mind your own *goddamn* business. I know what I'm doing!"

Mick jumps up and storms out of the gym to the shower area.

His nosebleed finally abated, he takes a long hot shower for 15 minutes. As he is drying off, with just a towel wrapped around his waist...he's standing in front of the mirror, posing and flexing his newly developed arm and chest muscles, smiling admiringly, *Yea baby...hide the women and children. Mick the Mauler is in town.*

Mick and Maria now undertake the project of remodeling the office space to teaching studio:

— *Mick - painting, wiping his brow, he gets paint all over his face. Maria, also painting, laughing at Mick. Mick, laughing, dabs Maria's nose with the paint brush.*

— *Mick assembling easels with a screwdriver, checking the blisters on his hands, with a mountain of discarded boxes, when a delivery truck arrives with 10 more cartons; utility tables to assemble.*

— *Mick sitting against the wall, head back, with a wet towel covered with blood.*

— *Maria sewing the awning for the front window, and antiquing a plaster lamp. Happy and smiling.*

— *Maria and Mick, exhausted and collapsed on the floor, laughing hysterically.*

The transformation is finally complete, with little time, or money to spare before the Grand Opening of the Sunday Painters School of Art.

It's late evening, and Mick is standing with his arm around Maria's shoulder looking at the front of the Studio from the street. One of Maria's paintings in the front picture window, with a spotlight on it, is framed with gold leaf letters on the window "Sunday Painter's School of Art". Maria has planted colorful Azaleas in the front, and there are several hanging pots with colorful flowers. Visible through the front door, numerous easels, stools and tables arrayed, ready for students. It looks positively smashing.

"Well mom, we did it...with two days to spare before the High Noon Big Bash on Saturday," Mick says.

"Oh, Mickey..." Maria says hugging Mick about the waist, "it looks so...*molto elegante*. I'm so proud of you, you really came through."

"Thanks...it was a team effort. How many are you expecting on Saturday?" Mick says.

"Sent out about 100 of your silk screen invitations. They got a great response...but I'll be encouraged if 50 actually show up. Our neighbors and Fogerty and May Bea got one too. I sure hope this works. After paying for the food, jazz trio and booze, we're down to our last twenty five bucks. I contacted the L.A. Times, the Calendar Arts section *did they 'know about the emerging avante garde art movement...Left Coast Greenwich Village, in downtown Burbank?* I think they bought it," Maria says.

"Yeah, *the Left Bank of Burbank*." Mick says.

"They promised to send someone out...with pictures, so no jeans and tennis shoes, *capisci?*" Maria says with a good-natured *mamma mia* scold.

"*Sì, mama mia...capisco*," Mick says.

"Let's celebrate! I'll buy you the biggest steak in town. Dinner and a movie. I'd like to see "The Ten Commandments" again, with that dreamboat, Charlton Heston as Moses," Maria says.

"Mom, that'll be, what...the third time, for God's sake?" Mick says.

"I know...I know. But it's not for me. Since you're going to be leaving the nest, where I can't keep on eye on you, I thought this would be a good last minute refresher course. You know...*Honor thy father and mostly thy mother...and do not commit adultery...remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy.*"

"That's my *Yiddishe Momma*, you never quit do ya. Okay...here's the deal. In the major leagues, one for three, that's .333, it's considered an All-star batting average. So...all I can tell ya is that while I'm gone, I promise to maintain a .333 batting average. I'll let you figure out how that shakes out. Deal?" Mick says.

"Looks like you win...this time, anyway," Maria says with a motherly *this is not over* raised eyebrow.

"Okay then...you got a date, mom. Real red meat...a big thick juicy steak. Far out! So Saturday it's *show time!* And I've gotta little surprise for ya,"

Mick says.

In February 1963, Cinerama Inc. unveiled a radically new design for theaters in Hollywood, to screen its movies. Based on the geodesic dome developed by R. Buckminster Fuller, costing half as much to build as conventional theaters of comparable size, and in half the time. With its 86 foot wide screen, advanced acoustics and 70mm film capability, the Cinerama Dome remained a favorite for film premieres and "event" showings.

Maria and Mick are seated near an aisle, to accommodate Mick's long legs. The theater darkens, the overture music swells and the opening credits start.

"Man, it's really hot in here. What's with the air conditioning? I'm in a full sweat," Mick says.

"Well it does take place in the desert...adds to the realism, dear. How was your steak?" Maria says.

"Excellent! Your lobster? Mick says.

"Wonderful, way too much though...doggie bag's, in my purse," Maria says patting her carpetbag purse, big enough for any contingency including pestilence, famine or flood.

The movie starts—it's a long one, about three and a half-hours. About three hours into the film, the lobster in Maria's purse is really starting to ripen—a very strong fishy smell. Mick is sniffing the air, looking at Maria, who is rapt, totally oblivious. Finally, the money scene, very dramatic and very serious, where Moses parts the Red Sea, the violin music swells, there are fish flopping all around on the now bare sea floor, on that huge wrap-around screen.

For 1956, very realistic cutting-edge CGI, computer generated imagery, from famous Hollywood Director Cecile B. DeMille. Mick taps Maria's knee to get her attention, and points to her purse, and holds his nose. She opens it, and the eye-watering unmistakable aroma of spoiled fish—of Biblical proportions—leaps out of her purse.

Suddenly from behind.

"Oye, mein Gott...this is sooo reeeel, I can actually *smell* da fishes!" a woman cries.

First Maria, then a chain reaction of Mick, initially a barely contained chortle. They are trying desperately to stifle their laughter so as not to make a scene in the crowded theater during the Big Denouement. While Moses is working his Major Mojo mit da Red Sea, tears are streaming down their cheeks.

There is a loud "Shhhh!!" from behind them. That makes matters even worse. Maria leans over and says to Mick, "if I try to not laugh any longer...I'm going to pee my pants!" Whereupon Mick laughs even harder.

Finally, from directly behind them, "SHH!!! YOU HEATHENS!"

Maria explodes with laughter, followed by Mick. The audience *en masse* is now yelling, "Shut up...Shh!...somebody call the manager!"

Then, Mick is hit behind his right ear, by something very cold and hard, it's an ice cream Bon Bon.

"That does it...definitely an Old Testament kinda mob. Let's get the hell outta of here before they stone us...with Bon Bons," Mick whispers to Maria. Maria, now hysterical, is weak from laughter, her legs like limp linguine. Mick grabs Maria's arm and helps her out of her seat, clutching her purse, amid catcalls and boos from the audience, he says, "Madam...shame on you...you're coming with me...right now!"

Taking advantage of the pitch black scene on the screen, Mick says loudly, scolding the now totally hysterical Maria mustering his most serious managerial tone loud enough for the entire audience to hear, "Very sorry for the interruption folks. I am removing this...this blasphemer...from the theater right now. As manager, I am offering all of you a complete refund...and free Bon Bons, for everyone...right after the performance. Just go to concession counter and tell them I sent ya. Thank you for your indulgence."

Mick, half-walking, half-dragging the weak kneed Maria, to a chorus of cheers and applause of appreciation, hikes up the aisle of the dark theater into the lobby, where Maria throws her purse to Mick, and bolts to the Ladies Restroom.

Saturday - High Noon

The Grand Opening of the Sunday Painters School of Art

Mick is awkwardly struggling with something from the trunk of his car, parked directly in front of the Studio. Grunting and groaning he is carrying something very large, wrapped in a white sheet. Maria is inside, setting out the refreshments. She is radiant, in a hot pink dress, with her hair up and artsy huge hoop earrings. There is a bevy of activity as Burbank's Beautiful People are starting to arrive in very expensive Caddies, Lincolns, T-birds *en mass*.

It's a hot August day—Mick in a full sweat, struggles up to the front entrance of the Studio, where he lays down his mysterious cargo in the front garden. Standing there catching his breath, two men, wearing loud identical Hawaiian sport shirts walk up to him. Frank Gwynne is the larger of the two, 30-ish with flawlessly coiffed hair, and Umberto Galvan, a small 20-ish Latin, obviously effeminate man.

"Hi there...I'm Frank Gwynne, Dog's World Magazine," he says.

"Yea, the art world is...dog eat dog, but..." Mick starts to wax.

"Uh...we're neighbors," Frank says, pointing to the 'Dog's World' letters painted on the front window of the next unit.

The diminutive Umberto Galvan steps very close to Mick, looks up at him fluttering his mascara'd eyes—offering his hand as a woman might, "Me nahme es Umberto-Ooooh...iya doo haaair..."

"Hi guys. I'm Mick...Kozlov. Thanks for coming," Mick says extending his huge hand to Umberto. As Mick attempts to release his large hand from the delicate perfectly manicured hand of Umberto, he continues to hold on, finally, reluctantly Umberto lets go.

"Can we give you a hand with that?" Frank says.

"Great, thanks. Man, it's hot," Mick says.

Mick removes his sport coat and begins to roll up his shirt sleeves. He now has muscles. Umberto is all eyes on him. Mick yanks the sheet off, revealing an almost full-sized sculpture, done in plaster of Paris of a very well-built man, head to toe, arms bound behind the torso, jaw at a grotesque angle, who obviously has just been executed by hanging. There is plasterized rope with a hangman's knot shooting straight up from his neck. His genitals are well defined and ample.

"Oh, my *gawd!*" Umberto shrieks with delight.

Frank eying the torso up and down, says, "Very uh ...impressive. A self-portrait?"

Mick, totally naive and oblivious to the sexual preference of his two new friends, says, "Nope...kinda hard to pose for yourself,"

Frank says, "Too bad...eh Umberto?"

"So if you guys could just grab a hold, and give him a lift, I'll tie the rope to this beam overhead. It's pretty heavy so get a good strong hold," Mick says.

Climbing the step ladder, Mick picks up the torso by the rope, Umberto enthusiastically pounces on it, grabbing it by the penis, while Frank gets behind it with a hand on each buttock. Mick now fully extended, has just finished tying the rope off, when Ed Fogerty and May Bea come out of their unit to join the party, only to witness this tableau of depravity. Fogerty freezes in his tracks, while May Bea bursts out laughing.

"Oh...*my gawd!*" she screams.

"Hi, May Bea...Ed. Hey, thanks for coming to the Grand Opening," says Mick.

"Okay, Umberto...you can let go now. Umberto...Umberto!?"

Frank pries Umberto's hands away, "*Sooo Sorrrrry* about that, Mick. A little Doggie Dogma here...the little Chihuahua will *always* try to hump the biggest dog on the block. His eyes are always bigger than his...you know what,"

Maria hearing the commotion, emerges from the front door just in time to see Ed Fogerty, cycling through five shades of red. She quickly moves in to defuse the situation. Seeing the hanging sculpture for the first time, she

immediately starts to laugh, until she realizes that ol' Fogerty's about to go into cardiac arrest.

"Hey mom...well, here's your surprise. Been working on it for three months...my evening sculpture class at UCLA," Mick says proudly.

"Well Mickey, I'm definitely surprised. In fact uh...speechless," Maria says.

"Like it Mom? It's called...'Hung Man'. It's a protest against capital punishment. Hey, how 'bout a political sculpture garden here? What do you think, Ed?" says Mick deciding to have a little fun with Mr Ed.

"Looks pretty uh...*well-hung*, to me," say May Bea, with tears streaming, mascara now starting to make dark tracks in the thick pancake make-up. Umberto fake faints into the arms of Frank.

Fogerty is clutching at his bolo tie, sputtering "You...can't. Take it down! *Right now!* Maria, tell your son to take it down. Now Goddammit!" screams the apoplectic Ed Fogerty.

"Well, I guess if political art is supposed to stimulate a sense of social outrage, and uh...liberate one's emotions, two 'Oh my Gawds', and one 'Goddammit'...then I think my work is done here," says a grinning Mick.

"Oh come on Ed...I kinda like it. It adds a certain, uh 'mascaline' touch that's been kinda missin 'round here," says May Bea giggling like a school girl.

"Stifle it, May Bea!" yells Ed Fogerty.

Maria intervenes, stepping in between them just as Fogerty is about to lunge at Mick.

"Ed...I'm really sorry about this...misunderstanding. Can you excuse us for a minute? Mick, can I have a word with you inside. Please...*Now!*" Maria says, forcefully gesturing with her head inside, and away from Mr Ed.

Inside the studio:

Punctuated by an occasional flashbulb, over seventy-five of Burbank's well-dressed aristocracy, with a sprinkling of a few Pier One Nehru suits and Tie-dye outfits to go with the artsy spirit, are now getting into the scene. Chatting and laughing, looking at the art work and picking up class sign-up brochures. With the champagne copiously flowing including the members of the jazz trio, now starting to get loose, everyone's having a good time.

Maria takes Mick by the arm as they go inside. Once inside out of sight, Maria explodes with laughter...stamping her foot, bent over double, tears streaming down her face.

"Geez mom...something I said? Ed looks kinda upset. Ya think maybe he's in favor of the death penalty?" Mick says with that same impish Mikie smile.

Maria says, trying to catch her breath, "If he wasn't before...he is now. Yours. Listen Mickey, park the gallows humor and stay away from Ed for a while...I'll take care of this. Okay? And thanks for the thought son, it's really an...*interesting* piece. Anyway, the party's a great success. I've already got 40 new students," Maria say bursting into laughter again.

The party's over. It is an unqualified business success. She signs up over 50 new students. A good time was had by all, with lots of good press coverage for the gala, perhaps only, cultural event of the season of Downtown Burbank. With the Mayor of Burbank and his wife in attendance, it will make front-page above the fold of the Burbank Bugle. Mick and Maria are now cleaning up, with Frank and Umberto "helping". Frank is finishing-off the remaining partially filled glasses of champagne, while Umberto is following Mick around like a puppy.

"Hey mom...great party!" giving her a big hug, "Today we take Burbank. Tomorrow the world!" Mick says with a theatrical maniacal laugh.

Looking around the studio, "For the first time in my life, I have a sense of *hope*...peace...and independence about my life...our life. Thank you, son for everything you've done," Maria says tearfully, hugging Mick.

Umberto breaks down and begins to cry, joining in hugging Maria and Mick with Frank just rolling his glassy bloodshot eyes while upending another unfinished champagne glass.

As Maria and Mick lock up the Studio and walk back to the apartment two blocks away, happy and laughing, they do not notice an old car, motor idling parked down the street, lights-off, for the last hour. The car with Pennsylvania plates slowly pulls away into the darkness.

Later that night—the Studio is locked up for the night. "Hung Man" has been retired for the evening. Eerily bathed by red and green exteriors floodlights, his male declaration has been decorated with a strategically placed hanging potted Azalea by Maria to temporarily appease Fogerty. Nope, not a scintilla of social outrage among the conspicuously affluent buffed Ob-livias and Biffs, not even a raised eyebrow of social conscience. Tough crowd. Suddenly, out of the darkness a hand, with long red finger nails, reaches up with nail clippers, cutting the macramé strings suspending the pot; then a loud crash, accompanied by the unmistakable cackling, wicked laugh of May Bea McCoy. *May be not buster...*

The apartment—a few days later

Mick and Maria are sitting at the dining room table, just finishing up breakfast. There's a pile of duffel bags and a large suitcase by the front door. Mick is now about 215 pounds.

"Still hungry? There's a lot more in there," Maria always the *mamma mia* says.

"Thanks mom...that was great. I'm absolutely stuffed. I'd better get myself ready, they'll be here soon," Mick says.

He stands up and wraps his long arms tightly around his mother, "Well, I guess this is T-T-F-N...Ta Ta For Now. I'll try to get home for Christmas, depending on game scheduling," Mick says.

"Oh, Mickey...I'm going to really miss you, son," Maria says.

"Me too, mom...but I guess it's time to leave the nest, eh? I've gained the weight, now I guess it's up to me. I know you'll be okay, now. You've got a lot of students, and a steady income, just don't work too hard...okay?" Mick says.

"Okay son. How ya gettin' up to Berkeley?"

"I answered an ad in the paper...looking for a student to share gas money...don't know anything more about them. I'll get up there a week early. Little concerned...haven't heard back yet about my class schedule...or if I'm even registered yet. Just hope that my high school transcripts got processed in time. I'll get you all the contact info after I get settled in."

"Do you have enough money?" Maria says.

"I'm fine, mom...thanks for the extra dough. Very generous compensation, considering I would have done it for nuthin, for *mama mia carissima*. But, thanks again, I can sure use it up there," Mick says.

The doorbell rings, Mick opens the door. Cameron Glen is a short, very slight, 20-ish long-stringy-haired hippie. With him is an 18-ish, Haight-Ashbury chic beauty, with long straight golden hair. She's tall and slender with large full pendulous breasts, obviously bra-less. Mick makes eye contact with her large, sensual doe eyes. He invites them in.

"I'm Mick, this is my mom."

"Cool, man...like I'm Cam, this is my ol' lady Moonstar. Ready to go man? Gotta hit the road, ya know man...if we wanna like make Berkeley tonight."

Mick walks over to Maria, they hug.

"Please...pleeeeeeze, call me when you get up there. Okay?" Maria says.

"Sure...love ya mom," Mick says giving her a gentle kiss on her cheek.

"Love you, son," Maria says gently caressing Mick's face as they part.

"Okay, let's hit it," Mick says.

They each grab a bag and go down the stairs. Maria runs over to the window facing the street below, and sees them throwing the bags into a old

beat-up multi-colored VW bus with crudely painted peace symbols all over it. Maria now in tears, registers concern on her face. Mick gets in the front, and just before they drive off he looks up at her and waves—just like dear brother Mikie had seconds before he was hit by the A&P truck on that Christmas Eve.

As they drive off, tears streaming down her face, Maria runs to the next window, keeping Mick in sight as long as possible.

The Sunday Painter School Studio - About two weeks later about 10 PM

"Well class, this is a good place to stop for this evening. Let's clean up and put the wet paintings on the drying racks," Maria says standing at the front of the class by her easel, just completing an evening class. There are eight students, all painting a vase of Azaleas, now cleaning up, and packing up to leave.

Ruthy, one of her students, an old friend, lingers behind. She is a little unsteady on her feet and slurring her words.

"Pia, I really enjoyed the class tonight. But I don't seem to be able to get the color right on those Azaleas. Can you have a look at mine?" says Ruthy.

"Sure, Ruthy," says Maria looking at the painting "Okay...I see the problem. A little more alizarin crimson...there, that'll do it."

"Oh, thanks Pia. I'm in no hurry to go home, would you like to get something to eat?" says Ruthy.

"Oh, Ruthy, thanks but I'm absolutely exhausted...a splitting headache. This is my sixth 3 hour class this week, my second today. I've still got a lot of cleanup to do tonight," says Maria.

"Can I help? Maria, I really don't feel like going home. Fred's probably there by now, drunk. I just don't feel like dealing with him," says Ruthy starting to tear up.

"Oh Ruthy, thanks, but there's nothing you can help me with. Ruthy, I hope I don't offend you by saying that I would prefer you didn't drink while in the class. Some of the other students are a bit put-off by it. Okay?" Maria says.

"Okay, Maria...sorry, I probably should be getting home, or Fred'll think I've been out foolin' around, and make me pay for it," says Ruthy.

"I'm so sorry, Ruthy. Maybe we can talk another time, when I'm not quite so beat. It's getting late, can you do me favor and lock the door on the way out?" Maria says.

"Sure...see ya next Thursday night," Ruthy says.

Ruthy gathers up her stuff, and in her condition, goes out the door without locking it. Working away, Maria is just finishing up, when the door flies open.

"Well...well...well, if it ain't that cute little art-teest...every night, just paintin' away. All work and no play? Hey...that doesn't look so hard," the drunk

slurs.

"I'm sorry...we're closed. Please leave...*now!*"

The drunk staggers toward Maria. He picks up a palette knife, and dipping it in paint, spreads it very thickly on the canvas.

"See...told ya. Nothing to it. Time for my private lesson...a nude."

As he lunges for Maria, she grabs the open jar of turpentine on the table and throws it in his face, "Not tonight...Picasso, I've got a headache. Here's one for the road."

"Oh *gawd...ooohhh*. I can't see. You bitch, you blinded me! *Goddammit!*" screams the drunk.

The drunk reels back, staggering around knocking over easels and chairs, rubbing his eyes with both hands, screaming. Maria spins him around, and bum-rushes him out the door. Writhing in pain, he lays down on the sidewalk. She locks the door, runs to the telephone, and calls the police, who are there within minutes.

About an hour later in front of the studio, Maria is standing outside, as the police are loading the cuffed drunk into the patrol car. The scene is eerily illuminated by the flashing red lights. The drunk's vision now restored, he yells out the rear window of the patrol car as it pulls away, "This ain't over...you don't know who you're messin' with, lady. I know where you live!"

Maria utterly exhausted, still shaken, massages her throbbing temples. An hour later after finishing cleaning up, locks the door to the studio and somehow trudges back to the apartment.

About midnight, Maria has collapsed on the sofa, in the darkened living room with a wet towel on her forehead with a massive migraine. In her haste to get off her feet and lay down, the front door is left slightly ajar. The door slowly creaks open. A shadowy figure, silently moves toward Maria still lying on the sofa. Suddenly, Maria senses there is someone in the room, and opens her eyes to see a silhouetted large male figure looming over her in the dark—she cannot make out who it is. Maria, startled, tries to sit up, to resist, but her head is pounding with such pain, she collapses, slouching back down.

"I'm back," the familiar voice says.

Totally spent from the evening, she lays there resigned to her fate, "Nicky? Is it you, Nicky?"

Nicky is now bending over her, his face very close to Maria's. She can now make out that familiar tormented febrile face, eyes frantically searching hers for some sign of affirmation, the saccharine scent of vodka on his breath, unshaven with beads of sweat dripping on her, his hair soaked with sweat.

"I...I've come home, Pia...I love..."

"Nicky...*Stop! Stop!* This is *not* your home anymore. Nicky...you have to leave, *NOW!*" Maria says. Nicky begins to get agitated and draws

closer.

"You are...*my wife!* You can't talk to me that way," Nicky yells.

"Not anymore Nicky. We are *divorced*...for over a year now. Right after you left, for the umpteenth time," Maria calmly says.

Nicky moves his hands toward her menacingly. Maria continues "It's over, Nicky. I don't care *what* you do to me. All those years living in terror with my mother...and then with you. I'll *never* go back with you! *Ever!* So do *whatever* it is you're going to do...just get it over with. I'd rather be *dead* than to be with you...for an hour...a minute," closing her eyes, and turning her face away from him.

Nicky, now silent, half-heartedly lunges, then stops. Staring at Maria, her obvious disdain and revulsion, he finally realizes that it is futile. He slowly stands up. Maria, opens her eyes, and unflinchingly, coldly stares at him.

"Okay Pia. But never forget you're still my wife...forever. Be careful what you wish for. I can't...won't...live without you! If I can't have you....the cops will bring you my clothes in the morning...from the river," Nicky melodramatic says as he has threatened many times before.

Nicky angrily exits, slamming the front door shut. Maria struggles up and staggers to the bathroom. The only sound in the darkened apartment now—vomiting, then dry retching, and sobbing.

- Chapter 4 -

*But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
You're gonna have to serve somebody,
It may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody...*
- Gotta Serve Somebody - Bob Dylan

1964—UCB Berkeley, California

A run-down one bedroom, ramshackle apartment on Bancroft Way, right across the street from the entrance to the UCB campus not far from Sather Gate and Sproul Hall.

Byron Brawley, with prescribed Cal-chic scraggly beard and long hair is a junior at UCB. He and Mick attended the same high school. As jocks Mick, who is two years behind, had struck up a friendship with the charismatic Brawley who was always able to get his hands on six-packs of the 16 once green cans of stout Ranier Ale, "Green Death" for under-age Mick, because he worked at a liquor store part-time evenings. And he was always good for a stimulating discussion on literature and the arts.

So Mick had run into Brawley, a few days after he arrived at Berkeley. An ex-high school football linebacker, who loves to hit and if he can, hurt. He is seemingly impervious to pain. He relishes taking a hard hit—he's cocky, stocky, very strong and athletic with a reputation in high school as being a little 'off center' scrapper aka 'Brawler Brawley', with a serious mean-streak always just below the surface.

Despite his proclivity for violence, when he is sober he's got an erudite sense of humor, and is generally fun to be around, in spite of the Jekyll-Hyde switch, about three beers below the surface.

But his brash behavior and pugilistic penchants belie a brilliant intellect. He is an expert on the Baroque Music period, J. S. and the rest of the Bach Boys, Handel, Scarlatti, Vivaldi and Telemann et al. An English Lit major with an emphasis on Geoffrey Chaucer on whom he intends to do his Master's Thesis—he is a natural raconteur and mimic.

His retelling of the infamous Miller's Tale, about Nicholas, a student, relentlessly trying to sleep with his landlord's wife, Alison, is executed with a perfect spot-on Old English cockney accent. His ruggedly handsome looks, roguish behavior and his eloquence both in writing and speech is reminiscent of the great American Beat writer, Jack Kerouac.

But, when he drinks, his dark side with the unpredictably short fuse, often erupts into indiscriminate fisticuffs with anyone within swinging distance. Mick knows they're in for long night, when after a few drinks, he

deliberately baits the biggest, meanest looking guy in the place, by brazenly hitting on his girlfriend. If the guy protests, Brawley usually opens the dialogue with his planned prelude to violence—something like, "Hey...ass-breath...don't interrupt me while I'm talking to this very lovely lady that's obviously waaay outta yer league." No matter what is said after that, it's usually followed up with "care to step outside to discuss it...and get your ugly mug rearranged?" After "the two minute warning", it's usually over in less than two minutes. Before the other guy can even get his hands up, from out of nowhere Brawley usually lands a sucker punch. Hard...very hard. Then pouncing on top of the poor son-of-bitch, furiously raining punches, lefts and rights, until he's beaten him unconscious, barely working up a sweat, usually unscathed.

No one that's hung out with Brawley can ever remember him losing a 'fight', the secret of which Brawley says *"ninety percent of winnin' a street fight is always land the first punch...hard."* Mean. Very mean, and scary for Mick to think if he should unleash that sadistic streak on him. But Mick like many of Brawley's friends, curiously finds the element of unpredictability and danger, the adrenal high of the potential for random vicarious violence always just below the surface, somehow seductive, in an inchoate primal way.

Mick and Byron Brawley are hangin' out at his apartment, having a beer.

"So, Koz...did you like talk to the coach, man?" Byron Brawley says.

"Yea, he says my transcripts didn't get processed in time, some bullshit about admission records being delayed by some radical student sit-in demonstration, closing down the administration building for over a week...so I can't get enough of my classes for the Fall Semester to be eligible to play. Said he was 'real sorry', but he can't get me on scholarship or even give me any help until the next semester. I can practice with the team, but I am pretty much on my own, for living expenses," says Mick.

"Well that exactly sucks...like, what ya gonna do now, man?"

"I'm kinda in a bind. Guess I'd better find a job, and a place to hang and just pray that I don't lose my 2S student deferment. That thing in Vietnam is starting to get real ugly. I haven't even told mom...don't wantta worry her," Mick says.

"Well, man...my roommate here, a law student, just got busted for possession of pot. Booted his ass out of law school, so he's outta here. You can move in here until you can figure things out...a good location, the Student Union is right across the street and the gym is just down the road. I'm at the library most of time, anyway," Byron says.

"Thanks, man. Yea, if it's okay, I'll crash here for a while...good thing I ran into ya at Sather Gate or I'd really be screwed. Barely recognized ya with that 'hair hat' from the last time I saw you in high school with the crew cut...what, two years ago? Anything goin' on tonight?" Mick says.

"Yea...Frat Rush Parties all this week. That means kegs...lots of free beer and the coed chickies will be on da loose, checking out the scene. And there's a rally in front of Sproul Hall...this afternoon," Byron says.

"Hey, Byron, who were those people I saw you with...demonstrating at Sather Gate. That guy that was doing all the talking, sounded *very* with it," Mick says.

"Mario Savio...he's *real* with it, man. Very balsy, from New York. He's speaking again this afternoon, at the rally at Sproul Plaza...should be a cast of thousands. The SDS and the FSM will be there big-time," says Byron.

"SDS? FSM?"

"Students for a Democratic Society...Free Speech Movement," Byron says.

"So what's their beef?" Mick says.

"Well man...free speech. Like, when you're on campus, the Bill of Rights, is suspended...so your rights to express yourself publicly are subject to the college thought police. Not good, man, especially for the black students that are demonstrating, going up against the establishment on civil rights...equal Ops, the stuff 300,000 of us marched for in D.C...in August of '63, when Martin Luther King gave his famous 'I have a dream' speech. I get goose-bumps just thinkin' about it," Byron says.

"I wouldn't mind hearing that guy Savio again," Mick says.

"Yea...agreed. Stuff a few beers in your pockets, and let's head over. Want to get there early so we're right where the action is. But first, let's do a doobie...just to get into a pol-iti-CAL frame of mind," Byron says.

Byron and Mick stuff a few bottles of beer in their coats. Byron pulls a joint out of his huge green army surplus parka, and lights it up. He takes a long drag and hands it to Mick.

Mick takes the joint...hesitates, smiling, "First time for everything." He pulls a deep drag and starts coughing violently, but immediately begins to feel the high. Brawley just laughs as Mick hands it back, and he takes another long pull on it, then snips the end off and leaves it in the ashtray.

"You'll get used to it, man. It's a cool, mellow high, a lot cheaper than booze...and, like, no drivin' the bus," Byron says.

Mick looks at Byron quizzically.

Byron continues, "Ya know...after a sixer of Green Death Rainier Ale, like clutching the toilet seat, while ya ralph your guts out," he says mimicking holding a toilet seat, "Come on...let's get out of this dump. Time to elevate our consciousness to a higher plane as we enter da political lab-OR-ratory of BIZ-erk-ley. Welcome to my world, my man," as Byron and Mick head over to Sproul Plaza.

Because they are drinking beer from bottles, Mick and Byron stay at the back of the crowd now starting to gather at the steps of Sproul Hall.

Feeling a hand on his shoulder, Mick turns around...to see a long and lean black guy, about 6'2" now with his arms folded, lime green bell-bottom trousers, with a fuchsia long-point collared shirt, framing a finger-thick gold rope chain. Setting a high outrageous-fashion standard for the future blaxplotation Super-flies, including a ponderously full Afro. He's looking at Mick like he knows him. He looks familiar but Mick can't quite place him.

"Hey, man...do I know you?" Mick says.

Then that electric smile, with a row of perfect white pearls, "Koz...you don't recognize me do ya man? The CIF Championship two years ago...like *swish*," Gabriel Sweet says grinning, holding out his right hand for the ritual cool black brother's hand shake, which takes almost thirty seconds to get through.

Gabriel Sweet was a year ahead of Mick, when they played in the Semi-finals for the 1A Southern California CIF (California Interscholastic Federation). Yin versus Yang. Sweet went to *Cocoa* Compton High School in South Central L.A, with a gym so old, sometimes they'd get rained out. Mick, to *Very Vanilla* Glendale High sporting a Sportplex gym. Compton eventually cruised through the Championship, after barely beating Glendale in the semis, in double over-time, a buzzer beater by Sweet Gabe, with Mick hanging all over him. A fall away desperation jumper from about 22 ft...*swish*...with his standard mocking grin after the sweet sound of *pop* of pure shooters, as it hits nothing but bottom of the net...*Sweeet...baby!* His, quickness, hops, high arching jump shot with a quick release were legendary, deadly accurate from anywhere over 20 ft. Sweet was one of the most highly recruited prep B-ballers from California.

He ended up at UCB, but Mick heard that he became academically ineligible after his freshman year. After that, like many of the best high school athletes, who couldn't be bothered with mundane activities like attending classes and passing tests, he faded into obscurity.

"Holy shit...Sweet Gabe? Man, I didn't recognize you with da Afro-hair-hat...cool threads...nice understated look. You hijack a clothing shipment to 'Pimps-are-us'?" says Mick smiling.

"Yea man...like dig it...Oakland Shattuck-Ave-Chic...like clothes don't make the man...clothes *are* da man. Whatcha doin' here man?" the always grinning Sweet Gabe says.

"Hitched a full-ride...B-ball, that is until they screwed up my transcripts. So looks like I'll be red-shirtin' first semester freshman year...workout with the team, scrimmage, until next semester if I can find a job 'til then. "What's up with you man? You playin' anywhere, college ball?" says Mick.

"Nawh...gave it up man. Didn't dig the book scene. All I wanted to do was party hearty and play hoops in Divy One...on my way to da NBA. But the damn profs weren't diggin' it. So, now I'm playing some serious semi-pro ball evenings just to keep in playin' shape...which allows me to pursue my day-time

uh...pharmaceu-TILE dispensary practice. Got a walk-on try-out with the NBA...SF Warriors, next week. Hey man, if you're not doin' nuthin' tomorrow night...like checkout Mossy...Mosswood Playground, under da lights...on Webster...downtown Oakland, evenings from seven on. Five on five full court, wit da bruthas. Winnah stays on. Some of the best B-ball in the Bay Area, maybe da uni-VERSE...NBA scouts in reglar 'tendance.

I'll make the intro. They won't let wonder-bread-honkies even on da court...until they can see you got game. You can play on my team...and bring your 'A' game," Gabe says. Oakland's near-mythical McClymonds High School was a hothouse for young black gifted basketball alums like USF's and Boston Celtics' perennial all-star 6' 9" Bill Russell, and Atlanta Hawks' 6' 8" Paul Silas, who frequented the Mossy pick-up B-ball scene when home for the summer.

"Deal...been awhile. I could use a good workout. Whatcha doing here, man...like on campus?" says Mick.

"Supportin' da cause of the Black Power Brutha's...Huey Newton, and just doing a lil' bidness...while I'm at it," Gabe says smiling while rubbing his nose with his gold and diamond studded index finger.

"By the way...this here's my roomie, Byron Brawley," Mick says.

Gabe intuits from Brawley's body language, about threes beers in by now, and that all too familiar up-and-down baleful stare, that he's not diggin' his action. They exchange uneasy nods. Gabe, whiffing malevolence in the air, hurriedly says, "Okay man, like I gotta get to mingling here...lotsa bread to be made...later man," again with the Byzantine, but this time much abbreviated handshake. Wise move, Your Sweetness...very wise move.

Mosswood Park basketball court:

After a suicidal flat-out ride, between, around stopped traffic, through "STOP" signs on the back of Brawley's *Vespa* motor scooter, Mick clutching his basketball, holding on to Brawley for dear-life with the other arm, they arrive around six-thirty with Mick drenched in full stress-sweat.

"Aside from da mota scoota, not a bad Marlon Bran-flakes *The Wild One*...terrorizing the town," says Mick stepping on to his rubbery legs.

"Uh...I coulda bin a contenda...a sum-body...instead of a bum," doing a wicked Method Marlon from *On the Waterfront*.

A few of the black young-gun wannabes are taking shots, hoping to impress some of the major players, to get picked for a team. Mick immediately notices that he's one of the few, make that only, white guy at the park, dressed to play. The court is asphalt, with the boundary lines in many places almost worn-off or non-existent. It appears to be regulation length and width. The basket backboards are weathered wood, with rusty rims and galvanized chain nets. There are two banks of lights, with half of the bulbs dark, bathing the

"court", with two groups of weathered bleachers on one side, which are already beginning to fill up, predominately with black folks lugging all manner of coolers and blaring boom-boxes of pervasive Motown. Diana Ross and the Supremes, The Four Tops, Marvin Gay and Lil' Stevie Wonder, and the August anthemic "Heat Wave" by Martha and the Vandelas.

There are a few pockets of white folks, some of which are carrying notebooks or clipboards, presumably either college or NBA scouts. There's a sign-up sheet on a clipboard with a tethered pencil laying on the first row of the bleacher.

At about seven-fifteen, the serious players start to show up. Like royalty, they arrive fashionably late, greeting each other, basking in the local lore of mythical Mossy. Gabriel Sweet finally shows up, staying in perfect character for his audience, he 'pimp rolls' over to the conspicuous white-interloper, sans brutha-shake, "Yo Koz...like we're up after the first game, to twenty-two, by four, winnah holds the court until beat or calls it a night."

Mick hands him his ball. Gabe from about 25 feet, without even warming up, launches a rainbow arching jump shot with gentle backspin rotation, turns to Mick, and says with that Sweet-smirk...*swish...sweeeet*...about two seconds before the ball pops the bottom of the chain net...*ching*. Pure. He struts over to mingle with the other black players, the bruthas, with lots a high-fivin', good-natured pimpin', laughing and joking. Mick walks over the bleachers and takes a seat, next to Brawley, now getting dangerously near three beers, taking it all in.

"We're a long way from Honkie-ville Glendale, Toto," Brawley says.

Some of the players, are older, but still look like they got game. You can tell by the deference paid to them by the young-guns, that they're treated like venerated elders. Court sages holding forth. Mick recognizes several Division One college players, UCB, USF and Stanford, and a few NBA guys from the Warriors and the L.A. Lakers....all of them starters, many all-league performers.

Mick says, "Winner stays on? Could be a very short night."

A black stretch limo, with smoked windows and flashers frantically blinking, slowly, almost presidentially, pulls right in front of the bleachers. A low murmur starts to build from the crowd. Gabe walks over to where Mick and Byron are sitting.

"Well lookie here...King Kong's comin' out tonight for a little workout. Figured he might show up tonight...for a lil' fresh meat."

"King Kong? Why they call 'em that?" Mick naively asks.

"You'll see soon 'nuf." The suspense is palpably building. Finally, the rear door facing the bleachers flies open. Some very large black guys spring out. They're all 6'4" or more, in matching warm-ups.

Mick says, "So which one of those rather large Nigerian gentlemen is Mr Kong?"

"Sheeet, man...doe's is just da ball boys...they jus' scrimmage and during the warm-up, shag balls. They don't even play...didn't make the cut," says Gabe with a grin.

Just about then, another five guys pile out, all them bigger than the first group. There is one guy who's only about 6'4" maybe 220 pounds. Mick says, "So who's the runt?"

"Oh that's Marcellus Jackson, All-American at Ohio State last year...he's da point guard."

They start a warm-up drill, doing lay-in's. About five minutes into it, they start putting on a show for the bleachers. Everyone is now doing spectacular dunks, effortless reverse two handed...three-sixties, you name it. Each one more spectacular than the last, to the *oohhs* and *ahhs* of the crowd.

Then, a hush falls over the crowd as King Kong, makes his Grand Entrance. First, one very large sneakered foot appears. A major misnomer—there's no way something that big could a) ever sneak, and b) can be called a foot which is supposed to be 12 inches. This thing's about 16 inches long, followed by the second, shaking the ground on impact. His hulking mass is sartorially turned-out in a XXX-XX Tall custom-tailored Adidas Gold La may, warm-up suit with a monogrammed *Bodacious* at a chic slant, tastefully accessorized with a matching gold front tooth. As he unfolds from the limo, there is collective gasp from the crowd—they immediately start chanting...*Bo! Bo! Bo!*

Mr Black, appears to be at least 6'11" plus another 6 inches of Afro, tilting the Toledo's just a few pounds shy of a half-ton pickup truck. The last guy out of the limo is Jewish-looking, not to be redundant—very short, balding, wearing a big stogey in his mug, a Kosher clone wannabe of the legendary Boston Celtics coach Red Auerbach.

Mick guesses, *Hmm...must be the coach, or da money man. Just because it's cliché doesn't mean it ain't true.*

"Holy Toledo, man...must weigh 'em on a truck scale. Looks like he's got da same fashion consultant as Sweetness," Mick says.

"Mr Bodacious B Black...alias King Kong. Any questions?" His Sweetness says.

"Now that you mentioned it...aside from the obvious, I do see a certain almost alarming resemblance...the same bellicose expression of perturbation, displayed atop the Empire State Building...while swatting at bi-planes," Brawley analogizes.

"Seriously...never heard of him, where'd he play?" Mick says.

"U of A."

"University of Alabama? Man, they sure grow 'em big down South," Mick says.

"Uh...Un-rehab-ables of Attica, man. He was like All-PCL...Prison-

Corrections League, 15 years running. By the way, you'll be guardin' The Bo tonight. And, you can drive to his left...'cause he's blind in that eye, from a prison knife fight," Gabe says without a hint of irony.

Well, there it is. Sweet's token honkie Mick, trying to stop uh...Mr Kong, would be tonight's comedy warm-up act for the bruthas.

"So what's the middle initial "B" stand for?"

"No one's ever had the balls to ask after a brutha once joked that the "B" proly stood for *Bekins*, as in the moving van...just once," says Gabe.

"Thanks for the potentially life-saving tips, man. By the way what was he in for?" Mick says.

"Armed robbery...liquor store. Picked outta da line-up by da owner. Says he was framed...a case of mistaken identity. His shyster lawyer say dat da lineup was uh...prejudiced. All da otha guys was only 6 feet tall," Gabe says.

"Like 'yer honah, ma client resents da allegation...and resents da alligator," Brawley says, with a spot-on imitation of an old Amos-and-Andy Kingfish-ism ominously punctuated with the pull-top *poooosh* of his fourth beer.

After talking with Gabe, one of the elders, about 6'4", in-shape wiry, with a comparatively modest Afro, wanders over to where Mick is sitting. "Hey man, I'm Charles Washington. Gabe says you'll be playing with us," he says without a trace of street-Ebonics, extending his hand minus the ceremonial hand-jive. His eyes are intelligent, intense, invitingly ironic.

"Hey, man...I'm Mick Kozlov. Friends call me Koz...this is Byron," Mick says taking his firm but friendly, long hand.

"Charles," Byron says shaking his hand with uncharacteristic receptivity. Hmm...instant recognition by two intelligent fellow travelers.

"Yea, man like I've seen ya at Sather Gate a few times when Brother Mario Savio was like tellin' it."

"Yea...seen you around with Savio," Byron says, "you a student here?"

"I'm second year at Berkeley Law, Boalt. In my spare time...*ha*, president of the local chapter of SNCC, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Played a little B-ball here a few years back," he says with an affable smile.

"Yea...C-Wash, lead the league in scoring and rebounds...second team All-American if I remember right?" Mick says.

"That was then...different priorities now. I'm just out playin' for fun, now. Too much like a full-time job then, man...*waaaay* too intense and serious, so now I play for the right reasons. Choreography on the court...creative expression, like ballet without the leotards and to stay in shape. What's your course of study for you two cats?"

"Byron's second year...English Lit major. If I ever get enough of my

classes, got a ride to play B-ball here...pre-architecture," I say.

"So you know Savio?" Brawley now shifting seamlessly into his intellectual intensity.

"Yea...Mario's a special cat...smart. A philosophy major, a natural born but reluctant orator...and leader. Wouldn't think it by the looks of 'em, until he get's it goin'. Pure as they come, man. Totally guileless," C-Wash says almost reverentially.

"We heard him rappin' again, last night...wouldn't mind meetin' him, and having a sit-down. I think that goes for Koz too," Brawley says.

"Yea, man count me in...maybe you could set something up. The four of us at La Val's Pizza...only place takes my bogus I.D. The first pitcher of brew is on us," Mick says.

"See what I can do, man...so how do I get a hold of you cats?" C-Wash says.

"Post it on the bulletin board at the Student Union. Just print "KOZ" in big block letters, the date and time, and we'll be there, man," Mick says.

"Okay Koz...check it out, tomorrow sometime after noon," C-Wash says.

While all this has been going on, the first game on the bill is about to start.

Bo disrobes his warm-up to more *oohhs* and *aahhs* from the bleachers. Apparently, The Bo has occupied the considerable time on his hands by pumping iron...a man needs to channel his considerable abundance of spare time and testosterone into a healthy hobby.

Working out with friends...and dumbbells, seemed like a relatively harmless alternative to say, the infamous Attica past-time, riots. He is a polished black onyx sculpture. Like one of those kinesiology charts showing all the muscle groups, perfectly defined. Even his muscles have muscles.

Also, now on the court, two very large black gentlemen, wearing striped referee shirts with lariat whistles have mysteriously appeared bearing an uncanny resemblance to two of the first guys out of the black limo.

Just before the game starts, Mick notices the coach, the Auerbach clone giving a final inspirational message, on a clipboard with a diagram of a basketball court imprinted. No need for frivolous "X's" and "O's" here. He just scribbles "3B"...the starting five synchronously nods. Just in case anybody has forgotten, most especially Mr Black he restates the strategy, "Ball, Bo...Basket." They break with an ominous, under the circumstances ironical "No prisoners!" They quickly dispatch the other team in about 15 minutes, with a final score of 22 to 2, the single 2 points, an errant accidental tip-in by Bo in the course of sweeping the boards. Bo scores all 16 of his total points from about 3 feet encamped in the key, mostly with thunderous dunks. Marcellus Jackson is allowed to score the remaining 6 points with dazzling drives likewise finished with spectacular dunks. The other three guys on the

team are merely cosmetic formality.

"Let's go...we're up," Gabe yells.

Bo having his smoke break prematurely interrupted, shakes his massive head, takes one last deep drag on his cigarette, then angrily crushes it beneath his behemoth foot. Not a particularly good start for establishing an open channel of communication.

Brawley does his Mel Brooks bit about the sacrificial Christians just before being feed to the lions, huddling in the 'dressing room' of the Roman Coliseum, rapping on the dungeon door, "Christians...five minutes!"

Time for the warm-up act.

Mick assumes his defensive position on the court, as Marcellus Jackson dribbles the ball up-court. Mick is standing in deep shadow behind The Bo, about 3 feet from the basket with his hand gently resting against his taut, steel-hard back muscles, totally eclipsed from what's going on in the front court. Suddenly, Mick senses that Bo now has the ball...presumably step two of three, of the 3B offense. Then Bo, apparently bored from the tedium of the previous game, goes off-script and bounces the ball...twice, then jumps up in a spinning motion toward the rim. Mick determined not to be intimidated, in retrospect a potentially career ending decision, decides that he'll foul The Bo, *to send a message...early*. Mick hitches a ride on to the shoulders of, the now Mr Kong, and feels himself being propelled upward, with his head on a collision course with the rim.

"Fifth floor...men's haberdashery...I believe this my floor...excuse me...comin' through..." he lets go just as the ball is slammed through, bouncing off Mick's head, about 10 feet in the air. Message—*Returned to Sender: Address Unknown.*

Less than two minutes into the game, and the stand-up comedy act already has 'em rollin' in da aisles. At this rate he's almost guaranteed a return engagement.

On offense, Sweet Gabe drains an automatic 20 footer and we're all tied up.

The next time down court, Mick decides to front guard The Bo, to deny him getting the ball. Stop step two of three, theoretically no step three. Made perfect sense...at the time. The Bo is momentarily bemused by this brilliant defensive strategy. In the meantime he's occupied the key area for well-over 15 seconds beyond the regulation allowed 3 seconds. Mick starts screaming at the referee, jumping up and down, "3 seconds! 3 seconds...come on ref...call it!"

The referee finally blows his whistle. Points at Mick, and forms the hand gesture of a "T" signifying a technical foul on Mick.

"How the hell can you *even* make that call...for just jumping into the air? That's *such* bullshit! He's been campin' under the basket...all night for *Chrissakes*."

The ref looks at Mick, "The technical did not occur from you jumpin' up. It was when you came *down*, dat da infraction *o-ccurred*...and no mo' *fuckin' pro-fanity* or I'll toss yer honky ass," the ref sneers. Pretty funny stuff. Mick himself is involuntarily forced to join in with the chorus of knee-slapping laughter coming from the bleachers.

The game goes back and forth for about 30 minutes, 20 to Bo's 22. Both C-Wash and Sweetness are keeping them in the game with some devastating outside shooting. The Bo, not used to playing over 15 minutes straight, without a smoke break, is starting to tire, as evidenced by a deafening labored panting. Just as Bo goes up for a dunk, to end it, a flash-bulb goes off causing Mr Kong to hit the heel of the rim with the ball, with the rebound miraculously careening about 10 feet, into Mick's outstretched hands. A hush falls over the crowd. Bo stares at Mick in utter disbelief.

"Ah du baleeve dat ya'll got sum-thin' dat belongs to *me*." A talkin' King Kong ladies and gentlemen...the first Isaac-Hayes-utterance from Mr Kong of the entire performance.

He then reaches over to where Mick is standing, also in amazement, clamps the ball and everything near it including Mick's hands, with both of his gigantic paws, picks up the ball with Mick still attached, and starts a violent shaking motion. The problem of course is that Mick cannot let go because his hands are pinned under Mr Kong's. Finally, Mick is tossed free, like a rag-doll on to the tarmac. More laughter. That Mick, determined to revive the dying art of slapstick...or literally, die trying.

The Bo, now unmolested by pesky mosquito Mick, exhausted from a hard day at the office, standing flatfooted stuffs the ball. Mercifully. Game over.

Mick, now laying on his back, somewhat in shock, checks out his left hand where intense pain seems to be emanating. Two fingers are at a very unnatural angle. They are dislocated, one at the second joint of his ring finger, and the little finger at the first joint.

Mick screams at the ref, "Whattya call that, ref!?"

The ref says, "I'd call dat seriously stupid, man. If I was ya'll...I'd lay *per-fectly* still...like, play *dead*, man, so as not to uh...further *in-fer-iate* The Bo no *mo*'."

Brawley springs up, runs over to Mick, and kneeling down, seeing the dislocated fingers, grabs first the ring finger, before Mick can protest, pulls it back into the place, then does the same thing with the little finger.

"Owh...*owh!* *fuck* me," Mick screams in pain with tears streaming down his face, but the pain now begins to subside.

"Sorry man...had to do it quick. The longer they're out of joint the longer it takes to heal," Brawley says.

Mick is slowly escorted to a seat at the bleachers by Brawley.

"You want me to take care of that big gorilla?" Brawley says with

that familiar intense look of mayhem. Mick realizes Brawley's patented sucker punch would probably land somewhere around Mr Kong's navel, plus he's way above even Brawley's considerable punching weight.

"Not unless you're packin'!...besides, shootin' Mr Kong there...probably just piss 'em off even more. And tell my booking agent dat this uh...prestigious outdoor venue, it is now officially off da list," says Mick.

"Yea...tough crowd. I take your point, he's probably got me by maybe...what, a quarter of ton?" agrees Brawley, revealing an unprecedented prudential sense of non-invincibility. Hmm...must have run out of beer.

Mick stands up, "Okay, ladies and gentlemen that concludes tonight's performance...thanks, you've been a great audience. Ya'll come back, now. And don't forget to tip your uh...pusher," Mick says loud enough for bleachers to hear.

To a smattering of applause, as Mick and Byron walk off the court, he waves to the crowd, thus adding but a mere brief honky footnote, to the already rich lore of Mossy. Gabriel Sweet flashes a smile of appreciation toward Mick, for exceeding even his expectations for an entertaining night of comedy relief.

C-Wash walks over, "You okay Koz? I'll say this much for ya. Ya got balls...more than ya got sense, man," with an easygoing admiring smile.

"Yea...that was *real* special, man. Time to split. Always leave 'em laughin', and wantin' more," Mick says.

"Okay man, like get some ice on that right away...I'll be in touch," C-Wash says paternally patting Mick on the butt.

Two nights later: La Val's Pizza Parlor

Since 1951, La Val's is a Berkeley institution. A local watering-hole for Cal students. Good pizza, cheap pitchers of beer and relatively relaxed drinking ID scrutiny compared to Larry Blake's Rathskeller basement bar on Telegraph, both just a few blocks from campus.

Mick and Brawley arrive at La Val's about 9 PM, on the appointed day left on the SU bulletin board by Charles Washington. It's Friday night, which kicks off two days of non-stop partying and hook-ups, so the place is humming, crowded and buzzing with activity with boundless adolescent energy. Pitchers of beer, sometimes three or four on tray are being hustled by waitresses, barely able to keep up with the guzzling students after a week of classes. There is a constant cacophony of yelling and laughing, an occasional scream of feigned protest from a coed being groped by a drunken frat boy, over a background of the captivatingly simplistic lyrics of Motown:

The Drifters, On Broadway—

*Oh when the sun beats down and burns the tar up on the roof
And your shoes get so hot you wish your tired feet were fire proof
Under the boardwalk, down by the sea, yea
On a blanket with my baby is where I'll be...*

The Ronettes, Be My Baby—

*The night we met I knew I needed you so
And if I had the chance I'd never let you go
So won't you say you love me? I'll make you so proud of me
We'll make 'em turn their heads every place we go...*

The room is dimly lighted with red glass flickering candlelight on each table, a thick pall of cigarette smoke hangs over the room, with an occasional whiff of pot downwind from the men's room.

They get lucky and score a four-top toward the back where it is a little more quiet. Within five minutes, Mick spots Charles walk through the front door, accompanied by a relatively average height and compact Mario Savio. Mick stands up and waves his left hand with two of the fingers in splints with conspicuous white bandages, and catches C-Wash's attention.

C-Wash and Savio make their way through the crowd with several of the students acknowledging them both, with handshakes and congratulatory pats on the back. The crowd, mostly white, with a few blacks who appear to be jocks, for the most part are dressed hippie-chic, with lots of hair, beards, beads, and tie-dye.

At the table, Brawley stands up, as Charles makes the introductions.

"Mario, this is Byron...the guy I told you about. He's been at a lot of the demonstrations. And this wounded warrior here, is Koz...both are *muy simpatico* to the movement," C-Wash says.

Handshakes all around, with Savio making direct eye-contact with those intense smoldering, penetrating eyes. Everyone grabs a seat, as Brawley, the oldest looking and less likely to be 'carded', motions to a waitress. She gracefully slips and slides, almost balletically through the bustling crowd to the table. She is obviously harried from the demanding and often rude students, yelling for more beer, so she does not bother to check ID's. Despite her stressed demeanor, one can tell she's a beauty with short blonde, tousled happy hair, and the trim, lean body of a lady jock, maybe volleyball or track, probably a student.

No chit-chat...no exchange of pleasantries. "Whattya want fellas?" she yells over the din of the crowd.

Brawley orders a pitcher of dark beer, with four glasses, without a further word, she disappears into the pulsating mass of bodies.

Then as if on cue, the twangy voice of iconic chronicler of social

unrest, the poet turned troubadour Bob Dylan begins singing the timely, layered and chewy lyrics of *The Times They Are a-Changin'*.

*Gather 'round people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown*

*And accept it that soon
You'll be drenched to the bone
If your time to you
Is worth savin'*

*Then you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'
Come writers and critics
Who prophesize with your pen
Keep your eyes wide
The chance won't come again*

*Don't speak too soon
For the wheel's still in spin
And there's no tellin' who
That it's namin'*

*For the loser now
Will be later to win
For the times they, they are a-changin'...*

Mario Savio was born in New York City in 1942 to a Sicilian steel worker father. Both his parents were devout Catholics and, as an altar boy, Savio was planning to become a priest. Savio's part in the protest on the Berkeley campus started when former student Jack Weinberg was manning a table for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). The University police had just put him in a police car when someone from the surrounding crowd yelled "sit down". Savio, along with others during the 32-hour sit-in, took off his shoes and climbed on top of the car and spoke with words that roused the crowd into frenzy.

The waitress returns. Still no frivolous small talk, she deftly places the pitcher and four glasses on the table, and says, "That'll be three-seventy five," for the first time openly eying Brawley.

Byron lays down a five, with smile and says, "Keep it...by the way, who does your choreography? Very impressive." She briefly returns the smile, pauses then, "You need anything else...I mean anything, just let me know," and

with a wink, scribbles something on the back of a napkin, and leaving it on the table, vanishes again into the throbbing mob. Brawley routinely files the unread napkin, into his shirt pocket, along with the countless others. With his rugged good-looks and natural charisma, the man is a male magnet for women.

"How *do* you *do* it...gotta line-up program to keep the names straight?" Mick asks.

"I rely heavily on the use of generics...like *honey, baby etcetera*...usually it's just one date, part of my coed-conservation catch and release program. But she definitely could be a keeper," Brawley says with a licentious smile.

Mick fills all four glasses, then raises his glass, "To the cause, the major cause, from the minor Koz," Koz says.

They all clink glasses and take a long pull on the dark beer.

"So, you mind if I call you Mario, Mario?" Brawley says.

"Sss-ure...Bbb-yrn..." Savio answers, face flushed with red which validates that he is not clowning around.

As a child, Savio was inflicted with a stammer which he had worked diligently to overcome. But occasionally in social situations, especially with people whom he does not know, he is initially painfully shy and sometimes stammers until he is comfortable with them, or he has something compelling to say to a throng of hundreds, sometimes thousands of students, then the stammer miraculously vanishes.

C-Wash tactfully adds, "Mario here's not used to speakin' in small intimate gatherings, which sometimes makes him a little nervous. Reverse stage fright," exchanging a grin with Savio, diffusing the social unease hanging in the air. Mick can see there is a deep personal connection and mutual respect between C-Wash and Savio.

"Mario, so how did you end up at Cal?" Byron asks.

"Lll-ong story. I had grown up in New York, so initially I went to Manhattan College, a Catholic college taught by Christian Brothers, sixty-sixty-one, then I transferred to Queens College...New York, a little more cosmopolitan and free-thinking which is where I first got a taste of student activism. In the summer of '63, I went down to Mexico to work with the poor. My first exposure to Third World living conditions...that is until I went down to the South...to Mississippi. Anyway, while in Mexico, my family had relocated to Southern California.

"Why Biz-erkley?" Byron asks.

"Man...I was like *really* ready for a change from the East Coast, so I decided to have a look at some schools out West. Initially I considered UCLA, but I found myself increasingly drawn to Berkeley for reasons that were at least partially political, where in the 50s students had been expressing dissent against the arms race, the cold war and the legacy of McCarthyism. It was an exciting place, man...a hotbed of political activism and I was attracted to UC

Berkeley's beauty, with its trees, streams and scenic overlooks of the San Francisco Bay. It was...and still is entrancing. So in the Fall of '63, I arrived at UCB a young and naive philosophy major." Now, with not a trace of stammer.

"How did you get involved in student activism at Cal?" Mick asks.

"About half-way through the first semester, I started attending meetings of University Friends of SNCC, the predominantly African American student group battling racism in the deep South. From there I became involved in a tutoring project, which SNCC and CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality helped to organize...teachin' black high school and elementary students in West Berkeley. It was my first exposure with political repression and the fear the movements for social change, in particular the civil rights movement by blacks, had evoked among conservatives. For me, the civil rights movement had a powerful appeal because it offered a new and serious role for students. It connected with my passion for social justice. Man...seeing those TV images of civil rights activists facing those police dogs in Birmingham...left me both ashamed and inspired. Ashamed that America was so bigoted inspired me to join the movement to battle racism. So in the summer of '64 a lot of us whites, who had never experienced racism, went to Mississippi to see it, feel it...and touch it...first hand," Savio says.

"Were you there when, Michael Schwerner, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman were killed?" Byron asks.

"Yea...that was a tough one. At first, we didn't know for sure that they had been murdered, but Bob Moses said that the likelihood was very high. I remember Bob who was leading the cause down there, who had himself had been mercilessly beaten almost to death, giving us activists a little talk on the perilous reality of the Jim Crow South. He said...*some of you may want to reconsider your commitment to the Mississippi Project. People have been killed. You can go back home...and no one will look down on you for doing it.*

When Bob Moses spoke, everyone understood that he was a man speaking from his heart...and being very careful about what he said. His courage...patience and genuine love...and determination to come to real terms with the lives of people who had been made economic outcasts...well it was awe inspiring. I wanted to be like Bob Moses. I wanted to *be* Bob Moses. So although several did leave, with no recrimination, that night Marshall Ganz, a fellow activist and I had a long discussion. It was one of the most memorable in my life, because despite our own fear of the potential for serious injury or even death, as this was not some threat in the abstract...*we might die...I might die.* We both made the choice to go on. We volunteered to go to McComb, one of the most violent areas. McComb got so violent and Klan activity so threatening that the leadership delayed sending the group to McComb, and instead to Holmes County for a few weeks," Savio says with deep reflection in his intense eyes.

"So what were you hoping to accomplish down there, Mario" Mick says.

"Well Mick, our work mainly focused on voter registration. Most local blacks were either landless farmers or residents of local towns who depended on whites for their employment...and feared any attempt to register would antagonize their white bosses, costing them their jobs. The were warned by the whites...never to speak to the Northern agitators," Savio says.

"The final step in the voter registration process is the most difficult. This involves prospective black voters going into hostile white territory downtown to register," C-Wash adds, who has been silent through most of the evening allowing Savio to speak, all the while gazing at Savio with obvious unashamed admiration for this white man, who was and is, risking his life for *the cause*...the egalitarian civil rights of *his* people.

"Some of the blacks seeking to vote were elderly...and inspiring. The most powerful event I witnessed was when I brought an old man down to Lexington to attempt to register to vote. This very elderly black farmer, a man of about 60 or 70, hard to tell down there...the life of a sharecropper is hard...very hard. I had personally recruited him. He went into the registrar's office wearing an old beat-up hat...he was stooped. He went up to the desk. I had to wait by the door because Mississippi law required the registrant to go through the process alone. He took off his hat and very politely, with a kind of shuffling manner held his hat...and just stood there...patiently waiting to be acknowledged by the registrar who happened to be the local Sheriff's wife.

She started in on him.

What you want boy?

I want to redish, maam..in a small deferential, almost obsequious voice. It's part of the dialect down there. They turned register into a two syllable word *redish*.

What's that you say boy?

I want to redish, ma'am.

What's redish...what you talkin' 'bout boy? We don't got no redish around here.

On and on, about the fact that he couldn't say register. But he never gave up. She finally had to give him the form, but she made him eat shit for it. She humiliated him...or she tried to. As I was watching this unbelievable injustice unfold, I thought...here's somebody who because of something I had done, was facing that kind of humiliation, maybe risking his life...his family's life. He must have been afraid...I know I was, yet he stood his ground. And I could only stand there. You're powerless to do anything...while this black gentleman who simply wanted to exercise his Constitutionally guaranteed rights, was being treated worse than a dog. It just tears up your insides. I was awed by the quiet dignity this elderly farmer had displayed...and horribly upset at being barred from aiding him.

"Hard to believe...that in this country...in the 1960s almost 100 years after the Civil War, that black people could be treated like that man. Sorry man,

go on," Mick says naively, shaking his head.

"Yea...so anyway, in the course of witnessing this event of wanton injustice, I felt I had become an adult...a man, with a determination to stand up for freedom. That simple farmer's courage, changed my life," Savio says choking up, his eyes tearing.

"Were there any acts of violence against you and the others?" Brawley asks.

"One in particular stands out because of the response of local police...or lack of it, because it was emblematic of their bigoted attitude. We were in Jackson...Robert Osman and I had just had lunch. We met up with a young black man who said he would lead us to the meeting place of some of the civil rights organizations. We must have made an easy target. A black and two whites walking and talking together through the streets of this segregated city. An old gray Chevy owned by a Klan member pulled up to the curb ahead of where we were walking. Two white males sprang from the vehicle...both had brown wooden billy clubs. They came at us...we ran...and they chased us. I was struck twice on rear part of my left shoulder...it was a glancing blow. When I turned around toward the intersection, I could see Robert Osman being beaten on the back with billy clubs. He was doubled up with his hands clasped over his head. Since Osman was committed to non-violence he did not use force to resist...instead protecting himself only by covering his head. He suffered serious injuries to his back, ribs, knee and arm. While neither the young black man nor I required medical attention, Osman was hospitalized.

This is the part that'll kill ya...literally. I managed to get the license number of the car used by the assailants and called the police. The Jackson Police blamed *us* for the assault saying, *We don't call 'em Negroes...down here...they're Niggers. And go on back to where y'all came from and stop causing all this trouble down here...or you'll get in a lot more than trouble before you leave Mississippi.*" Savio says.

"Hey Mario...look at the time, man. We'd better get shakin'," C-Wash says standing up. Mario, standing up, smiles and says, "I hope I haven't gone on too long here...once I get wound up. And I hope you two will join us, in the movement. In any case...nice connectin' with ya both. Thanks for the beer, the next one's on us," Mario says shaking both Brawley's and Mick's hand.

After they were gone, as Brawley and Mick were finishing the pitcher of beer, Brawley says, "So whatta think, man?"

"Pure...man. I want to be like Mario Savio. No...I want to *be* Mario Savio," Mick says smiling.

Brawley, faintly smiling, slowly nods his head in affirmation, "Diggin' it, man...that cat...both of 'em, got more moral and physical courage than I'll *ever* have. Savio and C-Wash are true heroes of social justice. Committed, humble servants to the cause of universal human rights. Inspiring shit, man...*abso-fucking-lutely* inspiring. To all the Mario Savio's and Charles Washington's in the world," Brawley says raising his glass to Mick's, with both

of them chugging the final glass of the pitcher.

“Ready to split, man?” Mick says.

“Hey man, you go ahead. I’ve got a little social business to attend to. Catch up with ya later,” Brawley says smiling.

“Dig it...excellent choice. Do everything I would do...later, man,” Mick says standing up to leave.

“Everything...and more,” Brawley smiles.

Walking back to the apartment alone that night, under the starlit night, gave Mick the opportunity to reflect on the encounter with the ‘accidental activist’ Mario Savio, and his intellectual and spiritual fellow traveler, C-Wash. He was filled with a sense of wonderment and reverence for the millennia of struggle for social justice by men like The Christ, Mohammed, Buddha, Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and now up close and personal, Mario Savio and Charles Washington. Under these very same stars. Feeling as though he too, at some embryonic level was beginning to understand what it was to be a man—a universal man.

The infinite number of lives given...and taken for the cause of human rights through history. Brawley and Mick would have several more of these powerfully enlightening meetings with Savio and C-Wash.

Mick, who was chronologically at least two years younger than the others, but intellectually decades behind in maturity, for the most part sat quietly and just observed and listened to the profound enlightenment of their erudite discussion and towering intellect. It was positively transcendent.

Michaelangelo's Renaissance. Greek philosophy, the Classics, the law, literature, music, art...everything and anything. Mick was enthralled with the back-and-forth, sometimes intense, occasionally heated, but always civil and respectful, often leavened with humor and irony. Mick was deeply grateful for having the opportunity to have the door opened for him to the whole new and exciting world of ideas on subjects like the diverse political theories of government, Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Locke, Kant...and an endless list of great thinkers, philosophers, artists, writers and poets, and composers.

When Mick had some free time he would spend hours at the UC Library which had a *non-pareil* collection of music—the fusion of Jazz with Classical in Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue. Opera, including all of Puccini's lyrical operas, arias like Vissi d'arte from Tosca which Mick grew up listening to. In particular, the Baroque and Romantic periods—all of which was available to listen to on LP vinyl records on a turntable with earphones. Seated in comfortable over-stuffed wing chairs surrounded by the musty scent of literally thousands of books, a repository of vast stores of knowledge and wisdom in the rich, dark mahogany bookcases. He was in bibliophilic heaven.

Mick was particularly stirred by the Romantic period of Russian composers, the piano concertos of Sergei Rachmaninov, also quite tall, *‘six and a half feet of scowl’*, which seemed to resonate with his core Russian Cossack

DNA. His erotic Piano Concerto Number 3 was like making love...long slow lyrical *Intermezzo: Adagio* passages followed by a playfully seductive quickening of tempo, *Allegro ma non tanto*. (*It*. lively, but not so much).

Those discussions in which Mick eventually began to participate and contribute, helped him to begin to form his own ideas on abstract concepts like social justice—it broadened and deepened his cultural literacy and world view immeasurably. During these discussions, there was little or no intellectual *bravura* or pedantic posturing. And all three of them were generous and encouraging of Mick's participation, and patiently listened and answered Mick's many questions, which to them at the time must have seemed rather *jejune* and inane.

As Mick's relatively puerile priorities began to become reshaped, the words from his first meeting with C-Wash begin to reverberate, *That was then. My priorities have changed. I'm just out playin' for fun...now...too much like a full-time job then, man. Waaaay too intense...and serious, so now I play for the right reasons*. And Mick now understood completely what C-Wash was saying when he witnessed his effortless athletic *pas seul* as he would leap into the air, seemingly defying gravity, in a suspended state of blissful grace, waiting for his mere mortal defenders to fall victim to Newton's Law—no showboat dunk—just gently laying the ball in, high above the rim.

There are very few earthlings born with this gift. The legendary Russian ballet dancer, Mikhail Nikolaevich Baryshnikov, C-Wash, Elgin Baylor, 'Elegant Elg' of Seattle University, who had become Mick's B-ball role model, and later, perhaps the greatest of all—the great Julius Irving, alias 'Doctor J', all possessed serious hang time.

As a consequence of the kind inclusiveness he received, a deep psychic bond was formed, far more than intellectual, with those three young idealistic men—'the best and brightest', which he would cherish for the rest of his life. Even after the lives of all three of these brilliant young men still in their prime of life were to be prematurely abbreviated.

Mick would not see Brawley for two days, until he finally shows up at the pad with the blonde beauty from La Val's. Her name was Angie, and she was even more beautiful under scrutiny of daylight, with intelligent, smiling warm brown eyes cast in a wondrous gaze upon one Byron Brawley, heart-breaker *par excellence*.

But Mick begins to suspect that maybe Brawley had finally met his match. She was also an English major, and a gymnast whose events were the uneven parallel bars and the balletic floor exercise which accounted for her purposeful yet graceful movements...and her compact, sinewy trim appearance. Unbeknownst to Brawley, she had observed him in a class on Gustave Flaubert's ribald classic debut novel, *Madame Bovary* in its native French—not only smitten by his rugged handsomeness and self-assured manner, but his incisive insights and witty eloquence he had displayed during class discussion of the reading material. It was the classic case of the hunter chasing his

prey...until he himself, was caught.

After spending some time with them, Mick had the distinct sense that Angie, also resolutely independent, was not only Brawley's athletic equal, but intellectually as well. So, from that time on Mick didn't see much of Brawley around the pad.

- Chapter 5 -

There's a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart that you can't take part! You can't even passively take part! And you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus—and you've got to make it stop!

- Mario Savio – Student activist and patriot

December 2, 1964 about noon - the steps of Sproul Hall - UCB

The students started gathering around 11AM in front of Sproul Hall for the scheduled rally which was to start at noon. By noon, there are about 6,000 undergrad and grad students, faculty and Teaching Assistants, many of whom had gone on strike in solidarity with the FSM. At the time there was a total enrollment at UC of about 27,000 undergrad and grad students. The heavy-handed response by the UC Administration in gratuitously singling out the leadership of the FSM for expulsion and suspension from the relatively docile, unsuccessful November rally was perceived as arbitrary, vindictive and grossly unfair. It energized and motivated many of the students in response. The crowd is in an angry, confrontational mood.

Mick and Brawley, who have arrived about 20 minutes earlier, connect with Charles Washington. He asks them if they intend to participate in the take-over and sit-in. They both acknowledge their commitment.

To which C-Wash responds, "Ya know....from the way it looks, there will be no shortage of students willing to do the sit-in, but you two would be more valuable to the movement by remaining outside of the building, to be our eyes and ears...to bear witness and to duly note the activity of the media and in particular the police. We're almost certain that the administration will bring the police into this, which is what we're hoping for. To call attention to this fight...regionally and nationally, just like in Alabama and Mississippi. It was a major turning point in the civil right movement. I know I can trust both of you to be accurate and meticulous about memorializing this, probably the most important and hopefully decisive political action by the FSM thus far. If you have a camera, take pictures, a lot of pictures, make notes about what was said and who said it. It could become invaluable if things gets really ugly here...which it has the potential to be."

Mick says, "Well C-Wash...if you and Mario think the cause is better served by our doing that, I'm okay with it. I'll go back and get my camera and buy film, a lot of film, and shoot it."

Brawley says, "Okay, Charles...I'll make notes and cover media and police participation and work the local media angle. I hear that Berkeley's

listener-supported radio station, KPFA, is going to broadcast the rally and air a documentary on the FSM crisis."

"Thanks, man. I'll tell Mario you two cats are on board. This is uncharted territory, man...wish us luck, we're going to need it."

Then Charles Washington, gives Mick and Byron each a long farewell hug, like a warrior preparing to go into battle against overwhelming odds, and disappears into the throng to be with his compatriot Mario Savio, whom he has obviously become very protective of.

The first speakers are FSM Steering Committee members, Martin Roysner, Michael Rossman and Steve Weisman. They set the stage with a history of the movement, exhorting the students to not just passively observe, but to actively participate in the rally and the scheduled take-over and sit-in of Sproul Hall.

Then Charles Powell, the UC student body president takes the podium, who compounds the anger of the students by opposing the sit-in to a chorus of boos and cat-calls. He is perceived as a proxy for the Administration and the UC President Clark Kerr. His plea for the students to disband and leave is dismissed as a sell-out to the First and Fourteen Amendment interests of the undergrad students that the FSM had been championing for the last several months.

Mick and Brawley, have returned in time to catch the speech by student body president Powell, just before Mario Savio is to speak. Mick takes a position from above, looking down on the faces of the crowd with a day-pack full of camera gear and film. Brawley, wearing an old beat-up 'cub-reporter' fedora, with a hastily scribbled "Press" on the back of a business card, inserted into the ribboned hat band begins to mingle in the crowd. Mick is taking photos of students using a telephoto lens, faculty and administration, mostly *verite* 'react' shots during the speeches. Brawley is interviewing students, and the generally reticent faculty, making copious notes, mostly about the issues championed by the FSM, and how they plan to respond to them.

Mario Savio now takes the podium, and begins to speak. His first words address the speech just given by SB president Powell:¹²

You know, I just wanna say one brief thing about something the previous speaker said. I didn't wanna spend too much time on that 'cause I don't think it's important enough. But one thing is worth considering.

He's the...he's the nominal head of an organization supposedly representative of the undergraduates. Whereas in fact under the current director it derives—its authority is delegated power from the Administration. It's totally

12 Robert Cohen "Freedom's Orator: Mario Savio and the Radical Legacy of the 1960s" (2009)

unrepresentative of the graduate students and TAs.

But he made the following statement, I quote. 'I would ask all those who are not definitely committed to the FSM cause to stay away from demonstration.' Alright, now listen to this, 'For all upper division students who are interested in alleviating the TA shortage problem, I would encourage you to offer your services to Department Chairmen and Advisers.' That has two things: A strike breaker and a fink.

I'd like to say...like to say one other thing about a union problem. Upstairs you may have noticed they're ready on the 2nd floor of Sproul Hall, Locals 40 and 127 of the Painters Union are painting the inside of the 2nd floor of Sproul Hall. Now, apparently that action had been planned some time in the past. I've tried to contact those unions. Unfortunately—and it tears my heart out—they're as bureaucratized as the Administration. It's difficult to get through to anyone in authority there. Very sad. We're still...we're still making an attempt. Those people up there have no desire to interfere with what we're doing. I would ask that they be considered and that they not be heckled in any way. And I think that...you know...while there's unfortunately no sense of—no sense of solidarity at this point between unions and students, there at least need be no...you know...excessively hard feelings between the two groups.

Now, there are at least two ways in which sit-ins and civil disobedience and whatever—least two major ways in which it can occur. One, when a law exists, is promulgated, which is totally unacceptable to people and they violate it again and again and again till it's rescinded, appealed. Alright, but there's another way. There's another way. Sometimes, the form of the law is such as to render impossible its effective violation...as a method to have it repealed. Sometimes, the grievances of people are more...extend more...to more than just the law, extend to a whole mode of arbitrary power, a whole mode of arbitrary exercise of arbitrary power.

And that's what we have here. We have an autocracy which...which runs this university. It's managed. We were told the following: If President Kerr actually tried to get something more liberal out of the Regents in his telephone conversation, why didn't he make some public statement to that effect? And the answer we received...from a well-meaning liberal...was the following: He said, 'Would you ever imagine the manager of a firm making a statement publicly in opposition to his Board of Directors?' That's the answer.

Now Savio begins to more forcefully address the issue of student sovereignty. He is starting to gain some of his legendary rhetorical momentum:

Well I ask you to consider...if this is a firm, and if the Board of Regents are the Board of Directors, and if President Kerr in fact is the manager, then I tell you something...the faculty are a bunch of employees and we're the raw material! But we're a bunch of raw materials that don't mean to be—have any process upon us. Don't mean to be made into any product! Don't mean...don't mean to end up being bought by some clients of the University, be they the government, be they industry, be they organized labor, be they anyone! We're human beings!

And that—that brings me to the second mode of civil disobedience. There's a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart that you can't take part! You can't even passively take part! And you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus—and you've got to make it stop! And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it—that unless you're free the machine will be prevented from working at all!! That doesn't mean...I know it will be interpreted to mean, unfortunately, by the bigots who run The Examiner, for example. That doesn't mean that you have to break anything. One thousand people sitting down some place, not letting anybody by, not letting anything happen, can stop any machine, including this machine! And it will stop!!

We're gonna do the following...and the greater the number of people, the safer they'll be and the more effective it will be. We're going, once again, to march up to the 2nd floor of Sproul Hall. And we're gonna conduct our lives for a while in the 2nd floor of Sproul Hall. We'll show movies, for example. We tried to get Un Chant d'Amour and they shut them off. Unfortunately, that's tied up in the court because of a lot of squeamish moral mothers for a moral America and other people on the outside. The same people who get all their ideas out of the San Francisco Examiner. Sad, sad. But, Mr Landau...Mr Landau has gotten us some other films.

Likewise, we'll do something...we'll do something which hasn't occurred at this University in a good long time! We're going to have real classes up there! There's gonna be freedom schools conducted up there! We're going to have

classes on the 1st and 14th amendments!! We're gonna spend our time learning about the things this University is afraid that we know! We're going to learn about freedom up there, and we're going to learn by doing!!

Now, we've had some good, long rallies. Just one moment. We've had some good, long rallies. And I think I'm sicker of rallies than anyone else here. She's not going to be long. I'd like to introduce one last person...one last person before we enter Sproul Hall. Yea. And the person is Joan Baez...

Joan Baez had just appeared at UC Berkeley to a sell-out crowds, where she had sung a full repertoire of social-conscience folk music, including Bob Dylan's elegiac *The Times They Are a-Changin'*. With Joan Baez's inspiring folk music and a touch of celebrity, the movement is rising to the occasion on December 2. Joan Baez, the Dylan muse...the female troubadour of social justice was part of the patriotic framework—the FSM equivalent of waving the American flag.

She was the lone female voice at the rally. She played a role that accorded with her own pacifism but also with traditional gender roles—that is, after male speakers revved up the crowd's anger, so as to incite and justify mass civil disobedience, Baez gently calmed things down in the name of love. After singing her first song, Baez told the crowd as they prepared to march into Sproul Hall:

The only thing that occurs to me, seeing all you people out there...I don't know how many of you intend to come inside with us...but that is that you muster up as much love as you possibly can, and as little hatred and as little violence, and as little "angries" as you can, although I know it's been exasperating. The more love you can feel, the more chance there is for it to be a success.

As the rally ends, Savio too adopts this calmer tone, urging that students walk slowly into Sproul, which they do, giving the procession an almost religious solemnity—protesters not storming the building but entering in a dignified manner, while singing “We Shall Overcome,” following the amplified sound of Baez's angelic voice. Baez, Savio, and the other FSM speakers tapped into a powerful sense of idealism concerning freedom, democracy, and student rights, activated by a semester of grievances against the administration. More than a thousand protesters marched into Sproul Hall.

As anticipated by the leadership of FSM, on the evening of December 2nd, President Kerr calls the Governor of California, Edmund G.

Brown. Responding to erroneous and manufactured reports of student violence, Brown speaks on the phone with, Alameda County assistant district attorney Edwin Meese III. Meese seconds a call for arrests, telling the governor that “temporizing would only make the eventual blow off more dangerous.” Governor Brown further responds by authorizing the police invasion so that “there will be no anarchy, and that is what has developed at the University of California.” This results in massive use of police power: 200 Alameda County deputy sheriffs, 150 state highway patrol officers, 50 Berkeley police, and 37 campus police mobilize to clear Sproul Hall on December 3, at three o’clock in the morning which is done deliberately so as to minimize media coverage.

At about 11 PM, Mick and Brawley return to the apartment on Bancroft Way, just across the street from the campus, less than a five minute walk to Sproul Hall. They’ve been there for almost 12 hours, so they intend to get some nourishment and a little sleep. The Berkeley campus police have a presence, but they number less than 50.

Considering that there are approximately now only about 800 students sitting-in on the several floors of Sproul Hall, it’s unlikely that they will attempt any kind of police action, at least until the morning.

About 1 AM, they are awakened by the sound of sirens. When they step out on to Bancroft Way, going East against the one-way traffic, they see processions of law enforcement cars, ambulances, army personnel trucks and buses, loaded with cops, some in riot gear, with flashing red lights eerily illuminating the buildings. They immediately realize that the UC Administration has called in a massive police response. There is a parade of patrol cars emblazoned with Alameda County Sheriff insignias—too many to count, along with numerous California Highway Patrol vehicles and Berkeley Police cars. The massive show of force is obviously designed to intimidate the protestors and deter anyone sympathetic to their cause from participating, not only on this day, but in the future.

Mick and Brawley, grab their gear and run over to Sproul Hall, where they observe a command center has been set up. There must be close to 500 cops—their sneering and smirking expressions, exudes an air of hostility and resentment among the cops, as they are getting themselves psyched up to deal with the 'hippie anarchists'. Derisive laughter and a lot of macho posturing along with a palpable atmosphere of expectation of inflicting some physical pain on the 'little commie bastards', is all-pervasive.

Because they are perceived as press, they are able to get close enough to overhear the commander of the operation loudly addressing about 20 uniformed squad leaders:

Gentlemen, our mission today is to respond to an order from the Governor of the State of California to restore order and remove trespassers unlawfully assembled on property of the State of California. We'll mobilize at 14:30, at which time the chief of campus police will then enter the building with a bullhorn, and recite the

necessary legal notice, giving the demonstrators 30 minutes to peacefully and in an orderly manner, leave the building, or they will be subject to arrest and prosecution for trespassing, and failure to disband an unlawful assembly. By 15:00 hours, if the protestors have not disbanded or indicated an intention, willingness and an ability to do so, because they are the lead law enforcement agency requesting assistance, the first wave of Berkeley campus police will begin physically removing demonstrators.

Because the campus cops can recognize the protestor's leadership on sight, especially this trouble-maker Mario Savio along with his co-conspirators...they will be identified and removed first to hopefully weaken the resolve of the others. They will be escorted, carried or dragged by any means necessary for removal, and placed in to the waiting buses with wrist restraints, behind their back and taken to the county jail where they will be processed, booked and placed in detention. The second wave will be the City of Berkeley police, then the Alameda county sheriffs, and finally the California State highway patrol, will be the final wave if necessary.

Additionally, just in case some of the protestors or persons sympathetic to their cause, including faculty, outside of Sproul Hall attempt to provide any assistance to the protestors, or resistance to the operation, there will be a force of about 100 officers in full riot gear in reserve, with tear gas, standing by at the ready. Any questions?"

"What if they resist arrest while we attempt to remove them?" one of the officers asks.

If they resist using any force whatsoever including hands or fists...or kicking...or biting, then use whatever reasonable force is necessary to subdue and remove them from the building, making sure to note which one of the uh...anarchists hooligans failed to comply and resisted arrest...especially with force for future prosecution for resisting arrest, and attacking a police officer. Any other questions?" the commander says.

Again hearing none he continues:

Men...our goal is to have these unwashed rabble-rousers cleared out of the building before, 18:00 hours before the media is even awake. Our intel tells us that there are about 800 to 1,000 protestors. With the almost 500 officers we've got standing by, we should have it cleared out no later than 6 AM...the buses loaded and gone before the sun even rises and media has had its first cups of coffee.

Any other questions? With no other questions he says,

Okay...explain the mission and the rules of engagement to your men, and tell them 'at ease' until about 14:00 hours...at which time they

should start preparing for engagement. Okay...it's 13:36 hours...and mark.

Brawley says, "Koz, I'm going to sneak into Sproul the back way, and give Mario and Charles a heads-up on the cops. Can you stay here and keep an eye on the developing situation? Be back in about 20 minutes...I hope."

"Got it...give 'em my best, man."

Brawley casually walks around the back of Sproul Hall so as not to attract any attention from the cops, knocks on a locked rear door, where he is let-in by one of the protestors providing security. He makes his way to Savio and Washington, who are in a heated discussion with some members of the Steering Committee on the second floor of Sproul. He catches Washington's eye, and beckons him over.

"What news have you from the front?" C-Wash says with a twinkle in his eye.

"*Il n'est pas bon...mon Capitain* uh...not good. Maybe you should get Mario over here so I can fill ya both in," Brawley says.

C-Wash calls over to Mario, who breaks off the discussion with the others, and walks over to C-Wash and Brawley.

"Byron...howya doin' man? What's it look like out there?" Mario says.

"Honestly man? Does the name George Armstrong Custer like mean anything to you two cats?" Brawley says with a grin. Both men despite the enormity and major stress of the situation, manage a smile, which cuts some of the thick tension in the air.

Brawley updates the two men on the planned massive police action by the UC administration. They both listen intently, asking a few questions, nodding thoughtfully.

"Good...then it won't even be a fair fight. We've got 'em right where we want 'em," Savio says, "because no amount of force can ever withstand the power of the truth. That's what you and Koz will be doing...bearing witness to the truth. Truth to power brothers!" he says shooting his arm skyward into a fist.

When they are finished, Brawley says, "I've gotta get back...Koz's keepin' an eye on things, takin' lots of pictures. I'll try to get back with more info later if I can. You cats be cool...now. They're going to try to single you out early to attempt to demoralize the others. I just want you to know that there is a prevailing attitude of almost festive hostility among those cops...be careful, man...*very careful*. They're just lookin' for even the slightest excuse to beat on somebody, most especially the FSM leadership. Okay? Later, man."

Savio and Washington thank Brawley—they exchange handshakes and hugs. Brawley disappears out the back door into the early morning

darkness.

2:00 AM Sproul Hall

Mick and Brawley, make their way to the back entrance of Sproul Hall, with the intent of being inside to record the event, when the cops initiate their action. But when they reach the rear of the building, they are surprised to find that the police have already set up a perimeter around the entire rear of the building, to prevent any of the protestors from escaping.

"We're screwed, unless we can bluff our way into the building...or the pigs will have their way 'em," Brawley says.

"Yea man, no tellin' how much damage they can do to those kids...with no eyes or ears of the press to worry about. Let's go for it. Since neither one of us has press credentials, tell 'em we're independent news stringers on assignment from that conservative rag San Francisco Examiner," Mick says.

The San Francisco Examiner has a notoriously conservative bias slant on the news—it has been virulently derogatory in its criticism of the FSM and particularly harsh on Mario Savio.

Brawley brazenly walks up to the one of the officers with chevron stripes on his sleeve, and announces, "Good evening uh...mornin' officers. We're independent news gatherers on assignment for The San Francisco Examiner. We'd like to gain access to Sproul to cover the removal of those anarchists bastards...when they get what they deserve!"

The cop says, "Sorry...my orders are that *no one* goes in...and *no one* comes out. No press is allowed...during this official police action sanctioned by the governor of the State of California."

"And...why's that?" Mick asks.

The cop answers with pat almost rote response, indicating that the cops have anticipated this possibility and would try to preclude the press from reporting on it by bluffing the pretense of safety. "We dunno what those hooligans are capable of...they could have weapons, and if they try to resist arrest, there could be a violent physical confrontation that could put bystanders, like the press at risk for serious injury...or worse."

"We'll take our chances. We'll sign a release absolving the police of any liability," Brawley counters.

The cop just smiles, looks them both over—up and down, "San Francisco Examiner my ass. Get your hippie asses outta here, like right now before I arrest the both of you for interfering with a police officer in the discharge of his official duty."

Brawley says, "You can't keep the press out, man...that's unconstitutional! First Amendment freedom of the press. We have a legal

right...and a duty to be present...and..."

The officer, when confronted by the legality of his actions, now with mean belligerent eyes, nodding to another cop standing nearby, "Is that right...just watch me. Officer Wainwright, escort this two *esteemed* members of the press around to the front of the building, where they can exercise they First Amendment rights up their ass. And if they protest in any way...arrest their asses and throw 'em in the bus, where they will be joined shortly by their pals."

As Mick and Brawley are escorted to the front of Sproul Hall, Brawley starts to say something to the cop, but Mick, grabs his arm, and whispers in his ear, "Hey man...be cool. We'll be of no use to anybody, with our asses just sittin' in a bus. Let's just do what we can do," Brawley grudgingly nods in agreement.

2:30 AM Sproul Hall

The Chief of the Berkeley campus police, with bullhorn in hand surrounded by a phalanx of cops, climbs the stairs to the front entry of Sproul Hall, and disappears through the massive metal front entry doors.

Ten minutes later, to a growing chorus of voices singing *We Shall Overcome*, emanating from the now open windows of the several floors of Sproul, louder and louder, the campus police chief with his entourage, exits the front entrance and walks down to the command center, just shaking his head. Soon, all the sympathetic faculty and students outside are joining in, including Mick and Brawley:

*We shall overcome, we shall overcome,
We shall overcome someday;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,*

*We shall overcome someday.
The Lord will see us through, The Lord will see us through,
The Lord will see us through someday;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
We shall overcome someday.*

*We're on to victory, We're on to victory,
We're on to victory someday;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
We're on to victory someday.*

*We'll walk hand in hand, we'll walk hand in hand,
We'll walk hand in hand someday;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
We'll walk hand in hand someday.*

*We are not afraid, we are not afraid,
We are not afraid today;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
We are not afraid today.*

*The truth shall make us free, the truth shall make us free,
The truth shall make us free someday;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,*

The truth shall make us free someday..

3:00 AM Sproul Hall

About 40 Berkeley campus police enter Sproul Hall. Within 5 minutes, the cops in groups of two or three are carrying, sometimes dragging the completely limp bodies of protestors out of the entrance, down the stairs to a processing area, where they are identified, cuffed with wrist restraints and then placed on to one of the many waiting buses.

Mick is busy taking pictures, as one by one the protestors exit. It is very slow going because few of the protestors are ambulatory and many provide no resistance or assistance to the cops in the transport of their bodies. As each protestor comes out, they are greeted with applause. Within 10 minutes, both Mario Savio and Charles Washington, bodies totally limp offering no resistance exit, to a thunderous applause and the chant, "Free Speech! Free Speech! Free Speech!"

The police deliberately and with forethought, drag them both down the front steps, so that their backsides are being bounced against the concrete steps, hitting their lower backs and spine with a percussive blow at each step. Mick has positioned himself at the bottom of the steps—he is taking photos as fast as the camera will allow. He catches Mario's Savio's and C-Wash's eye. They both smile, and flash Mick a "V" peace sign with their fingers. Some of the students and faculty are yelling, "Police brutality! Police brutality! Stop the police brutality!" as the protestor's faces wince with the impact of each successive step.

It will take the police almost 11 hours to remove all 800 protestors. Because of the widespread media coverage, regional and national newspaper coverage, and the imagery on prime time broadcast news, the December 2nd sit-in at Sproul Hall UC Berkeley will ultimately lead to a victory for the FSM, with the UC administration being forced to revise it rules regarding political speech on campus, and will inspire and spawn countless other demonstrations in colleges and universities, not just in the U.S., but internationally.

The political activism at Berkeley will come to be viewed by many historians as the watershed moment in 20th century American history as the

genesis of the transformation of anti-establishment, anti-government political dissension—spreading like wildfire on American college campuses—eventually proliferating and galvanizing the general public to question, and if necessary, confront governmental dogma with civil disobedience.

A new progressive idealism based on equality of civil rights and social justice would begin to emerge, which would usher in recently elected president Lyndon Johnson's liberal political agenda, known as the Great Society, resulting in passage of two key pieces of legislation—The Civil Rights Act of 1964, and The Voting Rights Act of 1965.

After about 5 hours, Mick has run out gas—and film. Having had nothing to eat and coming down from the adrenal rush of the stress of the event, both he and Brawley are exhausted from witnessing the nerve-racking events of the day.

They decide that nothing more can be done, and head over toward the Student Union, to get something to eat and to commiserate with some of the other student activists, when they start to sense a ruckus, along with the unmistakable pungent odor of tear gas. Suddenly a crowd of about fifty students, are running pell-mell towards them, from Sather Gate, being pursued by cops in riot gear, brandishing batons. Two cops had cornered one totally defenseless guy...straddling him, whaling on him mercilessly with their batons with no indication of let-up. Sensing the potential lethality of the blows, they exchange a wordless "*oh shit, bad idea...but I guess we better stop this*" glance of affirmation.

Brawley and Mick both grab a cop by the back of their riot vests, and pull them off. The one campus cop then turns his mayhem on Brawley, and starts chasing him, a futile exercise in his riot gear. The other cop's baton on the back swing has caught Mick on his left forehead, opening a nasty gash and blackening his eye. When the cop spins around to face his interloper, Mick's face is momentarily revealed to him. This confirms that what started out as a bad idea, can only get worse. As he draws his baton back, Mick kicks him in the groin, hard which brings him to his knees, but the aborted blow lands on his left knee. But it gives them a brief window of opportunity to escape, as Mick half-hobbles and half-drags the immense mass of the victim into a dark basement stairwell.

Mick can hear the cop yelling with a fierce vehemence, "I'll remember you...you fuckers are history...expelled!" yells the groaning campus cop as they retreated, huddled into the obscurity and safety of darkness.

Mick begins to survey the condition of this very large, bald cranium, bleeding profusely from a long vertical gash on the back. He turns him over to inspect him from the front. His totally hairless face, no eyebrows or eyelashes has got deep cut at the bridge of his nose, which is also bleeding profusely into his eyes. He is desperately rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand to clear his eyes.

"Hey man...can you hear me...are you okay?" Mick yells.

"Jezuz Christ man, you don't have to yell. I might be blind but I ain't deaf...does it look like I'm okay? And what the *hell's* going on with my voice? All of sudden I sound like a *castrato*," Ad Hoc Shapiro says.

"Looks like you took a pretty good shot on the front of your neck...the larynx area. My guess is that this is probably not going to be remembered as one of the high points of your matriculation experience at Berkeley. And...you're probably going to have one helluva of a massive headache tomorrow, like an order of magnitude of Ten Tequila hangovers. I'm Koz...come here often?" Mick says.

"Yea...great place to meet engaging people. A real kick in head, and a regular riot, man...Ad Hoc...Hawk Shapiro," he says smiling extending his massive bloody paw engulfing Mick's considerable hand.

"Take off your sweat shirt, man," Mick says.

"So soon? But I hardly know ya...just because I'm damaged doesn't mean I can be taken advantage of...or that I'm easy," Hawk says facetiously batting his lash-less eyes, while pulling off his 2X white sweatshirt emblazoned with UC Berkeley Bears, revealing his massively developed muscles.

"Sorry man...wrong plumbing *pour moi*. Okay...I'm going to tear the sleeves into strips for bandages to try to stem the bleeding from the back of your head...but it's definitely gonna take some stitches," Mick says.

"*Quel dommage*. Guess my luck has changed after all...from bad to worse," Hawks grins.

Mick tears both sleeves off, then into long strips, he tosses the sleeveless sweatshirt back to Hawk, and says, "Here ya go man, put that on. So, what occasioned the visitation of that pig's baton on your melon?"

"Might've been something I said that referenced his mother's proclivity toward indiscriminate fornication with farm animals or possibly that rock that hit him right square on his helmet, uh...the other helmet. Shit man...nobody was challenging the cops gratuitous use of force. I guess my outrage of watching those pigs draggin' those peaceful protestors down those stairs, just for standing up for their First Amendment rights...got the better of me," Hawk says.

"That would probably do it. You an undergrad or grad?" Mick says.

"Grad...second year law...Boalt Hall, or was," Hawk says.

"So...do you know Charles Washington?" Mick says while bandaging Hawk's head which stems some of the bleeding.

"Yea, man...he's been in some of my con law classes. Smart cat...and non-violent...courageous as hell. When they started to drag him down those stairs, I guess I just lost it. Hey, man I'm starting to feel light headed...and nauseous...with a monster pain in my..." Hawk says.

Suddenly, Hawks eyes start to roll back into his head, and he goes

into a momentary seizure, then lapses into unconsciousness.

About five minutes later, after he had eluded his pursuer, Brawley circles around and finds Mick and Hawk. Together they carry and drag Hawk's unconscious immense bulk to the hospital. The police, anticipating the need for medical care of the student protestors, have a cop waiting in the ER with a camera. Mick and Brawley disregarding their own welfare, immediately upon entering the emergency room, begin yelling for a doctor. The nurses immediately place an oxygen mask on him, rush him into an operating room. They wait around for over an hour, until the attending physician comes out.

"How's he doin', doc?" Mick asks.

"Your friend is in critical condition. He's suffered a brain aneurysm...probably from multiple severe head trauma. We've managed to stabilize his condition. He's going to be hospitalized...for quite a while. Sorry to have to tell you this, but sometimes accompanying a major aneurysm there is a possibility of brain damage and permanent mental impairment. You didn't get him to the hospital any time too soon...another half-hour and I don't think he would have made it. I'll need your names for the medical report...and get some facts surrounding his injuries. What happened to him?"

"He was just exercising his constitutional rights doc...in a very rough neighborhood for free speech," Brawley says.

"Your names?" the doctor says.

"Clark Kerr...with two 'R's'," says the chancellor of UC Berkeley, the FSM antagonist.

"Of course you are..." the Doc says.

"I'm Charles Powell...with two 'I's. Gotta run doc...take good care of 'em...we'll check back later," says the anti-FSM, UCB student body president.

"Un-huh..." the Doc says not even bothering to write anything down.

They abruptly leave before the doctor can extract any more information from them.

Thus, would be the beginning of, an at times rambunctious, life-long friendship, more of a brotherhood, between Michaelangelo Kozlov, and one Ad Hoc, "Hawk" Shapiro.

Eventually, for Mick, resulting in Goodbye basketball scholarship. Goodbye Berkeley. Goodbye student deferment. And, Hello Draft Board.

- Chapter 6 -

Burbank - late afternoon

Maria is in the studio, after a class, tidying up preparing for the evening class, when her eye catches the still life of azaleas on the drying rack that the drunk had painted on with the palette knife. She walks over to it, and notices how the depth of the thick paint creates a texture and dramatic shadows. She places the painting on her easel, and with palette knife, begins applying thick paint over the existing brushwork. Very quickly the painting comes alive. Now, she is furiously, *angrily*, mixing bold colors, and rapidly applying the thick paint with slashing, broad aggressive strokes. Epiphany. Sometimes the Muse shows up when you least expect her—looking nothing like you could ever imagine. *Madam Muse—a drunk in drag?* she says to herself smiling.

The Studio - later that day

The students are starting to arrive for the evening class. Three students are standing in front of Maria's heavy impasto still life of azaleas on the wall drying rack. It is the same subject that they had all painted together as a class the week before.

"Wow, I wish my painting looked like that. Look at the texture...it looks almost three dimensional," says one student.

"The colors are so alive...and yummy. I like the looseness of the style...sort of impressionistic. Maria...can you teach us to paint like this? It's brilliant! What was your inspiration?" says another student.

Maria comes over to the students. She smiles slyly, "A visitation from the Patron Saint of Painting. Our Lady of uh...Turpentine. Okay, class, let's get started. Tonight were going to paint apples...luscious, red apples. I hope you all brought a lot of paint..." she says pointing a palette knife loaded with thick red paint, " 'cause you're going to need it."

January 1965 - Maria's apartment - night

Maria's eyes slowly flutter open—the illuminated clock on the night stand of her darkened bedroom says 2:35 AM as the hinges on the closed bedroom door begin to creak. The door is slowly swinging open. Her breathing becomes rapid and shallow, her heart racing with beads of sweat sprouting on her brow. *Will I ever be free of the torment and the potential for violence from*

Nicky? A large dark shadowy figure, slowly methodically moves toward the bed. She hears heavy, labored breathing, as the shadowy figure advances toward her and quietly kneels down next to her, Maria pulls a rolling pin from under the pillow, and in one quick motion swings wildly and hits the intruder.

"Ouch...ooh...*Goddammit!*" the shadow man yells.

Maria fumbles on the night stand light. She sees a fully-bearded man with shaggy hair, dressed in baggy, dirty clothes.

"Get away from me! I've got a rolling pin!" Maria yells, arm cocked.

"Yea...like, I hadn't noticed? You losin' it...living alone?" the interloper says, rubbing his head.

The voice is familiar but she cannot place the face with the full beard and black and blue bruises all over it. His left eye is swollen and black and blue.

"Mickey?" Maria says.

"Yea...who da hell did ya think it was? *Giacomo* the Ripper?" Mick says still rubbing his head.

Maria throws her arms around Mick neck and hugs him, "Oh, I'm so sorry...did I do that? Are you okay son?" Maria cries, touching the cheek under his blackened eye.

Mick reaches over and picks up the rolling pin, looks at to see if there's any blood, and tosses on the floor, and starts laughing. Maria now joins him in a chorus of hysterical laughing as they hug each other.

"*Jesus*, mother didya join the Holy Rollers...or what? Nah, mom...you didn't do that one. It's a long story. I am so tired...I just want to go to my room and sleep for about a week. Okay?" Mick says.

"Okay son...we can talk over breakfast," Maria says.

Mick gives her another hug, stands up and goes down the hall to his room with a slight limp.

"Oh, Mickey, be..." Maria yells, followed by a loud crash.

"Oww...*Goddammit!* Again! *JeZUZ Christ!*" Mick yells.

Mick reappears in the doorway rubbing his head.

"...careful about the lamps...hanging from the..." Maria says trailing off.

"Honest to gawd, mother...one of these days you're going to kill me," Mick says, from the doorway rubbing head again.

"...ceiling...plaster Renaissance lamps, I'm gold leafing. It wouldn't have killed you to call, ya know," says Maria with mock indignation, "Gawd...you look awful...like you've been through hell."

"Thanks...not nearly as bad as I feel. I called several times...just rang and rang. Anyway, hell was starting to look pretty damn good. Good night,

ma," says Mick rubbing his head as he heads toward his bedroom.

Mick is sitting at the dining room table with a cup of coffee in front of him. He downs a small white pill with a swig of coffee. Maria exits the kitchen with mounds of eggs, potatoes, bacon and toast. She places the food in front of Mick and sits across from him.

"Mick, are you okay? You were sleeping so soundly...then suddenly, I heard you screaming and yelling. When I checked on you...guess you were sleepwalking...in some sort of a fight. You had thrown the mattress on the floor...wildly punching it. It really scared me, son. I was afraid to startle you out of your sleep. You finally collapsed on the mattress...exhausted, and went back into a deep sleep. I hope I didn't put you into a coma," Maria says.

As Mick is devouring the food, he pauses, looks up at Maria, trying to change the subject and lighten the moment. He rubs his head, then, rolling his eyes, feigns a seizure...spasmodically jerking his entire body.

Then, talking into his cupped hands, "*Calling all cars...be on the look-out for a middle-age woman with a madam butterfly hairdo...wanted for assault and battery. She is armed...with a rolling pin and considered dangerous...that is all.*"

"*Very funny!* Mick, *I'm serious*...what's going on? I hadn't heard from you in weeks...I was sick with worry. Then you show up looking like a homeless refugee from a hippie commune...all those cuts and bruises?" Maria says.

Mick's eyes tear up as he looks at Maria, then looks away. He pushes the breakfast plates away, and takes a long swallow of his coffee, and recomposes himself, putting his elbows on the table cradling his head in his hands.

"Your son's a radical...anarchist criminal according to the FBI...that's what J. Edgar Hoover calls *us*," Mick says proudly defiant.

"FBI? *Us*? What the hell happened up there?" Maria pleads.

"Berkeley...was is in some ways...a disaster. After coach told me I couldn't get into school with enough units to be eligible to play basketball that semester, I ran into a guy I went to high school with...graduated two years earlier. Byron Brawley. He offered to put me up. About two months later...it was a sunny afternoon, we went to what was supposed to be a peaceful, non-violent student demonstration in front of the administration building. The protest organizers, some friends of ours, Mario Savio and Charles Washington were leading a demonstration...a sit-in...a take-over of Sproul Hall. There was about six thousand of us, outside Sproul Hall...arms inter-twined, chanting, *FREE SPEECH! FREE SPEECH! FREE SPEECH!* Then they lead almost 1000 students, peacefully, calmly into the building for the sit-in while singing *We shall overcome*.

Mario and Charles had asked Bryon and I to record the event...ya

know for posterity. Byron interviewing bystanders and faculty...me taking pictures. After it was almost over, Byron and I were walking back to the Student Union, when we see some cops chasing several students...in full riot gear. Two of the cops had this poor kid cornered...and they were beating on him pretty good...like to have killed him. So Byron and I intervened. Byron pulled the one cop off, who ran after him...I grabbed the other. But he got few licks in...and got a good look at my mug before I incapacitated him."

Maria eyes are now tearing up, "My gawd...I'm afraid to ask...did you injure him...seriously or worse?" she asks.

"Nah...the pig's okay, but the student they beat up was in pretty bad shape...blood everywhere. He was unconscious when Byron and I dragged him to the hospital. He had a serious head injury...maybe brain damage. They're weren't sure if he'd even make it...or if he does, if he's going to have a life-long mental impairment. At the hospital, the cops had cameras...taking pictures of anyone who might have been involved in the demonstration. I was sure they must have got one of me...and Byron, 'cause we waited around for over an hour to make sure he was okay.

About a week later, I went to the hospital to check on the student...A. H. Shapiro is his name. He's a law student...or was...now that his brains are scrambled?

Anyway, they had to open the back of his head to relieve the pressure...from the internal bleeding. He's got like fifty stitches in the back of his head...said he'd been arrested and expelled, but he didn't rat on me. I wasn't sure that they could ID me, but the cops probably had a picture of me...and I knew if I stuck around there in Berkeley it would be just a matter of time before that campus cop would see me around and identify me and they'd arrest me. I knew I had to get the hell out of there. So I can't go back there for a while...at least this 'til blows over...like maybe never. Byron's still up there in school, working with Charles Washington at SNCC. I don't think the cop that chased him can positively identify him. He shaved off his beard in case they've got his picture at the hospital.

So anyway...I split and hitchhiked down here. I didn't want to wake you, so I let myself in with my key."

Maria is staring at Mick, with tears streaming down her face, she says, "Oh...Mickey I'm so sorry. I just had a terrible feeling about Berkeley...like a premonition that day you drove off as I watched you leave from the window. I just wanted to chase you down to yell...*no...don't go*. It was like reliving the nightmare of the death of my dear brother, your namesake, Mikie...all over again. I wish the hell you'd never gone up there."

"Mom...I don't regret having gone to Berkeley...or what I did. I did what I had to do...what you always taught me. I did the right thing. Byron and I got involved in something very important...much larger than my little personal problems. I met some very courageous and committed people...Mario and

Charles...the best and the brightest, persecuted for just trying to do the right thing, to assert their constitutional rights and for the civil rights of blacks in the South. For the most basic human right...to vote. I'm a changed person, Mom. I see the world in a whole different light now. The injustice of the whole friggin' system...the unfairness of it, controlled by the rich and powerful...and the oppressive government. There's no turning away...or going back now," Mick says.

She gets up and takes a stack of mail out of the drawer of the credenza, and solemnly places it in front of Mick.

Mick stares at the letter on top and slowly opens it and begins reading, "I've been drafted...the NBA it ain't. *You are hereby directed to present yourself for Armed Forces Physical Examination by reporting at the Selective Service Center in Los Angeles March 9, 1965,*" Mick says handing the letter to Maria.

"My son, wandering around in the jungles of Vietnam...with a bull's-eye on his back? Over my dead body. No way!" Maria cries.

"Over somebody's dead body. A very inviting *tall* target...stickin' out like a sore very long thumb. Yeap...now mothers get to watch on TV, while the *fuckin'* military industrial complex grinds up their young...and for what? They're not going to get me to kill some poor little rice patty rube, just to fatten up their already obscene bottom line. At Berkeley, it's *hell no...we won't go!*" says defiantly.

"What are you going do, Mickey?"

"I don't know mom...I really don't. But no way am I going to Vietnam. I guess I could go to Canada, like a lot of the draftees...but that seems like a chicken-shit way out. I guess I'll just have to appear as ordered, and refuse induction...on the basis of being a conscientious objector and see where that goes. Might mean some jail time. But hell no...I won't go. Period."

"Oh son...I'm just sick with worry. But I'll support any decision you make," Maria says as she comes around behind him and gives him a hug.

Mick decides, if he doesn't get drafted, he will enroll at UCLA, in the spring, so that means it's time to make some money for the next semester to save for tuition and books, and buy a more reliable car to commute to Westwood.

He is working out, five times a week with weights at the local YMCA, and still taking steroids. He body is dramatically changing. He now weighs about 245 pounds, of solid muscle. He responds to an ad in the L.A. Times for a warehouseman at Sears and Roebuck mail order fulfillment center in East Los Angeles. Because of his size and strength he is immediately hired to work on the South dock, unloading rolls of heavy carpet and linoleum. In a sheet metal oven of a warehouse, the work is grueling—doing heavy lifting all day long, but the money's good and it keeps him in shape. In the process he is

exposed to a whole new world of working class Latinos and Blacks. Mick is humbled by their quiet dignity and work ethic...never complaining...never missing a day's work or being late.

They are very appreciative of having a steady good paying job with benefits including medical insurance. Mick becomes fast friends with several who graciously invite him to their modest homes for dinners and Sunday family barbecues. Children are plentiful, well-groomed and polite. Beautiful, healthy and boundlessly happy in a supportive atmosphere of love, joy and lots of laughter, with many *tias y tios*, aunts and uncles, and *abuelos*, grandparents lovingly doting over them.

The kids are enthralled with Mick's relatively enormous size and after the initial shyness wears off, they climb all over *El Gigante*...The Giant, like a jungle-jim, giggling and competing to sit on his lap, And when he playfully tosses them up in the air, and calls them *mis camarones pequeños*, my little shrimps, they shriek with delight.

Working with Latinos he begins to hone his Spanish. They patiently tutor him, learning many idioms, which he often mangles to the laughter of his new *compadres*, and in the process becomes fairly fluent in *español* which increases the bond between them.

He is struck by their sense of commitment to family and community and the joy taken in simple pleasures like family gatherings. It opens his eyes to a whole new world of working class folks tirelessly toiling to make a better life for their children. The quiet unspoken patient resignation to get their kids an education, perhaps, even college with the hope of realizing the American Dream of each generation moving up the social ladder, one agonizing wrung at a time. To be all that they can be—to make a better life for each successive generation, one generation at a time.

He continues to play basketball in industrial leagues three nights a week, just to keep his skill set up, and to stay in condition. At one of the games in a recreation league, he plays against a team sponsored by a one of the more popular local top 40 radio stations KRLA. He does a few slam dunks and puts on some dazzling moves which brings some "oohhs and aahhs" from the crowd, playfully clowning with some of the opposing players.

After the game, he is approached by one of the disc jockeys, Charlie O'Donnell, to play as a ringer on the team for charity benefits around the L.A. metro area, for marketing and promotional purposes for the station—sort of a Honky Harlem Globetrotters, dubbed the KRLA Apes. Mick's roll is to work out some funny routines with Charlie to get a laugh, sometimes at the expense of the other team, which is usually the faculty of ex-jocks and coaches at local high school benefits to raise money for some cause. He gets paid handsomely, by the game, for entertaining the crowd with thunderous dunks and clowning around with the on-air radio personalities, including Charlie 'O' and Casey Kasem, ending with everyone passing out promotional T-shirts and hats to the

audience, emblazoned with KRLA. By now Mick, at six-foot-six weighing in at about 250 pounds of well-defined muscle, with long flowing hair and beard, is an imposing physical specimen and a bit of a heartthrob with cheerleader coeds of the various high schools venues they play.

It's great fun...all the guys on the team are on-air personalities...loose, zany and very funny. After the games, they consume voluminous pitchers of beer and prodigious amounts of pizza and tell endless hilarious jokes and stories complete with dialects.

From 1958 Charlie O'Donnell, born, and raised a tough street kid from Philadelphia, whose legendary velvet baritone voice could "peel wallpaper", was the sidekick to Dick Clark on the highly popular with teens, American Bandstand, nationally syndicated weekday afternoons from WFIL TV, Philly. In 1964, when he came to L.A. KRLA was battling KFWB for the "Top Rocker" spot, and due to Charlie's efforts 1110 AM became a major force in a very competitive market. Mick and Charlie connect immediately as they are both born in Philly, and have the same edgy South Philly cynical sense of humor, in Mick's case deeply embedded in his DNA—they become fast and long-time friends.

Occasional celebrity "guest" players who contributed their time to bolster the attendance gate included comics Bill Cosby, a good B-ball player, also from Philly, and the fall-down funny Richie Pryor, who was just beginning to make a name for himself doing stand-up, before his then radical manic 'niggah' routines.

One night, the KRLA Apes had a gig at a local high school, in Glendale.

Richie Pryor is advertised as making an appearance, so it's a sell-out crowd—the gym is packed with Young Republican crew-cuts and bouffants. Glendale, a bedroom community of L.A. was a highly affluent, gentrified de facto James Crow WASP enclave, whose concept of ethnic diversity consists of a few token country club Jews—Blacks were allowed within city limits if they were out of town before sundown. As they pull into the high school parking lot, Mick says to Richie, "Dig it man...nothing older than a year or two. Mercedes, Porsche, BMW. A decidedly Germanic *leit motif*, perhaps a harbinger. Uh...any questions about why last year George Lincoln Rockwell picked this WASP nest for the West Coast headquarters of the American Nazi Party?"

"Yea, man. Looks like a Nazi new car lot," Richie says.

The de facto segregation in the North, of exclusive suburbs like Glendale, California, even though absent the overt physical violence, in some ways was no less insidious and emotionally pathological for the Blacks, as in the deep South. While there may have been a patina of civility and racial acceptance, the dirty and dark truth is if you were a Black man caught driving in town after sundown, the police would pull you over, and subject you to all

manner of harassment, sometimes threatening arrest for a minor infraction like a broken taillight...mysteriously working before the pull-over, sometimes resulting in a costly impounding of the vehicle.

Often, after a long interrogation about the purpose of their visit, with no probable cause, an unwarranted search of the vehicle including the trunk on suspicion of burglary was done as a routine matter. They then, 'for your own safety', would be 'escorted' by the police to the city limits. But the message was loud and clear—unless you're white, Anglo-Saxon, your kind ain't welcome. The unspoken Jim Crow mantra; *Now, if you're white you're alright...if you're Brown you can stick around...but if you're Black. Git back!*

The policy of rampant de facto 'redlining', the practice of denying, or charging more for housing, services such as banking, insurance, access to health care, or denying jobs to residents in particular on racial bias and prejudice, employing a complex sinister lexicon of code words to avoid prosecution, was always just below the thin veneer of civility.

During the warm-up, the girl cheerleaders come over, and start to openly flirt with Mick, wanting to feel his biceps etcetera, and touching Richie's Afro, asking for autographs. Richie gets 'em laughing, and they begin fawning over him, much to the open resentment of the members of the other team. In the course of the regular warm-up routine of the Apes, doing lay-ups, Richie leans over to Mick and says, "Hey man...notice anything...unusual about da crowd?" riffing in his high-pitched patented paternalistic white-man mimic.

Mick scans the crowd, and notices that there is not one Black person in the entire audience.

"Now that you mention it Richie, there does seem to be a conspicuous absence of people of uh...color, in attendance," Mick says.

"*Sheit*, man. The only color I'm seein' is red...rednecks. There ain't one Black brutha in the whole fuckin' gym. What is this...a fund raiser for the local chapter of the American Nazi Party?" Richie says.

Then the all-very-white coaches and faculty start warming up. They are reeking with the smell of alcohol—they've obviously been drinking. Their eyes are red and they're raucously laughing, pointing at Richie. Not a good sign. Mick and Richie walk up to Charlie O, "Who booked this gig...the Glendale Grand Wizard?" Richie says.

Mick takes Charlie aside, "Hey man...these guys are all loaded...and there's a mean vibe coming from them...toward Richie."

"The marketing manager booked it. His old high school. It'll probably be okay...*I hope*. Just in case keep on eye out for Richie," Charlie says.

"Like...that marketing guy any relation to Joseph Goebbels? Hey man, I played against this Wonder-bread high school. The fact that it's named after a Hoover tell ya anything? Welcome to my ol' hood, man...Glendale, aka

Green-dale," Mick says drawing dollar signs in the air.

"Herbert or J. Edgar?" Charlie says.

"Hoover as in vacuum, man...as in sucks big time," Mick says

The referee blows the whistle to start the game, with Richie on the bench.

From the opening tip-off, it becomes obvious to Mick and the other Apes, that the other team is not only not playing in the spirit of fun, they are out to prove something. They're making excessively hard fouls, to the amusement and applause of the crowd, which only encourages their gratuitously aggressive play. Mick calls time out.

"Hey Charlie...didn't these guys get the memo...that this ain't supposed serious? What the hell happened to fun?" Mick says.

"Yea, I know man...that one Neanderthal asshole that's guardin' me is holding on to me...pushin' and shovin' non-stop. If he don't knock it off...I'm going to clock him. Let's put Richie in the game, clown around a little...maybe loosen things up," Charlie says.

Richie takes the floor. A kid in the front row of the bleachers does a bad imitation of a monkey, playing to the crowd, jumping up and down, scratching himself, drawing a big laugh from the bleachers, which of course only encourages several others to join in with the monkey mimicry. Monkey see...monkey do. Its racist intent is not lost on Mick or Richie.

Mick, now tiring of the charade of a charitable cause, decides to send a message to the other team...*so you guys want to play some serious B-ball, huh? Okay...game on.*

Charlie O throws a perfect lob pass which Mick catches mid-air, and slam dunks, hitting the Neanderthal, standing under the basket squarely in the face, drawing an "oooooh" and a laugh from the crowd. The next play on the other end, in retaliation and an escalation of hostilities, Neanderthal bulls his way over Charlie for lay-in, which the last second Mick jumps high and blocks, spiking it hard, again in his face. Now the crowd is really getting into it...wildly cheering, *in your face...in your face.* Apparently he's not much more popular with his own locals. His face is now glowing red, no small measure, from humiliation.

After the first half, the Apes have built up a 10 point lead...mostly on baskets from Mick and Charlie. But there is a growing ominous aura of malevolence emanating from the other bench.

At the start of the second half Mick, grabs a rebound and spots Charlie breaking down court. Mick throws a long baseball pass to Charlie who has a clear path to the basket. He goes up for an uncontested lay-in, when suddenly Neanderthal barrels underneath him, while Charlie's in mid-air, and undercuts him, flipping him upside down. This kind of egregious foul is considered to be one of the worst fouls in basketball. The equivalent of an unprovoked street mugging—it is strictly taboo to undercut a defenseless

player in mid-air because of the high probability for serious injury. The last split second, Charlie miraculously manages to get his feet under him, but lands very hard with a loud thud. Mick seeing this immediately sprints down court and arrives just in time to witness the South Philly tough street kid kick in. As soon as he hits the floor, Charlie bounces up and bull-charges Neanderthal, tackling him.

While Richie is just standing there enjoying this farce unfold, one of the stocky crew cut football coaches runs up behind him, and with no warning, delivers a cheap shot cross body block from behind, sprawling Richie on the floor. Mick, seeing this grabs the coach around the neck restraining him from behind as he's getting up.

"Hey...you chicken shit. That's unnecessary roughness. The penalty...a free kick," he whispers in his ear.

"Get off of me...you niggah luva. I ain't done with that smart-ass uppity niggah," the coach yells with a thick Southern drawl.

"...and automatic loss of possession of...balls. You're cracker ass is so done," Mick calmly says.

As all the attention of the referees is on Charlie and Neanderthal rolling around on the floor, Mick spins him around, and at close quarters, inconspicuously knees him in the groin. He drops like a stone, rolling on the floor writhing in pain, holding his genitals.

You can take the boy out of the South...

Referee whistles are now blowing non-stop, as both benches empty on to the floor. After Charlie has got some serious licks in on Neanderthal, Mick tears Charlie off of him. It takes about five minutes, to finally restore order—Charlie is awarded two free throws.

Mick goes over to Richie and helps him up.

"Hey Richie...havin' fun so far?" Mick says.

"Dunno how much more of dis kinda fun I can take, man...so where's the next gig, Selma Alabama?" Richie says.

"This is the dress rehearsal...welcome to Selma North," Mick says.

When the players line up on the key for the free throws, Neanderthal is closest to the basket, beside him is Richie Pryor. Richie is leaning in toward Neanderthal, whispering something in his ear, non-stop. Neanderthal's face is getting redder and redder by the second. While the free throw is in the air, Richie deftly slides behind Neanderthal, and perfectly timed with the *swish*, pulls his shorts down around his ankles, exposing his huge, very white and very hairy bare butt, adorned with only a jockey strap. This draws a huge round of laughter, hoots and cheering from the crowd. All the Apes including Mick are now in convulsive laughter. Even some of Neanderthal's teammates can't restrain themselves.

Richie, is now taking theatrical bows to the audience, while

Neanderthal, instinctively covers his front with one hand, and then with the other hand is struggling to get his shorts up. Finally, he gets them up, and sees Richie mugging for the audience. With his small mean pig eyes filled with mayhem, he lunges at Richie, but Richie's too quick and evades him, continuing with his antics.

"Run! Richie, run!" Mick yells.

Neanderthal recovers and starts chasing Richie, but Richie is doing his best Cassius Clay and Neanderthal is Sonny Liston. While Cassius, is being chased around the gym, Sonny like an awkward bear cub, is making a complete fool of himself trying to catch him. Cassius now running backwards, is mercilessly taunting him. The gym is in complete chaos. Referee's whistles are blowing non-stop. Richie takes one victory lap around the gym, then into the locker room, with all the Apes following him, as Neanderthal's teammates tackle him, and restrain him until he finally calms down. Game over. No T-shirts? No hats? No promo? No shit.

In the locker room, everyone quickly dresses without showering. They jump into their cars, and make good their get-away. On the way back, they stop at their customary watering hole pizza joint where the fun begins, with Richie doing his side-splitting re-enactment over *beaucoup* beer and pizza.

"Hey, Richie...so wuddya say to Neanderthal that could spark such a...recalcitrant reaction?" asks Mick, Richie's new straight-man.

"Apparently is he is overly sensitive about his phallic uh ...shortcomings and the imagery of his wifey indulging in sexual fantasies...particularly with uh...well-endowed multiple Nigerian gentlemen," Richie says, slipping seamlessly into his high-pitched white-man shtick.

- Chapter 7 -

Sunday night - March 7th 1965

Mick and Maria are watching the Sundays Night Movie on ABC, Judgment at Nuremberg, when suddenly the programming is interrupted by the coverage of the march from Selma to Montgomery Alabama. The shocking video images of the brutality visited upon the peaceful Black marchers are horrific. The first march had taken place that Sunday, on March 7, 1965.

About ten in the evening, the phone rings for about 10 rings. Maria glances at it, but doesn't acknowledge or respond to it. She seems intent on ignoring it.

"Mom...you gonna get that?" Mick asks.

"Just ignore it...it's probably a wrong number," Maria says.

After 20 or so rings, Mick gets up and answers the phone.

"Hello...hello? Who is this?"

There is no answer just the sound of heavy breathing...then *click*.

"Mom...that's probably why I couldn't reach you. What the hell's going on here?" Mick says.

"It's nothing...let's not talk about it now. Maybe later...too much going on with you to go into it," Maria says

Five minutes later, the phone begins to ring again, this time Mick jumps up, angrily answering, "Who the hell *is* this...*goddammit!*" Mick yells into the receiver.

"Koz? That you, man?" the voice says.

"Yea...this is the Koz. Who the hell are you?" Mick yells.

"This is Byron, Mick...I got some really bad news for ya, man," Byron Brawley says haltingly.

"Byron...sorry 'bout that man. Mom's been getting these harassing phone calls. What's up?" Mick asks.

"You been followin' that march from Selma to Montgomery...Alabama. It's all over the news, and on TV?" Byron asks.

"Yea...we were just watching the coverage on TV...brutal man."

"I just connected with Mario Savio. He said you should probably know, since you and Charles Washington were so close. C-Wash went down there...to help John Lewis chairman of SNCC, organize a march from Selma to the capital...Montgomery. They marched over the Edmund Petus bridge, about six hundred of 'em...with John Lewis and Charles leading the march, where they were met by about 200 Alabama State Troopers...just waitin' for 'em in

riot gear with gas masks...some mounted on horseback.

They were ordered to disperse. They refused to turn around. They were being totally non-violent in their demonstration...they just simply wanted the right to peacefully march to Montgomery, about 50 miles away to petition the governor's office on voting rights issues for Blacks. Without any further warning, the troopers waded right into 'em...swinging billy clubs on the men...and the women and children...and with tear gas...and dogs. They didn't have a chance man. C-Wash, we're guessing because he was so much taller, bigger was perceived as more of threat...was one of the first attacked.

The fuckin' pigs beat on 'em...savagely. By the time it was over, C-Wash had been laying there unconscious for at least half an hour before anyone could check on him. He never regained consciousness, man...he died tonight. Those fuckin' cracker cops beat 'em to death!" Brawley says half-sobbing.

"C-Wash...dead?" Mick says in disbelief.

"Yea...man, anyway I thought you should know. I'm calling from a payphone. I gotta hang up now...sorry man," Brawley says, choking up. *Click.*

Mick slowly cradles the receiver on the phone and starts to tear up. *Charles Washington...gone.*

Maria seeing that Mick is emotionally distraught, ashen, with tears streaming down his face asks, "What's happened Mickey...you look like you just lost your best friend?"

"Yea...something like that mom. I can't talk about it right now," Mick says, as he walks back to his bedroom, closes the door and slowly collapses on the edge of the bed, cradling his head in his hands, and begins to sob uncontrollably.

It became known as "Bloody Sunday" when over 600 marchers, protesting the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson and ongoing exclusion from the electoral process, were attacked by state and local police with billy clubs and tear gas.

Jimmie Lee Jackson was a civil rights' protestor who was shot and killed by an Alabama State Trooper James Bonard Fowler in 1965. Jackson was unarmed. His death inspired the Selma to Montgomery marches, an important event in the American Civil Rights movement. He was 26 years old. Jimmie Lee Jackson was a deacon of the St. James Baptist Church in Marion, Alabama, ordained in summer 1964. Jackson had tried to register to vote without success for four years. Jackson was inspired by Martin Luther King, Jr, who had touched off a campaign against Alabama restrictions on Negro voting and attended meetings several nights a week at Zion's Chapel Methodist Church. Attempting to exercise his fundamental right to vote led to his death at the hands of an Alabama State Trooper and to the inspiration for the Selma to Montgomery marches

The unintended consequences of the news coverage of the abject

brutality by the Alabama government to thwart the marchers was, in some ways, an accidental watershed for the civil rights movements. The unprecedented compelling moving images with audio, captured the sound and the fury of the gratuitous violence used by the Alabama state troopers against the defenseless, non-violent marchers, sounding a clarion call to rest of America for justice...as never before.

It is widely believed that the comprehensive television coverage of the assassination of John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963, is considered the technological genesis of the capacity to almost instantaneously connect with, shape, manipulate and eventually exploit the raw emotions of the public. It would signal the arrival of a new and perhaps to some, a threat to the traditional corporately controlled status quo of media. If released, untamed into the wilds of raw democracy, the technology of visual media, could become a powerful, even dangerous, democratic agent of political change.

The unparalleled seemingly magical ability to arouse public awareness and emotions at near real-time through the broadcast transmission medium over the air waves, through essentially a microscopic electronic beam scanning back and forth across a TV screen of 525 lines 30 times per second transmitted to the far reaches of America, and the world, unleashed a powerful technology, and ultimately a pathological weapon, in the hands of the manufacturers of consent—Unreality Industry Inc., a harbinger of the Information Age.

So, like most technology it was a good-new versus bad-news proposition. Possessed of a seemingly limitless capacity to provoke a profound shift of collective consciousness in positive ways, later the high concentration of corporate media ownership of both content and delivery mechanisms, in some cases within the same market, would begin to subtly, insidiously shape the discourse of public discussion and opinion, including the electoral process, often resulting in the manipulation of the electorate voting against its own self-interest.

Some would later compare the heroic sacrifices of the marchers on that "Bloody Sunday" as sacrificial lambs that were martyred for the good of the civil rights movement. The civil rights leadership, recognizing the inherent, albeit unintended opportunity in the unprecedented shocking visceral impact of this tragic incident in history, would wisely decide to channel and capitalize on the ensuing, intense national outrage. It would ultimately turn the tide in forcing the U.S. government to finally seek legislative remedy to protect voting civil rights for all minorities in America, manifesting the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

But, it must not go unsaid, that it was primarily precipitated by the sacrifices, for centuries, of countless heroic "ordinary" Black people, along with many White brethren who, in some cases gave their lives for the vision of

Jesus Christ's Sermon on the Mount—a shining City on the Hill.

For it was predominately through the leadership of Christian churches particularly the Black churches in the South, that was at the forefront in exhorting the world to fully and unconditionally recognize for all men, the vision of the Founding Fathers embodied in the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

The second march, "Turn Around Tuesday" was held the following Tuesday, March 9th, and resulted in 2,500 protesters turning around after crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Immediately after "Bloody Sunday," Reverend King and others from SCLC, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, began organizing a second march to be held on Tuesday, March 9, 1965. They issued a call for clergy and citizens from across the country to join them. Awakened to issues of civil and voting rights by years of Civil Rights struggles, from the Montgomery Bus Boycott to Freedom Summer, and shocked by the television images of "Bloody Sunday," thousands of common people of good will, including hundreds of non-black ministers of all Christian sects, Catholic priests and nuns, responded to SCLC's call.

To prevent another outbreak of violence, SCLC attempted to gain a court order that would prohibit the police from interfering. Instead of issuing the court order, Federal District Court Judge Frank Johnson issued a restraining order, preventing the march from taking place until he could hold additional hearings later in the week. There was also insufficient infrastructure in place to support a long march, one for which the marchers were ill-equipped.

Based on past experience, SCLC was confident that Judge Johnson would eventually lift the restraining order and they did not want to alienate one of the few Southern judges who was often sympathetic to their cause, by violating his injunction. Further, a person who violates a court order may be punished for contempt even if the order is later reversed, so the SCLC leadership decided to demur.

That evening, three white ministers who had come for the march were attacked by four members of the Ku Klux Klan and beaten with clubs. The worst injured was James Reeb, a white Unitarian Universalist minister from Boston. Selma's public hospital refused to treat Rev. Reeb, who had to be taken to Birmingham's University Hospital, two hours away. Reeb died on Thursday, March 11 at University Hospital with his wife by his side.

On Thursday, March 25, under the protection of thousands of federalized Alabama National Guardsmen and police ordered by president Johnson, 25,000 people marched from St. Jude to the steps of the State Capitol Building where Reverend King delivered the speech "How Long, Not Long":

The end we seek, is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience. I know you are asking today, How long will it take? I come to say to you this afternoon however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long.

After delivering the speech, King and the marchers approached the entrance to the capitol with a petition for Governor Wallace. A line of state troopers blocked the door. One of them announced that the governor wasn't in. Undeterred, the marchers remained at the entrance until one of Wallace's secretaries appeared and took the petition.

Later that night, Viola Liuzzo, a 40 year-old white mother of five from Detroit who had come to Alabama to support voting rights for Blacks, was assassinated by Ku Klux Klan members while she was ferrying marchers back to Selma from Montgomery.

Liuzzo was horrified by the images of the aborted march on March 7, 1965. Nine days later, she took part in a protest at Wayne State. She then called her husband to tell him she would be traveling to Selma, saying that the struggle "was everybody's fight."

Viola Liuzzo decided to take the fight to Selma, the current center of the civil rights movement. Leaving her husband and children in the care of her family and friends, The Southern Christian Leadership Conference received Liuzzo, and tasked her with delivering aid to various locations, and recruiting and transporting volunteers and marchers

After the march concluded on March 25, Liuzzo, assisted by Leroy Moton, a 19-year-old Black man, helped drive local marchers to African American colleges and to their homes in her 1963 Oldsmobile. As they were driving along Route 80, a car tried to force them off the road. The car with four Klan members then pulled up alongside Liuzzo's car and shot directly at her, hitting her twice in the head, killing her instantly. Her car veered into a ditch and crashed into a fence.

The four Birmingham chapter Ku Klux Klan members had traveled to Selma for the purpose of interfering with the campaign, even at the cost of murder. They believed the loudest message conveying their views would be sent if they killed a non-southern activist, in order to discourage future outside supporters. Their opportunity for such action took place when they came upon Liuzzo and Moton. Although Moton was covered with blood, the bullets had missed him. He lay motionless when the Klansmen reached the car to check on their victims. After the car left, for the next half hour he began running, searching for help, eventually flagging down a truck that was bringing civil rights workers back to Selma.

Among the Klansmen in the car from which the shots were fired was FBI informant Gary Rowe. Despite Rowe's eyewitness testimony, the three members of the Ku Klux Klan were acquitted of murder by an all-white

Alabama jury.

Afterward, J. Edgar Hoover's FBI smear machine COINTELPRO operation scurrilously spread false rumors that Liuzzo was a member of the Communist Party and abandoned her children to have sexual relationships with African Americans involved in the civil rights movement.

Ultimately, after all the beatings and the martyring of Black women and children, and men, including one 23 year old Charles Tyrone Washington, one of the best and brightest of any color, even after the KKK bombing death of four young girls at the Baptist Church in Birmingham—sadly, it took the death of innocent Northern white folks to finally galvanize the country's outrage over the draconian tactics of wanton violence by the Southern Segregationists.

On March 15, 1965, president Lyndon Johnson presented a bill to a joint session of Congress. The bill itself would later pass and become the Voting Rights Act. Johnson's speech in front of Congress was considered to be a defining moment for the civil rights movement.

Even if we pass this bill, the battle will not be over. What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and state of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause must be our cause, too, because it is not just Negroes but really it is all of us who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice.

And we shall overcome.

The bill became law at a ceremony attended by many civil rights leaders, including iconic activists Martin Luther King Jr and Rosa Parks, at the signing of the Voting Rights Act on August 6, 1965. This act prohibited most of the unfair practices used to prevent Blacks, and other minorities from registering to vote, and provided for federal registrars to go to Alabama and other states with a history of voting-related discrimination to ensure that the law was implemented.

On a Tuesday, June 25th 2013, the Supreme Court systematically stacked by the various Republican administrations over the years with conservative appointees, in *Shelby County vs Holder* ruled that states no longer can be judged by voting discrimination that went on decades ago, a decision that argues "*the country has fundamentally changed since the racially motivated laws of the civil rights' era.*"

In a 5-4 ruling, with all the progressive justices dissenting, the majority of conservative justices said the Voting Rights Act's requirement that mainly Southern states must undergo special scrutiny before changing their voting laws is based on a 40-year-old formula *that is no longer relevant to changing racial circumstances.*

Subsequent the decision, almost overnight, many states in the South enacted legislation which ostensibly was designed to discourage and gratuitously encumber the process of voter registration, under the pretense of preventing, essentially non-existent voter fraud—again targeted at the Black population—the de facto resurrection of one Mr James Crow.

Mutantur, quanto magis haec eadem manere... The more things change...the more they stay the same.

- Chapter 8 -

Tuesday - March 9th 1965

Early Morning - Selective Service Induction Center - Los Angeles, California

Mick is standing in a long line, with about 40 young draftee recruits, ages 18 to early 20s, all in their underwear and T-shirts, each holding their manila envelope pre-induction packets and empty urine specimens vials. Many are Black or Hispanic; almost all obviously from the lower economic class. A white, stocky rooster of a sergeant is strutting up and down the lines, exhorting and badgering with a thick Southern drawl—a real cracker. One theory holds that the term derives from the "cracking" of whips, by white foremen in the antebellum South against African slaves.

"Okay you grunts...keep it movin'! Those of you fortunate to be selected to serve yo cuntry...get used to it. Yo ass belongs to Uncle Sam. Any of you *ladies* who *intend* to refuse induction, step out of line...*now!* And we'll have a little chat...man-to-woman like," the sergeant yells.

Mick, bearded with long hair, takes a long deep breath, looks up and down the line, then steps out, along with only one other white, very slight young man, with shoulder length hair, causing a collective murmur up and down the line. Cranking his bull-neck, the sergeant puts his face right in Mick's and sputters, "Well, well, well...what *have* we got hiya? Missy...kinda big...for a girlie. I didn't say to step out of line if'n y'all need a Kotex. Y'all just won first prize for stupidity. Now...I'll repeat it so's even a moron like y'all can unnastan'...is you *refusin' induction!*"

"Thanks y'all...now dats reel white of ya. But y'all know where you kin put dat der prize...and dat goes fo da box a cracka jacks it comes in, as I dun much care for...jack...*asses*...or *crackas* fo dat matta, uh ...boss. Oh...and stayin' in line? Redefines stupid," Mick says.

This draws a big laugh from the line, especially from the Blacks.

"You boys best shut up, now...an' knock off dat laughin' if y'all know what's good fer ya," he yells at the line. "Okay...smart ass. Jez keep it up. Now, missy...if you've got the balls, which I doubt...repeat your refusal and with *suh!*"

The other man returns to the line.

"*I refuse induction* on moral grounds uh...massa *suh!*" Mick yells.

"Okay, Mary Jane, walk this way...the *grave*, in every sense of da woid, consequences are about to be made clea in ways even yo stupid ass kin unnstan'. Then your sorry ass *will* be mine, ya hea, boy? Walk dis way, boy," he says motioning his hand to follow.

Mick shrugs okay, and falls in behind, mimicking the smug strutting

sergeant's walk. This draws another big laugh from the line, prompting the sergeant to spin around—he is not amused.

"Just following orders...*suh!*," Mick says.

They enter a door, with "CO Screening", which slams shut behind them.

Tuesday March 9, 1965 about 6 PM

Marie's apartment

The three main national broadcast networks, had been interrupting the regular programming all-day with non-stop TV coverage of the horrific sound and images, of the first and second march, from Selma to Montgomery.

In the same somber, sober voice, avuncular Walter Cronkite, the trusted CBS six-o'clock news anchorman, that had announced with a chilling professional equanimity, that president John F. Kennedy, America's equivalent to royalty, had just been pronounced dead—is giving some background on the marches.

Mick, haggard and sad-looking, lets himself into the living room where Maria is transfixed in front of the TV. His long hair and beard replaced with a GI haircut and a clean shave.

Sitting in the dark, in tears, Maria's face is etched in the eerie flickering glow of the TV.

Without looking up, "Hi son...you heard about the march today? They turned them back...again...been cryin' all day," Maria says.

"Yea, mom...at the Draft Board," Mick says.

Maria turns the TV volume down, and looks up at Mick.

"My God...your hair...are you drafted!?" Maria cries.

Mick joins Maria on the sofa. On the TV they are showing archival footage of the first Sunday march, with the cops chasing down the defenseless marchers, as Mick begins:

At first, I refused induction, mom...they made me sit around, for about 2 hours, trying to sweat me...hoping I would have a change of heart. Then, finally a young black officer calls me into his little crypt and confirms with me that I'm refusing induction. He's looking over my file, in the meantime this sergeant, obviously from the deep South, who had called me out of line was talking to some other soldiers, loud enough that everyone could overhear him, saying things about the Selma march...how "dem Selma...White niggahs this...and Black niggahs that, got the beatin' they deserved" and how today they had turned back "those niggahs and dem Northern agitatas...showed 'em who's boss."

The expression on the face of that young Black officer was getting

more and more angry and agitated the longer that sergeant carried on with his bigoted tirade.

Finally, when he looks up from the file at me, I can see he's extremely upset.

I say, "I think I know how you feel, man. On the Sunday Selma march, I lost one of my best friends...a Black man...we were at Berkeley together...Charles Washington. He was helping John Lewis organize the march...so he was right up front...they were totally non-violent and peaceful, man. He was one of the first to get attacked. He never had a chance to even protect himself, man. Those fuckin' cracker pigs literally beat him to death. He died that night. In the news...on TV...not a word was mentioned about his death. And why do you think that is?

'Cause he wasn't White, maybe? He was a law student, man...smart, dedicated...and courageous. But because he was a Black man, somehow his life, has less value? Fuckin' tragedy, man. Now they want to send the Black man to fight their imperialist wars for 'em...half-way around world...when he's not even allowed to sit a White lunch counter in Montgomery, the capital of Alabama."

Mick says his voice cracking with emotion.

The Black officer's eyes, began to tear up. Just about then, that sergeant walks over to the doorway of his office and yells in, "Hey...you got this fuckin' hippie processed yet, boy?"

The young Black officer, looks up...he just stares at him for about 10 seconds, then jumps up and starts to walk over toward the sergeant, with both of his fists clinched. I got up, and managed to step in between. He was strong...his rage was so intense. I could barely restrain him. He wanted to do some serious damage to the cracker sergeant. I whispered in his ear, "Not here, man...not now, not here." Finally, he calmed down and went back to his seat behind the desk.

"That's right boy...you jus sit yo sif down...in da back of da bus. You do not even want any paart of me," the sergeant says, his lips curling in to an ugly mean smile, then turns around and struts off.

Absolute silence. Even though the other soldiers had witnessed this humiliating incident, probably one of many regularly heaped upon Black soldiers by White officers, they had tolerated if not tacitly condoned it with their deafening silence.

Even after president Harry S. Truman had ordered the desegregation of the U.S. military in 1948 with Executive Order 9981, virulent de facto Jim

Crow attitudes and practices were still very prevalent in 1965 in all branches of the U.S. military.

Time stood still, for about a minute, then the guy seems to melt, like he'd taken a punch to his gut.

"You okay, man?" I said.

Finally, after about a minute, he says, "Yea...close the door."

I closed the door and sat back down.

He looked at me, fighting the tears and said, "Thanks...I'll settle up with that cracker later. The whole fuckin's world's gone mad, man...JFK...Malcom X...dead. Now Selma...and they expect me to send our bruthas over there? For what...just so's Whitey can buy bigger mansions...fancy cars...and 'spensive yachts? Man, do you have ANY idea what happens when you refuse?...heavy shit man. Like you could be facin' tooth-brushing latrines for 2 years in Leaven-fucking-worth," he says.

"Oh my God, Mickey...are you going to prison?" Maria cries.

"So let me finish, mom."

Then he says in a low voice, "Look man...you put on the questionnaire that you're six foot six? Here's the deal. Get back in line and I'll tear up this Conscientious Objector Referral. Go through the exam...and make sure you don't slouch when they measure yer ass. And pray beaucoup...if you see that sergeant...yes SUH...no SUH...duty, honor, country 'n shit. Got it? Now get the hell outta here. This lil' chat NEVER happened."

"So...please! Please! Tell me...did you get drafted?" Maria breathlessly cries.

Mick stands up, at full attention and delivers a smart military salute, then doing his best John Wayne, "At ease...at ease, lil' lady.

I answered the call of duty for my country...yeap, you *NEVER stand so tall*, as when you are called upon to protect America's shores from invasion by that Commy Super-power...Vietnam. Your son measured up, thanks to my extra hair hat, 6 foot six and one-quarter inches. You're now looking at a proud...4F. Unfit to serve, 4F as in *four-ever*. Too tall...by *one quarter* inch. On the way home, I decided it was time to get back in school...getta a real job, so I gotta a haircut and shave," Mick says with an impish grin.

"Oh, Mickey!" she screams, playfully slapping him, "You scared me to death!"

With tears of joy streaming down her cheeks, Maria jumps up and hugs Mick tightly.

"Hey mom...this calls for a celebration!" Mick says hugging his mother, rocking her back and forth.

"We've got a lot to be thankful for! I hope you know that it was my prayers and candles to Saint Anthony that delivered you," she says making the sign of the cross.

"Yeap...musta been those 100 candles. Nobody does that Catholic vood-oo...like you d-oo, mom," Mick says.

"Time to celebrate...a feast to give thanks to Saint Anthony. I just wish your sister could be here...she was worried sick about this. Anyway, you can invite some of your buddies," Maria says.

"That sounds great, mom. But I'm warning ya...these guys can really eat. And how 'bout instead of this Saint Annoyance...March 17th is Saint Patrick's Day. More of *mick* kinda saint as I intend to get *very* drunk," Mick says.

"Then Saint Patrick's Day it is...Italian style, of course," Maria says.

- Chapter 9 -

Saint Patrick's Day—Maria's apartment

From early morning and all through the day, while sipping Chianti, Maria is busily working in the kitchen, making all of Mickey's favorites, joyously singing Italian arias, accompanying the vinyl LP records on the Hi-Fi. The air is permeated with the scrumptious aroma of fresh-baked rosemary bread and pasta sauce.

All day long, Mick is breaking off pieces of the still hot, fresh bread, and dipping it into the huge pot of brilliant alizarin crimson tomato sauce, simmering on the stove since morning. Meatballs, sweet Italian sausage, veal scaloppini, roasted Italian bell peppers, marinated in fresh garlic and basil in olive oil. Mozzarella cheese wrapped in prosciutto antipasto, bruschetta with marinated artichoke hearts and marinated mushrooms, on melted cheese, toasted to perfection, with baskets full of fresh bread. And bottles and bottles of Chianti, just waiting to be uncorked. The smells are *magnifico!*

At about seven o'clock, before the guests arrive, Maria walks into the living room, "Well, Mickey...whatta ya think?" she says giving a slow turn around.

"Wow! Ain't like no *mama mia*, I've *ever* seen...and she can cook too, folks! Smashing...positively smashing, mom," Mick says.

She has transformed herself from a *trattoria mamma mia* into beautiful *avant garde* artist, albeit a toned-down a la Left Bank in Burbank, with her raven hair piled up on top of her head, her large luminous green eyes sparkling in the flickering candlelight, in a hot-pink shift, with hoop earrings. Even at 49, she's still a looker—positively beguiling.

Maria's entertaining everyone with her stories about some incidents in class—they are rapt and enchanted by her. It is the first time, in a very long time, that he has seen his mother quite so happy. She is obviously in her element as the gracious, vivacious witty hostess. It brings tears to his eyes to see her enjoying herself so unreservedly, so completely, which she could never do as long as the Ruskie Prince of Darkness, alias Mick's father, was in her life. A natural born raconteur, whenever she has an audience, her larger than life personality flourishes. With lots of wine and good food, and the buzz of several simultaneous, naturally flowing conversations punctuated by raucous laughter, everyone is in a festive, happy mood.

Maria, Mick, Charlie O'Donnell and his wife, and his very tall and big buddies, Steve, John and Bill, B-ball teammates, are sitting around the candle-lit dining room table, when there is a lull in the music. Charlie O, now feeling pretty good from the Chianti, starts singing in the beautiful sonorous voice of an Irish tenor to Maria, an Italian rendition of When Irish Eyes Are

Smiling:

*When Italian Eyes Are Smiling, sure 'tis like a morn in spring.
In the lilt of Italian laughter, you can hear the angels sing.
When Italian hearts are happy, all the world seems bright and gay,
And When Italian Eyes Are Smiling, sure, they steal your heart away...*

Everyone applauds. Maria blushes, reaches over and gives Charlie a big kiss on the cheek.

"Here's to the Irish...the most charming men in the world...next to the Italians, of course," Mick says raising his glass of wine to the others in a toast, which Charlie with feigned indignation, affecting a thick Irish brogue says "Ya know where I come from, them's fightin' words...Mickey, m' lad," with a toothy Irish smile.

"What isn't?" Mick good-naturedly ripostes with a grin.

"Anybody still hungry?" Maria asks, followed by a loud chorus of *NO!* from the guests.

"Couldn't eat another bite...sure beats the hell outta boiled potatoes, corned beef and cabbage. Twas da best dammed Saint Paddy's Day...ever. The antipasti, the veal and pasta. *Gracie...molto gracie,*" the ever-charming Charlie says.

"And...the candlelight and the opera...very cool. Thanks, Missus K," Bill says.

"Rigoletto and Rigatoni...specialty of the house. *Bravissima, mamma mia!* Thanks, mom," Mick says.

Everyone joins Mick in clapping as Maria curtseys.

The opera music, the great food and wine, the sense of family and the good times shared, the ceaseless laughter, over a delicious Italian feast, stirs within Maria a sense of nostalgia, even longing, to connect with her Caravaggio Italian roots.

At about 1 AM, the party finally begins to break up, with Mick shaking hands at the door as they are leaving, the phone rings. The phone continues to ring as Mick closes the door.

Two minutes later, the phone rings and rings again, Mick finally answers it this time.

"Hello? Hello? Whoever the hell this is...knock it off and grow up!" silence except for heavy breathing.

Mick is just about to hang-up, when a thin, frail female voice says, "*I just called...thought I dialed the number wrong. Is Pia there?*"

"Mom...it's for you...some woman," Mick says.

Maria picks up the phone, "Hello?"

"Oh, Pia..." the voice says, sobbing, "I feel so all alone...so useless...unhappy...I just called to tell you...goodbye..."

"Ruthy? Is that you dear? What's going on?"

"Oh...I made a big Saint Patrick's Day dinner...it was supposed to be a surprise for Fred...'cause he's Irish, I thought it would make him happy...but Fred, as usual got mean drunk. He threw the whole corned beef brisket at me....told me I was worthless...that I couldn't even boil a dinner without ruining it. He slapped me and called me a whore...in front of my own children! I just can't take it anymore Maria...thanks for the all years of friendship and kindness...I've taken some pills...goodbye Pia," Ruthy says sobbing.

"No! Wait Ruthy...you can't. Please...let's talk about it. Where are you right now!?" Maria pleads.

"I'm not sure...some motel, it doesn't matter...it's too late for talking now. I've already taken a lot of pills," Ruthy sobs.

Maria gestures to Mick to pick up the other phone to listen in.

"Ruthy, look out the window...tell me what you see," Maria says.

"Oh...I don't know...a Dairy Queen and...a gas station, a Shell..." Ruthy says, her word growing increasingly slurred.

Mick hangs up the phone.

"It's the Lamplighter Inn, just around the block, keep her talking...I'm on my way!" he says.

Mick sprints out the door, down the stairs.

"Ruthy, are you still there...keep talking to me, honey...we can get some help for you. Stay with me...please Ruthy," Maria says.

"I'm getting very sleepy now, Maria if I stay around here, I can never get away from...him...someday he'll kill..." Ruthy mumbles, her voice trailing off.

"You can't let that *bastardo* ruin your life! You have so much to live for...your children."

Maria hears the phone drop to the floor...complete silence.

"Ruthy! Ruthy! Talk to me!" Maria screams into the phone.

After several minutes, which seem like an eternity, still clutching the phone, Maria now hears the sound of a familiar voice.

"Mom...Ruthy's still alive. The night manager let me in. I've got her up...while walking her around, she vomited up whatever she took. I called an ambulance, I think she's going to make it, mom. We didn't get here any too soon," Mick says still out of breath.

Maria can now hear the distant wailing of approaching sirens.

"Oh, thank God, Mickey...come on home son."

"Okay...as soon as the ambulance shows up. I think I may have just set the unofficial world record for the 400 meters. Well now...can't say this was boring Saint Paddy's Day, can we now, lass," Mick says with an Irish brogue.

Just the way Mickey says it, gives her a chill. It rekindles memories of her love for Father Patrick O'Connor when she was a young woman—and his unspoken but palpable passion for her. And he, out of guilt, the classic kind of Catholic guilt that the church had carefully, expertly cultivated for centuries, had chosen to uphold his duty to the flock, to affirm his vow of celibacy, breaking not just one, but two hearts in the process.

His kindness to her and her family, during those very dark days of The Great Depression, especially toward her little brother, Mikie. His powerful, heart-felt eulogy at her brother's memorial service. *What if things had been different. If Patrick O'Connor could have...would have. If she had never met Nicolas Kozlov. How different her life might have been...if...if...*

Maria, now realizes that her exhortations to Ruthy were as much to herself. To live for her children—for herself, to get on with her life, to be the most that she could be—where ever that might take her.

Thanks Ruthy. Ya know...I think we're both going to be just fine now...just fine...

- Chapter 10 -

A hot Summer night about 11 PM - about 5 months later

Maria is working at the studio, looking at the books with her checkbook out, when Mick shows up.

"Hi, mom...burnin' it huh...how's it goin'?" Mick says.

"Hi, Mickey...well to be honest, not great. I didn't count on most of my students, taking the summer off, for vacations, with their kids...my revenues are really down. Not worth it to stay open in the summer...almost as much work for a class of 2 as it is with 10," Maria says.

The phone starts to ring—it rings incessantly, but Maria again acts totally oblivious to it. Finally, Maria reaches over and hangs it up without answering it.

"So what's the deal with the phone...again? Are you going to tell me what the hell is going on?" Mick says.

"Oh...it's just some secret admirer...nothing for you to be concerned about. I don't want to talk about it right now. I'm kinda beat, been working the same long hours, but for a lot less money," Maria says tiredly.

"Hey mom...sounds to me like you've got a severe case of V-D, " Mick says.

"I beg your pardon...unless you can get it from dreams. It's been a long time, son. I haven't even been on a date...for so-o-o long, " Maria says indignantly

"V-D...and D...Vacation Deficit Disorder. Why don't you shut down for a month or so, and take some time off...ya know, kinda recharge your batteries...and take a break away from the paint and solvents. Maybe your headaches will subside," Mick says.

"Oh, how I'd love to get away from Burbank...from this tediously predictable suburbia even if it's just for a few weeks...maybe see my roots...Italy. We'll see...how's work?" Maria says.

The phone starts to ring again. Same response from Maria. Mick finally reaches over and picks it up.

"Hello? Hello?" *click*

"Mom this is startin' to freak me out, more than a little. I'm going to get to the bottom this...with or without your help. Why won't you just tell me what's going on?" Mick says.

"There's nothing you or anyone can do...it's best for everyone, including you. And especially me...if we just live with it, for now. Please, Mickey. It's a closed subject," Maria says.

"Okay. But I don't like it. And if it goes on for much longer I'm definitely going to find out what's going on...even if I have to get the police involved.

Anyway, I found a better job today in West L.A, with the phone company...a lineman. I can work days...or nights, and get some night classes until I can save enough money to go full-time. Pay's much better, and it's working outside all day in the fresh air and sunshine, in mostly Santa Monica and Malibu on Pacific Coast Highway, instead of being stuck inside that oven of a warehouse. And it's close to UCLA. I found a place with some fellow students, right on campus...so I'll probably move out there the end of the month. I'll apply to UCLA full time next year. And, oh...I bought some newer wheels today. More reliable...very cool," Mick says.

"Oh Mickey, I'm so happy that you're going back to school. When things pick up in the fall, I should be able to help you out a little, with books and tuition."

"Thanks, mom. That's really sweet of you to offer...but I should be okay," Mick says walking over to his mother and giving her a hug. Maria realizing that Mick is always more vulnerable when being hugged by his mother, decides to go for it.

Looking up at her son towering above her, batting her green eyes, with that disarmingly charming 1000 watt smile she says, "Mickey, son...since you'll be moving out, do you think you could teach me to drive before you leave? I could drive the old beast to go to the market...art supplies and errands," Maria says.

"Mom, I don't know. Took a day of intensive training for the blender...just to figure out slice and dice. Stick with fewer moving parts...like that rolling pin," Mick says,

"Slice, dice, schmice. Oh, Mickey...it wouldn't *kill* you to take me out in the car, a few times, would it?" Maria pleads.

Then Mick suddenly feels a bone-chilling foreshadowing. *Kill me? Nah. Seriously maim...a distinct possibility...*

Maria knows, that if she is persistent, that it's almost impossible for Mickey to refuse her anything, sooner or later he'll give in. When Maria sets her mono-mind on something, for most mere mortal males, resistance is futile.

Maria has many wonderful qualities and talents, but mechanical aptitude is most definitely not among them, coupled with the fact that she is not very good at multi-tasking...a necessary skill for driving a car. As an artist she can be easily distracted, mid-sentence, by the wonders of nature like the "beautiful oranges and ochres" of the fluttering wings of a nearby Monarch butterfly. The thought of Maria on the loose in a lethal 4,000 pound misguided missile is a terrifying proposition.

So Mick rationalizes his dubious decision to teach his mother to drive as an altruistic, almost act of heroism and self-sacrifice. The soldier

throwing his body on the live grenade to shield his comrades—to save not just Maria from herself, but the many innocent men women and children that could unwittingly find themselves within Maria's potential range of highway mayhem. After years of being the foil of the strong-willed, sometimes obstinate Maria in her many crazy escapades, Mick realizes there is no way he can possibly disabuse his sometimes monomaniacal mother of it—unless maybe after the first lesson, a scare can be thrown in to her, enough to cause her to reconsider.

He decides to cut to the chase, and give in to the inevitable. In this case, the sooner the better before she can seek outside lessons from some poor unwitting instructor. So against his better judgment, to keep the peace, he reluctantly concedes.

"Well...okay, mom. But let's take my new car. It'll be easier for you learn on. It's safer and the brakes are better. How about tomorrow after work about 4:30?" Mick says.

"Oh thanks, Mickey. It'll be fun...you'll see," Maria says hugging him tightly.

*Fun? If you consider Hitchcock's Psycho a romantic comedy. Okay. Fasten your seat belts...it's going to be a bumpy ride. Click.
Time for Mick's and Maria's Great Adventure.*

- Chapter 11 -

Mick and Maria's Fun Adventure

Maria is sitting behind the wheel for the first time ever, with Mick as navigator in Mick's '62 perfect Pontiac Catalina coupe.

"Okay, mom. What's the first thing you need to remember, when you get behind the wheel?" Mick asks.

"Oh thanks dear," Maria says adjusting the rear view mirror to a better position to carefully arrange her considerable hair, "very thoughtful of them to put that mirror in such a convenient place," she says carefully patting her hair in place.

"Uh...mom, that *might* be the tenth. *The* first thing, and *even more important* than how your hair looks, is for you to fasten your seat belt," Mick patiently explains.

"But won't it rumple my dress? I just had it dry-cleaned, ya know," Maria says.

"Mom, if God forbid you have an accident...without your seat belt, your dress will be more than rumpled," Mick says his patience already beginning to wane.

"Accident? Not to worry dear," then Maria reaches into her prodigious purse, and places a magnetic plastic statue of St. Christopher, the patron saint of travel, on the dashboard, drapes a rosary from it, and makes a sign of the cross.

"What? No Holy Water? "

"Ya know that's not a bad idea, son...next time. And I'm really glad to see that you're finally are getting some religion. But with Saint Christopher...and Saint Anthony on board, we should be safe enough," Maria says.

Realizing that this discussion is going nowhere, Mick reaches over and fastens the seat belt on his mother, and then himself, and sensing some premonition of doom, cinches both tightly.

"Okay, mom...place both hands on the wheel...at ten and two o'clock. This will be the normal position of your hands while driving...keeping both hands on the wheel at all times. Now turn the ignition key to the right, to start the motor." Maria just sits there.

"Mom...what are you waiting for?" Mick says.

"Well...I didn't want to take my hands off the wheel...just in case you were testing me, dear," she explains.

"Just while you're actually moving...okay?" Mick says.

Maria reaches over and turns the key to right, the powerful motor roars to life, but the starter motor continues grinding noisily against the flywheel, as Maria keeps the key turned to the right.

"Release the key!" Mick yells.

"Well...you didn't tell me *that* silly," Maria says, finally letting the key spring back.

Mick is already starting to seriously rethink his decision.

With a deep sigh he says, "Okay...with your foot on the brake, slide the gearshift into "D" for Drive. Look in the rear view mirror and tell me what you see?"

"Well honestly...my hair just looks a fright," she says.

"Mother...this may come as a shock but the rear view mirror is mainly for looking to the uh...rear. Not to check your hair," Mick says.

"But I thought Drive meant that we were going forward...not backward, Mickey," she says.

Mick reaches over and adjusts the mirror, and says, "Tell me when you can see a car coming from the rear," he says.

"Any car in particular I should be looking for?" she says.

"You're looking to see if anybody is coming up from behind you before you pull out into traffic," he says.

"Oh...okay. There we go...no problem. Nobody back there that I recognize," she says adjusting the mirror.

"Okay...now using the turn signal lever, flip it so that your left blinker is on...and slowly pull away from the curb," he says.

Maria flips on the right blinker and floors the accelerator, moving very fast from the curb, screeching the tires.

"Whoa...slow down girl. Gently press the accelerator. And I said left...not right," Mick yells.

"The accelerator...is that the one on the left...or the right?"

"If it matters...it's the one and *only* right," he says rolling his eyes, "Okay let's practice some *right* turns. Put on your *right* blinker, and turn *right* at the next corner," he says trying desperately to remain calm.

Maria puts the left blinker on...and starts looking to the left.

"Mom...the *other right*. I said *right*," he says pointing, "not *left*."

Maria corrects and turns right, hopping over the curb with the right rear wheel.

"See, told ya...easy. Isn't this fun?" Maria says.

Copious beads of sweat are now beginning to sprout on Mick's forehead. As they drive around the block a few times Maria is now able to at least miss the curb when turning right.

"Mom...very important. Just ahead...stay to the RIGHT here or you'll end up on the on-ramp to the fast lane on the Hollywood Freeway at rush hour, not for the faint of heart, mom," Mick says.

Of course, Maria bears to the left—they immediately they find themselves in the fast lane on the Hollywood Freeway going 20 miles per hour.

"*Jesus* mother! Step on the gas! Hard...get movin'. Uh...the pedal to the far right!" he yells.

Perfect. Mick can just hear his buddies, *hey, did ya hear? Koz got 'rear ended'...in Hollywood. Ha! Ha!*

And, of course, Maria steps on the brake. They are now sitting in the car at a full stop in the fast lane of the freeway, horns blaring, and tires screeching as driver after driver takes evasive action, cursing, swerving around them, at 60 plus miles per hour.

"Don't they see my winker *winking*? Some people...just shouldn't be allowed to drive," Maria says.

Mick, is now in a full sweat. Maria's oblivious.

"Good point...*now* Goooo! Step on it! *First right*...or last rites. *Jesus Christ*...where's a Goddamn Priest when you need one," Mick says.

It was then, that Mick saw it...a sign from God? A big green sign..."Barham Blvd" just to the right of them. Divine intervention?

A spectacular near miss by a huge UPS delivery truck.

"*Jesus Christ*, lady!" the angry driver yells out his open side door.

Yeap, that confirms it...a true religious experience. A sign of deliverance.

Mick, now speechless, jabs toward the off-ramp sign with his right hand, like Moses, pointing to the Promised Land.

"Mom, turn *right*...not *left right*, but *right right*. Head for that off-ramp. *Do y it now!*" Mick yells.

"All-*right* son...you don't have to raise your voice, it makes me a little nervous," she says.

Miraculously, The Red Sea of cars parts. Remember this is the *Hollywood* Freeway. Maria, making the sign of the cross, fumbles on the left blinker and makes her one and only perfect right hand turn at 5 miles per hour traversing across 4 lanes of high speed traffic, bumping over the shoulder, across the ivy, and down on to the off-ramp.

"Mother...pull over...to the *right*. *Now please!*" Mick yells.

"*Right* right or *Left* right?" she says

"Just pull over, *anywhere!*" Mick screams.

Maria pulls over to the side of the road and comes to an abrupt stop, lurching Mick forward, straining his seat belt.

"Okay, dear, don't get *up-cited*. We were never in any danger. Saint

Anthony was my co-pilot...you know, we haven't practiced any left turns, yet?"

They are somehow, miraculously unscathed. Mick is trying desperately to regain his composure.

"*Lesson over*, mom. I'll drive home. You might want to rethink this driving thing. Kinda tough to teach painting...in a body cast," Mick says.

"Is driving always *so*...noisy. Rude horns honking...and all that yelling and cursing," Maria says.

"Not for everyone...but you seem to have uh...the gift to bring it out in others," Mick says.

"Why thank you, son," she says blushing appreciatively. "See I told you it would be fun. Oh, I can hardly wait for my next lesson. Can we practice left turns next time? My that was...exhilarating. I think I'm having a hot flash," Maria says daintily dabbing her forehead with the back of her wrist.

"That makes two of us. Sure mom...just to make it even more *fun* we'll go at rush hour. Nothing more uh...exhilarating than turning left in front of on-coming traffic at rush hour," Mick sighs.

And that's how Mick got religion. Yeap...he found faith in the fast-lane...of the Hollywood Freeway. And so it is—Maria indeed has somebody up there, or somewhere, looking out for her. And Mick somehow knows, that when he leaves, that she'll be just fine. But Mick wouldn't be surprised if this Saint Tony guy started demanding hazardous duty pay. A-men.

- Chapter 12 -

Berkeley 1966

Byron Brawley's sitting at the bar nursing a beer waiting for Angie to get off her shift at La Val's. She's serving a table of rowdy jocks. One of them, Brawley recognizes is the star quarterback on the UCB football team. He has taken an interest in Angie. He's flirting with her, and after a few pitchers of beer, he gets bolder, and starts groping her. She tactfully tries to resist, but he's now showing off in front of his pals. Angie comes by where Brawley is sitting, and Brawley asks her if the guy is bothering her. She tells Brawley, she handled a lot of drunks—not to be too concerned because she's only got 15 minutes left on her shift.

She makes one final pass around the bar, when the QB grabs her and sits her on his lap, and grabs her breast. She jumps up and slaps his face, and tells him to cool it, with, "Forget it, meat head! I'm not interested!"

QB says, "Hey...you obviously don't know who I am. Who do you think you're talking to...you little slut?"

Hearing the commotion, Brawley walks over to the QB and says, "Hey man...the lady is not interested. Now why don't you just behave yourself."

The QB, about 6'4" at least 220 pounds, jumps up and says to Brawley, "Mind your own fuckin' business, asshole...if you know what's good for ya!"

Brawley just smiles, and says to Angie, "Come on Angie...let's get outta here. The class of the clientele is decidedly going downhill."

The QB grabs his arm to restrain him. Brawley just looks at his hand on his arm, and says with a faint smile and deadly calm, "I'd suggest that you *never* put your hands on me again...*ever*, unless you want to get your face changed."

Byron clamps his right hand around the wrist of QB and slowly, effortlessly peels it away.

Angie says, "Come on, Byron...let's just leave."

"Byron, huh? What kind of a faggot name is that? Hey honey...what you need is a real man," QB says and grabs Angie's arm. Byron steps in between Angie and QB, removes his hand from Angie, and gives him a shove backwards, "I guess you don't get it, man. Okay...but just so you know, once you start it, I'll be forced to finish it."

The QB's two teammates are egging him on now—it's too late for QB to back down.

One of the other jocks, says, "Ooooooh...bad ass. QB...why don't you take this faggot outside and teach him a lesson!"

Angie is now pleading with Byron, "Please Byron...just let it go. I'm okay. I don't want any trouble here. I don't want to lose my job."

"Yea Bi-ron, as in Bi-sexual. Why don't you just get your little faggot ass outta here...and leave the girl here. I'm not done with her yet. *Now*, asshole before I kick your ass around this bar. Or...let's step outside and settle this man to woman uh...Bi-ron," QB says with a frat boy smirk.

Byron just smiles, looks at Angie, then says, "Lead the way hotshot. Oh, by the way this won't be a very fair fight."

"Sounds like he wants to *chickenshit* out...*brack brack brack*," QB's pal says.

"Nope. Me...against *only* three of you? Consider yourself warned," Byron calmly says with faint smile.

"Ha! Okay, Bi-ron, you're dead, faggot," QB says.

QB struts toward the entrance, with his entourage in tow.

"Ang...you'd best leave now. I don't think you'll want to see this. This won't take long," Byron says smiling confidently.

Byron follows the QB out the door, despite Byron's warning, with Angie following. As soon as the towering QB, at least a head taller and 30 pounds heavier, reaches the sidewalk he turns around with a mean smirk on his face. Without any warning, Byron nails him, full-force with a left hand, in the gut, which doubles him over, immediately taking away the height advantage. He then brings an upper-cut from the floor, and catches him square on the chin, knocking him backwards. He lands on his back spread-eagled on the sidewalk with a thud, hitting the back of his head, out cold. It happens so fast, none of QB's pals even saw the punches. His pals are in shock, one of them kneels down, "Hey QB, you okay man?"

QB's glassy eyes open one at a time. He is still dazed, but now he's turning his head to the side, spitting broken teeth out, with copious amounts of blood. In less than 30 seconds it's over. The teammates storm Brawley, and wildly start swinging at him. He can see immediately that neither of them have ever been in a serious street fight before. He methodically, turns and faces one of the other attackers, knocks him down with a combination of two quick short punches, then turns on the other, who raises his hands, signaling that he wants no part of him. By now someone has called the Berkeley police, within less than a minute, a patrol car skids up to the sidewalk, red lights flashing. Two cops jump out, yelling "Everybody! Back off! *Now!*"

One cop kneels down next to QB, and says, "This guy's a mess. Hey...looks like the Cal quarterback Rusty Warren. What happened here?"

The other cop's got Brawley in a restraining hold with his arm behind his back. Brawley's unscathed. One of QB's teammates has got, what looks like a broken nose and facial cuts.

The guy who stayed out of it, who was doing all the big talk, tells the cops, "This fuckin' wild man, just attacked us, man. He went after QB first...for no reason. We were just sittin' in the bar, having few beers and some laughs with the waitress. She was comin' on to Rusty...flirtin' big time, when this asshole comes over and starts pimpin' us. We didn't want any trouble...so we decided to leave. He followed us out. That's when he went berserk...no warning...hits Rusty, and then attacks us!" bigmouth says.

Angie yells, "That's a lie! These assholes, picked a fight with Byron. He was just defending himself...and me. The big one...the QB, was coming on to me...grabbing me. Byron tried to deal with it peacefully but they were all drunk. He kept grabbing me...he wouldn't let it alone. He picked the fight with Byron!"

The one cop gets on the radio and calls for an ambulance, which arrives in less than 5 minutes. They take QB away on a gurney. His pals get into a car and follow the ambulance to the hospital. He then goes into the bar to try to find any witnesses to the fight. He is not surprised that 'nobody saw nuthin', as most of those at the bar at the time of the confrontation, have already cleared out, many because they're under legal drinking age and possess bogus IDs.

The other cop, restraining Brawley, cuffs his hands behind his back, walks him over to the patrol car, and roughly deposits him in the back seat, slamming the car door shut. He gets Angie's name and address, then gets into the right front seat of the patrol car and says to Brawley, "Okay tough guy...give me your name and date of birth and your address...and don't get cute. If you lie to a police officer, that's a separate offense. And reach around and pull out your wallet and lay it on the seat beside you...do it *now!*"

"Byron Vincent Brawley, date of birth, December 22, 1942. 1452 Durant St. Berkeley, 94702. Hey, man...this is bogus! Those guys started this, three against one. The quarterback...Warren, big man on campus groped my lady friend...I just tried to..."

"Shut up!...I'll let you know when you can talk," the cop says, he then reaches around for Brawley's wallet, now laying on the back seat beside him. The cop goes through his wallet until he finds a California driver's license. He gets on the radio, and calls in the information to the dispatcher. About a minute later, the dispatcher comes back, with a warrant out for an unpaid speeding ticket, and that Brawley has two priors—convictions for assault and battery in Glendale, California, both suspended for community service. Also, a recent arrest in Berkeley for trespassing and disturbing the peace while demonstrating on the UCB campus.

The cop reads him his rights, and places him under arrest for the traffic warrant, and due to serious nature of the injuries of the other party, which requires hospitalization, for suspicion of felony assault and battery.

Angie makes bail for Brawley, but she is ambivalent about the incident. At one level she is proud of Byron for the way he almost casually

dispatched those three thugs, but a nagging disquiet remains. She has never seen this violent side of Byron Brawley before. The cold calculating warrior, who was capable of methodically inflicting grave physical harm, with almost savage ferocity. He shows no remorse for the damage he has done to Rusty Warren. On the contrary, he relishes it. He's glad he took that pompous ass, the big man on campus, down a notch or two.

The next day, the local papers, including the San Francisco Examiner, report that Rusty Warren, the star quarterback for the Berkeley Bears, is in the hospital. As a result of the unprovoked assault and battery upon him, corroborated by the testimony of his teammates, he will miss the big regional rivalry game, a homecoming game with Stanford that Saturday. '*The assailant is a student at UCB with an extensive record for violence*', intentionally conflating it with his civil disobedience demonstrations on the Cal campus.

The Athletic Director at UCB tells the Deputy DA to throw the book at the violent student radical. It's now becoming a high-profile case, with the Deputy DA getting as much press mileage as he can for his own career path, with press releases like, '*...violence against peaceful students...particularly exemplary student athletes of the caliber of Rusty Warren will not be tolerated. An example must be made of this Byron V. Brawley, to send a message to those campus radicals that would indulge in such thuggish behavior.*'

About a month later, the overworked public defender assigned the case, a young guy maybe two years out of law school, with shaggy long hair wearing John Lennon glasses, and a huge caseload, sits down with Brawley and candidly lays out his options. He counsels Byron Brawley to accept a plea worked out with the Deputy DA.

"Here's the deal Byron. Look, man...I've checked with your profs. By all accounts you're a smart guy, who could have a potentially bright future...maybe someday as a tenured prof, if you can get past this charge without a conviction. I've negotiated a plea deal with the Deputy DA that if you agree to enlist in the army, he'll dismiss all charges, the record of your arrest will be expunged.

Otherwise, if it goes to trial and you lose, he'll be asking for, and probably get a felony conviction. With your priors...the extent of the injury of the campus 'golden boy' and the testimony of his witnesses of the savagery of the attack, you might be looking at 24 months in county jail, plus two years probation. Plus you'll be convicted felon, which would just about guarantee that you could *never* have any career you might want at a University or any other school job anywhere...including junior high school...unless it's a janitor sweeping floors. The press, most especially that conservative rag the SF Examiner has made this a *cause célèbre* against radical violent student activism...and you're the poster boy. I'd advise you to strongly consider takin' the deal," the PD says.

"Well...this is such bullshit man! Those assholes started it...I just

finished it. So this is American justice huh? Whatever happened to a man's right to defend himself?"

"Well, it seems you have defended yourself a few too many times. And this last time more than a little uh...too vigorously and with the wrong cat...at the wrong place...and the wrong time. And justice has got not much if anything to do with it. Time for a reality check. And I gotta know soon...before they withdraw the plea offer," the PD says.

"So those are my choices, huh? Either way I'm fucked. But I guess if I have to take my chances between going to Vietnam or jail at least in Nam, I suppose I've got a fightin' chance...as opposed to a getting screwed over for certain. Ending up with a felony conviction on my record. I guess I've really got no choice. I'll take the deal," Byron says.

"Okay...here's how it works. Go down to the local Army recruitment office and enlist, bring back the documents and we'll present them to the Deputy DA," he says.

"Won't be necessary. I just got my draft notice. Cal expelled me about a month ago, for conduct unbecoming a student...most particularly for roughing the passer, the star quarterback. They notified the draft board immediately. My 2S deferment was rescinded...fast tracked. The model of bureaucratic efficiency, when they want to screw somebody over. So *hi ho hi ho...it's off to war I go*. Two years in the Army, has got to be better than even two months in jail," Byron says.

"Okay...I think I can get them to go along with that. Go down and get processed early. Tell them you can't wait to get into the war. Take the physical then get me the paperwork...pronto, okay?" the PD says.

The night before he is to report for his assignment the next morning, Byron spends with Angie. Just a quiet dinner for the two of them at their apartment in Berkeley. She is devastated by the proposition of Byron going to Vietnam. The casualties are starting to mount. Every day, there's a growing list of KIA's in the newspapers. They're mostly just kids, 18 to 22 years old.

"Oh Byron...don't go! We can go to Canada together. Leave tonight and be at the Canadian border in British Columbia, Vancouver in less than 10 hours. We can start a new life up there...just the two of us. You can get a job teaching. Please baby...don't go! I gotta a bad feeling about this," Angie cries.

"Baby...I know it's a tough call. But I can't run. I've never run from anyone...or anything in my life and I don't intend to start now. I don't want to be a fugitive the rest of my life, always looking over my shoulder, never being able to return for fear of being arrested. As much as I love you baby...and I want you with me, I couldn't subject you to that...your family and mine. It's just no good. Besides, if you haven't noticed I can take care of myself, okay? It's only one year, in country, it'll go fast. Don't worry baby, they can't kill me. Haven't you noticed? In-VINCE-ible, is my middle name," he says smiling, trying desperately to lighten up the moment. "Then, when I'm back in the states or wherever they assign me...you can join me there," Byron says, hugging

Angie tightly.

Angie is crying bitterly now, she knows she can't talk him out of it, "Okay baby. I just love you so much. My gawd...if anything should ever happen to you..."

They make passionate love all that night—as if it were for the last time.

The next morning Byron Brawley is on his way to boot camp for basic training at Fort Ord, Monterey Bay, California. At the bus terminal, while waiting for the bus, he calls his pal, Mick Kozlov from a pay phone to update him. He's now living back in L.A. after leaving Berkeley because of his run-in with the law at the Sproul Hall demonstration about a year earlier.

"Hey Koz...howya doin man?"

"Hey Byron...good to hear your voice! What's up, man?" Mick says

"Say listen...I can't talk long. I'm at the bus terminal waiting to ship out to Ord for basic. Just wanted to ask you for a favor since I'm going to be gone, you know like...you're in the army now...you're not behind a plow...etcetera. While I'm in Nam could you do me a favor and keep in touch with Angie for me. I've given her your phone number and address. Maybe you could keep an eye on her for me until I get back, man...ya know check in with her from time to time. If she needs anything...anything at all, take care of it, and I'll settle up when I get back. I'd sure appreciate it, pal

And Mick, if anything should happen to me... Anyway, once I get to basic, I'll send ya letter with all her contact info," Byron says.

"Sure, bro...not a problem. Don't worry about a thing. If Angie needs anything, anything at all...just have her contact me and I'm on it."

"Thanks, Mickey," a relieved Byron says. He very seldom calls him any other name than Mick or Koz.

"Hey Byron, you okay, man?"

"Yea...I just got a chill down my spine. Not sure why. Anyway...I gotta run now. And thanks, man," Byron says.

"Hey Byron...I love ya brother. Man, it's a jungle out there, take care of yourself. And don't be hero," Mick says trying to cut the tension.

"Yea...got it. Love you too, man. I'll be in touch," Byron says. *Click*

Mick calls Angie from time to time, and sometimes when she's feeling low and lonely for Byron, she'll call him late at night, and Mick will try to cheer her up, sometimes even talking her down from the high solitary ledge of loneliness of so many loved one's left behind,

Byron has been in-country in Vietnam for over 11 months—and counting days. He's one of 4 squad leaders with 12 riflemen under his command, in a platoon of about 40 men. More than half of the soldiers in his squad are Black, or Hispanic. The rest are white, mostly from working class

families, with some Southern boys from Mississippi, Arkansas and Tennessee. This causes some tension between the Northern Black *bruthas* and the Southern *Crackas*, when the Blacks play 'that loud jungle bunny' Motown music.

When Mick tells his mother Maria, that Byron and his squad are in country in Vietnam, Maria goes to Saint Ignatius Catholic church, and buys, 13 Saint Christopher medals, has the priest bless them with holy water, and gives them to Mick to send to Byron and his mates, along with a care package of delicacies, and some cassette tapes of Motown music that Mick puts together. Martha and the Vandellas's "Heat Wave" and "Nowhere to Run" ...some Marvin Gay "How Sweet It Is to Be Loved by You" and "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" that the soldiers can play on their boom boxes.

Byron's company, Company B, 235th Infantry, consisting of about 150 to a 180 soldiers, is stationed in the jungles of the Kontum Province. There's a lot of Viet Cong activity there, with frequent fire fights and sniper action, with a high casualty rate—rugged wild jungle, with all manner of booby traps, bugs, snakes compounded by the constant oppressive humidity.

Mick includes a letter with the care package:

February 12, 1967

Hey Bro,

Hope this finds you and your comrades well. Enclosed is something from mom, that she thought might give you and your buds some peace of mind. She insisted...I've learned over the years that once she sets her mind on something...fogitaboutit!

They are Saint Christopher medals blessed by a priest...one for each guy in your squad. No obligation to wear them...but you know mom...and her Catholic voodoo...no one can do vo-DOO...like she DOO. Mom's praying like over-time...and lighting, must be hundreds of candles by now for you and your men to come home safely.

I've seen it first hand...powerful mojo, man.

Hope you enjoy the music...and the goodies.

I check on Angie from time to time...by phone or letter. She seems to be doing okay...as well as could be expected. She misses you terribly as we all do.

Mario Savio sends his best. He's still raisin' hell up at Berkeley...since we lost Brother Charles...my god...it will be two years, this March 7th. That one still hurts...bad.

Mario seems to have become more withdrawn and intense. I think he is a little disillusioned with the dissension of the leadership....political bullshit and I also think he's slowly phasing himself away from FSM. We occasionally exchange letters. He's very upset that you were forced to go over there...even though he is vehemently opposed to the war as are most of the students at Cal, he understands that you had few options. He asked for your address. I gave it to him. Said he'd write when he could find the time.

Okay...that's all for now, man.

Write when you get a chance...keep your head down. And don't be hero!

Luv ya Brutha,

Koz.

Byron calls the squad together and announces that he has something for them. He's carefully, referentially, lines up the medals on a table. He takes one Saint Christopher medal and puts it over his head and says, "Okay, men...these are Saint Christopher medals...for anybody that wants them. You can each take one...or not, doesn't matter to me. They're from a wonderful lady stateside, a mother who's praying for all of us...my buddy's mom. They've been blessed by a priest."

With death of one of the rifleman the previous week, from a Viet Cong sniper, the squad is now down to eleven, plus Byron.

Everyone of the soldiers in the squad, picks one up and puts it around their neck. No wise cracks. Each one of them is deeply touched with the thoughtfulness and generosity of it.

To a man, they all respect and admire Byron Brawley, as a leader and as a man. His character and courage which he has demonstrated in numerous firefights. His fairness and commitment to his men. He has never asked any man to do anything that he himself wouldn't do. They would follow him anywhere, including hell, which was never very far away.

On March 15th, The Ides of March, about 2 AM, Mick receives a phone call. It's Angie, crying hysterically, "He's gone! Mick...he's gone."

"Angie? That you? What goin' on?" Mick says.

"Byron's dead...Mick...on March 12th, I just received the Telegram...Western Union. 'We regret to inform you that...' I can't even read it out loud, Mick. Oh gawd! Oh gawd! My Byron's ...gone!" Click.

Mick is in shock. He slowly cradles the phone. *Not again...C-Wash, and now Byron...so senseless. So goddamn senseless*, as his eyes start to well-up with tears.

He decides to let Angie grieve alone for a while before trying to call her back, as he's not in much better condition than she, certainly not to be giving any kind of grief counseling.

Mick decides to drive up to Berkeley a few days later, to be with Angie. Just before he leaves, on March 21st, Mick receives a letter:

March 11th, 1967

Hey Koz,

Well, the Saint Christopher's were a big hit with the men...every one of them has been wearing them including moi. Tell mom...the men and I send a big hug and a thanks!

Don't know if they'll do any good, but since we've been wearing them...we haven't had any casualties. Keep your fingers...and anything else you got crossed.

I'm countin' days now, man. I'm short, only 17 more days and my tour of duty is up. One whole year, literally shot to hell. We take a position...they take it back. We kill each other over ridiculous swamp and jungle. It's all about body count. I'm so sick of this whole fuckin' business. But I can't show it in front of the men. Some of them are long...a lot of days left.

I just got a replacement for the kid who was killed by a sniper last month, a black kid, from believe it or not Selma Alabama. His name is Harold Jackson, he's barely 18 years old. What are the chances of that one? He says he was just a kid...ha...what is he now?...but he said he marched with his father on March 7th. Said he remembered C-Wash...he was the big one way up front...with John Lewis. Too weird man. Small fuckin' world, eh bro?

Anyway he's just a green kid...scared shitless of being over here as he should be. He asked about the Saint Christopher medals that all the guys were wearing. A good kid. The Crackas have been riding him pretty hard...they'd never try that shit with Northern Blacks. So I've had to straighten a few of them out on

that score.

He's a good kid...I hope he makes it. They're all so fuckin' young, man. The first month is the most dangerous out here...until they can figure some things out.

Could you ask your mom for another Saint Christopher medal...for me for when I get home...and can thank her in person with a big hug? I gave mine to the kid. You'd thought I gave him the medal of honor. He was so damn appreciative. I hope it gives him some peace of mind at least, as it has for me. Maybe...just maybe he'll survive this insanity.

Okay...gotta run...we've got a major search and destroy mission tomorrow morning at 06:00 hours. Gotta get everything ready...and check out, everybody's gear including rifles and ammo. It's the kid's first patrol, so I'll keep him close the first few times out.

Luv ya bro,

Byron

PS

Can't wait to see my Angie...and you and I are going to get VERY VERY drunk...for at least a week.

PPS

And if anything should happen to me...I know you'll take care of Angie for me. See ya soon, Mickey.

While up at Berkeley, to spend time with Angie trying to help her sort some things out, she receives notification from the US Army, that she was the named beneficiary on a large life insurance policy Byron Brawley had taken out.

She also receives notification of a recommendation of commendation:

March 12th, 1967 in Kontum Province, Vietnam.

AWARD OF THE SILVER STAR

For gallantry in action against a hostile force: on 12 March 1967, Specialist Four Byron Vincent Brawley was serving as a Squad Leader, in the Republic of Vietnam, when it

came under heavy sniper fire from two enemy machine guns and an unknown number of snipers.

Specialist Four Brawley immediately maneuvered his lead machine gun team forward to engage the enemy positions. As soon as his gun placement had been firmly established, he moved to the flank to give supporting fire. After a few minutes of intense fire exchange, Specialist Four Brawley realized that the enemy could not be extricated from his present position.

Ignoring the threat to his life, he rose to his feet and charged the machine gun emplacement, placing a large and accurate volume of fire into it. Just as he reached the enemy gun, he was fatally wounded, but his heroic behavior created the diversion necessary for the remainder of his men to establish an assault and overrun the enemy.

Specialist Four Brawley's extraordinary courage, determination, and devotion to duty are in keeping with the highest tradition of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself, his unit, and the United States of America.

The decorations earned by SP4 Byron Vincent Brawley include: the Combat Infantryman Badge, the Parachute Badge, the Silver Star, the Bronze Star, the Purple Heart, the National Defense Service Medal, the Vietnam Service Medal, the Vietnam Campaign Medal and the Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm Unit Citation.

The cause of death was listed as Small Arms. At the time of his death Byron V. Brawley was 24 years of age. He was from Glendale, California.

Angie is very bitter about Byron's senseless death, and threatens to throw the medals into the trash.

Her constant mantra is, “For what? Tell me Mick, *for what did he die?*”

“Now I'm not religious, Angie, but one scripture does come to mind, I think it's John 15;13...and it goes something like this, *Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.* He loved his men and was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for them. Like many warriors...he died for his comrades, not for some abstract bullshit *devotion to duty in keeping with the highest tradition of the military service and reflect*

great credit upon himself, his unit, and the United States of America.

“Mick...you were his best friend. He spoke of you often...like a brother. What the hell compelled him to always seek out conflict...and danger?” Angie tearfully asks.

“Angie, at some level I believe he became addicted to the adrenal high of danger...the fight or flight response. In his case *always* fight, the state of hyper-arousal intensified his life experience. And like most addictions, it feeds on its self...with each successive fix requiring more to satisfy the addiction.”

“But Mick...I thought he loved *me*...that he would have thought about me...us...before frivolously putting his life at risk. I guess in the end, he didn't. Maybe he was incapable of loving me, or anybody else to that degree,” Angie says tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Addiction...in its many forms, is a jealous mistress, Angie.”

Mick decides not to tell Angie that his last letter had the ring of precognition of his death...perhaps self-fulfilling.

“After spending a great deal of time with Byron, I sometimes wondered if deep down he had a death wish. I think he always sensed it—the siren call of the danger. A love affair with death...he flirted with and teased it...ultimately it could only end in one way. Death, his constant companion patiently waiting...you might say, was his muse. He was a brilliant, bright shooting star...with an innate sense of the heroic. A star crossed warrior in the tradition of a mythic Greek Tragedy. And I and others will forever remember him as an ageless young brash, brilliant rascal who loved and lived life to its fullest, as we will always remember James Dean. Forever young.

Bad Boy Byron Brawley, the rebel...*with* a cause. Angie. I hope you too can remember him as he was, young, beautiful...larger than life.” Mick says hugging Angie tightly, both of them silently convulsing with grief.

While in the Bay Area, Mick looks up his old pal Hawk Shapiro who is now living and working in Livermore, at the Lawrence Livermore National Labs a federal research facility founded by the University of California in 1952, a Federally Funded Research and Development Center.

Mick wants to inform Hawk of the death of their dear friend Byron Brawley whom he had gotten to know after Brawley and Mick had rescued him from the vicious blows of the campus cop's baton during the FSM demonstrations at Berkeley in 1964. After the death of Charles Washington, he was devastated...now with this news, which Mick wants to break in person, he will be deeply saddened as will Mario Savio, now teaching math and philosophy at Sonoma State University.

After Hawk's promising law career was prematurely terminated, with most of his Mensa intellect thankfully still intact, even though he now has epileptic seizures from his traumatic brain injury from the fracturing of his skull, the frequency of his seizures can be controlled with medication.

But he is unable to pursue a career in the law, because he is now prone to occasional unpredictable violent fits of rage and episodes of emotional outbursts from TBI. So Hawk ends up at LLNL, a government think tank, initially doing research, where he's able to work for the most part in a solitary environment. After a few years he gravitates toward computer science. And always a very quick study, in a very short period of time he becomes a programming whiz, mastering coding for the CDC 6600, the flagship mainframe supercomputer of the 6000 series of computer systems manufactured by Control Data Corporation. The CDC 6600 is generally considered to be the first successful supercomputer, and Hawk is the now the System Administrator...*da man*.

Mick hasn't seen the Hawkster, in over a year, but they talk regularly on the phone, sometimes several times a month sometimes for hours at a time.

So after spending some time with Angie, after a quiet very private ceremony they scatter Byron's ashes over the San Francisco Bay from the iconic Golden Gate Bridge. Mick bids an emotional farewell to Angie. She's a tough lady and Mick has no doubt that she'll eventually be able to move on, but it will take some time, as one Byron Vincent Brawley will be one very tough act to follow. Mick, keeping his promise to his pal Byron, will continue to be available to talk to her anytime day or night, which Angie deeply appreciates.

Although Hawk outwardly seems to handle the news of Byron's passing okay, he excuses himself and goes for a long walk...alone. When Mick calls Mario Savio and breaks the news, he's devastated.

So Mick heads South, back to L.A. after he and Hawk spend almost a week together, having picked up right where they had left off. He looks good and sounds emotionally healthy. Still practicing his martial arts regime, he's still incredibly strong and fit.

Hawk's as cynical and sarcastic as ever with the same acid wit. A good sign...of contentment. They will continue to stay in touch as only brothers would—for the rest of their lives.

Now it's also time for Mick...to move on.

- Chapter 13 -

My migration to media, film making and video production began, quite accidentally, sometime in the early 1980s.

The checkered path of my meandering matriculation, consisted of an unguided aimless tour of just about all the University of California campuses, initially UC Berkeley on a hoops athletic scholarship, then UCLA, ending with a brief stint at UCSB, before deciding to finally surrender to my incessant creative callings, always just below the surface deeply embedded in my Caravaggio DNA, to make art for art's sake. *Ha!*

Just out of college in the early-seventies, with a useless B.A. a Bastard of Arts, majoring in Industrial Design, then an M.F.A., Masturbation in Fine Arts in photography with a minor in painting from prestigious high-gloss Art Center College of Design in L.A. Like most art college grads, after I got the ridiculously expensive, but very worthless diploma, the reality of the value of an MFA to make even a half-way decent living from the arts, became painfully obvious when I went out into the real world, looking for a real job. I couldn't even find a position in the arts that would pay much more than minimum wage, painting...with a roller.

About the only thing left was teaching, but being in a captive classroom situation never agreed with me as a student having cut many classes, mostly because of the inane rote lectures from tenured lifers. So how could I even hope to endure the torture of being in classroom as an instructor for years and agonizing years to come?

Then one morning, after 6 months of interviews for inane min-wage 'entry level' jobs like art museum intern, I saw a large display recruiting ad in the L.A. Times for an insurance claims adjuster, with a picture of a smiling guy wearing a coat and tie, carving a check for a smiling man and wife on a briefcase on the hood of his brand new company car, which came with the job.

So...since my inability to buy a car was causing some serious deleterious dating consequences with the ladies, I decided to become a Casualty and Property Claims Investigator. Yeap...just like that. Eventually, an Examiner for a large international multi-lines insurance company, Global Lines Mutual, aka GLM, affectionately referred to by the claims staff as "*Good Luck Mutha-fucka*" for their policy of parsimonious payment of claims. I soon discovered I was born with a gift of negotiating, and still fiercely competitive from my college B-ball days, it became a blood sport of slam-dunkin' on my adversaries, the oftentimes predatory personal injury attorneys. The cheaper I settled, the more they liked me, the higher the promotion.

But after about 6 years, with my background, now a highly trained investigator, settling of large, mostly bodily injury claims many of which for

Fortune 500 corporations, I decided to go out on my own as an Independent Claims or Public Adjustor. This enabled me to create exorbitant hourly billings like some of my "Attorney Bernie" lawyer friends. So I sat for, and passed the state exam for both Independent Insurance Claims Adjuster, and while I was at it, a California State Private Investigator license.

In the meantime to bolster my legal chops and credentials, I enrolled in a local law school, nights—University of West Los Angeles, taking the big three, torts, contracts and civil procedure, which have the most relevance in my work. Like some anonymous jailed career criminal bitterly said, *If you want to make crime pay...go to law school.*

I find that I have a natural affinity for the law. The dialectical process of honing one's critical thinking skills, the joy of formulating and synthesizing a sound, elegant legal argument, and the art of successfully, oftentimes forcefully, selling one's legal argument. The negotiation process, is the ultimate ego trip for most lawyers. But after completing a year, I decide that I have enough of dealing with attorney's monstrous egos all day, both of my clients and opposing attorneys, and the last thing I want, is to be around lawyers any more than I absolutely have to. I leave law school after completing the first year.

Living on the beach in Malibu with two, at least tolerable, attorneys pals and working in West Los Angeles, California near the Coed-Target-Rich University, UCLA was a great gig—a Charter Member of The 4S Club, Sun, Sand, Surf and of course, Sex.

Most of my business initially was defense work, to investigate including forensic still photography and videography, a skill which I had picked up along the way out of necessity. Also, occasionally negotiate and otherwise handle high exposure bodily injury and property claims in defense of claims against multi-national corporations which were self-insured for the first 10 to 100 million bucks, like Big Oil or Big Tobacco.

After a few years, I soon realized where the big money was. I evolved away from insurance or defense work to working for high profile plaintiff attorneys as an investigator and all-around MF, not that MF; a Mr Fixit, often as a "claim administrator", mostly for civil suits, usually high value minimum 6 figure damages bodily injury cases where I'd get a piece, a percentage of the action, from in some cases, very lucrative high profile Class Action litigation.

It is here where I first got involved in film and video production, recording video of sworn depositions, creating trial presentations to "ameliorate the jurors' comprehension", then eventually creating trial visual aids, full color charts and graphs, and arrows, lots of very big red arrows, along with "compelling narratives" like showing a "day in the life" of some poor now quadriplegic bastard, trying to figure out how to wipe his ass, after being broadsided by a freight train at a defective railroad crossing.

Guaranteed to make the defense attorneys beg the judge for an in-

Chambers sidebar for settlement negotiation with the plaintiff counsel, uh...that would be us, as many of the jurors, tears unashamedly streaming down their faces, and that's just the men, malevolently glared at their Armani Asses as if they were something they just stepped in.

It was in August of 1971 about 2 AM, the petulant and frenzied tone of the phone, could only be my high-powered client and high-maintenance part-time paramour Vera Mirren Esq., proto-alpha female attorney. In typical subtle Vera-esque fashion, "Misha, get on the first plane this morning to Albuquerque, New Mexico."

"Thanks for asking, but no, no you didn't wake me, but damn I was just on the verge of cracking the code to Joyce's Finnigan's Wake. 'Spose that can wait. Been by my bed for...ten years. What's up?"

"Good. Big case...multiple fatals...target defendant," salivating "can't talk now, 'cause I can hear Vlad's just about finished peeing. I'll call ya in later in the morning with details. Get some sleep...gonna need it."

Click. So much for pillow talk.

It is this fateful incident, which sends me to New Mexico to investigate an accident with the hopes of finding the surviving accident victim and signing him up with Ve-raptor, where I would meet Chief Leonard Eagle Feather and his daughter, Sora on a Navajo Indian Reservation. I had not a clue that it would be the beginning of a long and meandering, often tortuous journey of the reawakening of my conscience and my very soul, that would dramatically change my life forever.

Veruska, the diminutive in Russian for Vera, with her luxurious law office in Century City Plaza high rise looking out over the Pacific Ocean in the far distance, is a very forceful, notoriously ruthless, high-powered Personal Injury and Criminal Defense Attorney, living in a ridiculous ten bedroom mansion on Montana St. in exclusive Brentwood. It's heavily populated with major movers and shakers, particularly in the Hollywood film industry.

Married, but for some reason, obsessed with *moi*, her husband, is a very wealthy and powerful "real estate developer", Vladimir, alias Rad Vlad Mirrenoff anglicized to Mirren. He's a member of the Russian Mafia, nicknamed by law enforcement as "The Brothers Borscht".

Just the mere mention of the name Mirren in some dark under-belly circles, is cause for major fear and loathing when invoked. And Veruska capitalizes on it, effectively using it as the ultimate tool of intimidation, like for slow paying criminal defense clients billed at her ridiculously exorbitant hourly fee. And the brand becomes her backstop against male chauvinism in her negotiations with attorneys of the other side, including prosecuting Deputy District Attorneys, casting a particularly ruthless and no-nonsense cache, which she exploits to her advantage.

This 6 foot tall lithe, blonde beauty, is built like a runway model with

legs that go forever. Sinewy well-defined muscles, but with full breasts, with an insatiable libido, much like myself, which, hopefully is our well-kept little secret from her not-so-understanding barely upright *homo erectus* hubby, Rad Vlad.

My mission, tasked by my not-so-little, and not-so-sweet *laskovaya moya* Ruskie paramour, was to get to the scene, get the police report, get pictures and statements, then sign up the surviving father as a client, before anyone else could step on her action. She had gotten a heads-up, in the middle of night when her house keeper, a cousin of the surviving father of the victims, was crying hysterically on the news over the phone of the horrific accident.

Veruska wasted no time in prying the contact information from her under the pretense of wanting to send condolence flowers to the bereaved family, which of course she never did. Rather, her first call was to mobilize her assets, that would be *moi*. Within an hour, she was on the phone with yours truly.

To get around the various state laws against this kind of brazen solicitation of personal injury clients, the altruistic legal assistance offered by Ms Mirren, of course solicited by the housekeeper, will be invoked as an *entre* to representation. And, if later scrutinized by the bar association, provide some semblance of compliance with the law as a defense against the possible allegation of yours truly being a "runner" or a "capper". The fact that Ms Mirren does not have a ticket to practice law in New Mexico, is a mere technicality. There will be dozens of NM attorneys lining up, just panting for the opportunity to rent out their shingle and soul, for the cache on their legal resume to include being 'co-counsel' with the star power of Vera Mirren for potentially one of the biggest P.I. cases in New Mexico's history.

I fly into Albuquerque, rent a car and drive to the accident scene, no more than 10 hours after the accident. A New Mexico Trailways common carrier passenger bus, had struck a pick-up truck with an Indian family—a father, wife and 5 children, on a dark and deserted highway late at night. The pick-up was driving South in the far right lane at about 50 mph on Interstate 25, on the way to Santa Fe.

According to the prelim police accident report from the New Mexico Highway Patrol, and some of the investigating officers still at the scene when I arrived, the bus driver had been driving for 13 hours straight in violation of Federal Interstate Regulations of a maximum 10 hours. The pick-up truck with a camper shell included five sleeping children.

The bus inexplicably drives right over the back of the pick-up. In the absence of a mechanical malfunction, the working proximate cause was that the driver had apparently fallen asleep at the wheel. Mercifully, judging from the accounts of witnesses on the bus, they never knew what hit them. They died instantaneously

The mother fatally injured, dies in her husband's arms, while asking if her children are safe. The father, thrown clear, has miraculously escaped

relatively unscathed. After the impact, the father in a state of shock, is seen by witnesses, passengers on the bus, wandering down the highway picking up some of the limbs of his children. Some would later say that he was truly...the unlucky one.

I arrive on the scene after the vehicles have been removed—the horrific aftermath with debris from the pickup, still scattered all over the Interstate, including clothing, little children's shoes, and dolls, and dried blood. It's a bad one.

I take numerous pictures, then drive to the NM Highway Patrol to get a preliminary accident report, the final of which because of the seriousness of the accident and multiple 'fatals' will not be ready for at least five days. But the prelim gives me enough facts to get started, most importantly including where the damaged vehicles were taken, because often in accidents of this magnitude with common carriers, they will attempt to control access to any and all vehicles involved—most especially photos by somebody other than the common carrier, which depending on their liability exposure, may never see the light of day.

I find out where the vehicles were towed, and drive out to the impound yard to get some photos of the bus and the other vehicle, or what's left of it. When I go into the office, and ask the dispatcher, who happens to be the owner, to see the vehicles I am refused access. Occasionally they are even successful, in having the accident scene photos, sometimes taken by the investigating police, to somehow 'misplace' the photos, especially when the victims were considered to be no 'great loss', like Native Americans.

Obviously the bus company has already paid the owner off, so that no photos can be taken. I argue vehemently, but to no avail—he won't budge. So I act like I've given up and leave. I park the rental car down the road where it's not visible, and hike back. By now, it is getting dark, and the office is closing. I sneak back about 1/4 of a mile along the chain link fence, and see the bus, and beside it a large blue tarp covering something, maybe 3 feet high. I throw my camera bag over the fence, and hop over. I pull back the tarp and there is the pick-up truck, I think. Totally flattened—it is almost unrecognizable. Judging by the impact the bus must have been doing at least 80 mph when it literally drove completely over the back of the pick-up. I take a whole roll of 36 shots of 35mm black and white photos, because it's starting to get dark, I'm having to use the flash.

The owner who lives on premises sees the flashes from the camera. He immediately realizes what's going on and looses his two Doberman Pinschers. I hear the barking snarling of the attacking dogs—they are on me very quickly. I run for my life, get to the fence, and throw my camera bag over it. The last second I hop the fence just as a snarling dog reaches me grabbing and tearing my pant leg as I leap to the other side of the chain link fence. Laying on my back, out of breath from running and the sheer adrenaline rush from nearly being devoured, my face is now about a foot from the fence. On

the other side I can feel the hot breath of the Doby, ramming his pointed foaming incised snout through the chain link to eat my face.

After about 5 minutes, I am able to compose myself sufficiently to make sure I've got the film canisters I've shot. I unload the camera and put the last canister from the impound lot in my bag with the other one from the accident scene, and reload the camera in case I want to take some shots of the surviving father, if I can find him. I drive out to the reservation to try to make contact with surviving father and relatives. The reservation is near Santa Fe, New Mexico. I drive for an hour and half on US Hwy 25, along the same route as the scene of the accident that the family was on. By the time I get to the rez, it's dark, but with a full moon rising.

It is here where I would first encounter Chief Leonard Eagle Feather, a cousin of the surviving father. On the rez, everyone is related, either by blood or otherwise. But more importantly, I will meet his daughter, Sora Eagle Feather; a 24 years old, beautiful and bright Native American woman, again not for the last time.

At the reservation, taking personal inventory, with one torn pants leg, I realize that I must look like I got the worst end of an encounter with a coyote. I change into another pair of jeans so as not to look too unprofessional.

It's now quite dark. There are several groups of young braves on a porch, sitting around, drinking beer, the pungent smell of pot is pervasive. It's only 8 PM but they are already stupid fall-down drunk. I start asking around, but everyone is very wary of a white man...any white man, especially in a new car. To them, after decades of invasive visits from Bureau of Indian Affairs officials, and Federal law enforcement like the FBI, any white man must look like an undercover cop...or worse, a narc—and trouble. Everybody I ask in the ramshackle reservation, sorely in need of major maintenance and repair, for directions to house of the father of the victims either ignores me, tells me they don't know or says *Ch'iidii off* in Navajo. Don't have to be a linguist to recognize the universal middle finger in any language.

Finally, the Chief, Eagle Feather, and his daughter Sora, hearing the commotion outside of his house, come outside and confront me. I tell him my business, that I represent an attorney who is a *dear friend* with the cousin of the father of the victims.

Sora, a little spitfire, wastes no time in laying in to me. Despite Sora's very assertive and protective attitude, in which she also tells me off, again with the *Ch'iidii*, I am smitten by her natural beauty. The worst case is that my visit isn't a total loss, as I am learning a new and useful words in a new language.

I respectfully ask if I may come inside to discuss the matter. Probably more out of curiosity, with a wry smile, the Chief ushers me in. Sitting at a table is an Indian man maybe in his early 40s, hard to tell with Native Americans because of the hard life on the rez. His right arm is in a sling, head bandaged, his face full of contusions and abrasions.

"This is my cousin, Sherman Eagle Feather. He is the father and husband," the Chief says.

I walk over and hold out my hand, introducing myself. It is not reciprocated. Despite the chilly reception so far from everyone, to be successful at what I do, a lack of dogged determination is not an option. I refuse to give up and press on. I noisily slide out a chair, and take a seat at the table so I can engage Sherman Eagle Feather, eye to eye. I slide Vera Mirren's business card across the table.

"Mister Eagle Feather, I'm Mick Kozlov. I'm a licensed private investigator working for attorney Vera Mirren in Los Angeles, California. She is the good friend and employer of Nascha Eagle Feather, who I believe is your cousin. I'm here representing Ms Mirren, to try help you at the request of your cousin, during this, I'm sure, a very difficult time. Our mission is to assist you to get justice...from the party that has caused you and your family to suffer such a horrific loss."

Nothing...just a dull lifeless stare, like I'm invisible. The same 1000 yard stare of PTSD war vets back from Nam.

I begin to explain the legalities of the situation and how I'm here representing one of the most powerful and successful personal injury plaintiff attorneys in the United States. I rote recite her impressive resume of high six-figure settlements and judgments, and tick off some cases, names of common carriers, like airlines, and mention how many millions of dollars she's won for her clients. Not impressed.

The Chief is inscrutable. He does not let on that he graduated from law school at UNM at Albuquerque and lets me dig myself into a hole, deeper and deeper. I spin the conversation to trying to convince the Chief and his daughter that I'm only here to try to help this poor unfortunate soul.

"It won't cost him a dime out of his own pocket for the attorney to get for him what he and his family so justly deserve...I hope that I can count on your help to convince your cousin Mr Eagle Feather here, to sign this legal representation retainer agreement...it would be the best for all concerned."

The Chief and Sora listen impassively, as I describe the representation agreement consciously leaving out the contingency percentages. No need to go into too much detail which might confuse or cause undue concern for the poor bastard. Yea...right, Mr Concerned Capper.

The Chief scanning the agreement, says, "Very commendable of you and your boss to take such a...personal unselfish interest...such uncommon compassion from complete strangers for Sherman's loss, to get justice for him. Very impressive indeed. It says here that if the case goes to trial, that the attorney can take up to 50% of the total settlement...plus expenses, have I got that right?"

"Well...yes, but that's standard in the industry," I say, but hearing it out loud, instantly realizing my insensitive choice of words.

"Industry? What the hell do you think you're doing here! Do think this some kind of a game? Some factory operation to manufacture money for you and your boss? And you...you're nothing more than a..." she is interrupted by her father.

"A capper...a runner...I believe is the legal term of art," the Chief says smiling sardonically with a twinkle in his eye.

"...a scavenger, like a circling buzzard...over road kill, trying to make money off of other people's misery. Shame on you!" Sora Eagle Feather cries.

As I gaze upon the natural beauty of the face of the guileless Sora Eagle Feather, suddenly I feel ashamed for my behavior, for my attempts to exploit these poor Indian people...*just another white man trying to screw over the injuns.*

I guess I had always known in my hearts of hearts that what I was doing for V. Mirren, et al, was pretty low on the food chain. But for some unknown reason, maybe the image of a buzzard...picking over the bones of a carcass, which I would later ponder for many hours, disarms and stings me deeply. The way she says it...with such truth, honesty and conviction, for the first time I am actually forced to entertain the cold hard truth, that Sora Eagle Feather is speaking the painful reality about *me*...what I do...why I'm *really* here, and what kind of person that must make me.

The Chief then says, "Mr Kozlov, please tell your boss...thanks for her touching concern for Sherman Eagle Feather's welfare...but no thanks. I am a member of good standing with the New Mexico Bar, and that I will personally handle this case, for no compensation. I think we are done here. Sora will show you out."

My natural alpha instinct not to lose, reflexively I start to protest, "But..." then looking into Sora's intense eyes, I realize that I am outflanked by these noble Natives, and indeed, very 'done here'.

"Okay. Thank you for your time. I am truly sorry for your loss...or if I offended anyone. I wish you and your client only the best. So...I'll be on my way. No need to show me out," I say.

There is not a hole deep enough for me to crawl into. I am suddenly overwhelmed by the dignity and grace of these so-called *primitive* First Nations people, who despite living in 'third world' conditions of poverty and privation, in America, the richest country in the world, in many ways are far more civilized than my society. There is a tribal sense of cultural continuity, community and familial responsibility, egregiously lacking in my so-called civilized culture.

I get up to leave. Sora follows me out. Just outside the door, she lightly taps me on the shoulder—I stop and face her. Her stunning beauty is majestically revealed in the soft moonlight. High cheekbones and fine features—a sensual mouth with bee-stung lips, and long thick raven hair with wide-set, smoldering but somehow kind coal black eyes peering up at me. I am smitten.

Sora apologizes for her dismissive, harsh words, "I won't retract anything that I said in there...but it was very impolite and against our Indian customs to be so ungracious. I'm not sorry for what I said...but how I said it."

I say, "It is I that should be apologizing for coming here under these preten-...uh...circumstances."

I then reach into my camera bag hanging on my shoulder, and pull out the two canisters of film I had shot at the accident scene and the wrecking impound lot.

I take her hand and place the film canisters in it, then close her hand, "The insurance company will not pay without a major fight...every step of the way. It will be a very long and arduous battle, and it will be very expensive to get them to pay what they should. The bus company would never allow you to take or view photographs of the vehicles. Both those vehicles will be long gone by this time tomorrow...the whereabouts of the pickup somehow, mysteriously lost. But when the attorneys for the insurance company see that you have *these photos* of the scene and what was left of the pick-up...and the bus...the horrific impact from the excessive speed...and the scattered belongings of the children from the accident scene...I doubt that it will ever get in front of a jury."

Sora then reaches up and gently caresses my face, which sends an electric tingle down my spine, and says, "Thank you..." pauses, gazing into my eyes searchingly, then turns around and noiselessly like a lithe panther, disappears into the black night.

I stand there in the quiet darkness for a long time, my heart, inexplicably racing, until finally the distant cry of an infant in distress snaps me out of my trance.

I mindlessly get into the rental car, and sit there for another 5 minutes. *What the hell just happened in there? I'd been totally disarmed and out-maneuvered by an old Indian man and his daughter. Me...the Koz...Mister Hardball, without so much as even a whimper. And exercising my new Navajo vocabulary, Ch'iidii it! Maybe it is time for a change...*

I decide that I could use a nice long drive to think about some things, and rather than drive back to the airport, I'll drive the rental car all the way back to L.A., and maybe see some country I've never seen. It will also give me some time to work out a few different plausible scenarios, concocting a story that I could tell the venomous Veruska back in L.A., about how I couldn't find the prospective plaintiff let alone sign him up, or the wrecked vehicles, etcetera...etcetera.

On the way back, driving for hours on the miles and miles of endlessly long straight roads, with distant expansive horizons and big skies, allows me to set the cruise control and just let my mind go out to play. Recess on the playground of...*what if*. I begin to mentally massage the proposition of maybe some day getting the hell out of L.A.

On the map, I see this huge body of water, called Lake Tahoe, so I

decide to check it out. From Highway 395, I take Highway 50 West, eventually to Sacramento, California, to Interstate 5 South, which is pretty much dry, straight and fast, all the way to L.A.

I first drive through the outskirts of Reno, famously billed as the Biggest Little City in the World, the largest city of Northern Nevada. Then Carson City, the state capitol, which still embraces that John Wayne Western rugged individualism, with lots of wide open spaces, cattle ranches, and all that goes with it—Stetsons, cowboy boots, and pick-up trucks with obligatory rifle racks. Nevada's idea of progressive thinking is legalized prostitution.

I begin my steep ascent West up Highway 50 through the rugged Sierra Nevada over the 7,000 feet Spooner Summit. When I finally descend into the Tahoe basin, my eyes are suddenly graced by the spectacular vision of the oceanic pristine Lake Tahoe, Nevada. The vivid teal blue of the Lake and the deep ultramarine cloudless sky is breath taking. I am immediately captivated by its awesome natural beauty, and decide to spend a few days there checking it out. Nestled in the picturesque snow covered Sierra Nevada, it is a huge fresh water lake formed by receding glaciers, millennia ago.

Hmm...seeing some business opportunity potential, my normal rational capitalistic mindset now revived, kicks back in at full tilt. Straddling the border of Nevada and California, I could perhaps set up a downsized practice for insurance and PI investigation, my investigative roots, with my legal place of business on the California side, like a PO Box which would allow me to use my California licenses, but I could live on the Nevada side. And because Nevada has no state income tax, all of my income, including and most especially my high income from my passive income investments, like stocks bonds, and rental property would not be subject to California state income tax. No small amount.

What better place to reinvent the Koz? And just in case, on some of those long lonely frigid nights of winter in my snowy mountain retreat might get a trifle boring, as a hedge—casinos, with 24/7 gambling, liquor and all the side dishes that come with it on the Nevada side of South Lake Tahoe. I could even start a Northern Chapter of The 4S Club—now, Sun, Snow, Skiing and of course, Sex

- Chapter 14 -

Sora Eagle Feather, half Hopi and half Navajo, is strikingly beautiful. Tall, for a Native American, she's a double for Joan Baez with a voice to match. True to her namesake, Sora in Navajo means 'singing bird soars', like her mother, who frequently sang at the tribal gatherings, and around the house. Raised on a Navajo Indian Reservation, as a child her father impressed upon her the value of an education as the only way to escape the rez.

Life on the rez was not easy. Her Hopi mother, Catori was a chronic alcoholic, who constantly fought with her father, Leonard Eagle Feather, over her addiction to alcohol. Her mother was only 17 years old when she got pregnant with Sora, the oldest of 3 children, a brother 2 years younger and a sister 3 years younger. After constant struggles with alcohol addiction, her mother finally loses her will to live, and dies of complications from diabetes, from a stroke at only 34 years old, with alcoholism accelerating her rapid deterioration.

Sora is only 16 years old when her mother dies. She is forced to take on the role of motherhood, to raise her younger siblings. It forever quells her appetite to have children of her own, as her young brother is born with a mental disability, probably from alcohol fetal syndrome, and requires almost custodial care. Her younger sister is also cursed with alcohol addiction. Her mother's premature and tragic death, and having to shoulder the responsibility of raising her siblings, motivates her even more to get off the rez, so she won't end up like her dear tragic mother, to whom she was very close and loved very much.

Unfortunately she has not escaped the genetic lottery, and is also cursed with the predisposing genes for alcoholism. After seeing how it ruined her mother's life, and those of her aunts and uncles, she resists it, tries to control it, but it never really goes away.

At the age of 22, in 1969 she graduated from a liberal arts College in Santa Fe, NM with a degree in Art and Music Therapy. She's living on the rez, after having taken care of her mentally impaired younger brother, who has died of kidney failure also from diabetic complications at the age of 19, and working in the field of music and art therapy, until early 1972, when she decides it's finally time to 'get off the rez'.

So, she packs up her guitar and moves to Los Angeles to pursue a graduate degree in music ultimately to teach, and to ply her folk singing talents to pay for her education at University of California at Los Angeles, UCLA. It is in L.A. in mid 1972 while performing, as Nora Feather, singing folk songs, mostly original social justice themes that she has written, while playing her guitar at a coffee house in Venice Beach that she re-encounters Mick Kozlov.

Mick and his paramour, Vera Mirren, are out for the evening to catch

some live music, have some drinks and talk over some business, away from the chaos of the office. Mick intends to tell Vera that he wants to cut back on his work etcetera from her, to make some time for his art, photography and some painting—to get a life. It is not going well. Hearing the news that Mick is attempting to disengage with her, especially the etcetera, she's slamming down Vodka Martinis like water.

It is now almost one year since the first encounter with Sora Eagle Feather on the Indian Reservation in New Mexico. In front of a microphone stand, bathed in low-key theatrical light with a blue gel, she introduces herself as Nora Feather. Wearing theatrical make-up, her hair in bangs with her now trademark eagle feather hanging from her hair, which only Native Americans are legally allowed to possess, she looks very different now.

Mick, sitting at a table very close to the stage, is momentarily distracted from the conversation with Vera by the lovely rapturous singing voice of one Nora Feather. Mick's divided attention sparks an affront to overly sensitive Ms Mirren. She confronts Mick, and says, "I've heard enough of this touchy *feel-ly* folk shit...I'm ready to leave...now!"

"I'm not ready to leave right now Vera...I'd like to hear some more music. She's got quite a beautiful natural voice," Mick says.

"And that's not all that's beautiful...I can see how you're looking at her. Now for the last time...I'm leaving...and you *are* coming," Vera says dripping with childish jealousy.

"Hey Veruska...come on, lighten up will ya? Just another half-hour," Mick says.

"I drove...so we are leaving. *Now!*" she says standing up petulantly jingling the keys to her new Silver Mercedes 450SL.

"Since you drove...if you're so unhappy, then maybe you should leave. I'll grab a cab home," Mick says calmly which infuriates Vera even more.

Vera is now in full-spectrum tantrum mode, stamping her feet like a child, screaming, "Misha...I'm warning you...for the last time. Are you coming?"

"The last time...or penultimate time?" he says with a smile to try to lighten her up. But, her tantrum remains fully intact.

"Okay...I warned you!" she screams.

"Or what, Vera? You gonna sick your mad dog Rad Vlad on me? This conversation is over. I'll talk to you tomorrow, after you've cooled off enough to carry on an adult conversation. Good night...and drive carefully, you've had a lot to drink," Mick says with even more equanimity, then dismissively turning his back on her, looks toward the stage, which angers her even further. By now some of the other customers are becoming annoyed with the histrionics. The guy at the next table yells, "Hey you two...why don't ya take it outside?"

Vera reaches over, grabs her unfinished drink from the cocktail table, and pours it over his head, yelling "Fuck you! Asshole!" causing quite a ruckus among the patrons trying to listen to the acoustic music. She pivots an about-face and with a quick time march, jostles her way through the crowded cocktail tables, knocking over several customers drinks.

Mick then stands up and says loud enough for the surrounding patrons, "Ladies and gentlemen...that concludes this evening's bonus vignette performance of Albee's, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf." Which diffuses the situation, with laughter.

On the way home, Vera Mirren, driving like a banshee on San Vicente Blvd, wraps her new Merc around a tree on the meridian. Other than a few bumps and bruises, except for her ego, she was not seriously injured. But she was arrested for a DUI, of course blaming Mick for all her misfortune. That night, will mark the beginning of a tumultuous descent into a rancorous relationship hell for Mick in trying to distance himself from Ms. Vera Mirren Esq.

After Nora's set, Mick stands and applauds wildly. Because he is so tall he catches Nora's eye. She recognizes him almost immediately from almost a year ago at the rez.

Mick walks up to the stage and asks her if she'd care to join him, offering to buy her a cocktail. She declines the cocktail, but politely opts for a Virgin Mary.

She takes a seat at the table. She does not show her recognition of him, until finally with a newly acquired showbiz coyness, she says, "you look familiar...have we met?" knowing full well who he is. He smiles and says "Hey that's supposed to be my line...do I look that easy to you?" She blushes and smiles, then breaks into the popular song's opening lyrics, "Do You Know the Way to San Jose"...but with Santa Fe?:

*Do you know the way to Santa Fe?
I've been away so long. I may go wrong and lose my way.
Do you know the way to Santa Fe?
I'm going back to find some peace of mind in Santa Fe..*

*L.A. is a great big freeway.
Put a hundred down and buy a car.
In a week, maybe two, they'll make you a star
Weeks turn into years. how quick they pass
And all the stars that never were
Are parking cars and pumping gas...*

She laughs...that shallow showbiz smile all mouth and teeth, but her eyes belie a deep inner sadness, masking deep physic wounds. Her coal black eyes bore a hole through him. His spine tingles as it did on that moonlit night

that they first met. "My God! Of course...you're Sora Eagle Feather...a year ago...in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I didn't recognize you with your hair...the make-up!" he says engulfing her delicate hand in both of his, shooting an electrical charge to her very core.

"Bingo...aka Nora Feather...my *nom de guerre*. My showbiz persona for marketing, etcetera."

As they get reacquainted the conversation turns to the lawsuit over the wrongful death of her cousin's family. Sora tells him, that at the mandatory pre-trial settlement conference, where up to that point, the insurance company had been stone-walling the family, her father, Chief Eagle Feather Esq., counsel for the plaintiff, wordlessly spreads 20 of the 8x10 black and white photos of the flattened pick-up truck and the accident site before it was sanitized by the insurance company, on the large long walnut conference table, for the insurance company defense lawyers. There was an audible gasp...then *Where did you get those photos?* The attorneys say in unison. Turns out that not only is a picture worth a thousand words...but about 250K each."

"So...got their attention, eh? They blinked?"

"Within a week, they made an offer for settlement, *a humanitarian overture*, to save the surviving father from the rigors of litigation, and having to relive the terrible tragedy that took his entire family that nightmare night. Over 5 million dollars, much of it going to an endowment for college tuition for Native Americans aspiring to go to college at UNM. It's called the Eagle Feather Foundation, set up by my father in the deceased children's names, who were robbed of the opportunity of ever fulfilling their dreams...their potential.

Almost on the anniversary of the accident having received his settlement check a week earlier, Father told me my cousin Sherman Eagle Feather, driving a brand new Ford pick-up with a factory camper shell he had bought just that morning with cash, on the same highway...at almost the same spot and the same time, he, *'driving at a very high rate of speed, inexplicably swerved into an overpass abutment and was killed instantly'*, no more than 100 yards from where his family died.

The toxicology report said that his blood alcohol level was three times over the legal limit. The local paper wrote it off as just another *firewater fatality* of an injun. But we all knew that it wasn't the whiskey that killed him. It was survivor's guilt and grief...that finally took him," Sora says.

"How tragic...how totally heartbreaking. Seven lives," Mick says.

"My father and I, have often wondered what happened to you. We all owe you a great debt of gratitude for your kindness and generosity in giving me those film canisters on that moonlit night on the rez," Sora says.

"Yes, I too remember it...like it was yesterday. The moonlight soft on your face...your raven hair...glistening. I...well I've thought about that night many times," Mick says.

They are both immediately smitten with each other. The romance

blossoms and becomes fast and furious and within a month, Sora moves in with Mick, who had recently rented a house with a garage, which he has converted to a studio, in Venice Beach, an *avant garde* artists enclave, about 10 minutes West of Westwood and the UCLA campus.

Within 5 months, Sora learns that she is now almost 2 months pregnant. She cannot bear even the thought of having a child, especially at this time of her life, after having already experienced the overwhelming responsibility of being a surrogate mother. By the time the Supreme Court Decision in *Rowe vs Wade* "legalizing abortion", is decided in January of 1973, she is over 3 months along, past the first trimester. Legally, she would be forced to have the child, or to seek a "kitchen table" abortion. The initial holding of the trimester framework will later be rejected by the Court, and amended to a right to abortion until viability.

She agonizes over whether to tell Mick she is pregnant. She is now beginning to show, so much so that her careful measures of deception, soon will become futile.

Mick had often emphatically stated many times that he does not want children because of his own difficult childhood. When she does finally break the news that fateful night, he behaves badly...very badly, goes out and gets very drunk, and when he comes home, he says some very mean-spirited, abusive things to her.

Because he is terrified of any kind of commitment, and not prepared for a mature and loving relationship, out of fear, he goes into his usual attack mode. Being a successful hardball negotiator, which had served him well all those years in the professional legal arena, has honed his rhetorical scorched-earth attack skills, to intuit where the hidden buttons of rhetorical advantage reside, just waiting to be pressed.

The kicker was when he calls her a *stupid squaw* and stormed out of the house to stay with a pal. When he awakes the next day, badly hung-over but now lucid, he realizes how much he truly loves Sora Eagle Feather.

He heads home, feeling completely ashamed for how he has behaved, with the intent of apologizing. Willing to do anything to save the relationship, even flirting with the big "C" word practicing it out loud while driving home ...*com...uh...commit...commitment*, to try to salvage the emotional carnage that he had wreaked.

But alas, she had already packed and left, leaving only a short note behind:

December 21, 1972

Dear Mickey,

You have revealed a side of you that is very dark...and very hurtful. Your mean-spirited words have hurt me more deeply

than a punch to the gut...more than you can ever know. I could never be with anyone who feels the way you do toward women...toward Native Americans. I do not want a child either, ultimately, it is my problem...so I'll take care it.

Do not try to find me...I never want see or hear from you again...and don't worry, I'll take care of "my situation" without your help...financial or otherwise.

Goodbye...

Sora

PS

Hope you have a REAL Happy Birthday.

Yes...it will definitely be one of his most memorable birthdays. Because of his selfish, self-absorbed narcissistic attitude, he had without conscience, already caused a lot of heartbreak in his short lifetime. A "serial heart breaker" his pals called him, which he took as a compliment. "How can you cause *so many* broken hearts?", his pals used to kid him. Which he perversely, arrogantly takes as a compliment, glibly replying, "Easy man, I just pace myself...one at a time."

But, this time was different, he had not broken just one heart, but two—hers and his. The whimsical parody song by Oscar Brown Jr, "But I Was Cool..." starts to pace in his head...mirthlessly...

*I've always lived by this golden rule,
Whatever happens, don't blow your cool
You've got to have nerves of steel
Never show folks what you honestly feel
I've lived my whole life this way
For example, take yesterday.*

*I breezed home happy
Bringing her my pay
Her note read "so long sappy, I have ran away."
I threw myself down across our empty bed.
And this is what I said*

*But I Was Cool.
So I one-for-the-roaded it
At an all night bar
Wound up so loaded
I tore up my car*

*The judge threw the book at me
And when he read his sentence there I said*

But I Was Cool.

*So I said she's the only one I have to thank
So I found her and pulled my gun and fired point blank
The shot whistled straight passed that woman's head
And killed my hound dog dead*

But I Was Cool...

So...as usual, Shakespeare got there first, "*What a piece of work is a man!*" And when he says, man, he means, *man*. For the first time, he was now a casualty of his own capricious irresponsible behavior—himself, collateral damage from his wanton disregard for the hearts of others. Now—his very own *corazon espinado*, a speared heart. And he did not like the feeling of it, not one little bit. The sleepless nights, the constant dull ache of a deep sense of loss and longing, which he had never, ever experienced before.

He begins to realize what a bastard he had been all those years to all those women who had blindly entrusted him with their hearts, their hopeful emotions. A trust he had frivolously betrayed over and over again. All the indiscriminate pain and unhappiness he had caused, just to gratify his own ego. Bastard was far too kind of a word, rather *il bastardo*, for he was behaving with the same reckless narcissistic abandon—the incarnate of his Russian father and maternal Italian grandfather, both shameless philanderers. If there is a '*bastardo* gene', it was no longer recessive. He obviously was a carrier.

Saul Bellow had it right, when he penned the novel, "More Die of Heartbreak." Mick never quite got over losing her. Never again, to see those huge luminous ebony eyes of his beloved Sora Eagle Feather, gazing back at him, filled with love and hope—except in his dreams, of what could have been.

After leaving Mick, Sora Eagle Feather, feeling lost and alone, goes to stay with a girl-friend from school. For two weeks she wanders around aimlessly, grappling with the heart rending decision about having an abortion. When she decides she can wait no longer, she decides to have the abortion.

Her friend knows of a "clinic" in Tijuana, Mexico, just across the border, where several of her young coed friends in a similar predicament, have gone. Her girlfriend offers to drive her there. When they get to the "clinic" they are met by a fat, dirty Mexican "Doctor" who leads them into his "operating room" which is nothing more than filthy, dimly lighted kitchen, where he first demands \$200, cash *solamente seniorita*.

By the fourth month, she has been feeling a stirring within her belly. Yes, there is a living person in there with a beating heart...and a soul. *If only I*

hadn't waited so long...it would have been so much easier:

Sora is so frightened and distressed by the unsavory and filthy conditions, that the last minute, she has a change of heart, and runs out to the car, crying hysterically to friend, "I can't do it! I just can't...please take me back to L.A. I just won't go home to my Father...my family."

She returns to L.A. to pack her things, and catches the first Greyhound bus to Santa Fe New Mexico, to her Father and to the reservation family.

Her Father, Chief Leonard Eagle Feather and the extended Indian family receive her with open arms. Being in the warm, nurturing environment of the other mothers on the reservation, reaffirms her decision to bring the baby to term.

Despite the reality that she still loves Mick Kozlov deeply, she is still emotionally damaged from his insensitive, mean-spirited words and the rancorous parting.

After Sora had left, Mick sinks into a deep depression. He can't concentrate on his legal work, and instead, expresses his personal grief and deep emotional sense of loss, in a series of 10 very large oil paintings on canvas, called the Sora Series. They are very edgy—dark with somber colors—filled with Native American iconography, subtly incorporated into his unique abstract expressionist style. They immediately sell out the local gallery.

In the meantime, Mick tries desperately to find her. He contacts her father, who has been instructed by Sora, never to tell Mick that she is living on the rez, and most emphatically about their child together, which he reluctantly honors.

When the child is born, upon seeing the newborn, she is overwhelmed with love for her beautiful baby boy. He looks like baby pictures of Mick as an infant. He is very long, but quite under weight and sickly, probably due to the mother's drinking and incessant smoking of cigarettes, to deal with the stress of her situation. The alcoholism, always just below surface, laying dormant waiting to be triggered, had surfaced with a vengeance. In those days, no one totally realized the danger of smoking, or fetal alcohol syndrome on the unborn fetus.

She decides to stay on the rez, with her people—with the Clan Mothers lovingly helping to raise her son. In the meantime, she becomes deeply involved in her father's efforts to stop a pipeline by a big energy corporation National Petroleum Inc, NPI, that would pass directly through a part of New Mexico that is Navajo Land, with possible damage to sacred sites, and in the event of accidental discharge, causing pollution, and surface water and well contamination, which could lead to health risks among their communities for decades.

She becomes a strong advocate for Indian rights, often speaking at rallies. She begins to find her voice as an advocate for her people's rights,

social justice and becomes an articulate and an effective speaker.

She also begins to attract some national attention with her original songs she performs about the broken treaties with the white man, and the many injustices visited upon the Native Americans in particular by the government, and the exploitation of the First Nations by corporations. Because of her increasing celebrity and national notoriety, she is beginning to be perceived as a threat not only to the local energy projects, but perhaps even a larger threat to corporate expansion of energy projects on Indian land nationally.

- Chapter 15 -

1974 Mick's Northern Migration to Lake Tahoe...for his health.

By now, after channeling my grief, and deep depression from losing Sora by getting back into my painting and art, I had somewhat emotionally recovered and rebounded.

But, after the rancorous break-up with Veruska that night at the bar in Venice, when I had reconnected with Sora Eagle Feather, for months Veruska relentlessly stalked me. Midnight phone calls with an avalanche of vociferous voice messages, alternating between sobbing suicidal declarations of love, then venomous hate and threats of retribution—all left unanswered.

The crescendo had come, when she found out that I was living with Sora. Veruska finally figured out that we were history. My psychotic paramour, made good her threat. She informed hubby Vladimir that for years, I had been trying to force myself upon poor defenseless little Veruska. I could just imagine the hysterically sobbing schizophrenic Bette Davis performance. Veruska tearfully convulsing to Rad Vlad of the sexual liberties I had attempted to take with her, which she had of course heroically resisted.

All coming to a head that night in Venice, when in a drunken frenzy my increasingly aggressive sexual overtures had caused her such emotional trauma, that in trying to escape my brutish advances, recklessly racing home to the safety of her protector Vlad, she totaled her Mercedes getting herself busted for drunk driving in the process.

Obviously all my fault. I was not surprised to find out that I been listed by name on her statement on the police report for being the 'proximate cause', including being threatened with a lawsuit for negligence, for the damages, along with intentional infliction of emotional distress. All frivolous threats that went nowhere, calculated to terrorize me. Lawyers.

So, on one typical monotonously bright and sunny El Lay morning, I found my pristine vintage Bahama Yellow '67 Porsche 911S Carrera looked like the L.A. Dodgers had used it for batting practice—all the windows broken with every body panel spray-painted with the monogram "BB". Which, with my amazing investigative skills, I deduced to mean a calling card from the Brothers Borsch.

One doesn't have to be a particularly quick study—to draw *moi* any more of a *pictcha*. From his considerable notoriety, this was about as subtle a warning as the Rad One gives—an unmistakable dear-deadman-walkin' memo to get-the-hell-outta-town...like yesterday. The next memo would probably include batting practice on my knee caps.

So after about 10 years of L.A. *dolce vita*, and with a little nudge, a

highly motivational memorandum from the Rad One, I had finally decided that I had had enough of the old L.A. chestnut. The Four Seasons of California—Wildfire, Mudslide, Earthquake and Riots. And a fifth ubiquitous bonus season of Every-Hour-Is-Rush-Hour, from 2 PM on, the Un-Happy Hours—a taxiing Luftwaffe squadron of Beemers, Porsches and Mercs, poised for take-off—the drivers affecting the same practiced mask of long-suffering tolerance. On a good day averaging maybe 5 mph on the 405 San Diego Freeway 20 miles North and South eventually funneling into the Wilshire Blvd. off ramp—about a billion bucks per mile just in Kraut cars. All very Wagnerian.

So, I decided to collapse my business operation and escape from the vast and vapid wasteland of L.A. Growing increasingly weary of the non-stop, every-hour-is-Happy-Hour-somewhere partying and shallow cliché relationships of my life, I was ready to seek a deeper meaning in life, far away from L.A., and far, far away from Mr and Mrs Mayhem.

Lake Tahoe, where I had spent some time on the way back from New Mexico in 1972, was beginning to look more and more appealing. The more I thought about it, the better I liked the idea of being in another state, like Nevada about 400 miles North of Botox Babylon, where I could explore and embrace my inner-mountain man—to seek solace and refuge in the mountains, to find the *real* me. To take up the life of a mountain man sustaining myself someplace uh...*mountain-ish* to test my manliness, I would force myself to get by on a spare budget of about \$100 K a year, of course not counting stock dividends.

What better place for complete and total Koz-mick makeover than pristine Lake Tahoe. And with an added bonus of no Nevada state income tax.

Nestled in the picturesque Sierra Nevada mountains, *Sierra* from *Serrucha* in Espanol, serrated or jagged snow-covered mountains, it is a huge fresh water lake about 22 miles by 12 miles wide at an elevation of about six thousand feet. And just 3 hours by pick-up, 2 hours by Porsche, from the world famous cultural assets and restaurants of San Francisco, my favorite city.

But reinventions are not without potential unintended consequences—the inherent financial vagaries of major change, and of course finding all the good restaurants...a new barber.

But, I would first have to prepare for The Koz's Great Adventure.

Of course, I would employ the same exhaustive methodical process that has been so successful in my business over the years. Comprehensive and thorough research, with a bulleted prioritized checklist.

In 1972, I had seen Sidney Pollock's film "Jeremiah Johnson" with Robert Redford, ironically another Santa Monica boy. During the obligatory L.A. hour wait in line at the cinema in Westwood, I had an opportunity to observe 'the bea-u-tiful people' in their natural habitat.

The magnificently manicured and studiously-casual expensive plumage of the parvenu-dom, some sporting rough-out desert boots, with a few perfunctory pairs of Tony Llama \$500 a pair lizard skin cowboy boots, as an homage, a tip of the Stetson if you will, to rugged Western mountain manliness they were so desperately trying to affect.

I was now primed and ready for change. A new chapter, filled with dreams of manly Hemingwayesque adventures. Maybe a *mano a mano* encounter with a 'Griz'. Visions of seriously accessorizing my split-level McMountain man cave with the skin of my trophy, in harmlessly docile repose in front of a huge faux stone gas-jetted fireplace with a "no kindling required" to initiate a roaring fire.

So, to preempt being perceived as a 'pilgrim' as the great character actor, Will Geer convincingly cast as Bear Claw Chris Lapp, had dubbed Jeremiah Johnson, I carefully prepared and cultivated my new mountain man persona:

Checklist:

1. Grow a beard worthy of real mountain man...no wimpy effete goatee for me...a full bushy au naturale Grizzly Adams.

2. Wardrobe—to avoid that "just stepped out of the Sear's Catalog" look:

a) Pants - blue-jeans...red-tag, leather-waist-label Levis, custom tailored of course, properly aged through stone washing, an add on upgrade option.

b) Shirts - my usual custom tailored shirts, tapered, only cut in flannel, with flap-chest pockets and snap buttons. All pre-washed multiple times, wrinkled, and faded...for that authentic mountain man look.

c) Footwear - Boots of course. Ah...but this could be problem, as new shiny boots would be a dead give-away that I was a green-horn. What to do? A stroke of genius—tie'em to the rear bumper of the Porsche and drag them around the block a few times...voila.

d) Hat(s) - a floppy wide-brim Stetson, aged (see "2(c)" supra). If clothes indeed make the mountain-man, I could be straight from central casting. Willie Nelson, eat your heart out.

3. Vehicle - Since, I'd have to park the Porsche in the garage during the winter months, I'd need something equivalent with my new manly station in life; a pick-up truck. Of course, it would have to be "Merican Made"...so a Ford, a 4 x 4 - 3/4 ton, the bigger the tires, the better. Too new looking? Take it to

Manny's Mar Vista Detail Shop, for some random-looking fresh primer spots, and have Manny drive it to work for a few weeks.

I would cook my meat over the blazing orange electrodes of my Sharper Image Electric Rotisserie—basting, rotating and roasting, then pulling the meat apart with my bare hands, to the manly symphony of my grunting and smacking lips. My new mountain-man-mantra would be WWJD, "What Would uh...Jeremiah Do?" No 'girlie man', I'd send Polaroids documenting me roasting a huge leg-of-something, *a la Jeremiah*, to my dissolute L.A. friends who still dined out almost every night. To them, "roughing it" meant no linen tablecloth.

I arrived at Lake Tahoe in the Summer of 1974; it took me about a month to get settled in. Summers in Tahoe are spectacular, with the average daytime temperature seldom over 75 degrees. Because of the high altitude, about 6,200 feet at lake level, the air is much thinner, with little or no atmospheric pollution, causing the sky to look like it has been painted on with a deep cerulean blue, which in turn reflects the color back on to the lake. It is high-desert, so the air is dry with the delicious, pervasive scent of pine trees. The Lake itself, is so large, that it creates its own weather system, surrounded by high mountain jagged peaks like Mount Tallac, Freel Peak and Ralston Peak, all almost reaching 10,000 feet in elevation.

Each season, has its own unique beauty. The Winters, with the average annual snowfall level of 20 feet. At higher elevations 30 to 40 feet and higher, the surrounding mountains are spectacularly beautiful after a snowstorm. Everything is a pristine white, made even more dramatic against the brilliant blue sky.

In the Fall, I decided to restart my investigation business. Earlier research had indicated that none of the insurance carriers had staff adjusters living or working in the vicinity. I made some appointments with some of the major insurance carriers down in Sacramento, about 100 miles West, where most of the claims offices were located that handled Lake Tahoe and surrounding areas. I ended up returning to Lake Tahoe with piles of unresolved claim, multi-lines, including property and casualty. Many that were backlogged for months, some of which had already been referred to the California State Insurance Commissioner for poor, or non-existent claim service.

Just from the one visit, from the backlog, I would have enough work to keep me busy for 3 months. In the meantime I finished up some of the negotiations for my other attorney clients in L.A. So cash-flow was not a problem. This time, I decided that I would limit my practice, to allow me more free time to pursue my painting. *Ha!*

In addition to the existing claims, I was getting new property and

casualty claims every day, especially during the winter months when the roads were treacherous with snow and ice, often 'black ice' which is usually not readily discernible by eye, but could be deadly when driving on the snaking mountain roads lined with huge immovable old growth pine trees, that always win in a collision.

I had been living, and working in Tahoe for several years and had settled in to a life in the mountains rather easily. My investigation practice was busy...a little too busy, as it was cutting into my art work and studio time, and my social life. There was no shortage of beautiful women, most of them very healthy and athletic. I dated several, but deliberately kept the relationship on a casual basis—that is until that one 'dark and stormy night' in January of 1979 that I ran into, literally, one Annie Trudeau.

Most mountain people were pretty laid-back, nothing like the L.A. crowd I had just left behind. Very welcoming and generous, mostly my age, athletic, active and engaged. They spend a great deal of time enjoying the multitude of outdoor activities. Most worked evenings at the Casinos as card dealers or waiters. Worked hard and partied hard—all night, and played very hard, outdoors all day.

It was a great life. The more time I spent in the wilderness, the more I began to sense some very deep spiritual connection with those big mountains, that the Native peoples, who had summered at Lake Tahoe embraced. I even got a season pass at Paradise Valley Ski Area, and learned to ski that first winter, skiing over 60 days my first season.

Being so tall, I knew that I would never be great skier, but I learned well-enough to ski some moguls, and on occasion, a little powder. Most of the really great skiers were compactly built, no taller than 6 feet. Almost all of my new friends, in the winter days, skied their brains out, or what was left of them after drinking and medicating all night. And in the summer months, biked and hiked, and basically lived outdoors.

During the summer months, I did a lot of hiking and backpacking in Desolation Wilderness—a high desert with many little pristine lakes, and beautiful scenic alpine meadows, bubbling with a dense kaleidoscope of wildflowers. I also got into a little rock climbing with my new friends. Nothing particularly challenging, because again, I was relatively tall for the sport to take it seriously. Most of the good climbers were short and compact, with powerful upper bodies, like gymnasts, with not much weight below the waist, which was considered dead, useless weight. But I did enough of it to learn some basic technique—the-do's and more importantly, the-don'ts—how to climb safely, along with rope management. I usually climbed with friends, so there was no need for me to have my own equipment.

In the winter, single vehicle versus tree accidents were frequent, usually serious, and often resulting in totaling the vehicle, with serious injury or fatality. Usually when two vehicles collided, both vehicles were a total loss.

One of the most dangerous winter routes was Highway 89 from South Lake Tahoe around Emerald Bay to the North Shore, Tahoe City. For almost 30 miles, it's a narrow, serpentine two lanes, with many steep grades and switchbacks, made it a 'white knuckler' during the winter.

Sometimes, if the driving conditions were poor, it might take emergency responders, sheriff and ambulance, as long as a half-hour to forty-five minutes just to get to the scene. A seriously injured victim, could bleed-out without some knowledgeable first aid intervention.

Because there are many stretches of 10-15 miles of mountain road, where there is no phone service to even call for help, I had installed a CB radio in my truck, which reserved Channel 9 for emergency calls, since it was monitored by local law enforcement and first responders. Because it was difficult to maintain snow removal by the County, Highway 89 was often closed during a heavy snow storm. There are numerous turnouts to allow vehicles to pass, also affording spectacular scenic vistas looking down on majestic Emerald Bay, sometimes almost 1,000 feet below. In some places, the narrow roadway, is barely wide enough for two normal size vehicles even during the dry months, but in the winter, far too narrow to allow the snowplows to push the snow off to the side of the roadway.

There is a scarcity of guard rails at the turnouts so the snowplows can push the accumulated snow over the side. It is definitely not a route for the uninitiated *tourista*, unaccustomed to driving in the ice and snow.

One morning, about 8:30 AM in January of 1979, after a heavy snowstorm, dumping over 3 feet of snow at lake level the previous 3 days, I got frantic call from one of my clients, Allstate Insurance, from the Sacramento claims office. It was a cloudless morning, with the reflection of the brilliant sunlight off the virgin snow, making it difficult to see without polarized sunglasses. But the break in the weather would be short-lived; the forecast was for another serious front to hit the area later that afternoon. This happens frequently in the mountains—the storms come in waves of sometimes two or three. Even with modern forecasting technology, the weather in the mountains is at best unpredictable, often capricious, and can very quickly, without notice become deadly.

The examiner on the file, John Schwartz literally begged me to investigate an accident ASAP. It had only been reported early that very morning—a single vehicle on a turnout, on a deserted stretch of Highway 89, near Emerald Bay.

It seems that one of Allstate's insured, was driving a 1978 GMC 26 foot Glenbrook 260 Motorhome. The collision policy had just been written the week before, with an alleged ACV, Actual Cash Value of over \$50,000 bucks.

The owner had just reported the loss earlier that morning by phone. The 'accident' was alleged to have happened 3 days prior, before the big snowstorm, and he was just now getting around to reporting it. He told the

sales agent that he had purchased it used about a month earlier from a private party for \$52,000 cash, fully loaded, but did not insure until then, because he had decided not to drive it...until now.

According to the claim report filed by the owner, a gentleman in his mid 50s, had taken his motor home on a trip, from his home in Sacramento up to Lake Tahoe, about 90 miles East. He was driving North on Highway 89, on his way to North Lake Tahoe. It was late at night, about 11 PM, when he pulled into a turnout, he says to check on a noise coming from the rear of his vehicle. He further states that he put the vehicle in "park" turned the motor off and got out to check on the vehicle. As he was checking out the rear of the vehicle, it inexplicably "just took off by itself" going straight ahead, in one of the turnouts without a railing or barricade, over the side of essentially a cliff. When asked why he had not reported it sooner, he said he was so "traumatized by the incident that it just slipped his mind", and further indicated that he had neglected to notify the El Dorado County Sheriff's Department of the accident, because he didn't think it necessary, as no other vehicles were involved. Hmm...very malodorous indeed.

So Allstate wanted me to get out there to investigate and photograph the scene, ASAP including photos of the motor home or what was left of it, after its free fall of maybe 1,000 feet. They were getting ready to mount a case for declination of coverage, under the exclusion of "intentional acts of the insured". Typically, when accidents like this happen on Highway 89, where the vehicle is not accessible, it is left until Spring or even Summer, to salvage it, as it is considered too dangerous to attempt a salvage operation during the winter. The owner was now demanding immediate settlement.

"Mick, this whole claim stinks. It's got fraud...intentional act written all over it. He insures it, a week before he takes it up to Tahoe...in the winter, just before a major snowstorm, which by the way was forecast down here in Sacto. The bill of sale for over fifty-kay...from a private party, looks bogus. Then he waits to report it 3 days later, until after the snowstorm, so the vehicle can't be recovered for at least what...4 or 5 months? And no police report. " John Schwartz says.

"Yea...sounds pretty thin. Do you know the exact location where it went over...did he give you a milepost or anything?" I ask.

"Are you kiddin'? This guy is Mr Vague. He obviously doesn't want us to see it before settlement. He's playin' hide the 26 foot motor home with us. But, I did manage to draw out of him that it was just South of Emerald Bay," John says.

"Okay, John. Good news...bad news. The good news...I think I know the area. There's just one or two turnouts that have no guardrail, just South of Emerald Bay. Bad news...there's another storm, a big bad boy, by all the forecasts. S'posed to hit us by later this afternoon...probably dump another 2-3 feet. After which, should make it almost impossible to get to it. If you want me investigate it, I'd have to drop everything, and get out there before the storm

closes Highway 89.

After today...it's pretty much inaccessible until the snow thaws. So if it's where I think it is, I'll have to rappel down the side of the mountain. It's steep, real steep...then using an ascender, to winch back up. Probably take me 2 hours to get to the scene, photograph the launch point, and figure out the best way down...about a half-hour to rappel down, an hour to photograph everything...then maybe another hour to winch back up. It won't be easy...and it definitely won't be cheap.

John...I'll have to bill this at double my hourly rate including travel time...hazardous duty pay. Plus I'd have to buy four 80 meter lengths of 9.9 millimeter alpine climbing rope, rappel and belay gear, a harness and ascender at the Outdoorsman," I say.

"Mick...I don't care what it costs. If we can't get out to the accident scene...we're staring at fifty-kay...automatic. I want to nail this bastard! I'd owe you big time," John says.

"Okay...tell me a little about the insured...some background. What's he do, any other stuff insured with you. Prior losses' etcetera and anything else you can think of...like the Declaration Sheet of the policy," I say.

In investigating an accident, it's always helpful to have context, especially when doing a post-mortem at the scene of an accident. Small, seemingly insignificant details take on greater meaning, when one knows what you're looking at...and for. Sometimes it is the little details that form, and fill-in the missing pieces of the puzzle, as to what *really* happened.

"I'll FAX all that over to ya...in the next half-hour," John says.

About 15 minutes later the buzz and whir of the FAX:

Insured—Harold, age 55 and wife Elsie, age 61, Schumacher; he's a Real Estate Broker. Lives in Sacramento. He's gotta 1979 Cadillac Coupe de Ville and a 78 Corvette Convertible, along with a house for about \$450K. Scheduled jewelry including gold totaling about 50K, all with Allstate. No other vehicles or property insured with us, at least. MVR driving record—one speeding, the Corvette. No accidents, no other moving violations in last two years. Dec Sheet attached.

Thanks, JS

By 9 AM, I am loading my gear including cameras and lenses and plenty of film into my truck *Moby Dick*, after the eponymous Great White Whale, a very large white Ford 4X4 3/4 ton F-250, with a 4 speed manual transmission. It has a camper shell on the back which enables me to stow my gear out of the weather. It sits especially high off the ground with lots of clearance, and tall, wide aggressive-tread snow tires to facilitate getting around during winter months, to make it up and down the road where my house is

located high above Zephyr Cove, Nevada.

The house, which I had bought in '73 has a commanding view overlooking the Lake toward North Shore—*Casa Nevada, snow covered house*. The street, called Lookout Road, named after the US Forrest Service Fire Lookout station, just above my house, is so steep and narrow, that in the winter, they seldom if ever get the snow plow up there.

It takes me about half an hour to get across town on the main highway East to West, crossing the state border into South Lake Tahoe—the California side, essentially Highway 50, to get to the Outdoorsman. It's a legendary mountain-mecca sporting goods shop, selling all manner of ski and serious mountaineering equipment.

I buy the climbing rope, two belay devices, harness and ascender, and head West on Highway 50 to Highway 89 North. It's slow going up Highway 89. They've just opened the highway, and there's a procession of stranded locals and chained-up delivery trucks slowly meandering the climb North. The twisting road, even though it's been plowed is still treacherously slippery, even with my four wheel drive.

It takes me about an hour to get to the first turnout without a railing. I pull in, get out of the truck, and walk over to the edge of the precipice. I grab my high-powered Bauch & Lomb 10x50 binoculars, and looking down, I don't spy any wreckage. I continue on to the next turnout, about a mile further North. I park, and check to see if I can spot any wreckage below, again scanning left to right with the binoculars. Nothing. Then, scanning back right to left, I think I see a hump. I let my eyes adjust to the glare of the snow. Yes. There is something there. I take out one of my Nikon 35mm cameras, and mount the 200 mm telephoto lens, and a polarizing filter. Despite the glare on the snow, by rotating the collar on the polarizing filter, I can now make out the up-side-down outline of the undercarriage with the four wheels facing straight up, like some dead roadside animal laying on its back with its paws reaching to the sky. New meaning to the term Road Kill.

I move my truck out of the way and take many photos, from every angle, setting numbered distance markers for scale, every 25 feet. My guess, is that the turnout has about a 3 to 5% grade uphill, which would make it impossible to roll forward without some sort of power driving it. It is now becoming increasingly obvious; it is highly unlikely that the behemoth motor home could have accidentally gone over. It would have to be perfectly positioned—essentially aimed, to clear the narrow width of the opening to the precipice.

It's now about 12:30 PM. The sky is beginning to darken from the Northwest. I pull the truck back toward the edge of the precipice, put it in gear, set the emergency brake, and place chock blocks under the rear wheels, along with two day-glow orange traffic cones at the rear of the truck, to prevent a snowplow from striking the rear of the truck—joining the DOA motor home far below, with *moi* attached.

Because of the surrounding high mountain peaks, the roadway and the steep slope are already in deep shadow. With the sun rapidly disappearing, the temperature is starting to drop dramatically. The wind is starting to kick up, to maybe 12 mph. Whitecaps are beginning to form on the Lake far below. Here it comes. I figure I might have two hours, three at the most before the storm hits, so I'd better *andale*, rappel down, get my pictures and get the hell outta there before they close Highway 89. During a snowstorm even before dark, driving that road is a nasty, stress-sweaty business—so I definitely want to be off that highway before nightfall. This far North in the winter, sunset will be about 4:30 PM, then the temperature will drop precipitously, maybe 15 degrees, turning any melting snow on the roadway into black ice.

I get the 4 reels of climbing rope out of the back of the truck. I tie the end of the first roll around the front differential axle with a double bowline knot...the most secure knot known in sailing and mountaineering. I throw the first roll over the precipice, down the slope, and carefully retrieve it, making sure that I have all the coils carefully placed on top of one another. I take the far end of the first rope, and tie a blood knot, an end to end splice knot to the start of the second roll, and then toss the second roll over the edge. Looking down, I can estimate that the two lengths will reach just about half way to the wreckage. I repeat the process with the remaining two rolls, then I tie a medium sized rock on the end of the last rope and heave it as hard as I can, while paying out the coiled ropes of the other rolls, making sure there are no tangles.

The slope is so steep, that the fresh snow has not accumulated deeply, the rock carries almost the full length of all four rolls of rope. But that steep slope, could also mean that there could be danger of avalanche, because of the instability of the snow. I will have to keep that in mind the whole time, once I'm over the edge, tethered to the rope. I am now committed. I slip on my one piece ski suit, then my lightweight Gore-Tex boots with an aggressive knobby sole. I then snap my 'gators' on, long thin nylon tubes with snaps along the length, over the tops of my boots and my pant leg, to keep the snow from coming into my boots.

I put on my rappel harness, checking that the operation of the carabiner is positive and secure, snap in the belay device, then pull on my knit ski cap and my polarized ski goggles on to my forehead. Finally, I place my camera gear in my day-backpack, along with the hand ascender to essentially winch back up. In the inside pocket of my zippered snow suit I also pack a hand held portable cassette tape recorder to make audible notes, which is voice activated allowing hands-free operation. I plug-in the lavalier microphone into the external mic jack, affix the lav to the lapel of my ski suit and do an audio test playback to confirm it's good to go, and leave it turned on.

I decide to leave a note on the dashboard, in large block letters, viewable from outside through the windshield. In case it snows while I'm down there, they'll be able see it if they open the truck door:

MONDAY - JANUARY 13TH @ 1:15 PM

I AM RAPPELLING DOWN BELOW TO INVESTIGATE A SINGLE VEHICLE ACCIDENT INVOLVING A LARGE MOTOR HOME THAT IS ALLEGED TO HAVE HAPPENED ON OR ABOUT JANUARY 10TH. I EXPECT TO RETURN NO LATER THAN 3:30 PM.

IF FOR SOME REASON YOU ARE READING THIS NOTE, AND IT IS LATER THAN 3:30 PM, THEN SOMETHING MAY HAVE PREVENTED ME FROM RETURNING, IN WHICH CASE PLEASE CONTACT THE EL DORADO SHERIFF'S DEPT USING THE CB RADIO IN THE CAB OF THE TRUCK, ALREADY SET ON CHANNEL 9.

THANK YOU.

*MICK KOZLOV
KOZMICK INVESTIGATIONS
ZEPHYR COVE, NV 89448*

I pull on my Gore-Tex alpine climbing gloves with high cuffs, and thick leather palms as there will be considerable friction from the sliding rope during the descent. I shoulder the backpack, and affix the belay device to the rope, which will enable me to control the speed of my descent by feeding the line through it. I give the rope a few nervous tugs, take some deep breaths, and step over to the edge of the precipice. Then, very slowly I step backwards with my first step. The snow up top is about two feet deep...powdery dry and light which should afford good compaction and traction. Very slowly, I feed the rope out as I take one step then another backwards, controlling my speed by the amount of friction on the belay device, all the while trying to maintain a perpendicular angle to the slope with my body. The top is at about a 45 degree slope, but it will increase to about 60 degrees as I approach the half-way point.

It's slow going. It takes me about 20 minutes to get to the half-way point, where it then gets very steep. I very carefully navigate the steep part, and in another half-hour I reach the Motor-home...or what's left of it, already a half-hour behind schedule. The frame and chassis are still pretty much intact, the top and sides of the body look like it had been dropped from the top of a 50 story building...which it had. It has come to rest on kind of a plateau against a large, now listing, pine tree, balanced precariously, so I make it a point not to spend any time unnecessarily below it, in case it decides to let go. I will remain tethered. But at least there is a relatively level shelf which enables me to stand almost vertical.

I take off my gloves, and place them inside my ski suit next to my body to keep them warm. I pull out one of the Nikons from my backpack,

already affixed with a 28 millimeter wide angle lens. I'm shooting a roll of 36, Kodak Tri-X 400 ASA black and white film, a relatively 'fast' film which is good for situations with low ambient light, so I can shoot with a small aperture F-Stop, like F12, without having to resort to a flash, with good depth field allowing everything within 15 feet in front or behind the focal plane to remain in focus. Using the internal light meter, I set the shutter speed to 1/60th of a second, and start taking images; full frame establishment shots from a distance to show the setting and establish the orientation.

The whole time I'm taking photos, I am verbally describing the location of the camera, by frame number, and the direction and approximate local time of the shot on to the cassette recorder. In forensic photography, especially in cases that may ultimately be litigated, it's a necessary process to record and preserve this meta-data, should it end up in court—along with the kind of camera, the lens and the settings of the camera while the images are being acquired.

The first thing that I notice, looking at the undercarriage is that this particular motor home is a front wheel drive. Hmm. No way this thing could have ever made it over the edge, up the 3% grade, by inadvertently engaging the power train. Once the front wheels were over the edge of the precipice, it would have just hung-up there, with the front drive wheels spinning uselessly...the front end suspended over the edge.

Unless...the vehicle was backed in, which would also allow the driver to get up some speed...to get a good run at the edge, then jump to safety just before it went over the side. This guy is starting to look like a real pro.

The smell of leaking gasoline from the huge gas tanks which could probably hold up to 50 gallons, is very strong. Two 25 gallon tanks. I note that both of the gas caps are missing...not likely that both would have come loose from the ride down the slope, unless they were removed before, up top, with the intent that the uncontained gasoline upon impact would ignite.

I now attempt to find the front of the vehicle to see if I can locate the keys for the ignition, to check the status of the switch, if it is still turned on—if so, photograph it then turn it off—with all the ambient gas this thing is a sitting time-bomb. I'll want to check to see if there are any other keys present on the key ring, like a house key. No other keys, might mean that he removed all the other keys before staging the accident, because he didn't want to incur the expense of having keys made. It's little details like this, which alone may not seem significant, but combined with other minor incongruities start to accumulate to form a plausible narrative about what really happened. I circle around to the front of the vehicle.

Even with the body compressed down about 6 to 8 feet from the impact, upon careful inspection I can see that there is a great deal of old rust on much of the damage...old damage from a prior major collision, probably a roll over? Had the insured purchased a totaled RV for next to nothing salvage cost, then insured it as new? Not the first time I'd seen this...with cars and

sometimes boats.

The windshield is popped out. I kneel down to look inside.

"*Shit!*" I yell as I propel myself backwards.

Belted and harnessed in the front upside-down passenger seat is a person, with roof pushed down on its head, obviously no longer alive. I attempt to compose myself. I take several slow deep breaths, enabling me to control my stress-induced rapid shallow breathing from unexpectedly encountering a cadaver. I pull myself together, and remind myself why I'm here...to take pictures, to preserve the evidence. The stakes are obviously much higher now, with a fatality. All the more reason to slow down—to be thorough and precise.

I begin to study the cadaver through the viewfinder, quickly snapping off pictures, the sound of the shutter, and film advancing lever, the only ambient sounds, which grants me the illusion, temporarily at least, of detachment from the reality. It appears to be a woman, or what's left of one. The body has obviously experienced multiple trauma from the long tumultuous ride down the side of the mountain. She is staring straight ahead, her eyes open with a wide-eyed look of horror, her mouth, contorted open with the ghastly expression of abject terror as if captured mid-scream. A paisley-patterned red and white bandana, probably used as a gag, appears to have slipped down around her neck. She must have been conscious, when it happened. She looks to be middle aged, tanned wearing an expensive designer warm-up suit. Her hands are duct-taped across the front of her chest, from around the back of the front bucket seat, obviously immobilizing her. I zoom in on the front hand, her left hand, and notice a tan line on her ring finger—no ring. I snap off two quick bracketed exposures. My mind is buzzing. Could this woman be the spouse of the insured Harold Schumacher, Elsie Schumacher?

If so, Harold Schumacher not only forgot to call in the claim, it would appear that it had also slipped his mind that his wifey was in the motor home when it went over the side. The distinct tan line on her ring finger, would seem to indicate that the wedding band had been recently removed...maybe to be recycled for the next lucky Mrs Schumacher? Yep...a real sweetheart.

I decide there is nothing that can be done for her...as I am reluctant to disturb the body, and potentially contaminate a crime scene. Pity...such a horrific ignominious end. I'm left wondering what were her last thoughts as it became clear that her own husband was about to launch her over the cliff? Did hubby remove the gag so he could hear her last words, pleading for her life? Did he reveal his dark motives to her before leaping free from the death trap? Did she die, not knowing *the why*?

Now my main imperative is to conclude my work down here, and get the hell outta there, before darkness descends. I've had more than enough darkness for one day. I locate the ignition switch, and photograph it. It is still turned to the 'on' position, but not surprisingly, there are no other keys on the key ring. Using a tissue from my breast pocket, so as not disturb any finger prints, I gingerly turn the ignition switch to the 'off' position to mitigate the

threat of fire from the copious ambient leaking gas. I look at my watch. It's now getting close to 3 PM and the shadows are getting very long and dark, casting a funereal pall over the scene. I take one last pass around the wreck, to make sure I haven't missed anything. Done.

I stow all my camera gear in the backpack, and remove the ascender tool, affix it to my life line, put my gloves back on and start the long climb up. I'll have to give it a kick, to get up top before the storms starts to settle in. I'll also have to get on the CB and alert the El Dorado County Sheriffs of a possible homicide.

I really push myself going up. When I get to the truck, I'm totally gassed, in a full sweat and breathing heavily. I look at my watch—4:05 PM. It's already starting to get dark...very dark, so I put on my emergency flasher lights so I don't get plowed into, literally. I stow my backpack, remove the climbing harness, and immediately grab the microphone on the CB, which was intentionally left on—tuned to Channel 9, 27.065 MHz, the emergency frequency.

"This is an emergency call. I repeat this is an emergency call. Anyone monitoring this frequency, including law enforcement or any first responders, please acknowledge. Over," I say. I wait 10 seconds. Nothing.

I repeat the call out two more times. Finally, after the third time, "This is the El Dorado County Sheriff's dispatcher, in South Tahoe substation. Please state your 10-20, uh...your location...for jurisdiction determination. Over," the crackling voice says.

"I'm on Highway 89 North, just South of Emerald Bay, parked in a turnout. Over," I say.

"Okay. What's your emergency. Over."

"There is a vehicle, a large motor home, that went over the side on or about 4 days ago. It is down several hundred feet below the roadway. I have just returned to the roadway above after rappelling down to investigate it. There is one known fatal, still inside that I was able to determine from the outside only. My name is Mick Kozlov, I am a private investigator out of Stateline Nevada. I was hired to check it out by the insurance company. The fatal appears to be a homicide. I repeat homicide. I'm in a Northbound turnout...a white Ford pick-up with my emergency flasher on. Over," I say

"Okay...any need for an ambulance or medical attention? Over."

"No...appears that the one confirmed vic has been deceased for over 3 days. I do not think there could be any survivors in the back of the RV which is inaccessible. I am not in need of any medical assistance. Over."

"Okay...please stay on site. I'm dispatching a unit to meet you there. Do you copy? Over," the crackling voice says.

Shit!...I was afraid of this. Now I'm definitely going to have to be driving down this treacherous bobsled run...at night in the middle of a blinding snowstorm. Well, it is what it is. I'll just put it on the bill for Allstate, a new

line item under white knuckle pay.

"I copy. What's the ET to my 10-20? Over," I say.

"Hard to say...the storm's closing in fast. But it'll be at least an hour...or more, before we can get somebody up there. Over."

"10-4. Please keep me posted on the progress of the dispatched unit. It's gettin' pretty nasty up here...I sure as hell don't want to spend the night. Over."

"10-4. Copy that. Over and out."

"10-4. Over and out. This frequency is now clear and available until further notice," I say.

It's now 4:35 PM, and very dark. Since I initiated the call, there has been absolutely no traffic either direction on the highway. Not a good sign. Probably getting ready to close the highway, overnight at the very least. I go to the front of the truck, untie the climbing rope from the front axle housing, and begin retrieving it, separating and untying each length into separate coiled rolls. I stow the climbing gear in the back of the truck, and remove the camera bag with the two cameras. Once inside the cab, I unload the rolls of film from both of them, placing them securely into the aluminum screw tops canisters and put them back in the camera bag where they will be warm and secure.

I start up the engine, leave it on idle, and turn on the heater to warm the cab. I decide to take a little nap, before the Sheriff shows up.

I am awakened from a restive sleep by several sharp raps on the driver side, snow-covered window, followed by a back and forth, probing searchlight beam. I look at my watch—6:10 PM. About an hour and a half to get here. Not bad. I roll the window down, and about 6 inches of snow cascades on me. Outside, a bright yellow hooded slicker snowsuit with reflective glow-strips in the blowing whiteout, an eerie apparition. On a nasty night like this, these guys earn every penny of their modest salary.

"You the one that made the emergency call about the accident?" he asks.

"Yea...Why don't you get in the truck and I'll fill you in," I say.

Without a further word, he circles around the truck and climbs in.

"Phew...man, a nasty night to be out," he says dropping his yellow hood, removing the glove from his right hand and holding it out, "Jim Stratton, El Do County Sheriffs."

I take his hand, which is cold and wet—we shake. It's a firm, but friendly handshake. They seem to look younger, every year...this one looks barely old enough to shave, maybe in his early 20s with pleasant almost wry expression on his face, with an unflappable 'no-big-deal' demeanor.

"Yea man, sorry to have to bring you out in this...but I thought the law ought to get a heads up, for a potential homicide, before I left the scene," I

say.

"No problem. So whatta we got here?"

I fill him in on my case, and then update him on what I found.

"So, looks like a homicide, eh? I am going to have to get the detectives involved then. Since it is entirely possible that the husband is a suspect, and I'm going to have to ask you to tell your client not to have any contact with the potential perp...at least until we've had a chance to review the facts. We'll want to contact him first, and interview him, so that he's in no way tipped-off that he's a suspect in a murder investigation. And much appreciated if you could get copies of all the prints you make...as soon as you can get them to us. Eventually we'll probably want the negatives, which of course will be returned to you as soon as we can make a copy of the film strips," Jim says.

Despite his young age, I'm very impressed with his professionalism and knowledge of criminology. They train them well these days. This one will make detective in record time.

"Okay, Jim. But frankly I don't think you'll be able to get down there, for a week at least. This guy is already putting pressure on Allstate to settle. My impression, from what I've seen so far, is that this guy is a real piece of work. Smart and ruthless. So we'll have to have a plausible excuse to delay the settlement negotiations, without creating suspicion," I say.

"Agreed. I'll have the lead detective give you a call. He'll want to see those pix ASAP...when do think they'll be available?" he says.

"I can go into the darkroom tomorrow, and print an extra copy. I'll call your detective when they're ready, and he can pick them up, maybe tomorrow afternoon. I'm in Zephyr Cove...Stateline Nevada," I say.

"Great. Thanks for your cooperation Mick. I'll make a note of the location in my report. Not much else we can do here tonight. I'd suggest you start thinking about heading South...off this mountain. They've already closed 89 North and South, probably for a few days, at least. By now, shouldn't be any vehicles, North or South," he says.

We shake hands. He exits disappearing in the whiteout.

I get out of the truck, throw the traffic cones and chock blocks. in the back and survey my best strategy to get turned around, to drive South. About 8 inches of fresh snow has already fallen. I clean off the windshield, check my wiper blades removing the ice, then turn them on...at full speed they're barely able to keep up with the snowfall. The wind is gusting probably at about 30 mph, buffeting the big truck—it's whiteout conditions with visibility getting below 50 feet. In the distance I see a pair of headlights, slowly snaking toward me heading South, wildly weaving from side to side. From what I can make out as it goes past me, some sort of a 4-door sedan, an older Volvo, fishtailing.

An old Volvo rear axle drive with no tire chains...Good luck with that...

I check my watch—7:12 PM. Time to get the hell off this mountain

to the safety and warmth of *Casa Nevada*, and a long hot bath in the Jacuzzi tub, with at least one hot brandy.

If I had waited much longer, I would probably have to chain-up myself...in this? Not fun. As it is, it takes me a good 15 minutes to get turned around. I almost get stuck broadside in the roadway a few times, before I can finally get the truck headed South. I put it in 4-wheel drive compound low, and keep it in second gear, to control my speed, and take off. The only way to drive in snow is slow...very, very slow. You must control your speed, especially on a downgrade because brakes are next to useless, so you drive like there's a raw egg between your foot, and the accelerator and the brakes, in a very low gear, and use the drag of the motor in low gear instead of the brakes.

I'm making maybe 10 mph top speed. My headlights shining on the whiteout are next to useless. High beams are even worse. I'm craning my neck to see the evanescent roadway, with the wind increasing, the visibility is rapidly deteriorating. I'm starting to get a migraine from the stress. My aching neck and screaming shoulder muscles are starting to cramp up...beads of perspiration are sprouting on my forehead. I am now coming up to a nasty stretch of road, a steep downgrade, with a series of switch-back "S" turns, with a hairpin turn at the end. After that it flattens out, and should be a piece of cake...or so I thought. *Ha!*

As I slowly creep through the "S" turns, just about to enter the dreaded hairpin turn, I think I detect some movement in the road ahead. But it's probably my eyes playing tricks on me...from all the stress of driving in this mess. Suddenly, right in front of me, maybe 25 feet away, I see a something...ghost-like, standing in the middle of the roadway, slowly waving its arms. I dare not step on the brakes. I am forced to instantaneously to decide whether to pull to the left or the right. Because I know that there are no barricades and steep fall-off to the left, I opt for the right. The figure in the roadway appears oblivious to the danger, and does not take any evasive action. All I can do is get as far to the right as I can, very gently, so as not to spin-out and slide sideways into this snow zombie.

The last second, the apparition moves to the left two steps, and as I slither past it, my left side view mirror barely misses its head by inches. I can now see its face. It's a bloody mess, a wide-eyed stare, apparently in shock as I slide by. I repeatedly gently tap the brakes and manage to come to a stop about 50 feet down the road. I jump out of the cab, and run back. In the middle of the roadway, in a collapsed heap, is a body, dressed in ski clothes. I bend down on one knee, and take a look. It's a woman. Her face is bleeding profusely...possibly a broken nose. She's groaning in pain, and holding her left side, rolling from side to side.

"Are you okay?" I yell.

"Does it look like I'm okay, *mon ami* ?" she yells.

"No...frankly you look like you just got hit by a truck," I say

"Thanks...you could have lied to me ya know. Definitely not one of

my smarter moves to trying to drive in this."

"Where'd you come from?" I say.

She points to an opening on the left side of the road, "Over there, I went off the road, and down the side...way down the slope. It took me about 15 minutes...just to crawl back up to the road. If you hadn't come along..." she says.

"A Volvo?"

"Yea...what's left of it. Wrapped around a tree which kept me from going all the way down. *Mon Dieu*, my God!" she says.

"Can you walk?"

"I don't think so...my left leg doesn't seem to want to work anymore."

"Okay...I'm going to have to carry you to the truck. We've got to get you to the hospital...like *tout suite*," I yell over the wind noise.

"*Parlez-vous Français?*" she asks.

"*Un peu*...obviously, just enough to get into trouble," I say.

I pick her up. She's not very heavy. In my arms, I can tell that she is slender and relatively tall.

"Come here often?" she says as I carry her to the truck, cradled in my arms.

"Sure...great place to meet outdoorsy chicks...especially the incapacitated ones that I can take advantage of," I say.

"Well then this *is* your lucky day. You don't look like you'd have any problem getting girls," she says facetiously batting her eyes. A good sign—at least her sense of humor seems to be intact.

I get her to the truck, and stand her up, which draws a loud scream of pain. I open the passenger door. I pick her up, and as gently as I can, place her on the front seat. Again, she screams in pain. I can see tears streaming from her eyes in the dome light of the cab. It's the first time I get a good look at her face. Even with the blood and contusions, I can see that she's a beauty. Hmm. I go to fasten the seat belt shoulder harness, but as soon as I touch her left side, she screams again in pain. Okay...forget about restraint. First priority is to get her to Emergency. The nearest hospital is Saint Joseph's in South Lake Tahoe, under normal circumstances maybe a half-hour away. But these are definitely not normal circumstances.

When I slam the truck door shut, she screams again from pain. Not good. Possible fractures. Maybe some internal injuries.

I climb into the cab, easing my door shut.

"I'm Mick," I say.

"Annette...Trudeau. Friends call me Annie. God...Siegfried's going to kill me for this..." she moans.

"*Enchanté, mademoiselle*," I say

She extends her left hand to me. I put my right hand into her cold, clammy hand. Definitely in shock. She squeezes it hard, "*Merci beaucoup!*" I gently pry my hand loose so I can drive.

"*Pas un problème...time to allons-y, ma amie!* Okay...Annie...try to relax. Just close your eyes and enjoy the e-ticket bobsled ride down the Matterhorn to the hospital," I say.

I belt up, and I look back over at her. She appears to have passed out, most probably going into secondary shock. There's no time to waste—she could be bleeding internally. If so, she could bleed-out unless I can get her some help...soon. Very soon.

I put it in gear, and give it some extra gas, spinning the wheels, crab-like until I can get some traction. When I finally get it straightened out, I shift into third gear, fishtailing, slipping and sliding all the way to the hospital, averaging 15-20 mph.

We arrive at Emergency in about 40 minutes. I jump out, run into the Emergency receiving, and yell for a doctor. The on-duty doctor and nurse briskly walk over to me.

"I've got a very seriously injured accident victim in my truck...just outside. Hurry, I think she's bleeding internally. I picked her up on the road about 45 minutes ago!" I yell.

After giving what little information I had on Annette Trudeau to the nurse along with some facts about her accident, I wait around for about an hour to find out if she's going to make it.

The nurse finally comes into the waiting area, "She's in surgery now Mr Kozlov. All I can tell you for now is that she's lost a lot of blood....internal bleeding, another half-hour at the most and she'd have bled to death. And...an unspecified knee injury. We won't know if she's going to make it until after the initial triage surgery is complete...it'll be touch and go for a while. There's nothing more I'll be able to tell you until tomorrow. Her condition is listed as critical, but she's young and healthy...I think she may pull-through. You should go now...and get some rest. Call the hospital tomorrow around noon, and we'll be able to give you more information about her condition...and the prognosis."

From the hospital, it takes me over an hour driving in the blinding snowstorm before I finally got home. It's almost 1 AM. I am so exhausted that I just flop into bed, barely having enough energy to get my boots off. My lack of energy was due in part to the fact that I had nothing major to eat all day, except for few energy bars that I keep in the truck for emergencies...like this? *Ha*. It has been a long day. A *very* long day.

The next day, I do not awake until almost 10 AM; when I look out the window from my bedroom at the normally commanding lake view it's a whiteout, Visibility is maybe 100 feet and still snowing heavily.

I take a long hot shower, until the hot water runs out. Then I build a

big fire in the fireplace to take the chill off. Nothing seems to still the sense of vulnerability of the often seemingly capricious implacable forces of nature—to assuage the primal fears of the vagaries of the sometimes petulant *Madame Nature*, like a roaring fire.

She plays no favorites...ruthlessly impartial, she knows no mercy...only rules. Violate her rules, wittingly or otherwise, at your own peril. Failure to play by her rules can lead to serious injury, and in the case of Annie Trudeau, possibly even death. And She always bats last.

By then, I realize that I am ravenous. I make a four-egg provolone cheese omelet with sautéed red potatoes, mushrooms, onions and green bell peppers, with sour-dough toast and a huge pot of coffee. It is a welcome diversion—cooking for me is generally an enjoyable and relaxing process, so I seldom dine out. As I slowly eat staring at the comforting hissing, crackling logs, the faint scent of a campfire smoke somehow calming me, I ponder the previous day's events. I have a lot more to digest than breakfast.

It feels like the whole day had been just one bad dream...like some surreal Wagnerian fugue. The discovery of the body in the RV, which I was totally unprepared for emotionally, and then literally running into one Annie Trudeau. Hmm. There is some ineffable connection *avec cette mademoiselle*, that is starting to haunt the hell out of me.

By about 11 AM, after my second cup of coffee, I finally start to return to some semblance of mental acuity and normalcy. I realize that I still have some work to do today. First I have to call John Schwartz at Allstate, and give him my preliminary report. He'll be pleased.

Next, I'll go into the darkroom, develop the two rolls of negatives, print contact sheets, then crop and print the selected images—8x10 inch prints, including one set for the El Do County Sheriffs.

I pick up the phone and listen for dial tone....miraculously phone service is still up and working. I call Schwartz's direct line. He picks up on the second ring.

"John Schwarz."

"Hey John...Mick here."

"Mick...hey, I hear you guys are gettin' hammered up there with this latest front."

"Yea...before it's over, we're going to see a few more feet out of this bad boy. John, I made it up to Emerald Bay yesterday. I managed to get down to the wreckage before the storm hit," I say.

"Excellent! Whadya find out?" John says.

"Before I go into any detail, I have to alert you to the fact I found a body in RV. No positive ID yet. But I suspect that it may be Mrs Insured, Elsie Schumacher...same approximate age. Now, I'm no expert...but judging from the way I found her, it would *not* appear to be an accidental death. The accident site is being considered a crime scene by El Dorado County Sheriffs...a

homicide."

"You're *shittin'* me...you think he oted his old lady?"

"Unless she was a female Houdini, and duct-taped herself in the front passenger seat, yea...it sure looks that way. I think he counted on no one getting down there before Summer...before Allstate would be forced to settle...then pull a permanent *adios*. The El Dorado County Sheriffs were called by CB on site...an officer responded, but because of the lousy weather, my guess is that they won't be able to get down there for at least a week, if then. They definitely do not want you or anyone from Allstate to have any contact with this guy Schumacher, until the Detectives can see the pix I took of the scene and of the cadaver. Okay? If he knows that the vehicle has been inspected, they think he may rabbit," I say.

"Got it...so tell me what you found."

"Before I do that...is it okay with Allstate, if I'll give them all the contact info from my end...and do you have a problem with me releasing my photos of the scene to them?"

"Not a problem. Give them everything you've got. We will cooperate fully with the authorities and coordinate any and all contact with the insured with them," John says.

For the next half-hour over the phone, I outline the results of my investigation. I tell John Schwartz that in my professional opinion based on my investigation at the site, that it is "highly unlikely" that the damage to the insured vehicle was the result of an accidental event according to the legal definition and the insuring agreement.

"The photos will show the mature rust present all over the vehicle would tend to indicate that there was evidence of major pre-existing damage...maybe a salvaged roll-over." He's ecstatic. I tell him I'll get out a full report to him, with photos within a week.

As an investigator, to protect yourself from spurious civil lawsuits by the accused for defamation of character, even when you're 99.9% sure, it's never stated as a certainty...always as percentage of probability, much like the instruction given to a jury sitting on a civil tort trial—"the preponderance of evidence" standard—as opposed to the more stringent criminal standard of "beyond a reasonable doubt."

I go into the darkroom, and develop the two rolls of negs and print two contact sheets, which are just positive images of the native negative filmstrips with sprocket holes and frame numbers. Having studied photography at Art Center, I have my own darkroom. Since I shoot primarily black & white, which is the accepted standard for forensic photography, developing and printing of images is relatively easy, compared to color processing. And, it gives me the value-added service to bill to the client, with the added advantage of quick turn-around and control of the cropping and contrast levels of the

prints.

I select the frames to print on the contact sheet, by viewing them with an eye-loop, then with a grease pencil I make preliminary crop marks. For future documentation, if it becomes necessary, each image that I print will be referenced by frame number and any meta-data about the image, on the audio notes recorded at the scene. I will keep each audio cassette on file for five years, in case they ever need to be transcribed for litigation purposes.

The ghastly images of the deceased are unsettling. I've taken a lot of images of accident victims...some of which were at the accident scene, of mangled bodies, including fatalities. But this one was different. This was anything but an accident, and I suspect that at some point the victim must have realized that she was going to die...probably hours before, by her own husband's hand, as opposed to a fatal accident victim where there is little or no warning. I suppose, in the end, it makes little difference to the victim. Dead is dead. Period.

I print two copies of each, of the 14 images of the launch site on the roadway, and 15 prints of the damaged vehicle, including the deceased. I hang the prints up to dry.

Having gotten authorization from Allstate, I call the El Do County Sheriff's Department, and get connected to the Detective, who has been assigned to the case.

"Detective Benson, here."

"Detective Benson, I'm Mick Kozlov, a PI, that is investigating a claim for Allstate Insurance on Highway 89...yesterday. I understand you've been assigned the follow-up...as a possible homicide?" I say.

"Yeap...lucky me," says a buoyant Randal Benson.

"Detective, I promised the responding officer Jim Stratton, that I would make available copies of the photos I took at the scene, including the images of the cadaver which appears to have expired not from accidental or natural causes."

"Call me Randy, Mick. Yea, I was just looking this over, when you called. What can you tell me?" Benson says.

I outline my findings, and answer a few questions.

"Allstate has authorized the release of any and all info that I have on the case, including photos. I have addresses and phone numbers etcetera, of the insured, along with the photos. But honestly, the weather is so bad, I don't think I'd be able to get them to you until this storm is done," I say.

"Can you give me the basic contact info over phone to get me started?"

"Sure...then let's connect in a few days. In the meantime, I don't think much is going to change with the suspected perp...certainly not with the vic," I say.

"Roger that...nasty business...if he did kill his old lady like that. He's a cold-blooded MF," he says with a derisive cop laugh. Hmm...probably ex-military; they usually make pretty good homicide detectives, especially the ones that have been MPs, in combat, and executed their duty under the constant specter of death.

"Randy, judging from the obvious careful preparation and planning, this guy is very cute...don't underestimate him," I say.

I give him the contact info for the insured along with my contact info—we agree to stay in touch.

My next call is to Saint Joseph's Hospital ICU.

"ICU, Nurse Haley" the voice says.

"Hi. I want to check on the condition of an accident victim brought in late last night. Her name is Annette Trudeau. The duty nurse said to call back today around noon."

"What is your relationship to the patient?" Nurse Haley says.

"A friend I guess. My name is Mick Kozlov. I brought her in."

"Please hold," she says.

"Mr Kozlov you're not listed as a relative or a contact. Ordinarily I could not divulge any information to you...but it says on the chart that you pretty much saved her life. So, off the record, she is conscious...very conscious. Her condition has been downgraded from critical to serious but stable. I asked her if she wanted to allow you to have access to her info, and she said by all means...'unlimited access' unquote. And she further said for you to 'get your you-know-what over here, uh...toot sweet...whatever that means, unquote. For someone that has been through what she's been through, she's a lively one," Nurse Haley says with a smile in her voice.

"Thanks. Tell her that me, and my *you-know-what*, will be over to visit, in a few days, after this storm clears," I say.

Two days later, I awaken to a brilliant blue cloudless sky. In the winter months, it happens like this in the mountains. Just after a snowstorm, the trees heavily laden with pure white glistening snow, the crystal clear sky and the clean crisp cold air, there is a palpable, exhilarating sense of renewal.

My first order of business is to dig out. I fire up the snow blower and remove about 3 feet of lovely fluffy light powdery snow. I finish up with the snow shovel, and I'm done by 9 AM. It will be a few days before the snow plow shows up, as they will concentrate on the major streets, before getting up to the top, where I live. That's, fine...I'm able to get around fairly easily with the high clearance of my 4 X 4 truck.

The local 'powder hounds' will already be on their way up in the chair lifts, eager to be the first ones down the virgin un-skied runs. Whooping

and hollering all the way down—it's the same sensation as grabbing the perfect wave and surfing it all the way to the shore. After the first hour or so, the grooming crews will be busily grooming the mountain with their half-tracks, getting it ready for the *tourista* skiers who prefer skiing on groomed hard pack runs.

But I have some work to do today. Maybe tomorrow I can get up there, and ski Paradise Valley, taking Ridge Chair to the very top and spend the day up there, just cruising the intermediate runs, carving some nice Super G slalom turns, before they get full of bumps.

I call Randy Benson at El Do Sheriffs and we agree to meet half-way at the locals favorite, the legendary Red Hut Cafe for breakfast, right on Lake Tahoe Blvd—specializing in all manner of waffles.

When I arrive, I see an unmarked dark blue Ford Crown Victoria, in the parking lot, probably Detective Benson's. Four-door Crown Vics are the *de facto* standard ride for non-uniforms in most local police and sheriff departments.

I walk in and look around. I immediately see a guy, standing up waving at me. I walk over to his table. He's about six feet, well built, fit-looking with a military bearing and crew cut, maybe in his early forty's, old enough to have served in Vietnam.

"Jesus...Jimmy Stratton said you were a big one. Randy Benson," he says smiling, mostly with his deep set piercing blue eyes.

"Hey Randy...pleasure to meet ya, man," I say as we shake hands.

He pulls a chair out for me, and we sit. I hand him a manila envelope with the 8 X 10 photos and copies of the Allstate claim file. The waitress comes over. I just order coffee. Benson opens the envelope and starts perusing the photos. Finally, he gets to the images of the cadaver, slowly studying each one of the images, the expression on his face is impassive and inscrutable. He's obviously been around a while.

"Definitely grounds to refer to the DA for investigation of possible homicide. I did a cursory background on our boy. He's a big-time Real Estate Broker and mostly developer, in Sacramento, with a rep as a real swinger. Apparently his wife is...or was...the money behind the man," he says matter-of-factly.

"Yea...I thought you might want have a little talk with Mr Harold Schumacher...maybe ask him if he's misplaced a wifey?"

"Thanks, Mick. I really appreciate this. Can I buy you breakfast?" he says.

"Nah...thanks Randy. Maybe next time. I gotta shove off...I've got a lot of catch-up to do because of the storm."

"I'll keep you posted. We'll have to get the Sacramento PD involved in this, since he's a resident of Sacramento," he says.

"Sounds good. Randy, as I said before this guy is a real sweetheart...smart...cold and calculating...and he's got money. So I wouldn't be surprised if he 'lawyers-up', as soon as you contact him. Allstate has agreed to have no meaningful contact with him until they hear back from you, so he won't know that we've inspected the RV. Not that I'm trying to tell you how to do your job, but you might just want to start out with talking about the vehicle, like it's a routine procedure to file a police report on a highway accident, not letting on that you know anything about it," I say, as I we stand up and shake hands.

"Yea...good point. I'll be in touch," Detective Randy Benson says.

I stop at a flower shop and pick up a bouquet of mixed wildflowers, on the way to Saint Joseph's Hospital to visit Annie Trudeau.

It's almost 10:30 AM when I walk up to the nurse's station, and ask which room she's in. I walk into the room, a semi private, with the other bed empty, and find Annie Trudeau laying in the elevated hospital bed by the window, wistfully staring out at the freshly fallen snow. Seated in a chair next to the bed, is a guy that looks to be maybe in his late twenties, talking animatedly to her—she seems to be someplace else.

"*Bonjour mademoiselle*," I say with a big smile, as I walk into the room.

She looks up and smiles broadly, then seems to catch herself, looking hesitantly toward the guy sitting down, then back at me.

"*Bonjour Mick...comment ca va?*" she says.

"*Bien...Ca va?*"

"Sieggy, this is Mick Kozlov...he's the guy that saved my life. Mick, this is Siegfried," she nervously says.

Siegfried gets up, chest puffed out, struts over to me, and extends his hand. Hmm...a cocky little shit. I seem to often evoke that Napoleonic insecurity from short guys when introduced.

"Sieggy...Becker," he says.

As we shake hands he gives me the macho vise-grip, the whole time he is peering searchingly into my eyes, like he's trying to size me up. Competition for his lady? He's about 5'8", with a stocky, compact build. He's a good-looking guy, with a strong chin, lively intelligent blue eyes and a thick mane of long blonde hair. A real ladies man. His face is very tanned with 'raccoon' tan lines around his eyes, like he spends a lot of time on the mountain skiing.

"Hi. Siegfried Becker...that name sounds familiar," I say.

"Sieggy's a competition mogul skier...probably saw his name in the Tahoe Tribune and maybe on TV...professional freestyle competition," Annie interjects.

"Yes...of course," I say, the whole time while shamelessly surveying Annie Trudeau's physical assets.

I barely notice her left leg with knee support, suspended in traction.

In the light, I guess her age to be around 25. Even without any makeup, Annie's face, despite the sutured cuts, and abrasions, and the nose packed with cotton, though very pale from loss of blood, is still beautiful. Her lupine colored eyes under naturally arched eyebrows are large and expressive, with long dark lashes...and an inviting mouth with full, cupid's bow lips. Her thick and lustrous long henna hair, is piled in a bun on top of her head emphasizing her high cheekbones and aristocratic forehead. Even though she's wearing a hospital gown, I can see that she is bra-less, with just an erotic suggestion of protruding nipple, on her ample breasts. *Mon Dieu!* Doctor Wilson, uh...Woody is now fantasizing his hospital bedside manner.

"So Mick, I uunde standt dat you rescued mina schatzi from da jaws of death, up zer undt Emerald Bay," he says with a thick Otto Preminger *Stalag 17* accent and a sneering smile, with more than a twinge of Teutonic arrogance.

"Rescued?...oh I don't know about that. Anyone would have done the same thing," I say playing the *tisk...tisk...* humble hero, as I walk over to the bedside and hand Annie the bouquet of wildflowers.

"Oh, they're lovely...*merci beaucoup*. I just wish I could smell them, but my nose is packed with cotton...it was broken when it hit the steering wheel," she says smiling with perfect white pearls, that were thankfully spared from the secondary impact.

"*Da rien*. So what's the damage, Annette?" I ask.

Annie starts to answer, but she is preempted by this Teutonic Twit.

"Torn ACL left knee...and a ruptured spleen," he impatiently recites, without a trace of sympathy in his tone.

"I'm so sorry Annie. What's the doctor's..." I was about to ask, but I am again interrupted by this Siegfried.

"Mick, kin I haf un vord mit you...outside?" Siegfried more orders than asks, taking me aggressively by the elbow and escorting me outside in to the visitors lounge.

Once outside, I say, "What's up?" with a discernible tone of irritation, overtly releasing my elbow from his overly-familiar grasp.

He exaggeratedly looks both ways, like some weaselly Peter Lorre villain in some B-spy movie, and then says in low almost inaudible voice, "Can you find ze Volvo again...ver she vent ova?" he says.

"Probably...why?" I say in a normal voice.

"Shh...lower your voice. Let's just say, that it would not be good for mina Annie if za cops found ze merchandiz en ze car," again with a contemptible smirk.

"Merchandize?" I ask again not buying into Siegfried's melodramatic moment.

"Merchandize. Meaning pharmacy...as in pills," he whispers.

"Oh? What kind of pills are we talkin' about here uh...Siegfried?" I say.

"*Shhh!*" Again with the overly theatrical side to side glance, he leans toward me in *sotto voce*, "Quaaludes, man...a full shipment of over 1,000 caps, in za trunk. She was picking zem up for me from North Shore, because I am being vatched by za cops."

"So let me get this straight...you were having Annie pick up the drugs, because you were afraid the cops would bust you...you had her drive them down here, so you could sell them?" I ask.

"Ja wohl...zen zis stupid storm hits. Zust bad luck," he says without a trace of remorse about placing Annie in harms-way, either with the weather or the cops.

"And you want me...to show you, where the car is so you can get the drugs out of the car, before it's discovered by the cops? Right?" I ask.

"Ja...so let's go already," he says, again with the grabbing my arm.

I angrily pull my arm from his grasp.

"Yer outta your friggin' mind if you think I'm *even* going to get involved in something like this....now *fuck-off* you Kraut bastard, before I lose my temper and *weiner schnitzel* yer ass!" I yell.

"Okay Mick. But if za cops find za drugs in ze car, Annie vil go to jail...for a wery long time," he cockily declares thinking he has the upper hand.

"You wait here...while I have a word with Annie. Alone," I say.

I walk into the room, close the door, and sit down beside the bed.

"Annie, I've just had a little chat with your...friend Siegfried. He tells me that you picked something up for him in North Shore, and you were on your way back when you got caught in the storm?" I ask.

"That's right Mick. He said to meet some guy in Tahoe City, at a bar, and to pick up some special medication, that he has to buy on the black market because it's not approved by the FD...something, for his migraine headaches. He has these terrible, blinding cluster headaches...sometimes so bad he can't even function...for days. He said he felt one coming on and didn't think he could drive up there to get them...that he needed 'em because he has a competition next week. Why?" she innocently asks.

"Annie...Siegfried just told me that he had you pick up an illegal drug shipment...over 1,000 Quaaludes...classified as a Schedule One drug by the DEA. You're talking serious hard drugs here. So I gotta ask ya. Did you know that Siegfried is dealing drugs? Big time?" I ask.

Annette Trudeau, bursts into tears.

"NO! I had no idea! You mean that package in the trunk is full of illicit drugs?"

"Yea...your friend's a real sweetheart. He was being watched by the cops, so he had you pick up the shipment so he wouldn't get busted. He wants me to take him to your car, so he can get the drugs out, before the cops find the car...and maybe discover the drugs," I say.

"That bastard! I feel so...stupid...so used. I wish the hell that I had never met him...one of the biggest mistakes of my life. Oh Mick...I'm so sorry that you are getting pulled into this. What are you going to do?" she says sobbing hysterically.

"Annie, I believe you when you tell me that you didn't know anything about this, okay? It's none of my business, but if you hang around this low-life arrogant Kraut bastard, it's just going to be a matter of time before he's busted...with that quantity...he's a major supplier. They're already watching his ass...not if, but when...and you or anyone around him could end up going down with him. We're talking major hard time."

"*Mon Dieu!*" she cries, placing her hand over her mouth.

"Okay...calm down now...everything's going to be alright. Here's how this will go down. I'll have him follow me up there in his car. I will just drive by and indicate at the location where your car went over and keep driving. After that, he'll be on his own. But I want you to promise that you'll have nothing more to do with this creep, okay?" I say.

"Okay Mick. I promise. And thank you, so very much...again. You seem to be my savior...my guardian angel. I don't know how I can ever repay you," she says.

"I'm sure we can work something...out," I say with a licentious grin.

"Or in. Oh, you men...only one thing on your mind!" she says good-naturedly punching me in the arm, smiling while wiping the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Actually, what's important to me, is not just the one thing...although it's an important...thing, but everything that precedes and follows it. More later on my clinical dissertation on foreplay and...post-play. Gotta run now. But I'll be back later to check on your...*you-know-what*," I say.

As I get up to leave, she reaches up, and grabs me around the neck and pulls me down to her soft moist warm lips, and gives me a long deep kiss, sending electrical shock waves down my spine. As I gently pull away she says, "I know it sounds crazy, but I wanted to do that the whole time...in your truck, that night out there on the mountain. *Plus tard et être poursuivie...attention mon homme de la montagne*," she says gently caressing my face with her hand.

Well now...*more later and to be continued...be careful my mountain man*. Hmm. Indeed, I'd better be careful *avec la femme fatale*...

I leave to find Siegfried pacing back and forth where I left him. Seeing me, he hurriedly walks over.

"Okay...here's the deal. It's non-negotiable. I'll show you where the car is on one condition...that after today...you never, ever contact Annette Trudeau again. I've just spoken with her...she now knows what you did...that you are nothing more than a low-life drug dealer...disguised as a hotshot lover-boy professional skier. She wants nothing more to do with you. Ever. Are we clear on this?" I calmly say.

Smiling he says, "Maan...you obviously do not undaschtandt...*da situation*" he says with air quotes. "Annie is..."

I move my hand in a zipper motion across my lips to cut him off.

"No talk...just listen. Very simple proposition, Siegfried. Yes or no. No maybes...buts...again this is not negotiable."

He pauses for a minute...pondering his options, then finally says, "Ja voldt...let's go."

"I'll take that as a yes...and if you ever even try to make contact with her again, there's a certain El Dorado County Sheriff's Detective by the name of Randal Benson, that I'm sure would be very interested in hearing about your pharmaceutical practice," I say.

"You know Benson!?" he says, unable to conceal his surprise and apprehension upon hearing the name.

"We're like this," I say flashing my fixed-together index and middle finger, then bending the index finger, giving him the *screw you* bird.

"Okay...okay. Itza deal...now let's just go, already!" he says.

"Oh...and one more thing. Here's how it will go down. You will follow me in your car. When I get near to the place where the car went over the side of the road, I'll start flashing my left blinker. When I'm even with the spot, I'll quickly flash my right blinker for no more than a few seconds. That will be where the car is. I will keep going...I will not slow down...I will not in any way give you any assistance in finding it. Okay...let's go," I say.

Heading North on the recently plowed Highway 89, in about a half-hour, I reach the approximate spot where I had found Annie. I don't detect any recent tracks where the Volvo went off the road, so I assume that no one even knows that there's a car down there. It sends a chill down my spine, realizing that had I not come along when I did—if I had been just a few minutes earlier, Annette Trudeau would probably not have survived the night, most likely dying a lonely death on the roadway, either from loss of blood or hypothermia. But the more sobering realization was that I would never have met Annette Trudeau. After only a very short exposure to one another, already a deep psychic connection was beginning to form, which I had not felt with any other woman since the loss of the love of my life, Sora Eagle Feather.

I look in my side view mirror, and confirm that Nazi-breath is following behind me in his late model 4x4 Toyota Land Cruiser, with a ski rack of course. I flip on my left blinker, then about five seconds later, my right blinker for only a few seconds. In my side view mirror, I watch him peel off to the right side of the road. I do not slow down, but continue North for a few miles, until I can find a convenient place to safely turn around. This should give him ample time to get his 'merchandize' out of the trunk of the vehicle, using the keys still in the ignition, and be long gone by the time I return.

About 15 minutes later, driving South, I pass by the accident scene—the Land Cruiser is gone. I continue on back to the hospital, to confirm that Siegfried Becker has not had second thoughts about our deal not to contact Annie. I pull into the parking lot. No Land Cruiser. I park and go see Annie.

It's about 6:30 PM when I walk into her room. It is now dark outside...there is only a dim night light next to her bed, casting a soft warm glow upon her angelic face. She is sleeping soundly. I do not want to disturb her from a much needed rejuvenating rest. I quietly sit down beside the bed and just gaze upon her. Her peaceful expression, seems to add to her vulnerability and innocence. I sense a deep aching in my heart. I am filled with a protective sense of...what? How could it be love? I barely even know this *femme*. I wonder if the manner of our meeting has triggered some mutual recognition of our mortality, of the fragility of life—if some higher source of synchronicity has brought us together.

So there it is. I decide that I will not attempt to deny or even resist it. I just sit there and bask in the warm glow of the intense emotion of the moment—the powerful sense of harmony and peace—silently observing her for almost an hour, until she finally stirs, slowly opening her eyes. The first thing that she sees is me, sitting there, smiling at her. She smiles. It's a beautiful warm loving smile. I reach over and put my hand on hers. Studying her face, I now see that there are tears welling up in her eyes, streaming down her cheeks.

"Are you in pain? Do you want me to call the nurse?" I quietly ask, gently squeezing her hand.

"No...silly. These are tears of happiness...and joy," she whispers, firmly squeezing my hand.

"How do you feel? Can I get you anything?" I ask.

"If there is any pain, I wouldn't feel it. I'm filled with such an overwhelming sense of gratitude...for being alive," she says, then hearing her sappy tone, she adds, "...and for you, entering into my life," again facetiously batting her eyes.

"Do you want to sleep some more?" I ask.

"I can sleep when I'm dead. But I would like some water."

I pour a glass of water from the pitcher on the table. She quickly drinks it down.

"So...I never asked you what you were doing up there on *that dark*

and stormy night?" she says with air quotes.

I fill her in on my work, and outline the investigation that brought me up there.

"Where are you from? I detect a slight accent...and you speak fluent French," I say.

"I was born and raised in Northern Maine, a small town called Frenchville...go figure, huh? Right at the Canadian Border, across the St. John River from the Province of New Brunswick. French is the second language for most...and for many of us, the first language."

"So, then I take it then...that you're not related to the *other* Trudeau's...the Canuck Prime Minister? So no stretch-limos? No being whisked away to exclusive ski chalets in the French Alps, on First Class Champagne Concord flights, as a reward in recognition of my selfless, heroic act?"

"Nope...sorry about that Mick. My people are strictly coach class...in every respect. They're Acadian French...French hillbillies, basically potato farmers, so they speak a mish-mash of French and English...Franglais. I grew up in farmhouse where French was the primary language."

"Hmm...so *now* ya tell me. Is your family still there?" I ask.

"No. The family located to Southern California...Long Beach, when I was a sophomore in High School. Went to Long Beach State for three years. I'm the oldest of five; three sisters and one brother. I moved to Lake Tahoe in 1972...to get out of the L.A. metro madness. How 'bout you?"

"Born in Philadelphia...raised in Southern Cal. Moved from Venice Beach to Tahoe awhile ago...for health reasons, my knees. But that's a story for another time," I say.

There's a long awkward silence as her darting eyes betray that her mind is grappling with something. Her expression registers indecision, finally she says, "So...Mick, I *just* have to ask you something. Before this goes any further...and I get my heart broken. Are you married, eh?"

"Not that I know of..." I say.

"Are you involved a serious relationship?"

"Hmm...you get right to it don't ya. Well...okay, I guess I'd have to say that maybe I am," I say.

"Oh..." a long pause as her lower lip begins to quiver.

"I guess I'm not surprised. If you don't mind my asking, how did you meet?"

"I just ran into her one night...and that was it. I guess we both knew...right away," I say.

"Oh..." again with the *Oh*, after almost a minute of silence which I have no intention of breaking because I'm having too much fun, finally she says. "How long have you been together?"

"What time is it?" I ask

Looking at the clock on the wall behind me, "It's about 8:30...why? Do you have someplace you have to be?" she says with a hint of suspicion in her tone.

I begin counting backwards on my fingers.

"78 hours and about 20 minutes...give or take a few minutes," I say.

She ponders my answer, looks at me quizzically, then she bolts upright with a huge smile and throws her arms out wide. I stand up, and lay my upper body against her soft, warm inviting breasts. Her arms wrap around me, as I burrow my hands in through the back of her open gown, finding my way down to the small of her warm, smooth back as we tightly embrace.

For a long time, no words are spoken; she is quietly sobbing. I slowly pull myself from her far enough to gaze into her tear-filled eyes. As our eyes lock, I gently lower my lips on to her waiting, quivering, open mouth...deeply, passionately.

So much for being careful *avec la femme fatale...eh mountain man?*

Annie's condition continues to improve, so that a week later she is able to be released from the hospital. In the meantime, I had spent considerable time with her at the hospital, getting to know her. She's about 5'8" tall, with a slender, toned lean body; bright as well as beautiful, with a quick wit, and a quirky, self-deprecating sense of humor.

She works at Sahara Tahoe Casino, evenings as a sitting Captain for the Main Showroom, and skis days. It's a relatively prestigious, usually male dominated position, and very lucrative; frequently taking home \$750-1,000 a week, just in cash gratuities. In the summer months, when the headliners are in town, often taking home \$500 a night.

With the proposed ERA, Equal Rights Amendment, to the Constitution in 1972 and increasing pressure from NOW, the National Organization for Women, founded in 1966, the corporate management at Sahara began to see the handwriting on the wall; that the paternal 'good ol' boy' management mentality would have to undergo some change. Her timing was perfect—she broke the barrier with a balanced combination of her disarming charm, good looks and low key 'woman's rights' assertions while still remaining popular with her male co-workers 'as just another one of the boys.'

And for two weeks in August, before his death in '77, all of Lake Tahoe would be invaded by the legions of followers of the King, Elvis Presley. The whole town, basking in the profligate spending, with almost a religious fervor of his fanatical devotees, often staying in town for the whole two weeks. So everybody makes money, a lot of money...most especially the Nevada Casinos where gambling and drinking are ubiquitous 24 hours a day, along with the side dishes of prostitution and the sale of so-called recreational drugs, mostly cocaine and Quaaludes. 'Tooting' cocaine up one's nose, at \$100 for a

mere gram as an 'upper', then Quaaludes, at between \$5-10 a pop, to bring you back down, so you could eventually get some sleep, then getting up around noon, downing a few Bloody Mary's, taking a few 'toots' to get you jump-started. Then, *rinse and repeat* the cycle all over again...and again.

The huge showroom at Sahara normally with a rated maximum seating capacity of about 1,000, for fire safety—the place will be sardined with over 1,500, with the Fire Marshal in attendance each night to 'pick up his envelope'. Mostly heavily bejeweled and seriously over-accessorized rich middle-aged courtesan wannabes, 15 years past their prime, often pathetically decorated, in heavy theatrical makeup wearing a plunging cleavage-revealing exorbitant Oleg-something cocktail dress, who think nothing of throwing another couple hundred bucks at a seating Captain, just to be a few tables closer to their King. She and the other 9 seating Captains, after dividing the take, often take home over \$1,000 cash, in one night.

But since the passage of legalized gambling in New Jersey, in 1978, all the West coast casinos were starting to take a heavy hit, from the new competition, mostly located in Atlantic City. Many of the top-billed entertainers, were getting offered much more by Atlantic City or Las Vegas in performance fees than Lake Tahoe, with it's relatively small showrooms, could pay. So when the revenues started to dry up, the showrooms in Tahoe, begin to go dark, except for an occasional 'headliner' weekends, leading to many cutbacks and layoffs at Stateline Nevada Casinos.

She's well educated and relatively well-read. An English major in college, with an interest in creative writing, with a minor in French—she became disenchanted with the 'whole college scene', and yearned to return to a more non-urban setting, like her roots in Northern Maine. So she quit college with just two quarters remaining to graduate, and moved to the mountains, much to the disappointment of her very traditional, fundamentalist Christian parents, who still lived in Long Beach.

Because her car is still lying unnoticed off the side of the road up on Highway 89, I agree to take her home to her rented house way out in the county, that she shares with a roommate, about the same age, who she works with. Her name is Nancy...as in Antsy.

She is on crutches, making it very difficult for her to maneuver, so I carry her into her place, and lay her down on the sofa. Nancy comes out of the kitchen, and we exchange greetings.

Nancy is the complete antithesis of Annie. Although attractive in a handsome almost masculine way, she is short and rather stocky in build, with wide shoulders and muscular arms, like someone who weight-trains. Her personality is cool and aloof, with a constant expression on her face like she either smells something bad or her maybe she's been hiking all day in boots that one size too small, with the unmistakable whiff of misandry toward me. I suspect she may be a still-closeted Lesbian.

"Nancy, this is Mick...the guy that I told you about," she says almost

apologetically.

"Hi," she says rather coolly, dismissively.

"Hi, Nancy. Nice to meet you," I lie.

"Well, Annie...how are you going get around with that bum leg? Where's your car?" she says.

"It's still up there...a total loss."

"Looks like you've got a big problem then. I hope that no one expects me to drop everything, and take care of you and chauffeur you around. Between my responsibilities at the Church, skiing and working, I'm not going to be around much if you need anything," she declares, behaving rather unsympathetically toward Annie, letting me know that she's a very busy and important lady in the local chapter of the Church.

"Oh? And what church would that be?" I ask.

"Mick, both Nancy and I are very active in Scientology...in fact it was Nancy that opened my eyes to the human potential movement, and L. Ron Hubbard. Do you know anything about Scientology?" Annie interjects.

"Scientology? No. To be honest, I'd have to plead ignorance. But, Annie if you're involved, I'm open to hearing about it," I say. Mr Thoughtful.

But in actuality I had encountered several so-called *Scientologists* down in L.A. Typically, very self-satisfied, insufferable to the point of arrogance about their level of enlightenment, compared to the rest of the unenlightened unwashed masses that believed in the existence of God or some other religion. They believed that everything...and anything not of Scientology was just a crutch to prevent the poor dupes from taking responsibility for their own lives—past present and future.

So I was curious to try to understand what the attraction was for Annie, in her own words. I knew one thing for certain from my encounters in L.A.—participation in this so-called Church, was not cheap. I had heard that the more enlightened you wanted to become, the more it would cost you—exponentially.

I had a hard time understanding the concept of commercialization of self-enlightenment. Just as I had a difficult time reconciling the commodification of Christianity by many mainstream Christian fundamentalist, most especially the so-called Televangelists like Pat Robertson, a Southern Baptist minister, who was president and founder of CBN, Christian Broadcasting Network, and their constant on-air drumbeat of solicitation for donations to spread the Gospel of the Bible. Their mission, rather missionary statement was, to save unenlightened souls who had not yet received the message of the "Good News" Gospel—to become believers in Christ, to be 'born again', or face eternal damnation in the fires of Hell. Checkbook salvation with a not-so-pure *profit* motive.

Once true believers, as a measure of the depth and commitment of their faith, they would be expected to *tithe*, or contribute at least 10 percent of

their income to the "church", including and most especially the Electronic Church, as there is a 'lot more overhead than traditional bricks and mortar churches'. Turns out, saving souls electronically, was not a cheap 'ministry' alias business proposition, to not just perpetuate, but like any other large corporate endeavor, with an inherent mandate to grow—or risk extinction. So despite the well-known fact that both utilized the same mind-numbing strategies toward achieving the same end—blind allegiance and faith, it was with no small irony, that each indicted the other to be a religious cult using indoctrination toward a commercial end.

Nancy announces, "Well, I was just on my way out...to go skiing. The snow is perfect, so I want a get a few good runs in the bumps before I have to go to work today. Annie is quite capable of explaining Scientology. Bye. Talk to you later Annie." And she's out the door.

Hmm...Scientology. Why am I not surprised? What does surprise me is that Annie, herself is an acolyte, a dedicated follower of L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of Scientology. I had also heard that his considerably self-serving autobiographical stature was widely disputed.

I sit down beside Annie on the sofa.

"Okay, Annie. Scientology?" I say

She looks into my eyes, searchingly for a trace of skepticism, condescension, which I manage to suppress, barely. A reaction that had probably greeted her pronouncement on prior occasions, most probably from her Evangelical Christian family.

"Mick...are you seriously interested in hearing about it? If so, I must warn you that it is something that I do not take lightly...that it is not a just a belief system, but a very different and revolutionary way at looking at the world...and every one on it. It has changed my life," she says with tone of gravitas I had not yet seen in her.

"I'm listening," I say.

"Okay. But remember...you asked me," she says with thin smile, unsuccessfully veiling her apprehension.

I nod my head for her to continue.

"Scientology teaches that people are immortal beings who have forgotten their true nature," she starts tentatively, studying the reaction in my face.

"Go on...tell me about the Church. The good...and the bad," I say.

"Scientology is one of the most controversial new religious movements to have arisen in the 20th century. The so-called bad news first. The church is often characterized as a cult and it has faced harsh scrutiny for many of its practices, which some critics contend, include brainwashing and routinely defrauding its members.

"Doesn't sound particularly original...like they borrowed it from the

playbook of some of the Christian Televangelists..." I say.

A tolerant smile, then, "Another controversial belief held by Scientologists is that the practice of psychiatry is destructive and abusive and must be abolished," she says rather defensively.

"And that's not the good news?" I say smiling to trying to lighten the situation.

Undaunted, she continues, "Its method of spiritual rehabilitation...a type of counseling known as auditing, in which practitioners aim to consciously re-experience painful or traumatic events in their past in order to free themselves of their limiting effects," lapsing into what sounded to me almost like a rote recitation of dogma.

"How'd you get involved in Scientology?" I ask.

"A fair question. Through Nancy and her friends mostly. Generations of my family were raised as Catholic...there were few if any non-Catholics in the small town where I grew up in Northern Maine. As a kid, me and all of my siblings went to Catholic schools, I even considered becoming a nun...but I obviously decided against it."

"Thank God...an answer to prayer. Mine. When they say nun...they mean none," I say.

"Yea...well, no problem there. It would have been a disaster. Me in a convent? I would have lasted maybe two weeks."

"And...like they say, a mind is a terrible thing to waste...especially when it's wrapped in such a beautiful container. Sorry...go on," I say.

"Thanks. So anyway we moved to California so my father could find a job away from potato farming. Then, because of the cost, we all ended up in public schools. In Southern California, in college, I was exposed to a whole new world of ideas...including some mind expanding aids. Some of us were reading *The Teachings of Don Juan*, by Carlos Castaneda, so one Sunday some of us went out to the desert and dropped some peyote. For me...it literary blew the lid off of Catholicism. How 'bout you, any religion when you were growing up?" she asks.

"Yea...much more mundane, but on my mother's side. She's pure Italian...a Roman Catholic, with an unshakeable faith, especially in Saint Anthony, to intercede...to deliver from harm. I too went to Catholic schools for several years, until the nuns with the metal edged rulers finally gave up on me. I've still got the scars on my knuckles...and elsewhere to prove it.

Mom was always pestering me to go to church...every Sunday, it would start about seven o'clock for nine o'clock mass. Every 15 minutes...*get up for church*. It started out as a good-natured battle of wits.

Until one Sunday, by then even at 12 years old, I was already much bigger than her, she came in and said, '*or else*'. I just rolled over to go back to sleep. Then she went into the closet and got a wooden coat hanger, and said, '*I'm warning you...*' Again, I just ignored her. Then she lost it, and started

thrashing at me with the coat hanger. I just looked at her, and started laughing. But then she broke the hanger on me, with just a small piece of hanger left in her hand, flailing it in the air while I was howling with laughter. Finally, exasperated and out of breath, she just tossed what was left of the hanger, sat down on the bed, and together we just sat there, laughing hysterically.

So then I said, '*what would it take for you to give up on this church thing with me, mom?*' She then played the ultimate mommy card, she started to cry....big time, alligator tears, shoulders shuddering, the whole bit. Then she blubbers '*co-co-munion....*' It was then, that the dormant Catholic Guilt Gene must have percolated from the deep recesses of my DNA. It made me feel so guilty that I put my arm around her, and in a weak moment, heard the words escaping from my own mouth, '*...if I promised to get my First Holy Communion, would that make you happy mom...no more church?*'

She then looks up at me, immediately stops crying, the tears miraculously evaporating, and says, '*it's a deal*'...then gets up and walks out before I could recant. I immediately realized that I had been artfully outflanked by feminine vulnerability...again. But, because I knew it would make her happy I followed through on my promise. And, after my Communion she kept her word. I've never been inside another Catholic Church since, except for Saint Peter's Basilica at the Vatican when I was in Rome visiting my mother," I said.

"What a great story! For me too, it was the guilt part that I had the most trouble with. The notion that Catholicism's guilt inducing doctrines were punitive, designed to control the minds and the hearts of its believers. The followers were serving the church, instead of the church, serving its followers. As a result, I stopped practicing being a Catholic, and begin searching for something...I didn't know what, but something more rational and less restrictive...less oppressive and less punitive," she says, with more than a slight twinge of anger in her tone.

"So Annie, it looks like it might be a difficult situation around here for you, at least until you're able to get around better," I say.

"Yea...and I need to deal with the car issue *tout suite*. Report it to the insurance company," she says.

"You'll definitely need some wheels...especially living out here in the boonies," I say.

"I'll manage. I always do," she says. *Madame Plucky*.

"Okay...here's the deal. I've got a spare bedroom at my place. If you want to consider staying there, at least until you can get the car thing resolved...get a replacement vehicle, I'm open to it." I ask.

"Thanks...but I think both you and I know, that if I come over there..." she says smiling.

"Hey...no pressure. Only if it would help you out," Mr Magnanimous says.

"Well...I guess this is the part where I'm supposed to act coy...riddled with reluctance and indecision," she says.

"A furrowed brow would be a nice touch. Hey...we're both consenting, speaking for myself willing adults here," I say smiling licentiously.

"Okay...I guess just until I get the car thing resolved," she says smiling, again with the batting of the eyes.

"Done. It'll be purely Platonic..."

"Or not. Hopefully more Plutonic...as in thermal nuclear..." she says with that killer smile.

"Who are you insured with?" I ask

"State Farm."

"Good. Why don't you pack some things that you'll need for a week or so....and we'll head over to *Chez Mick*, contact your State Farm agent, and get that started," I say.

"Thanks Mick. Well, I guess we still have to think of some way to repay my growing debt to you...here's a down payment," then she reaches over and gives me a deep passionate kiss. Platonic...*eh?* Right.

"Uh...your credit is now officially good with me. You want to leave a note for Miz Nancy...with contact info?" I ask.

"Yea...frankly she'll be relieved that she doesn't have to deal with any of this. And so will I."

So when Annie moved in for 'just a few weeks'—she never left...until she did. She maintained the pretense of living with her female roommate, Nancy, for the sake of not revealing to her Fundamentalist Christian parents and family that she was, by their standards, *living in sin*. Whenever her parents or siblings came to visit, at least several times a year, she would stay with them at her place, until they left.

It turns out, that exposure to the El Lay. *zeitgeist* also had a transformative effect on her parents and siblings. L.A. does that—often even *saints* are no match for it. *En masse* they stopped going to mass, converting from Catholicism to the more entertaining Holy-wood commercial brand of Tele-Evangelical Christianity, shortly after Annie had left for Tahoe. They had been *born again*, *praise the lord and hallelujah*, while religiously watching CBN on cable TV, and were now actively involved in TBN, Trinity Broadcasting Network. A competing Electronic Church in Orange County, closer to home, founded in 1973 by the eventually disgraced and defrocked Jim Bakker and his wife Tammy Faye. A scandal of Biblical proportions of financial misappropriation and sexual "*improprieties*". Later...both reduced to tragic punch-lines on late night TV.

Being New Christians, now *on fire with the Word*; they volunteered to man the phones for incoming calls, for viewers receiving *the call to serve*

the Lord, guiding them through the divine process of *receiving the Gospel*. Then with an emotional plea to the newly anointed, zealous Christians for a generous monetary contribution, they invoked the guaranteed deal-closer...*in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Between TBN and their perennially unprofitable 'Amway practice' which I later jokingly referred to as both 'non-prophet enterprises'...they were kept very busy with their dual evangelizing, which distracted them from Annie and I. Thank God.

It turns out, that within several months, after being away from the daily doses of Scientology from Nancy *et al*, she began 'to see the light'— becoming disenchanted with the legalism of it, not to mention the constant demand on her time and her bank account. She begins to fall away, or 'backslide' much to the chagrin of Miz Nancy and the 'associates' of the local chapter of the Church.

So Annie was again in full heat-seeking spiritual mode, when she become exposed to the teachings of The Buddha. After several minor detours between Scientology and finally landing on the board, on Buddhism, it became obvious that Annie's mercurial flights from one religion to the next were indicative of a much more fundamental level of inner-unrest and longing...and sadly, gullibility.

But the real odyssey of the spiritual transformation of Annette Trudeau, ultimately, ending in our alienation and estrangement, just begins here.

- Chapter 16 -

In the summer of 1981, I was working my investigation practice, leaving enough time to do some painting, when I read in the local newspaper, that due to the passage of California State Proposition 13 in 1978, which essentially severely limited property tax revenues flowing to school districts all over the state, that the local school district in South Lake Tahoe, was threatening to be forced to cut all funding for athletics to the local schools. This included the South Tahoe High School's football and basketball programs. Reading further, I saw that the local cable company, owned by ACT, American Cable Telecommunication Inc., was soliciting help, to raise revenue to supplement the athletic programs so that the kids could have athletic teams.

Having been active in all sports when I was a kid, I had played everything—baseball, basketball...even football. I had an appreciation and respect for participation in sports—the positive health aspects, both physical and mental, along with the role of wholesome competition in molding character. Not to mention the fact that anything that drew kids away from the toxic effects of a sedentary life spent in front of TV, had to be a better alternative.

There was a contact name of Richard Rudawski and phone number listed. I wondered if it was the same Richard 'Rhino' Rudawski that was an All-American middle linebacker at UCB back in '64 when I was up there, who later played in the NFL for a number of seasons with the Denver Broncos. It sounded like it might be a worthy cause, so I gave him a call.

We agreed to meet for lunch later that day, at the local hotspot, Carlos Murphy's in the middle of town on Lake Tahoe Blvd.

I walked in right at noon, and went to the bar area, where I immediately spotted this huge mountain of man, sitting at the bar, with a cocktail in front of him, laughing with the bartender. I walked up behind him, and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Richard?" I asked

He turned to face me, and could immediately tell that this was not his first drink of the day...two maybe three ahead of me, judging by the redness of his eyes.

"Mick?" he says.

"Yea...hey man...howya doin'?" I say.

"Great...and gettin' better by the minute," he says, motioning to the bar stool next to him, then extending his hand. I give him my own very large hand, but it seemingly disappears into his massive meaty paw.

"What are ya drinkin', Mick?" he says.

"I'll have whatever you're havin'," I say.

"A double Chivas Regal, on the rocks...and another one for me, Scotty," he says to the bartender.

"So Richard, you the same Rudawski that played up a Cal, back in the '60s?" I ask.

"Yeap...call me Rhino...or Rude," he says with an engaging, toothy slack jaw smile.

When our drinks hit the bar, he finishes the one drink, picks up the next one and says, "Here's to ya, man."

"Cheers...you want to get a table where we can talk?" I say picking up my drink, and taking a sip.

"Sure...Scotty, send over another round to our table will ya? And put all this on our lunch tab. Thanks pal," he says laying down a ten for a tip on the bar.

"Thanks, Rhino," Scotty says. Rhino apparently is a mid-day regular here at the bar.

We get seated. The waitress hands us some menus and without looking at it, he says, "The barbequed baby back pork spareribs are killer here."

"Okay. Thanks...but I think I'll go a little lighter," I say.

The waitress comes back with another round of drinks.

"I'll have my usual," he says.

"A double order of the ribs and French fries?" she asks.

"You know it baby," he says playfully patting her on her butt with his huge mitt, which she does not seem to take offense to, probably because The Rhino is a notoriously big tipper.

"I'll have the chicken tostado," I say handing her my menu.

"So, Mick...you remember my name from my UCB days?" he says, sipping his drink.

"Yea...I was up there in '64...on a B-ball scholarship. It didn't work out. I left after a year. Did you know Rusty Warren?" I ask.

"Yea...I played with the 'golden boy'. What a prick. Nobody on the team could stand his ass. He was strictly about looking out for number one. When we heard he got his ass kicked over at La Val's, by some girl's boyfriend...not a very big guy either, but musta' been pretty tough, we all secretly cheered," he said.

"Brawley," I say.

"Sorry?"

"The guy that put Warren in the hospital...his name was Byron Brawley. He was my roommate and best friend up at Cal," I say

"Man, I would've paid to see that one. Well...*I think this is going to be the beginning of a beautiful friendship,*" he says with a broad smile. Again

holding up his glass in a toast, "Here's to your pal...Brawley. You still in touch?"

"Nah...he was KIA...Vietnam in '67. A Silver Star for Gallantry," I say raising my glass, and taking a long pull, downing all of it.

"*Shit*. Sorry, man...bad luck. That whole *fuckin'* war scene...some sick shit," he says his expression momentarily darkening.

"So tell me a little about this fund raising for the local athletic program?" I say picking up my next round waiting on the table, taking another pull.

"Well, first off I gotta tell ya a little about the people I work for. ACT, American Cable Telcom Inc; home office in Denver, Colorado. In fact, that's how I got this job, Regional Director of Marketing...after my playin' days were over with the Denver Broncos. They are one of the biggest MSOs, multi-system operator, in the U.S. But they've got some serious political problems with the local cities and counties, the franchisors. Too much growth...too fast, so the quality of the service is *shit*.

That's why I'm here. This franchise, with the City of South Lake Tahoe is in serious jeopardy. The quality of service is so bad...the customer complaints so many...and prices so high for what is offered, that the City has finally had enough of ACT. The franchise is up for renewal pretty soon, and the City is threatening not to renew it. It would be a huge loss. But worse, a precedent for other franchisors...maybe put some idea in their collective heads to give ACT the bums rush in other towns," he says.

"Okay...I think I got. If I understand you correctly, ACT's motives are not entirely altruistic here with this fundraiser. So you guys are trying to save the so-called franchise by trying to atone for *shitty* service...for high prices?" I say.

"Bingo Mick. So I came up with the idea to raise some money to save the athletic program...maybe get some good press...and feel good PR ya know, for the kids and all that. But frankly, I don't know quite how to go about it. So that's why I'm looking for some help from people in the local community who know the political landscape. We don't have much time on this deal but the company's willing to throw some very big bucks at this to save the franchise," he says.

"So ACT corporate really doesn't give a shit about the kids. This really is all about corporate profits...and loss," I say.

"Yeap...I guess that's how it shakes out, Mick. The CEO, J. Murdock Mahoney has given marching orders to everyone that's responsible for franchise relations...which includes me. Fix this...and fix it now, or your replacement will. Nobody disappoints Jason Mahoney, alias Ca-Je...more than once."

"Ca-je?" I say

"Uh...*Cable Jesus*," he says.

"Well now...I'll have to give this some thought. Under the circumstances, as you have outlined them, I'm not entirely sure I want to get involved with this," I say.

"I understand, Mick. But I just wanted to be square with you...ex-Cal Bear to ex-Cal Bear. That said, I personally have begun to develop a relationship with the local high school football and basketball teams, the players and coaches. The coaches are all good guys. They're in the profession for the right reasons. For them, it's all about the kids just having the opportunity to participate. They realize that these kids will probably never go on to play big time college ball. But they want them to experience what you and I experienced as kids...being a member of a team, learning the ethic of hard work and sacrifice...being an unselfish team player. If *we* don't make it happen. It won't," he says with disarming sincerity.

"Okay Rhino, I think you're personally in this, also for the right reasons. As long as the kids are the ultimate benefactors of this deal, I guess I don't really care about the motives behind it by the parent corporation...even if ACT, in the end benefits. For me, it's all about the kids. So...I'm going to role the dice with you Rhino, that you're being square with me. I've got a few ideas I can run by you...after you buy the next round," I say smiling, extending my hand which Rhino grabs vigorously shaking my whole body.

As he motions to the waitress, Rhino's face lights up with a broad smile, "Becky...another round over here, please," he yells.

The whole time I'm talking to the literally larger-than-life Rhino, while nodding his head in agreement, he's diving into the two plates of ribs with reckless abandon, his face ear to ear, smeared with grease and barbeque sauce. He's ruggedly handsome, with an affable face. My guess...he's about 6'4" maybe going 275 pounds with shoulders like he's still in shoulder pads. Apparently it takes a lot fuel stoking the boilers, to keep the Rhino Train running.

By now, I've got two rounds of double scotches under my belt. Despite the fact that the Rhino is still at least two rounds ahead of me, as we've been downing double Chivas for over two hours, with his huge volume, he still acts relatively unfazed. Neither one of us is feeling any pain.

"So, Rhino...based on what you're tellin' me about the short time line...here's what I'm thinking. You ever seen those sappy sentimental telethons on TV? Every year Jerry Lewis does the MDA, Muscular Dystrophy Association fundraiser...raises millions of bucks over a weekend," I say.

"Yea, man, I remember...kinda cheesy. I can't stand that guy...Jerry Lewis."

"Agreed. Not many people can. Very cheesy indeed...but why do ya think they do it every year? 'Cause it works...big time. Raising millions of bucks that would normally take months if not years to raise, in a matter of just two days. The power of TV personified. So based on the underlying rationale here, to make nice to the community, and the City Fathers, something like this,

if done right, with video vignettes of local human interest stories...of the coaches...and athletes, and but more importantly, the local politicians, interspersed with the actual on air telethon, you could raise the money *and* create *tres* good will for ACT in the process. But most importantly...the priority of giving the kids the opportunity. It's *win-win baby*. Instead of the 'big bad-ass corporate cable company' a kinder, gentler face, in your case a very large...charitable face.

You'd be the MC...not a Jerry Lewis, but a coach. Coach Rhino, on your cap...with a clipboard and a whistle, givin' away tee-shirts and caps to the kids, with the logo of the telethon. Updating status reports on the contributions, blowing the whistle when hitting one of the many plateaus of \$\$\$\$. The metaphor of the coach, exhorting the community to do the right thing...to win one for the kids. *Rhino's kids*.

"I like it...tell me more, after the next round. Becky...another round over here please," Rhino yells.

"By the way, just so there are no surprises, what's up with the nickname Rhino? Got anything to do with that big horn on its snout...like always bein' horny?" I say.

"Nope...nuthin' that cool. It's 'cause when I'm runnin'...I kinda gallop like a Rhino with my head down, and when I hit you, you feel you done been stuck by a Rhinoceros horn," he says with no small amount of pride.

"Okay...I guess we can live with that. If anybody asks ya...since this is ain't supposed to be *R*...as in Rhino rated for violence, you can leave the part out about spearing the poor bastard. So...the first thing we gotta know is, how much do they need, so we can set a goal...adding at least 20 percent to that number, for pledges that aren't actually realized. You got a number?" I ask.

"No...but I gotta meeting set up with the mayor and the city manager, next week so we can run this by them. I can have them get the numbers for that meeting. Can you make it to the meeting, and pitch the deal for us?" he asks.

"Yea...probably. But we'll need for you to get some approval from your people before we make the pitch...so we'll need a production budget etc. to submit to them. My rough estimate is that we're looking at about 20-30 K dollars out the door...minimum. That would include marketing dollars, like radio and print...promotional premiums like hats and tee-shirts...and bill stuffers with donation forms, sent out with the cable bills...etc.

If you want me to produce it...then we'll have to talk about some sort of compensation scheme for me, to act as executive producer and director. Since this is essentially for the kids, I'd be willing to turn-key the whole production for about 10 large, or about half what I would normally get. That does not include all the production equipment....cameras, tape decks, editing, lights and sound etcetera, which would be the responsibility of ACT, which I'm assuming has access to all the necessary prod-equip in-house, along with professionals who know how to use it. So ballpark...20K plus 10K for *moi*," I say.

"Done deal...30K is chump change for what's at stake here," he says, taking another pull on his cocktail, while yelling, "Becky!"

"Okay...the other major issue, is timing. It's got to be televised on a weekend...like noon to midnight Saturday and Sunday...when people are at home. My guess is early winter is when most people will be staying at home, inside...but before the holidays, when there's some more disposable money in town. That leaves us with only about 3 months, to put this whole thing together. There's a helluva lot to do, man. It'll be tough but it can be done...*if* we can get started in a coupla weeks," I say.

"I'm all in, man. I can handle the marketing...including print in the local newspaper...radio, and doing a dog and pony show with the local service organizations, like the Rotary Club and the Lions," he says.

"Finally, you'll need a catchy name to pitch it...something that says what it is...to sell it to the community and the local movers and shakers," I say.

"Got any ideas, Mick?" he says.

"Oh I don't know. How 'bout something like...Sporta-thon? A telethon for sports. It's 1981...so Sporta-thon '81, in case they need to do it again, every year, like Superbowl XV, etcetera," I say.

"I like it...a lot. Let me run this by my people," he says.

"Okay...one last, last thing. It's already 4 PM. Happy hour is about to start...which means I'm gonna *try* to stand up...and leave before I get *very stupid* and lapse into TSS?"

"TSS? I think my third...or mighta been R4 wife had that. Uh...Toxic Shock Syndrome. Are you about to have your period?" he asks with a faux puzzled look.

"Toxic *Scotch* Syndrome. Nope...no period. Just one big question mark on how da hell I'm going to drive home...if I don't leave, like right now," I say.

"Okay Mick. Hey, you want me to call ya a cab? Okay...you're a cab," he says. It's an old Borscht Belt joke, but when you're half-hammered, even tired jokes seem hilarious.

"I think I can manage. Yeap...the beginning of a beautiful friendship. You outta here too?" I say with a toasted grin.

"Nah...think I'll stick around here for just one more round...or two. Becky gets off at about seven, which means I'll be gettin' off about eight. I'll be in touch. And thanks Mick," he says pumping my hand with his big toothy man-child grin.

This indeed would be the beginning of a long and close friendship with Rhino Rudawski. But more significantly, the genesis of my odyssey of revelation of the incredible power of a few major corporations controlling the media, both content producers and delivery technology, for better or for worse, to influence and shape the discourse of the *vox populi*, but more profoundly,

control who even gets to have access to the 'megaphone'.

Sport-athon '81 is a huge unqualified success. With my connections at the casinos through Annie, we get interviews with some of the in-town celebrity headliners, like The Cos, Bill Cosby, himself an ex-B-ball player in college, and Willie Nelson, advocating the cause.

For a Saturday and Sunday in late October of 1981, for 12 hours a day, we cablecast a telethon out into the cable system of about 30K homes in California and Nevada, featuring lots of pre-produced interviews with local politicians, school administrators, coaches, and student athletes.

Rhino and I make personal house-calls to each of the five major casinos in Stateline Nevada which borders the City of South Lake Tahoe. Since much of their locals-based revenue comes from residents across Stateline, we pitch the concept of being a 'good community citizen' to individual casino Managers. The casinos are all highly competitive with each other.

So once we get the first one to go along for \$500, we go to the other casinos and let it tactfully slip how much their competitors are giving...whipsawing back and forth between the Managers, until we get everybody up to \$1,000. So we've got \$5K, a month before the telethon. It's cheap advertising for them and an excellent return on investment for perceived goodwill in the community, with the local smiling Casino Manager of each of the five major properties coming on air, presenting a check for \$1,000...*for the kids*. Uh-huh.

Rhino is brilliant as the on-air MC. He's an accomplished raconteur with many colorful stories about his days in the NFL. And he's great at interacting with the student athletes on-air, who are in awe of him, generously handing out autographed tee-shirts and caps emblazoned with the Sport-athon logo. And of course, there is the obligatory tugs-at-your-heart-strings little kids coming in with mayonnaise jars full of nickels and dimes that they've collected door-to-door.

Corporate ACT, flies some heavy hitters in, CEO Mahoney's Senior Vice President of Operations, Paul Berman and Corporate Franchise Relations Manager, Marla T. Dyson, to deliver a check for 5K dollars, on-air. This creates many photo ops to demonstrate to the other franchisors that ACT is a kinder-gentler-mega-media-corporation...with a heart. Right.

Sport-athon '81, creates about \$85,000 net over two days, which exceeds the goal, by about \$20,000. Everybody's happy...including the local politicians, City Councilmen, the Mayor—everyone gets a lot of political mileage from it. It's win-win—an unqualified PR success for ACT. And especially the kids.

I get invited to go to the ACT corporate state-of-the-art production facility in Denver, to edit a 1 hour documentary about the telethon, called Sport-athon '81, How ACT Saved the Athletic Program of South Lake Tahoe. It is entered in the ACE Competition, Awards for Cable Excellence, held by the National Cable Television Association every year for programming produced by cable companies. It wins first place in its category delivering good national press for ACT.

While in Denver for a week, editing the documentary, I'm introduced to many of the corporate officers of ACT. One afternoon, I receive an invitation from Mahoney's Secretary, to have dinner with CEO, J. Murdock Mahoney the following evening. Rounding out the guests are VP Paul Berman and Corporate Franchise Relations Manager, Marla T. Dyson, both of whom I had met earlier, when they flew in for the telethon.

We are to meet at some ridiculously-priced five-star place, downtown Denver, about 7 PM, *Chez something-or-other*, for cocktails, and dinner. I arrive by cab right at seven, to find that they have already been seated. I'm dressed casual, with a blue blazer and tie, over jeans, with Sperry Topsider deck shoes, sans socks, which raises the eyebrows of the snooty *maitre d'* as he escorts me way to the back of the restaurant, to a private dining room, where I find everyone already seated at a large four-top table with linen tablecloth and napkins; with two empty cocktail glasses each, in front of them. Hmm...already behind two rounds. These ACT folks are a tough crowd to keep up with. The *maitre d'* pulls a chair out, for me, then drops the napkin on my lap with a condescending air like he smells something bad, which I suppose is not my cologne, but more because of my relatively uncouth casual attire.

"May I get you something to drink?" he reluctantly adds, "sir?" Pierre asks who I suspect, by day, answers to Pete.

"Sure...I'll have a Johnny Walker Black, over," I say.

"Very good sir. May I get anyone else another cocktail?" he says.

They all nod yes, and Pierre removes the empty cocktail glasses and oozes out of the room.

They all stand up. Paul, 'Pauly' Berman, whom I had spent considerable time with in Tahoe, and who I had liked immediately when I first met him, makes the introductions, and we all shake and sit. When Pauly was in his early twenties, he had lived in Tahoe North Shore, in Tahoe City, skied Squaw Valley the Mother of all Mountains, site of the 1960 Winter Olympics. For a time, he was on the professional freestyle circuit, until he blew out a knee, which prompted him to go back and finish his undergrad at NYU where he grew up, and then finishing up with an MBA from Harvard Business.

The men are wearing bookend dark gray Brooks Brothers, white shirt and unremarkable neckties, the de facto corporate uniform. Marla Dyson's in a tasteful herringbone tailored pants suit with a relatively daring accessory, a muted mauve silk scarf. You go girl!

Pauly Berman, maybe, 35, is short and compact—looking trim and fit, with a relaxed and affable persona and an easy, contagious laugh. Despite having an MBA from Cambridge, he's still got a thick NYC accent, and the hip urban brash manner to go with it, which he makes no attempt to conceal. It serves him and his boss, Jason Mahoney well, especially when sitting in on those marathon sessions of negotiation...*doin' deals*, where he comes across as a tough, street-smart take-no-prisoners NY Jew, which belies his brilliant intellect and his personal generosity of spirit.

It's well-known that Mahoney relies on Pauly to do his heavy lifting—overseeing operations, hiring and firing, and it is no secret that he is being groomed by Mahoney to eventually run American Media Inc., one of ACT's many *subsids*, which is rapidly merging and acquiring creators and deliverers of programming, at a dizzying pace.

Creating multi-layers of corporate subsidiaries, to keep the Department of Justice Anti-trust Division overwhelmed, legally outgunned...and off their back. So this long term strategy of aggressive acquisition pursued under the guise of diversification, if left unchecked by the DOJ, ultimately would allow ACT to become hegemonically vertically, and horizontally integrated and politically well-positioned. Owning and controlling distribution, from creation of content to the consumer, including movie-goers and cable TV subscribers, would allow ACT through its many Byzantine subsidiaries to get a piece of the action at each step of the food chain.

Marla Dyson, is also in her early thirties, an undergrad from U of Illinois, with a JD, Juris Doctor from Stanford Law. In her heels, a mid-western raw boned gal, she's close to six-feet tall, with voluptuous curves. She's super-smart and an elegant looker—pure class.

Before showing up for dinner, to mitigate my considerable capacity to demonstrate my ignorance, I decided that I needed to know a little more about Doctor *J...* as in Jesus.

Indeed, Dr. Jason Murdock Mahoney, has an impressive resume of matriculation; MIT B.A.. Electrical Engineering and Economics, Princeton M.S. Electrical Engineering and Industrial Management, Harvard Business M.S., and Ph.D Operations Research.

From his bio, I am surprised to learn that he's only forty-two. In fact, with his youthful, fit and trim appearance he could pass for someone my age.

A large man, maybe 6'3", with broad square shoulders, a strong chin, and full head of dark thick hair, graying slightly at the temples, cut conservatively short but definitely styled—the poster-boy for presidential.

His wide-set unblinking eyes, are very dark, making his pupils indiscernible, deep under a prominent brow, casting the same menacing persona of a shark. Not much of a smiler, it's more of fleeting smirk, which is probably a good thing for him—his sneering thin upper lip revealing far too many reptilian teeth for the size of his mouth.

All the while speaking to you, he maintains an inscrutable, penetrating gaze, seemingly searching, sizing-up and measuring the object of his attention, like a curious circling shark. I begin to wonder if the initial *J*, stands for *Jaws*.

Because I have no illusions about how my meager intellect measures up to these Masters of the Universe, I decide to let them do all the talking, to limit my contribution to the conversation to an occasional sagely nod—to leave them guessing, rather than confirm my stupidity. So, I'll just be lil' ol' me...since everybody else is taken; WYSIWYG.

"Jace, Mick here is from Lake Tahoe. He and Richard Rudawski produced that telethon in Tahoe...it was a huge PR success for us," Pauly Berman says.

"And...I think as a result, now, we may have a good chance of getting that franchise renewed in South Lake Tahoe," Marla Dyson adds.

"Well, it was Rhino's idea to do something for the community...for the kids. I just facilitated his brilliant concept," I say. Mr Modesty.

"So...you're a facilitator, by trade, Mick? Tell me more," Jason Mahoney asks.

"Mr Mahoney..." I start.

"Please...Jason," he says with his laser gaze.

"Okay...Jason. Well, in my former day job, down in L.A. I was a negotiator and a claims administrator for some big-numbers plaintiff attorneys," I explain.

Pauly, Marla and Jason, exchange nodding glances. Suspicions now confirmed about my stupidity. So much for keeping my mouth shut.

In the meantime Pierre wanders in. Pauly wordlessly signals another round with a circular hand motion.

Pauly says, "Mick here is too modest. I hope you're not offended...but we've done some checking on your background, and some other things. According to our rather in depth research into Mick's past employment history...in interviewing some of his former clients, he was a can-do take no prisoners, and M-F uh...Mr Fixit. Smart...and if need be, the other M-F."

"So...I can see you did your homework. To what end may I ask?" I say.

"Mick...you're probably wondering why we invited you to have dinner with us? I'll save ya the guess work and cut straight to da chase, man. It's no secret in the industry...in all the trades, because of our recent major priority of merger and acquisition of cable systems, which provides most of the more than healthy cash flow which funds all the other acquisitions, that we've taken our eye off the ball. We've neglected to take care of...and protect the cash cow that we've got. Many of our systems in Northern California and Northern Nevada, are up for franchise renewal within the next 5 years," Paul says

I finally get an opportunity to demonstrate my sagely nod, and jump on it. Then, "If you don't mind my asking...and this has what if anything to do with me?" I ask.

"With the unqualified PR success of the telethon in Tahoe, we think you might be able to help us with some of our more problematic franchise renewals in uh...MF kinda role," says Marla with a wry smile.

"And not da Mr Fix it...da uda MF," Pauly says in exaggerated *Brooklynese*.

That one almost draws a smile from Dr. J. Almost.

I have no idea where this going, so I just continue with the nodding, alternating between pensive and wryly puzzled, which gives me enough time to muster a sagacious response.

"Oh?" I say.

"If you were to take the position we're offering you...you'd be working very closely under Marla, as her eyes and ears on the ground, at a newly created position. Regional Manager of Operations and Franchise Affairs for the Northern California and Nevada cable systems. To identify, troubleshoot and fix problem areas with existing local management...and problematic relationships with the franchising authorities for the various systems," Pauly says.

The part about working very closely *under* Marla, definitely captures my attention and imagination.

"I'm very flattered by the offer. But to be perfectly frank, I don't know cable from corn pone. With my limited technical background and understanding of the technology, I wouldn't feel qualified to manages cable systems," I say.

"We're not looking for that in this position. This is all about the politics of getting to *yes*...by *any* and *all* means necessary which you seem to be uniquely qualified for. All of the system managers at the local systems have technical background, many of whom are just promoted technicians, holdovers from the old days in cable. Unprofessional for the most part...some without any college. They're totally clueless about how to manage the critical political relationship with the local government franchisor. In many cases, the relationship has devolved to an adversarial one. When we allow that to happen...we may win the battle but always lose the war. Automatic," Marla says smiling, while catching me snatching a glance at her left hand, absent a wedding band.

What is it about these damn, not just beautiful, but brilliant, alpha females like Veruska Mirren, and now Marla Dyson that is like an aphrodisiac for me?

"If you don't mind...I'd like to give this some serious thought, before giving you my answer," I say

Jason Mahoney now seamlessly intervenes in his customary role as

The Great Closer, "Okay...the one rather obvious part of this offer that we haven't discussed is the salary and perks. What kind of numbers would help persuade you to come on board?"

Hmm. Skilled negotiators never make the first offer. Get your counter party's demand first, depending on with how much conviction it is conveyed through body language and speech inflection, then make your counteroffer. Mastering the art of reading emotional and physical cues, body language, is crucial to the art of effective negotiating, as much if not more so, as being fluent with the facts and figures.

"Well...Jason, I'd have to think about that as well," I say, easing back into the familiar playful foreplay of negotiating. Mr Cooool.

"Ballpark?" Pauly says.

"Oh...gee, aw shucks," I say smiling, "I don't know, I guess I'd expect maybe...at least \$50,000 a year, plus benefits," I say, shooting high just to get a reaction. Apparently not nearly high enough.

Jason Mahoney smiles and says, "\$65,000 plus full medical and dental and profit sharing...a plus a luxury company car of your choice. Does that help you make up your mind?" he says.

"It doesn't hurt...but there is one more major issue that would need to be addressed, as a condition precedent to even considering your offer...at any salary. Would I be expected to relocate from Lake Tahoe?" I ask.

"Mick, our *sources*..." with air quotes "have lead us to believe that you are involved in, shall we say, a serious relationship in Tahoe. Because Lake Tahoe is fairly centrally located among the various systems that would be under your supervision, we would have no problem with you setting up your office in Tahoe, including hiring your secretary locally. That said, you would be spending a considerable amount of time traveling from system to system, and here in Denver, attending corporate manager meetings...and making your unique talents available, like helping to create and craft policy for corporate franchise relations, generally," Marla says.

Unique talents available. Ms Dyson...you have no idea...

"Hmm, yes...I can see you've done your homework. If it's okay with you, I'd like to have a week to think about it," I say.

"\$75,000 and that's my best offer," Jason Mahoney says again with that unblinking laser stare.

Time for another sagacious nod. Seems the less I talk, the better I do.

"Mick...as you may have already noticed, Jace is not used to hearing the word *no*...or even maybe...from *anybody*...and he does *not* like to be disappointed. We'd like to have your answer...before you leave town," Pauly says with an undercurrent of the ominous in his tone.

"I intend to complete my editing of the production, and return to Tahoe in about three days. You'll have my answer before I leave," I say.

Pauly silently nods grudging affirmation, pauses a moment to reflect, exchanges eye contact with Jason, then motions Pierre, who has been standing at attention by the door, to come over to the table. Apparently part of Pauly's job description, is to ensure that Dr. J. does not experience *any* disappointment whatsoever.

"We're ready to eat now...please bring us menus, another round...and your best bottle each of red and white wine," Pauly says rather coolly.

We finish dinner, a long drawn-out seven course affair, indulging in small talk, with Pauly telling some hilarious off-color jokes, which do not seem to offend Marla, keeping everyone loose, except for Dr. J. whose measuring gaze I feel focused on me much of the evening, foreshadowing something dark and malevolent.

But I do manage to find out a little more about Dr. Jason Mahoney. He's got two kids, a daughter college age, and a son, high school age, attending a school just outside of Denver. On the surface, he's appears to be a dedicated family man, and speaks respectfully about his first and only wife. I also discover that he is passionate about sailing...racing sloops in off-shore ocean regattas. The Big Boys, 12 meters class, and big \$,\$\$\$,\$\$\$\$. It gives me some insight into his reputation as being somewhat of loner, and his notorious, intensely competitive nature, preferring the solitude of racing sailboats, to more social sports, like golf or tennis.

While living in Southern California, I had crewed on some off-shore yacht races, like the Annual Newport-to-Ensenada International Yacht Race, and found the solitude of the expanse of limitless horizon of the open seas, the awe-inspiring sunsets, evocative of a spiritual sense of solace. But always just below the surface a respect, an ineffable, almost addictive awe...and fear, of the seductive, often unpredictable, sometimes petulant *Madame La Mer*. I get it. Dinner is followed by a Courvoisier brandy and an anisette liqueur.

After dinner, it's about 1 AM as I accompany Marla out of the restaurant. We walk out into the cold night air with me holding her under her arm. After so much alcohol, both of us sort of bracing each other up. Standing there, in the brisk night air she gets a shiver, then with a cooing sound, nestles up under my wing placing the front of her body against mine, pressing her soft breasts against me, her face burrowing into my chest. I place my arm around her shoulders...just to be polite. Right. I catch a resonant whiff of her intoxicating perfume. Veruska's, *for my Misha* scent which I make as *Amirage* by Givency, at a couple hundred bucks an ounce, my favorite fragrance on a woman. I begin to wonder exactly how much her *sources* actually *do know* about me, at the time, a seemingly innocuous foreshadow?

I walk her over to her car.

"Would you care for a ride tonight...to the hotel?" she adds looking up into my eyes, smiling not so innocently.

Now what do I do? But my better angels, usually woefully over-matched and outmaneuvered, especially in such a highly inebriated state,

somehow prevail and convince me that Annie, who is back in Tahoe...waiting, deserves at least *some* measure of token resistance. To assuage my lustful guilt, I vow to myself to call her at home tomorrow morning and tell her about the offer...the job part.

"Thanks...but I think I need a walk in the night air, to clear my head a little," I hear myself valiantly say, but with a discernible lack of conviction, which she picks up on.

"Maybe next time," a confidently smiling Marla says, gently squeezing my hand. She slides into her new midnight blue Audi Quattro and drives off, leaving me standing there, for several minutes oozing with moral ambivalence as I watch her tail lights finally disappear into the night.

After some serious reflection, and discussing it with Annie over the phone, I decide to accept the offer of the position at \$75K...not a bad wage, for Tahoe. It would mean suspending my investigation business, but frankly, after all these years of dealing with the inherent negativity of personal injury litigation—the human misery of the injured victims, hyper-adversarial ego-maniacal attorneys, and insurance companies, I am definitely ready for a change. Worst case is, that I can always restart my practice, and be up and running to the income level where I left off within six months.

It would be my first encounter of many, with one J. Murdock Mahoney, CEO of ACT, affectionately referred to by other media conglomerate CEO's, Chief Enrichment Officers, as...Cap, short for Captain Ahab. A polite reference to his fascination with the sea and passion for sailing...and obsession for winning at any cost, financially and every other way. But more so, it is emblematic of his monomaniacal ruthlessness and hubris, often leading him to defy common sense and believe that, like a god, he can enact his will and remain immune to the laws of man and nature, commanding a morally oblivious, bankrupt Ship of Corporate Fools, HMS, *His Majesty Ship*, Pequod Inc. And ultimately, he would prove to be a much more than worthy adversary.

I call Marla to inform her of my decision, She gives me the canned ACT welcome aboard speech, and offers to take me to lunch, then the airport for my return flight to Tahoe.

Over lunch, compared to our last encounter, she's in full-business mode. I assume, that the recognition that we'll be working closely together in her now un-inebriated state, Marla seems to have realized her role as my boss—she's professionally aloof and all business, which frankly fills me with a great sense of relief.

Lunch is a token affair with the unspoken compact of *sans* alcohol. We talk about when I will officially start—in two weeks. She gives me a brief synopsis of my duties, job description, perks and benefits. By then, it's time get to the airport, where I have her just drop me off in the loading zone in front of the American Airlines terminal.

"Hey, thanks for the lift, Marla. I'll give ya a call in the next few days. It'll take me a few weeks to get all my current business in order, including advising my clients that I'm no longer available," I say.

"Great...talk to you soon. Have a great flight," she says perfunctorily.

The two hour and twenty minute flight from Denver International to Reno is unremarkable. Thankfully both seats in my aisle are empty, which allows me to stretch out my long frame, and catch up on some much needed sleep.

When I enter the baggage claim area, I immediately see Annie racing toward me. *My gawd, I had forgotten how beautiful she is...but le monsieur most certainly has not...*

She leaps up, throwing her arms around my neck, enveloping my mouth with her soft, warm voluptuous lips. I throw my arms around her slender back and lift her off the ground, spinning around. Her lively lean body pressed tightly against mine, feels so familiar, so natural, that I am actually moved to tears of joy...and gratitude, mostly for not having betrayed her trust.

- Chapter 17 -

The drive from Reno to Lake Tahoe normally takes about an hour. The whole time the conversation is playful, easy and natural. We stop in Carson City, elevation about 4,800 feet, right at the base of Highway 50 before it ascends up Spooner Summit to 7,200 feet elevation, to have something light and unremarkable to eat at some little cafe. Making small talk, the waitress mentions that there's supposed to be a pretty big storm coming in this afternoon, with the snow level dropping to 3,000 feet. We quickly finish up, and pay the bill, wanting to get over Spooner summit, before the big boy hits.

As we head toward the summit, it begins snowing lightly at first—within a half an hour the wind is howling, the trees dancing nosily—it's approaching a complete whiteout when we arrive at *Chez MAK*, about 5 PM. In January, it's already dark as I pull into the driveway. When we open the truck doors, it's about 15 degrees colder at the Lake elevation of 6,200 feet. Just ahead of it.

Upon entering, I immediately notice that something is different about the place. There are now curtains, and many subtle feminine decorating touches...very homey and cozy. I build a big roaring fire in the fireplace, while Annie lights many fragrant candles and some incense.

I put some music on, down low...a little Lionel Richie, a duet with Diana Ross, *Endless Love*. I break open a nice bottle of chilled white wine, and we get comfortable on the several huge pillows on the floor in front of the warming fire, with our glasses of wine. The only sound above the soft music, the crackling fire and howling wind whistling under the eaves.

Endless Love

*My love,
There's only you in my life
The only thing that's bright*

*My first love,
You're every breath that I take
You're every step I make...*

I get up, open my carry-on case, and take out a something that I had purchased at the Duty-free store at Denver airport. I lay down beside Annie, seemingly entranced by the primal power of the dancing flames of the crackling fire, reflecting off her serene lupine eyes.

"Close your eyes," I say.

When she does, I remove the cap from the spray bottle pass it under nose, "Take a deep breath..."

She does so...then opens her eyes and looks at me, "*Mon dieu*, that is divine! What is it?"

"*Amirage*...by Givenchy. Like it?" I ask.

"*Bien sur...c'est enchanteur*," she coos.

"Good...if you like it, I'll buy you buckets of it *ma amore*," I say smiling.

"Oh, *ma cherie*...put some on me...now, all over," she whispers unbuttoning her top.

I slowly remove her top, revealing her bra-less luscious full breasts, her generous nipples obviously aroused. I spray the perfume on her neck first...then her shoulders, down to her inviting breasts, at each touch, lightly kissing. Her body begins to vibrate as I slowly pull her jeans off, casting them aside, placing more perfume on her delicious body, lower and lower, kissing her gently each step of the way.

She is now lying completely naked with only the warm glow of the flickering fire subtly revealing her beautiful feminine contours. She reaches over and pulls my shirt off over my head, reaches down, unbuckles my belt, and in one continuous movement, removes my pants, tossing them clear. We are now both completely naked, our bodies vibrating at the same frequency with expectant passion. We kiss passionately, and as we look into each others eyes, with hers barely open she pleads for me to mount her.

As if on cue, Rachmaninoff's 3rd Piano Concert begins playing, the epitome of the erotic. In Russia, his music initially was banned because it was considered far too sensual for public consumption. The Rach 3 is like making love...long, slow, melodic with crescendos and many tempo changes. We make passionate love...for several hours. Both of us dripping wet from multiple orgasms, her slick body glistening in the firelight, punctuated with groans of...*plus...plus...jamais arrêter ma amour!*

I get up and throw some more logs on to the waning fire, get a down comforter off the sofa, lay down beside her, and throw the comforter over us. We tightly embrace, her back nestled against my chest with my hands caressing her soft warm breasts. I am suddenly overwhelmed with the sensation of timelessness—a joyful bliss and gratitude that at this moment...in this place, all is right with the world.

We fall asleep and do not awaken until morning, still in the same embrace, when I am stirred from a deep peaceful sleep, by the loud groaning sound of the roof trusses above, already straining under the weight of the massive ice and snow build-up.

It turns out that this is no ordinary snowstorm. Indeed, it snows all through the night, and for the next three days, seldom without let-up. Early on

the third day, we lose power, telephone and cable TV, probably from the high-winds causing the snow-laden trees to fall, taking out the aerial utilities, which includes most of Tahoe. Because the house is all electric—no power means no heat, no cooking, no refrigeration, and no heat tape to keep the plumbing from freezing.

I take everything out of the refrigerator and bury it in a snow bank in front of the house. There are now 4-6 foot snow drifts already starting accumulate. I go outside to survey the situation, and estimate that there is about 6 feet of snow on the roof. Not good. If the snow load for the roof is exceeded which is right at about 7-8 feet, the roof could collapse.

It continues to snow, unrelentingly. With no phone, we have absolutely no contact with the outside world, so we don't know what the weather forecast is. The battery operated radio receives only static, which means the local radio station transmitters are probably damaged, and unable to broadcast. Another two to three days of this, could mean 8-9 feet of snow on the roof. The tremendous weight of the ice and snow is already causing compression of the framing structure of the house—the interior doors are no longer functional. Some of the door frames at the top are compressed down into the doorway by as much as one-half inch.

This definitely spells trouble. If the snow load on the roof isn't relieved, the whole house could collapse like a house of cards...with us in it. Pancake City.

In addition, because it is so cold, and with no heat—the interior house temperature nearing 40 degrees—the plumbing freezes under the house, so now there is no water for cooking etc., or toilets. I open all the facets in the bathrooms and the kitchen, put on my one piece snow suit, and clamber through the basement crawl hole, with a flash light and an acetylene torch.

For about an hour and half, I crawl around under the house, surveying the pipes for a tell-tale rupture in the relatively fragile cooper water supply lines. No obvious burst pipes visually...yet, but I won't know until I get the main line defrosted. If I don't get the pipes defrosted, and soon, once the pipes burst, it will be a nightmare to fix, forming an ice rink on the ground under the house and everything around it, making it almost impossible to work down there; *Sit spins* and *death spirals*...a la Olympic figure skater Dorothy Hamil.

I search for tell-tale condensation on the pipes, with heat tape on them, useless without power. I remove the heat tape and play the torch flame on the places that appear to be frozen. Finally, after about an hour warming the main pipe with the torch, I get lucky, and find several places where the pipe is frozen, which is announced by a loud cracking sound followed by the sound of the ice releasing from the blockage, accompanied by the loud noise of the water rushing through all the lines, spitting out of the open facets, immediately revealing two small bursts of shooting streams of water on the feeder pipes.

I quickly turn off the main shut-off valve. Climb out of the basement,

go into the garage, get some solder, flux, emery paper and several half-inch sleeves, a tube cutter and a coupla more bottles of acetylene gas for the torch. It takes me another hour to repair the burst lines, before I can turn on the main valve again. Thankfully, the line does not refreeze and the repairs hold...as I hear the water rushing toward the facets. From now on, we will keep all of the facets, both the hot and cold water lines open with a low steady stream to keep the water moving, so as not to freeze. Most people do not realize that, counter intuitively, it is often the hot water pipe that is the first to freeze, because of the excitability of the hot water molecules. To test this, if you put hot water in an ice cube tray, it will freeze up faster than cold water.

By the forth day the storm really bares its teeth. Annie and I, with the Lake effect feeding the moisture content of the clouds, assume that this bad-boy has got some serious legs, so we get into our one piece ski suits, go outside and begin to shovel the driveway. It takes us both shoveling for over two hours, enough for me to open the garage door to be able to make a path, to get the snow blower out. Even outside, we can hear the constant groaning and shuddering of the roof trusses under the massive weight above.

Then, with snow shovels, we begin building a huge drift on one of the existing drifts next to the roof, already almost eight feet high, which will serve as a ramp about 30 feet long, of compacted snow. We place some old discarded sheets of plywood I had found under the house, down on top of the snow ramp, to enable traction for the snow blower, which will connect to the low point of the roof eaves.

I then fire up the Snapper snow blower. I climb the ramp up to the roof, with a heavy rope tied to snow blower. I get Annie to engage the clutch, and drive and cajole the blower up the ramp, while I pull with all my might, until we get the blower up on to the roof, with Annie working right alongside me the whole time...never complaining...always positive, smiling and playful. What a gal...they sure make 'em plucky in Northern Maine.

Once the snow blower is on the roof, over the next few hours, I make several runs until I can get the snow pretty much blown off the roof. By then, it's almost dark. Both of us are exhausted. We go inside the house and I throw some more logs on the fire in an attempt to get at least one room livable temperature-wise. We take inventory, and realize that we probably have enough food for another two days...if we carefully ration what we have. After we lost power, I had fashioned a standing grill from the sliding grill from the oven in the now useless stove, with legs fabricated from long metal cooking spoons and forks, lashed with wire to the grill, to cook our meals over the fire. Canned pork and beans never tasted quite so good...especially after shoveling snow all day.

One other little interesting development to further challenge our urban camping experience—because the fireplace is mostly for cosmetics, I never keep more than a half of a cord of wood. At this rate of burning the fireplace, we might have 2-3 days of wood left. So we are now forced to be

also judicious with the consumption of the firewood. I start making a mental note of which wooden furniture would be expendable. First candidate, the IKEA coffee table—one way to finally resolve the age-old question. Is there *any* real 'wood' in IKEA 'furniture'?

Each night as we sleep next to the fire, it is like a scene from David Lean's masterwork, *Doctor Zhivago*, when Yuri and Lara, with her daughter, in the dead of winter are forced retreat to the relative political safety of the isolated old family estate in the Russian steppe. Our days are spent reading by day and candle light by night. Annie decides to write some poetry. We make love often and a profound closeness, a level of intimacy I had never experienced with another human being, is formed. We have long talks, about the future which I've never done before with any woman. By the time I had decided to entertain any kind of long term commitment with Sora Eagle Feather, the relationship had imploded.

After far too many cursory, shallow relationships, sooner or later, I had found that one of the most important priorities for most women, was the notion of having a family, at least one child. That was deal breaker for me...no matter how much I could ever love a woman, because of my turbulent childhood with an abusive, philandering alcoholic father, I did not want to sit through that movie again. Most especially, I did not want to subject a child to even the remotest possibility of going through that. One night after some passionate lovemaking, Annie begins to cry. At first, she tried to restrain herself, but eventually it overwhelmed her. She snuggled deeply into my chest.

"Oh...Mickey, please, just hold me tight. There is so much I want to tell you...that you don't know about me, but I'm scared to death of losing you if you know," she sobs.

"It can't be that bad...we've come a long way, girl...in a very short time. But I have a closeness to you that I've never felt with another woman. Does this have something to do with you wanting to have a family...with having kids?" I ask, while gently stroking her lovely long hair.

"*Mon dieu...n'est pas*. I do not want *any* children. Ever. Period. That you don't have to even worry about," she says with such a vehemence that I am somewhat startled by it.

"Okay...then what *should* I worry about?" I say smiling, moving her head away from chest looking into her eyes.

"It's such a beautiful moment...now is not the time to talk about that. I don't want to ruin it. Maybe some other time...okay? Please...some other time," she says looking into my eyes searchingly, holding my head with both of her hands and kissing me deeply, then burrowing her face into my chest.

By the sixth day, the snow stops falling, giving way to a brilliant cloudless cobalt sky. A welcome change from the white monotony of incessantly falling snow. Exhilarated by the marvelous bright light of the sunlit pristine snow, we go outside and play in the snow, making a snowman, dodging snow balls playfully thrown at each other. Both of us having sore

backs and arms, as we have shoveled snow for at least two hours a day, just to keep up with the snow fall.

Early on the seventh day, the power comes back on. I tune the radio to the local AM station, to get an update on the weather, and the situation. It turns out that this was a once in a 50 year event snow storm, shattering all recent records for snow accumulation for one continuous storm. I'm not surprised. We also hear, that there are many storm-related injuries, and several fatalities. Some from highway crashes...and some from collapsed roofs, and structures, including a supermarket roof of a Safeway, that was literally flattened from weight of ice and snow.

With the phone now working, I immediately begin receiving frantic calls from my insurance company clients, to handle claims for structure damage from weight of ice and snow, and many automobile accidents, some with serious injuries or fatalities. I have Annie answer the phone and take claim reports, while I begin prioritizing the claims as to severity, casualty claims over property claims, and whether there are injuries or fatalities.

One particularly tragic group of claims, involves a mobile home park, down by Tahoe Keys, where several aged retired senior citizens, were crushed to death, when the weight of the snow flattened the flimsily constructed mobile homes, killing several old folks as they slept in their beds. A rather tragic, if not ironic end, for folks who had paid their dues in life, and had moved to Tahoe to retire, for their health, the dry climate and fresh air, to be closer to the magnificent natural beauty of Lake Tahoe. But again, *Madame Nature*, knows no mercy...only rules. She harbors no bias...only cold indifference, and ignorance of the rules is not a defense against the ravages of her fury.

One of the most notorious examples of this in history, happened just 50 miles North of Tahoe—The Donner Party. Delayed by a series of mishaps, a group of American pioneers spent the winter of 1846–47 snowbound in the Sierra Nevada. Running out of food, some of the emigrants resorted to cannibalism to survive, eating those who had succumbed to starvation and sickness. One of the survivors was reputed to have ruminated about the tragedy, *Don't take no shortcuts...and don't never dilly-dally.*

After the claim reports are evaluated and prioritized, I call the Claims Managers of my client insurance companies, and inform them that I will be collapsing my investigation and claims practice in two weeks. That due to the exigent and serious nature of the storm related claims, I will complete them, but that I will not be able to accept any more claims henceforth, until further notice. Each one of the Claims Managers voices disappointment and without exception advises me that if I should choose to later resume my practice to be sure and contact them. I call John Schwartz on his direct line.

"John Schwartz here."

"Hey...John. Mick Kozlov here...howya doing, man? You gettin' hammered with claims by this last storm up here in Tahoe?"

"Yea...brutal, man. Just sent ya a bunch. I don't know which genius in underwriting thought insuring so-called mobile homes...like livin' in a glorified refrigerator box...in Tahoe with predictable snow load issues, thought it would be a good risk. We lost three...in Tahoe Verde Trailer Park alone, complete totals. Two with the owners DOA...buried alive, in their beds," he says.

"Yea...I've got those here. John, the reason I'm calling ya, is to inform you that I'm suspending my practice...I've been offered a position with ACT Inc. I start, tentatively in two weeks. Wanted to personally let you know, since you've been real square with me...that because of the emergency nature, severity and volume of the storm related claims that I have just received, I will complete them. But unfortunately I won't be able to take on any more claims...after today. Sorry man," I say.

"Mick...I'm really sorry to hear this. You've been a great asset for us here in Sacto...timely and professional. I guess we'll just have to send up a staff adjuster then...but none of them are multi-lines like you. So it'll probably take two or three to fill your shoes. But I wish you the best...if something changes, give me a call.

Hey Mick...you remember that RV claim up at Emerald Bay? Where the guy did his ol' lady?" he says.

"Of course. What ever happened with that?" I ask

"You're going to love this. Remember the Detective from El Do County Sheriffs...Randy Benson?"

"Yea...as I recall a pretty sharp copper," I say.

"Well, he came down to Sacto. We talked about a good strategy to trap the hubby...legally of course, into lying for the record. We agreed that we would invite the insured into the claims office here, and take a routine recorded statement...because it was over 50K, we'd need a signed...and recorded statement proof of loss, covering the circumstances of the loss, and a police report. I personally would take the statement...without him knowing how much we knew from your investigation. Anyway, he came into my office. All pushy and irate...that the claim was taking too long to process, threatening to call his big-time lawyer...suing Allstate for Bad Faith if we didn't settle with him, like yesterday. He knew all the lingo.

So, I took his statement. You're right...this guy was a real piece of work. Short, middle-aged, bottle-suntan, bad comb-over, and lots a gold...rings and chains...and of course a Rolex. A walking cliché, a caricature of himself. I asked him if his wife, also a named insured on the policy, was with him when the accident happened, so we could statementize her. He said no...that his old lady had run-off with her Personal Trainer from the Health Club about a week before. As far as he knew she could be someplace in Costa Rica with her thirty-something boy toy...and he hadn't seen or heard from her...and didn't know...or couldn't care less, where she was."

"So you got him on the record under oath, to commit to the facts, and

lying about his wife?" I ask.

"Yea...but here's the best part. So...I complete the statement. Then I tell him that there's somebody outside who wants to talk to him, from El Dorado County Sheriffs, to complete a routine police report on the accident required for us to make payment. *No problem he says.* A cocky little shit. So Detective Benson comes in, all smiles and polite, showing proper deference to Mister Big Time Developer.

Benson sits down, with a blank accident report form in front of him. This guy Randy Benson is good...very good. He introduces himself with a handshake...totally disarming. The insured reciprocates...*Harold Schumacher...call me Sonny, every one else does.* So he's filling out the report, taking his time...like its no big deal, just routine. The guy is starting to get annoyed, he keeps glancing at his Rolex...acting like he's being put out.

Finally, Benson slides the completed police report across the table to have him sign it. Strictly routine. The guy signs it and gets up to leave. Then Benson pulls a masterful Columbo, *uh...excuse me...just one more question, Sonny.* Then he takes the photos you shot at the scene including the cadaver, and without a word spreads them on the table, and says. *So Sonny...help me out here...I'm a little confused. You say your wife ran-off...so...who is this woman in the photographs?* Suntan Sonny literally shits his pants...man it was unbelievable, the stink. Then Benson reads him his Miranda rights. The guy's in shock...but has the presence of mind to shut up, and immediately lawyer up," he says.

"Did he take him in?" I ask.

"Nope...probably 'cause of the stink as much as the fact that at this point it's pretty much all circumstantial. The cops can't produce a body, at least until summer; after the last big storm, the RV was buried a massive avalanche. But Benson had already contacted the Sacramento PD, showed them the photos and your report. They do some checking and find out that nobody, including her friends and family have seen or heard of the Missus since after the accident. Sonny apparently has told 'em that she was at some pricey weight reduction and cosmetic surgery retreat...to get a face lift, a full make-over on the QT in Palm Springs for two weeks...at least.

Anyway, so the guy with a full load in his pants waddles out...funnier 'n hell. He immediately races home. Based on probable cause, Sacto PD does a stakeout. In about a half-hour, the guy comes out, with some thirty-ish arm-piece Bottle Blonde Bimbo, each carrying two large suitcases...like they're not going for just an overnighter. He throws them into the car and takes off. They follow him to Sacramento Airport, up to the ticket counter to American Airlines, where he buys four tickets...first class. Two tickets to Vancouver, YVR BC...and get this...two tickets from Vancouver to Havana, Cuba...where there is no extradition treaty with *Fidelito*. While he and his uh...secretary are sitting in the airport bar, slammin' down straight vodkas, the Sacto PD detectives wander over, and say, *Mr Schumacher? We'd like to have a few*

words with you, and your friend here, about the whereabouts of your wife. That's when the Bimbo loses it, and starts screaming at Sonny, I told you we'd never get away with it...you asshole. I didn't have nuthin to do with this...it was all his idea!"

"Perfect...so she spilled her guts?"

"Oh *yea*...they arrested them both...on the spot. She's already ratted him out for a plea deal...accessory after the fact, as she was his ride home from the murder scene. The DA of Sacto is filling a Murder One...pre-med with special circumstances which makes Sonny boy is eligible for The Needle," Schwartz says.

"So...there is some justice in the world after all," I say.

"Yea...by the way, Detective Benson, says he owes you one. Without those photos, the guy probably would have pulled it off...once he got the settlement check on the RV from us, he probably would have rabbitted...most likely Cuba.

It turns out that his wife had all the money. After a few years of pumping it into his real estate developments, she realized that she was being had...was going to divorce him and file suit along with the other investors, for fraud and misrepresentation. It was a Ponzi scheme, using her wealth as seed money. He scammed about 15 million bucks from outside investors...what are friends and family for? Until it reached the critical mass, when interest rates skyrocketed to around 15%, the new money couldn't keep up with the charade...and all the properties went into foreclosure. Then it was *adios* time for Sonny boy...but first he had to deal with the inconvenient wifey who was now complicatin' his life...terminally...for her. "

"Real estate developers...the third oldest profession, behind prostitutes and lawyers. Okay John...I gotta run...get busy on these claims. Good job. Take care," I say.

"Sure...ever in Sacramento, look me up, and I'll buy ya dinner...and drinks," John Schwartz says.

"Dinner? Sure. Drinks? You might want to reconsider that offer," I say.

"Hey Mick...the money you saved us on this claim alone, Allstate can afford more than a few drinks. Keep in touch. And thanks again, man. Pleasure doing business with ya. And good luck with the new gig," he says.

- Chapter 18 -

By the time we dig out, and things return to some semblance of normal, it's Saturday. Paradise Valley has re-opened two days before—with over 10 feet of fresh powder. Our friends tell us the mountain is awesome...the snow's never been better, the whole mountain is open, and the main run at lodge level Gun Barrel, nicknamed The Face is groomed and perfect, with little or no bumps. Usually by the weekend, the moguls on the face are pretty gnarly after being skied all week. The conditions are so good, since we'd been working pretty hard, Annie and I decide to go up and catch a few good runs. Both of us have season passes at Paradise, affectionately referred to by the Casino working ski bums as Pair-a-Dice. So we can go up anytime during the day, even if it's to get just a few good runs in.

We get up to the main lodge parking lot, about one in the afternoon, with The Face visible from the parking lot. It is as billed—magnificent. Steep but groomed to perfection. Despite the snow storm, Highway 50 over Echo Summit, is a maintenance priority by Caltrans because it is the main route for the trucking in of vital necessities like groceries etcetera. The parking lot is surprisingly full. Powder Hounds...somehow always undaunted and undenied...*luv slaves* to the aphrodisiac of the first runs down in the deep, untracked virgin snow.

We see that most of the skiers in the parking lot getting ready to go up to the chair lifts, are young—giddy with an expectation of a good day on the mountain. Party-hearty young aggressive Half-dayers, mostly—some already obviously well on their way to getting loaded either on beer or pot.

Annie and I are waiting in the lift line, to go up to the top of the face, and ski down, when some hotshot hooligans, about 6 of them, cut into the line in front of us. They're already half-in-the-bag, laughing and yelling, generally making asses out themselves.

"Hey...there's a line here..." I say

The one hotshot, who seems to be the Alpha of the pack, says, "So?" then turns around and ignores us.

"Go to the end of the line...now," I say.

Alpha of the pack says, "Or what!?" as he's being egged on by his pals.

"Real simple...I'll say it real slow...so even you morons can follow it. Either get to the end of the line, like everybody else...or I'll call the Marshal over and you can try to explain to him why he shouldn't pull you ski passes for the day. Am I making myself clear enough for even you to understand?" I say.

"Oooh...I'm sooo scared. *Fuck off*, man," Alpha says and turns around and starts laughin' and high-fivin' with his pals.

Annie says, "Let it go Mick...it's okay, the line's moving pretty fast."

"Nah...I think these kids need a little lesson in mountain etiquette...and deportment. They're trouble...keep our place, I be right back," I say to Annie.

I break out of line and pole-ski over toward the lodge, until I spot a Marshal in a red one piece ski suit. I ski up to him, and recognize him immediately. He's a friend that I had done some rock climbing with. From climbing, he's well-built and very strong. A good guy.

"Hey...Matt, howya doing man?" I say.

He turns around, recognizes me, smiles, and says, "Hey Mick, how's it hanging, man...a perfect day, huh?" Matt says.

"Yea...the snow couldn't be better. Except Annie and I were standing in line for the chair lift to go up to ski The Face, and these young hotshots...about six of 'em...all loaded, cut in line in front of everyone. I think someone should have a little chat with 'em about proper mountain etiquette...before they cause more trouble on the mountain," I say.

"Lead the way, Mick," Matt says.

We get back over to the line, and find them still hootin' and hollerin'. I ski up to the line, duck under the rope, next to Annie. I nod to Matt, toward the hooligans—they're now gettin' close to loading on to the chair lift. He walks over to them, flashes his Marshal laminated ID tag on a cord, around his neck, and says, "I've had some complaints, about you fellas cutting in line. Please step out of the line," Matt says.

The Alpha says, "Hey...we didn't do nuthin' wrong. What's the beef?"

Then behind us a chorus of fellow skiers yell, "Those guys cut in line...this fella here confronted 'em, and they refused to go to the end of the line."

"I'm not going to tell you again...get out of the line...now!" Matt says.

They all get out of line, sullen and defiant, just about the time we are about to board the chairlift.

"Thanks, Matt," I yell over to Matt.

"No problem Mick. Have a good day," Matt yells back.

Then the Alpha whose maybe 5'10" stocky build with a constant sneer, flips me off with a middle finger salute.

We make a couple nice runs down the face. The conditions are indeed awesome. Annie's skiing ahead of me. There are now some medium sized moguls beginning to form, which Annie loves to ski. She's a beautiful skier...seemingly dancing through the mogul field, effortlessly making a series of quick turns and pole plants, her knees compressing to absorb the bumps, with her upper body from the waist up, very still, most especially her head, which is absolutely motionless. I can see people up on the chair lift looking down pointing at her...screaming, and hooting as she effortlessly glides down

the mountain, a ballerina on skis.

After a few runs, I tell Annie, "Hey babe, I'm going to go up to the top, Ridge Chair, they've got the gates up on the slalom course...good day to carve some slalom and giant slalom turns. She ya in about an hour, down at the lodge for a little *apres ski*, okay?" I say.

"Okay, baby...it's just so good here, I'm going to stay on the Face...see ya in about an hour," she says.

I bend down and kiss her on her warm salty lips, as both of us have worked up a nice little sweat, give her a little pat on the butt, and head for Ridge Chair, one of the older chairlifts, with just two seats per wooden slatted chair. I ski up to the end of the line, with maybe 15 skiers in front of me. I've got my sounds on, a Sony Walkman portable cassette player with headphones with a tape I made especially for making slalom turns...a little Carlos Santana, just the right beat to make quick rhythmic slalom turns to. I've got my eyes closed, my head bobbing to the music when my reverie is interrupted by some more hootin' and hollerin' coming from the front of the line. I open my eyes, to see the same hooligans cutting in line again, right before the boarding area for the chairlift. The lift operators are too busy, ensuring that every one gets seated properly in the chair to monitor the line, as the empty chair swings its final arc downward from the mountain, before completing the 180 degree turn before it heads back up the mountain with two skiers per chair.

All six of them, board the chairlift and are on their way up the mountain, by the time it comes for me to board. Immediately in front of me is a younger woman, beside her a young girl, who looks to be about 12 years old. They're both seem very tentative as they approach the boarding area, where they are supposed to ski to the embedded marker in the snow, lining it up with their ski bindings. They barely make it in time, before the chair smacks them in the rear, causing the chair to radically swing back and forth, until it finally clears the boarding area. I'm next up, beside me is a middle-aged woman who looks like she's done this many times before and both of us easily are in place by the time the chair whips around for the upward ascent. I've got my tunes on, it is unspoken etiquette not to engage someone while on the chairlift who's got headphones on, listening to their music. Thankfully she gets it, and nods at me. I return the nod.

But by now the noise coming from the chairs in front of us is so loud, the yelling and hooting, that I take off my headphones. I observe, the one chair, with the Alpha Asshole that I had encountered earlier, trying to bounce the chair up and down, yelling and laughing. The other idiots follow his lead. Soon, with all three chairs, are bobbing up and down, mid-span between the towers, the cable starts to deflect about 6-8 feet up and down....they keep it up. I'm now holding on to the side of the chair, as the whole span is now undulating almost 10 feet up...then down. I hear a frightened scream coming from the young girl in the chair ahead of us. The chairs in the mid-span sink down about 12 feet, then catapults up about the same.

Suddenly...a loud *snap*, as the thick 4 inch strand cable becomes derailed from the pulley above, releasing the cable from the stanchion. The whole span, which we are on, plunges down about 20 feet, then catapults upward like a slingshot, violently propelling all the chairs skyward, ejecting at least six of the skiers out of their chairs into the air, some of them free-falling as much as 40 feet from the top of the arc, the equivalent of falling from a four story building. The operators immediately apply the lift brake—the chairs come to an abrupt halt swinging crazily forward and backward, up and down.

I'm holding on to the chair superstructure with both hands, but my fellow passenger loses her grip and is ejected up, out of the chair. She's now about a foot in the air, when I release my right hand and barely manage to grab her by the back collar of her ski suit, forcing her downward back into the chair. I hold on to her collar, until the chairs stop swaying to where I feel it's safe to loosen my grip on her with my right hand, my left hand still a death grip with the arm rest of the chair. It takes almost five minutes before the chairs stop swaying.

"I've got you...you'll be okay...just grab on to the armrest of the chair," I yell.

She doesn't respond, so I keep holding on to her.

Immediately we begin to hear blood curdling screams of pain...and crying from below. The chair in front is now empty...both the woman and the young girl having been ejected at the apogee of the cable. Our chair is now about 10 feet above the ground, as are most of the chairs mid-span. I see the six skiers, including Alpha, drop from their chairs, and ski off, without saying a word or stopping to render any assistance.

Looking down below, I can see that there are maybe 6 to 8 skiers who have been thrown out of their chairs. I look over to my right, and see that my fellow passenger is white with terror, clutching the side of chair, paralyzed with fear.

"You okay!?" I yell. She doesn't respond. Staring straight ahead...she seems to be moving her lips with her eyes closed, silently praying. I nudge her with my elbow, which seems to snap her out of it. She turns and looks at me.

"Are you okay!?" I yell again.

This time she slowly nods her head, "I...I think so. What happened?" she cries.

"Those guys caused the chair to derail, I'm going to drop down, see if I can help down there," I yell.

"Please don't leave me...I'm so scared I think I going to..." then she vomits.

"Gotta go...you'll be alright. Just sit tight...the ski patrol will be here soon...don't try to get down on your own, they'll lower you down with a rope," I yell.

By now the lift operator has called down to the main lodge and there

are already several guys wearing orange ski patrol suits with big crosses emblazoned on their ski suits starting to ski into the area. They're all outfitted with two way VHF radios. I release my bindings and let my skis drop to the snow below. I then slowly position myself around in the chair so I can lower myself from the bottom of the chair...hanging from the bottom foot rest of the chair, my full length, with my arms outstretched, which puts my feet about 3 feet above the snow, I release my grip. I drop into the hard packed snow, sinking in about a foot, which lessens the impact. Taking an immediate inventory, thankfully, nothing seems broken or sprained.

In my ski boots, I manage to trudge over to the people who were in the chair in front of me. When I get there, blood is everywhere. The woman obviously already going into shock—she's sustained a compound fracture of her lower left leg. I can see the white bone material jutting out of her ski pants. I release the one ski still on her other leg.

By now the pain in her leg is really coming on fast...she's going into secondary shock. I bend down, and take her gloved hand in mine.

"Listen to me...you're going to be alright. Help is on the way...don't try to move, lay perfectly still, take some slow deep breaths. I'm going to check on the young girl. But first I'm going put a tourniquet on your leg, it's bleeding and we need to control that. Do not look down at your leg," I say.

I take off the blue paisley bandana that I tie around my head while skiing, a sweatband, wrap it around her leg and tie it tightly above the knee, which should stem some of the blood flow.

"Okay...God my leg hurts...so bad! My niece...Michela...please take care of her! I'll be okay," she says.

I kneel beside the young girl. She is barely conscious, and going into serious shock.

I grab her gloved hand and shake it to get her attention. She looks up at me...a glassy-eyed, dazed expression then starts to cry hysterically.

"Michela...is that your name?" I ask.

"Ye...ess. Mich-ela...Ale-ssandro that's my aunt. Is she okay?" she says through her convulsive sobbing.

"Your aunt's going to be okay. Now...Michela, my name is Mick...another Michael like you. Just lie still, don't try to move anything. I'm going to try remove the skis from your boots. You yell if it begins to hurt and I'll stop. Okay?" I say trying to comfort her. I release both the bindings on her skis.

"Does that hurt at all?" I ask

"No," still sobbing, "I didn't feel a thing...my legs...I can't feel my legs!" she cries.

This is not a good sign...could mean a serious spinal injury. It's very important under these circumstances that the victim remain totally immobile so

as not cause further damage to the spinal cord.

"It's okay...Michela, just close your eyes, and take some long deep breaths...help is on the way. You're going to be just fine. Very important! *Do not try to move your legs of your hips!* Okay? Your aunt is okay...just try to stay calm. Remember, slow deep breaths...that's a good girl," I say. She slowly nods.

About this time, I see Matt, the ski Marshal racing toward us.

"Mick...I thought I recognized your ski suit...you're covered with blood, man...you okay?" he yells.

"Yea...the blood's from her leg" I say nodding toward the aunt, " a compound fracture of the tibia fibula. I put a makeshift tourniquet on it but she's going into shock big time. The little girl, her niece...may have a serious spinal injury...maybe a concussion. She has no feeling in her lower extremities...it doesn't look good. You're going to need a back board to get her down. A chopper would be your best bet. In case the vics lose consciousness, her name's Michela Alessandro. The aunt seems to be stable...but she's lost some blood."

"Thanks Mick. What the hell happened here?" he asks.

"Remember those hotdog skiers I called you in on earlier today? They cut in line again on Ridge Chair. By then, they were probably really drunk...had Bota bags around their necks. Anyway, they started bouncing the chairs up and down...all six of 'em. That's what caused the cable to derail. After the cable let go...all of them, dropped from their chairs and skied off offering no assistance. If you think your guys have got this covered, we should ski down, like *pronto*, before they split," I say.

"Got it...*goddammit*. My fault, man. I shoulda pulled their lift tickets on the spot. But they begged me not to...college kids. Promised to shape up...you know how it was when we were kids," he says apologetically.

"Hey Matt don't beat yourself up on this...you didn't make the cable derail...they did," I say.

"Okay. Let me tell my lead guy what's up with these two vics, then let's go get those bastards," Matt says, in a malevolent vengeful tone. Matt Stevens is no one you want to have mad at you. While I'm sliding my boots back into the bindings, and finding my ski poles, he brings one of the ski patrol guys over, updates him, then says, to me, "Let's go!"

Just about then, I see Annie skiing really fast toward me. She brakes sideways, spraying snow all over me, almost hitting me with her skis, and screams, "Mickey...*Mon dieu!* Are you alright!?" tears streaming down her face.

"I'm okay baby. Hey, thanks for the shower," I say smiling, wiping the snow from my eyes, "I was on the chair lift when it let go...but I'm not injured. Some of these other folks aren't as lucky," I say, holding her shuddering body against me.

"The blood on your suit...you sure you're okay?" she's crying now.

"Yea...I'm sure," I say patting her back reassuringly.

"We heard down at the bottom about the accident. I was sick with worry that you might have been injured...or killed. I'm so thankful that you're okay!" she says wrapping her arms around my waist with a death grip, burying her face against my chest.

"Annie...those hotshots that we had the run in with, they caused this. Matt and I have to ski down to the bottom, and try to catch them before they split. Okay? You stay here and see if you can help. You might go over to that little girl over there with her aunt and try to comfort them. The little girl's in pretty bad shape...see if you can keep her warm and from trying to move around and from going into further shock. She might also have a concussion...try to keep her talking, so she doesn't lose consciousness. I'll see ya back at the lodge later. Okay baby?" I say.

"Okay baby. Oh Mickey, please be careful!" she cries kissing me deeply.

"Don't worry about us...you should be worried more for the morons that caused this when Matt catches up with 'em. Gotta go, baby," I say.

I pick up my poles, and finish stepping into my ski bindings. I look over at Matt and say, "Let's do it!" We furiously shove off skating with our ski poles, polling to gain speed, until the gravity of the slope is sufficient to get us up to speed.

Matt's a very hot skier—he takes off like shot, with me behind him. It's a real effort for me to keep up. We both get into an aerodynamic downhill racer tuck position, letting our skis run, flat and fast with no edging. We ski down to the top of the Face run, without even slowing down, jump off of the small cornice catching about 5 feet of air, then ski almost straight down, flat-out staying in the fall line, making very few turns, skiing on just the tops of the bumps. We're down to the bottom in record time. Matt gets on his radio, calls the office, and tells them to send the South Lake Tahoe PD, to meet us in the main parking lot.

Using our ski poles to propel us, we half walk...half run on our skis toward the parking lot. From above, we both scan the parking lot. For a few minutes nothing...finally emerging from behind a row of cars, I spy three guys, one of them limping between them.

"There...there's three of 'em. I recognize the ski clothes of the one hotshot trouble maker. He may be hurting...his two pals are helpin' him. Looks like they're about to get into their car. We'd better *andale*...before they get away," I say pointing in their direction.

Matt and I kick off our skis. As we're awkwardly making our way toward them as fast we can in our ski boots, at this rate they'll be long gone before we can get there, when we spot a patrol car from STPD pull into the lot. Matt, frantically motions to them, and they drive over.

"What's up, Matt?" the one officer says, who obviously knows him. Matt is well known and highly respected for his volunteer wilderness search and rescue efforts.

Matt points over toward the perps, and says, "Those guys over there...they caused a serious accident up on the mountain...derailed a chair. Mick here witnessed the whole thing. They're trying to split...I want you to detain them, officer," Matt says.

"Roger." and he jumps back into the patrol car, turns on all the flashing lights, and speeds over to the three. While were making our way over there, it's slow going in ski boots, we see the officers get out of the car, and confront them. It takes almost 3 minutes to reach them.

"These the guys you think caused the accident?" the officer says.

"Yea...Larry, Moe and Curly, the moron in the middle. He was the instigator. Those other idiots just followed his lead. There's three more that were with 'em...they've probably already split, but I think you can get their identities out of them...one way or another. In that regard, I would be glad to offer my professional services...at no charge," I say, handing him my PI business card.

The Alpha hotshot says, "Hey man, this is such bullshit...we just happened to be on the chair. Look, I'm hurt myself," he says pointing at ace bandaged leg.

"Officer, there are at least six...maybe eight people seriously hurt up there. One little girl may be paralyzed...from the waist down. I was on the chairlift. I'm willing to press charges for assault against me. I want these guys arrested. I'm more than willing to testify against all of these...*people*. If you need it, I can come down to the police station later and give you my statement. But right now I've got to go find my lady, she's probably worried sick. Randy Benson's a friend of mine...he'll vouch for me," I say.

"If you know Randy...with El Do Sheriff's that's good enough for us," the one cop says.

So now, Alpha hotshot, ain't feeling so hot...or cocky. I stare at him, just hoping he'll do something stupid like take a swing at me, so I can 'defend myself'. Instead, he his now totally diffident, refusing to make eye contact with me, just staring down at the ground, not making a sound, other than a barely discernible sobbing sound, with his shoulders beginning to shake. By now, he is probably starting to sober up and realize he's in some serious shit.

The cops cuff them, read them their rights, put them into the back of the patrol car, and with a tip of hat, with all the red lights flashing, siren blaring, speed off like it's a *2-11*...armed robbery in progress. Cops. They *love* those flashing red lights and sirens, the more the better. They don't need much of an excuse to turn them on like a *10-10 code*, otherwise known as lunch.

Matt and I make our way back to the main lodge. At 4 PM, the shadows are already getting dark and long. With the sun having sunk behind

the ridge, the temperature is dropping precipitously. The whole time we're walking back, he's on and off the VHS radio—it's crackling with urgent but calm voices, giving status reports and requesting resources.

"Mick, I'm going to have to get back up there. We've got 8 confirmed injuries...6 very serious, thankfully no fatalities...yet. Got a chopper to medivac at least 4 of the 6, including the little Alessandro girl and her aunt. All the vics are off the mountain...none too soon, it'll be totally dark up there in an hour. Thanks for all your help, man. It's now a crime scene. Gotta get back up there. Hopefully my guys got a list of eye-wits...get that to the cops, and yellow tape the scene. Later," Matt says, as we exchange a jocks upright hand clasp.

"Matt, if it'll help, I can give a statement about the proximate cause of the derailment. But I gotta tell ya, man even under those circumstances that cable *probably* should have never derailed. Have Paradise's attorney give me a call. Take care," I say.

"Thanks Mick. Yea...I know. Paradise is going to need all the help it can get on this one. I'll probably lose my job for not pulling those lift tickets, but my only concern now is for the those victims," he says earnestly, with a sincere sense of concern and integrity. The guy's a real Prince. One of the most generous and principled people I know, as evidenced by the number of lives he's saved, countless times risking his own life in the process. Braving almost impossible conditions, snow storms, threat of avalanche, to rescue someone, often from their own stupidity, usually complete strangers. I'll make certain my statement ameliorates his decision not to pull the passes from the hooligans.

"Got your back on that one, brother," I say. He flashes a half-smile, gives me a quick nod of appreciation, then hurriedly skis off into the impending darkness—to do his duty.

I walk over to the main lodge to the outside patio area right at the base of The Face ski run, normally populated with laughing and joking skiers, getting loose, drinking cocktails and ordering appetizers after a great day on the mountain. The *apres ski* boy-girl hook-up ritual. It's still busy but the mood is more somber and serious. I spot Annie, sitting with some of her friends, with a glass of white wine in front of her. Included with the group is the beautifully coiffed Siegy Becker, local drug runner, who is laughing and talking to Nancy and Annie animatedly, until he spots me. His face turns white, loses the smile, then gets up and abruptly leaves without making eye contact. No loss. I come up behind Annie, pull down the collar on her ski suit, and plant a wet kiss on the back of her slender neck.

"Ummm..." she coos shuddering her shoulders, "I'd know those lips anywhere."

"I'd know the taste of that lovely nape," I say, the salty taste, the fine silken strands of hair mingled with the faint scent of *Amirage*, still there, immediately getting *le monsieur's* attention.

Her ex-roommate Nancy is there at the table, whom we haven't seen much of, since Annie's been staying at *Chez MAK*. She just rolls her eyes.

"Hi Nancy," I say coolly.

"Mick. Hey you two oughta get a room," she says tastelessly, something you might expect a guy to say...or Nancy. Apparently she still has not gotten over the fact that Annie has strayed from the fold and moved on from the Church of Sanctimonious.

"Already got that covered...try it sometime. With the right man...you might even start to like it. You ready to head home, babe?" I reply with a slight edge causing Nancy's face to turn crimson. Her mouth opens but only a flustered stammer comes out triggering an involuntary burst of derisive laughter from the others at the table. I had finally had enough of Ms Nancy's superior mocking attitude toward Annie—it was long overdue.

Annie, always kind and gracious, sometimes to a fault, is oblivious to the growing dark undercurrent between Nancy and I, or the fact that maybe Nancy has more than friendship in mind with her. With that, Nancy and her entourage of Hubbard acolytes, thankfully bid a frosty goodbye, leaving just Annie and I at the table.

"*Bien sur...ma cherie!* Did you find those guys that caused the accident?" Annie asks turning around to face me.

"Yea...the cops have 'em now. I may have to go down to the PD later this evening to swear out a complaint. But first, I could sure use a double Johnny Walker...then a nice long hot Jacuzzi soak with my baby. So much for a relaxing day on the mountain. What's the status on the little Alessandro girl?" I ask.

"I sat with her and her aunt for about 15 minutes...just held her, trying to keep her warm...making small talk to try to keep her mind off the obvious. Still no feeling below the waist. Then the medi-vac helicopter showed up and evacuated her and her aunt down to Sacramento. Turns out that it's the same Alessandro...the granddaughter of the former Mayor of San Francisco," she says, then finishing off her wine, and standing up to face me with her eyes tearing up.

"Yea...it's a tough one. But even with those drunken morons bouncing the chairs on the lift up and down, that cable *never* should have derailed from the pulley. Ridge Chair's one of the oldest lifts on the mountain...probably should have been replaced or the very least retro-fitted years ago. This will *not* be cheap for Paradise Valley. With Mayor Alessandro's legal connections...they'll go all-in for Paradise's deep pockets. This one could drag on for years. Costing cubic bucks just for defense costs," I say, automatically lapsing into investigation mode while hugging her. When you've been doing investigation work as long as I have, sorta like a cop, sometimes it's hard to turn it off.

"Oh, Mickey...she's such a sweet, beautiful little girl. So brave. I promised to stay in touch with her. How could this happen?" she says, wrapping her arms around me, holding tightly.

"College kids. Six of 'em...they were drunk. Been drinkin' all day. Not just the lives of the injured, little Michela Alessandro and the others, but those college kids...their lives are changed...forever. God...I am *so* tired of seeing people's lives ruined...pointlessly injured, or killed by drunks. Not the least bit sorry to be leaving the business.

It's always the same. When you post-accident interview a drunk driver, always filled with profound remorse. *I've done it so many times before...I didn't think it could happen to me.* But all the remorse in the world, tragically can't turn back the clock, or bring back someone's innocent son or daughter...mother or father. No redo's allowed in history. Hey...let's get the hell outta here," I say, not at all liking the sound of my own dark rant, suddenly feeling overcome with a bone deep sense of sadness for little Michela Alessandro.

Yes...it's definitely time for a change.

By the second week, with a lot of extra effort, I manage to get all the preliminary field work done on the claims resulting from the Great Snowstorm of '82. The number of claims from collapse of weight of ice and snow and frozen plumbing water damage is considerable, many a total loss, especially to unoccupied vacation homes with no power or heat. I work long into the nights, preparing reports, including photos. I place an outbound message on my answering machine of the business line announcing that I have officially closed down the investigation business.

The first week in February I call Marla Dyson at ACT Inc.

"Hi Marla...Mick Kozlov here. How are ya?" I ask.

"I'm well...ready to go to work, *big boy?*" She replies. No small talk.

"Sure. I've cleared up everything on my end. Where do we go from here?" I ask.

"I probably won't be able to get up to Tahoe, until the beginning of next week...looking at my calendar, I could probably fly in next Sunday afternoon...into Reno, rent a car, so we can get an early start on Monday morning. In the meantime, why don't you research some office space, and staffing for the Regional Office. We figure one secretary slash phone person, and one admin assistant. Okay?" she says.

"That'll work okay for me. You gotta budget for the rental and staffing?" I ask.

"Yea...I'll send it out to you today with our standard corporate lease agreement which you can present to the landlord if you find something that seems workable. We'd prefer to have the operation working out of the state of Nevada, for obvious tax and regulatory reasons. Can you set up a meeting with the Mayor and City Manager of South Lake Tahoe for next week?" she says. All business. Good.

"Okay. I'll get started on that. See ya in about a week. Travel safe.

: : AMERICAN AMNESIA — *m.a.kominsky* : :

Bye Marla," I say hanging up.

By Friday, I've located a few candidates for office rental, tender a specimen copy of the corporate lease—they all promise to get back to me by next week.

- Chapter 19 -

On Sunday evening, Marla Dyson calls to inform me she has checked into the Sahara Tahoe Hotel Casino. We chat briefly, and I agree to meet her for breakfast 9 AM Monday morning at her hotel. I walk in to the pancake house at Sahara Tahoe, and find Marla already seated at a four-top table with an orange juice and cup of coffee, with some file folders spread out over the table. She's dressed in business suit with tasteful make-up, and simple pearl studded earrings, projecting the confident, consummate executive persona. I have to admit, she's even more beautiful even in the morning light, than I had remembered her from that night in Denver.

"Good morning Marla," I say as I pull out a chair and sit down.

"Good morning Mick...coffee?" she says distractedly looking down at an open folder, then she looks up briefly, inscrutably, and motions to the waitress to bring coffee and menus.

"The accommodations okay?" I say finally making eye contact with her, for few searching seconds. She looks unsettled, like she's trying to bluff herself out of an uncomfortable situation with overplayed indifference.

"Yea fine. And just how are you?" she asks as an afterthought.

"I'm well...way past peachy," I say smiling brightly, which disarms her somewhat, finally bringing a reluctant smile to her super serious face. Two words immediately come to mind, to describe Marla Dyson...*in-tense*. So this is a preview of coming attractions—the atmosphere dripping with sexual tension.

"We set up for a meet with the Mayor and City Manager this week?" she asks still rapidly thumbing through pages, trying desperately to look the efficient driven professional in control of the situation.

"Yea...Tuesday...for lunch at Carlos Murphy's. I've got a private room reserved, in case there's some raised voices. I've also included the City Attorney, who will be drafting the enabling ordinance legislation and a complete novation of the franchise agreement. They intend to put the franchise out to Request for Proposals, to other big players on the playground...like TCI and Times Warner...to put some heat on ACT. We can get into the personalities of the main players later, but don't be surprised if we don't receive the warmest of receptions. At the moment they are not particularly happy with ACT. " I say matter-of-factly, sipping my coffee, then leaning back in my chair. Mr Cool.

"I'm not surprised they want to RFP...after we basically fumbled the ball, then kicked it more than a few times, trying to pick it up...not just here but everywhere else. So I'm used to that. That's what you're for, Mr Personality. Time to earn your money, big boy," she says regaining her stride, now that there is business on the table—a familiar and safe territory in which she is

good...very good at what she does.

"Got it...it's game time," I say, feigning my most serious exaggerated game face. "This a good time to sketch out the political landscape...get some background on the local players?" I ask.

"Yea...good a time as any. Sketch away sport," Marla says, reluctantly smiling, while folding over to a clean piece of paper on her yellow legal pad, her pen poised.

"Okay. Starting at the top of the food chain, with the Mayor. Donnie Trent...that's, *it's not Donald...it's Donnie*. Been in Tahoe for over 20 years...was a Blackjack dealer at Harrah's for over ten years. He's early forty-ish, with three inch cheater heels, flashy...lots of gold...rope chains and rings...silk shirts and black slacks...by looks of 'em, at least custom tailored. The John Re-Volta genre. Can smell 'em comin' a block away...always reeks of *au courant* cologne. Drives a 1980 Red Ferrari GTSi...probably 30 Gs new.

Fancy's himself a real ladies man...seriously coiffed...never a *Brylcreamed* hair out of place. A Latin lover type with some Hispanic blood somewhere. A real charmer who likes to show-off his whiter-than-white capped teeth...smile-on-demand. Got an air of sleaze about him. He oozes, more than walks into a room.

He and *esposa numero tres* took in a foster child, a girl, into the home about 10 years ago. He recently airmailed the third wifey, got a divorce and took the obligatory middle-aged-crazy arm piece upgrade. Married the foster kid, a real looker...who was 18 at the time, about 20 years Donnie's junior. He's a mover and a shaker in local politics and apparently needed a trophy wife to complete the package. Nobody's quite sure exactly what Donnie does do...to support his lavish life style. His rezy says he serves as a political consultant on matters of real estate development, but lists no clients.

Marla, he's nobody's fool. Street smart with a lot of political savvy...and cunning. The word on the street is...don't underestimate him. Very articulate, and with his casino roots, because the town is loaded with casino workers, he's well-liked and trusted by the community. He always wins reelection by a wide margin...although his fellow city councilmen, in private refer to him rather derisively. Oh...and he's an elder in the local LDS church. A walkin' talkin' contradiction, uh...*oxy-mormon*...if you will. Sorry." I say.

"Has he expressed any sentiment about the Franchise renewal, or ACT...one way of the other? About working with us?" she asks.

I answer by wetting my index finger on my right hand and holding it up into the air...checking for wind direction.

"The guy's the consummate chameleon...or he wouldn't have survived this long."

"Can we get him to listen to what we can do for the City...and him personally?" she asks.

"Yea...but again, he's smart and cagey. My sense of him is it'll have to

be a slow play, subtle and nuanced, build trust or you'll scare him off. There's five City Councilmen including the Mayor...four men...and one woman...so it's basic arithmetic, gettin' to three is the name of the game."

"Got it. Who's next?"

"City Manager Robert...*Bob* Martel. Probably in his early late 40s to early 50s. A good guy. It's an appointed position. He runs the City, and serves at the pleasure of the City Council. He's been doing it for about 8 years. A decent guy with a family...with two sons who play high school football, benefited directly from Sport-athon '81. Might be a good idea to get Rhino Rudawski involved. He and Martel seem to have established a friendship spawned from Sport-athon.

I think he appreciates what we did for the town. We have a good working relationship. So...he and the City Attorney will make recommendations to the council, including the franchise renewal, which they usually follow, so we've got to sell them on the notion that we give a shit about the community, about being more than just some big carpet-bag corporation."

"To the regard, you livin' here for a while now...probably couldn't *hoit*," she says.

"Yea...despite the predominance of the economy by the corporate casinos industry...and tourism...it's big city challenges with a typical provincial small town mentality. So it's all about who ya know. His admin assistant, Jane *Janie* Costanza, pretty much runs the day to day, with Janie doing the heavy lifting, like handling complaints from cable subscribers about issues of poor service, etcetera. She's pretty burned-out with us, because of the amount of time dealing with cable complaints, which takes up way too much of her time. She will be key, in getting somewhere with the City Manager. She's in her early thirties, a little on the plump side, but attractive, sweet and kind, with a few kids. A hard workin' honest gal, a supermom, who I perceive to be reasonable...and fair...but at the moment, would like to see ACT go away. I'll deal with her...and Bob Martel," I say.

"Okay...next," Marla says.

"City Attorney David *Dave* Chandler. Also in his early thirties. Been City Attorney for about 5 years. Bright...conscientious...and very serious about his job. I like him, because he's direct and pretty much guileless. He'll always be square with ya...and ya never have to guess what he's thinking, so he's not much of a poker player. He's married—no kids, a dedicated public servant.

He's in the process of drafting two ordinances. The Enabling Ordinance, and the actual Franchise Agreement. He's getting a lot of help from the League of California Cities, and the California Cable TV Association, in the form of sample legislation that's already been ratified by other municipalities with the same or similar size and demographics.

He'll then tweak them for a better fit for South Lake Tahoe. I'll deal with him as well, in pre-negotiating the preliminary drafts. So, I'll need a

sample draft of a franchise agreement from ACT, which will lay out the technical specs for the proposed system...channel capacity and offerings...and also the PEG channels, which they are very interested in," I say.

"Yea...I'll get that over to ya first thing when I return to Denver on Thursday. There are some unique challenges up here in the mountains with bandwidth capacity of the system, number of channels, broadcast channel availability through microwave only, etcetera. I'll have my engineer guy, get a hold of you and give ya a crash course on some of the things that ACT can...and cannot...or will not, be done up here. The number of, and channel positioning of Public Educational and Government access channels will be a sticking point for us," she says.

"Okay...here's a list of all the players, including the other four City Council members, with addresses and approximate age with their employer or DBA if self-employed, if you want to do background...or Dunn and Bradstreet 'em. Never can tell what little nuggets from people's past might turn up, including financial problems, past or present. Leverage issues. Anything else you want to cover this morning?" I ask sliding the folded list over to her.

"Good work, Mick. Nope...we're good for today. I've got some serious catch-up to do the rest of today. So...we've got about 16 months before the current franchise agreement matures. Do you have a tentative timetable when you think we can get this in front of the City Council for an up or down vote?" Marla asks.

"We should have all the details fleshed out, no later than a year from now. Figure another 4 months of negotiation to get us across the finish line, hopefully with the first vote. In the meantime...lots to do."

"Okay. How about I buy you dinner tonight?" she asks with an uncharacteristic tentative tone.

"Sure...mind if I bring a friend, to keep us from an all-work and no-play dinner conversation. Probably time you met Annette Trudeau," I say.

"Okay. Sure...bring your uh...*friend*. Any recommendations for dinner?" she asks with a fleeting mixed look of surprise and disappointment.

"How about the five-star Four Seasons, at the very top of Harrah's. A spectacular commanding view of the whole Tahoe valley, including the lake. I'll make the reservations. Shall we say 8 PM?"

"That works...especially looking forward to meeting *the little lady*," she says with no small twinge of sarcasm. Hmm...maybe this is *not* one of my better ideas.

After dinner, driving home, Annie's unusually quiet and seemingly preoccupied.

"What's up, Annie...you seem a little down?" I ask.

"Oh...*nothing*..."she says.

Now when a woman answers that question with, *Oh...nothing*...it

means anything but *nothing*.

"Okay...let's have it, baby. What's going on?" I say.

"It's just that...okay. Surely you must know...that woman, Marla has got the hots for you big time. The whole evening...was like I never even existed. Honestly, I think if I had gotten up to leave...neither she...or you would have even noticed. How do you feel about her, Mick...be honest. Okay?" she says

"Annie...Marla's married to her career. She's used to getting what she wants. But I've already made it clear to her, that I'm not available. If I wanted to be with her...do you think I would have invited you to dinner? I wanted her to understand that you are my lady...that I love you...and that you are my *one*. Yes, she was...unforgivably impolite and dismissive toward you, but that's more of a comment on her character, than yours. You showed your class and character tonight, which I find *very* sexy indeed. I can't wait to get you home to show you my uh...appreciation," I say smiling placing my hand on hers, now looking over at her.

Annie then slides closer to me, and puts her head on my shoulder.

"That's what I wanted...and needed to hear, baby. Thank you," she coos.

- Chapter 20 -

I am awakened to the sound of the phone by the bed, rudely ringing insistently. Prying open one eye, I take a peek at the flashing red numerals on the night stand, next to the phone. 3:12 AM.

"Hello."

"Mick this Nancy...sorry to call you at this time of night...but there's a family emergency...for Annie. Can I talk to her...now!? It's really important!" she says, her rapid panting conveying a sense of urgency. By now Annie is stirring, but still half asleep.

"What is it Mick?" she asks still half-asleep.

"It's Nancy...for you. Something about a family emergency, here," I say handing her the phone.

"Nancy? What's wrong?" Annie says.

After a few seconds of voice from the other end, Annie says, *"Mon dieu! Siegy...dead? Hold on...I'm going to get on the other phone upstairs. Are you at home? No? Probably tapped? Mon Dieu! Okay...give me the number...got it. I'll call you right back,"* she says and hangs up.

"What's up Annie?" I ask.

"Mick baby...I can't talk about it right now. I have to call Nancy right back! I'll do it from upstairs uh...so you can go back to sleep," she says breathlessly, her face even in the subdued light of the dark bedroom seems highly stressed.

"I overheard you say...*Siegy's dead*. What's going on?" I ask.

"I'll have to tell you later. Please Mick. I have to call her right back. Now!" she says, then jumps out of bed, slips on a night coat, and races upstairs.

Less than a minute later, I hear Annie on the phone upstairs, talking hysterically.

I quietly insert a nail file from the night stand, in between the cradle and the receiver, leaving the button depressed. I put the receiver up to my ear, placing my hand over the mouth piece of the receiver and slowly release the button, so as not to make audible click.

"Nancy...*what happened?*" she cries.

"They don't know yet. Last night...they found Siegy's body curled up in the trunk of his Mercedes...dead, for at least 2 days...a parking lot...SFO, San Francisco Airport. He'd been shot in the back of head...several times," she cries.

"*How do you know this!?*" she yells.

"I just got off the phone with Donnie. He was tipped off by somebody at South Lake Tahoe PD," she says.

"Oh shit!. What does Donnie think happened?" she says.

"He said, 'knowing Siegy'...he thinks that Siegy tried to screw somebody over in the supply chain. Got greedy. He thinks that because he thought he was so smart that he could get away with it. Donnie thinks that he just a got a little too cute...once too often," she says.

"What does Donnie think we should do now?" she says.

"He thinks we should just sit tight...and he said do not to talk to anyone about this. That includes Mick. Period. I call ya later...after I know more. Annie...I'm really scared," Nancy says sobbing.

Click.

I hang up the phone and turn on the night light in the bedroom. About a minute later, Annie comes back down in the bedroom, obviously she's been crying. She sits on her side of the bed with her legs hanging over the side, not saying a word just sobbing.

Tapping her on the shoulder, "Annie...what's going on?"

"Oh Mick...I don't know what to say. Everything is falling apart. I just can't..." she says trailing off.

"What's this about Siegy? Annie...I overheard the conversation on the phone. I'm sorry...but I was concerned for your welfare. I heard the name Donnie mentioned. The only Donnie I know is Donnie Trent, the Mayor. Is it Trent? If that's so, what's he got to do with you...and what did Siegy have to do with you, and Nancy...and Donnie?" I ask calmly, quietly.

Annie throws her legs on to the bed, and looks over at me with a forlorn expression.

"Mick, I guess we need to have a talk..." she says with great resignation.

I sit up and put my hand on hers resting on her leg.

"Okay...shoot. But please start at the beginning. Okay?" I say.

"Okay, Mick...okay. From the beginning. Mick that night we met...that you saved my life, up on Emerald Bay highway, I wasn't just some innocent dupe, running errands for Siegy. I knew what was in that package. I'm going to have to trust you with the rest of this story. That story I told you at the hospital was a well-rehearsed prefabricated cover story...in case I...I ever got busted. I'm so sorry. I can't live this lie any longer." *And the Oscar for Best Performance by an actress in a dramatic leading role goes to...Annette Trudeau...*

"Go ahead...what you tell me will be in strict confidence," I say.

"Mick...Siegy, Nancy and I, and Donnie Trent...were involved in the sale of drugs. It started out as a small time operation, but the demand became so great and the money so good, that it just kept growing and growing until

Siegy and Donnie, begin selling to other local dealers. Donnie had some connections with the drug cartels in Mexico. He was having the cocaine brought up, then he and Siegy were cutting it down and selling to other dealers in the area," she says.

"But...what did you have to do with all this, Annie?" I ask.

"Both Nancy and I were mainly couriers. Because we were women Donnie and Siegy thought we'd draw less suspicion. So we made pick-ups and deliveries...drugs...and money. Huge amounts of cash. Like the one I made that night in Tahoe City. Not only was there drugs in the trunk of my car that night, but also over one hundred thousand dollars...in cash, I was dropping off coke, and picking up cash, and some pills from one of our sources." she says.

"But why, Annie...why would you allow yourself to get mixed up in something like this? You make enough money at Sahara, don't you?" I ask.

"Mick...now comes the tough part. I'm not the kind caring person you may think I am. Mickey remember when I told you that in college, some of us went out in to the dessert and dropped some peyote? Well...that's not all that happened. I got high and had sex with one of the guys...a professor from Long Beach State. He called himself a Shaman...and that having sex with him would be a trans-formative experience. It was trans-formative alright...I got pregnant. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to have an abortion, but when I told my mother and father that I was pregnant...they wouldn't hear of it. Being devout Catholics they said I would burn in eternal hell-fire if I aborted the baby. They convinced me to bring the baby to term...that they would raise the child as their own. But...when I had the baby, she had some problems.

She had some kind of congenital brain defect. We don't know if it was related to the use of the hallucinogenic drugs...or not. Anyway...her name is Sarah. She's now going on seven. She was diagnosed with cerebral palsy...about 5 years ago. She requires constant care...which is very expensive. There was no medical insurance...she's not insurable, so my parents had to put her on Social Security Disability. But the costs per month...just for medication and other things, out of pocket is sometimes several thousand dollars a month," Annie says.

"I'm so sorry Annie...please go on," I say, gripping her hand.

"Well...Mom and Dad wanted me to have a life. I was so young...they insisted that I try to move on...that they would take care of her. This was before she was diagnosed with CP. So after dropping out of college...I came up here. Twice a year I go down to Long Beach to visit...and to see Sarah. She does not know I'm her mother. She's been told that I'm one of her sisters.

Anyway...so I needed some money...big money to be able to send down to Mom and Dad every month. Just about the time Sarah was diagnosed with CP, I had met Siegy through skiing. We became friends...then lovers. By the time you and I met we had evolved into just business associates. Anyway when we had first met, I had told him about my situation, he connected me with Nancy...and I moved in with her. He told me Nancy was working with he

and Donnie for the past two years. So I begin working with them. The money was good...so that I could send two...sometimes three thousand a month down to Mom and Dad. They just thought I had a great paying job at the Casino. I never corrected that impression. What I didn't know was that Nancy had started chippin' coke, recreationally at first, stash a little from each delivery for her growing habit...until she became seriously addicted.

The money Siegy, Donnie, Nancy and I were making was obscene. Siegy bragged to me he had several hundred thousand dollars buried in his back yard...with money in several safe deposit boxes under various alias names in banks. A lot of the money, was laundered through the Church of Scientology...disguised as contributions. In Donnie's case...the local Mormon Church. I keep at least forty thousand dollars cash hidden...here, in the garage, in coffee cans in my trunk along with some product...mostly coke," she says.

"Annie...I just don't know what to say...honestly. I am having a hard time wrapping my head around this," I say, shaking my head.

"Oh Mick...I'm so sorry. But I feel such a sense of relief that you know...it was killing me inside...not telling you. I'll understand if this could mean the end for us...I...I just..." she says crying, throwing her arms around me with her face buried in my chest.

The phone begins to ring again. Numb from the shock of these latest revelations about Annie's secret life, I almost decide not to answer it. It rings maybe 10 times before I pick it up. I look at the clock...it's now 5:25 AM.

"Hello," I say.

"Don't talk...just listen. If you think you know who this is, DO NOT mention the name," the unidentified caller says ominously with a voice disguise mechanism on the line.

"Okay...do you think this line is being tapped?" I say.

"Don't think so...probably couldn't get a warrant based on insufficient evidence...yet. Just the same...tell your friend not to take any chances."

By now, you probably know that Siegy Becker was found dead in the trunk of his car at SFO. Becker, and Donnie Trent have been under investigation by the joint task force on drugs...Operation Deep Snow...for over a year...by the Feds, El Dorado County Sheriffs and South Lake Tahoe PD. The death of Becker, has precipitated the Feds to round everyone up. Your girlfriend...Annette Trudeau has been implicated through her prior association with Becker and Nancy Howard. They've already got sworn arrest and search warrants out for, Trent and his wife, and Nancy Howard...and a search warrant for Siegfried Becker's house...and your house since she is apparently living with you for the last several months. She...and you...have been under constant surveillance, since she moved in. They will be serving the search warrant on your house this morning by dawn, hoping to catch you unawares. This conversation never happened," the voice says.

Click.

I hang up the phone...incredulous. Man...what the hell have I got myself into here? I look at Annie, then back at the phone...back at Annie. One thing is very clear...I must make an immediate decision here. Not having the luxury of time to logically think this through...all my options at this point look pretty lousy. Do I allow the woman that I thought I knew...that I thought I love...go to jail? Would the Feds even believe me if I try to plead ignorance, *gee I had no idea my girlfriend, who's been living here for over 6 months was involved in drugs, let alone dealin'*. So how would you explain the 40K stashed in your house? *Yea...right.* The ultimate CLE for MAK uh...Career Limiting, make that Ending Event.

It's now about 5:30 AM...the law is probably already on their way to serve the search warrant by first light...which gives me maybe 20 minutes to deal with this. Annie looks at me. My face must be registering great fear and anxiety...and indecision. "Mick...what is it? Who was that!?" she screams.

"Get dressed...now! But leave your robe and pajamas on the bed. Don't do anything with your hair...just put your jeans and boots on. I'll explain as we're getting dressed," I say.

"But Mick...I don't..."

"Just do it! We don't have any time to talk about it!" I say.

As Annie and I are slipping on our jeans, parkas and boots I say, "Okay...Annie, the law is coming to execute a search warrant...here, based on your connection to Siegy. Someone...a friend in law enforcement...don't ask who, just tipped me off. From the phone conversation, I don't think they have an arrest warrant for you...or me...for that matter...*yet!* That probably means that they don't have sufficient grounds for a judge to grant an arrest warrant...so they'll be on a fishing expedition looking for something suspicious that will rise to the level of probable cause for an arrest. So listen very carefully. First thing to remember is to stay calm. Now...show me where you've stashed the cash and the drugs...everywhere and anywhere, around the house. We don't have much time...we've got to get everything that could possibly be considered incriminating out of the house...*now!*" I say trying desperately to remain calm myself.

Annie leads the way out to the garage, where she has a large steamer trunk. She unlocks and opens it. Inside there are two large Yuban coffee cans green of course, with black plastic covers. She opens one coffee can, and reaches inside to pull out several wads of cash. Four bundles of 10 *Large* each, with a thick blue rubber band, and with a piece of paper on each...*10K. Jezus...40K might be a hard-sell as tips and gratuities Ya think?*

"Is that *all* the cash...everywhere around the house? Anything over a hundred bucks in the rest of the house?" I ask.

"No...that's it," she says.

"Okay...what about the drugs. Where are they? All of

them...including your personal stash...*any and all drugs*. Coke...pills?" I say.

She opens the second coffee can. Inside are 10 or 12 baggies of white powder...and several baggies of pills...judging by the color...probably *'ludes*. Enough to probably get a minimum of 15 years, a criminal enterprise for distribution of drugs. *Shit*...do I attempt to stash the drugs and maybe get busted, in itself a probable admission of guilt...or do I allow Annie to go down. Like I said, lousy options. I realize that either way I have to be fully committed to that course of action. I pause for a moment and gaze into Annie's eyes. She is looking back at me searchingly with tear-filled eyes, realizing that at this point that I am deeply conflicted. *Ya think?* I reflect on this for maybe ten seconds. Finally, "Okay...show time, baby. Anymore...*anywhere?*" I ask

With an immense sigh of relief, she shakes her head.

"Wait here...I'll be right back! Do not touch the contents of the can with drugs!" I say.

My mind is racing...the stress and pressure of the moment is not allowing my mind to function clearly. I run to the living room...and stop myself. I close my eyes and take some long slow deep breaths. Now what?

I'm replaying the phone conversation. Are Annie...and I...going to be caught up in the net of Operation Deep Snow? *Je-zus*...what a nightmare, trapped in a third-rate Stephen King pastiche.

Then...it comes to me. *Deep Snow*. Snow of course is the street name for cocaine. The perfect irony.

I run downstairs into the bedroom and get 4 pairs of long white ski socks. I then run back upstairs to the kitchen, where I keep a big jar full of quarters and loose change. I grab a handful of quarters, and drop them into the bottom of each double sock, so that each sock now weighs about a pound. Then I get four large plastic ziploc bags that can hold up to a quart. I run into the garage. It's now just starting to get light...we don't have much time.

Annie is sitting on the edge of the trunk...in a daze.

"Annie...snap out it!" I yell.

She comes to life...like I say, they make 'em pretty plucky in Northern Maine.

"Okay. Here's what we're going to do. I've got four socks. First I want you to pick up the drugs using the plastic bags to handle them...do not make direct contact with the coke. Drop them into the large plastic ziploc bags, then into the two socks. Then we'll do the same with the cash. Got it?" I ask

"Oh Mick...are you sure you want to do this?" she cries.

"Not the best time for a discussion on morals...or legalities. Very limited options here...we'll deal with the *you and me of this later*...if we don't get busted big time," I say.

She nods her head.

I tie the ends of all four of the long ski socks into a knot, and pull

them very tight, with drugs in two them, and money in the other two. I find a black sharpie felt pen in a garage junk drawer, and mark the two socks with drugs with a big "D", the money socks with a big "M".

"While I'm dealing with the socks...take the coffee cans up to the kitchen, and wash them out with hot soapy water...and dry them off. Then pour the coffee out the cans in the pantry into the two coffee cans that were in the trunk, and shake them up...but good. Toss the empty pantry cans in to the trash. Then wash your hands thoroughly with hot soapy water...and put on some of that smelly moisturizer cream," I say.

Carrying all four socks, I run in through the front door into the living room, through to the patio door, on to the snow laden deck at the rear of the house. Because the house is built on a steep slope, it's about 30 feet down below to ground level. I sense Annie watching...mystified, but I do not have time to explain.

Nestled in a stand of Tamarack pine, I spot a large dead old growth cedar snaggle tree, which will make a distinct landmark, maybe thirty yards from the deck. It has long since died from a fire maybe 50 years ago.

I take the first sock and swing it around my head like a gaucho's bolo, and release it in the direction of the snaggle. The educational value of the fledgling PBS TV was never better demonstrated...or appreciated. *Nova—The Life of the Gaucho*. They'll get an unusually generous three-figure donation from *moi* on their next beg-athon fundraiser assuming I'm not doing two-figures...in Folsom.

It lands in the still unmelted, untracked deep snow about 10 feet from the base of the tree; the heavy weight of the quarters in the bottom of the sock causes it to totally disappear leaving only a small hole much the size of a large fallen pine cone.

I do that with each sock, until all four socks are now deeply embedded in the soft powdery snow...with no tale-tell foot prints in the snow leading to them. Frankly I'm a little pleased with myself, from maybe 100 feet, a nice little grouping of no more than 10 feet. Hmm...*I still got it baby. If Argentina doesn't have an extradition treaty with the US, maybe I'm not too old to be a gaucho. Or not.*

I then look at Annie, and say, "Now...go downstairs...put on your pajamas and get in bed. I'll be along as soon as I shovel off this deck so there are no recent foot prints," I say.

Shoveling furiously, it takes me about 5 minutes to get the deck cleared. I go inside and catch the kitchen clock on the wall. 5:56 AM. It is now starting to get light outside. I wash my hands...twice in hot soapy water and generously apply scented moisturizer—lilacs.

I run down stairs, take off my clothes, and grab both of our clothes and throw them in the dirty laundry...since they would be warm from us having worn them.

I root around my dresser and finally find my namesake pajamas...ubiquitously studded with little Mickey Mouse cartoons, along with a pair of Mouseketeer ears...opting for the more whimsical non-Drug Kingpin look.

"Two obvious?" I say to Annie, holding the Mouseketeer ears, twirling around like a runway model finishing with a fetching pose. Annie's brief smile gives a much needed light moment of relief from the heaviness of the situation.

"It works...if you don't over-accessorize. Maybe lose the ears...or not?"

I hop into bed—pulling Annie close to me—I put my arms around her...and we wait.

"When they come...just act like we've been awakened out of a deep sleep. Drowsy...like you're not quite awake yet. And don't volunteer any answers. If they ask you any questions, just be direct, with a yes...or no. Okay? Remember, just act natural," I say carefully adjusting the Mouseketeer ears on my head. It does us both some good to hear her hearty laugh.

Amidst the cloying scent of lilacs...*in February*, she nestles her head against my chest and in complete silence...we wait.

We do not have to wait long...but it seems an eternity. In less than ten minutes, there's hard pounding on the door with loud commotion and yelling, "This is Federal Agents with the Drug Enforcement Agency! We are here to execute a search warrant. If you do not open the door immediately we will use force to gain access!" he yells.

"Annie...stay here...until I call you. Remember you were asleep," I say

She nods.

I run upstairs, sans ears, put on my best sleepy face, muss up my morning hair, and open the door.

"What's this all about officers?" I say sleepily, deadpanning in my Mickster pajamas—this being maybe the second time I've worn them in ten years. The other time a Halloween costume party.

"Are you Michaelangelo Kozlov!?" yells the big burly guy with a shaved head, the large white DEA letters emblazoned across the chest and back of his black bullet-proof vest.

"Yes...I am. Why? Is this like some kind of a prank? A Candid Camera...gotcha kinda deal?" I say.

"This is a search warrant...which gives us the authority to search the premises in its *en-tirety*...including any outbuildings, garage, vehicles, closets, personal effects...everywhere and anywhere. Do you understand?" he says gruffly, flapping the warrant in my face.

"So this isn't about those unpaid parking tickets, then?" I say.

"I repeat...are you willing to peacefully comply with this court order, smart ass?"

"I guess I don't have much choice. What's this is all about. Why are you here?" I ask with what I think is just the right amount of surprise and indignation appropriate for someone who has just been awakened out of a deep sleep...in Mickey Mouse pajamas.

"We are looking for evidence of narcotics...for use and or sale...and any associated contraband. Give me the keys to any vehicle you or Trudeau own. Now!" he yells, giving me a head to toe, checking out my pajamas—stifling a snicker.

"What? You were expecting Hugh Hefner in silk? There must be some mistake...let me see that warrant!" I say.

The officer slaps the warrant at me, then pushes past me with several other officers in tow. They immediately start tearing the house apart. The other four officers are yelling, like they talking over a 737 jet taking off. All these guys seem to have one volume level...like everyone they encounter is totally deaf. Probably an effective intimidation tactic.

"I'll check the vehicles...you check the kitchen and pantry. Keys?" one yells at me.

I walk over to the where keys to the vehicles are hanging in the kitchen, then toss both sets more at him with some heat. "Catch."

"Is there an Annette Trudeau on the premises here?" the lead no-neck, Officer Loud yells.

"Yea...she's downstairs still asleep...or was until all this ruckus," I say, which I think is a nice touch...but I remind myself to be careful not to be too cute...to overplay my hand.

"Have Annette Trudeau come upstairs. Now!" he yells.

I yell downstairs, "Annie...honey, come upstairs...*now puleeze!* There's some nice policemen here who want to have a look...inside your drawers."

About a minute later, Annie appears at the top of the stairs from the master bedroom below in her pajamas, house coat and pink fuzzy slippers.

"I don't understand. What's going on, Mick?" she says, yawning and scratching with her hair, a perfect disheveled mess. *Nice touch baby...well played...with a grudging admiration for her consummate ability to deceive...moi in particular.*

The next officer through the door has got a drug sniffing German Shepard on a leash. He unleashes him, and the dog starts sniffing everything, up and down our legs including mine and Annie's hands. He gets no hit...and continues on through the rest of the house. Next the handler takes the dog over to the trash...then the pantry and finally the refrigerator, opening and inspecting everything, including in the freezer. *Mental note...if I survive this...never...ever*

hide anything in the refrigerator; that you don't want to found.

The Feds are here for over 4 hours. They literally tear the place apart, but find nothing. They go out on to the deck and look down below with binoculars. They never go down to the rear of the lot, because the snow is still 4-5 feet deep and untracked.

The Feds are not happy, but do not suspect that we were tipped off. They drive off pissed, but empty handed. It takes about an hour for my pulse rate to return to normal and another two hours to put the house back in some kind of order.

The following day the town is all abuzz. The headline in the morning Tahoe Daily Tribune reads:

South Lake Tahoe Mayor Donnie Trent, 46 and his wife, Sarah Trent 22, arrested as Drug Kingpins

SOUTH LAKE TAHOE — Undercover federal agents using wiretaps, videotapes and paid informants gained entry into an elaborate, statewide drug distribution and money-laundering network that included South Lake Tahoe Mayor Donnie Trent and his wife, Sarah, according to court documents made available Tuesday.

Federal agents decided to close down the sting operation and make arrests after one of the prime suspects, local freestyle ski celebrity Siegfried Becker, 28 was found murdered in the trunk of his late model Mercedes at San Francisco International Airport just three days before.

The detailed court filings—affidavits used to support the multiple arrests—provide an insight into Trent and the workings of illicit drug trade centered in the resort communities around Lake Tahoe, with money and cocaine being shuttled among suppliers and dealers in Orange County, Palm Springs and San Diego.

The accusations about the Trent's have stunned residents of the bustling Lake Tahoe resort city where Trent presided as mayor. There had been whispering about his life style—about the source of his income, his Red Ferrari and fast motorcycles and his marriage to his 22-year-old former foster child. But few suspected that the 46-year-old part-time politician was caught up in the shadowy underworld of cocaine trafficking, as he is described in the court documents.

"He's a flamboyant personality. A loner," said Amy Burton, the mayor pro tem of South Lake Tahoe. "I don't know who his friends are. He's somewhat of an enigma."

An elaborate undercover operation—code-named "Deep Snow"—led to the execution of arrest warrants in the early morning hours, of the Trent's and 17 others, including a South Lake Tahoe casino employee, Nancy Howard. Ms Howard was found at her residence, unconscious and non-responsive. Rushed to the hospital, she was pronounced dead from an apparent drug overdose. An autopsy is pending.

Criminal complaints have also been filed against three other suspects who remain at large after a 20-month investigation conducted by the FBI, the Internal Revenue Service, the Drug Enforcement Administration, U.S. Customs, South Lake Tahoe police and El Dorado County Sheriffs. One of the suspects is Enrique 'Ricky' Gomez, who allegedly acted as Donnie Trent's bodyguard and partner in laundering \$655,000 in "drug money" monitored and video taped by undercover agents. Trent is a prime suspect in the murder of Siegfried Becker. Ballistic tests are pending on Trent's handgun.

Trent bragged to undercover IRS and FBI agents that "he had a method to launder money out of the country that left no paper trail and no tax liability and that the system had been in place for 20 years," according to one affidavit.

At times packing a silver Smith & Wesson semiautomatic pistol in his briefcase, Trent picked up cash from bus stations in San Diego and again in Stateline, Nevada, in red canvas ski bags, according to the court papers. In one case, two other defendants were said in the documents to have personally transported \$250,000 in cash passed to them by Trent from Los Angeles to the island of Antigua.

For his trouble, Trent was paid \$48,500 in commissions. The court papers reveal a world of fast cars, private planes and weapons stashes. Always worried about detection, those accused of dealing drugs and moving their money into bank accounts are said to have gone to elaborate lengths to avoid being caught.

One of the defendants, Nancy Howard, allegedly a drug courier, was very active in the local Church of Scientology where money from the sale of drugs was purportedly laundered.

Earlier this month, Howard allegedly delivered a kilogram of cocaine, wrapped as a baby shower gift in paper with blue and pink lambs on it, to a government informant.

Wearing gray sweat shirts with "Sac Co. Prisoner" stenciled on the back, Donnie and Sarah Trent made a brief court appearance Tuesday. The two are charged with multiple counts of money laundering and

distributing cocaine and pills.

The scheduled hearing was intended to determine what bail if any would be required to obtain their release. But attorneys for the Trent's asked for a delay until later in the week.

Trent's arrest surprised those who knew him in South Lake Tahoe, a resort community that still thinks of itself in many ways as a small town. Yet several of Trent's associates interviewed Tuesday conceded that they knew very little about the man who lived in a 'conspicuously large house for the neighborhood' near the Paradise Valley ski resort, not far from the state line casinos.

He is an elder in the local Church of Later Day Saints.

Annie and I appear to have escaped the long and wide net of the Feds...so far. It would also appear that I, Michaelangelo Kozlov also possess perhaps an innate, accomplished capacity for deception...the way I instinctively with great facility, without any conscience, eluded the efforts of the Feds to bust Annie...and don't forget...*moi*. Maybe there is such a thing as a natural born miscreant? Or maybe the larger question; is everyone to a different degree, if the stakes are high enough...capable of criminal behavior?

Hmm...maybe all of us...with varying levels of 'virtuosity', possess the potential...the guile, for consummate behavior of evading the law. If that's so, then ultimately, isn't my indignation aimed at Annie who found herself in a very difficult circumstance not of her own making, an act of sublime hypocrisy? I decide to sort all that out later.

It's a humbling...and yet bittersweet epiphany which helps to temporarily at least, assuage my disillusionment at being so easily deceived by Annie. I guess at some level, it's not the actual betrayal that is at the center of my outrage, but more the humiliation. The insult to my monstrous male ego—the gullibility of having been so completely, so consummately duped.

With the news of her overdose, sadly the matter of Nancy Howard implicating Annette Trudeau to get a better plea deal and perhaps implicate me, to vindictively repay me for my insults to her, was no longer in play.

Had she taken herself out, as a profound act of loyalty, indeed unrequited Lesbian love for Annie so that she would not be enticed to flip on Annie? Did Annie wittingly exploit Nancy's love for her to tragically induce, perhaps even seduce her to make the ultimate sacrifice, in the name of love to protect herself from prosecution? The answer to that unspoken profound question of the circumstances of Nancy's overdose and whether it was purely voluntary, or coaxed, was never discussed with Annie...as frankly I guess I just didn't have the courage to want to find out any more about Annie's now unfolding consummate capacity for duplicity. As the old saw goes, I guess you never truly know someone until they are under extreme stress or

existential duress. And that stress does not build character, but only reveals it...

In the end was Nancy, a self-possessed, sanctimonious atheist Scientologist, ultimately behaving more like a Christian than Annie had often preached...or was ever capable of? *Greater love hath no man than this, that a man, or in this case a woman, lay down their life for a friend, John 15:13.*

It is clear that at this point in time, the Feds probably have no direct evidence linking Annie to the drug operation or they would have showed up with an arrest warrant in hand along with the search warrant. But the Feds have vast and relatively unlimited legal resources...oh, and by the way...the law is happens to be on their side. So even if they can't directly prove she was involved, like the sting op with Nancy Howard, if they prosecute her...and or me, it will become a *very* long, arduous and *very* expensive nightmare just to defend ourselves from prosecution. Even if we 'win'...we still lose. Big time.

It's time to have 'the talk' with Annette Trudeau.

- Chapter 21 -

Buried deep in the back of the same issue of the *Tahoe Tribune* there is another AP article about the death of a prominent folksinger, a Native American activist:

Nora Feather, American Indian Folksinger dies in fiery automobile crash

The world of folk and social conscience music today is mourning the untimely, premature death of the beautiful Native American folksinger and songwriter, Nora Feather 33, who died in a fiery single vehicle accident on a deserted highway in New Mexico on the night of December 23, 1982.

It is believed that she had fallen asleep at the wheel while returning from a special benefit concert held to protest the encroachment on a sacred native American burial ground by a proposed petroleum pipeline by energy conglomerate National Petroleum Inc, NPI. The New Mexico Highway patrol related that there was evidence at the scene of alcohol being contributory to the cause of the accident...

Mick never gets to it, because of his fixation, like most folks in the community, with the front page local drug bust of the Drug Kingpin Mayor...and his own brush with the DEA.

- Chapter 22 -

After about week from the news of the local bombshell about the drug bust, things start to return to some semblance of normality in the community but sadly that cannot be said for *Chez MAK*.

One evening, as Annie and I are silently sitting by the fire, gazing at the burning logs for about an hour; she on one side, and me on the other of the sofa. Since that close brush with disaster with the DEA search warrant, conversation has been almost non-existent between us, and when there is any, it is strained and uncomfortable. We have our meals in silence, the food not tasting quite as good as cardboard. At night, we barely even brush against each other in bed.

"Annie...I think it's time we had a talk..." I say.

"Let me guess what it's about," Annie says with a sneer.

"Okay. Here's what's going on with me. I can't continue on with you as though nothing has happened. This situation...our estrangement, it's not healthy. So we need to start communicating, sooner than later," I say.

"Okay. You start..." she says defensively folding her arms in a somewhat haughty tone gazing at the fire avoiding eye contact with me.

"Alright then. Okay. I thought I knew you Annie. I thought that we had no secrets from one another...then this happened. To be honest, I'm pretty goddamned scared...and yes, angry that we're in this mess. We could have both been arrested...not just you...but me too. We're talking serious hard jail time here. So I want to hear it from you. Could you...do you think that you would ever be able to trust me again...if our situations were reversed?" I ask.

"Probably not, Mick. Is that what you want to hear?" she says.

"Annie...the first thing that needs to happen here if there's going to be any chance of us working through this is complete honesty. And that means no more defensive posturing. That goes for you...and me. Agreed?" I say staring at her, trying to get her eyes to look at me.

She finally turns and gazes at me with her tear filled eyes.

"Okay Mick...okay. So...where do we go from here. I'm so humiliated...so depressed...I honestly don't even know where to start saying how sorry I am...that I have caused you such misery," she says in a weary tone.

"Okay...that's not a bad place to start. Do you still love me Annie?" I ask.

"Of course I do Mick! I'm just so afraid that you've lost all respect for me...that you no longer love me. I'm just so sick with worry, that I've lost you. Can't eat...can't sleep...the best thing that's ever happened to me...that I've blown it, and that I can never get it...or you back," she says now looking into

my eyes searchingly, the firelight reflecting the glistening tears streaming down her cheeks.

I pat the seat beside me, "Come here...and let me hold you, baby," I say.

She immediately scoots over under my outstretched arm. I bring my arm down across her slender shoulders and draw her near me. As her now bony shoulders loosen, she sighs. She has lost considerable weight over the past week...probably from the stress and not eating.

"Annie...listen to me carefully. I still love you too. But these kinds of wounds don't heal themselves overnight. So...here's what I'm thinking we should do. If you stick around here...in Tahoe, Nancy, gawd bless'er had not implicated you, or we would have heard something. I don't think there's any hard evidence to link you to the operation...it would have been her word against yours at this point. But I think it might just be a matter of time before the Feds start thinking that there's some unfinished business with you...and me. If they decide to get heavy with you...interrogate you...well... So I think it might not be a bad idea if you were leave Tahoe...at least for a while, until things cool off. Could you go back down to L.A...to Long Beach, to your family, say, for several months?" I ask.

"Oh Mick...I couldn't bear not to be near you...but since we're being honest here, is this just a nice way of you telling me *you want* me to leave...to get out of your life?" she asks, sitting up staring, penetratingly into my eyes.

"Okay Annie...to be honest...yea, I guess so. I think we both need some time to process where we should go from here. That can't be done with us on top of each other. I want to stay in touch with you. I honestly think that after things with the Feds are more resolved, and we've had some time to reflect on the relationship, we'd have a much better chance at working things out," I say. Cold.

"Okay Mick...in fairness, I guess I can't say that I blame you. I think that it's probably best that I do leave...sooner rather than later. I'll call my Mom and Dad and tell them that I'll be coming down for an extended visit. I'll try to leave by the end of the week. Would that be soon enough for ya? And by the way...do you think it would be safe enough for me to go down and get the money and the drugs out of the snow?" she asks.

"There is no rush on your leaving...take as much time as you need to get out of town...but..."

"Hmm...straying from the script are we? Guess I blew it...you called my bluff. That was the part where you were *supposed* act crestfallen, fall on your knees, and beg me stay," she says facetiously batting her eyes. A good sign that she is starting to regain some of her plucky composure.

"Sorry baby...flunked high school drama class, 'cause I couldn't stick to the text.

But...it's a fact. The longer you are in the gun-sights of the Feds, I

think the greater the risk is for prosecution...and frankly, not just for you. As far as retrieving the money and the drugs are concerned, that should be the very last thing you would do...just before leaving town. Never know if they'll be back with another search warrant. By the way, I hope you will not be tempted to keep the drugs. There's enough there alone to send you to jail for a very long time. My advice...don't leave any finger prints on them. Put them in a plain paper bag and toss them in a dumpster someplace on the highway behind some 7-11 way out of town," I say. Mr Pragmatic.

"Okay then. Well I guess that it's settled. So much for lovey-dovey small talk, eh? Until I leave...probably best that I sleep on the sofa," she says icily standing up from the sofa now seemingly resolved to the abrupt *denouement*.

"Probably so Annie...probably so. I'm so very sorry Annie that this is happening to you...to us. But I do think it is best for you to get out of town for you...and honestly for me," I say.

"Yea...right," she says.

I stand up and go to kiss her goodnight, but she averts her mouth, and I kiss her on the cheek. "Good night Annie. You'll find the bedding in the hall closet," I say coolly.

I watch her walk unsteadily toward the hall closet, obviously distraught and in shock from the sudden resolution. As I make my way downstairs to my empty bed, I'm filled with a profound sense of sadness.

Lying in the dark lonely solace of my bed, somehow forces me to reflect on what just happened with Annie. A profound, aching sense of loss and bewilderment, the likes of which I have not felt since Sora Eagle Feather walked out of my life. There seems to be a not-so-subtle pattern emerging here. Sora Eagle Feather...Annette Trudeau, just to name a few—a repeating Ophelia cycle. Mercurial commitment, all ending with precipitous operatic lamenting Ophelia scenes followed by stage-right exits by the female protagonist. Yeap...as usual Shakespeare got there first.

Each time followed by my own predictable Danish Modern Prince soliloquy: *Am I doing the right thing? Did I abandon her in her greatest time of need?* Or is it just one more case of MAK...just being MAK. A selfish *bastardo*?

I'm filled with a deep sense of conflict about the parting. I will miss our good times, the laughs the good-natured kidding. The passionate lovemaking, the companionship. But frankly, beneath it all there is an overwhelming sense of relief that she is *bon voyage* mode.

Am I just a wildly careening emotional wrecking ball? Like it's hard-coded in my soul, beyond my control. Little consolation for the *victim*. I begin to wonder if I am destined to lead the solitary life of a monk. Mick the Monk—has a nice alliterative ring to it.

So, is there some series of traumatic emotional events in my

childhood like the emotional abuse of my alcoholic philandering father that have precipitated a Dismissive-avoidant Detachment Disorder? Ah...*an encouraging breakthrough. Sorry but your time is up...we'll have to take this up next week.*

Or maybe as a penance I should just start a Monastery for sociopathic fellow-travelers to take them off the streets; The Order of S. O. B? *Coed* of course.

So henceforth uh...Horatio, I will vow to make a conscious effort to lead a life of abstention from any female companionship and complications like a recovering alcoholic...one day at a time. But knowing my love of the feminine form, the addictive novelty and joy of being in a new relationship? The exciting process of mutual discovery, the blissful exploration of each others body, it's just a matter of time before my pathetic lack of resolve finds me in another *situation*. A fool for love? Or in the end, is it just lust? *Il bastardo!*

One night, while reflecting on my situation with Annie, still filled with ambivalence about her leaving, I finally fall asleep after staring at the ceiling for about three hours, when the phone beside the bed starts ringing...petulantly. The red LED digital clock shows 4:30 AM. *Jesus! Now what?*

Half-asleep, it takes about 5 rings. I jiggle it, finally, "Hello?" I say warily.

"*Mickey...you sound half asleep,*" the familiar voice says.

"Mom? Do you have any idea what time it is?" I say with an edge.

"*Off course, dear...*" to her companion "*what time is it love?*"

Pia continues, "*Why it's 12:30...Rome time...A little late to still be in bed...are you getting cranky in your old age?*" she says giggling, sipping...something. A Manhattan? Her favorite.

"Mom...it's 4:30 as in the morning *here*. The roosters are still asleep." I say.

"*Well I hope I didn't wake you. But since you're awake now...and by the way you're not a kid anymore. Apparently you grouchy ol' men need your sleep,*" she says again with a school girl giggle.

"No...no...just resting my eyes. With the time difference I'm always awake at 3 A-M waiting by the phone, just in case you call," I say.

"*That's a good son. Now take out a pencil and paper and write this down,*" she says, "*Flight 48 British Airways leaving on Thursday...at 11 AM.*"

"Mom...you're coming for a visit? That's uh...only in three days. Why such short notice?" I say.

"*No dear, you must be still half asleep. Now pay attention. You*

really should try to get more sleep, dear. You're flying to London for a wedding," she says impatiently.

"Must be a pretty special wedding. Prince Charles? Very funny stuff, mom. Manhattans?" I say.

"No dear...London," she says exasperated *"you're going to give your mother away at her wedding, Saturday the 9th...to Patrick Wodehouse. And by the way, do you still have that nice dark suit with blue pinstripes. It'll look very smart with a pale blue shirt and a red tie...a black velvet vest would be a nice touch,"* says Mother...just being a Mother.

"Wodehouse...Wodehouse, as in Jeeves-the-Butler-Wodehouse?" I say.

"No, no dear...I'm not marrying the Butler, I'm marrying P.G.'s nephew. Gotta run. See you soon, lovey. Ta Ta for now." she says, now very British.

Click.

That's it. Done deal. I just smile to myself. Okay mom, if it'll make you happy, I'm on my way. I sit down with Annie and tell her that I'll be gone for several days for the wedding. There is still an awkward and painful estrangement between us.

Mother had been living in Rome Italy since 1968 where she had relocated to get away from the Ruskie Prince of Darkness, my father who had been stalking her after their divorce.

It was there she was 'discovered' when she went to MIPs in Canne France in 1974. At 59, she was still a looker. She was there to pitch her unique teaching method of oil painting—instant painting, for a TV series on instructional oil painting. For anybody else the longest of long shots, but Pia Kozlov is not just anybody.

She was introduced to a young Brit producer who immediately recognized her natural charismatic, and vivacious personality. Made for TV.

Paint Along with Pia had a good run. 52 half hour programs on British ITV and 26 on PBS in the US, nationally syndicated half-hour programs shot and taped, unscripted, with Pia just being Pia doing her thing in real time, the whole time with Pia crackin' wise and telling amusing anecdotes while painting. Somehow, miraculously always finishing a complete painting in the 26 minutes allotted. She was a natural, and the camera, and the audience loved her natural homespun humor and non-intimidating approach to teaching. She developed quite a cult following, just on the basis of her quirky and fun persona.

As her TV career was starting to wind down, she had returned to her 'lovely Rome...my home' to retire, teach a little and paint. She had met Patrick Wodehouse in one of the painting classes she taught. A classic Brit, with a pencil mustache, sporting an ascot with a charming mellifluous Anglo-accent and Brit savoir-faire. He had been living in Rome for over 10

years as a Brit expat, with his wife when he was widowed two years earlier. He was indeed the nephew of the great British writer, P.G. Wodehouse, considered literary royalty in the U.K.

So after years of being Pia Kozlov's foil, I realized that resistance is futile. Get on the Pia Train...or get out of the way.

It would be a much appreciated distraction from the heaviness that had descended upon Chez MAK with Annie and myself. So I book a flight for London and arrive the day before the wedding with some serious jet lag. Pia and Patrick have driven across the Pond to Wimbledon London, and had arrived the day before. I get a chance to meet Patrick. He's a great guy, very attentive and kind to Pia, which makes me feel a little more comfortable with the sudden announcement of this ACT III union.

The small intimate ceremony is to be at a lovely little neighborhood Anglican church. At 68, Pia's still dresses to kill. She looks positive ravishing. Patrick, 5 years her junior, and about 5 centimeters shorter, is also sartorially splendid.

With me alongside my beaming Mother, who's wearing a very chic dark suit and corsage looking very matrimonial with a grinning Patrick, we're standing in front of a middle-aged rather plain matronly woman Pastor.

The church is full of Pia's and Patrick's multitude of friends.

“Good afternoon. What happened to Pastor Rollins?” Patrick says.

“I-I-I mmm...So-oh-oh-sorry...but he was taken ill the l-l-l-last minute...and he asked me to stand in for him. I'm very nervous, I don't normally do w-w-w-weddings...or give s-s-s-ermons,” she says with a stammer. *Really?*

Mother is now fighting laughter, not at the poor lady Pastor's expense, bless her heart, but just the hilariousness of the situation, of the whole burlesque scenario. Personally I was not surprised. Anything to do with Mother usually ends up like an episode of *I Love Lucy*.

Pia whose first impulse, next to laughter, is always kindness, says trying to reassure the diffident Pastor, “That's quite alright dearie, I'm sure you'll do just fine. Maybe you'd like to do the shorter version of the ceremony?”

I am now desperately trying to stifle my laughter—*damn* near busting a gut. Could only happen to Mom. Okay. *Cue the I Love Lucy intro music.*

“Oh...Thhhhh-ank you! P-i-a-a...dooo yooo...ttttake P P P P P...Oh the hell with it. I nnnnow pppronounce you man and wife...kiss the Brrrride!”

Definitely short...and very sweet. Mom and I burst out laughing, then Patrick takes Pia in his arms, with a big triumphant toothy grin on his face, bends her over at the waist and gives her a big wet kiss. The organ kicks in with the Wedding March, as Mom and I hug. Patrick then plants a big kiss on the mug of the Pastor, bringing a big grin to her crimson face.

Pia and Patrick walk down the aisle toward the rear of the church with everyone having a great laugh, throwing rice and roses. That's it...it's over in less than two hours including the reception. I'm there less than 48 hours. Then it's an 11 hour plane ride from Heathrow back to SFO, then a three hour drive back to Tahoe.

Pia and Patrick would eventually settle in Wimbledon London where she would be eligible for UK National Health Care. They would enjoy a wonderful life together, frequently traveling to Italy and the rest of Europe. They were married for over 28 years. Some of her lady friends would say with no small amount of envy, a 28 year honeymoon, until Patrick's sudden unexpected death at the age of 90. Two months later, with her soul partner and faithful companion gone, she peacefully passes at the age of 95, wrapped in the warm embrace of Morpheus.

They had a great prime-time run together. Throwing many lavish dinner performances, with Mother entertaining everyone with her Auntie Mame *Yes! Life is a banquet and most poor suckers are starving to death*, anecdotes and antics delivered a la I Love Lucy. They lead a full, active and productive life to the very end. And neither of them left anything on the stage. As the Brits say, *Good show! Mom and Patrick, Damn good show!*

And God bless'em. Wherever they are—I'm sure they're planning their next *very* big soiree.

When I return home from London, I immediately notice that Annie's car is gone. I let myself inside the house—it is deafeningly quiet but the scent of her perfume eerily lingers. I find an envelope with *Mickey* in a delicate feminine cursive hand, leaning against a now empty wine glass on the kitchen counter along with the house key. I pour myself a double Johnny—straight-up, leaving the bottle out. I take a long pull, sit down on the sofa, open the envelope and begin to read the tear-stained heartbreaking letter.

Mon chere Mickey,

I am so profoundly sorry to have pulled you into my labyrinthine life. I thought this was my chance to finally find a lasting and true love...with you. But as usual I screwed it up...again.

Seems like I can't quite close the deal with a good man...ever, eh? You're a decent and

:: AMERICAN AMNESIA — m.a.kominsky ::

caring man. Et très sexy! Quite a package...for any lucky girl.

But, you and I are now officially yesterday's news. It would be too hard for me to stay in contact with you. The longing for your sweet delicious body...every time I would hear the sound of your voice.

I'm going to take this time with my family to reflect on where I should go from here with my life, because obviously what I am doing isn't working. I keep making the same damn mistakes over and over. There is something that I have been searching for I think all of my life. I realize now that it can't be a 'someone'...as wonderful as you are...but something much deeper. Until I find it, I know that I could never be happy, with you, or anyone.

If I EVER do find what I'm looking for...I'll be in touch. And maybe we could do an encore? Eh mon chere? In the meantime, I won't leave any contact information. All the better if the Feds come sniffing around again.

I'll never forget that you saved my life...twice. Once on that 'dark and stormy night' on the mountain, and the Feds house-call. From the bottom of my heart...Merci beaucoup!

*Avec tout ma amour...toujours,
Annie...the Goodbye Girl.
XOXOXO!*

Like I said...plucky.

And as the curtain falls on yet another Act III of Goodbye Guy bids adieu to Goodbye Girl. I'm reminded that this love thing? Ain't for the faint of heart.

I put the now freshly stained, with my tears, letter back in the envelope. I decide to place it with my other *important papers*, along with the letter from Sora Eagle Feather.

Bonne chance ma amour...jusqu'à ce que nous rendezvous...encore.
Good luck my love...until we *rendezvous*...again.

- Chapter 23 -

After the departure of Annie, as a distraction, I pour myself into the task at hand at ACT Inc. With the former Mayor Donnie Trent now ignominiously jailed in Sacramento, awaiting trial in Federal Court, the political landscape and calculus has changed dramatically for the cable franchise renewal with the City of South Lake Tahoe.

The new Mayor Amy Burton, is the complete antithesis of the flashy, politically savvy Donnie. She's middle-aged; a housewife with a couple teen-aged kids, rather matronly looking, but well-educated, intelligent, fair and reasonable. I have several lunches with her to discuss the renewal—she always insists on paying for her share. She's politically unambitious and refreshingly direct and pragmatic.

She understands that the reality of booting ACT Inc. out, as a practical matter would be a chaotic and costly legal proposition for the City, as I have tactfully made it very clear that ACT Inc. would not go quietly into the night. That the stick is never very far behind the carrot.

Because the city has suffered through the recent trauma of national notoriety of being perceived as governed by a *drug kingpin* mayor, and by inference a *drug mecca*, there is no appetite to stir up any more negative controversy...or publicity, as the life's blood of Tahoe is tourism. So taking on the 700 pound corporate gorilla, ACT Inc. in a legal battle is not anything they have the resources or the stomach for, which I recognize and exploit to its fullest potential—diplomatically...of course. Right.

But part of the art of negotiation includes exploiting the counterparty's weakness which both of you realize, but without giving a gratuitous open, high-handed voice to it, always trying to leave other party's dignity intact, as much as possible. It's a delicate dance that requires a great deal of patience, constantly walking the tightrope between the carrot...and the stick, all the while attempting to foster the gradual, incremental building of trust. Unless, of course, the other party is arbitrary or patently unrealistic in their demands. Then the gloves come off. And you *do not* want to go smash-mouth with ACT Inc. and one J. Murdock Mahoney.

Over a period of several months, new Mayor Amy Burton believes that I'm negotiating in 'good faith'; we establish a level of trust, that never would have been possible under Mayor *Donnie*—at least not without some personal *quid pro quo*. Marla Dyson, wisely senses that the less visibility that ACT corporate has in the negotiation and settlement process the better the prospects for a more attractive and expedient result for ACT. She makes very few visits to Lake Tahoe, and has very little direct interaction with the local government in the negotiation process. So Marla and I, with the exception of my trips to Corporate in Denver, have very little physical contact uh...business

wise anyway.

Working diligently with the City Attorney, within six months, we have hammered out and negotiated a tentative Franchise agreement with the City. In light of the fact that the initial prospects of getting any kind of favorable renewal of franchise were once considered remote, corporate ACT Inc. is duly impressed with the results, and my stewardship in particular, especially since the terms are far more beneficial to ACT than they were willing offer to keep the franchise.

But ACT is particularly pleased, because the franchise renewal predated the Cable Communications Act of 1984 by only several months, which would have statutorily granted the franchising authority more power to insist on the implementation of some of what was considered onerous provisions by ACT, like dedicated PEG, Public, Educational and Government channels; a very burdensome and costly proposition for the cable operator. Our insider cable industry lobbyists in Washington DC, had given us a heads-up on impending legislation on the cable industry, that was still in the draft phase. It had not yet hit the trades, or the National League of Cities political action committee's radar, the substance of which, I do not volunteer to the City. So that gives me an even greater sense of urgency to get the deal done. ASAP.

The franchise renewal passes the City Council unanimously, not by accident almost 8 months before the expiration date of the existing franchise agreement and almost six months prior to the passage of the Cable Communications Act of 1984 without the subsequent statutory PEG provision. *Done Deal, baby. Next?*

So, about two weeks later, with very little notice, I am summoned to corporate headquarters in Denver by VP Paul Berman, to have a meeting with Pauly, Marla...and Jason Mahoney. I fly into Denver on Thursday night, pick up a rental car and check into my hotel, for a meeting scheduled at 9 AM Friday morning. I am instructed to not book a return flight until after that weekend. *More details to follow upon your arrival.*

Friday, I get to corporate about 8:30 AM, and drop in to say hello to Pauly Berman and Marla Dyson, before the meeting with Dr. J, to get a preview of the reason for my attendance, which up to now, has been conspicuously...mysteriously lacking in explanation. Both of them greet me with warm and effusive praise for my job on the franchise, but are very vague and evasive about the purpose of the meeting with Jason Mahoney.

At 9 AM, Pauly, Marla and I walk over to J. Murdock Mahoney's office. His secretary ushers us into his huge sixth floor corner office, with wide 10 foot high floor-to-ceiling windows, framing a commanding breathtaking view of the snow covered Colorado Rockies.

She shows us where the coffee and pastries are set up, seats us at prescribed locations at the head of the table, a 14 foot long solid African walnut conference table with 12 black leather upholstered wing chairs. Class.

Nothing understated here—Conspicuous Corporate Wealth on display. The subtext...*it's good to be King*. Not much has changed since feudal times. While the world prays for *po folks*, the vassals, it listens to the demonstrably rich and affluent Lords.

Pauly and Marla are seated across from me, with the head chair obviously reserved for the *King*. At each seat location is a legal size folder with about 2 inches thick of material inside. Each folder is stamped with large block red letters:

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL
FOR CORPORATE MANAGEMENT EYES ONLY!

PROPERTY OF:

AMERICAN CABLE TELECOM INC.

DO NOT DUPLICATE !!

About 5 minutes later, CEO and President J. Murdock Mahoney purposefully strides through the door. He walks up to me and I am greeted with a what appears to be a genuinely warm handshake, which makes me very uneasy. Hmm...*what he's after?*

He clears his throat then takes two deep inhales from an oral asthma inhaler, prescription by the looks of it.

"Good morning everyone. And Mick...thank you for coming on such short notice," he says.

I had a choice?

"Sure, Jason...happy to be here," I say, leaving off the 99 year old George Burns rejoinder...*I'm just happy to be...anywhere*. I still have not fully recovered from the stress of surviving the looming encounter with the Feds, the difficult parting with Annie, and the Homeric effort required in getting the franchise renewed. I'm shanked—physically and emotionally.

"Okay, then...let's get started. In front of each of you is a packet with material that is obviously sensitive information. I must reiterate the necessity for the contents of this folder to remain absolutely for your eyes only. Do not even share it with other members of the corporate staff. It is absolutely imperative that the press does not get hold of *any* of these documents. Are we all categorically clear on that?" he asks.

We all nod affirmatively. *What? A plot to overthrow the government? Ha! Ha! Ha!*

"Now, let's open the folder, and have a look at what all this secrecy is about, shall we?" he says with his usual irritating self-satisfied smirk.

All of us open the folder and begin to review 'The Memo'.

"You'll notice the first enclosure is a memorandum dated August of 1971 from Lewis Powell, presently serving as a Supreme Court Associate Justice, entitled *Attack on the American Free Enterprise System*, sent to friend, Eugene Syndor at the US Chamber of Commerce. It was written before President Nixon nominated him to fill the vacancy left by Justice Hugo Black, a staunch supporter of liberal policies, civil liberties and labor. Black endorsed Roosevelt in both the 1932 and 1936 US Presidential elections and was an enthusiastic supporter of the New Deal, no further comment should be necessary, other than...*good riddance*.

After thoroughly reviewing it, you'll understand why the memorandum was marked *Confidential*. It was discovered by Washington Post leftist columnist Jack Anderson, who reported on its content a year later, after Powell had joined the Supreme Court, alleging Powell's efforts as an attempt to undermine the democratic process and integrity of the Supreme Court, summarily dismissed by the US Chamber as yet another *prima facie* example of anti-capitalist, Eastern liberal press bias.

The memo is essentially a clarion call for corporate America to become more aggressive in molding politics and law in the US. It is credited with sparking the formation of several influential right-wing think tanks and lobbying organizations, such as The Paul Revere Foundation and the American Legislative Action Congress, as well as inspiring and emboldening the US Chamber of Commerce to become far more politically active," pausing dramatically making eye contact for emphasis.

Mahoney continues, "In it, Powell argued, *The most disquieting voices joining the chorus of criticism came from perfectly respectable elements of society: from the college campus, the pulpit, the media, the intellectual and literary journals, the arts and sciences, and from politicians*. In the memorandum, Powell advocates *constant surveillance of textbook and television content*, as well as a purge of left-wing elements. He names consumer advocate Ralph Nader as the chief antagonist of American business.

The reason, despite its early date of creation, that it is the first enclosure is important. In that it forms the political armature...a manifesto of the basic political philosophical underpinning for every thing that follows it," Mahoney pedantically lectures his acolytes.

Pausing with almost comical theatrical gravitas, he continues, "To summarize...from 1964 through 1980, mostly under, charitably described as *leftists*, LBJ, and Carter, virtually the entire American business community experienced a series of political setbacks without parallel in the postwar period. In particular, Washington undertook a vast expansion of its regulatory power, introducing tough and extensive restrictions and requirements on business in areas from the environment to occupational safety to consumer protection.

Today...the American economic system is under broad attack. This attack requires mobilization for political combat: *Business must learn the*

lesson...that political power is necessary; that such power must be assiduously cultivated; and that when necessary, it must be used aggressively and with determination—without embarrassment and without the reluctance which has been so characteristic of American business.

The critical ingredient for success is organization: *Strength lies in organization, in careful long-range planning and implementation, in consistency of action over an indefinite period of years, in the scale of financing available only through joint effort, and in the political power available only through united action and national organizations.*

The reason I've called you here to today is to advise you that ACT Inc., along with many other large multi-national corporations, from sectors including of course Media, Telcos, Banking and Finance, Energy, Transportation etcetera...virtually every major sector of American corporate business is finally about to undertake serious efforts to organize corporate push-back against the unnecessary, onerous, overly burdensome, bordering on socialist regulation by the Federal government. The membership of the Entrepreneurial Corporate Caucus, or ECC, a conservative group of chief executive officers of major U.S. corporations, organized to promote pro-business public policy, will form the nucleus of this effort. So, the genesis...the formation of ECC was a direct result of the call to arms of the 1971 Powell Manifesto. It is, shall we say, a more uh...fervently *conservative*, but below-the-radar iteration, of the Business Roundtable. Any questions so far?" Mahoney asks.

"And my involvement, if any, in this effort?" I ask.

"ACT Inc. will be at the vanguard of this effort...leading the charge. Because Pauly and Marla's responsibilities for day-to-day operations are already more than demanding of their full-time commitment, they have both expressed great confidence in your abilities, based on your performance in Lake Tahoe in securing the franchise agreement, to represent ACT at the ECC. You would be the face of ACT in this effort, unless for some...*unfathomable* reason you should elect *not* to accept the position," Mahoney says smiling confidently.

I say, "Before I comment on that...I have a few fundamental questions. This memo has obviously been around for over ten years. So...*one*, why now? And *two*...why me? There are many other highly qualified lobbyists and political pols who have much more experience in this arena, than I."

"Okay...fair questions. To answer the second question first. Pauly and Marla think that you have demonstrated a keen, finely honed adroitness on how to get things done...to get to *yes*...and with a minimum of drama. And since both Pauly and Marla will be closely involved in overseeing this effort, they feel that, *A*, they can work with you...and *B*, we can trust you...that you will be loyal and dedicated to the interests of ACT, of course our paramount concern, which we may...or may not get from an outside *hired gun*.

The answer to the first part of your question is this. Since Ronald

Reagan took office in 1981, the political landscape has never been more conducive to deregulation as evidenced by the strike-breaking position taken by Reagan against PATCO...the air traffic controllers union, in the summer of 1981 where he called the bluff of PATCO to strike, and fired over 11,000 air traffic controllers. The firing of PATCO employees not only demonstrated a clear resolve by the president to take control of the bureaucracy, but it also sent a clear message to the private sector that unions no longer needed to be feared. In the process sending the broader message that literally...a former B cowboy actor who has been selected by the GOP to play the biggest starring role of his life...was the new sheriff in town.

So along with the increasing appetite in congress for deregulation and privatization, and the growing sympathetic composition of the Supremes, there may never be a better chance to get this done. And most political polls seem to indicate that Reagan will cruise through a re-election campaign with no serious Democratic challenger...and easily be re-elected. We, myself included, think with your help...we can get a lot done in the next 4 years including, the wholesale national telecommunication and cable deregulation, and more importantly, relaxation if not outright abolishment of the FCC and DOJ rules against ownership of multiple media in the same major market," he says.

"Okay...thanks. But I think I'll need to give this some further thought...before I can offer the obvious kind of commitment ACT would expect...and deserve," I say, frankly feeling very ambivalent indeed about jumping right back into the middle of the ocean, of battling an unrelenting riptide of adversarial foam and froth, when I haven't even completely towed off yet from my last against-the-tide marathon swim.

"Alright Mick...fair enough. But let me just leave you with this footnote. Included with this position is an increase in your base salary to 100K a year, along with stock options...and of course all the other benefits from your prior status," he says, again with the *Jace is not used to hearing the word no...from anyone* confident smile.

"Thank you. I'm flattered by the offer...and your confidence in me. I'll get back to you before I leave town after this weekend," I say.

Mahoney continues, "Okay...I *guess* that will have to be soon enough. In the meantime, assuming that you will have made the smart...the *right* decision, this weekend, I'd like you to be my guest out at the ranch. We are expecting company for Saturday and Sunday. Several CEOs from Fortune 500 corporations by special *private* invitation, one from each sector, will be flying into my private airstrip at the ranch in their corporate Lear jets, where it will be safe and secure from the prying eyes of the media...and the possibility of leaks as to the number and identities of the attendees of the conference. We will be convening an exploratory plenary session, to take input from the other CEO's. I'd like all three of you, to sit-in on this meeting...and the one on Sunday as well.

To ensure complete privacy from the press, the conference was scheduled for a weekend. Each attendee and their entourage will be chauffeured from the ranch, to separate individual five-star hotels in the Denver area, so as not to attract any undue attention from the media. We will convene here at my office on Saturday and Sunday at the prescribed times. Sunday afternoon, they will be chauffeured back to the ranch...to fly out.

This meeting should give all of you some insight into what to expect...allow you to meet the major players. And Mick, I don't have to remind you that this is the NFL. That you would be suiting up for a smash-mouth, grinding ground game...again, assuming of course you've wisely decided to accept the position," Dr. J says.

Hmm...football, an apt metaphor for entrepreneurial trench warfare. As an ex-b-baller, I had always had a problem with football. The inelegant primal, brute force of it—zero-sum wining by grinding your opponent into the mud. And what's up with that pointed pig-skin? Ever try to dribble a football? Fogitaboutit...

"Mick, after we adjourn here, my secretary will give you directions to the ranch...we'll expect you for dinner tonight at 7 PM, with my family...and some friends. You'll be our guest for the entire weekend including tonight. The first plenary session is scheduled for noon on Saturday, ending with the second session convening at 10 AM Sunday, concluding by 2 PM. In the meantime you all will review the material in the folders. Come prepared. Any questions?" Jace says, then leaves the room.

"Okay...I'll see you all tomorrow...obviously, I've got some homework to do," says Pauly as he gets up to leave, placing the folder under his arm.

"See ya all tomorrow," Marla says, as she stands up to leave flashing me a fleeting look of disappointment that we won't be having dinner...etcetera tonight, having recently been advised by me during an earlier tryst in Tahoe, that Annette Trudeau is no longer on the program. So much for Mick's recent mercurial monastic mandate. *Pfst!*

"Marla...got time to have lunch with me today, to help me get a better insight and perspective with the material?" I say reaching out to my boss for some much needed uh...mentoring.

"Sure...always glad to be of service. Come by about noon," she says trying desperately to restrain her obvious pleasure at my overture in front of Jason Mahoney.

I check in with Mahoney's secretary for the directions to his ranch, then decide to go back to my hotel to do some serious reading before noon check-out. I pack, then begin reading the *verboten* contents of the folder before leaving for my luncheon date with Marla. After which, I'm off to the Fiefdom of *Ca-je Rex* for dinner with the family, and to spend the weekend at Mahoney Manor, presumably with other assorted courtiers and courtesans.

As I begin reading, it quickly becomes obvious that the impressive list of attendees of the ECC, the *who's-who* of the hyper-capitalists, like the Illuminati, are the Neo-Feudal Lords, at least in their own not-so-little megalomaniacal minds.

Host and Roundtable Moderator:

J. Murdock Mahoney - President & CEO
Cable TV and Satellite Programing;
American Cable Telcom, Inc. (ACT) and American Inter-Media Inc. (AIM)

Keynote Speaker:

Max Mesmer – President Political Strategist and Legislative Lobbyist - Mesmer Strategies Inc. (MSI)

Attendees:

Drew and Chase Kramer - CEO & VP
Operations, respectively Energy - Coal and Natural Gas;
Kramer Energy Industries Inc. (KEI)

Reginald Meade - CEO & Chairman
Newspapers, Print & Radio/TV Media;
World Media Inc. (WMI)

Michael Goodwin - President & CEO
Entertainment Motion Picture & TV Content;
Zenith Studios Inc. (ZSI)

Lane Rector - CEO & Chairman
Oil and Liquid Natural Gas –
National Petroleum, Inc. (NPI)

Jamie Draper - CEO & Chairman
Banking and Finance
Bank of Long Island, Inc.

Payton Chandler - President & CEO
Telecommunications and Telcos
Universal Telephone & Telecommunications, Inc.
(UT&T)

Rand Rourke - Talk Radio & TV Host.
*Developer of the Proposed Libertarian -
Acropolis Libertatem*

Gordon Nelson
Libertarian founder of Americans for Tax Fairness.

Frankly, after reading the radical, right-of-John-Birch mission statement, I realize it's probably no accident that I'd never even heard of it. The embryonic Libertarian organization and the individual members would of course assiduously attempt to insulate themselves from the prying eyes of the press—the same kind of cultish mystery and cloaked secrecy surrounding the Freemasons, of which there is more than probably much common membership.

Mission Statement:

The only proper functions of a government are the:

- Police, for protection from criminals,
- Army, for protection from foreign invaders,
- Courts, for protection of your property and contracts from breach or fraud by others, to settle disputes by rational rules, according to objective law.

Self-evident Truths:

- All property and all forms of wealth are produced by man's mind and labor; and
- It is the sole power of each individual to achieve or to destroy one's own happiness; and
- Public welfare is the welfare of those who earn it; those who do not, are entitled to no welfare.

Hmm...looks like repurposed Galt Gestalt. Chapter and verse from Ayn Rand's fictional *magnum opus* tome, Atlas Shrugged—Rand's most ambitious manifesto of Objectivism. Individual rights embodied in *laissez-faire* capitalism nicely distilled in American oil industry business magnate John D. Rockefeller's:

Do you know the only thing that gives me pleasure? It's to see my dividends coming in.

As I review the attendees, conspicuously absent is a representative

from the US Chamber of Commerce. Is it possible that the highly tendentious pro-business CC is considered too moderate for inclusion in this Libertarian Wild Bunch?

From the agenda, it would appear that the first day, Saturday, will be dedicated to introductions and socializing, formulating and refining the intent, structure and parameters of actions of the organization, including defining respective roles and leadership. Then listing the range of topics for the roundtable discussion, which is to follow on Sunday.

Reading through the various bios of the attendees, I can't abate the nagging disquiet that these are the so-called Royalty of Capitalism—the elite of the Chosen Ones, the self-anointed Masters of the Universe.

It's somewhat daunting, and I must say, flattering, and yes, even seductive to think that I may be a player, albeit a peripheral bit player, involved in this effort by the preeminent lions of capitalism to fundamentally redefine, reshape and *maybe* even completely restructure the rules of engagement of capitalism, and yes, democracy in America. And by extension, indeed the entire planet. Maybe power is the ultimate aphrodisiac? Make that a *definite maybe*...on both counts.

It is not lost on me that this historical clandestine meeting of the Captains of Capitalism could conceivably become part of the genesis for the redefining of political power based on a radical oligarchical distribution of wealth in the world. And more importantly who controls it, how to keep it, and to what lengths it will be wielded.

So...it turns out my little joke about the *overthrow of the government* may have had more than a kernel of truth to it—the old Reverse Robin Hood allegory. This merry band of plutocrats are essentially advocating a highly coordinated long-term strategy calculated to force an economic corporate *coup de etat*. A redistribution of vastly increased wealth—in slo-mo. Starting in motion, an inexorable tide of seemingly minor, inconsequential political victories. A slow and gradual accretion, so as to be almost imperceptible—the cumulative effect not being realized until what? *It's too late?*

The moral dilemma I have to confront before I leave Denver is my potential role in the time honored parable about the frog in the simmering pot. Do I want to be the hapless frog? Or can I morally rationalize being a guy who turns up the heat?

The first stage of willingly participating in an immoral, if not illegal act, which this may well be, is to desperately seek some historical precedent. Some prior morality play that could conceivably rationalize and overrule my initial ambivalence about being involved.

Of course the Faustian Bargain immediately comes to mind...not a bad outcome for *Monsieur* Mephistopheles—not so good for *Herr* Faust. Or for Tricky Dick—the Watergate fiasco.

But, what if there would be some greater social good to be achieved by bending the rules. Would this be any different from FDR's attempts to stack the

composition of Supreme Court, to be more sympathetic to a more liberal legislative agenda?

I decide to put the Frog-pot-stove motif on the back burner, for the moment at least until I've had a chance to get more input from the actual players at the conference.

At 11:30, I drive over to ACT Inc. to meet VP Marla Dyson for lunch. Her secretary buzzes her, then tells me to go on in. I knock on the closed door, and open it to find her voraciously reading the contents of the folder.

"Living dangerously are we?" I ask.

She looks up at me and smiles broadly, "Sorry?"

"No drawn blinds?" I say.

"Hi, Mickey. Well, frankly, I am desperately in need of some major excitement in my life...which by the way, you *will* be providing this afternoon," she says standing up, stretching her arms backward, causing her lovely full breasts to protrude, "Ready to go? Any special requests for lunch?" she says smiling mischievously.

"Well, so much for *no* pressure. But rest assured my associate *Mista* Wilson, uh...that would be *Woodrow* H. Wilson, will hopefully rise to the occasion and do everything bodily possible to meet the challenge, assuming a coupla double Johnny Walkers can overcome the inherent performance anxiety of satisfying a high-powered Alpha *shikse*. As for lunch? Something low fat...to preserve my girlish figure. Some white meat. Breast of uh...something sounds good," I say.

"Well, you're in luck, big boy...it's the special on the menu today," she says, locking up the folder in filing cabinet, then walking over to me and grabbing my hand with a nice squeeze, "Let's bust outta this cell block...*now!*"

As we're leaving she announces to her secretary, "I'll be gone for the rest of the afternoon. Anything short of nuclear holocaust...or a massive drop in my stock...*do not* page me."

At *Mista* Wilson's very persuasive urging we decide to skip lunch and go straight to her condominium, a gated monument to conspicuous opulence. I follow her Audi in my rental, which at a normal legal speed, is maybe a 10 minute drive. In less than 5 minutes the horny corporate Barbarians are at the security gate.

Fast forward a few hours later to her minimalist but lavishly all-white appointed 8th story condo. Both of us are sitting up in a bed large enough to have its own zip code, with a glass of wine, under ridiculously high-thread-count satin sheets covering our still glistening bodies. The cold, clinical atmospheric of Marla's antiseptic operating-theater of a master bedroom is somehow unsettling.

As the sun is slowly slipping behind the same commanding view of the Rockies, "Top ten...maybe top five of most satisfying business lunches...ever," she says, clinking her glass to mine in a toast.

"Don't know if I coulda survived bein' number four," I say.

"The key is a strict training regimen, gradually working up to optimum performance levels. I'm hereby appointing myself your *very* personal trainer."

"See...that's the difference between men and women. Women are more into that uh...whole journey thing. Long distance marathon runners who savor the wine-sippin' experience, even the pain. Men are pure pleasure-seeking missiles of *luuuuv*...sprinters...guzzlers, more interested in the destination, an exploding climax...through the tape at the finish line," I say.

"For a sprinter...you did just fine. And Mickey? No complaints," she says nuzzling up close.

"*Merci* baby...and *Mercy sil vous plait*. Hey, Marly as much as I hate to say it, I'm going to have to think about getting dressed pretty soon. I'm expected for dinner by the King at Hacienda del Rey at seven. How long do think it'll take me to get out there?" I say.

As she gets up, "Hold that thought...I desperately have to pee. Don't go anywhere. I'm not through with you...yet. Don't make me use restraints," she says smiling.

"Perchance an elaborate system of ropes and pulleys? As I find a woman with mechanical aptitude...kinda handy to have around the house. Ya know...good with their hands, particularly if they can work on uh...plumbing. *Very* useful," I say.

As I watch her walk toward the bathroom, I am awe-struck by her lithe, graceful body. For a tall woman, she's perfectly proportioned; full yet firm uplifted breasts, wide shoulders, a wasp waist, the narrow hips, and the lean, well-defined legs of an athlete. My gawd! *Monsieur* Wilson likewise immediately registers his shameless appreciation for the exquisiteness of her feminine form.

In search of some Kleenex to blow my nose I open the drawer of the night stand. Hmm...interesting what you may find in a woman's...drawers. A bright pink vibrating dildo, tough to compete with the on-demand reliability and staying power of good ol' Pink Floyd. Condoms, assorted love-lubs and...handcuffs. No Kleenex, but an oral inhaler, obviously prescription with the name of J. M. Mahoney with a recent date of a week ago. I quickly close the drawer just before she returns.

Apparently Dr. J has recently operated here as well. Part of the '*no disappointment clause*' of the employment contract of an executive VP, to never utter the 'N' word...No, to the good Doctor?

When she returns to bed, "Probably about half-an-hour. By the way...just to prepare you a little for what to expect. The ranch, "with air quotes

of her free hand" is about 400 acres, with over a thousand head of Black Angus beef cattle, and last count, at least 30 pure bred Arabian horses. A hobby of the lil' lady, Missus Mahoney," she says.

"Jesus...Sounds like something from Bonanza. Ben Cartwright's Ponderosa, which would make me, what...the big dumb one, Hoss Cartwright?"

"Something like that. Only time will tell. Mick, before you leave, it might be time to let you know what you might be getting yourself into, uh...of course I mean with this position that Jace has offered you. By now, you've probably familiarized yourself with the material well enough to realize that these are career corporate soldiers. Lifers...playin' with live ammo. Once you join *our inner sanctum* of Jason Mahoney et al, it's very difficult...if not impossible to get out. Just ask Pauly...or *me*," she says, putting her glass of wine down on the night stand and staring into my eyes, completely devoid of the levity a minute ago.

"Kinda like...being a *made wiseguy* in the Mafia? Only one way out...ten toes up?" I say with a grin, which goes unreturned.

"Mickey...I *really like* you. I always have from the first day...and when you were attached with Annie, if it's possible, I wanted you even more. And now it's about *waaaaay* more than just the sex. Do you understand what I'm trying to say here? And it doesn't matter if you feel the same way about me...or not. That's how much I *care* what happens to you," she says gazing searchingly into my eyes.

"So...I'm not just another pretty face?" I say batting my eyes. Which draws a good-natured punch to my arm, but with a bit of an edge.

I start to say, "Well, as Hoss Cartwright might say, *moronically* earlier this morning I was giving this exact topic some serious cogent thought...and I was reminded of the ol' frog in the simmering pot trope, ya know where the..."

"Mick...let me break it down for ya...okay? *Choose*. You're either *not* in the pot...or you *are*. You know the Eagles song...Hotel California?" she asks.

"Yea...sure."

"Remember the lyrics? This is the part I want you to *ree-lly* think about...*before* you agree to join *us*," she says.

*Last thing I remember, I was
Running for the door
I had to find the passage back
To the place I was before
"Relax, " said the night man,
"We are programmed to receive.
You can check-out any time you like,
But you can never leave!*

"So if I join up, do I get to wear a sword? What...a secret decoder ring? Will I be expected to return some kind of stupid secret *honky* handshake with a bunch of middle-aged fatso white guys in matching leisure suits? Sorry...but that's where I draw line in the sandbox...and definitely, no tasseled *fez* or raccoon hats. Period.

Marly...I really appreciate that. But as you may have already noticed I'm a *very* big boy. I've been around more than a little. I can take care of myself. Now...I've *really* got to get going...jump in the shower and get dressed. Don't want to disappoint his Lordship, now do we?" I say gently stroking her cheek with the back of my hand.

"Okay...one last thing before you go," she says, cradling my face in her hands and kissing me deeply, "now...you can get dressed."

As I climb out of bed, she gives me a playful but sharp slap on the butt. In the shower, I begin to replay the lyrics to Hotel California in my head...

*You can check-out any time you like,
But you can never leave!*

And then the part that she didn't say...

*And I was thinking to myself..
This could be Heaven or this could be Hell*

*Then she lit up a candle and she showed me the way
There were voices down the corridor,
I thought I heard them say...*

- Chapter 24 -

The drive out to the Ponderosa takes a little over a half-hour, which gives me a little time to ponder my relationship with Marla. I am deeply conflicted with the notion that VP Marla Dyson seems to have sold her soul, to the *company store*. It occurs to me that Marla has been trying to tell me that she herself, is *bought and paid for*; which I find more than a little tragic and rather depressing. Is it just a simple matter of career ambition? Or are she and Pauly, trapped in the *inner-sanctum* under the beguiling Rasputin spell of J. Murdock Mahoney—his extreme wealth and therefore power, which somehow morally seems a little less reprehensible.

I decide to put all that aside for a while, and from here on out, concentrate on my own decision of whether to accept the position. A tacit Faustian Bargain? Which I have decided I will suspend until later this weekend after I am able to gain more insight into what I might be getting myself involved in—both the near and long term.

I turn off the main road on to graveled path, unobtrusively marked by a stone obelisk, maybe 6 feet high. Like the Washington monument, a not-so-subtle phallic symbol of economic hegemony and American male potency. So much for nuance.

In the distance high on a hill, against the backdrop of the snow-capped Rockies, I see what looks more like a *kitschy* El Lay suburban Spanish motif mall, than a house. I continue driving for maybe a quarter-mile, which brings me to a completely fenced estate—spiked wrought-iron pickets which I guess to be about 10 feet high, between four foot square river rock turrets every 20 feet.

I stop at the manned kiosk in front of a gate. I check my watch—6:35 PM.

"Good evening sir, the nature of your business?" says the stocky uniformed security buzz-cut-guard with a practiced smile and an irritating, contrived politeness. He's packing a holstered sidearm—a semi-automatic, maybe a 9mm.

"What? No alligators? A moat...maybe a drawbridge would have been a nice touch?" I ask.

Nothing. Apparently he's not amused by my wit. Like an anchovy pizza, not for everyone.

"Yea...you're probably right. The gators? A bit much. Okay...I have an appointment. Mick Kozlov to see Mr Mahoney," I say. Tough crowd.

He meticulously makes an entry on his clipboard, probably including that I'm a *wise-ass*, then gets on the phone. After less than a minute, nods to me as the huge wrought-iron gate slowly, noisily creaks open. I continue up the

hill on the now concrete paved tarmac for about 100 yards until it turns into a circular drive under a Spanish Mediterranean portico, with its massive size, woefully out of scale to the two story *Orange County-isimo El McMansion* behind it. I'm guessing maybe 20K square feet minimum all stacked under a red terra cotta tile roof, like something designed by a Francisco Lloyd Wrongo. Parked under the portico is a squadron of 8 new black Chevy Suburbans, presumably for transportation back to the corporate offices of ACT for the weekend summit. A valet parking attendant materializes out of nowhere.

"Good evening sir, do you have any luggage you'd like me to carry in for you, *sir*?" again with the polite, almost obsequious demeanor, disconcertingly so. Judging by his bearing, trim appearance and buzz-cut, also probably ex-military.

"No thanks...I can handle it," I say slipping him a fiver, which he politely refuses with a sweeping hand gesture, fleetingly revealing the butt of a gun in a shoulder holster tucked under his blue blazer.

"Very good sir...please leave the keys in the car. I'll park it for you. If you want to leave, just let me know and I'll bring the car up for you, *sir*," he says.

"Thanks. How will I find you?" I say.

"Sir, there is *always* someone on uh...duty, twenty-four-seven."

Hmm...*And welcome to the Hotel California, sir...enjoy your stay.* Now, with increasingly alarming loudness, ricocheting around inside my *cabeza* is that damn song...

*You can check-out any time you like,
But you can never leave!*

As I grab my carry-on out of the trunk, no sooner do I slam the lid, the car drives off disappearing around the side of the house. I walk up to the double eight-foot high solid oak front doors, which are open by the time I reach them. An impeccably attired and groomed manservant of Hispanic descent, is standing there with an amiable smile framed by a carefully trimmed obligatory Latin mustache. Arrayed above the massive arched doorway contour are hand wrought-iron letters, *La ciudad brillante en la colina.*

Now, I'm not what I consider terribly fluent in Spanish, but my translation of the inscription is, *The bright...or shining...city on the hill.* Probably just a coincidence that president Ronald Reagan, in speeches famously references the exceptionalism, the promised land of America the *beautiful*? Yea...right.

"Mick Kozlov, to see Mr Mahoney," I say.

"*Si* Senior Kozlov, *yo soy* Raphael...welcome to the *hacienda.* *Por favor*, allow me to show you to the *veranda*, where *Senior* and *Senora* Mahoney

and guests are taking refreshments and cocktails. And may I take *su maleta* to your room?"

"*Buenos dias...y muchas gracias Raphael,*" I say

"*Esta bien, señor...por favor, sígueme usted,*" Raphael says taking my bag with a smile, pleased with my Spanish response.

Cocktails?...the magic word. Lead the way Raphael, could sure use a doble-Juanito right about now...vamos!

I follow Raphael through a meandering maze of rooms, the walls full of large original oil paintings, mostly figurative portraits of what I assume are Jason Mahoney's family, his children, including presumably a full-size of his wife with an Arabian horse. And several huge landscapes, some maybe 8 feet by 6 feet, a few that I recognize as originals by Thomas "Yellowstone" Moran. Some depicting the vast panorama of Yellowstone Valley, others of the turbulent sea, from the time he spent living in East Hampton, Long Island. Serious Big Collector Bucks.

On the way through the house, I stop and gaze through an open door into a dark wood paneled library revealing several very large hanging photographs of a large racing sloop on the open sea under full sail, beating to weather, heeling mightily in a heavy frothing sea, with an upward slanting *Más Rápido!* on the transom...every serious racing captain's constant exhortation to his crew...*faster! Si, mi capitán! Andale!..Arriba!*

A few images of Jason Mahoney sporting a sailing foul weather suit, and an uncharacteristically uninhibited broad smile, holding up a trophy surrounded by smiling members of an adoring crew. There are also many trophies and plaques on the wall. Definitely a serious, yet blissfully happy sailor.

I myself, even as a child had always been enthralled by the sea. My own art reflects my fascination with the changing moods of *Madame La Mer*. But my paintings though often as large as Moran's, are less literal, more gestural, attempting to capture the essence of the raw power, capriciously unleashed by the sometimes petulant *Madame*. It is what attracted me to off-shore sailboat racing in Southern California, now relegated to an occasional weekend regatta with friends out of San Francisco Bay—to experience and photograph the many changing moods of the open sea to eventually translate on to canvas.

Whenever I feel emotionally unsettled, overwhelmed by the complexities of life, I seek the solace of the sea to 'ground' me. The constant low level primal B-flat roar of the wind and waves, the omnipresent scent of the salt laden air reminds me of my primordial origins. The pure and simple elegance of nature, rejuvenates my spirit.

As I catch up with Raphael, we finally reach the rear of the *casa grandisima*, and walk out on to a huge *veranda*, facing an Olympic sized pool, with a backdrop of meticulously tiered landscaping, more of an arboretum

much like the magnificently manicured grounds at the Huntington Art Museum in Southern California, with all manner of exotic flowers and trees. The air is lush with a delicious *melange* of fragrances from flowers that I had never experienced before.

As I approach a large table under a huge umbrella, with four people, Jason Mahoney spots me, smiles, stands up and walks over to me. On the street I would not have recognized him in *ranch-chic* jeans, boots and western shirt.

"Mick...welcome. Nice to have you," he says shaking my hand warmly.

"Well thanks, Jason...nice to be had," I say smiling.

"Before I make the introductions what can Raphael get you to drink?" he asks.

"Thought you'd never ask, Jason. Yea, a Johnny Walker, over...would be very much appreciated," I say.

"Okay...Johnny Walker, Red, Black...or Blue?" he asks.

"I usually drink *Juanito Negro*...over. Blue? Don't believe I've ever had it. The difference?" I naively ask, again blithely revealing my colossal ignorance on such epicurean matters...it's a gift.

"*Azul es el mejor*...aged for over 60 years...as opposed to the Black which is about 12 years. Starts at about \$200 a fifth. Raphael, please bring Mr Kozlov a Johnny Walker Blue, straight up...a double. *Gracias*, Raphael. Mick...you don't want to drink Blue over. The ice melts and dilutes the full appreciation of the nuanced blend. It's to be sipped...and savored, like a fine woman," he says. *Like your private stock, Marla Dyson?*

His sentence is punctuated by the loud slamming down of a cocktail glass on the glass patio table top by the sole woman at the table followed by a hasty, petulant folding of the arms. Got *my* attention, but Jason seems oblivious. Hmm...obviously, she's not particularly receptive to the simile either.

"*Muy bien, senor* Mahoney," Raphael says, then walks behind a complete wet bar on the *veranda*.

Jason Mahoney walks me over to the table and makes the introductions.

"Mick...my wife Peggy...Max Mesmer...and Ernie Porter, chief of security on loan from Lane Rector, NPI for the conference this weekend. He's arranging all the logistics and transportation for us."

"Pleasure," I say nodding toward Peggy Mahoney which goes unacknowledged.

Both Mesmer and Porter stand to shake hands.

"Mick...call me Ernie," Ernest Porter says with a thick Southern drawl. His gratuitously firm handshake is almost confrontational. On his extended right forearm arm I can't help but notice the large spiraling tattoo of a snake, with the serpent forked tongue morphing into the inscription, *El Negro*

on the back of his hand. Wearing black jeans and a black golf shirt, maybe 6'2" tall, lean and wiry with the hard ropey vascular muscles like someone who works out...a lot. On his substantial left bicep, a skull tattoo, with *FORCE RECON USMC*. Hmm...an ex-black ops guy, a perfect specimen of a made-in-America trained killing machine. His coal black, unblinking lifeless eyes, and hard sneering mouth, give me a momentary chill.

"Hi Mick...heard some good things about you from Jason," Max Mesmer says without making direct eye contact like he's talking to someone behind me, his fleshy effete handshake, clammy like three day old fish. He's fifty-ish, short with shoulders like a goat, and a thick mid-section, a polyester Hawaiian shirt tucked into his belt-less trousers, almost up to his armpits with daring red suspenders. His idea of casual Friday, tops-off the package of a Max Bialystock double, complete with the bad comb-over.

"Thanks."

I notice that Peggy Mahoney doesn't appear to be very sociable, rather distant and aloof, judging by her unfocused sullen bloodshot-eyes, she's obviously already several rounds ahead of everyone else, most probably usually the case. Despite her washed-out appearance, one can tell that at one time she was probably a beauty, and could still scrub up pretty good. Her copper hair is cut in a low-maintenance short bob. I make her age to be early forties, but with excessively high-mileage and considerable premature streaks of gray at the roots from her last dye job, a coupla months past shelf life. Wearing brown riding boots with tan jodhpurs, the tightly-fitting brown knit pull-over is unflattering to her flat, chicken chest. She's short and compact—a slim body with slender but fleshy crepey arms, with the thick torso and a face that exhibits the unmistakable puffiness of a career alcoholic.

Jason motions me toward an empty patio chair next to Peggy who reeks with the saccharine pickled scent of alcohol. We all take a seat, just in time for my drink to arrive.

"*Gracias*, Raphael," I say.

"*De nada, señor.*"

I take a sip. It's like nothing I have ever tasted before, from the heavy cut-crystal tumbler the thick smooth viscosity oozes over my lips on to my tongue exploding in a subtle synergistic blend over a predominately musty hint of oak...nectar from the gods, ambrosia.

"Not bad...Jason, could get used this," I say.

"Good. If you make *the smart* decision...maybe you'll get that chance. Mick...Max is going to be giving the keynote talk tomorrow morning...to kick off the conference. I'd like you two to get together sometime before the conference...for a preliminary exchange of some ideas and strategies for our long-term game plan, maybe after dinner tonight," Mahoney says.

"Sure...not a problem, Jason," I say.

Dinner with Jason, Max. Peggy and I is an unremarkable affair, with Ernest Porter deferring. We are joined at dinner by Jason's 16 year old son, Trey. He's tall for his age, maybe 6'4" with a hulking frame, with not much on it. I'm reminded of myself when I was the same age.

"Trey...Mick here played some B-ball in college...at UCB. Trey's *only* a second string center on his high school basketball team," Jason says with an unmistakable disdainful tone.

The poor kid seems to have inherited his mother's sullen disposition, I'm sure due in no small part to failing to measure up to his father's expectation of perfection.

"Yea? So were you any good?" he says rather snidely.

"Good...maybe a half a step from great. I wasn't a particularly gifted athlete. I was good enough to start in high school...we had a good team...they carried me. Got a full ride to UCB, but left the program early, due to uh...political incongruities, shall we say?" I say smiling.

"Mick...maybe tomorrow morning...after breakfast, you could show Trey a few things about post play in our gym," Jason says.

"Well that's up to Trey...but yea, if you're interested I'd be happy to, Trey," I say.

Before Trey can even answer, Jason says, "Great. He'll be there...9 AM *sharp*."

Trey's face darkens, then he pretty much clams up for the rest of the evening. Poor kid. Been there...done that.

The *entre* is classic Ponderosa bill of fare. Mounds of barbequed baby back pork ribs, of course raised and slaughtered on the ranch. The way Max Mesmer attacks the pork ribs would tend to indicate that he's not a practicing orthodox Jew. Peggy Mahoney doesn't make it through the entree, before she dozes off at the table. The fact that her face ends up in the mashed potatoes, would also tend to indicate that my conversation is less than riveting. Raphael is summoned by Jason, to assist the missus upstairs, followed by Trey. Then, like some cliché scene from *Bonanza*, Ben Cartwright, Max and I retire to Jason's study for brandy and manly cigars. Cubans of course.

As we're sitting around the crackling fire in the massive river rock fireplace, puffing and sipping, like real men, scanning the room, I notice what appears to be a small armory in a floor-to-ceiling *armoire* behind locked double glass doors.

"Quite a collection of guns...you a hunter?" I ask

"Yes...I hunt a little. Mostly non-humans," Ben Cartwright says with a *ha ha* smirk, "and an occasional gray wolf or mountain lion that is menacing my cattle. But I'm mostly a collector of firearms...with an extensive collection of handguns, including vintage civil war, and handguns of the old West, like the Colt .45. Care to have a look?" he says.

"Not particularly into guns but...sure. Max, you interested in seeing this?" I say trying to be inclusive.

"Honestly...no, guns terrify me," he says, taking a sip out of the brandy snifter, just staring at the fire surrounded by a cloud of smokey fragrance of his Cuban cigar, relishing every puff.

He walks me over, opens an unlocked drawer in a credenza next to the *moire*, and removes a key ring. He unlocks the one door, then releases the other door from behind, and fully opens them both. The gun case is obviously a custom built affair, with shotguns, rifles and hand guns arrayed in elaborate stations against a red velvet background material. In the center a large bronze National Rifle Association *cloisonne*, with a red background, and an American Eagle clutching a rifle with the founding date of 1871. I notice an M16 assault rifle, the kind used in Vietnam, from the pictures that Byron Brawley had sent me from his tour of duty in 'Nam. Also, what appears to be some kind of hunting rifle with a scope, but with a multiple-shot magazine, perhaps for hunting *peasants*...who might be pilfering his cattle? Hmm.

There is also a large collection of various handguns, from vintage revolvers up to more contemporary models, semi-automatics with large magazines.

"That an M16?" I ask.

"Yes...it is, fully functional in the semi...or automatic mode. And next to it is the infamous AK47, the rifle of choice by the Viet Cong...also capable of firing multiple bursts, in semi, or fully automatic mode. Be careful...it's loaded, as are all the guns here...for protection," he says handing it to me. As I take it from him, inexplicably my heart begins to race and I break out in a cold sweat. Some psychic connection with my best friend from UCB, Byron Brawley, KIA in Vietnam. This would probably be the kind of gun than killed my pal...*from small arms fire*, as the citation read for the Silver Star for Gallantry.

I immediately hand it back to him, "Thanks...but uh...anyway. Thanks for showing me. Impressive collection," I say.

Jason looks at me quizzically, pauses, and shrugs. I abruptly turn and return to my chair by the fire as Jason replaces the AK47 in the gun case, locks the doors and places the key in the credenza drawer.

When Jason rejoins us by the fireplace, he says, "Mick...I notice you're wearing Sperry Topsiders. Do you sail?"

"A little bit. I've crewed...the Cinco de Mayo regatta to Ensenada, but certainly not anything serious like the 12 meter class you're into," I say motioning toward the wall-size photos of the *Mas Rapido* with my cigar hand.

"Like off-shore racing?" he asks.

"I do...but my experience is mostly with sloops ten meters and under... Because of my size, I'm considered prime moveable ballast. I enjoy the physicality of cranking the jib winches on quick multiple tactical

tacks...sometimes in a pinch a little foredeck work with a 'chute, and on rare occasion a helmsman. But I have to say that I particularly enjoy the mental challenge of the tactical part of racing, and on a clear night with billions of stars it's magical, almost spiritual...for me at least," I say.

"No *almost* about it. The romance of being on the open sea under sail where theoretically, from any point of origin, with a good boat and crew, and some wind, one could literally sail anywhere in the entire world, limited only by one's imagination and seamanship," Jason says almost wistfully with a fleeting flicker of openness, then catching himself, but it's too late, I know what I saw. And more ominously J. Murdock Mahoney, knows what I saw...something akin to vulnerability. Then the switch is instantly flipped back to CEO Mahoney mode.

"...and an irrepressible sense of adventure," I add.

"Indeed," he says gazing at me searchingly. Then it's gone.

Then turning to Max Mesmer, "Okay Max...we should probably get started. Why don't you outline your talking points to Mick, while I go check on Peggy," as he gets up and leaves.

With Jason gone, Max Mesmer, now in his element, begins listing the bullet-points of his talk. It becomes obvious that he has carefully thought out a long term legislative strategy, including the eventual re-composition of the Supreme Court, more conservative, and much more sympathetic to business. It's a highly ambitious long-term vision, which he articulates with great enthusiasm and intensity.

I ask several questions, but it becomes very clear early on that he is enthralled with the sound of his own voice, and that he's not particularly interested in what recommendations I may have, so I let the *Mesmer-izing* one do all the talking, making a few mental notes that I will take up later with Marla and Pauly.

About an hour later, Jason Mahoney returns; it's almost 11 PM.

"Okay gentlemen, I assume that you are now good to go for tomorrow's meeting. I'm going to suggest that we all retire for tonight. Raphael will show you to your respective rooms, where your things have already been unpacked and laid out. Breakfast will be served starting at 7 AM. Good night Max...Raphael?"

"Good night Jason and Mick," Max Mesmer says as he follows Raphael out of the library.

As I'm about to leave, Jason takes me by the arm, and with his head, wordlessly motions for me to stay.

"Mick...there's something that I need to cover with you. No one...and I mean no one is to know what I am about tell you, not even Pauly or Marla...and certainly not Max. I am informing you that I have had four sub-Rosa cameras and various microphones strategically installed throughout the conference room area...the cameras will be undetectable.

Since we will not be taking formal written minutes for legal...and security reasons, it will provide a record of what was said...and by whom. Because you are fluent in video production, and because secrecy and security is of the highest priority, after the conference, I'm going to ask you, and you alone, to take the raw footage to our post production facility, lock the doors, and edit the footage of the four cameras into a complete record of both days of the conference. Of course, the priority is to ensure that the audio and video quality for any given speaker is the best possible. Again, it will be for *my eyes only*. Are we absolutely clear on this? And, do you understand why I'm doing this?" Jason says intensely staring into my eyes.

"Not sure, but my guess would be that because it will be believed that there is no record, formal or otherwise, that everyone will be more likely to be candid...more outspoken," I say.

"Correct. Okay. Tomorrow morning after you've had your breakfast, Raphael will escort you over the gymnasium...where Trey will be waiting at nine. Raphael?" he says.

Raphael, seemingly always hovering in the shadows within earshot of the beck and call of *el patron*, appears in the doorway.

"*Por favor*...follow me upstairs to your room, *Senor*," Raphael says.

Replaying the events of the evening, the proposed clandestine recording of the conference, the apparent deep unhappiness of Jason's wife and son and Mahoney's apparent obsession with guns and related paranoia about *protection*, causes my sleep to be somewhat restless and sporadic, so the next morning I'm up by 5 AM.

My room has a decent sized full bathroom with a large shower. I take a long hot shower, finishing off with a Siberian Rinse of my *other peeps*, of pure cold for a full minute to remove the cobwebs, shave, get dressed and put on my gym shoes, which I always carry with me in case I want to go for a hike or a jog.

By 6 AM, I'm downstairs, where I let myself out the front door to go for a brisk morning jog, usually for an hour, before breakfast. The morning air is cool and fragrant with the luscious sweet scent of freshly mowed alfalfa. I begin walking toward a distant barn with a corral, populated by maybe twenty horses. I don't know much about horses, but I do know beauty...and an Arabian when I see it. Despite their relatively short stature, they're still classified as a horse. They are an elegant breed with an arched strong neck and long flowing mane and tail. Among the group, is an all-white stallion, along with an all-black mare—they appear to be an item. As I walk up to the corral, the big stallion starts to nicker and whinny, with his ears pricked forward, he walks over to the corral fence. I walk up to him, and pat him on his massive head.

"Hey boy..." I say scratching between his eyes, as he emits a low rumble of appreciation through his nostrils, bobbing his head up and down

playfully.

"He likes you...never seen him take to a stranger like that before. Horses are a good judge of character," I hear Peggy Mahoney say behind me, exiting the barn carrying a blanket and saddle.

"Good morning...yea...maybe the size thing...probably thinks were related," I say.

"Do you ride?" she asks

"Nah...never got into it. Lucky for the poor horse...having to lug my big uh...mass around," I say.

"I'm Peggy Mahoney," she says apparently not remembering me from last night. I must say, considering how bad she looked last night, she looks transformed, alert and relatively happy, without the alcohol induced sullen mask...or the mashed potatoes on her mug.

"Mick Kozlov...I'm hear for the conference," I say, not wanting to embarrass her for not remembering me.

"Yes...of course, we met last night. I just wanted to introduce myself a little more properly than last night. I was a little under the weather and not a very gracious hostess, I'm afraid," she says, laying down the saddle and blanket on the middle rail of the corral, extending her hand.

I take her hand, "I hadn't noticed...but thanks," I lied, "going for a ride this lovely morning?" I ask.

"Yes...every morning. Beats the hell out of psychotherapy, know what I mean?" she says for the first time exhibiting a lovely smile with an endearing gap between her front teeth. Yeap...she gets off the sauce, could scrub up real good.

"Yea...for me it's a long morning hike or a run. Keeps my head straight for the rest of the day. Need any help with the saddle?" I ask.

"Nope...thanks, been doing this since I was a kid," she says slipping between the horizontal rails. Then walking over to the big white stallion, firmly patting his strong arched neck, "That's my *Blanco*...good boy," taking a small apple out of her riding jacket pocket, and placing it in his mouth, his huge white teeth loudly crunching it, followed with a low whinny of appreciation.

"Well, I'll let you two get going...have a good ride," I say, as I turn to leave her hand quickly reaches through the fence, lightly, tentatively, touching my arm.

"Mick...last night after dinner, Trey told me that his father imposed upon you to spend some time with him this morning...at the gym. I just wanted to say thanks...and to let you know that Trey has some uh...*issues*...to kind of prepare you. He's been diagnosed with bi-polar disorder...and schizophrenia. It runs in my side of the family...along, with as you probably have already observed by now, alcoholism. So Jason, while never having said it openly,

blames me for the way he is...*defective* genes. But he's also a brilliant kid...kind of a savant, really...prone to excesses and obsessions, sweet but *very sensitive*, with a dark calculating side like his father. He's fine as long as he stays on his meds...but...

Anyway, I just wanted you to know...and perhaps you could be a little *more* patient with him? He's a good kid...and not a bad athlete, but he lets his emotions sometimes sabotage his abilities...low self-esteem. Jason can be so uh...impatient with him at times. His expectations for Trey are very high...unrealistically so, which only compounds his fragile self-image issues," she says with an apologetic, but protective maternal tone.

"Thanks for that Peggy...I'll keep it in mind," I say.

"Thank you, Mick," Peggy Mahoney says with a sincere, warm smile of motherly appreciation.

"Not a problem...have a good ride. See ya later," I say, smiling, then turning around to start my morning jog up the hill toward a beautiful meadow blanketed with a riot of wildflowers, populated by hundreds of free grazing Black Angus cattle against the backdrop of the snow capped Rockies and huge white fluffy clouds.

I get a moderate rhythm going, maybe a 10 minute mile pace, take a quick glance at my watch...7:35, after about twenty minutes I start to break a nice little sweat. At a base elevation of over 5,000 feet—Denver, the Mile-high city—the cool, clean succulent mountain air is like a tonic as my runners-high endorphins start to kick in. The whole time I am thinking about Trey's relationship with his overbearing father. The parallels with the difficult relationship with my own alcoholic abusive father, the same issues of self-sabotage and low self-esteem, resonate deeply with me.

Yeap...sure beats the hell out of psychotherapy.

By 8:10 I'm back to the *hacienda grandisimo*. I make my way to the kitchen where I find a seated Raphael, nursing a mug of steaming coffee, with an attractive middle-aged matronly *Latina* woman bustling about the *cocina*.

"*Senor Kozlov...este es mia esposa...Consuela*. She will cook anything you want for breakfast," he says.

"*Por favor*, Raphael, please call me Miguel, and *el gusto es mio*, *Consuela...gracias. Dos huevos, por favor* uh...scrambled," I say.

"*Si...senor no hay problema...pero le gusta huevos rancheros senior uh...Miguelito?*" she says with a warm smile.

"*Si. Muy mucho y gracias, senora*," I say.

"*De nada. Huevos rancheros...coming up*," she says with an ever-present warm smile.

"*Senor*, after breakfast, I will walk you over to the gym...where you are to meet *Senor Trey* at nine. *Esta bien?*" Raphael says.

"*Si...esta bien, Raphael*."

The *huevos rancheros* are wonderful, cooked to perfection with all fresh ingredients including freshly laid eggs, sprigs of cilantro, over *frijoles*, melted cheese and freshly prepared salsa over a bed of homemade toasted flour tortillas.

"*Muchas gracias, Consuela. Su-premo! El mejor!*" I compliment Consuela.

She smiles back, shyly averting my eyes.

By 9 AM, Raphael has escorted me to the gym. *Gym?*

Ha...it looks more like Division Two college sport-plex with a full size full-court complete with glass backboards—why am I not surprised? I show up with no expectations. Judging from the kid's lousy arrogant attitude at dinner, I'm seriously hoping he's a no-show. I'd rather be spending my free time with Miss Marly.

There's a steel rack on rollers of leather basketballs under the basket. They all appear to be new. I pick one out...take a deep inhale. Ah, the familiar comforting scent of the leather. I dribble it to check the air pressure...perfect, of course.

Never could resist the opportunity to shoot hoops, so after I do a some stretching out of my hamstrings, calf muscles and Achilles tendons for about 10 minutes, I then run a few medium speed full court sprints, just to warm up the ol' *cuerpo*.

First, I begin with some close bank shots under the basket with both my left and right hands. Then I move out about free-throw depth and methodically work my way around the basket from 15 feet, with easy jump shots. The only sound, the loud echo of a bouncing ball in the empty gym, accompanied by the familiar nostalgic squeak of sneakers on the gym floor. Then...*swish, swish, swish...yea baby...I still got it!* Gawd it feels good to be out here. Reminiscent of those many solitary but happy hours I'd spent in the gym as a skinny kid honing my skills.

"Do you *ever* miss?" I hear a voice behind me say.

I turn, and see it's Trey, in a \$300 gym suit, gym shoes that probably run about \$200 a pair, with head-to-toe assorted basketball fashion paraphernalia. He looks like he's on a commercial shoot for Nike or Gator-aid. With no small effort, I manage to stifle my impulse to guffaw.

I glance at my watch...9:35. Not a good start.

"Hey Trey...nice fashion ensemble. Didya like rip-off a Big Five sporting goods? And yea...I've missed...once, back in nineteen and seventy-two, the L.A. Earthquake. After I released the shot...the basket moved," I say deadpanning it.

Although he tries desperately not to smile, he finally breaks up. *Yeap...I still got it.* Not a bad looking kid...when he smiles.

"So...okay Trey. The first rule of an effective practice routine is regimen. Doing it the same way, every time. Repetition creates muscle memory...which allows you to trust your body to perform to its maximum potential...without the crippling self-doubt. Ninety percent of being good in any sport is practice...and focused relaxed intensity, also known as self-confidence, so the *other* 90 percent is confidence. No practice...no confidence. A daily, hard uncompromising practice routine. So, the second commandment after regimen, among the many you will learn...*as ye shall practice...so shall ye play.*

The first thing we're going to do, is warm-up and stretch. Then run a few sprints...then always, and I mean always start with the fundamentals...including defensive stance and footwork drills. Then and only then, do we actually pick up a ball. Then it's passing...crisp chest passes, then bounce passes against a wall. The last thing we do is shoot buckets. And...finally, *the* most important thing to remember is....punctuality. Nine o'clock does *not* mean 9:35. We clear on that?" I say.

"Okay...*whatever*," he says, dismissively.

"Okay *what*?" I say with an edge.

"Okay...*Mister* Kozlov," he says with sullen sarcasm.

"Trey...drop the mister...and the attitude, okay? If you want me to spend some time with you, then a major attitude correction is in order. You're not doing *me* any favors being out here. We're doing this for *you*, man...not *me*...and lastly *not* for your *father*. Okay pal? By the way...I go by Koz. Ready to go to work?" I say.

"Okay uh...Koz. What do you want me to do first?" he says with youthful earnestness. A good sign that he's starting to get the rules of engagement.

"First thing, air-mail all the ridiculous regalia you're wearing. Strip down just to your shorts and t-shirt, lose the head and wrist bands etcetera and etcetera," I say

I walk him in through the warm-up and skills drill routines. He's huffing and puffing, but with a surprising eagerness and commitment, he breaks a good sweat. Encouraging. For a tall gangly kid, he moves pretty good, although it's obvious that he's not in basketball condition, and that he's never been coached properly in fundamentals and footwork. That will be the first order of business.

Six-foot-four at 16, judging by the size of his feet and hands I'm guessing that eventually he'll be at least six-six. All the more reason for him to learn fundamentals, especially good footwork which will include daily rope skipping, until he can grow into his length. We'll also get him doing some daily push-ups and pull-ups to improve his upper body strength, and put some muscle on his bony frame so he can bang the boards with the big boys.

Listen to me will ya?...with the *we*. Coach Koz, like he's *my* kid...*or*

something, which brings a smile to my face.

But is it possible that through Trey, that I am vicariously, desperately attempting to reconcile, indeed revise, my own history of my battle with my own autocratic oppressive father? A revisionist's futile attempt...a fool's errand, to try change the dark Gothic ending to a more *and everyone lived happily ever after?* "Is it possible that I may in fact need Trey, more than he needs me...to finally finish some dark festering, unfinished business? Jesus...I'm almost 40 years old. Where the hell is *that* coming from?"

I look at my watch...10:20.

"Okay Trey. That's enough for today. I've got a meeting to get ready for. Good job today. So tomorrow morning, we'll work on ball skills, including shooting. We'll start at 8 AM *sharp*. We clear on that?" I say.

"Okay...I guess so..."

"Okay...*what*, Trey? What time?" I say

"Okay Koz...8 AM, *uh...sharp*," he says grinning. Another good sign. Now we're starting to get somewhere.

"Good lad. So see ya *manana...en la manana*," I say, playfully slapping him on his butt.

"*Si, senior*," he says smiling, leaving me alone in the gym with my thoughts about what the rest of the day, the weekend and indeed what my future, if any with ACT, may have in store for me. If I decline the position as offered with ECC, then I'll probably end up leaving my current position at ACT, voluntarily or otherwise.

But I am distracted from having to grapple with the difficult decision whether to participate long-term in the ECC as envoy for ACT, by the youthful expectation, like a 16 year old boy in *uh...lust*, that I will soon be seeing one delicious Marly Dyson. Gawd, I love being in *uh...like*.

Time to hit the showers and hose off, *para mia seniorita muy bonita...horita!*

By the time I get back to the *hacienda grandisimo*, in the distance, near the stilted seven story traffic control tower with the huge wind sock standing straight out, I can make out several silhouetted tall vertical stabilizers, with the unmistakable high horizontal stabilizer of a Learjet 35A starting at about 3.5 million bucks a copy, entry level. The same jet that I had flown in, to depositions and trials with many of my former clients—high profile plaintive attorneys' in L.A., including one Vera Mirren, Esquire.

So...*Los Maestros de los Universos* have landed.

I run into Raphael on the way to my room to shower and suit up for the big game.

"Raphael...have all the guests arrived?" I ask.

"I am not sure, *senor*...but they're in the library with *Senor Mesmer*

and *Senor Mahoney*. *El patron* is asking for you. He says the limos will be departing for his office downtown at 11:30...in about a half-hour. What shall I tell him, *senor*?" he asks with an urgency.

"Tell him...*no hay problema*. I'll be good to go in 20 minutes, *mas o menos*," I say as I two-at-a-time run up the stairs to my room to shower and get dressed.

Within 15 minutes, I'm downstairs about to enter the library, in jeans, a clean sport shirt, and a sport coat sans necktie, and my trademark Sperry Topsiders, sans socks. Jason Mahoney, spots me in the doorway, waves me off, excuses himself from a conversation and walks up to me, wearing a dark Armani and of course, a bold beige tie.

"Glad you could make it, Mick. You didn't have to get all dressed up on my account," Mahoney says, good-naturedly but not without sarcastic edge.

"I always try to look nice *for you*, Jason," I say batting my eyes, while coyly patting my hair in place.

He tries, but can't suppress an evanescent smile. *Hey...I can still kill...even el patron*.

"All the scheduled attendees arrive okay?" I ask.

"Yea...we were just about to leave...without you. You'll be riding over in our corporate limo with me and Max. The rest of the attendees, in the hired limos. Game time. Ready to go?" he asks.

"Sure...game on, *el jefe!*" I say smiling, realizing that compared to some of the trials of the high stakes eight-figure cases I had negotiated, this was like...just a warm up act.

On the way over to the corporate offices of ACT, in the back of the limo with Jason Mahoney and Max Mesmer, Jason says, "Did Trey show up this morning at the gym...as ordered?"

"Yes...he did," I say

"On time?"

"Yea...he did well. He worked hard. I think the kid's got some potential, I'll work with him again tomorrow," I say, not giving him a specific time so that Jason won't be tempted to come to the gym to observe and most likely inhibit the poor kid.

"Okay...good, uh...thanks, Mick," he says thoughtfully with a faint hint of surprise.

"So, Jason...and Max, what is it that I should be looking for here, in today's meeting?" I ask.

"Mick, I'd say the most important thing for you to observe and learn today is...*power*. Who's got the power in the room...and the smarts. There will be some pretty monstrous egos in there. It will take a few hours to shake out who will emerge as the alphas of the pack...the *raison d'etre* of today's

meeting. From our extensive background research, we pretty much already know who the smartest guys...and gal, in the room will be. But ultimately, it will be about strength of personality. Who is going to lead...and who's willing to follow...or not," Max says.

"I want you to pay particular attention to Lane Rector, CEO of National Petroleum, and his right-hand man...VP Howard Roland. He's a notoriously ambitious brown-noser...and Ernest Porter, *El Negrito*, the guy you met the other night at the ranch. We understand him to be, literally, a hit-man for Roland. He's an oily, pun intended, slippery sub-Rosa son-of-bitch, who specializes in getting things done...by whatever means necessary, including so-called black-ops. And with an infamous reputation for never letting the law, or law enforcement interfere with getting a *done deal*.

He maintains his own security company...so he's an independent contractor which gives NPI, plausible deniability for his often marginally legal activities. We suspect that Rector, *et al* will attempt to emerge in a role of leadership, next to me of course, since I am the nominal head of this effort. I suspect that we will have to constantly monitor their activities...that's where you come in. To be vigilant that this character Roland, who *thinks* he's a lot smarter and clever than he really is, doesn't go rogue on us...pull some stupid cowboy stunt that could taint and jeopardize our long term strategy," Jason Mahoney says.

"So if I'm hearing you right, you see a potential for internal conflict with regard to interests specific to each economic sector...like the short-term self-interest...'eye-ee'...quick profits, of a big powerful energy corporation like NPI. And, how they might conflict with the long-term macro-strategy for power...and the ultimate control of the economy? And you want me...to be the cop on the beat, to anticipate and preempt any squabbles," I say.

Jason looks at Max, then nods at me and smiles.

"*Bingo*," Max says.

Some seriously mean streets...pretty tough beat, Jace," I say.

"That's *exactly* why we offered *you*...the job, Mick," Jason says.

"Anyone else?" I ask.

"Lastly but most definitely not the least, Reginald Meade. An insufferably arrogant Brit...CEO & Chairman of World Media Inc. He's our biggest direct threat. Mostly newspapers and print, but increasingly aggressive in the acquisition of content creation and delivery companies, including broadcast radio, and satellite and network TV...and reputedly, with his eye on some of our bigger cash-cow cable subsids.

Meade, getting along in years now, at 79 is starting to release more and more of the daily operational responsibility to his son Arthur, not the sharpest knife in the drawer.

But the real threat to us is the old man's young and beautiful, arm piece Asian wife, Alexandra Kwan, born in 47, known affectionately by her

adversaries as *AK47*...or The Dragon Lady. Disarmingly charming...but lethal as she is beautiful. She's a brilliant tactician and strategist...matched only by her unrelenting ruthlessness. M-B-A Harvard *magna cum laude*, and a P-H-D in econ at London School of Economics, and oh by the way, a J-D from Yale law. The few times she's been tested by some light-weight corporate eunuchs attempting a hostile takeover bid...left them a quivering mass. They now view her not just with respect but fear and loathing," Jason says smiling.

"If not penis envy. From what you say, she probably poses the greatest potential threat for an internecine media war...with ACT. Sounds like the Divine Miz Dragon Lady is just your kinda gal, Jace," I say kiddingly which draws an evanescent knowing smile from *el jefe*.

"So far, our most successful strategy with her has been containment...with an occasional feigned take-over interest in some of their properties...just to keep her on defense," Jace says.

"Yea, well if she's half as good as you say, she ain't fallen' for the ol' head fake too many more times," I say which draws nod and a smirk from Maxie Mesmer.

Hmm. This whole scenario is starting to more than casually resonate with the Italian leitmotif of the Godfather Trilogy...and Machiavelli, my *peeps*. A variation on the now famous Godfather dictum—Michael Corleone in Godfather II, "Keep your friends close...and your enemies closer..."

And, would I be expected to play the role of the *adopted*, but trusted outsider adviser, Tom Hagen...the *consigliere*, with no actual blood on my clean manicured hands, or would I end up like Sonny Corleone...the *family enforcer* in the trenches with the political slime who in the end, for all his good intentions and loyalty, gets caught in a deadly crossfire. Machine-gunned at the toll booth of uh...life. *A 'leave the gun, take the canollis'*, kinda ending for *mio*.

Just about then, we pull-up to the manned security gate to the ACT Inc. campus, followed in tandem by the Corporate Wagon Train of eight black Chevy Suburbans. I look at my watch...12:10 Saturday afternoon. So there will be few if any regular staffing employees working today or tomorrow.

As the security guard comes out of his kiosk, Wagon master, Ben Cartwright, lowers his smoke-tinted window. The guard immediately recognizes him and all but genuflects.

"Yes, sir, Mister Mahoney, *sir!*" snapping to a smart attention.

"Those eight black vehicles behind us are all part of my party. Close the gate after the last one. Today and tomorrow, make no record or notation of any kind, about my visit or the other vehicles or occupants in my party. After our entry, for the next two days, no one, not even employees are going to be permitted to enter other than the eight limos, the truck from the catering company Executive Food, my private secretary Rebecca Reese, and VPs Paul Berman and Marla Dyson. Is that *perfectly* clear?" he commands rather

cryptically with a melodramatically stern expression on his face.

"Yes, *sir!* Your secretary, the caterer and Mister Berman and Miss Dyson have already arrived, *sir!*" the guard says, as the gate slides open.

"Very good," Jason Mahoney says over the whirring sound of the window, as it slowly glides up—the covert melodrama of the moment, almost causing me to break out in a laugh. *What...no fake beards with shades?*

As the car is driven to the main entrance of the corporate office, I notice that the parking lot is almost empty except for the Executive Foods catering van, and a few cars, most notably Marla's Audi. *Yes!*

As we get out of our limo, the caravan of other limos back into some rapid deployment and escape formation. What? *No circling the wagons for the tonight's corporate campfire sing along?*

As each little entourage exits their respective limo, they began to assemble in the main lobby, where Pauly Berman and Marly Dyson are expectantly waiting, to greet and direct the corporate royalty up to the office of J. Murdock Mahoney.

I walk over to Pauly, "Hey Pauly...catchin' up on some paperwork on a Saturday...I see," thrusting my palm into his outstretched hand. He laughs with that easy infectious chortle, slapping me on the back, looking me up and down.

"Hey, Mickey...good to see ya, man. The Sears and Roebuck Grain and Feed Catalog store, is the *next* turnoff."

While he's doing his little *schtick*, I feel a hard pinch on my left butt cheek, causing me to spin around. Marly, giggling like a school girl, looking positively delicious is obviously already a round or two ahead. Hey it's Happy Hour...in London. For the Merry Band of ACT Alcoholic Acolytes, it's always Happy Hour...somewhere.

"Miz Dyson, need I remind you that it says right in the employee handbook, that *inappropriate* touching of a fellow employee in the uh...workplace, especially an...*underling*, could constitute sexual harassment?" I say.

While Pauly and Jason are occupied with the business of greeting and directing we move off to the side, "You mean like *this?*" Then she does it again, only much harder this time on the right cheek.

"Actually, I'm afraid that this has now escalated to the point of becoming a pattern of abuse...that I shall now be forced to refer the matter, to my counselor in such matters...*Mista* Woodrow H. Wilson, Esquire...whom I believe you have had the uh...pleasure of making his acquaintance? I say.

"A uh...bald fellow? With only one eye...*very* short?"

"Yes, one in the same. Tragically, blinded at birth by a Barbaric religious rite. *But...*I would describe him as being much, *much...*taller," I say

looking down at *le monsieur*.

"Here's yer workplace...right *heya*," obviously from hanging around Pauly to long, giving *Monsieur* Wilson a firm squeeze.

"Please *madame*...you make look, but unless you intend to buy, do not uh...fondle the merchandise. You break...you buy," I say.

While effeminately lifting my right leg backwards at the knee, we then do the alternating cheek Italian air-kiss routine, "*Mmwa...mmwa. Ciao bella! Ciao bella!*" We then wander back over to Pauly and Jason.

By now all the attendees with their entourages have assembled in the lobby.

"There are two elevators, please press the button marked *corporate office*, which will take you up to the conference area, where you will be greeted by my secretary Miss Reeves. There is a buffet luncheon set up, along with an open bar. We will convene the conference at approximately 1 PM. You'll find prescribed seating at the large conference table, along with the agenda and some background material. Enjoy," Jason Mahoney says.

Hearing the words *buffet* and *open bar*, Maxie sidles over to one of the empty elevators. After both the elevators quickly fill up, they are gone, leaving Pauly, Marly, Jason and I, waiting for the next elevator.

"You guys ready for a little corporate *kabuki* theater? The Dragon Lady, I guarantee you've never seen *anything* quite like what you're about to witness," Jason Mahoney says almost reverentially.

Fast forward to 1:15. Lunch and Happy Hour are over. All the principals are now seated at their respective prescribed pews at the huge cathedral of a conference table, with their entourages sitting behind them on chairs. Some of the principals, are sipping cocktails chatting and laughing with each other, while several staffers are leafing through the folders of material.

Pauly, Marly and I, with me in the middle are seated off to one side behind Jason, which gives us a commanding view of all the attendees, now looking toward Jason Mahoney, now standing at the head of the conference table.

In the seats closest to the head of the table, Reginald Meade, of World Media is to Jason's right, then to Jason's left Lane Rector, National Petroleum. Howard Roland is seated directly behind Rector and Alexandra Kwan behind Reggie. Pauly says *sotto voce*, leaning in to my left ear, "Keep your friends close...and your enemies closer..." The serpentine Ernest 'El Negrito' Porter is seated directly to the right of Howard Roland.

I get my first look at the Dragon Lady, sitting closely behind Reggie Mead, all business, quickly turning pages, furiously making notations, leaning over his right shoulder whispering, as he's nodding his head up and down. With

porcelain skin, large wide-set dark eyes, a pouty mouth with full lips, and stylishly coiffed shiny jet black hair. As advertised, she's a looker.

"Check out AK47...a walking Vera Wang, of course. All-Asian head to toe, probably to the tune of about four or five grand," Marla hisses. *R-rrrrrrr*.

Jason calls the meeting to order, "Let's get started. Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. Thank you all for attending this very important and timely two-day conference which I believe will go down as a definitive pivot point, when American business drew a line in the sand, and said to the government, both state and federal...enough. *E-nough* of your arbitrary anti-entrepreneurial legislation and *e-nough* of your exorbitant taxation and onerous regulation. And as now Justice Louis Powell declared in his famous keynote call-to-arms memo way back in August of 1971...it's long past the time to push back. To take back the American dream!" John Galt says to a smattering of subdued golf applause, various affirmative head nods and smiles from the Ayn Rand acolytes seated around the table, most especially from the back bench sycophants.

"As we have an ambitious agenda for the next two days, so that we might get right down to business, I'll dispense with the introductions as we all know each other. By now, you've had ample opportunity to peruse the proposed agenda in front of you. I would ask at this time, if any of you would like to propose amendments to the agenda or have any questions or general comments?" Jason Mahoney says scanning the gathering.

Miz Dragon Lady stands up, which allows me to check out her slender petite Asian anatomy, but with one very attractive anomaly, relatively large breasts...probably a gift from, and for Reggie. The gift that just keeps on giving, "Jason, will there be a written transcript of these meetings in the form of minutes. Formal or informal?"

"Alexandra, the answer to your question is no, there will be no written record of this meeting of any kind, for obvious legal and security reasons," Jason says.

Impressive. Where most players plan maybe four or five moves ahead, she obviously sees the whole board...much earlier, always looking eight to ten moves ahead.

"Very good, Jace. Thank you," Dragon Lady says sitting down, smiling. *Jace?*

"Anyone else?" Jason asks. Nothing.

"Okay. With no further questions or comments, let's proceed with the first item on the agenda. Max Mesmer, of Mesmer Strategies will now deliver the keynote address. Max?" Jason says sitting down. Another smattering of applause.

Using an overhead projector for bar graphs, pie slices and copious bulleted lists, it takes Maxie Mesmer about an hour to get through his not-so-mini rote rehearsed dog and pony show with tired laugh lines. Not exactly

Mesmer-izing stuff. Basically a manifesto for creating and implementing a long-term gradual economic strategy that embraces a global free-market international economy, with little or no trade barriers. A complete repudiation of the role of governmental control or intervention. Ostensibly, adios John Maynard Keynes—hello Milton Friedman. Max sits down to a round of enthusiastic applause.

"Thanks Max, for that excellent presentation outlining the long-term strategic interests of the Entrepreneurial Corporate Caucus...comments?" Jason says.

Lane Rector from NPI, dressed cowpoke-chic, with an affected LBJ drawl, clears his throat, "Okay...since this here conference is being conducted under high levels of security...with no written record, may I speak candidly to ya'll?" he says. Here comes the first volley.

"Of course, Lane...and I would also encourage all of you to speak openly and frankly...that's the point of this conference," Jason says.

"While I applaud in concept the intent of this here conference, I believe that at this stage before we get too far along in to substantive issas, that we begin to discuss procedural issas, like the potential for conflicts such as the boundaries of control of the E-C-C over its members, versus the sovereignty issas of the respective corporations. So I think we need to discuss some sort of dispute resolution process should the interests, economic or otherwise, conflict with one, or more of the other member corporations. Some form of arbitration mechanism, perhaps similar the UN Security Council, that would require unanimous consent and approval, with veto power vested in any one of the primary members."

"Okay...what's the nature of your concern, Lane. Can you give us an example?" Jason says.

Lane Rector then stands expansively waving his hand like LBJ giving The State of the Union address, "Sure, Jason, thought you'd neva ask," with a pasty smirk, "The primary concern that we of the fossil fuel industry have, and I would also include in that, coal, and natural gas...so it's also relevant for you as well, Drew and Chase of Kramer Energy...is the increasingly the-sky-is-falling ravings and drumbeat of the radical left environmentalists...on the alleged existential impact on the ecology through the consumption of our primary product, oil.

We spend a great deal of time and a helluva lot of money every year, millions of dollars, to ensure that our revenues from petroleum are not diminished by bleeding heart-liberal environmentalist, who care more about some ridiculous butterfly or beetle, than the economy. Oil is literally the fuel that drives the international economic engine. Full stop. And...we pay a lot of money to moles in the both governmental, and non-governmental environmentalist groups to keep us informed about what's going on in their huddles.

What I am about to tell ya'all must not under any circumstances leave

this room. The latest and greatest threat to our revenues, still in its infancy is something quaintly coined the *greenhouse effect* by the environmental scientists. It is a relatively new scientific revelation. Some of our own independent long-term computer modeling, correlates with the preliminary computer modeling done by NASA which we have uh...gained access to. NASA hypothesizes that unless the atmosphere can remain at or below 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide or CO₂ which is the uh...inescapable” he says with the same smirk, “by-product of the combustion of all carbon fossil fuels, perhaps within our lifetime, most probably by the end of the 21st century, the world may be a very different place, perhaps even uninhabitable in some regions.

Frankly, to put it quite bluntly...insofar as our business model is concerned...not our problem. As there is no mention anywhere is the corporate by-laws, about anything like saving Monarch butterflies or Dung beetles from extinction. Besides, none of us will probably even be around...to have to deal with it,” Lane Rector says with a cynical smile.

“Our own petro-scientists and geologist can pretty well predict how much energy in the form of oil and natural gas is still untapped sub-Terra Ferma. We know that unless something dramatically changes...some vast unknown oil reserve is discovered like the North Sea, we’ve already quantified the finite amount of oil still in the ground. We call it peak oil...where ongoing supply eventually will not be able to keep up with the demand, especially now with the increasing consumption of emerging economies like India...and eventually China.

By our calculations, again barring any unforeseen discovery of a bonanza of new oil reserves, or profoundly more efficient extraction technologies, we could see oil production peak as early as sometime in the first 25 years of the 21st century.

Let me be *cleah* ladies and gentlemen. Because our highest, and indeed by corporate charter, our *only* responsibility is to our shareholders, we do not intend to be prohibited or even impeded by anyone...including governments, by whatever means necessary from maximizing the profits of the sale of petroleum...until damn near every *goddamed* last drop is extracted and sold.”

Howard Roland adds, "And if I may add, Lane...when he says *any* means necessary...that's exactly what he means. So to summarize Lane's comments. No one, including the government or this entity, the E-C-C, ultimately is going to tell N-P-I what it can...or cannot do."

"Drew and I would both second the concerns and recommendations just registered by Lane," Chase Kramer says of the bookend Brothers Kramer of Kramer Energy Industry, Inc.

Then Dragon Lady speaks, "Lane, you indeed, make some interesting and compelling points about the issue of process before we delve too deeply into the substance. Allow me to make few preliminary observations. Firstly,

because the nascent structure of this fledgling political action committee, or P-A-C, at this time is rather amorphous, I believe it is to our benefit, jointly and severally...practically, and more importantly, legally...under the *existing* rule of law, to keep it thus. Essentially a 5-0-1-c-6 non-profit corporation without any power of control over the business decisions of individual member corporations.

And, if at some point down the road, some conflicts should arise...such as unwanted, unsolicited acquisition by one member corporation of another, I-E, in the unlikely scenario that ACT should attempt a hostile takeover of a World Media asset, we at World Media believe that it's crucial that the members of the ECC should remain impartial, indeed agnostic. It's just Major League Baseball...hardball. Even, if in the highly unlikely event somehow the reverse of the illustrative takeover were to happen. Would you not agree, Jace?" she says with a wicked smile. Nice move.

"Of course, Alex," Jace says.

"Secondly, the other issue, frankly, from the standpoint of legalities, for World Media, and conceivably me and each of you personally, is a far more troublesome one. The fact that these meetings are being conducted in a highly secretive manner...and that great lengths have been taken, to prevent the prying eyes of outsiders, most especially the press, would tend to indicate that we have something to hide by meeting so surreptitiously. A veritable buffet for the conspiracy theorists...and leftist journalists. Potentially spawning some accusations, groundless or not, of anti-trust activities...along with possible personal exposure for prosecution for criminal conspiracy by the D-O-J. It is for that reason that at the very beginning of the meeting, I specifically asked if minutes were being taken on this meeting, for which I was unequivocally assured by Jason, that there will be *no* legally discoverable *written* record of the substance, discussed at these meetings. Right Jace?" AK47 says again with the cold calculating smile of a ninja assassin.

The video will show that Jason Mahoney nodded in agreement.

Jason then stand stands up, clears his throat, and begins pacing around the conference table, also gesturing expansively as he expounds, *hmm, some kind of CEO style thing?* "My personal vision for the E-C-C, would be to maintain the facade of more of social club, like a very exclusive corporate country club, but with very...*very* high asset standards for admission.

To optimize the considerable years of accrued experience, skill, economic and political power of membership of the E-C-C in the form of strictly a strategic advisory body...like the elders of a tribe...leaving the ground game tactics and spade work, to the existing infrastructure of political action, like the US Chamber of Commerce. For gentlemen...and ladies, if Lane Rector's forecasts, and I might add, reinforced by other very credible independent prognostic scientific studies, are indeed correct about peak oil, and this so-called *greenhouse effect*...then civilization as we now know it, inexorably, will be reduced to a chaotic tribal society of primal inter-tribal

warfare...over the most basic needs for survival, including food and potable water for the masses.

So I believe the real challenge before us, though a contemporaneous worthy priority, is not so much to try to shape and control the evolution of the existing so-called democratic form of government, but to envision the coming of the new global world order as imposed by climate change, as our highest priority.

Best distilled as...how to position ourselves so as to maximize our leverage, so when the *music stops*...and the inevitable social chaos does ensue...when, not if, they will be coming after us with torches, pitchforks...lynch mobs in the middle of the night. And it will happen, gentlemen...and ladies, perhaps in our lifetime. So again, we must begin to position ourselves *now*, if we are to ensure that we, the *ruling class*, our families, children and grandchildren, are not left without a chair, at the head of the table. To quote one of our most esteemed captains of capitalism, and ideological brethren, John D., as in Doyen, Rockefeller, *I always tried to turn every disaster into an opportunity.*

In short ladies and gentlemen...*oderent dum metuant*...latin, *let them hate us...as long as they fear us...*

So it will become the prime imperative of all so-called corporate mainstream media to control the message. To control the content...obviously one must control media infrastructure. And therefore own the media...both horizontally and vertically. Implicit in that mission is to redefine and reinforce for the voters, that the era of control by unelected bureaucrats of a Byzantine bloated government *is over*. As president Reagan succinctly put it, government is not the solution...*government is the problem.*

And most importantly, we have to take structural control of the messaging apparatus...elite liberal media like the New York Times can...and must be portrayed as liars, socialist propaganda mills bent on the destruction of democracy as envisioned by the Founding Fathers...in short, enemies of the people and American self-determination and liberty...*to live free or die* democracy.

To that regard, ACT and WMI are on the same side of the ball. So creating and more importantly maintaining hegemony over the message and the delivery mechanism should be our priority number one. And I'm sure you all realize, that would also mean controlling the regulatory climate...by any means necessary, most especially Supreme Court appointments.

It's a long game...requiring patient and relentless pursuit of seemingly small inconsequential victories...won't happen overnight, but gradually, once the general cynicism toward government takes hold...before the liberals are aware that a large part of the electorate is now distrustful of any or all government institutions, even those that have become institutionalized as generally beneficial, like social security and medicare are characterized as being *socialistic*, they will finally become vulnerable to privatization,

unleashing countless billions of dollars available to Wall Street. It will then be too late for them to counter the groundswell of libertarian mindset in any meaningful way. It will only require the proselytization of about third of the electorate, and by extension, through aggressive redistricting, Congress to put the system into gridlocked chaos, causing deep polarization, thus crippling the legislative branch to reach consensus on any major legislation...more importantly on *any* detrimental financial regulation.

And in the remote possibility that they could agree on something that is not in the best interests of capitalism, by then the conservative control of the judiciary branch, most importantly the Supremes will be the backstop to ensure the protection of unfettered free market capitalism properly, and *solely* based on shareholder supremacy.

Well, thank you all for the excellent input and discussion for this, our first session. It's getting late. I'd suggest that we adjourn for today, and resume with the agenda set out for tomorrow's meeting, here at 10 AM. You're individual limos, will take you to your respective hotels. This meeting is hereby adjourned. Have a good evening," Jason declares.

As the conference quietly adjourns, under a palpable pall of solemnity with little conversation among the attendees, Jason Mahoney walks over to his desk, and unobtrusively flips a switch.

Well there it is. The vision of the coming New World Order, controlled by the Masters of the Universe. Indeed, the opening question posed by Ayn Rand in *Atlas Shrugged*, *Who is John Galt?* is answered. John Galt is not a *who*...but an *it*...a *what* skillfully resurrected by J. Murdock Mahoney et al. Indeed, the Russian immigrant Jewess, Ayn Rand would have been very pleased indeed, with Jason's little speech.

So the long-term strategy is to create and concentrate as much wealth and tangible asset for the *ruling class* as possible. The more wealth...the more power, so when the uh...*pate* hits the fan, they will control *how* and *where* it sprays out.

Essentially, a return to a Middle Ages society. Where land ownership and other tangible asset will form the basis for the ruling hierarchy of *the who* and *the how* the world is governed. Welcome to the New World Order—Neofeudalism. Like the King said about the serfs, *we just want to make their situation very difficult...but not impossible*.

In other words, *some bodies still gotta pick dat cotton*. So the question one has to start asking himself now...before it's too late? Is this New World Order inevitable, implacable? And if so, do I want to be a Lord...or a vassal?

After the room has emptied out, the only remaining attendees are Marla, Paul, Max Mesmer, myself and Jason Mahoney. Jason walks over to the conference table, and joins us where we all now seated, each with a cocktail in

front of us. All of us are frankly somewhat in shock from Jason Mahoney's Ahab vision for the future. I take a long pull on my cocktail.

"Okay...time for a little inside-baseball post game. Comments...impressions of the meeting? Marla?" Jason says.

"Interesting...how Dragon Lady did all the talking for Reggie. But after hearing her speak...I can understand why. What's up with that jackhammer Roland character, not-so-subtly explaining Rector's meaning. And what's the deal with his creepy reptilian pal?" she says.

"Roland is Rector's factotum...does all the heavy lifting including spearheading dark ops. And in Roland's delusional little mind *only*, the heir apparent. Reptile? An apt analogy. *El Negrito* Porter is indeed one to watch out for. No accident that the snake tattoo on his forearm is a Black Mamba, one of the most lethal venomous snakes known to man, a silent killer that lives in the shadows...with no known anti-venom. Pauly?" Jason says.

"Yea...AK47's the full package. Brings it with lotsa heat...and excellent deception in her delivery...good off-speed stuff. No doubt about it. A Cy Young chucker, even on a not-so-good day, probably un-hitable. Makes me wonder if she'd consider pitchin' for our team," Pauly says smiling.

"Believe me Pauly, I'm *personally* working on that one...*very diligently*. Max?" Jason says, with a smirk.

"Impressive performance by the Dragon Lady, no doubt. But I found it quite fascinating that Rector admitted that oil's days are numbered," Max says.

"Yes...but in serious scientific and academic circles, it is really not considered a new epiphany...just the industry's very late open recognition of it. The *greenhouse effect*...and resultant dramatic deleterious climate change is *very* real. And that *is* a relatively recent revelation. And frankly the fossil fuel industry, not surprisingly, had been living in a fossilized reality of denial about it. Until now...

But I can tell you this. The American people will *never* give up their *bourgeois* comforts, including and most especially their cars for some vague *hypothetical existential* crisis...not until it's too late and they are forced to. And when it finally does pass the tipping point? The thin fragile veneer of civilization will disappear, almost overnight. Mick? Your impression of Alexandra Kwan?" Jason says.

"Your closing comments...a nice lighthearted upbeat coda to end the day on, Jason. Anybody bring a Swiss Army knife...so I can just open a vein and get it over with?

On the matter of AK47, honestly, Jason...I've been around some pretty high-powered alpha types. Worked closely with plaintiff attorney's mostly, with off-the-charts brilliant minds, usually with an ego to match...forget the gender distinction. I can tell you if her performance is indicative, that *she got game. She's good...very scary good*. That whole little

takeover riff...brilliant. Sort of a Valentine caveat...*don't even think about messin' with World Media...or me.*

My advice, Jason? Play dead...maybe Dragon Lady will lose interest and look for some other fresh meat...and leave ACT alone. Or not," I say only half jokingly.

"Mick and Max, I'm having dinner tonight with Alex...uh Alexandra Kwan...a strategy meeting. The limo will take you back to the ranch. I won't be back until quite late so I'll call the limo driver to pick me up later," Jason says with a wink and a smirk.

Max says, "Okay, Jason. I've got some work to catch up on. I'll pack tonight so I can leave from the meeting for the airport, tomorrow afternoon."

"Jason, I'm going to have some dinner with Pauly and Marla...to discuss a few of today's *very* interesting developments," I say looking at Marla, "I can catch a cab back...or something."

"Okay...I'll see you all tomorrow...gotta run. Got dinner reservations," Jason says, then leaves for the elevator.

After Jason's out of earshot, Marla says staring at Pauly, "Right...over dinner...with Pauly, unless he can't make it and is expected home because of some family commitments...or something?"

"Yea...dinner. Sorry to disappoint you two but, can't make it tonight...some family in town. My in-laws...or something," Pauly says smiling at Marla then me, as he leaves the room for the elevator, giving Jason enough of a head start.

"What a pity...maybe next time, Pauly," I say to Pauly's back, as he raises his right arm, waving his hand.

"Well, I guess it's just you and me for uh...dinner, Mickey," Marla says.

"Yea...too bad about Pauly. I guess it'll be just up to me...to entertain you for the night. I'll try not to bore you with too much shop talk," I say.

"Yeap...just you and me...alone," Marla says.

"Well actually, I was kinda hoping that you wouldn't mind some additional company...as an old mutual friend is also in town for the night. *Mista* Wilson is free tonight, and feeling a trifle lonely," I say.

"Would not dream of disappointing my uh...*hardy* ol' pal, *Monsieur* Wilson. What do you two feel like for dinner?" Marla says grinning.

"Hmm...since Jason's going to be doing uh...Chinese tonight. In honor of our fearless leader, how about we go back to *Chez* Marla, and order Chinese take-out."

"Yea...uh *Jace*. You picked up on that too?" Marla says smiling.

"Gee uh...*Alex*. Not an exactly a hard tell to pick up on. But *Jace* and

Dragon Lady must have a reason for exhibiting the almost brazen familiarity," I say.

"Yea...Jace doesn't make tactical errors. Everything he says is carefully calculated. I think he may be sending Reginald Meade a little in-your-face valentine, that his days are numbered...professionally, and personally with Alex...almost taunting him. They've been going at each other for years," Marla says.

When I wake up the next morning, Marla is nestled under my arm, sleeping soundly with a peaceful, contented look. I raise my head and spot the clock...7:35. *Shit*...I'm supposed to meet Trey at the gym by 8 AM *sharp*.

"Marla...baby, time for me to get up," I say in her ear. Nothing. Finally, I gently nudge her shoulder, "time to get up," She cocks open one eye, looks up at me and smiles, "Okay...I guess I can sleep when I dead. Tell Woody that even though he's a sex fiend...that he's finally met his match," she says groping me. Woody is instantly awakened out of a deep slumber.

"Baby, as much as *we* would *luuv* to stay I promised Trey that I'd spend some time with him in the gym working with him...showing him some uh...offensive moves. I was s'posed to be there at 8 AM," I say hopelessly without conviction.

"Umm...apparently *le monsieur* has other plans for the morning...some offensive moves of his own," she says.

The next time I catch a look at the clock it's 8:10. Not complainin'...just splainin'.

I quickly shower, as Marla makes coffee and toast. By 8:30 we're on the road.

By 9:05 she drops me off in the driveway, and drives off. I race upstairs, put on my gym shoes, and jog over to the gym.

I enter the gym to find Trey, just sitting against the wall, cradling, more hugging a basketball, looking sullen and despondent.

"Hey, Trey...sorry to be late man but something came up...something very big that couldn't be ignored," I say. An inside joke, guess you had to be there.

He refuses to acknowledge me just continuing to stare down at the floor, his eyes full of tears and red. I walk over to him, sit down beside him, and put my hand on his shoulder, which he disdainfully pushes away.

"Hey, man...I'm really sorry, okay? But..." I start to say.

"What happened to the *And...finally...the most important thing to remember is....punctuality*," he snarls, staring into my eyes obviously angry and hurt.

"Okay, man I had that comin'...you busted my chops good. Now...where do you want it to go from here. How about if we try to start over here. Okay? Hey man...howya doin? Come here often?" I say.

Despite himself, he cracks a smile, "Yea...I was supposed to meet some jerk...but he was a no-show."

"Okay...that's more like it, pal. Hey, I've got to leave to get ready for a meeting in about 15 minutes...with your father. How about we pick this up tonight, when I get back...say about seven. Then we'll have the whole evening to spend together and work out. Sound like a plan, *amigo*?"

"Okay...I *guess* so, Koz. But if you're like even *five* minutes late, I'm going to have my old man dock your pay...big time," he says smiling. Like I said not a bad looking kid...when he smiles.

"Deal," I say standing up, then grabbing his hand, I pull him up, when unexpectedly, he throws his arms around my waist, and tightly hugs me. *Jesus*...I get a major tennis ball in my throat. I hug him back. The poor kid. Yea...Peggy was right, he is a very sensitive kid...probably doesn't have many if any pals. Reminds of I someone I knew intimately at his age. Someone very tall and skinny...and very sensitive.

"Okay, Trey...seeya tonight man. Be prepared to work your ass off. Tonight we'll cover some offensive moves, and shooting. Gotta run, later Trey," I say as I leave the gym and run back to my room to change into a clean shirt and jeans.

Somehow by 9:30, I'm downstairs at the front door, where Max Mesmer and Jason Mahoney are waiting, just as the company limo pulls up.

With the exception of the presentations by Libertarians Rand Rourke and Gordon Nelson, the second day of the conference is relatively unremarkable, patronizing The Chosen with a self-serving equal opportunity for each of them to pontificate their particular ethos for their brand of Capitalism and show how smart they think they are.

Rand Rourke, Evangelical Christian talk radio and TV host, unveils his vision for his proposed Libertarian walled and gated citadel; a utopia in Northwest Washington state. *Acropolis Libertatem*...loosely translated from a Greek and Latin contraction as, City of Liberty. *A City High on a Shining Hill embracing the true ideals of the U.S. Constitution, of Liberty...one nation under God*, Rand Rourke waxes.

Born Harold Limburger, he is a dedicated acolyte of the writings and teachings of Ayn Rand. His first name, appropriated from his fearless leader's last name, while his last name borrowed from the rugged individualist anti-hero Howard Rourke, in the Fountainhead, better reflected Rand's lofty *laissez-faire* anarchist's philosophy, far better than the eponymous stinky cheese, Limburger. And his adopted name, in keeping with a man of his media stature, has a nice punchy prime-time alliterative ring to it.

Hatched in Cascadia County, to chicken farmers in the far Northwest corner of Washington state, he reinvented himself as the self-anointed spokesmen for the common plutocratic God-fearin' Libertarian man, whose fundamental freedoms are being trampled upon by *Marxists, Socialists*,

Liberals and Establishment Republicans...who will likely find that life in our community is incompatible with their existing ideology and perverted lifestyles, extolls Rourke.

And if Liberty has been missing from the life of you and your family, consider the Acropolis Libertatem for your new home.

A two billion dollar, totally self-sufficient and self-contained, off-the-grid Libertarian city-theme park that would mark *the rebirth of our nation through its founding principles*. Its vision, a fortress-like city, that will feature *no recycling police and no local ordinance enforcers from City Hall*, but will require all residents to *maintain one AR-15 variant in 5.56mm NATO, at least 5 magazines and 1,000 rounds of ammunition. Just in case...*

The location of this proposed plutocratic paradise, built on 300 acres, was carefully researched and selected based on far-looking computer models of climate change, for the availability of plentiful rainfall and relatively temperate climate being near the micro-climate of Puget Sound, free from the calamitous tornadoes or hurricanes of other vulnerable regions of the U.S. like the Midwest or East Coast. And for added credibility, R. Rourke has *an intimate knowledge of this region, from being raised there.*

His high-gloss PowerPoint with glitzy video presentation rivals that of a multi-million dollar theme park...a Jeffersonian Disney World for the true believers and shameless apologists of Christ and the Libertarian lifestyle. *For a mere \$200,000 non-refundable deposit, you can reserve your custom one-quarter acre home site. Total population will be limited to the first 7,000 followers. First come first served. Reservations are filling up fast. So don't be left outside the gates—alone, to deal with the roving hordes of Barbarians of the coming apocalypse from Climate Change!"* he warns, ending with, "And I'm pleased to announce that J. Murdock Mahoney, has graciously accepted my invitation to serve on the prestigious Board of Directors, he himself having purchased five of the custom home sites."

Then Gordon Nelson, Evangelical Christian neo-conservative founder and president from the NGO and PAC, Americans for Fair Taxes, does his Libertarian dog and pony show, railing about the unfair tax burden placed on the wealthy, who are rewarded for their ingenuity, innovation, good ol' entrepreneurial spirit, and job creation by the profligate US government with onerous tax rates, including excessive inheritance tax. *For all the good we do for all the uh...workers, this is the thanks we get? Higher and higher exorbitant taxes and more and more stifling regulation.*

By 2 PM the meeting adjourns, the Lords with their attending courtiers, returning to their corporate jets for the return flight to their respective Fiefdoms to have afternoon Sunday dinner with their families after divvying up the world. I inform Marla, that I have to return to the ranch to meet up with Trey Mahoney for a promised workout in the gym. She's disappointed, but I explain to her that I'll be at corporate tomorrow, deliberately keeping it vague, to do some editing at the state-of-the-art post-production suite. We agree to

meet for lunch.

At 5 PM, I make my way down to the kitchen where I find the ever-present Consuela.

"*Como estas?*" I ask.

"*Muy bien...y tu? Yo puedo preparar una comida para tu, señor Miguelito?*" Consuelo asks smiling brightly.

"*Gracias...eso sería maravilloso...something light. I'm not very hungry,*" I say.

"*Si, esta bien...I have some tamales already made up,*" she says.

"*Perfecto, senora,*" I say.

By 6 PM, I'm at the gym where I find Trey inside shooting baskets. By the looks of his full sweat he's probably been there for at least a half-hour.

"Hi Trey...howya doin man?" I ask.

"Not bad...nice to see your watch works," he says. More attitude.

"Okay...let's not wear that out already. Ready to go to work?" I ask.

"Lead the way fearless leader," he says.

We warm up, stretch and do the defensive drill regimen, four full-court medium sprints, then get down to business with drills for offense.

"Okay...Trey, I want to watch you take some jump shots from the free-throw line. Just easy and relaxed, with no dribble. Just square you feet and shoulders to the basket...again, when you receive the ball from me, do not dribble...do not make any moves. Okay?" I say.

After ten shots, he only makes three from the 15 feet. With no defense he should make that shot at least six to seven times, while being defended at least five times. It's obvious to me, that his shooting mechanics are poor. He is releasing the ball late, after he reaches the high point of his jump, causing a relative flat trajectory, resulting in most of his shoots missing because they're short. The other flaw I see, is that he is not finishing with a wrist snap follow-through, the "hook" of the hand, with the index finger pointed directly at the basket, which produces a nice high arching shot with just a little backspin. It's simple physics, vectors and all that stuff. The higher the arc of the ball at entry point of the basket the more likely it will not bounce off the rim, if it's slightly long or short. The really pure shooters almost without exception shoot rain-makers, with the final follow-through of a snap of the wrist, forming 'the hook'.

"Okay, Tre. That's good for now. Now, I want you to just shoot an ordinary free-throw...no jumping. Okay? Aim for the back of the rim, 90 percent of the shots that are too short...don't go in," which I think is pretty hysterical. Nothing from Trey...rough room.

After another ten shots, he sinks only five. The same problem as the

'J'...his legs are not getting into the shot, and as a result his trajectory is too flat.

"Okay, Trey. Shooting free-throws, when you're not winded, in a controlled situation, you should sink at least 8 or 9 out of ten. You made five. Same thing with the jump shots. Undeclared from 15 feet you should make six or seven...you made three. I see what the problem is. So were going to have to completely tear down your shot mechanics and start over," I say.

After about an hour, I get him to tuck his elbows in, forming a 90 degree angle between his upper arm and forearm cradling the ball just above his forehead with a slight bend forward at the waist. Then I get him to start releasing the ball much earlier on his jump shot, while on the way up just before he reaches the high point, essentially using his legs to propel the ball. *Voila*...he gets it...much more arch, and softer, and no longer short. Finally, we introduce the wrist snap follow-through. The kid's an eager and fast learner. By the time we quit, his percentages are much better, and his form is also looking pretty good. And he's smiling...nothing succeeds, like success.

"Okay Trey, good job...much improved. Let's take a break and sit down for a few minutes," I say.

We sit down on the floor with our backs to the wall.

"So tell me about your team. What position do you play?" I ask

"Well...even though I made the varsity team...Mile High School, when I do play, which is infrequent, I usually play center...or forward," he says.

"Okay. I think, you're going to be a big dude when you finally quit growing...probably six-six or taller, but still not quite tall enough for a college center. So I think you want to work on your offensive skills facing the basket. We can get into posting up later. So I want you to practice, using the method we worked on today, shooting at least 100 free-throws. Strive to make 80 at least. And 100 "J"s a day...every day. Moving around the key, take 25 from four different angles. Stay within 15 feet with the "J"s until you can hit fifty to sixty out of hundred, again, without a dribble. Catch and release...later we'll incorporate the moves including dribbling, but I just want you to work on your form and footwork, and very important, always staying square to the basket. Then move back another three feet, and repeat it. Got it?"

"Yea...Okay. Thanks. Hey Mick...can I ask you a kinda personal question?" he says.

"Sure...Trey, anything, shoot," I say.

"Mick, have you ever loved someone...so much that it hurts...but they didn't know it. And you were afraid to tell them for fear that they might reject you...that sometimes you just can't think of anything else...that you can't even sleep or eat?" he earnestly asks.

Whoa...this is little more than I signed on for. When I said anything, I didn't mean that *anything*. But looking at the kid, I can sense that he is deeply conflicted and really has no one else to talk to. Okay...sure, like every adolescent kid, I know what he's going through. Been there...done that, so I

decide to plunge ahead.

"Yea...sure. When I was about your age...every guy and gal going through puberty experiences it...ragin' hormones and all that. It's all part of the maturation process, I guess. I was tall and skinny...and had a crush on this gal who, I thought at the time was *abso-fucking-lutely* beautiful. But she didn't even know that I was alive...and didn't care. I still remember her name...and I can still see her uh...face, Amanda Collins. She was my best friend's older sister, by two years. I used to have wet dreams about her. So what's going on with you?" I say.

"Well...kinda the same deal with me...Sam," he says.

"Samantha...classy, I always liked that name for a girl...older or younger...what?" I ask.

"Older...he's a senior on the basketball team. Sam Reynolds. Sometimes when we shower after practice, I can't take my eyes off him," he says.

Okay. *Now what?* No turning back now.

"So...I take it you have no interest in girls *at all* then...not that there is anything wrong with that?" I quickly add.

"Nope. Never have...never will. But I'm still a virgin. I feel confused...guilty...and so ashamed. So much in love, that it's killing me...that he doesn't know how I feel about him. But, I think just from subtle stuff, he likes boys too. I see him in the shower checking the other guys out too, but he always plays the macho man...always with a new girlfriend...one girl after another. But, even if he did feel the same way, I wouldn't even know where to begin...or how to make love. What would *you* do if you were me Mick?" he asks.

"Well the first thing...don't worry about the making love part. As with women...if you truly love her...or uh...him...it'll just flow naturally. Just don't put too much pressure on yourself to perform to some artificial porno standard...and the rest will take care of itself. Okay? Just curious, Trey...have you told either your mother or your father, about how you feel toward other men?" I ask.

"I think mom knows, but we've never openly discussed it. My father might suspect it, but if he ever found out for sure that I was a homosexual, he's so macho, he'd probably kill me, rather than suffer the humiliation of his son being a uh...*fag*," he says tearing up.

"Yea...that's a tough one. Trey, I think it might be time to sit down with mom. I know she loves you very much...and in talking with her, I think she would be very understanding and accepting. But if you don't *come out*, as they say, I think it'll start eating at you...and in the long run, make you very unhappy. So I think I'd maybe start with your mom," I say.

"Mick, now that you know this about me...do you think less of me? Can I *still* be your friend?" he asks staring searchingly into my eyes.

Can I still be your friend? Jesus. Another tennis ball in the throat. It's tough enough going through puberty, tall and gangly, but to have to deal with the deeply ingrained cultural guilt, shame and prejudice of being gay...just a kid. My *gawd*, my heart is breaking for him.

"Trey...the first thing I want you to know, is that I am honored that you would trust me with something that is so deeply personal and private. I respect and yes, even admire your candor and indeed, courage. And it will be our secret until you tell me otherwise.

And yes, no matter whatever should happen, you are and always will be my friend. I want to tell you a story. Many times, in the search for wisdom...for answers to life's persistent questions," I say smiling facetiously with air quotes, "they are best answered by a parable...or symbolic narrative.

Back in the 1964, when I was at UC Berkeley, I and many, many others were involved in some student protests on campus for civil rights, and free speech. One day, a friend, Byron Brawley and I were faced with the difficult to choice...whether to intervene, when the cops were mercilessly beating a fellow student with batons. We ultimately decided to rescue him before they beat him to death.

The guy, that Brawley and I rescued that day became my best friend...for life. Ad Hoc Shapiro...Hawk. We could not have been more different. He was short and stocky...brilliant...very Jewish...and *very* gay. In all the years that we have been friends it's never been an issue. Eventually, we sort of went our separate ways. He ended up in Seattle Washington, working for a software company called Microsoft. It so happens that even though he sustained serious head injuries from the beating, he had a brilliant talent for computer science and software design...and coding...what we would now call a savant. When we get together, it's like we pick right up from where we left off. We love each other like brothers...and there is nothing that I wouldn't do for Hawk Shapiro...and he for me.

So right about that time, there was four of us, Charles Washington, Mario Savio, Byron Brawley, myself...and later, of course Hawk.

Almost a year later, my pal Charles Washington, a young black activist who also happened to be one helluva basketball player at UCB, went to Selma Alabama for a massive march for black voter's rights...to Montgomery, the state capitol. But it seems that the state troopers never got the memo, more likely ignored that it was to be peaceful and non-violent.

Charles and John Lewis, the young president of SNCC were leading the march with about 600 demonstrators, along with some other members of Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee. He gave his life on that day...brutally beaten to death by the cops. Dying for what he deeply believed in...civil rights for all. Civil rights does not and cannot stop at the door with just the confrontation of racial inequality. The so-called patriotic pledge of allegiance that the religious racist hypocrites so eagerly invoke and rotely recite...*one nation, under God...with, liberty and justice for all...* does not say

for *some*...but *all*.

A few years later, Byron Brawley also one of my very dearest friends, had been drafted and was serving in Vietnam. He, as we all did, opposed the war but was forced to choose the army...instead of jail. He and his lady, whom he loved deeply, figured he'd do his two years and pick up where they left off.

Tragically, a natural-born leader...and a warrior, as a squad leader, he was killed trying to save his comrades in battle...an ambush by the V-C. And...it broke my heart. To this day...I can still see his wry, laughing joking face...all the good times. He sacrificed his life not out of some bull-shit sense of American patriotic duty...but for his pals...guys that lived...and died *for each other*. That Silver Star for Gallantry that was awarded posthumously would have meant nothing to him...certainly not more than the love and respect of his fellow comrades. Now, I'm not one to quote from the Bible much, but this one has stuck with me through the years...John 15:13. *Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.*

So...in many ways the cause for equality for women...and for homosexuals and lesbians, ain't *no* different from the battle for racial equality. Hopefully it won't take another 200 years to have the law of the land catch up with the universal rights of all men...and women.

On the 28th of August 1963 Martin Luther King, Jr. had organized a now historic march to Washington to show the importance of solving the United States racial problems. About 250,000 people gathered and listened to his immortal words: *I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.*

And the same kind of bigotry and prejudice exists today against gay men and women. So maybe...*children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by their gender...or sexual preference, but by the content of their character.*

And maybe...just maybe...one day, because you're smart and courageous you can blaze the trail for others...by choosing *to do the right thing*. To confront bigotry and prejudice...you will inspire others to do the same.

My only hope is that in your lifetime you'll find friends like mine...my pals Byron Brawley, the Hawster and Charles Washington. Doesn't matter if it's a he...or she...is straight...or not. And if your sexual preference should ever become an issue between you and your so-called friends, then I'd advise you to move on. Because frankly, the content of their character is sadly flawed and not worthy of *your* friendship," I say, finally standing up, giving Trey a hand up.

"Now...give me hug...and get busy on that "J"...cuz I'm going to be checkin' up on you from time to time. Okay my friend?"

As I throw open my arms, he gives me a big hug. I lift him up off the ground and shake him in a big bear hug. Finally, after about a minute he pulls away and says, with tears streaming down his cheeks, "Okay, *my friend*. Thanks Mick."

"Thank you for being so open and honest with a pal, Trey. And by the way, since you've apparently got some juice with the old man...*wouldn't hoit* if you could hit him up for a nice little raise for yours truly?" I say smiling, which draws a good-natured punch to my gut, and a Killer Smile.

Monday morning, I decide to get in a good run early, where I again encounter Peggy Mahoney out by the barn, saddling up, *Blanco Grande*...for her *beats the hell out of therapy* morning ritual ride.

"Good morning Peggy," I say brightly.

"Hi Mick...yes, it is a good morning indeed. Hey Mick, last night I had a little talk with Trey. He said you two had a good long talk about uh...some things yesterday...and he wanted to share some of it with me. Have you got a minute?" Peggy says.

"Sure, Peggy...what's on your mind?" I ask.

"Well, a lot was said...the kind of things that I never expected to hear from Trey. Very candid...and very emotional and I have to confess that I almost don't know where to begin," she says.

"Well, the beginning is usually not a bad place to start...like I told Trey, yesterday. Shoot," I say.

"Okay Mick, okay. Trey finally came out last night that he is *gay*. Something that I had suspected since he was a child. He told me that you urged him to confide in me...his mother, that I would understand and accept...and yes, love him no matter what," she says, her eyes welling up with tears.

"Peggy I can't...won't confirm what Trey told me in confidence," I say.

Peggy Mahoney then reaches up to me and pulls my head down, like one of her prize horses, and gives me a long passionate kiss on my mouth.

"Thank you, Mick...you have no idea how much I appreciate your kindness to my son. And if there is anyway...anyway at all I can repay you...just say the word," she says looking into my eyes deeply.

Oops. Unintended consequences. Looks like Trey isn't the only Mahoney with some unmet sexual desires and needs. Uh...*pent up demand*?

"Well, you're very welcome Peggy. But you don't owe me anything. What I did for and with Trey, is out of friendship...we are now officially pals...best buds," I say as breezily as I can muster.

"Mick, I would hope that you could be my friend too...only maybe a little different kind of *special* friend?" she says smiling but with a tentative tone.

"Peggy...thanks for the very flattering overture. But...not a good idea, for everyone concerned, including and most especially Trey. He's extremely vulnerable right now, and would probably perceive it as a betrayal of his trust in me. So, if you would like to talk more about Trey...I'm open to that. Otherwise, I'll let you get back to your ride...and me, with my morning jog," I say.

"Okay...Mick, you're probably right...for now. But seriously, if there is anything you think I can help you with..."

Trey asked me if I thought that either he or I should tell his father that he is gay. I told him, probably not a good idea right now...if ever. As you probably have deduced, Trey is Jason M. Mahoney the third...from a long line of hard-driving obstinate Irish macho males, of which in temperament at least, he is the exception. So the notion that Jason would find out that his son is definitely...irrevocably gay and will probably never sire any male children to perpetuate the Mahoney name would be very difficult for Jason to accept. Not every man is as secure in his manhood as you apparently are...especially his father.

Mick I don't know if you realize, but I have two children. We have a daughter as well, who is now a sophomore at Yale. The day she graduated from high school, she moved out, essentially to get away from her overbearing father. We hardly ever see her, unless I go up to New Haven, we don't get to spend any time together. My life here is very lonely. For the past almost five years, Jason and I have had *no* intimacy in our marriage...we sleep in separate rooms. I know that he sees other women, including Marla Dyson...that they have an ongoing sexual relationship. I don't blame Marla...I think she may be in a difficult situation with Jason...with not many options for getting out of it. As you probably already know, Jason can be very uh...persuasive...intimidating, even," Peggy says.

Oh?...I hadn't noticed...

"In case you may be wondering why I drink to excess? One of the reasons is...and I've *never* confided in anybody before about this. As I can never be really certain what happened between our daughter, Clementine...and Jason. She refuses to talk about it, or have any contact with him...emotional or otherwise. I can only suspect...and I'm not entirely certain that I could handle actually knowing...for sure.

Mick...It wasn't always this way with Jason and me. But about seven years ago, something happened to him when he started making all this money...and power that goes along with it. He changed...and not for the better," Peggy says.

"Peggy...I'm so sorry to hear how unhappy you are...but honestly, I don't think this is something that I either need...or *want* to know. Yes, Peggy we *can* be friends...but purely Platonic. If that works for you then, okay. I will continue to be friends with your son Trey for his own...and my sake...not yours or anybody else's...including Jason Mahoney unless Trey tells me otherwise.

He took a large leap of faith with me coming out like that...trusting me and I have promised him that I will never betray that trust," I say

"Thanks...Mick...for everything. I'll let you get back to your morning run," she says smiling warmly.

"Okay, Peggy...here's my phone number back in Tahoe if you ever need to talk. Gotta run now. I've got to get to the corporate office this morning to finish up some video editing, before returning home to Tahoe. I'll be in town for the next two or three days, if you need to get a hold of me. You can leave a message with Marla Dyson's secretary since I nominally work for Marla," I say handing her one of old business cards.

I then take a peek at my watch...almost 9 AM, "Bye Peggy...take care," as I take off on my own *beats the hell out of therapy* jog.

By the time, I shower, shave and pack, have a little breakfast, and am finally able to resurrect my rental car and drive in to corporate, it's almost 11 AM. I stop by Marla's office, stick my head in, and say, "Hey...beautiful...lunch about one, okay?"

She looks up from her computer—she seems unsettled. Then distractedly says, "Okay...fine," then continues on working. Hmm.

Then I head up Jason Mahoney's office. His secretary Becky Reeves, ushers me into his office.

"Good morning, Jason," I say brightly.

"Afternoon, Mick...are you ready to review the footage of the conference?" he asks brusquely.

"Yea...sure. That's why I'm here so bright and early," I say smiling letting his customary sarcasm slide.

Then, from his locked drawer, Jason hands me the 4 VHS tapes from the Closed Circuit TV cameras, one tape for each camera.

"Okay...we've covered what I want. One more thing. I want three different versions of the final cut. The first with *all* the comments, including mine. The second with all the comments *except* my final wrap up comment on Saturday, just before I adjourn the meeting...and a third...the same as the second, except without Alexandria's opening comment on Saturday about the written minutes...and her response to Lane Rector's comments. Got it? Label the spine of the cassettes with an innocuous number one, two and three respectively. How long do you think it will take you?" he asks.

"Okay be advised that CCTV footage usually has date and time super-ed over the video...not optional. There would be a lapse showing in the date and time which would indicate that there has been an omission...missing video and audio, the difference between the ending time and the beginning of when it resumes, indicative of just how much time is actually missing, " I say.

"Hmm....not good. Any suggestions?" he asks.

"Well...about the only suggestion would be to mask the date and time

super with some kind of graphic superimposition obscuring the raw time-date string...like a black rectangle with some graphic, like the just the date that would completely cover it," I say. Me in my MF mode. The other MF, Mr Fixit...it's a gift.

"Okay...do so on versions two and three only. How long will *that* take you?" he says

"Well, first I'll have to log all the tapes individually...if each tape has about 6 hours on it...extended play, total for both days, then it'll probably take me, even shuttling fast forward through them probably 6 to 8 hours just to make rough edit decision lists for each version. Then to edit the final cuts, maybe another day or two, including some rudimentary titling. Do you also want the names of the respective speakers with executive titles, also super-ed over the video as they speak? I ask.

"Probably a not a bad idea," he says.

"Okay...the edited masters will be on a VHS. How many copies do you want of it?" I ask.

"Just one...*and one only*. Then I want you to return *all* the raw footage to me. Under no circumstances is anyone else, including Pauly and Marla to learn of the existence of the raw video...or the edited versions. Are we *absolutely clear* on that, Mick?" he says, again with those trademark penetrating dark shark eyes.

"Perfectly clear, Jason. Can you call down to the post-prod suite and tell them that I'll be editing the next few days...and that I am not to be disturbed," I say.

"Already taken care of. The suite has been *exclusively* available for you *since 8 AM* this morning...and will be, until you release it, for however long it takes you," Jason says.

"Okay...then I'd better get to work," I say starting to leave when he almost forcefully grabs me at my right elbow.

"Mick...one last thing. We still have not heard back from you on your decision on whether you will join us at the E-C-C. I need your categorical answer before you leave town. Are we clear on that?" Jason says with an unmistakably ominous, bordering on malevolent tone, raising the hair on the back of my neck.

"Then you shall have it...at the very latest before returning to Tahoe," I say coolly, then quickly pivoting with the four tapes, make good my escape to the solitude and relative security of the editing room.

Logging raw footage, and making notations on a log sheet, relative to time code, is not an exactly riveting proposition, maybe one notch above watching miniature golf. Generally, there is nothing romantic or particularly magical about editing video. It requires a great deal of patience and technical attention to detail...constantly monitoring video quality and consistent audio

levels, flow and pace.

It's often rather boring especially when doing real-time talking heads as is also the case with recorded video depositions, of which I have done hundreds of times as a Certified Legal Video Specialist. This professional designation, makes the testimony when time and date stamped, theoretically unimpeachable, on technical grounds at least. Boring as hell...but lucrative, especially when there's potentially millions of dollars involved in the outcome.

By 12:45, I'm already bored to tears, so I wander over to Marla's office to pick her up for lunch. I tap on the door and let myself in. Marla is just sitting at her desk, staring off into space.

"Hey...ready for a little lunch, I'll buy," I say breezily.

She looks up at me hesitantly, then finally says almost resignedly, "Okay...let's go."

Not exactly the warm reception that I had expected. Something's changed. Obviously something's happened since I left her on Sunday. As she silently drives, she looks straight ahead, her hands nervously milking the steering wheel, not making eye contact with me.

"Whattya feel like for lunch...French cuisine, a little *Le Monsieur*, perhaps?" I ask trying to loosen here up..

"Honestly, Mick...I'm not very hungry. Do you mind if we just find a quiet place. I think we need to have a talk," she says not buying my attempts a levity. Not a good sign.

"Sure...your place?" I ask.

"No...right now. Probably not a good idea," she says ominously. Okay.

"You decide then," I say figuring that I'll let her deal with *it* in her own way, at her own pace. Finally, after about 10 minutes of silence, she pulls into a deserted parking lot of the trail head to a hiking trail, with a view of the pristine Rockies, turns off the engine, and for the first time, turns in her seat and faces me and makes eye contact. There are tears welling up in her eyes.

"What is it, Marly? Why are you so upset?" I ask laying my hand on hers on her thigh. She removes her hand from under mine. It is shaking.

"Mick...I don't know how to begin this...so I'll just be direct and plunge right in. I can't see you anymore...I'm so sorry..." she says now fighting back the tears, her lower lip trembling.

"Was it something that I said...did...or *didn't* do?" I ask with one of my best bright contrived smiles, trying to lighten up the moment. For the first time today, there's an evanescent smile, then in an instant it's gone.

"No...*gawd* no...I wish it were that simple. Oh...Mickey, I'm so unhappy. I...I'm...so conflicted, I just can't do this anymore," she says.

"Marla...I know about Jason Mahoney...and you. Is that what's causing the conflict?" I ask.

"How did you find out!?" she says staring intensely into my eyes.

"Hey...I'm a trained investigator, remember? And the first rule of a good investigation practices is to be open, to allow the clues, including exploring a person's uh...drawers, to lead you wherever they may. Frankly I had had some suspicions...which were presumptively confirmed while innocently looking for some Kleenex to blow my nose while you were in the bathroom. I came across a prescription asthma inhaler in the drawer of your night stand, along with your friend and my competitor, ol' reliable Pink Floyd, with Mahoney's name and a recent date on it, uh...on the prescription bottle that is. *Elementary* my dear *Dyson*," I say.

"So you've known all this time, and never said anything to me about it?" she says with an edge of indignation.

"Marly...it's been less than a week for *gawd's* sake. And by the way this morning when I ran into the Missus uh...Mahoney, she confided in me that she knows about her husband's multiple, forget serial, concurrent dalliances...including the one with you. A truly gifted libertine, I must say...makes my old man look like a rank amateur," I say with grudging admiration, leaving off the part about the Missus coming on to me.

"Oh my God! She knows? Mick this has been the longest week of my life...an eternity! I have been trying to figure how to tell you for the past several months. Sunday night, Jason came over. I finally decided that I *had* to tell him about you...and us, that I...I uh...felt very strongly about you...that I didn't want him to come over anymore," she says.

"So as of Sunday night Jason definitely knew about us. Hmm. Interesting, this morning he certainly never let on. He's good...*very good*. And yea...Peggy knows, but to her credit she does not blame you. In fact, she also indicated some empathy for your situation...that Jason would never allow you to leave the uh...relationship, voluntarily at least. So, how'd Captain Ahab take that *one*...the rejection?" I ask.

"Not good...he said that *he* and *only he*...would be the one who would decide *if* and *when*, he was done with me...like that...*done with me*," Marla says, now completely losing it, sobbing hysterically.

"Did he get violent with you...or threaten you in any way?" I ask.

"No...Jason doesn't do angry. He just gets his way...or gets even, which ever is more expedient. And he never, *ever* loses. He treats everyone that's involved with him, including his family...and me and Pauly as nothing more than some highly expendable business assets.

He also said something that was very degrading to me personally, which for the first time made me realize *who* and *what* I was going to be dealing with my whole humiliating...ignominious existence, as long as I stay at ACT.

He said that he didn't care who I whored around with...as long as I was *available when he wanted me*. Sex on demand with Marla...part of my job

description. And that essentially he was willing to share me with you, as long as you were willing to do his bidding for him at the E-C-C...just best business practices...a *quid pro quo* for him. Basically that I'm just another fringe benefit for working for J. Murdoch Mahoney. Mickey...is that how *you* feel about me? As just some...perk?" she says staring searchingly into my eyes grabbing my hand in both of hers and squeezing it very hard.

"Marly...I would have hoped that by now, after the time we've spent together, you would have known to not have to ask that question. I *love* ya baby...you're my *one*, no matter what happens with Captain Ahab. Never forget that," I say reaching over and hugging her tightly, then giving her a deep passionate kiss.

"Oh Mickey...*gawd* I love you so much...it hurts. I...I thought I had lost you. I was literally sick, with worry and grief," she says hugging me tightly.

"Do you think you'd be in any physical danger if you were to rebuke him?" I ask.

"No...Jason's too smart...and cunning for that. He has *so many other* ways and *mind-fucking* devices at his disposal...none of which would leave a mark...physically at least. I've made a deal with the devil, Mickey...and now the devil's calling in the note. Oh Mickey...what are we going to do?" she cries.

"Not to worry baby...let me think about it. You'll just have to trust me. There's always a way. And by the way...I never, *ever* lose either. Well except, for that thing at UCB...and there was the time when Rad Vlad ran me out of town on a troika...and of course there..."

"Okay...alright already! I got it. Mickey...I trust you *with my life, baby*," she says staring intently into my eyes. That look of complete and utter trust—and the echo of those words would come to haunt me for the rest of my life.

"Thanks for that. Well it won't be boring. Either me...or *Capitaine* Ahab is probably going go down for the count. A draw might be the best we can hope for. Dealing into a inside straight kinda odds. Our only advantage might be to exploit his colossal arrogance and complacency.

The N-F-L baby. Only one way to deal with their superior size, speed and strength...we may not be very big but we're uh...slow. So, we gotta try to keep it close for four quarters, then with superior deception and the element of surprise, the last minute of the game break open the wide receiver...uh, that would be *vous* in this little parable...behind the defense, as the QB, uh...*moi*, throws for a game winning Hail Mary, just as the final gun sounds."

And the part that I didn't share with Marla, let's just hope that the sound of the *final* gun, literally ain't from one of the many of NRA-boy's prized collection of fully automatic assault rifles.

"I'll say one thing for ya, Mick...you sure know how to add a little spice to a girl's hum-drum corporate quotidian existence," Marla says.

“Yea, I know...but as they say, all work...” I say.

“Sounds a little less than lottery odds,” she says gamely.

“Yeap. Thin...*very thin*, which makes the precision of the time frame...the execution of our plan mission critical, baby. The lousy timing of this whole exercise with Jason kinda complicates things...more than just a little bit.

He wants...indeed is demanding an answer about whether I will accept the position he's offered. Under the circumstances even though I was leaning away from accepting it, not wanting to get involved with those crackpot Libertarians, I think now, to buy some time, for the time being anyway...Jason has to think that I'm on board. That I'm buying in to all that entitlement and privilege of the *ruling class*...the whole all-you-can-eat bullshit buffet, until I can work out some kind of bullet-proof exit strategy for you and me. Okay?

But...even though you know Pauly much better than I...I don't think you should trust or confide in him...or anybody, including anyone in your family.

One last thing, baby. Just so you know what Ahab is capable of...he videotaped both days of the conference. Four sub-Rosa cameras with microphones stationed all around the room to listen in, on even stray conversation among the attendees. I suspect that's why he offered to host the conference at ACT. None of them know it...with the exception perhaps of the Dragon Lady. That whole little friggin' jaded, pun intended, *Jace and Alex* performance with her...the faint scent of conspiracy, like the smell of not-so-young, egg-foo-yung starting to go bad...someplace in the fridge.

I wouldn't put it past him that he's either got your phone tapped and, or sub-Rosa surveillance installed at your condo. Is the condo in your name or his?" I say.

“It's in the corporation's name...of course. A tax write-off...like me,” she says bitterly.

“I have been instructed in no uncertain terms *not* to reveal the existence of the those tapes...to anyone, including you and Pauly. For the next few days I will be creating three different variations of an edited master...*one copy only*. More later on that. After I'm done with the edit, I'm supposed to return all the raw footage. Then before I leave for Tahoe, give him my decision about accepting the position. I can't be sure, but I had the distinct sense that if he doesn't get the answer he wants, because of what I now know about the E-C-C, that my services, and me personally might become very expendable...and *very* soon.

And, again don't let Pauly in on anything...for now at least. And it goes without saying, don't let on to Jason that we had this little talk and that you know about the tapes...it could put you in grave danger. I know it's going to be tough, but until I leave it's going to have to be *business as usual*, baby," I

say.

"Oh, Mickey...what if he wants to come over?" she asks.

"Well...how 'bout the old tried and true feminine escape hatch, in this case never more true, *not tonight, honey, I got a headache,*" I say.

"More like a cluster migraine...a cluster-fuck headache," she says.

"Okay...one last thing. Start laying the foundation for you to have to come to Lake Tahoe, to work with me to complete some unfinished business with the franchise agreements of some of the other systems. And just in case this whole thing does go South...when you pack, do it inconspicuously of course, but pack as though you may not be coming back here. And take anything personal that you absolutely can't live without that's portable, like pictures etcetera. Tell him that you may have to be in Tahoe for a while to wrap things up. Keep that vague. Okay?" I say.

"Okay...Mickey. I guess we'd better get back. Are you coming over tonight?" she asks.

"Sure...don't want to arouse any undue suspicion, now do we? So purely for uh...appearances. Like I said *business as usual,*" I say grinning, which draws a playful slap.

"Well, me being the consummate M-B-A and J-D *business* professional, I would likewise remind you to include your better half, the brains of the outfit...*Monsieur* Wilson," she says.

Atta girl!

- Chapter 25 -

At 6 PM, I call it a wrap for the day. After so many hours of looking at talking heads, and logging the footage, making edit decision lists for three separate final cuts, I'm blotto...and definitely in need of a double-Johnny or three. Marla's already there, when I hit the call button on the intercom; the large metal security gate slowly creaks open.

I walk through the slightly ajar door to her condo, to find Marla outside, leaning against the balcony railing, gazing out at the golden sunset...*the gloaming* as the micks call it, behind the breathtaking Western Alps, the Rockies.

There's an Antonio Carlos Jobin number with a tantalizing samba back beat playing faintly in the background. She's lookin' good...*very good*...the way the warm Alpenglow invitingly plays upon the highlights in her chestnut hair. She looks so young and innocent...and *so* vulnerable. My heart rate kicks up about 50 BPM.

On a glass patio table is silver Sharper Image Penguin Martini shaker, copiously covered with beads of condensation alongside two iced Martini glasses, with skewered green stuffed olives. A bottle each of Bombay Sapphire Gin and my guy, Johnny. I pride myself on my adaptability...to be flexible in any given Happy Hour situation, in any time zone always remembering to observe and honor local custom first. An equal opportunity imbiber.

I walk up behind her and throw my arms around the front of her, sensing her warm soft, perfect breasts, are *sans brassiere*, her nipples already aroused, and place my wet lips on the nape of her bare slender neck. She sighs.

"It would appear that *the girls* are just as happy about *Monsieur Wilson's* visit...as he is. Would you like *Le Monsieur* to pour you and the girls a Martini?" I ask.

"Now that...I would pay to see!" she says laughing, then turning in my arms, now facing me, throwing her arms around me placing her head against my chest.

"Mickey...your heart is beating so fast and loud, pumping all that blood...*where does it all go?*" she says mischievously.

"Talk about excessive blood flow, *Monsieur Wilson*, may be temporarily unable to pour...as something's come up...which is hopelessly incapacitating his bar-tending skills," I say.

"By the way, may I say that I'm *extremely* happy that you remembered to bring your uh...*un-faithful* companion," she says.

"Well...actually, in these kinds of situations, I never leave home without him. Over the years I've realized that it is best to relinquish the control

stick in the cockpit over to co-pilot *Le Monsieur*...that resistance is futile," I say.

"Impressively uh...pragmatic." she says.

"Marla...I hate to even bring this up at such an uh...*suspicious* occasion, but if you could just hold that thought for about an hour...we have some work to do before we can begin taxiing for take off," I say.

"Oh? Like what could *possibly* be more important?" she says.

I whisper in her ear, just in case, "We can't talk out-loud about anything that's important until I can sweep the place for bugs and cameras. Okay?"

"Oh...yea. Almost forgot about that. Well hurry up will ya, the unbridled girls getting a little restless...don't know how much longer I can contain 'em," she whispers back.

"I'm all over them uh...it," I say.

It takes me about an hour to go through the condo. I hold my index finger up to my lips to signal Marla not to talk as I do my security scan *schtick*.

Not surprisingly I find four different audio wireless transmitter bugs, one in a wall light fixture right near the bed in the master bedroom...one each in the master bath, living room and kitchen. Hmm...very high end, not some gypo Radio Shack bugs. Obviously strategically and professionally placed by someone who knows what they're doing. Real pros. Of course. I would expect nothing less from the Captain.

Also in the master bedroom, in a ceiling fixture directly above the bed is a very small barely detectible video camera, also wireless...also very high end. I leave each one undisturbed, so whoever is doing the monitoring is not aware of their detection by me until I can decide *when* and *how* I want to deal with them. I motion to Marla to go back out on the balcony.

After we're outside on the balcony deck, I close the patio door. I had already cleared the balcony of bugs. I pour out the ice in the Martini shaker, fill it again with ice from the bucket on the table. I then pour 10 ounces of Bombay Sapphire Gin over the ice, put Mr Penguin's head back on, and begin gently shaking it. I then take the olives out of each Martini glass, place a few cubes of ice in each one and swirl the ice until the glasses are starting to sweat. I then pour about a half ounce of Johnny Walker Red in the bottom of each glass, then gently swirl each glass until there's a lovely amber film of single malt scotch coating up to the rim.

Now it's time for the *coup de grace*...I unscrew the stopper in Mr Penguin's beak, and let the ice cold Sapphire gin slowly *o-o-ooze* into the glasses, then lastly, gently position the olives in the glasses...just so.

Voila! Marla-tunies now being served on the terrace...with the Johnny giving the gin a lovely smokey after taste. I hand Marla the Martini.

"Burnt Bombay's...*Sante Madames*," I say holding my glass up to

hers.

"*Sante...Monsieurs,*" she says.

She takes a sip. "Um-mm. Divine...smooth, that barely discernible burnt flavor is so subtle...but gives it so much character. My compliments to the mixologist," she says.

"Marla...as you could see the place was bugged big time. My guess is that all of them have been recently placed, as there is no dust whatsoever on them compared to the environment they were placed in...probably since I arrived in town...or less than a week.

Which prompts an even larger question. *Why now?* Not to alarm you, but...just thinkin' out-loud here. Other than the possible obvious motive of jealousy...which you seemed to have dismissed. Maybe some growing paranoia about loyalty to his Lordship...and *the cause*, and the perception by Jason that I may be a potentially corrupting influence on you, making you a dangerous commodity for him to have around? So he may be hedging his bets...just in case, in the unlikely event in his mind at least, I were to decline his offer. Or, worse, maybe start blowin' whistles especially after having been given privy to being in the huddle with the Big Boys of the ECC. Me...and my services could suddenly become *very* disposable. In which case I'd have to wonder what would happen to me...and you...and anybody that's loyal to me if I said *no thanks*. Maybe a visit from our cold-blooded reptilian friend *El Negrito*?" I say.

You can check out...but you can never leave...

"That bastard! So where do we go from here?" she asks.

"Well...if I decommission them, or toss them, they'll know we're on to them. So we'll just have let them think they're still working. There has to be some ambient sound or they'll know something's wrong. So we'll take the bug out of the master bedroom, and put it in the living room. I'll position the video camera in the bedroom so it's facing up toward the ceiling. There's no trailing audio on it so they'll probably think that it just shifted. Try to remember not to reference any room in the house when talking, as they will have them labeled as to location being monitored.

I doubt they will be on to it before you leave town for Tahoe. And don't use your personal land line for any conversations with me...it's probably tapped. I'll call you only *to* your office line...call me only *from* your office. You also have my pager number...leave an alt number. So...anything we want to discuss that's important needs to be done either on the secure balcony...or the bedroom," I say.

"Why don't you grab Mr Penguin, of course observing proper animal rights protocol...as I hereby make a motion for the bedroom...right now," she says shimmying her beautiful bouncing breasts.

"I second that *e*-motion...the motion is carried unanimously," I say bustin' a little funky chicken rejoinder move.

"And as a purely symbolic gesture, to ensure that no animals were harmed during this very Happy Hour, I shall *not* carry Mr Penguin by the beak," I say as I wrestle with where to grab the slippery damn thing, finally sayin', *screw-it...* picking up Mr Penguin by the beak as we adjourn to the bedroom, where I have removed all the bugs and placed them in the living room. Then standing on a chair, aiming the camera harmlessly at the ceiling. And for the record no animals were harmed...with the exception of *el serpiente con un ojo* getting roughed up a little. Not complainin'...just splainin' Lucy.

Over the next several days, I complete the final edited versions on VHS of the three variations of the conference.

Wednesday afternoon, I walk up to Jason Mahoney's office, and present to Captain Ahab the three edited master cassettes along with the four original cassettes of raw footage. He immediately walks them over to the VHS player TV combo, and with the remote control, previews each, for about 3 minutes real-time then fast forwards to the parts that were supposed to be edited out. He then surprises me by randomly fast-forward shuttling through each of the four raw footage cassettes, then rewinds them. *Trust but verify...that there's been no switch. A personal caveat and preview for the coming games: He does not miss much.*

He smiles, when he sees that everything appears to be as agreed.

"Good job, Mick. Thanks. Now why don't we sit down...have a drink and discuss your decision about my offer," he says, all business now, as he goes over to his liquor cabinet pouring a scotch, up for each of us. I am seated in front of his desk, as he comes back to his desk, then leaning against it facing me...very close, handing me my drink. Hmm...*in battle always try to maintain the tactical advantage of holding the high ground. This guys is always in the game...Mr Intimidation.*

"Cheers, Mick...mud in yer eye...as my people say," raising his glass, not by accident, literally towering over me, looking down keeping his eyes intently trained on me while taking a sip.

"Cheers," I reply returning the toast taking a short pull.

"Okay...I've given you plenty of time to make your decision. Have you got an answer for me? After having privy to the conference and all the major players I would have to hope...for the good of *all concerned* that you have decided to accept my offer?" He says with an unmistakably ominous tone.

"I have. I've decided to come on board...to accept your offer, but with one pre-condition," I say.

"*Oh?* And just *what* kind of pre-condition?" he asks, obviously somewhat irritated that I have not fallen unequivocally into the fold.

"I'll perform all the tasks that you have outlined to me relative to the position offered. But, not as an employee per se, but as a contract entity. My annual compensation of 100 K would be the same, tendered on a monthly

retainer basis. The advantages for me are that I can continue to have my own business...my prior profession of investigation etcetera...along with a PR client base independent of ACT, to pursue the same or similar business interests for others. It would be a similar contractual relationship that you have with Max Mesmer.

In the unlikely event that I would perceive even the appearance of a potential conflict of interest of my representation of another client with the interests of ACT, I would forthwith, advise you accordingly, leaving you with the option to sever and terminate the business relationship with me at your earliest convenience, by tendering written notice without having to state cause. The obvious advantage for ACT is that you will have none of the standard liabilities of an employer to an employee...including possible legal liabilities for acts of agency on behalf of the master, which maybe construed as legally redressable...including civil and criminal. No benefits...including stock options, medical insurance or company car, etcetera, etcetera.

If you wish to proceed under these conditions, I will have a contract, and representation agreement drawn up for your consideration. The effective date of the agreement would be after I have concluded the ACT company business in Tahoe, still as an employee of ACT. I'm figuring within 30 days which will give us some time to draft and ratify the rep agreement," I say.

"Well now...and just hypothetically of course, what if I decide to decline your proposition?" he asks, again with the smirk, sensing that I may be bluffing.

I stand up and stare into his searching eyes, "Hey, Jason...no hard feelings. I've enjoyed working with ACT, you, Pauly and Marla. And it should go without saying, rest assured that any knowledge, proprietary or otherwise that I may have gained about the corporation, you and any of the employees of ACT...and or the E-C-C, would remain expressly confidential with me, of course...subject to the force of law," I say.

"I see. You've obviously given this some careful thought. Mick, I really like you. I think you could have *gone very* far with ACT. But it seems clear to me, for the moment at least, that you have made up your mind, so I won't insult your integrity by offering you more money...or perks...which I might entertain," he says of course trying to change my mind by sweetening the deal.

"Thanks Jason...but no thanks. This isn't about the money. Do we have a deal?" I ask putting my open hand out to shake hands.

He studies me searchingly for about 10 seconds. *The first to blink, loses.*

"Well, I guess under the circumstances I'm left with little choice. Okay then. Done deal," he says slowly extending his hand, which I briefly shake.

"But just *hypothetically* of course...*what if I* had summarily declined

your offer?" I ask smiling.

"Well Mick in that case...I guess, hypothetically, I'd just have to kill ya. Just a little Black Irish humor there, lad," he says with a bit of Irish lilt along with a chilling intense penetrating gaze into my eyes, followed with a hollow smile. But the message is unmistakably clear. Do not *even* think about *messin' with me*.

"Ha...ha...Jason. Okay, since my work is done here for now, I should get back home to Tahoe. I've still got some unfinished loose ends to tie up on a few of the franchise renewals. Probably take me at least a month to conclude my involvement in the negotiations, to get Marla up to speed for my replacement before I can free myself, to commit full-time to our new business relationship," I say.

"That should be soon enough. Just stay available in case an emergency arises, okay?" he says.

"Sure. Okay...unless there's something else...I should get going. I've got a flight out tomorrow morning early. Thanks," I say extending my hand again which he grudgingly fills with his.

"Okay...Mick. I'll be in touch...through Pauly," he says.

"Thanks." I say as I turn to leave.

"Oh...by the way. Marla won't be working with you on the franchise renewals...so there won't be *any* reason for her to go to Tahoe. I've found something else *very* uh...pressing, which needs her urgent attention...like yesterday. So, Pauly will be taking that over, at least temporarily," he says with a smirk. *Check...with the polite chess warning that my queen is in danger. Grave danger.*

"Oh...Okay. Whatever. See ya," I say dismissively, desperately trying to mask my disappointment and grave concern. As I exit his office, I can feel his intense stare boring holes into my back as I walk toward the private elevator.

By the time I get back to Marla's condo, she is already there, standing in the kitchen, with a glass of wine, busily chopping something.

"Honey...I'm home," as I bounce through the door left ajar, breezily doing my best Rob Petrie from the Dick van Dyke Show, while placing my briefcase on the kitchen counter. I then put my index finger to my lips, while pointing up to the living room ceiling, grabbing my ear lobe. Marla nods.

"Oh...Rooob...did you have a good day at the office, dear while I've dutifully been baking brownies and otherwise keeping a perfect home for my big brave man," Marla says doing a perfect Mary Tyler Moore of the dutiful housewife Laura Petrie.

"Yeap...and I had an interesting talk with the boss today. But before I get into that, after a hard day at the office...gee whiz honey-bunch, I could sure

use a highball," I say.

"Of course dear...just as soon as I get your robe and slippers you smart and powerful man. And for dinner, your favorite...my special meatloaf. You must be famished, foraging out there in the big bad uh...big business world," she says pouring me a double shot of Johnny.

"All in a day's work...which I do happily without reservation for our happy home, our two-point-five kids and one dog and point five cat, and for my beautiful and *very* capable *housewife*," I say, drumming my fingers on the counter, then taking a long pull on the Johnny.

"Oh...Roob! So tell me about your day, sweetheart. It's always so exciting to hear how smart and clever you are at work," she says.

"Well, yes...of course it would be. And speaking of me being smart...*and* clever...I did meet with the *big* boss today, Jason Mahoney about the new position that is being offered me with much more pay," I say, which causes Marla to stop with the slicin' and dicin', and look up at me, the smile now gone.

"Really. How did *that* go?" she asks the tone of levity also vanished.

"Just fine. But I'd rather tell you the *wonderful* news after our *wonderful* family dinner," I say

I motion to Marla toward the balcony with my head, then open the patio door and wait for her, closing the patio door behind us. Before saying anything, I make a quick sweep for any bugs that may have been placed since the last scan. All clear.

"Okay. Here's the deal. Good news...bad news. Good news first. I rejected his offer as an employee...but I countered. Told him that I'd perform the activities and duties as defined, but as an independent contractor only...for the same rate of compensation. He was *not* happy, but being the consummate poker player didn't openly display his displeasure. But I could tell that he was *seriously* pissed-off. Anyway, he reluctantly accepted my proposal. So in about a month, I'll be off ACT payroll, after I've completed the unfinished business on the franchise negotiations," I say.

"Okay...and the bad news?" Marla says.

"There's no way he's going to let you come to Tahoe. He told me that he had something pressing for you to do...that you would no longer be involved in the franchise renewals from Tahoe, that Pauly would take all that over," I say.

"Yea...pressing alright. Like *pressing* his body against mine. That *bastard!* So do you have a plan Mickey?" she asks.

"Marla...I don't have to tell *you* how slippery he is. He's *good*...*very good*, at all this corporate intrigue bullshit. But I think he now realizes that he may have made a major mistake in judgment in prematurely assuming my willingness to fall into the fold, with the rest of the sheep...no offense intended," I say.

"That's in really *baaahhhh-d* taste," she bleats.

"I think he's uh...*concerned*, justifiably, that when he let me into the huddle of the E-C-C, without extracting a commitment from me beforehand, that he screwed up big time. He was so sure...so cocky that I'd take the deal as not many *if any* ever turn him down...for anything. So okay...if you can hold out here for about a month...until I get things going again, back in Tahoe, then you can split.

When the timing is right, about a month from now, you will inform C-E-O J. Murdoch Mahoney, in the form of a letter for his eyes only, that you no longer can tolerate his predatory sexual exploitation as the employer over a female employee...that it's *over*; and that you will not file suit for sexual abuse in the workplace as long as he lets you leave unchallenged and unmolested with a good letter of recommendation which we will draft, seeking no severance, just a voluntary tendering of your resignation, effective immediately, for *unspecified* personal reasons. Tacitly leaving open the possibility of filing a claim for sexual abuse in the future, should he foolishly make the mistake of not honoring his side of the bargain. Okay?" I say.

"Okay...then what? I come to Tahoe...as *what*. To do *what*?" she asks with a bit of an edge.

"Thought you'd never ask. Okay...so you'd pick up and move to Tahoe where you have uh...not just one but two, very *special* friends there. We'd form a partnership...both professional and *very* personal. I could restart my investigation biz for some cash flow until we can get our own PR etcetera firm up to speed. With your legal credentials and impressive resume working for other corporations doing what we would be doing for ACT as employees, but without the exclusivity or strings attached...and ultimately more money. So whattya say, partner?" I say grabbing her and pulling her into me.

"Oh Mickey...it *sounds* so wonderful. But...do you honestly think we can pull it off? Do you *really* think he'll leave us alone?" she asks hugging me tightly looking up at me, her face filled with apprehension.

"Marla...I honestly don't know what the hell he's capable of. But I can tell you this, if there is such a thing as an evil-born man he's redefines it. So what's the alternative, baby? Do you want to live the rest of your life, working, *literally under* someone that evil and autocratic? This is your chance to make a break...a getaway. But I can't make that decision for you. All I can tell you is...that I love you and I want you with me...no matter what happens, we'll deal with it," I say.

"Oh Mickey...I love you. Just hold me...and tell me everything is going to work out, okay?" she says hugging me tightly.

"Everything is going to be fine, baby...*just fine*," I say, leaving off the *I hope*.

Both of us realizing that this will be our last evening together for at

least a month, we decide to have a quiet, light dinner then retreat to the secure bedroom. But before retiring for the evening, because I have a very early flight out in the morning, I decide to pack. I've been traveling light with just one suitcase, a carry-on and my briefcase. I pack the suitcase, leaving out clothes for the morning. The last thing I pack in the suitcase are the seven VHS cassettes from my briefcase. Just to be safe, I wrap them in two layers of aluminum foil to ensure that they will not be damaged by routine random x-ray at airport security.

We spend a quiet, reflective evening, just holding each other while listening to music, some rather melancholy Chopin and Ravel including one of my favorites, the lyrical Pavanne for a Dead Princess—tragically prophetic...

- Chapter 26 -

I must admit, it feels wonderful to be home again, in my beautiful Lake Tahoe, in the comfort of my own surroundings especially my large California King-sized bed, a full seven feet long by six feet wide.

In 1983 the first cell phone technology was released to the general public, a relatively primitive bulky handset at a ridiculous cost of close to \$ 4,000 each plus \$ 50 per month and .40 per minute. I buy one, establish an account, and send it to Marla, so we can talk on the phone without fear of being monitored. She keeps it a secret from everybody that she has the capability, so whomever may be monitoring her conversations is not aware that we talk frequently.

We talk at least three or four times a week. Because she is suspicious that her car may also be bugged, she only uses it while sitting outside, or in a quiet open public place.

She's been staying busy, trying to stay out of the sights of Jason. But apparently, the gossip at the coffee pot, around the ACT corporate office is that Jason Mahoney's considerable sexual appetites are now being satiated by the Dragon Lady, one Alexandra Kwan Meade wife of CEO and Chairman of World Media Inc., the aging mogul Reginald Meade. She's also hearing some rumors, from very reliable sources that something big...*very* big, in the corporate world of mergers and acquisitions is about to be announced about ACT, and a player to be named later...a *very* large player.

In the meantime, the landscape of television is being drastically and dramatically changed with the advent of the delivery of satellite programming, like CNN, Cable News Network, launched in 1980, by Ted Turner, maverick media mogul and President of Turner Broadcast. Cable systems including all of the ACT Inc. systems begin carrying it almost immediately, as it cannot be received 'off-air' broadcast like the big three, ABC, NBC and CBS networks and their local affiliates.

This invariably helps to drive more subscribers to cable TV. It will revolutionize how news and information will be delivered near real time—worldwide news, now 24 -7. Many public places like bars, hotel lobbies and airports will leave the TV tuned to CNN, all day long for breaking news, a constant Dow Jones update, and human interest and celebrity gossip stories that are beginning to draw a large audience. It's the incipient stage of what will eventually be called *reality TV*. Giving all news, including international, national and regional an element of entertainment, coining a new term, *infotainment*, and a local sense of connection and intimacy with happenings in distant places in different time zones. I also leave CNN on during the day while working at the house. It is not unusual for a flashing graphic to occasionally appear over the programming, with *Late Breaking News*

Story...stay tuned for live coverage from the site.

One afternoon, about 3:30 PM, I was working at the house with the TV on CNN, muted, when out of the corner of my eye, I'm distracted by a flashing graphic, *Hostage situation in the Denver area...stay tuned for latest developments.*

I un-mute the TV and turn the volume up. A reporter is standing in front of what appears to be a school in the background with the name, Mile High School. I immediately recognize it as Trey Mahoney's High School:

Details are sketchy and unconfirmed at this point, but here's what we've been able to confirm so far. It is believed that a male student is holding several other students' hostage at gun point. He is demanding he be given the opportunity to speak to the news media. The identity of the students remains unconfirmed. It is not clear why he is holding, so far as we know at this time, four other students at gun point. He has threatened to execute them unless his demands are met. Stay tuned for further developments
...the reporter breathlessly reports.

The phone rings. I pick it up, "Mick Kozlov."

The voice on the other end is crying hysterically, it's a woman, "Mick...it's Peggy...Mahoney."

"Hi Peggy, how ya doin? You sound really upset. I just saw on CNN that there's a hostage situation in the Denver area....looks like Trey's school. Is he alright?" I ask.

"Mick...it's Trey. He's taken some students hostage...with some guns he took from home...a handgun and some kind of rifle...an A-something or other," she says sobbing.

"Okay...please try to calm down, Peggy. Have you or Jason been able to talk to him directly...to ask him what the hell is going on?" I ask.

"Yes...but he won't tell us anything...and he refuses to listen to anything, I or Jason has to say. He says he needs to talk to you...and you only. Can you please call him....oh God please talk to him Mick before he does something really...please call him right away!" she pleads.

"Of course Peggy...give me the number. I'll try to reach him as soon as I hang up," I say.

"Oh thank you Mick...there's a private line...in the basketball coaches office at the gym. It's a direct number that bypasses the switchboard," she says giving me the number for the school.

"Have you talked to anybody at the school admin or teachers....or the police about the possible cause or the status of the police response. Do you

know if they've called out SWAT yet?" I ask.

"Here's the name of the Detective in charge...a Rodney Gabriel. Here's the number for the PD. They have patched him in from the high school to talk to us. Okay? Please...Mick, call Trey right away! This character Gabriel sounds like he's real eager to rush in there...like some kind of cowboy. And Mick...one thing Trey did tell me. He went off his meds about two weeks ago," she says.

"Okay...Peggy. In the meantime, you can give him my number...but tell him I'm probably going to be on the phone with Trey when he calls. Okay?" I say.

"Okay, Mick. Please call us back at the house...right after you get off with Trey! Promise?" she says giving me her phone number.

"I promise Peggy...gotta run. I'll be in touch with you as soon as I can. Bye," I say.

Jesus Trey...what the hell have you got yourself into, man?

I punch the number in on the keypad, and wait for it to ring. I immediately get a recording...*this number is no longer in service or you have dialed the number incorrectly...please hang up and dial again....* etc.

I immediately realize that in her angst, Peggy has neglected to give the area code for Denver...but I am so upset myself, that I don't catch it like I should have...like something one might do if it was his own kid in such jeopardy. I redial with the area code for Denver. It rings about 8 times, finally, *"Hello?"*

"Trey?...is this Trey Mahoney speaking?" I ask.

"Mick? Is that you? Mick...hey, good to hear your voice...got a minute so we can chat? I'm kinda in a situation here," he says laughing incongruously...sounding agitated...*kinda in a situation.* Ya think?

"Sure Trey...shoot, uh...*dammit*, poor choice of words. What's up...talk to me pally," I say, again with the laugh on the other end *"...you've still got your sense of humor I see,"* he says. He's talking very fast, being bipolar if he went off his meds, he could be in the middle of a manic episode.

"Yea I'm a regular riot...what the hell's going on, Trey? Are you...or anybody else hurt? Does anybody need medical attention...a doctor...or a lawyer?" I ask.

"Indian Chief, Mick...you forgot Indian Chief," he says laughing uproariously at his own joke, then serious. *"Nah...everybody's okay...so far. And when this is over I won't be needing any doctor...or lawyer,"* he says giggling.

"Okay, Trey...take a few deep breaths...and slow down, you're talking really fast...hard for me to keep up, man. Okay? So slow *everything* down...remember let the game come to you. Trey, why did you go off your meds?

"Those damn things zombie me out...just make me feel dead inside. So I decided I try going without them. That's when I got up the balls, no pun intended " again with the inappropriate amount of laughter " to go for it...with Sam."

"Okay, Trey...got it. Yea, we're a real pair...coupla funny coconuts aren't we, pally. So tell me what's going on man, from the beginning...deep breaths...and slow down. Okay?" I say.

"Okay...Mick, okay. Remember when I told you about Sam Reynolds, the guy I had a crush on? Well, one day about a two weeks ago, I finally decided to tell him how I felt about him. We were alone...just the two of us in the shower after practice. I asked him if he felt the same way about men that I do. Anyway...it turns out that he's as gay as I am. We made passionate love in the shower. You were right Mick...it felt so natural...so spontaneous and beautiful. No problems like you said. Okay?" he says.

"So then what's up with the hostage thing, then?" I ask.

"So after we're done...he tells me that if I tell anybody else that he's queer...I'll be sorry...that this will have to be our little secret which is fine with me. So anyway, a few days later, I guess he has a change of heart 'cause when I come in the locker room, to get dressed for practice...on my locker...with a magic marker in big black block letters...F-A-G...fag, Mick. Then, all the guys in the locker start laughing and mocking me, with Sam leading the taunting...egging everybody on. They leave the locker room...to go to the gym for practice.

I just didn't know what to do. Then I remembered our talk about maybe making a statement...about sticking up for myself and coming out. So I put on my jock strap, get dressed and go out into the gym to practice, like nothing's happened. All of sudden, my balls feel like they're on fire. I'm sweating like crazy...rubbing my balls, then everyone starts laughing...like fall down laughing. Sam says, hey hot balls...you get that from one of your boyfriends? Like that...trying to get some cover, so the guys won't suspect he's gay.

I sprint into the locker room, rip off my jock strap and run into the shower to try to get that stuff off. Finally, it starts to subside. When I go back to my locker, to get dressed...so I can get the hell outta there before they come back in, I see the tube of Tiger Balm layin' on the floor. That ointment stuff...you use for sprains and shit...it supplies heat to keep the swelling down. I know it must have been Sam that did it."

"Okay...Trey...that was a shitty thing for him to do...I get that. Granted...that punk Sam is a real prick. But what in the hell are expecting to accomplish by taking these guys hostage, man?"

"Okay...here's the rest of the story...maybe it'll help you to understand why I have to do this," he says, still talking so manically that sometimes it's hard for me to follow him.

"Trey...you don't *have to do* anything, man. Listen to me...you're not making any sense here. You're not thinking rationally...probably 'cause you went off your meds. This can only end badly. Please Trey, I'm beggin' ya man...give it up. Now! I'll talk to the cops...I'll have them promise that they won't use any force...they won't hurt you...when they take you in. You mother is just sick with worry," I plead.

"Let me finish, Mick okay? Please...just listen. So anyway, within a week, it's all around the school that I'm gay. During the day, in class or whatever, all the jocks, especially the football players are making my life miserable...hey fag...hey gay boy...the whole bit. Then one day after class after I quit going to basketball practice, some of the football players along with Sam and three other guys on the basketball team, cornered me. Those fucking football players gave me a real beating...broke my nose, knocked a few teeth out...for what? What did I ever do to them?" he says, starting to sob.

"Jesus, Trey...I'm so sorry man. I know it's easy to say, but don't pay any attention to those sexually insecure punks. I know they hurt you...bad. But trust me...*this is not the answer*. If you want to get revenge...violence against these guys will only hurt *your cause*. Okay?" I say.

"Mick...that's not the worst part. So I come home. I'm a bloody mess. My mom and my father are there. Mom, says, Trey...my gawd what happen to you? So I tell them...including my father that they had been bullying me for a few weeks and then they beat me up for no reason...just because I'm gay. Mom grabs me and hugs me...starts crying. The old man just stares at me, finally he says, '...if you're gay, then you had it comin'. Don't expect any sympathy from me...the Mahoney clan DOES NOT have queers. Period,' " he says crying.

"Oh man...*godammit*. I'm so sorry Trey. But you can't listen to him. He's just an emotional cripple. He's a big nothin'...not even worthy of you. Listen to me kid...let me help you get out of this okay? I promise...you can come and stay with me. Okay? We can do this together. We'll tell the world...I'll..." I start to say.

"Hold on a second Mick...somebody's at the door..." he says, then puts the phone down. I hear some voices, then Trey comes back on, *"Hey Mick...that was the cops. They say they're going to meet my demands...they're going to set up the cameras so I can tell my story...about the bullying and the beating. This is my chance to do the right thing. I remember what you said...do the right thing. Okay? Well it's time. Gotta go...tune your TV to CNN. Bye Mickey. I love you. Take care...my best pally,"* he says.

Click

"Trey! Trey! Don't hang up," the line goes dead.

I immediately hit the redial...the line's busy. I try three more times. Busy...probably off the hook.

I immediately call the number for the Detective, Rodney Gabriel. I get the local precinct.

"Denver police," they answer.

"This is an emergency I have to talk to Detective Rod Gabriel...it's matter of life and death. Can you patch me into his phone...out at the hostage scene at Mile High?" I yell.

"Who are you?" the voice says.

"My name is Mick Kozlov...I'm a close friend of the family of Trey Mahoney...the young man that's holding the students hostage. I think I can help...talk him into surrendering," I say keeping one eye on the TV.

Then I hear the guy yell, "*hey this guy wants to talk to Hot Rod...Gabriel about the hostage sit. Patch him in. Okay? Hang on.*"

It may have been only a minute...or two at the most, but it seems like an eternity.

"Gabriel here," the voice says.

"Detective Gabriel, this is Mick Kozlov...a friend of the kid holding the hostages. I think I can help...I can talk him down if..." but I'm interrupted.

"*That won't be necessary. The situation is resolved. The hostages have been freed...they are unharmed,*" he says.

"Great. What about Trey Mahoney. Is he okay?" I cry.

"*He won't be taking any more hostages. Before he came out to do the interview, I instructed my SWAT guys to take him down if they could get a clean shot...without endangering the lives of the hostages. He's DOA,*" Detective Gabriel says matter-of-factly, like he's handing out a parking ticket.

"Are you saying you shot him to death in front of the cameras...like a dog for Chrissakes!?" I cry.

"*No...not me personally...but yes he is confirmed dead. There were no cameras. Never was going to be any cameras,*" he says coldly total devoid of emotion or any semblance of sympathy.

"*Goddammit man...I could've stopped this. He was just a confused kid...he was off his meds. What was the big fucking hurry?*" I scream.

"*Too late...it's a done deal,*" he says.

"You cops...you lied to him...lured him out in open then assassinated him...like some dog. And he died for what? For being gay? You *fucking* cowards! Goddammit man!" I yell.

"*Well, that uh...kid was packin' a loaded and lethal AK47.*

When a kid picks up a man's weapon with intent to do bodily harm, in the eyes of the law...he's no longer a kid. I gotta go. I'm gonna have a shitload of paperwork to do," the compassionate Detective "Hot Rod" Gabriel says.

Click

Then on the TV screen flashes the graphic,

HOSTAGE SITUATION RESOLVED...ALL
HOSTAGES FREED AND UNHARMED! STAY
TUNED FOR MORE DETAILS!

Then the reporter comes back on clutching a microphone barely able to contain his excitement. Gesturing wildly, sweeping his arm toward the scene behind him, signaling the camera to zoom in for the money-shot close-up of the hostages being escorted out of the building. "Thankfully, all the hostages after their grueling ordeal...are unharmed!" he says, then as an *oh by the way*...an afterthought, "The perpetrator was killed in the *shootout* with the police...thankfully no law enforcement personnel were injured in the incident." *Shootout?* Sounds so much more dramatic than the reality. A surgical kill-shot from a safe and sanitary hundred yards, of a distraught and confused sixteen year-old kid who just wanted to be able tell his story to the world about the pain and angst of being bullied and beat up, for no other reason, than his sexual preference.

The middle-market local broadcast affiliate hack is now thrust on to the national stage—it's *his lucky day*. His big chance to make a name for himself. Maybe some major market TV station will pick him up. He's starting to wind it up now, "This is Robert Shaw, of KDNR...live from the scene of the dramatic rescue of four hostages from Mile High. Just to recap, all the hostages are safe and unharmed. Robert Shaw...signing off," enunciating his name very slowly and clearly, just in case a news director from the Big Leagues, thinks he might be ready for prime time...for *the show*.

I hit the mute button, and then start to cry uncontrollably. Like I've just lost my own son. Involuntarily replaying in my head, is the same haunting refrain used over and over again. *Everybody's a safe and unharmed* except a 16 year old kid, who just happened to be looking for love in the *wrong place*...at the *wrong time*...

Dammit! Goddammit!

The AP and UPI pick up the story, in no small part because the perpetrator is the son of corporate mogul, CEO of ACT Inc, J. Murdoch Mahoney.

Jason Murdoch Mahoney the third...Trey, dead at the age of 16.

In the story, there is no mention of the fact that Trey had been the victim of systematic merciless bullying and a severe beating by the so-called innocent hostages. J. Murdoch Mahoney, when asked for a statement about the incident:

My son was a very troubled young man. Sadly he made the unwise decision to quit his medication without telling anyone...including his mother or I. It was solely his decision

and as such, he must bear the full responsibility for his actions...for the tragedy that resulted. Thankfully no one else was harmed.

What happened was unfortunate, but I hold no else responsible, including the police, for the death of my son. I will have nothing further to say on the matter. I would ask that you all refrain from attempting to contact me or anyone in our family, that you respect our privacy, as we grieve for the loss of our son.

Well said...and well managed damage control for the reputation of CEO Jason Mahoney. Most conspicuously, no mention of the fact that his son was homosexual.

'...if you're gay, then you had it comin'...don't expect any sympathy from me. The Mahoney clan DOES NOT have queers. Period.'

A week later, I fly in for a very private memorial service for Jason Murdoch Mahoney, III. Marla picks me up at the airport, from there we head over to the cemetery for the funeral. We hug and embrace for a long time. Peggy Mahoney has asked me to say a few words at the service.

Finally, Marla says, "Mickey, are you okay?" looking searchingly into my eyes.

"Yea...I'll be okay. This is a...a tough one. I loved that kid. Have you heard how Peggy is taking this?" I ask my eyes welling up with tears.

"Pauly says she is, of course devastated...perhaps even suicidal. She's been drunk from the day it happened. Her daughter Clementine is here from college...probably the only reason she hasn't killed herself, yet...according to Pauly," Marla says.

"Okay...let's get over to the cemetery and get this over with," I say.

We arrive at the funeral site, just as the limo pulls up with the family. It is a beautiful bright sunlit day, belying the incredibly palpable darkness and sorrow of the moment. The usual ubiquitous prurient sensationalist paparazzi, at a distance with very long telephoto lenses, are hanging around like scavengers, just waiting for their chance to pounce on road kill.

There are about 20 folding chairs set out in front of the elaborate brass coffin, by the looks of it probably the most expensive money can buy.

We walk up to a seated Pauly and his wife, whom I had never met. He stands up and as we hug, he winces. I can feel his body has lost some of his once lean muscle. Probably from stress. "Mickey...glad you could make it man...Peggy will appreciate it. This is my wife, Joan." Joan stands up, and we also hug. She a short, compact woman, very trim and erect, and even though she's obviously been crying, I can still tell, is a beautiful woman. Marla and Joan, very close dear friends, embrace for a long time.

As the family makes its way from the limo, Peggy Mahoney, in all black with a veil, is being supported by Jason, and on the other side, presumably her daughter, Clementine. She seems very unsure on her feet. She's probably been drinking, even more, in order to get through this. She is quite a bit smaller than I remember her from our last encounter...probably from not eating, trying to drown her sorrows as the now seemingly cliché saying goes. Never works. Sadly the only sure way I know to drown one's sorrows would be to like take a leap off the Golden Gate Bridge.

As they approach, with them is a Catholic priest. We wait for the family to be seated, then we all take our seats in the front row. As I look around, I see no one else in any of the remaining seats. No friends...no other relatives, how tragic. I again, experience the sensation of a tennis ball being stuck in my throat.

The only sound is the rustling of the leaves from a cold, bone chilling North wind. After the he drones on about consequence of homosexuality, being a mortal sin, that without confession to expiate his sins, the not-so subtle implication of burning in hell for eternity, the oblivious priest, the *sanctimonious bastard*, then nods toward me. I stand and instead walk over to the podium, bracing myself with both hands. Close to the casket, I'm trying desperately to keep it together. I look down at Peggy and smile wanly. She nods her head.

I begin, "Young Trey Mahoney was more than a good friend of mine. In the short time we knew each other, I grew to understand what a special and yes, truly courageous young man he was. I loved that kid...like my own son. Sometimes in the face of such overwhelming grief...it is a good time to call upon other such tragic senseless moments in history for inspiration, to help us deal with our own pain...of others left behind...as others have dealt with it.

Trey had the soul of poet. A gentle and kind soul that only wanted to love...and be loved...for who he was, not what others wanted...or expected him to be. So I would like to leave you with a few of these words taken from the song by Don McLean, *Vincent*, about another anguished soul, Vincent Van Gough who also took his own life...just as sure as Trey did because, this world was never meant for one as beautiful as you..."

I begin...fighting back the tears...

*For they could not love you
But still your love was true
And when no hope was left in sight
On that starry, starry night*

*You took your life, as lovers often do
But I could've told you Vincent
This world was never meant for
One as beautiful as you*

*They would not listen, they're not listening still
Perhaps, they never will...*

"Trey sacrificed his unfinished life...attempting to *make* them listen. To do the right thing. His only crime was following his broken heart as to whom he chose to love.

Perhaps, now in some small way, they will begin to listen..." I say, then taking a seat.

I don't remember much of anything else during the actual service, as the clueless priest, mono-toned on with more of the expected religious platitudes.

After the service is over I walk up to Peggy. She seems totally oblivious to her surroundings...almost catatonic.

"Peggy, it's me, Mick," I say.

She looks up at me, there is a fleeting recognition of me, a wan smile, then she just stares out into space.

"Peggy, I'm so sorry for your loss...you know I loved Trey, like he was my own son," I say.

Then looking up at me, "I know Mick...I know...and he *loved you too*. Thank you so much for your beautiful words about my beautiful boy," she says so faintly that I can barely hear her, offering her bony emaciated hand to me. I take it. It feels like the hand of a woman in her eighties, with little weight or mass, covered by milky paper-thin skin. She then withdraws her hand and she is again gone to some other place, perhaps to join her son.

I shake Jason Mahoney's hand, and perform the perfunctory, almost brusque, "I'm very sorry for your loss, Jason," I say barely able to conceal my contempt for his despicable behavior toward his own son.

"Thank you, Mick...and thanks you for coming," like some automaton.

I then turn to the veiled Clementine, "I'm Mick Kozlov, your brother Trey, was a very dear friend of mine. I'm so sorry for your loss," I say.

She just nods, saying nothing like she herself is suffering from PTSD. Perhaps as Peggy had once confided in me...something very dark, to do with her father?

- Chapter 27 -

On the drive back to Marla's, I hold her right hand all the way...stroking it, feeling so grateful, to have her in my life. I then become lost in deep reflection about my time spent with Trey.

"How long can you stay for Mickey?" she asks.

"I'm sorry...you said something? I was someplace else," I say.

"Yes, I know...it's okay, baby. How long are you in town for?" she says again.

"Oh...uh...I should get back. I'm not sure I can be here. I just might be tempted to take Jason Mahoney out to the woodshed...maybe so he doesn't leave," I say.

"Baby, before you return to Tahoe, I know it's not a good time...but we need to talk about when to execute our plan to get me out of this corporate insane asylum. I think it's time...but..." she says with some tension and indecision in her tone.

"But what?" I ask.

"Well, I'm ready...whenever you say...that you are ready to have me in your life...*full-time*. But...Mick I want you to be absolutely sure, that you're comfortable with that proposition. It's a big move...for both of us. I love you Mickey, of that I'm very sure...more sure than I've ever been in my life. But I have to know that *you* have the same level of commitment...that you're also ready, and frankly, that you're *over Annie Trudeau*," she says.

Hmm...well, there is that. Annie Trudeau. So that's been lurking in her consciousness all this time? I have to admit to myself, the mere mention of the name gives me more than a slight increase in heart rate. *Jesus...what's up with that?*

Women just seem to have another layer of wisdom...of a deep knowing that we men seldom possess. Some call it intuition. I call it the feminine cellular cognizance of Yin. Is it during the love making that they sense some distant connection...a yearning for the embrace another woman. The *other woman*...from the past, alive or even dead, the present or even the future?

"Thank you for your honesty, baby. Marly...please pull over." She pulls off the road, comes to a complete stop then turns to face me, her eyes filled with a mixture of expectation and dread, "Yes...I've given you and me some very careful thought...including the ca...ca...commitment part," I say, only half-jokingly,

"Well...easy for you to say," Marla says with that beautiful smile, a real gamer.

"Marla...I believe that for perhaps the first time in my life...well one

of the first anyway...*probably the third actually*, that I am truly ready for a mature loving, committed relationship...more importantly with you and just you," I say taking her face in my hands, then giving her a deep passionate kiss.

"Oh, baby...I'm so happy. I could scream with joy!" she cries.

Then both of us starting hooting, hollering...and laughing until tears are streaming down both of our faces. In my case, as much of a release of the monumental grief over the senseless death of the kid.

When we arrive at Marla's condo, I do a quick sweep again for bugs, the master bedroom and bath, along with the balcony. No new surveillance activity, The camera in the bedroom appears unmoved, still tilted harmlessly upward.

I go into the kitchen, uncork a bottle of chilled white wine, and bring it with a fifth of Johnny Walker Red, and some glasses out on the balcony. I then close the patio door behind us. I pour a glass of wine for Marla, then a very generous shot of Johnny for me. I'm going to need it. We've got some pretty heavy *stuff* to work through. We both take a seat on patio chairs next to the glass top patio table, looking out at the Rockies, as the sun slowly creeps out of sight. I take a long pull, then launch into my plan of attack including long term strategy—for survival, financial and physical.

"Okay...timing's pretty critical on when you give notice to Jason. With the death of Trey, probably a little insensitive, even for him, for us to drop my draft on him for the rep agreement...and your notice. Let's give it a week, before we do the deal. Though highly unlikely, I'd like a signed agreement from Jason, before you drop the hammer on him about the sexual abuse issue etcetera. I've got a draft agreement which I'd like you, uh...my legal counsel, to look over for issues of legality, recourse and such. Make your notations, we'll discuss, and I'll prepare the final draft for submission to ACT.

In the meantime, we have three documents to prepare for your separation from ACT. The first is your letter of resignation, for his eyes only, with the caveat that unless he unequivocally releases you, promising not to impede your departure in any way...and that he will prepare a letter of recommendation which you will draft...and that he will not besmirch your reputation in any way whatsoever, or you will be forced to pursue a complaint for sexual abuse in the workplace, etcetera.

You will also indicate in the letter, that should he violate any of the terms of separation, or in any way impugn your reputation, professionally, or personally...or fail to provide a fair and honest reference...or should you meet with any harm, a copy of the letter, along with a comprehensive narrative and factual chronology listing the acts of abuse, will be filed with several parties, including your personal lawyer in a sealed and dated unopened registered letter which has been witnessed and notarized. But as a lawyer, and a woman, I'm sure you don't need any help from me in finding the right buzz words that would typically make a workplace abuser piss his pants.

The second letter will be very short...and direct, a one paragraph formal letter of resignation, for the record, indicating that you are leaving for personal reasons, effective immediately. Period.

The third document will be the draft of the letter of recommendation, listing your position, title, responsibilities, your uh...professional job description, dates of tenure, modestly acknowledging your competency and listing your professional accomplishments etcetera, which he will have transcribed on to corporate ACT letterhead, and sign as C-E-O," I say

"But Mick, what if he won't cooperate. I've worked with Jason long enough to know that he does not intimidate easily. He's one *nasty bastard*, to have as an enemy. What's our back up position?" Marla asks.

"There is no backup. It's basically one big bluff. You just resign...leaving hanging in the air, the implicit threat of the revelation of sexual abuse. Assuming he feels sufficiently at serious jeopardy at the mere possibility of you blowin' the whistle on the abuse claim, whether he openly acknowledges it or not, we don't really need him...or ACT. He'll find out soon enough that you're with me in Tahoe. And I suspect that he will probably then terminate the rep agreement, forthwith...unless he thinks he has more to gain. Maybe with his insufferable arrogance the possibility of buying our confidence, which I would not attempt to disabuse him of...until *we're* ready. But either way, in the meantime, maybe it will give me an opportunity to dig a little deeper.

I sense something very dark...and very sinister about this whole E-C-C thing. That maybe we have only been privy to the agenda just above the surface. I think Jason and Dragon Lady have been clandestinely coordinating some major agenda for quite some time that may entail more than just some seemingly benign political action committee. A much more proactive, and perhaps aggressive uh...political agenda, not to sound like some conspiracy theory nut job. Yea, I know...but right now, not for anyone else's eyes...yet. Which makes us perceived as even a greater threat vector. *No bueno*, baby.

That whole charade that they performed. The E-C-C, just a rah-rah vehicle for co-opting the other greedy corporate oligarchs, probably just an elaborate smokescreen. The other members probably don't even realize that they're just *beards*...useful pawns, to give the E-C-C stature and credibility...and cover for a much larger and sinister agenda.

By then the oligarchs will have capitalized on the irrational paranoia of the so-called radical right fringe elements, *'the useful idiots'* as Lenin called them. The single-issue anti-abortion and Second Amendment nuts, of which Mahoney has street-cred already through his high profile public stance on gun owner's rights with the NRA.

They will have also co-opted the same flag wavin', God-fearin', Bible-thumpin' nice folks who are quietly arming themselves to the teeth for the coming uprising against Big Brother Government...a ready-made private army of a Super-patriots militia for the Second 'Merican Revolution, ultimately

to unwittingly protect the sacred assets of the plutocrats...indivisibly co-mingled with the Second Coming of uh...*you know who*," I say.

"I for one would not for an NY minute doubt that he is capable of such an elaborate cabal. After working for Jason...having witnessed up close and personal, and yes, even a bag lady go-between for his corporate machinations. He makes the eponymous Machiavelli, look like a rank amateur," Marla says.

"Ya know it's more than ironic...that it's 1984. The title of Orwell's chilling dystopic vision for world domination, published in 1949 with the incipient ascension of the military-industrial complex as later warned in President Eisenhower's farewell address of 1961. But, it will not be 1984 that will be the paradigm for establishing the New World Order...not a first...that will come later.

It will be through the gradual yet implacable seduction, then apathy, of the fat and happy, mentally vapid populace through the constant assault of their sensory structures by ubiquitous vulgar, banal media...and sexy technology. Infusing fast-food fame and celebrity as a substitute for true sustenance...and substance. Amazing to me that Aldous Huxley *got it so right*, as long ago as 1932, with his brilliant *magnum opus* Brave New World.

Not if, but when, the people wake up to the fact that they have been duped into believing all this crap about the evils of government *per se*...it will be too late. The US governments will have been replaced by a New World Order...essentially a Plutocracy. After the collapse of the world's leading democracies...one by one, little by little, internationally the political power of other governments will be gradually emasculated and begin to crumble...replaced by a global autocratic oligarchy of the rich and powerful until the plutocrats of the world can take total control of the world economy. Neo-feudalism. Like Mark Twain, said, *History doesn't repeat itself...but it does rhyme*.

Yea...I know a conspiracy theorist's all-you-can-eat-buffet. A paranoid's psychotic playground...making the grassy knoll...U-F-O cover-up shit look puerile in comparison," I rant.

"Mick...sometimes it just seems so hopeless. Like what the hell is the point of even trying to fight it?" Marla says.

"Yea...that's exactly what the so-called ruling class is counting on...fortified by the gradual privatization...replacement of the responsibility of government institutions and social programs by plutocratic philanthropy...neo-feudal *noblesse oblige*, doling out just enough scraps to keep the vassals alive, paying them less and less for even more work. Just enough to survive, so that they can continue to work...to maintain their obscene wealth for them," I say.

"Jesus, Sweetie pie...thanks for that Panglossian picture. I was starting to get *really* depressed," she says playfully punching my arm.

"Yer *velcome*, *schatzi* and here's another ray of sunshine to further

brighten your day. It gets better. This ain't your ordinary airport paperback novel monolithic conspiracy...with easily identified co-conspirators wearing black hats...or white sheets.

There will be no smoking gun...no paper trails. This is a more fundamental *conspiracy of consciousness* which distills down to basic human instinct of self-interest, also known as avarice driven by the hubris of aristocratic entitlement...by insatiable greed. It's dubious at best that any kind of charges of criminal conspiracy could ever stick if indeed they were ever even levied, especially with the stacked Supremes being the final arbiter.

All great civilizations and empires eventually collapse not from external forces, but implode from within...from over-reaching and hubris in the excess, the Mayans, Romans, the Greeks. So this one is even more insidious and will be much more difficult to deal with...if at all."

"Well that's a relief. Just when I was getting ready to open vein...thanks *sweetie pie*," she says.

"Sure...just call me Sunny as in sunshine. But if I can just hang in there for the next several months...maybe I can dive below the surface and get enough documentation, in addition to the conference video, to be able to make a cogent and convincing argument...to expose it before it's too late," I say sensing the need for another pull on my whiskey.

"But Mick...why now? Why this concentrated effort *now* to consolidate media and lay the ground work for this so-called New World Order?" she asks.

"A good and reasonable question. One that will be definitely proffered by any rational thinking skeptic about the legitimacy of the premise of this massive cabal. The biggest motivating causation for the increased sense of urgency is three-fold. The first, the recognition of peak oil, the supply of petroleum fossil fuel as being an exhaustible, finite resource.

The second and more powerful motivation...the realization that climate change, the so-called green house effect...is real and more profoundly, inexorable. That the best mankind can hope for is to slow it down, and perhaps if we're lucky to mitigate the calamitous effects of it.

The Masters of the Universe...the Chess masters, that caused this whole environmental existential crisis with their mentality of plunderous greed also are the one's who are always looking at the *whole* board...*the big pict-ya*. They didn't rise to economic hegemony through luck or accident. These are not just the smartest guys in *the* room...but *any* room...*anywhere*. While everyone is looking maybe 5 moves ahead...they're 10 moves out.

And even as smart and as rich as they are...they can see *no way* out of this deadly chess match with *Madame Nature*? It's Check-mate, baby...for life on the planet, as we know it. So they have already begun the adaptive phase of preparing for the eventual collapse of society. Sadly the descent into chaos and positioning themselves to not only survive but to flourish. Every crisis always

presents opportunity for the astute, bold and willing and in the good old American entrepreneurial tradition...like Jason said in his little Galt pastiche, *never; ever...let a serious crisis to go to waste. This crisis will provide the opportunity for us, the ruling class to do things that we could not before.*

The third, is the same three primary prerequisites for evaluating whether any crime was or is in the process of being committed, including the subject one. What you lawyers call *mens rea*...literally *guilty mind* or criminal intent. Holding a Royal flush, the Royalty likes their odds. With all the resultant chaos and civil unrest, they're betting that even if prosecuted by an politically emasculated D-O-J, it would be a very low priority of what's left of law and order.

The political landscape may never be more conducive than it is right now, with the three branches of government in lock-step with a radical ideological sense of the priority and primacy of capitalism. They can and will justify their criminal intent, with the notion that democracy *must* serve this deistic entity of Capitalism...in direct opposition to the democratic ideals the country was *theoretically* founded on. These same hypocrites when challenged to defend their patently self-serving actions? Ha! In their greedy little minds, they're acting magnanimously...for the *Greater Good*, by *doing the thinking for the poor ignorant unwashed masses that don't know what the hell is good for them.*

So...the motive is already clear. The opportunity and more prominently, the means, with *acting* prez Reagan in the White House, is here and now, as it has never been before. And unless they seize the opportunity, *now*...they may never get another chance. More M-B-A platitudinous *carpe diem* bullshit," I rant.

"Mick...if they do let you penetrate the inner-circle...do you think they would ever let you leave, or live if you tried?" Marla says.

"Probably not...so we have to be *not just smart*...but *smarter*. If Jason's always 10 moves ahead on the board we have to be 20 moves...just to stay ahead. And we need to find a way to make it *very* costly for them, professionally...and personally, because ultimately that's the only way to get their attention. Not if, but *when*, they try to take us down," I say.

"*Lordy*...you *sho'* know how to sweet talk a gal," Marla says downing her glass of wine, pouring herself another.

"Mickey, I wish the hell I had never even met Jason Mahoney. I wish that you and I could just run away to some distant island and live out our lives in peace...but I know *you* could never do that...that you can't run away from this. Not sure why...maybe someday you can tell me. But...I'm with you Mickey. As long as *we're together*, I think I can endure just about anything," she says hugging me tightly.

"Thanks baby...but this conversation prompts a very important issue for the *we* part of this. This is my fight. I can not reasonably expect you to be willing to join the cause...just because you love me. There also has to be a deep

and independent personal conviction on your part for your reasons to participate. Otherwise, you and I, *the we*...won't survive this. I'm not going to lie to you. We're going to get dirty. It will get ugly...very ugly, and mean and nasty before it gets better...if ever. So I want you to think about it very carefully before you agree to enlist in *l'appel à la guerre*...the call to war," I say.

"Mickey...I guess I've always felt some deep sense of personal betrayal...to myself for essentially selling out to *the man*...ACT Inc. and literally, Jason Mahoney. Because I was blindly ambitious, partly because of my *august* family origins, I had something to prove to my over-achiever-father, my hyper-ambitious Stanford college chums...and myself. I sold out. Yea, that's right...*sold out big-time* and you can't convince me otherwise," she says.

"Okay, Marla...if you say so," I say, taking another pull off my Johnny.

"Jeez...but I didn't say you couldn't *at least try* to convince me otherwise," she says slapping me good-naturedly.

"Oops...sorry. Missed my cue on that one. How's this? *AwW gee honeybunch...don't be so hard on yourself, sweetie pie*. But seriously Marla...we all sellout at one time...in one form or another most especially me or would I be here working for ACT as well? So, who the hell am I to judge anybody? The central issue for me at least, is *the now*...that you and I...that the *we* get it, and *our* willingness to do something about it," I say taking her hand in mine.

"Gee...*honeybunch*, thanks...I think? But yea...hearing you talk so passionately about how you feel stirs me to think this may also be my chance for some form of personal atonement...*to do the right thing*. Like that poor kid, Trey Mahoney. I went through a *living hell* not being forthcoming with you about Jason. I damn near had a nervous breakdown, thinking that if you ever found out...I'd lose you.

Just as you have told me that you are ready for the uh...*C* word...with me, I'm ready to commit to the cause...and the *Koz*. *I'm all in*, Mick," she says tearing up squeezing my hand.

"Good. That's what I needed to hear. Marly, you remarked earlier about where does my sense of outrage come from? Some day...maybe I will tell you about some dear friends of mine who were sacrificed on the altar of greed. That as sure as *shit* flows downhill, massive inhumanity and human misery *always* flows from the pure pursuit of acquisitiveness and avarice that precedes it. Byron Brawley, Charles Washington...and of course, now Trey Mahoney, shall not have died for nuthin'...*for trying to do the right thing*. I think it's time you met Hawk Shapiro," I say.

"So okay...I want to hear about that...*all of it*. But for now...what's the plan, *mon capitaine*?" she says.

"Okay. Both of us have enough asset to keep us going comfortably, until I can restart my business, and we can start up your PR firm. My guess is

that we can have them up and running in less than 6 months, after which I would terminate, if one even exists, the agreement with E-C-C, as I do not want to have anything further to do with C-E-O S-O-B, J. Murdoch Mahoney, professionally or personally. *Ever,*" I say downing the glass of whiskey, then pouring myself another.

- Chapter 28 -

It takes me about month after returning to Lake Tahoe, to conclude my business as an employee for ACT. Pauly spends quite a bit of time in Tahoe finishing up, getting ready to collapse the office and staffing in Tahoe. I begin to notice an uncharacteristic seriousness and lack of spontaneity...seldom cracking wise...or laughing at my likewise mordant sense of humor. The normally easy flowing conversation and kidding is now strained and all business. Marla also senses his estrangement with her. Something's up. I have no idea what Jason Mahoney may have told VP Paul Berman, but I'm starting to get the vibe that Pauly is conflicted. Time will tell.

I forward the draft of the agreement for representation over to Jason Mahoney, through Pauly. He reviews cursorily, then looks up at me, "Mick...are you sure you and Marla know what the hell you're doin'?"

"Sure Pauly...hey man, what's up with you? You seem distant and really uptight since that weekend of the conference. Is there something goin' on that I should know about?" I ask

"Yea...I know, Mick, I know. I uh...never mind," he says. It's obvious that something's eating at him.

"Hey, ain't none of my business, but is everything okay at home...with Joanie and kids? It's been pretty intense the last several weeks...with all the changes at ACT, and the E-C-C. You seem really stressed out, man. Pauly after work, let's go have a few cocktails...I'll buy," I say.

"Mick...I really can't. I'm leavin' tomorrow morning for Denver, and I..." he says.

"Come on, Pauly...it won't kill ya to have a cocktail with a pal," I say smiling and punching his shoulder good-naturedly, which causes him to grimace and almost drop to one knee. Hmm.

"Okay, Mick...okay...after work," he says coolly.

"Carlos Murphy's...at six," I say.

"Okay...right," Pauly says distractedly.

I show up at Carlos Murphy's at six, to find big Rhino Rudalski holding up the bar.

I slide on to a bar stool next to Rhino slapping him on his enormously broad back...like smacking an old oak tree. He spins on his bar stool, turns and engulfs my outstretched hand, pumping it causing my whole body to rock back and forth on my stool. *The man-child has no idea how strong he is.*

"Hey, Mickey...good to see ya, man...been a while. Whattya drinkin' pally?" he asks.

"Johnny Walker Red...over...a double," I say which the bartender overhears, and places in front of me. I take a long pull, then look at Rhino.

"So...howya been big boy? Now that ACT's going to collapse this corporate operation in Tahoe, where ya headed?" I ask.

"Not bad. Not good...honestly Mickey, been better. For the past several months I've had these killer headaches, like migraines. Can't sleep...been real forgetful lately...and *very* agitated and angry. Becky broke up with me...said I was beginning to scare her big time with my moods *etcetera*," Rhino says seemingly in a rare melancholy mood.

"Did you see a doctor about it?" I ask.

"Nah. I've had the headaches, on and off since I left the NFL...but this time is different, man. They're much more frequent, hurt like hell man. I'm poppin' pain killers like candy. Chatting with some of my ol' teammates, several got similar issues...some of them diagnosed with dementia. *Fuck me*, man...they're only in their 40s. Anyway, there's a rumor...fairly reliable sources inside and outside of ACT of a big reorganization comin'...at the *very* top corporate level. No particulars yet. Not even sure if I'll have a job. All the execs and mid-management cubicle jockeys are pissin' their pants." Rhino says somberly.

About 6:30 Pauly wanders in, and wordlessly takes a seat at the stool next to me. Rhino and Pauly exchange hellos, handshakes and small talk. Then Pauly says, "Hey Rhino...will you excuse Mick and I...we've got a few things to talk about before I have to leave town for Denver tomorrow."

"Sure...no problem. Good seeing both of ya," a preoccupied, uncharacteristically serious Rhino distractedly says.

Pauly and I adjourn to a table, where he calls the waitress over, and orders a Jack Daniels over.

"Okay...Pauly, let's cut to the chase, man. Frankly, you've been acting a little strange of late...not just toward me but Marla has noticed it. Why don't you tell me what the hell's going on," I say taking a sip of my cocktail. Pauly's Jack Daniels arrives. He takes a long pull, then turns to face me. His eyes filled with intensity...and uncertainty.

"Pauly...what did you mean by *am I and Marla sure of what we're doing*?" I ask.

"Mick...I'm really in a tough situation here, man. I almost didn't come this evening. I actually drove by the place...like twice. Then the last minute turned around. I figured I owed you that," he says.

"Pauly...I consider you a good friend. There's nothing that you could say that would change that...so just tell it like it is, okay?" I say.

"Okay Mick. Okay," he says downing his drink, then raising it to the waitress for another. "What I'm about to tell you, if it's leaked that I told you, would get me fired in a New York minute...or worse. And it's the *worse* that scares...no terrifies me the most. Not just for me...but for you and Marly," he

says.

"You had me with *terrifies*. Go ahead...just can't wait to..." I say smiling.

"*Listen to me Mick!*" he says slamming his hand down on the table, causing the silverware to bounce, ringing out like some kind of ominous warning call causing some anxious side-glances from other tables, "pay attention, *goddammit!* And take what I am about to say to you very, *very* seriously. Okay? Or do so, not just at your own peril...but think of Marla," staring at me with an intensity in his eyes that I have never seen before from the usually sardonic, good-natured Pauly.

"Okay, Pauly...shoot," I say, soberly.

"There is going to be an announcement maybe as early as next month, that ACT and World Media have merged. Ol' Reggie Meade will be gone...the Board of Directors lead by Alexandra will have given him his professional...and personal walking papers. A corporate...*hasta la vista*, baby. The new company will be ACT World Media...with the Dragon Lady C-E-O and Jason Mahoney, President. It's the next logical move on the big chess board...in what will be many, toward the eventual and complete domination of market share of the media landscape in major markets...both content and delivery," Pauly says.

"Ah...so a *check* move. Vertical integration, controlling the delivery and distribution mechanisms...the messenger. Then gradually by acquiring control of most mainstream content providers," I say.

"Yea, something like that. Hey Mick, I'm sorry man, but I can't allow myself to be distracted by *peripheral* issues...like world domination," he says sardonically "...not my call...not my job description and ultimately not my worry. This is strictly business for me...*it has to be*."

So anyway...there will be like a dramatic restructuring of the company's labor force with lots of consolidation of management. Initial estimates are about a 20-30 % reduction in total workforce or between 15 to 20 thousand layoffs. Not by attrition...but effective essentially immediately.

It will be ugly. It's important that no one in either company knows this. It could cause a panic...a stampede for the door and maybe have an adverse effect on the stock price. After the smoke clears, the then juggernaut ACT World Media, will launch a hostile take-over bid of several of the more vulnerable major motion picture and TV production studios, like Disney, NBC etcetera...even print like the Wall Street Journal, maybe the Washington Post or even the New York Times. Giving them complete vertical and horizontal integration...domination in the marketplace, assuming the D-O-J doesn't intervene. But we have if from *very reliable, inside sources* that they won't. And I would strongly advise you to not to look into it...or even *ask how* or *why*.

We're talkin' billions with a capital *B* riding on this deal...and Jason has already made it very clear. *Nothing*...and *no one* is going to be allowed to

jeopardize his *magnum opus mega-deal*. By *whatever means necessary*," he says with an ominous tone.

"Okay. Got it...so no Christmas card from Captain Ahab this year? But seriously folks, how might this effect me...and Marla?" I ask.

"Jason now takes seriously that you and Marla have become a serious item. It took a while for his monstrous ego to get his head around the reality that he lost control of one of his trusted soldiers. He considers you a *corrupting and corrosive influence* on Marla...that she's left the rez...and that her priorities have become rearranged. *Skewed* is the term Jason used. She can no longer be trusted to do what's best for company...and of course, for Jason," he says.

"One and the same. *Corrupting*, and my fav, *corrosive influence*? Hilarious...especially coming from the good Captain, the highest compliment possible. And the offer for the job repping the E-C-C?" I ask.

"*Adios* baby. Gone. Jason's really pissed that you didn't take it...unhesitatingly *as offered*...when it was offered. He thinks you tried to manipulate him, hold him off until you thought you could take advantage of your insider knowledge...and use it against him, even blackmail. He now sees you as an existential threat vector, the potential to do him grave harm. He no longer trusts you...or by association, Marla. He's very uh...*unhappy* about how much you and Marla know about too many things including the E-C-C...and the possible damage you and or Marla could inflict...potentially disrupting the merger.

If Jason's vision, as articulated at the conference, got leaked to the press, public outcry from some liberal watchdog N-G-Os, just might force the D-O-J's hand to intervene and take a long hard look at potential anti-trust merger oligopoly ramifications. Could blow the whole deal *if* the numbers on high market-shares of the respective media in major markets of the proposed merger entity, saw the light of day.

He never had any intention of allowing you to work as a contract outsource. Because, he would have lost exclusive control of you. You'd no longer be his...M-F and *not Mr Fixit*. Loyalty and control issues...as you know, something Jace does not suffer well. But he never let on. He wanted to stall you to get the business wrapped up here, before you left. And then he intended to waltz you along until the merger was a done deal...then blow you off," Pauly says.

"Not surprised. Frankly at the conference, I sensed a foreshadow of the merger...personal...and corporate *with the Alex and Jace show*. What about Marla? How does she fit into this new landscape?" I ask.

"That one is a little more complicated. What I'm about to tell you must be in *strict confidence* okay? The consequences of it being leaked...*far more dangerous* than losing one's job...etcetera. Get my drift, pal?

Marla knows some things that *only* she, Jason and I know. How ACT

got some of our cable system franchise deals got done...by greasing some of the players in the local government. She and I actually have first-hand...like bag-man knowledge. Probably some criminal prosecution exposure there...corporate and personal," Pauly says, now starting to sprout beads of sweat on his forehead.

"Dangerous *how*?" I ask.

"Mick, Marla has confided in me how much you mean to her...and from what I can see, it appears to be reciprocal. If I were you, I'd start thinking about how to get Marla outta ACT...sooner rather than later. I can't say anymore pal. I know better than *anybody* what Jason Mahoney is capable of...and trust me you do not want to know first hand. My advice as a friend to both of you...*get the fuck outta Dodge*...make that Denver ASAP. Got it? Okay I've already said *way more* than I should've. I really *have to go* now," he says.

"One last thing. Pauly how do you fit into all of this?" I ask.

"Mickey...I gotta wife and three little kids. Because you and Marla have no such obligations I can't expect you to understand why I feel I have to see this through with ACT. I started with nothing. Jason took me in and he's been very generous to me and my family. I'm not proud of some of the things I've done...some serious *shit*, but I've always been able to rationalize it because I wanted my kids to have the opportunity I never had growin' up...to go to the best schools and colleges...to have a shot at a good life, without having to *sacrifice their soul*, like their old man," he says

"Thanks for the timely heads up. If I hadn't asked you to meet me tonight, when were you going to tell me all this...just as Captain Ahab was about to make Marly and I walk the plank? What I don't understand is this. Pauly you're one of the smartest guys I know. You've got everything working for ya...you could go anywhere. Any Fortune 500 would get into a bidding war to steal you away from ACT. Why, man...with all your career options, stock and big salary. Why did you allow yourself to be a such a sell-out? My *gawd*, man with your talents you could even do your own start-up," I say.

"Mick...believe me when I tell ya, that I've laid away nights...just staring at the ceiling trying to figure out how and when it all went wrong...and how to get the *hell out* while I still have a scintilla of dignity...and self-respect.

But...once you've a made that Faustian bargain, once you've turned *that* corner, ain't no turning back, man. Just like Marla...I know *too damn* much. If some of the things I've done for Jason Mahoney ever came to light, I could be staring at some pretty long, hard time. Things that even Marla doesn't know about...and you couldn't even *begin* to imagine.

My only hope of getting away from Jason, is to ensure this deal gets done. Then with all the reorganization, my position as factotum for C-E-O J. Murdoch Mahoney, will no longer be necessary.

Jason will start phasing out his operational responsibilities...handing them off to the newly anointed C-E-O, Alexandra Kwan. And they don't call

her AK47 for nuthin'. Then, like many others, for the *financial viability of the company, recognizing our primary responsibility to the shareholders, regrettably*, after over 10 years of doing the heavy lifting...and dirty work for Jason Mahoney, I too will have to be officially downsized...*irrelevant*. Like everyone else in his twisted life, " Pauly says bitterly.

"Pauly, I'm sorry man...but you're better than that. You're twice the man that Jason Mahoney could ever even hope to be...professionally...and as a human being. I know you give a *shit* about other priorities...like your family. You're a good and decent man, Pauly. I saw how you looked at those kids at the telethon in Tahoe to raise money just so they could *have the opportunity* to play a sport that they loved...to test themselves. I got that.

Jason couldn't care less about anyone but himself...*he lives only for deals*. To him everything and everyone...including his family are assets...chattels. He's a *sociopathic asshole*, who couldn't even get past the notion that his own kid was gay. When Trey reached out to him...he basically disowned him...*downsized* him. It devastated the kid.

Why do you think the kid basically committed *suicide by cop* that day? He had no intention of hurting *anybody*...but his old man...and himself. He knew he wasn't going to come out of it alive. But, it was going to be payback...to tell the whole world that the brilliant entrepreneur, the Fortune 500 multimillionaire, wasn't as perfect as he would have you believe, and that he had a homosexual for a son. In the end, sadly the kid never got his chance to publicly *come-out...to do the right thing*, to talk about the bullying, the beating and discrimination.

Like most things, Jason managed to preempt and micro-manage that disclosure. It's not too late Pauly...you me and Marly...we could do something together, something important, maybe something meaningful...and good," I say

"Mickey...it may not be too late for you and Marla...but it is for me," he says almost wistfully.

"Really? And how's that Pauly? It's never too late man, to at least *try* to do the right thing...even a 16 year old Trey saw that," I say, immediately not liking the far too sanctimonious tone of my own words.

"Yea...right. And just how'd that work out for the kid?" he says with biting sarcasm, obviously stung by my indictment of his character.

"Pauly...that's not worthy of you, man. There's something else going on with you, man...level with me," I say.

There's a long pause as Pauly unflinchingly stares through me, his tearing eyes penetrating my very soul.

"I'm a dead man...*walkin'*," Pauly whispers.

"*What?* What *the hell* are you talkin' about, man?"

"Mick...the tests are conclusive. *CLL*...Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia. *Fuck me*, man...42 years old...in the best shape of my life. How long I might have depends on how aggressive it is, but they're sayin' stage

four...maybe 6 months, a year if I'm lucky. *Ha! If I'm lucky*, the Doc says. One big *fuck-over*...a karmic gotcha, probably for all nasty shit I've done for ACT...and Jason Mahoney. So...frankly, I just don't have the *fuck-ing* time to be *fuck-ing* sick right now! I need to get as much asset in the bank, stock etcetera as possible. I need the big payday of this merger deal Mick, the increase in my stock value alone. For Joanie and the kids...so when the final curtain drops on my Act III, pun intended, my exit from ACT, etcetera, I'll go knowing my family will never have to worry or want...for anything," Pauly says.

"Jesus...I'm so sorry Pauly. *Goddammit!* Do you mind if I ask...how did Joanie take this? And how long have you known?" I ask.

"I was diagnosed about 6 months ago. It started with me getting really fatigued. Weight loss. Cold sweats...and then some swelling and tenderness of my glands...then big time near my gut. So I go see the Doc, ya know, a routine kinda deal. Fix me up Doc, make with some pills *pronto*...then get me back in coach for the final quarter of the Superbowl of mergers. *Ha!*" Pauly says.

"Jesus Pauly...isn't there *anything* that can be done?" I say

"Nope...stage four means like two percent survival rate. Joanie doesn't even know yet. Man...if she did, she'd have pressured me big time...to quit ACT like *right now*...to spend whatever time I have left with her and the kids. That's also in confidence, okay? So ya see, man...I don't *really* have much *choice*, or much *time* here. If I can just get through this merger. Okay? Gotta go," he says as he stands up to leave. I also stand up open my arms, and give Pauly a big hug and slap on his back.

"*God-dammit!* Man, I'm just heartsick hearing this, Pauly. Okay, man. Just remember...anything you need, anything at all...I've got your back. And if...when this health thing goes South, Marly and I will be there to make *damn* sure that Joanie and the kids get through it okay. That's a promise. Love ya, man," I say hugging him tightly, also tearing up.

"Thank you, Mickey...that *really* means a lot to me. I love you too, man. And take care of Marla...she's one in a million. See ya, pal," he says with a warm smile of appreciation.

He stands, pivots like soldier about to go into battle, to do his duty, and with his head held high, marches out the door, smiling and waiving jovially to Rhino on the way out. A real gamer.

Hotel California. You can check out any time you like...but you can never leave...not ever.

- Chapter 29 -

"Marla, there's a recent development here that may impact our exit strategy from ACT," I say on the phone after my meeting with VP Paul Berman in Lake Tahoe.

"Okay...what's goin' on?" she says.

"What I'm about to tell ya...must remain in strict confidence. If it gets out that Pauly confided in me, it could rain down serious retribution on him...and not just getting fired. I found out a few things from Pauly that might have a profound effect on how we proceed with Jason Mahoney. And I found out why Pauly's been acting so strangely. Marla, he's dying...of cancer...maybe 6 months to a year to live," I say.

"Oh...Mickey, how terribly sad. Pauly dying...the guy's the picture of health. He's only forty-something. I'm in shock...poor Joanie...and the kids. My gawd, Pauly and I have been through so much together with ACT. He was the only one I ever really felt like I could trust...he's like a brother to me," Marla says starting to sob.

"Yea...I'm still in shock myself. I promised him that you and I would be there for Joanie and kids...when the time came," I say.

"Oh of course Mick. Joanie and I are really close...like sisters. I'm like an aunt to their children. When I get off, I should call Joanie right away...let her know that I'm here for her," she says.

"No Marla! *Do not* call Joanie. Pauly hasn't told her yet...and Jason doesn't know either, so don't let on that you know. Okay?" I say.

"My gawd...poor Joanie!" she says.

"There's nothing we can do about any of that. And in light of Pauly's recent revelations...some, very unsettling, what we *really* need to talk about right now, is how to get you outta ACT...*ASAP!*" I say.

I outline the merger of ACT with World Media for Marla along with the timetable for the resultant staff reductions. I inform her that both she and Pauly will be downsized, and that Pauly is going to ride it out all the way out to the end, so he can accumulate as much asset as he can with increased stock value and anticipated severance pay for his family. Also, to keep his company health and life insurance intact.

"I think Pauly's planning on buying as much ACT stock on the open market as he can, in small increments over the next month, so as not to attract attention before the merger. Under the circumstances, I don't think he's concerned about prosecution for insider trading. Figures he'll probably be ten-toes-up, by the time the S-E-C puts it together. With the current cast of characters, if ever," I say, leaving out the dark parts about the potential for nasty reprisals against us from Jason Mahoney.

"Normally a risky proposition...but yea, I get it. Pretty hard to put a dead man in jail," she says.

"Agreed. So here's the question I have for you. If you don't resign, and get downsized, ACT will probably give you a generous severance package. My guess is that you'd have to stick around there for at least another two months...maybe longer. It is strictly your decision...but I think you should consider it. Take some time to think it over...you don't have to decide right now. If Pauly's right, there should be a big bump in the ACT stock value, as soon as the merger is announced. He also thinks that the downsizing for corporate management will happen very soon after the merger is a done deal. But this may or may not change our strategy about how to approach Jason depending on what you decide," I say.

"Oh Mick...I'm just not sure if I can pull this off...staying here...knowing about Pauly and the merger, acting like business as usual," she says.

"Well...again it's your call, baby. You've got a lot invested with ACT," I say.

"Oh screw the severance package. And if I retain the stock in ACT after resigning. And if I don't liquidate it until after the merger I can take advantage of the lift from the merger. I'm just so weary after all these years of trying desperately to suppress my self-loathing for my behavior...for the things I've done for...and with Jason Mahoney.

It's time for a change, Mickey. I just want out. I want to be with you...I want us to have a life. So I don't have to think about it anymore. After what you told me about Pauly...dying so young, really focuses the mind on how fragile life is. With news like this, how your priorities can change overnight when you realize how vulnerable you are to the vagaries of life...that you're not invincible.

Whatever time you and I may have left, I want to spend with you Mickey...and live each day with you as if each day may be our last. I love you Mickey. So...I guess I'm saying that I think we should proceed as planned...that I should resign, sooner rather than later. But, what do you think?" she says.

"And I love you too, baby. Yea...each day as if it may be our last. Frankly, I'm glad to hear that you're ready to move on. But I had to make sure you knew all moves available on the board...options. And that you were absolutely positive about how you wanted to proceed. Marly, any idea about how much vacation and comp time you have accumulated?" I ask.

"My guess is about five weeks...maybe six total with everything. Why? What are you thinking?" she says.

"Have you got the drafts of the three documents for your separation done yet?"

"Yea...If we proceed as planned, I think they're right there. I'll fax them out to you tomorrow...first thing," she says.

"Okay...assuming it's a go, here's the tentative timetable. To keep from drawing suspicion, I will formally submit my contract outsource proposal...for the repping position right away. Pauly says, there ain't a chance in hell he'll accept the terms. I'll make them non-negotiable...so it'll be easy for him to say no. He'll waltz me as long as he can before the merger. Working backwards from say the six weeks of vacation etcetera, you would tender your resignation, and the veiled threat of exposing, no pun intended, the sexual harassment in the work place claim, right after he receives my proposal. I'm confident he won't personally acknowledge anything other than your short succinct formal resignation letter. He'll have the personnel department draw up the separation papers including stock ownership and final paycheck along with the COBRA health and life insurance documents. Just like you were a janitor giving notice," I say

Yea...a janitor. An apt comparison...cleaning up everyone else's shit. I think I'd rather say...very, very personal reasons, you bastard! So what would be the effective date of separation from ACT?" she says.

"Wouldn't be surprised if he'll want to have an exit interview with you, just so he can eyeball you and get a read on how serious you are about the sexual abuse threat. Maybe try one last shot at some of his mind-fucking games. I think you should do it...again, to not draw any undue suspicion. Keep it short and not-so-sweet...and get the hell outta there ASAP. If he presses you, your verbal only reasons for leaving so abruptly might me something like *you are no longer able to resist uh...my...irrepressible charms,*" I say

"So give my overloaded gourd a date," she says.

"Assuming six weeks...your effective termination date could be as early as next week. Pretty much as soon as you can pack and be ready to hit the road," I say.

"Oh gawd...Mickey that sounds so wonderful! But what about all my clothes and stuff here at the condo?" she says.

"Whattya got?" I ask.

"The condo and all the furniture...and even my Audi, is all property of ACT. So all I really have is my clothes, lots of clothes...and some personal stuff...photographs. There are some family antiques, heirlooms and lamps...but that's it. It would all fit in a small like U-haul van," she says.

"Okay...not a problem. I'll fly in...rent a small U-haul and drive us back to Tahoe, stopping by Seattle to see an old friend. The Hawkster...maybe spend a few days in the Seattle area, and some time with my ol' pal, who I think it's about time you met.

It'll break up the drive nicely. We'll rent a car, see the Seattle area, then take a drive up to world-class Vancouver B-C, for nice little pre-honeymoon in a classic old hotel, to hold over us until we maybe can find a preacher in Tahoe?" I ask.

"Oh...Mickey? Are you proposing...like marriage? Like a Nick and

Nora Charles Thin Man kinda deal?" she cries.

"Yea...but mit out the too cutsey yap-yap dog Asta," I say.

"Oh Mickey...yes! And an oh yea, baby to Le Monsieur! I'm assuming that he's also up for the uh...union?"

"A reasonably safe assumption...my best man," I say.

"But...isn't the best man, usually the ring bearer for the groom?"

Mara asks.

"Of course...that's why it's probably better if it's a very private ceremony," I say.

"Oh Mickey! You...both of you, have made me, and the girls, very happy ladies!" Marla cries.

"Yeap...it's our Tahoe Wedding Special...two-fer-one," I say.

- Chapter 30 -

As planned, a few days later, I formally submit my outsource contract proposal through Paul Berman, not expecting any kind of an immediate response or even acknowledgment from Jason Mahoney. I am not disappointed.

Soon thereafter, Marla tenders her two letters of separation in a sealed envelope marked *personal and confidential* through Rebecca Reeves, Mahoney's personal secretary, and the brief and succinct, formal letter of resignation with an immediate effective date, through the proper channels of the Human Resources Department.

Not surprisingly Jason, by phone, does request an exit interview with Marla, *just for old times...and I hope we can remain friends* dinner, which she declines but agrees to meet him in his office.

I call her on her mobile phone, to check on her, after her meeting with Jason Mahoney.

"Hi babe...so how'd the meeting go with Captain Ahab?" I ask.

"He wanted to meet for drinks...and dinner...maybe one last roll in the hay. I told him that I didn't have time, because I was busy packing. Don't ask me how...but I just feel that somehow he knows about my move to Tahoe with you and a whole lot more. The shit-eatin' smug grin of his. What a piece of work. But, he didn't let on...just very, very creepy," she says.

"Yea...it wouldn't surprise me if that *son-of-bitch* found some way to monitor our phone conversations. It would have to be a line tap on my end. Probably interested in who I'm talking to other than you, as well. Shoulda thought of that one...*dammit*. Nothin' we can do about that now. But just to be on the safe side...from now on, I'll call you from another number...from a random pay phone, each time different. So let's hang up and I'll call ya back in about a half an hour. I want to hear more about the meeting...and work out the details for your move. Okay?" I say.

"Okay, baby...talk soon," she says.

The Black Mamba, just smiles when he hears Mick say, *"it would have to be a line tap on my end."*

"Yea...right...go find a pay phone pal," El Negrito muses, adjusting the earpiece from the earphone jack from the scanner, while sitting in his black Chevy totally-equipped Suburban so he can literally camp there, if need be, innocuously parked in the visitor parking by the front gate of the condo complex. Since the calls are made typically about the same time in the evening, it's no big deal to position himself to monitor the calls each evening until Marla vacates the condo...which will be very soon.

But the deadly Black Mamba snake is very patient. Silently laying in wait for hours...in the shadows, sometimes in total darkness just waiting for its unsuspecting prey to get complacent or careless...just for an instant. That's all the Mamba needs...to strike...to kill.

Even though mobile cell phone technology is relatively new, only since about 1983 in the U.S. markets, the *sub-Rosa* pros, as always are way ahead of the curve on being able to monitor and eavesdrop on communications.

Because it was initially an unencrypted analog RF, radio frequency signal, with a portable battery operated scanner from Radio Shack, if you know what frequency range to monitor, it's even easier to eavesdrop, than physically planting a bug on a land line...with virtually no risk of detection.

The same scanner technology has been used for years, by unscrupulous *cappers* for ambulance-chaser-attorneys, to monitor police calls to get to the accident scene to sign up prospective plaintiffs who may be injured.

I hang-up my land line office phone...a desk top DTMF push button model. I unscrew both the mouth-piece and the ear-piece of the receiver handle, and carefully inspect them to insure there is no bug. I check all the phones including the one in my bedroom and the kitchen. I then do a sweep of the house for bugs. All clean.

I then drive down to the bottom of the hill, find a pay phone at Roundhill Village Shopping center, and call Marla back.

"Hey babe. Okay, did a sweep for bugs. Nothing. Couldn't find anything obvious on my phones...doesn't mean it's not being monitored. So from now on I'll be callin' from a different pay phone each time. So tell me about the meeting with Jason," I say.

"Well he was predictably charming, in his own inimitable slimy way. Full of platitudes and gushing with faux appreciation for my achievements. You will be missed...blah...blah...blah. Won't you reconsider? More...blah...blah...blah. Rest assured that you will receive great references from ACT, and from none other than Lord J. Murdoch Mahoney personally, etcetera," she says.

"Anything about the merger...or your letter about the sexual harassment caveat" I ask.

"Quite a performance...probably for the rolling cameras. He knew that I wouldn't agree to meet him for dinner. More of his cutsey mind-fucking games to catch me off-guard. Not one word about the merger. And not one word about the sexual harassment letter. Then when I rise to leave, he walks over to me to give me a farewell hug, which I return.

When he draws back, his shark eyes are no longer smiling when he says with a chilling calm, holding me firmly by my shoulders at arms length with both hands, "And just in case it may have slipped your mind, my dear

Marla...perhaps distracted by the joyful planning for the impending uh...union with your dear Mick, I hope that I need not remind you that as a condition of your employment that you had signed a very strict...very legal...and very enforceable non-disclosure agreement with ACT, with severe liquidated damages stipulated of a minimum of \$200,000 dollars, per occurrence. Are we clear on that, Marla?" he says giving me a single violent shake of my shoulders, like an ominous exclamation point.

Then he says coldly, 'I think you know the way out'. He turns, and walks back to his window and just stares out at the view without saying another word. Mick I think somehow he knows we're getting married. I haven't told anybody! Period. And if he knows that...probably a lot more!" she cries.

"Yea...okay. Marly I want you out of there...ASAP! Are you packed and ready to go?" I ask.

"Yes, Mick...everything is boxed. I could leave tomorrow...tonight if I could. Oh Mick...I'm so scared. You didn't see his eyes. My gawd...how could I have...even. All these years. What the hell was I thinking?" she says starting to quietly sob.

"Okay Marly...just hang in there...and stay calm. I'm sure you'll be okay there until I can get there. But just to be on the safe side, make sure all your windows and the door is locked. Because Jason has a key to the condo, brace a chair and some boxes against the front door. Sleep in the bug-free master bedroom with a chair braced against the door, and make sure the cell phone is totally charged, for tomorrow. Okay? I'll catch the first plane out for Denver tomorrow morning. By the time I pick up the U-haul truck and get out to your place, it will probably be around 2 PM local time. I'll call you from the U-haul when I'm leaving.

Stay there. Don't go anywhere. And keep the door locked until I arrive. Let nobody...I repeat *nobody* in, but me. I don't care if it's an emergency...a fire, or whatever. The password will be the *full* name of *Monsieur* Wilson...don't say it out loud right now. Okay baby?" I say.

"Okay, Mickey...got it. I love you. See you soon. Bye," she says.

"Bye baby. See you soon...and don't forget that I love you. Everything's going to be just fine...try to get some sleep. And Marla? My best to the twins...Lily and Rose," I say.

"Sorry? Who?" she asks quizzically.

"The girls, after the flowers...just my little mnemonic for the identical twins. Lily for left...and Rose for right, *Ciao* for now."

Click.

- Chapter 31 -

"Marly...everything okay? Get any sleep last night?" I ask

"I got a few hours...no incidents. Very quiet here last night. Where are you?" she asks.

"I am at the U-haul rental, took a cab from the airport. Just leaving now...should be there about 1:30. You ready to go baby?" I ask.

"I was ready like a year ago. Yea...I'm packed and can't wait to get the hell outta here. Please be careful Mick. I'm still nervous after my meeting with Jason. Honestly, I don't know what the hell he's capable of. Okay?" she says.

"Okay babe. I'll buzz you at the intercom. See ya soon. Remember do not even open the door. Let no one in including me, without the password," I say.

"Mick, I'm afraid I have some really bad news for you. Pauly just told me that Richard Rudalski is dead. He was facing jail time for spousal abuse with his girlfriend. It took three cops to restrain him. The day before he was to be sentenced, he blew his brains out with a shotgun in a car. Left a note, saying he just couldn't handle the headaches anymore. The autopsy showed massive traumatic brain injury...probably from all those years in the NFL. I'm so sorry Mick."

"Goddammit! Rhino, dead? Okay, can't think about that now."

By 1:20 I'm at the kiosk intercom of the complex.

"Yes? Who is it?" she asks.

"It's me, Mick," I say somberly, still grieving Rhino's lousy exit.

The gate slowly slides open. As I drive through, I catch a glimpse in the side view mirror a portion of another vehicle behind me, a black vehicle, so close that I can not make out the driver or the make or model of the vehicle. He's probably pulled up so close, because it's a common courtesy to allow other tenants to pass through close behind, to not have to wait for the gate to close. I double park in front of her unit, open the side sliding door of the small enclosed U-haul rental truck, and take the elevator to Marla's unit. I knock on the door.

"Who is it?" I hear through the door.

"It's Mick...and uh...Woody," I say.

"Woody who?" she asks.

"Okay...Marla, come on. It's me, Mick," I say still bummed out about the news of Rhino's death.

"What's the password?" she asks.

"Okay, ha, ha, now I don't have time for the *knock...knock...* jokes. Come on open up," I say getting irritated.

"Who is it? With the password. Or I'll call the police," she says more assertively this time.

"Uh...*Monsieur Wilson...Marla*," I say.

"*Monsieur Wilson who?* State your full name...or I *will* call the cops. I mean it!" she says.

"Okay...*Mista Woodrow Wilson...now open up*," I say.

"Not good enough *Mista Wilson...for the last time*. Before I call the cops. State your full name including middle initial," she says.

"Okay. *Jeez. Mista Woodrow H. Wilson*," I say.

"Sorry...having a hard time hearing you through the door. The middle initial as in? And state your business," she says

"H...as in uh...*head-ache...as in EX-cedrin*. I'm here to whisk away you and the girls, the Dyson twins...Lily and Rose. I'm holdin' in my hand as we speak...*two tickets to Paradise...*" I croon. "Oh...and I'm kinda in a hurry here. My U-haul chariot's like double parked."

"Well...why didn't you say so in the first place. The girls are all dressed up...with hopefully someplace uh...*Paradisical* to go. Just fair warning. They've been behaving rather petulantly even unruly, waiting for the both of ya." Over the sound of rustling movement of sliding boxes, I hear a cackling laugh from the other side, then finally the door slowly creaks open.

There she is...even with dark circles under eyes looking weary from lack of sleep she's still a beauty. I think to myself what a lucky guy I am to be able to wake up to a woman who, without make up, is so beautiful, even in the morning. She flies into my open arms throwing her arms around me. I hug her tightly.

"Oh Mickey...you feel *so good...*just squeeze you to death!" she says. I give her a wet kiss on her exposed neck, then we go inside and close the door.

"Well...nice to be squeezed...by my main and only squeeze. But...we'll have to put the intense mutual squeezing session on hold for now. Show time baby. Ready to rock 'n roll?" I ask.

"Yeap. The girls...and I are in a full state of arousal, uh...readiness," she says.

A man walks up to the U-haul truck, looks around, then casually kneels down and hides a magnetically affixed transmission device on the rear frame of the truck. He turns on the hand-held receiver and immediately begins to receive a strong signal, displaying GPS coordinates of latitude and longitude beaming down from the Navastar satellites, the first of which was launched in 1978. Good to go.

He then drives the Suburban through the security gate, parking in an

:: AMERICAN AMNESIA — *m.a.kominsky* ::

obscure location not observable from the front gate and waits. Something he is very good at from Reagan's CIA-lead Contra days in the early 80s, patiently laying in wait to assassinate the Sandinistas and members of the democratically elected Nicaraguan government.

- Chapter 32 -

It takes about 5 trips each to get the truck loaded. Marla leaves the keys to the condo and her Audi company car on the kitchen counter. And with no pangs of nostalgia or ceremony, by 3:30 PM, we're off...heading for the Interstate Highway 80 West then to Interstate 84, Northwest to Seattle...a distance of about 1,300 miles.

Hawk will be expecting us to hit Seattle in about two days. I'll call him on his mobile when we're a few hours out from Seattle. He'll take some much deserved accrued time off from Microsoft...and show us around the Puget Sound area. I'm looking forward to seeing my best pal. It's been over two years since we got together, when he came to Tahoe for a short visit.

Following behind at a safely undetectable distance, about 3 miles back, is the black Suburban. The signal from the transmitting device, providing the continuously changing GPS coordinates to the driver, including speed and distance to the target vehicle.

His pulse revs up...just like all the other special ops when stalking his unsuspecting prey. Then the warm glow, as the addictive adrenalin rush kicks in. He's now in unstoppable killing machine mode, trained by the best in the business, America's finest, U.S. Marines Force Recon Special Ops.

The first day on the highway, after logging only about 200 miles, we decide to find lodging early, to get a good night's rest as both of us are a little punchy from sleep deprivation. We find some unremarkable roadside lodging chain, grab a light meal and fall asleep early, in warm embrace.

The next morning we rise early, feeling rested and refreshed from a much needed rejuvenating night's sleep. We have a light breakfast at the motel coffee shop, and we're on the road by 8:30 AM.

The second day on the road gives us a lot of time to talk. She seems genuinely interested in hearing more about Ad Hoc Shapiro, the Hawkster. I briefly outline the circumstances of our meeting at UCB and of our long undying loyalty and friendship. She's very interested in my past. But first I had to deal with the loss of my pal, Rhino Rudalski.

“Marla, did Pauly give you any more details about Rhino's death?” I say.

“Just that he had been having episodes of massive migraine headaches...and bouts with anger, and depression. A daily cocktail of antidepressants and pain killers, a deadly combination with copious amounts of alcohol. He was living with Becky, when he started to get violent toward her...inexplicable fits of rage. Finally, one day I guess he just lost it...beat her

up, pretty seriously. She called the cops. It took three cops to subdue and arrest him. He caused some major damage to two of the cops," she says.

"How sad, how utterly tragic. Such an ignominious end for such a basically kind and gentle guy. All those years of head trauma...college at UCB, then the NFL Broncos. RIP Rhino...you're finally at peace, big boy." I say wistfully

"I'm so sorry Mick. I know you were very close. So, tell me about your family, do you think your mother will like me?" she asks.

"Okay, babe. Yea, best we change the subject. Mom...my pal is quite the *broad*...and Diva. A potent cocktail of a stiff Martini of 3 parts 100 proof Auntie Mame...one part diluted Simone de Beauvoir....stir vigorously and garnish with a generous slice of Lucille Ball.

Discovered in her 50s...she has now become somewhat of an international celebrity, teaching oil painting on a weekly nationally syndicated series on PBS TV, *Paint Along with Pia*...and in the U-K on Independent TV— with almost a cultish-fervor following.

My father was and is difficult...they got divorced about 20 years ago...about 19 years too late. She moved to Rome Italy, to get away from his toxic, dark and tortured alcoholic persona. A real womanizer and all-around autocratic son-of-a-bitch. We have no contact.

Got one sister...older, who lives in Philadelphia...unmarried.

And yea...Mom would love you. As long as she thinks you make me happy...even if you had two heads to go along with your two beautiful girls...of course," I say.

It seems like a good opportunity to learn more about Marla's upbringing...and her family, which up to now, she has never really wanted to talk about.

"So Marla...how do ya think your family will take to idea of you gettin' spliced to giant of a man? A man among men," I ask.

"My mother will absolutely *love* you. A warning, she may put some moves on you...if she can find the time between her bridge club, golf and tennis at the country club," she says with more than a trace of bitterness.

"And your father? What's he do?" I ask.

"He's a partner in a big corporate law firm. Dyson, Mathews, Flowers and Associates specializing in corporate mergers and acquisitions. He's a *very* active alumnus of U-Illinois Law School, Chicago. A big reason why I ended up at Stanford Law and a large part of the reason I ended up in Denver with ACT, even though Daddy wanted me to come to work for him...with the other fifty drones practicing cubicle law," she says.

"Where'd you grow up?" I ask.

"Chicago...that's where I went to undergrad. Couldn't wait to get the

hell out of the Midwest away from my family the whole country club Jones-in scene," she says.

"Sibs?" I ask.

"Yea...two brothers, both older. One's a cardiologist, a real type A...and the insufferably pain-the-ass perfect son. How is it that people who have no heart...no capacity for empathy...end up being a heart surgeon?

The other brother...Johnny's my favorite. One reason I ended up a Stanford. You remind me a lot of him...tall, always joking. He lives in the S-F Bay area. He's in uh...pharmaceuticals. A drive-up street dispensary, if you get my drift. According to my parents a professional bum.

Lives a life totally free of conventions and orthodoxy...which *pisses the hell* out of my parents...probably in large part why he does it. Johnny and I are very close. He's the only one I've told about you and me. He was very happy for me...probably not the case when my snobbish other brother, Alfred or my father John senior, hear that I left a good paying career at ACT Inc...and about our getting married in a non-country club pedestrian ceremony. My mother will be particularly devastated that she will be precluded from conspicuously overlooking inviting some of her socialite contestants. Johnny's the only family I would even invite to our wedding," she says.

We continue driving...both us of comfortable without conversation for long stretches of straight flat highway. A good sign...enjoying the solace, embracing the white line fever of being on the great expanse of open highway. We just grind out the miles, stopping occasionally to view some of the beautiful vistas. The big skies of Wyoming, the Sawtooth Mountains of Idaho, the rolling green Palouse of Oregon and Eastern Washington, then the breathtaking drive up and over the Cascade Mountains down into Western Washington toward the vast Puget Sound.

After another night on the road, by the third day, at noon when we're about two hours out of Seattle, from the mobile phone, I call Hawk at work at Microsoft.

"Hey...Hawk. Mick here. Howya doing, man?" I ask

"Hey Koz...where ya at, man?" Hawk says.

"According to the map...looks like maybe a hundred miles out from wheels down...heading West toward Seattle on I-90," I say.

"Okay. Meet you at my place. I got a house near Capitol Hill, in Seattle, I'm just North of Seattle U. From I-90 just take I-5 North toward Vancouver to the James Street turnoff...left on Broadway...right on Madison...and left on 12th...right on Harrison. I'm at 1256 East Harrison. It ain't new or manicured, with lots of natural indigenous vegetation uh...weeds in front. Park on the street. Piece a cake...for anyone else. But in your case...call, not if...but *when* you get lost and I'll talk you in. Okay brother? It's noon, so you may hit some killer Seattle afternoon traffic by the time you hit downtown. One of the vicissitudes of urban living. Just deal with it...with a

minimum of whining *sil vous plait*," he says.

"10-4...and roger that. Hey...nothing to it. See ya soon...you'll see me waiting for you, parked in front of 1256 E. Harrison...in case you can't remember where you live. Your landmark is a U-haul truck with a beautiful lady passenger, a hitch hiker that I picked up along the way. Bye *mon frere*," I say hanging up. Then I look at Marla...just shaking my head, "I think Hawk forgot that maybe I'm not as quick a study as he is. Ha! I'll take I-5 to James Street then pull over and call him," I say. She just nods smiling.

Yeap...we picked up right where we left off. The Hawkster sounds good...on his game with the constantly good-natured ribbing of *bruthas*. It feels good to be going to see my pally...been far too long.

By four o'clock in the afternoon, Hawk has talked us in to *Chez Shapiro*. Indeed overgrown with weeds, it's a huge old craftsman bungalow, I think, with wonderful exterior period architectural details, and a covered full-width porch.

Seattle still has many neighborhoods with pockets of these beautiful old bungalows, built in the late 1920s and 30s, many having been faithfully restored. As Marla and I get out of the truck, the Hawkster exits the front door, and starts walking toward us.

Catching first glimpse of him after a period of absence, always hits me like a karate chop. He's comparatively short, with a thick heavily muscled upper body of a wrestler. For a big man, he moves with the lithe grace of cat. He's totally hairless...no eyebrows or facial hair, a small hoop pierced earring in his right ear lobe. His hugely disproportionate head, stuffed with more than his share of brains, is completely shaved reflecting the low evening sun. I glance over at Marla for her reaction. She is obviously trying to contain her initial surprise...and not doing a very good job of it.

"Don't worry he doesn't bite. Just let him sniff the back of your hand until his tail starts to wag...then you should be okay," I say half-kidding.

"My *gawd*," she gasps, smiling.

Hawk walks right up to her and throws his arms around her, picking her up like a large stuffed animal, spins her around then puts her down, "You're Marla, I would assume...after all the big buildup. Well I must say Koz didn't exaggerate...for a change. He said you're a real beauty. From the look on your face, you have probably deduced that I am...the one...the only Hawkster," he says putting her down, with a big toothy grin in an incongruously high pitched voice.

"Maybe later you can tell me how you came to take in this stray mongrel," he says looking at me, beaming with a big smile.

"Hardy...har...har. You're a riot Alice...a regular riot. Bang! Zoom! To da moon...Alice," I say.

And the anticipated rejoinder from his pal Ed Norton, "*Sheez*...what a

grouch! How can you put up with such a grouchy old man?" he says to Marla.

"Well there are parts of him...that more than compensate for his sometimes grouchy disposition." Marla says smiling.

"I like her already. I can tell she's going to be givin' ya a run for your *dinero*...which probably isn't saying much," he says.

He then walks over to me throws a bear hug around me, lifts me completely off the ground and shakes me up and down like a toy, crushing the breath out of me, "Hey Mickey...*goddammit* it's good to see ya *mon frere*." I throw my arms around his broad shoulders, "*Jezus man*," I gasp.

"That's it? After all this time...that's the best you can do to your best pally?" he says continuing to playfully shake me like some Silver back gorilla playing with his food.

"So stop mit da wrestle-mania *schtick already*, so I can at least catch a breath...and I might have more to say on the matter...unless I pass out from *ox-gen de-priv-ation*..." I'm barely able to exhale out, as I nod a fake faint. The man has no idea how strong he is. He then drops me like a duffel bag of dirty laundry feigning a hurt expression, to Marla "Like I said...a *real* grouch."

We gather up the stuff from the truck we'll need for our stay. Hawk leads the way, effortlessly carrying Marla's several bags, through the front door into the living room.

The place looks like a newsreel from the aftermath of one of those 50 or so twisters that levels some poor Podunk town on the plains of Kansas every year. Magazines and newspapers strewn all over, pizza delivery boxes propped open, some not empty, partially consumed Corona beer bottles, and *tres beaucoup* 16 once Starbucks coffee paper cups...everywhere. There's a modest attempt at 'furnishings', with a large 4 foot ex-telephone cable reel on its side, the center piece of the 'décor' of the living room in front of a Lazy boy recliner facing a huge TV. That's it...except for the no less than seven or eight glowing CRTs, on Seattle-based Costco folding tables and an array of several printers and scanners. It looks like a college computer lab.

"Like what you *haven't* done with the place," I say.

"Going for the Seattle-techno chic urban uh...minimalist look."

"More like a one man ghetto...hazmat site." I say

"Glad you like it. I was laying awake nights, grieving that it might not meet your epicurean decorating sensibility," he says.

"*Jezus!* Think you got enough computers? Did ya rip off a Radio Shack...for *Chrissakes?*" I ask

"Nah, the stuff I do at Microsoft, a lot of it I can do at home...writing code for programs for MS-DOS and for the new operating system called Windows, all very hush-hush. Eventually Windows will replace Microsoft DOS for the primary OS. I do a lot of testing and debugging here where it's

quiet, and I'm not prone to interruption from other code writers looking for help with their work. I'm a team leader on development and internal *alpha* testing...before it goes out to the field to high security selected *beta* testers," he says matter-of-factly.

During the whole exchange Marla is observing this interaction with a wry smile on her face, recognizing that here are two pals who have not seen each other in quite a while probably picking up the conversation where they left off two years ago. She gets it. The ultimate demonstration of male friendship...of fraternal love with the incessant good-natured ribbing back and forth...with no offense intended and none taken.

"Of course...somebody's got to make sure all those little digital soldiers...zeros and ones, line up properly in the correct formation and follow marching orders...and that's a mission only Captain Alpha Man...alias the Hawster...can be trusted to fearlessly execute," I say.

"Men...you have been personally chosen to undertake a very dangerous mission...some of you may *not* survive it. The very existence of our cyber-savior Bill-yonaire Gates depends on it. *Secure the perimeter men...and make e-very byte count!* Anyway...so Windows is in very preliminary dev because Apple Macintosh and Commodore Amiga are ultimately going to kick our ass if we don't figure out a way to make the damn PC OS have a more user friendly GUI uh...Graphical User Interface," he says.

"WTML...man. *Waaay* Too Much Information," I say.

"Yea...sorry. Forgot you're techno-challenged. Hey...you guys hungry? I know a nice little Asian place up on Capitol Hill, walkable...where we can grab some dinner. You like Thai and East Indian?" he says.

"Sure...let us stow our gear *mon Capitain*...and we're ready to go. Right Marly?" I say.

"I could eat...give me few minutes to deal with some deferred maintenance issues and I'll be good to go," she says.

We walk over to Capitol Hill, with a funky eclectic mix of restaurants and bars and bookstores, and what we used to call head shops in the 60s.

"Well now...this reminds me of The Castro district in San Francisco...a lot, crackling with sexual energy, male and female," Marla says.

"Yeap...this is Seattle's version of the Gay Bay Boy meets Boy...and Girl meets Girl. Target rich...if you every decide to switch teams," Hawk says grinning.

We walk into a not-so-small place on East Broadway, that sports a diverse menu with predominately Thai cuisine with some East Indian offerings. Obviously a happening place, as it's full with a '10 minute wait'...which usually means at least a half-hour if you're lucky. Hawk puts his name in with the non-gender specific host who is dressed like something out of

on *La Cage aux Folles*.

"Hawster...party of 3.5. A large table for my freak friend," says Mr Ironic.

We take a table in the bar to have a cocktail, while we wait for our table. It's Happy Hour, so the locals are out. The bar is starting to get lively, mostly catering to an obviously gay and Lesbian clientele. All the servers, men and ladies, are outrageously dressed...some even approaching costumed with elaborate jewelry, all highly accessorized, some with multi-colored radical spiked hair styles.

After we're seated at our table, our male server comes to the table, all smiles, "Good evening...I am F-redo," he announces like he's making a Shakespearean entrance...leaning hard on the F, "I will be *servicing* you. What may I get for you? If you'd like something you don't see on the menu...just ask, we're *very* accommodating and friendly here," he says looking directly at me batting his eyes which draws a smile and an eye-roll from Marla.

"For the lady?" Fredo asks looking at Marla somewhat condescendingly.

"I'll have a Bombay Sapphire gin Martini...with two olives," Marla says.

"For the gentleman?" he says to Hawk.

"A Jack Daniels over...make it a double. Hold the olives," Hawk says.

"And for you...*sweetcakes*?" he's says flashing his perfect whitened teeth at me.

"I uh...think I'll have my usual...Johnny Walker...up, a double," I say.

"Oh goodness me...how *bo-o-o-ring*. I'm sure you could get a Johnny...Tom, Harry or Dick...up...anytime...anywhere you want. Where's your sense of adventure uh...*Ball-hawk*?" He asks.

"Sorry? *Ball-hawk*?" I ask quizzically.

"No need to be coy with F-redo. I've positively *lusted* your profile on the CompuServe Bulletin Board...*Man to Man*. And your *yummy* picture...but I must say you're much...*much* taller and impressive in person. If I recall correctly your profile said five-foot-ten inches. Why would you want to lie about such an obvious *positive* attribute?" he says.

Marla is now staring at me, "Is there something you'd like to tell me uh...*Ball-hawk*, since you are *so much taller* in person?" she asks, desperately trying to contain her laughter.

"Maybe later Marla...or not. As to your second question...possibly on older photo...say when I was 12 years old. And, *Gee* uh...F-redo, that's an *excellent*...and I must say very *penetrating*, if you will, question. Why don't we ask our friend here uh...Mick. Mick why do you suppose one *might* lie about such an obvious factual disparity? It's okay...feel free to level with us uh...*Man*

to Man?" I ask looking directly at the Hawkster.

"Well...I uh...really couldn't begin to presume to get into someone else's, uh...head as to why they might not be truthful...in such potentially relevant and serious matters of the heart," he says smiling wickedly.

"Aw gee...go on Mick. Take a wild guess...hypothetically? I'm sure Marla, along with F-redo here are very interested in your...opinion?" I ask.

"Yes...*sil vous plait* Hawk. I obviously can't speak for F-redo here...but I am *just dying* over here...waiting to hear your hypothetical..." she can't finish before she is busting out in convulsive laughter, her eyes tearing up, slamming the table with her hand.

Now poor F-redo...not in on the joke is starting to look a little bemused by all this back and forth and laughing—his eyes narrowing as he is starting to suspect it may be at his expense.

"Well...speaking strictly hypothetically my guess would be that someone might be tempted to engage in these kinds of deceptions to perhaps present, *shall we say* a more attractive image, literally and figuratively," he deadpans.

"Ah...of course! To dangle a bit more attractive bait on the hook...*shall we say*?" I say, smiling at the Hawkster.

"A distinct...dangling possibility, *mon ami*," he says.

"Very. Okay...F-redo, thanks anyway. But I think I'll just stick with my ol' boring pal, Johnny...up, as we're in kind of in a committed relationship," I say to F-redo.

"Well okay, *Ball-hawk* boy...but if you should ever be lookin' to trade up here's a number you can call...day or night 24-7. Leave a voice mail," he says, hastily scrawling his phone number on a cocktail napkin, leaving it in front of me, then with a flirtatious wide smile wiggles off to fill our order.

I slide the napkin across the table to Hawk.

"Your lucky day, *mon ami*," I say.

"Obviously he was trying to get to me...through you. But no thanks, don't think it's a good fit for me...*too* gay," Hawk says.

While the U-haul truck remains parked on the street, Hawk takes next three days off, and shows us around Seattle, the usual *tourista* stops like the iconic Space Needle, built for the 1962 World's Fair in Seattle and the famous Pike Market.

We also check outlying beautiful West Seattle, situated right on the Sound. Alki Beach reminds me a great deal of some of the bedroom beachfront communities in Southern California, around Los Angeles, like Venice and Manhattan Beach. The locals, much more laid back and relaxed than the *intense* metro-sexual Seattlites.

We take the ferry to the San Juan Islands and spend some time seeing

the highly growth managed and beautiful untamed country on Islands like Lopez Island, where folks have a deep sense of identity and community with island life. Retaining the Pacific Northwest Seattle sensibility...but not in it.

On the fourth day, Hawk throws us the keys to his pride and joy, a red 1984 Mustang convertible Turbo GT with a stick shift.

"Have fun up in Vancouver...and keep an eye on the speedometer...easy to let that wild little pony get away from ya. And since you're an artist...might want to check out La Conner, an artist's community about 70 miles North. One of my favorite authors, Tom Robbins lives there. Ya know. Another Roadside Attraction, Even Cowgirls Get the Blues. Just tell 'em I sent ya.

Then take Chuckanut Drive North up to Moody Seaport on the way up...about 50 miles South of Van City. A nice little college town, with a decent University. Interesting history and beautiful old buildings like the City Hall built in 1890, and the Mount Baker Theater, a real vintage 20s cinema," he says.

The next morning, we rise early, and we're off before the morning traffic, headed North on I-5, most of the traffic is Southbound toward Seattle once you get past Everett about 30 miles North, home of Boeing Aircraft, maker of commercial jet airliners.

We check-out La Conner, in Skagit County, mostly flat and agricultural. Even with our esteemed *entre of Hawk Shapiro sent us...* Tom Robbins in not taking visitors.

La Conner is basically a wide spot in the road, a small, but charming artist's intimate enclave right across the slough from the Swinomish Indian Reservation.

From there, as we head North on I-5, the landscape begins to change dramatically, with heavily wooded mountains seemingly leaping out of the horizon. The top is down and it's a spectacular day, with big white fluffy clouds against a brilliant blue sky. We take the Chuckanut Drive turnoff, which winds all along the coast of Puget Sound with beautiful turnouts for scenic vistas looking to the West and the San Juan Islands. Visibility must be close to 50 miles.

I turn the Mustang loose through the twisting turns with the Turbo charged engine, the hard braking, then acceleration exiting the turns is exhilarating, giving Marla a bit of a white-knuckler adrenalin rush.

We pull into Moody Seaport, to the snap crackle and pop of the wound up Turbo charged high performance engine and the pungent smell of overheated smoking brake linings around lunch time in a small community called Fairhaven. We decide to have lunch there at a charming little cafe, called the Colophon Cafe, right next to Village Books, both situated in beautiful old brick buildings, which according to the cornerstone were built sometime in late

1891.

Directly East is the ever present, ever vigilant great white sentinel, snow covered Mount Baker of the Cascade mountain range rising to an elevation from sea level to almost 11,000 feet, the third highest mountain in Washington state, some more Western Alps. It reminds me a great deal of the towering mountains of the Sierra Nevada, only the base elevation of Lake Tahoe is about 6,000 feet, with the highest peak about another 6,000 feet, making Mount Baker seem much taller. Another big difference is that Lake Tahoe is essentially high desert, dry climate with not much lush vegetation.

Because Moody Seaport is at or near sea level, situated right on the Puget Sound with 40 inches of rainfall a year, all the surrounding mountains are very green with lush vegetation, densely populated with cedar and fir trees, some even old growth, if not yet clear-cut by the *logging industry...one of the primary sources of jobs, along with commercial fishing* we're dutifully informed by the local Chamber of Commerce as we pick up a complimentary map of Moody Seaport and surrounding areas.

After lunch, we browse Village Books for an hour or so, holding hands like two teenagers deeply in first-love. We have a light lunch at the Colophon Cafe. I have their legendary white clam chowder, Marla a cob salad with fresh hot baked bread.

It's a perfect, yes even idyllic day, just me and my baby on the open highway with the top down listening to some cassettes of Joan Baez love ballads, as she wistfully sings one of her former lover's anthemic classics, Bob Dylan's...Blowin' in the Wind:

*How many roads must a man walk down
Before they call him a man
How many seas must a white dove sail
Before she sleeps in the sand*

*How many times must the cannonballs fly
Before they are forever banned
The answer, my friends, is blowing in the wind
The answer is blowing in the wind*

*How many years can a mountain exist
Before it's washed to the sea*

*How many years must some people exist
Before they're allowed to be free*

*How many times can a man turn his head
And pretend that he just doesn't see
The answer, my friends, is blowing in the wind*

The answer is blowing in the wind...

Somehow we both seem to be hearing the lyrics as though for the first time as it deeply resonates with our own situation of leaving the dark and sinister world of ACT Inc. and Jason Mahoney behind us.

*How many times can a man turn his head
And pretend that he just doesn't see...*

Of moving on to a new and fulfilling life...together in *our* home in beautiful Lake Tahoe, full of hope and promise that all things are possible.

It was the first time, since Sora Eagle Feather, that I had ever felt such an overwhelming, deep emotional connection of unconditional love with a woman, so much so that frankly it somewhat frightens me because of the potential for painful loss. Again.

Something that I had vowed never to allow happen again after losing Sora...not even with Annie Trudeau, to never again expose myself to the heart wrenching, when not in a drunken stupor, laying awake nights, kind of emotional chaos.

Yes, as I will soon enough have reinforced, the only sure way to truly drown one's sorrow, is not through drink, but to jump off one of the *leapers*...very high bridges, like the Golden Gate, Aurora 99 Bridge in Seattle or later Deception Pass, of Whidbey Island. A few times, I admit, I will have seriously considered after spiraling into dark episodes of post-partem depression, a tempting alternative.

Those enchanting days together, bittersweet memories will be often fondly reflected upon for the rest of my life. We vow to return to Moody Seaport someday. Only one of us will.

By three o'clock, we head North to Vancouver BC. It takes us only 45 minutes to get to the Peace Arch Border Crossing into British Columbia. Traffic is light, so we are through the Canadian Customs in less than 10 minutes, and on our way North to Van City.

We check into our hotel, The Sylvia...a classic old hotel with Ivy covered walls, originally built in 1912. It still retains the charm of historic old Vancouver. Situated right on Beach Ave. overlooking beautiful English Bay, it's a short walk to famous Stanley Park, the Vancouver equivalent of Central Park in New York City. We take a long walk along the Seawall, stopping often to gaze at the spectacular sunset...seemingly made just for our eyes only.

We find a lovely quiet little bistro, the Tea House in Stanley Park overlooking the Bay and have an intimate candlelit dinner, with a nice bottle of Merlot.

The next day we rise early, check out of the hotel and drive around Van City. As big cities go, it's a very clean and well maintained metropolis. We end up in East Vancouver for lunch. Commercial Drive has much less gloss. Its funky-fun atmosphere reminds Marla and I of parts of San Francisco, up to now, our favorite Left Coast City. East Van's loaded with mom-and-pop family shops and restaurants...anything you want from East Indian to Sushi to Italian, at comparatively modest prices compared to downtown Vancouver, especially the Kitsalano area. We have a light lunch of Tandoori chicken with fresh out-of-the-oven Naan bread in a little sidewalk cafe called the Tandoori Palace. Obviously East Indian family-owned with three generations working side-by-side there, including three beautiful coffee-eyed, raven haired pre-pubescent boys eagerly acting as servers and busboys. Learning the family business from the ground up.

By 3 PM, we head back to Seattle. It's a brief visit, because we're both rather eager to get back to Tahoe...*home*. We spend one last night with Hawk. We take him out for a great dinner out on the Waterfront on Alaska Way, Anthony's Seafood.

I'm very pleased that Marla and Hawk seemed to have bonded. There is absolutely no awkwardness in their interaction, as if they've been old friends for years, both of them giving...and taking good-natured ribbing. I can't recall him ever being so sociable and accepting with one of my lady companions. Maybe he realizes that probably for the first time, this one is a keeper for me. As for Marla, she likewise realizes and yes even honors, how important my friendship—more like the brotherhood that I never had, is with the Hawkster.

So, after a delightful three-day visit with Hawk, like Ben Franklin's wise old trope says...*house guests like fish, begin to smell after three days...time to go*.

We're up early, and after a farewell breakfast with Hawk, we're back in the U-haul, heading South on I-5 toward Tahoe...*Homeward Bound...*

- Chapter 33 -

The audible alarm on the hand-held homing device, starts squawking early in the morning, indicating that the GPS is picking up change in latitude and longitude. He casually finishes his usual morning rations of ham and eggs, toast and coffee. As experience would prescribe, it's not healthy to eat too fast or to kill on an empty stomach. So even though it's been a nice little 4 days liberty in Seattle, it is time to get back on mission. Within 15 minutes, the black Suburban catches up until visual is confirmed on the U-haul truck. The driver then falls back a few miles so as not to be detected. As usual, he's done meticulous research and planning. He knows the address of their final—make that *very final* destination in Lake Tahoe.

Because we're eager to get home and sleep on a decent bed in familiar surroundings, we decide to go for it. Despite it's about a 15 hour drive including stops for gas and food, and stretch breaks, we'd rather drive straight through with both of sharing the driving, rather than stay at some shabby roadside roach motel.

We take I-5 then just before Medford, Oregon, cut over Highway 161 Southwest to Highway 395 South, a straight shot to Carson City Nevada. From there, we're almost home with short drive over the familiar Spooner Summit into Lake Tahoe, Nevada.

We keep grinding out the miles, until we hit Reno, Nevada just before midnight. Time to refuel. We decide we're desperately in need of a break, so we stop for a decent meal at a casino buffet, and take a little walk to stretch our legs along the scenic Truckee River walk, before the final leg home, about an hour and half. From fatal accidents that I have investigated, learning from the tragic experience of others, it's not wise to attempt to drive over Spooner Summit if you're fighting sleep.

They're so close to Tahoe, they're probably going to go for it...maybe have dinner in Reno then make the final push home. Good. They'll be exhausted from driving all day and night and not particularly aware. Maybe not thinking as clearly if it was daytime after a decent night's sleep. In either case, their homecoming will be a surprise...a very *big and loud* surprise.

The first rule of successful ambush is to take maximum advantage of the element of surprise. If you can wait for the enemy to reach a high state of fatigue, and get careless about their security, then the chances of success increase exponentially.

The driver of the black Suburban, does not exit in Reno, but instead floors it. There is little development between Reno and Carson City. It's a

straight and flat shot—few if any vehicles on the road at that hour. He'll want to get there at least a full hour ahead of his prey, to set up his little welcome-home party. He's making good time, the speedometer needle is flirting with 100 mph, when suddenly out of nowhere, the cab is full of a flashing red glow from behind. *Dammit...* Nevada Highway Patrol. *Shit.* I forgot to turn on my radar detector, *stupid*—from the last time I stopped for dinner and a six-pack. All those noisy false positives driving around the city.

The driver takes his M45 MEUSOC .45 caliber semi-automatic, standard-issue side arm for Force Recon, with a full magazine of 7 hollow-point cop killers, from under the seat, and places it under his black windbreaker between him and the cooler, on the seat in the darkened cab.

There's two of them. As he intently observes their movements in the side view mirrors, one of them, a lady officer, with no personal armor vest walks around to the passenger side, shining a cop's long black Maglite, like daylight, into the interior of the car. The cooler, obscures the view between the cop and his hand under the windbreaker. Then the dreaded sharp rap on the driver side window from the other officer.

"Roll down you window...driver's license and registration, please," he says standing well to the rear of the window opening. *Cautious...*not a good sign, but also no personal armor vest. Improves the odds. The first shot to the torso, then the deadly kill shot to the head.

The electric window goes down, "Sure officer," the driver says.

He hands him his drivers license and registration.

"California, eh? Where ya headed in such a *big* hurry, uh...Mister Rice?" he asks.

"Back home to Southern California. I was getting sleepy so I was in a hurry to find a place in Carson City...to spend the night. How fast was I going officer?" the driver says. The lady NHP turns out her flashlight and returns to the patrol car, probably to finish her donuts and coffee while it's still hot. Anything to keep from falling asleep during the normally, excruciatingly boring graveyard shift. This makes his odds much better, he can take out the one cop easily. Then shoot the lady cop through the windshield of the patrol car before she even has a chance to put down her cup of coffee, maybe even before they have called it in to the dispatcher with car and driver info. *New meaning to the term graveyard shift*, smiling to himself.

"Clocked on radar at over 100 miles per hour. Have you had anything to drink tonight, Mister Rice?" The officer asks.

Shit...if they open the cooler on the front seat, they'll see 4 empty cans of Coors from the six-pack. Probably if he does a breathalyzer on me, he'll get enough of hit to bust me for suspicion of DUI, usually an arrest, and a blood test, which will blow the whole time table and my bogus identity. And if for some bad luck reason they decide to check out the vault, the custom built THULE ski roof box, they'll find all the custom sniper rifles with scopes and

cop killer ammo, along with the R-P-G launcher...with grenades. Then I'm really fucked.

He casually slides his hand under the black windbreaker and grips the handle of the already chambered .45, flipping the safety off.

"Nope...nothing to drink. Gee...I'm really sorry officer. I had no idea...open highway. I guess I must've let my foot lean on the accelerator a little to hard. Thanks officer...for pulling me over. I was probably on the verge of falling asleep at the wheel," the driver says contritely.

The cop shines the light in his face, to check his pupil reaction, then says, "You're uh...ex-military? A U-S Marine Corp decal on your window?" he says.

"Semper Fi...Force Recon...you?" The driver says.

"Yea...did some time in-country in 'Nam...'68 Tet offensive. Special ops guy, huh? Okay...wait here...stay in the car," the officer says, smiling before going back to the patrol car to check for wants or outstanding warrants.

For a consummate professional like Ernie Porter with his vast experience in sub-Rosa work, it is SOP to anticipate the possibility of a routine stop by police or for a witness to jot down a license number at a crime scene like Kozlov's place in Tahoe.

It is not a difficult proposition to have access to high quality counterfeit documents like multiple driver's licenses, along with a selection of very authentic phony personalized license plates, in pinch pulling plates of totaled cars in a wrecking yard and registration documents from any number of the states, always in a different state from his "assignment". This greatly diminishes the likelihood of the authenticity of his documents being called into question as most likely the cops would not have access to the out-of-state databases. Maybe...maybe not.

But shit can...and often does happen. A routine stop with a little bad luck can cascade into a regular shit sandwich.

The window of opportunity is rapidly closing. He puts his hand on the door handle, but some kind of finely honed battle intuition from countless missions, perhaps the smile before calling it in. The smile that will maybe save he and his partner's life on that lonely dark stretch of highway?

Hmm...so maybe the ex-soldier's going to cut him a break. It's a calculated risk. Once they call in a DUI...I'm dead meat, which means they will have to die. But something in the cops tone...some deep recognition of camaraderie, of brothers in arms. Okay. Go with it...but be cool. Let it unfold...been in tighter spots. The most important thing is to stay calm.

I can always wack 'em and put the spare plates on from another state.

About five minutes later, the NHP officer returns, "Mister Rice...bad news...not-so-bad...and good news," he says smiling, "the bad news. I'm going to have to write you up for speeding. Not so bad news. I'll write ya up for 82 in

a 70 speed limit...otherwise, at over 30 miles per hour over the speed limit we impound the vehicle. And the fine would be about double. And finally...the good news *for you* is, next time you're in Nevada...do not...I repeat do not drive after you've been drinking. I can smell alcohol on your breath...and your pupils are not reacting properly to light. You've been warned. Got it?

I'd suggest you *very slowly* drive to Carson City, and get a good night's rest. Have a safe evening, and slow down Mister Rice...*Semper Fi*," the officer says smiling with a casual salute to his Mountie hat as he hands him the speeding ticket, license and registration, then heads back to his patrol car.

"Thank you...*roger that*...'preciate it. I'll be extremely careful, offica. Have a good night," the driver says to the back of the officer as he disappears into the black night. He then places the gun under the front seat again, safety on. He waits until the patrol car drives past him, before he slowly pulls on to the highway following behind about 200 yards until the patrol car crosses through a paved median turn-out and heads back the opposite direction. He reaches over and turns on his Fuzz-buster radar detector. *Won't make that mistake again.*

As soon as the tail lights of the patrol car disappear, he's back up to over 100 mph, making up for lost time...racing to get to Tahoe to prepare the homecoming...*a very special surprise party.*

By the time we get to Tahoe, and drive up the hill to *our home...Casa Nevada*, it's almost 2 AM. Both of us are exhausted from being on the road for almost 15 hours.

I hit the hand held garage door opener on my key chain, and the door magically begins to lift.

"I'm going to back the truck up to the garage door, so we can unload it in the morning," I say.

"Mickey...I've got to *pee so bad*, my eyes are burning. Can I hop out...before it's *too late*?" Marla says.

"Sure...you can go into the house through the interior door of the garage through the kitchen...it's always unlocked," I say.

Marla hops out and runs in through the interior door leaving it open. I slowly begin backing the truck up. Because it's heavily coated with road film, I put the window on the passenger side down so I see the side view mirror. I immediately detect the very strong, unmistakable odor of natural gas.

Then almost simultaneously, the sound of a ringing telephone from the kitchen...*who the hell could be calling me at this hour?*

"*Marly!*" I yell.

KA-B-O-O-OM!

The huge explosion catapults the U-haul van twenty feet into the

street, coming to rest, laying on the driver side. The concussion of the blast renders me momentarily dazed. It takes me several seconds before it begins to register...an explosion! Probably from natural gas. *Oh my gawd...Marly!*

A full block away from the carefully chosen observation post where the black Suburban is parked, the concussion of the blast shakes the ground. The Black Mamba coolly puts down his binoculars, and presses the disconnect button on his mobile phone. *Mission accomplished.*

He inhales deeply, savoring the moment. Like the deranged Lieutenant Colonel Bill Kilgore from Francis Ford Coppola's anti-war masterwork, *Apocalypse Now*, the bittersweet after-scent of the smoke from the explosion, is an aphrodisiac to the Black Mamba:

I love the smell of napalm in the morning. You know, one time we had a hill bombed, for 12 hours. When it was all over, I walked up. We didn't find one of 'em, not one stinkin' dink body. The smell, you know that gasoline smell, the whole hill.

Smelled like...victory...

But his elation is tempered by an inchoate feeling of disappointment. The lack of challenge, the seeming ineptness of his prey and the relative ease of completing the mission.

Anyway, a nice little payday for doing what the government had paid him to do for next to nothing. Truth is all those years he'd probably have done it for free, essentially to feed the addictive high of an adrenalin junkie. Now he gets paid, very handsomely for the same work...and the same rush. *Easy money.*

He drives about a mile and pulls into a darkened gas station, where he replaces the California license plates with bogus New Mexico plates, and begins his long drive back to Southern California—to his base of operations, near Camp Pendleton, about 40 miles North of San Diego where he trained almost 20 years ago. Just another day, field work away from the office.

It's now almost 3 AM, even while making sure to observe the speed limit, he can make a good coupla hundred miles distance away from the scene of the crime, before daybreak, before he stops for his usual morning ration of ham and eggs, and sourdough toast, coffee with cream and four sugars. All this stalkin' *sho 'nuf* works up a *man's* appetite. *Yesiree...*

I struggle to right myself, but the shoulder harness and seat belt restrain me. I have to release it or I'm not going anywhere. I attempt to get to my feet. Standing on the driver side window I manage to climb out the open window on the passenger side, collapsing on to the hard pavement outside...my

legs shaking and unsure, as I try to stand up. I turn and look back towards the house, or what's left of it. *My gawd*, the whole front of the house is gone, completely blown-out exposing the interior of the front of the house. A fire is now starting to rage on the roof and spreading rapidly to the rest of the house.

I run toward where the kitchen used to be, hysterically screaming, "*Marly! Marly!*"

The fire is now spreading to the interior. The smoke and heat are starting to get oppressive; visibility is getting worse by the second. The flexible gas pipe that feeds where the stove used to be is spitting out a licking orange flame several feet long.

I hear groaning under some debris in the kitchen. I frantically throw off the charred boards and sheet rock, to reveal Marla, laying there, her clothing already blood-soaked. *My gawd!*

I kneel down, place my arms under her and try to move her. She screams loudly from the pain. I gently lay her back down.

"Marly...can you hear me! *I've got to get you out!*" I yell over the fire.

"I can't move my legs. Mickey. What...*what happened?* I...I just had walked into the kitchen...when it...just exploded," she murmurs now going into shock.

There's a large ceiling truss pinning her at the waist. I try desperately to move it, but it hopelessly lodged. I frantically throw off some more sheet rock and debris, to expose Marla's legs. *My gawd*, both of them are badly mangled above the knee, the one barely connected. I rip off my belt and apply it as a tourniquet to the severed leg, but the femoral artery of the other leg is pumping blood. *She's bleeding out, before my eyes. I can stop it!*

"Don't try to talk baby...just lay still. I've got to get some help...call for ambulance! I'll be right back...don't go anywhere. Okay? I've got to get to the mobile phone in the truck!" I say.

"Okay. Wish I could say I like what you've done with place..." smiling gamely, then as the pain now intensifies. "Oh Mickey...please hurry...*it hurts so bad*. I...I don't want to...*die alone*..." she whispers. *Die alone. Jezus Christ!*

I sprint back to the truck, shimmy in through the open window and begin frantically groping the dark for the mobile phone.

Just about then I hear voices outside. I stick my head out of the cab and see several of my neighbors, in their night clothes and slippers, walking toward me.

"Mick...what the *hell* happened?" says my sixty-year old neighbor Tom Malloy.

"Tom...call 911! Get an ambulance up here ASAP!...and the fire department...hurry! Marla's badly hurt...she's still in the house!" I yell over the roar of the fire.

Tom runs back into his house.

I jump out of the truck, and run back into the house, to be with Marla.

I kneel down beside her taking her still beautiful but bruised face in my trembling hands. The smoke is making it difficult to breath. The heat from the fire is intensifying.

"Mickey...am I hurt *bad*? Don't lie to me..."

"Marly...it's uh...not good, baby. But I promise...I won't let you die. The ambulance is on the way. *I love you Marly!*" I say, over the frenzied approaching sirens.

Marla gazes up at me, reaching for my hand which I take in mine. She is rhythmically squeezing it as she writhes in spasms of pain. Her eyes, now glassy and unfocused meet mine.

"Mickey...just hold me baby...*just hold me...*" she whispers.

"I'm right here baby...don't give up...fight! You've got to fight...*please...for me! Don't you dare leave me, baby!*" I beg

"Mickey...I guess I knew it was all too good to be true. That you and I could...I sold my soul, and now...*I didn't deserve you baby...or to be happy...ever. I love you Mickey...forever...*" she says starting to sob.

I gently stroke the hair back from her face with my trembling hand. I bend down and gently kiss her quivering soft lips...for the last time as her teary eyes slowly flutter shut, the grip from her hand slowly releases, becomes limp.

"*Marly! Marly!...oh gawd! Marly...don't leave me...Please! I can't live without you baby!*" I yell as I hold her lifeless body against me, rocking back and forth.

I feel someone firmly tapping me on my shoulder. I look up to see a paramedic.

"Sir...*please sir*. Please let me have a look at her," he says softly while taking her other wrist desperately searching for a pulse, shaking his head side to side.

"*No! She's not dead...she's just in shock...she'll be okay. She just needs some rest...after the long drive...*" I yell rocking back and forth with Marla Dyson in my arms.

"I'm sorry sir...but there's nothing more that can be done for her. You have to leave, *now* sir. The fire is closing in on us *fast!*" the paramedic says, grabbing me by the arm, trying to pull me away. I shake him off, "*Get the hell away from me...I'm not leaving her!*" I yell.

Then another paramedic shows up, both big strong guys, they each grab an arm, dragging me clear, kicking and screaming.

"*No! No!...My gawd No!*" just as the roof collapses with a deafening crash, totally engulfing the entire house in flames.

- Chapter 34 -

After losing Marla, I spiral into deep depression. Within two days Hawk flies in from Seattle—he stays at my side constantly, incessantly, sometimes irritatingly shadowing me even to the bathroom, essentially on suicide watch. Since losing the love of my life I am basically dysfunctional, that day September 10th 1985, at 2 AM is indelibly seared into my memory and consciousness. Forever.

The house had been leveled by the explosion and the fire. In some places burned down to the foundation. I'm so emotionally traumatized, I can't even bring myself to look it again. It's a total loss along with my Porsche which was in the garage. Everything, all the contents, including all my clothes and personal effects, family photographs...gone. Even all the production equipment, cameras, tape decks and post-production equipment—all gone. The only thing that survived is my trusty great white pickp-up. Moby Dick, parked on the street in a turnout, sustained minor cosmetic damage but is drivable.

Hearing the news, many friends attempt to make contact, to offer condolences and support. But my phone line, and of course my answering machine is not functional. Just as well, as good intentioned as their attempts are at consolation, I really don't feel like dealing with it—any of it.

I'm staying at a hotel in town, which the insurance company is paying for under the coverage of the Homeowners Policy. After Hawk arrives, at his insistence, I check into a room with double beds so that he can keep an eye on me—so I *don't do something stupid*.

"Hawk, I really appreciate you being here, man...but you're starting to get on my nerves, being my shadow okay? Don't you have to be back to work?" I ask

"Screw the job...I've taken a leave of absence. And it's just too fuckin' bad if you don't particularly want my excellent companionship. Got it? You got no choice in the matter, bro...so just fogitabout-it!" he says.

"So...for how long do you intend to be in my grille, man?" I ask.

"That depends on you. For as long as it takes for you to stop feelin' sorry for yourself and decide to get back in the game. In the meantime...get used it," he says.

One of the most difficult calls I've every had to make is to notify Marla's family of her passing. I speak with her mother over the phone. Not surprisingly, I find her very assertive with an accusatory edge in her tone...as though I was somehow responsible for her death. Despite the fact that Marla's body was consumed by the fire, her family, insists that she be interred in the family plot, in Chicago...*it is not open for discussion*. It is a very short and terse conversation, with her essentially hanging up on me.

Because I have no legal standing with Marla, and her last will and testament has her mother appointed as executrix, legally I can have no say in anything about her memorial or funeral arrangements. Before I can even object the family quickly has Marla Dyson's remains, flown to Chicago. It will of course be a closed casket. They send their son, John Jr from the Bay Area to make the arrangements for transfer. John and I meet for the first time. He is devastated by the loss of his sister. We spend the day together. He strikes me as a nice guy, and says that he's harboring no blame or responsibility toward me for the death of his sister. He goes through Marla's clothes and belongings that were in the U-haul, that I have stored in the hotel room. The antiques and lamps etcetera are stored in the underground parking structure. He sorts out the family mementos, photos, heirlooms and jewelry, and says, "Just give the rest to Goodwill...including the antiques."

The three of us go out and get blind drunk. The next day, with no goodbye, he is gone. I never hear from him or anybody else in Marla's family again.

When I call the mother again to find out when the funeral is, I am referred to the family attorney by the manservant, who says Mrs Dyson is unavailable.

The attorney tells me I will be contacted when the arrangements have been formalized. After a week of hearing nothing, I call the attorney in Chicago.

"Can you tell me when and where the memorial and funeral service are going to be held?" I ask.

"Oh...Mister Kozlov, didn't anybody from our office contact you? The memorial and the funeral was held two days ago. I'm very sorry. As you can imagine with all the chaos of preparations, you know compiling guest lists, finding a caterer to do the wake...etcetera...very challenging. I guess Mrs Dyson forgot to contact us with the information. We just found out the day before, so I guess contacting you somehow slipped through the cracks. I'm very sorry," Attorney George Flowers says.

Of course having a 'just so' proper funeral with a proper guest list, properly catered must have been emotionally draining for the model of social propriety, Mrs Dyson. *Well the good news, baby...wherever you are, glad you're not going to have to sit through your own platitudinous funeral extravaganza...*

Hawk and I had been staying at the hotel for almost two weeks, when one day over breakfast in the hotel coffee shop, he says, "Koz...staying in this hotel is the shits man. Having to eat all of our meals out...no cooking...not good. Our diet's the shits. You've got to eat Mickey or you're going to get very sick. You've lost at least 15 pounds already. Now that Marla's arrangements are resolved, let's get the hell outta here. It's not healthy for you to be around here, man. It's been almost two weeks now Mickey. There's nothing here...or..."

Hawk says.

"Or no one? Say it Hawk...she's gone. I'm not sure I want to...go on, pal," I say starting to tear up again.

"Mickey...that's how I felt after Berkeley...after that beating from the campus cop that scrambled my brains when I had to quit law school, I thought my life was over. Do you remember what you said?" he asks

"Hawk...this is different. Much different, man. She was *everything* to me," I say.

"Do you remember what you said to me, *goddammit!* Answer me!"

"I suppose you're going tell me...whether I want to hear it or not?" I say.

"Yeap...you said that if I took myself out...ofted myself, it would break *your* heart to lose me. That someday, after the pain had begun to subside that I would be okay. That I would still have you...and that someday I would *thank you* for not letting me do *something stupid*.

Well, I'm telling you...right now. *Thank you* Mickey for keeping me going. I love ya, man...now let's just jump in your truck...hit the road and get the *hell* outta Tahoe, back to Seattle. I'm beggin' ya man...there's nothing more you can do here. Let's just leave...right now. *Allons-y!* Okay *mon frere?*" he says.

"Okay man...okay. Let me think about it. But Hawk...there's something still nagging me about this whole damn thing. I still can't even imagine how this could've happened. What caused it? How could there be a natural gas leak. It would have had to be leaking from the time I left...for at least the week I was gone. Unless someone broke in, like a burglar. But even with that remote possibility....why leave the gas on? A prank? Nah...very thin.

With that amount of gas in the house over a prolonged period of a week, it would have blown long before we got there...probably even from the electrically timed night light, programed to go on at dark and off at midnight.

No...there's something I'm missin' here, man. When I finally do fall asleep at night...the same nightmares come a callin'. It's like I'm reliving it each time. They're talkin' to me, man...tellin' me something ain't right with this whole friggin' deal.

And each time I wake up, upright in the bed in a cold sweat yelling *Marly! Marly!* To the sound of the phone ringing, then...*KA-B-O-O-OM!*

Ringin Hawk. None of my phones had bell ringers...except the one in the office downstairs for my direct dedicated outbound business line only which you could never hear upstairs. All the rest were all newer DTMF key pads with ringing tones...instead of bells, including the kitchen. And just a coincidence that the phone *rang* just before the explosion...at 2 AM? And how the hell could the gas start leaking by itself.

In my nightmare from hell...I'm with Marly. Trying to comfort

her...telling her everything's going to be okay...*ha!* Just before the collapse of the ceiling...before the paramedics drag me clear, then Marly's now haunting, prophetic words just before we left for Tahoe...

*After what you told me about Pauly...dying so young...really focuses the mind on how fragile life is...with news like this, how your priorities can change overnight when you realize how vulnerable you are to the vagaries of life...that you're not invincible.
Whatever time you and I may have left, I want to spend with you Mickey...and live each day with you...as if each day may be our last. I love you Mickey...*

I keep seeing the gas flex line from the wall fitting jet...snaking loose...spitting flames. The stove was completely gone...blown away, probably acting like shrapnel on Marla's legs. But the coupling that *would* have been connected to the stove is intact on the flex line...not damaged. The explosion would have severed the soft copper flex line leaving the coupling connected to the stove. Makes no sense, man I gotta go back out there...to the house, take another look," I say

"Okay, man. Now that's more like it...you're startin' to actually *think* again. I know it's tough Mickey, and man if there was any way I could make it easier for you...to take some of your pain on to me, you know I'd do it in a New York minute. But one thing you do not need right now is pity...especially self-pity. You're startin' to come around...a good sign, pally. And you're right...something really stinks and it ain't the smell of natural gas.

So...if it will help put your mind at rest...let's go, right now! But...after we do that I want you to promise that we'll leave. Go back to Seattle. Okay?" he says.

"Hawk...all I can promise ya is that I'll consider it. Let's go!" I say.

It's been almost two weeks since the explosion. With Hawk driving my truck, as we get closer, I started to break out in a cold sweat. My stomach is doing jumping jacks.

Finally, we pull up to where *Casa Nevada* used to be...*our* home...*our* future...for Marla and I. *My gawd*, it's almost totally leveled. I get the tennis ball in the throat...big time.

It's a beautiful day. The spectacular view of the lake from the street, now totally unobstructed belies the horror of my loss of Marla. I sit in the truck, staring in disbelief, my right hand shaking as I reach for the door handle...*maybe this wasn't such a good idea...*

"Mickey...you okay, man?"

"Yea...just give me a minute to process this," I say.

"Okay...I'm going to get out and have a look. Take as long as you need."

Hawk gets out. I watch him walk over to where the kitchen used to be, as he ducks under the yellow tape set up by the fire department, I'm filled with deep sense of appreciation for his unconditional friendship and love. Maybe...just maybe...I'll stick around. At least until I can get to the bottom of what happened here.

I finally manage to compose myself enough to open the door, when I am struck the acrid smell of burnt structure, transporting me back to the horrific night. Something I had experienced before, while investigating fire losses of other peoples homes but never had such a violent reaction.

I now can fully appreciate the comments of the owners when they said that the unique smell, henceforth forever, triggered some deep visceral response, a gag reflex like an aversion to food that had caused food poisoning, that made it almost impossible to dig through the remains, even for their salvageable memoirs. I immediately blow my breakfast. *Shit. I do not* want to be here. But I've got to find out what happened...*for Marla*. I rinse out my mouth with a some bottled water from the truck.

"Hey, Mick...you got a shovel or something in the truck, to move some of the debris?" Hawk asks.

I open the rear tailgate of the camper shell, and pull out a shovel, something that most people who live in the mountains where there's heavy snow fall, always carry with them to help themselves or others dig out if stuck. I usually carry two, a snow shovel and a spade tip. I walk over and duck under the tape, handing the spade tip shovel to Hawk, keeping the snow shovel.

"Be careful, man. That floor is probably unstable. You could step right through it, big boy...probe it with the shovel...hard, before you step," I say.

"Got it. Mick...so what are we looking for here?"

"Okay...first you try to find the gas flex line that went to the stove. I'll look for the phone that would have been in the kitchen...closest to the gas leak," I say pointing to where the stove would have been.

After about 10 minutes of moving debris Hawk says, "I found it...still connected to the wall pipe. Yea...you're right, the coupling is intact on the stove end," Hawk says.

"Good...let me get the tool box out of the truck...and I'll break it loose. But first I want to take some pictures of it," I say.

I go back to the truck and get the tool box which I, like most mountain dwellers, always carry with some wrenches, screwdrivers and jointed pliers, in case I have to do some rudimentary road side repairs, like a water hose or fan belt tightening. I also get out one of my 35mm SLR cameras which I always keep in a day-pack in the truck fully loaded with film, formerly for my investigation work, now for art photography like landscapes and sunsets.

I hand Hawk the tool box, and take 7 pictures, 3 establishment shots, one from each side, one from dead on and 4 close-ups, one with the macro on

the coupling that was connected from the wall to the stove.

While Hawk is removing the flex line, I take the snow shovel and start moving debris where I think the kitchen wall phone would have ended up. After rooting around for about five minutes...*bingo*.

I find the kitchen wall phone...and right next to it, another desk phone. The plastic is melted on both of them, but I can make out the metal base plates. The wall phone essentially dissolved from the heat, but the desk phone, some of the plastic is still unmelted. It's orange, the same color as the phone from my office downstairs! The base plate and bell ringer being metal is still intact. Before doing anything else I take numerous photos of the two phones, right where I found them.

"Hawk...come over here. See that phone with the bells...*somebody* moved it to kitchen from downstairs. The ringing...*of course*. With the flex line totally removed from the stove, the house especially the kitchen would fill up with gas in maybe an hour or so. Someone had to release the flex line after the light timer turned on...and off for the night light, my guess, sometime after midnight when it was programmed to turn off. It had to be placed there...in the kitchen close to the gas jet plugged into the wall outlet, after unplugging the wall phone. The spark from the bell solenoid would be enough to ignite the copious ambient gas fumes. The wall phone tone would not create the necessary spark...like the bell phone. That would explain the call...just before the explosion at 2 AM. They would've had to be close by to visually coordinate the call with our entry. In my nightmares, I remember the ringing just before it blew. *This was no fucking accident!*" I say.

"*Dammit, man...*we're talking some heavy shit here...like *murder*," Hawk says.

I then place what's left of both phones along with the gas flex line in a spare pouch in my large day-pack in which I carry the camera and film.

"Yea...obviously I wasn't supposed to survive it. Who ever did this wanted to take out me...and poor Marla. They didn't figure on me not being inside when the phone rang. If Marla hadn't gotten out of the truck first, I would have smelled the gas...and maybe been able to save her. *Jesus...*this house has been friggin' cursed...since the day I bought it. First with Annie Trudeau...and now Marla."

I take another 10 photos before touching anything, to preserve and record the scene. I am now in full investigation mode. After years of experience, now in my element, I start to function in a cool, collected methodical way. It feels good to be temporarily distracted from my overwhelming grief of losing Marla.

"Any idea who'd want to do something like this to you, man?" Hawk says.

"Yea...more than an idea. Much more..." I say.

Proving it and payback would be quite another matter.

:: AMERICAN AMNESIA — m.a.kominsky ::

But I have nothing but time to plan and savor la vengeance.

- Chapter 35 -

About a minute after I knock on the front door, with a frenzied dog yapping in the background, the door opens. It's Tom Malloy...my next door neighbor. He's in his early sixties and has lived in Tahoe for over 30 years. He married a woman of mixed American Indian descent, her nickname is Dolly from Dolores.

"Mick...Hi, how ya doin'? Com'mon in," he says warmly, opening the door widely inviting Hawk and I in.

"Honestly...been better Tommy. This is my friend Hawk Shapiro," I say.

"Pleasure," Hawk says engulfing the hand of the relative slight Tom Malloy.

"Same here," Tom says obviously slightly taken aback by Hawk's unusual Mr Clean appearance and massive muscular development.

"Dolly...Mick's here. Teddy...quiet!" He yells over the frantic barking of Teddy their Toy Schnauzer.

Dolly comes out of the kitchen and immediately gives me a hug and a pat on the cheek. She's a short compact woman, slender with strong features and kind coffee eyes. Still a handsome lady, with long pure white hair, drawn back into a ponytail with a Native American beaded barrette.

"Mick...I'm so sorry for your loss, son. Is there anything we can do to help?"

"Thanks for the kind words, Dolly."

"Would you like some coffee or anything to drink?" Dolly says.

"No thank you, Dolly. We can't stay. By the way I didn't get a chance to thank you for calling the ambulance and the fire department that uh...night. Thanks," I say.

"Of course Mick. We're so deeply sorry about your lady friend. What a terrible accident. The fire almost took our house too, if the fire department had arrived when they did," he says.

"Tom what I'm about to tell you and Dolly must be kept in strict confidence. Okay? This may not have been an accident," I say.

"Accident?...no way. Nothing personal Mick...but it's the curse...the curse of my people, the Washoe Indians for what has been done to their beautiful sacred land. All the development...casinos...condos and timeshare...*da ow a ga*...mispronounced Tahoe "edge of the lake" in Washoe...and the ancient ceremonial Cave Rock just up the road...where some of my ancestors were buried, until they built those huge ridiculous houses...*on their graves*," Dolly says bitterly.

"Yea...I'm beginning to think that this was *much more* than an accident myself. I'm just curious...did perhaps either one of you see or hear anything or anyone unusual around my house, oh, maybe a day or so before the fire?" I ask.

"Well...now that you mention it, Mick...the night of the fire sometime after midnight, Teddy started barking like crazy. I've got insomnia...usually don't fall asleep until well after midnight. Anyway Teddy was going crazy...as you know, that *damn* dog does that with every *damn* car that passes our front door but usually settles down after they pass, but this time he kept it up. So when I looked out the window, I noticed your exterior spotlight on the garage, was on. I guess it's on some sort of a motion detector. There was a car...no, a truck, parked in the driveway, one that I didn't recognize. I thought it might be a friend or a relative...so I didn't think anything of it," Tom says.

"Have you told anybody besides us about what you saw that night?" I ask.

"Nope...nobody asked," Tom says.

"Good. Keep it that way...at least until I have a chance to look into this further. I don't want to alarm you but don't open the door for anyone you don't know. Okay? Do you remember anything about the truck? The license plate number? How long was it there?" I ask.

"Are we in any danger Mick?" Dolly asks anxiously.

"No...as long as Teddy here's on duty. I doubt that anybody could get close enough...but just be on the safe side. Can you remember anything about the truck or the driver?" I ask.

"Well if the same truck comes around...he'll be staring at the business end of my 12 gauge. Yea...so anyway, it was black...a newer Suburban. Couldn't make out the plate but I could tell it was California by the color since we see so many across Stateline. Was there maybe half-an-hour then left...about an hour before you came home," Tom says.

"Were you able to make out anything about the driver...anything at all would be helpful," I say.

"No...sorry...never gotta look at 'em. The windows of the Suburban were tinted...black, ya know like a president's car. Vice-president Bush would call it a Texas Cadillac," he says with a grin.

"Anything else you can remember?" I ask.

"Well, there was one other thing. It had one of those roof things...like a black box but sorta sleek, ya know. It had large white letters on the side, started with a 'T' something...ended with an 'E'.

"Probably a THULE molded fiberglass roof box...very high-end, and very aerodynamic," Hawk interjects.

"Anything else, Tom?" I say.

"Not really...sorry Mick. So what are you going to do? Are you going

to rebuild?" Tom asks.

"Tom...I'm not sure what I'm going to do. But I think I'll be gone...for quite a while. It'll take several weeks...if not months to totally resolve this with the insurance company. In the meantime, sorry for the eyesore. Here's my mobile phone number, in case you have to get a hold of me...or remember anything else. Okay? And thanks again, neighbor...for everything. You've been really helpful," I say writing my number down on a page of my spiral notebook, then tearing it out for him.

"Okay Mick. Good luck to ya...please stay in touch. You've always been a good neighbor. Dolly and I'd hate to lose you," Tom says with Dolly nodding in agreement.

"Well...I don't intend on letting that happen. Thanks again," I say as I rise, shaking Tom's hand and a returning a hug from Dolly. Hawk and I exit, and climb into the truck.

Well now...a lot to process. Maybe it is time to get out of Tahoe, so my mind can function free of the memories here, both the good...and the bad. I've got some serious reflection...and yes, some investigation to do. I'll have to decide whether I've got enough to go to the local police. Right now, with no concrete leads on the vehicle or the driver...it's pretty thin. They'd probably just dismiss me—postpartum grief...and survivor's guilt, and paranoia.

I'll wait until I can flesh it out a little better, then decide. Nothing more can be done here in Tahoe. I'd have to rent a place and start all over with everything...cooking stuff, clothes...everything, gone from the fire, except my toxic state of mind. All the negotiation with the insurance company on the settlement, on the house and contents, can be done by phone and mail.

"Okay. Where to *Kemo Sabe*?" Hawk asks.

"Well, Tonto...thought you'd never ask. Seattle...and make it snappy. The sooner I see Tahoe in the rear view mirror...the better. Besides F-redo is probably sitting on pins and uh...Space Needles, just waiting for your illustrious return," I say.

"You're a riot Alice...a regular riot," Ralph Cramden says.

"Sheez...what a grouch," says Ed Norton.

- Chapter 36 -

We check out the hotel, and by 2 PM we're on the open highway headed North for Seattle Washington. Gotta admit, *Gawd* it feels good to have Tahoe in the rear view mirror.

If there could be *any* good news in this, it is that everything I owned and I *considered* important, and *thought* mattered, is gone. I am essentially a *tabula rasa*, with no material or otherwise, encumbrances to define who I really am. But more importantly who...or what, I want to become.

Several days after the fire, I had been forced to totally re-tool my wardrobe. All my expensive custom tailored freak-sized 50 XLT suits, sport coats and slacks...gone. So I'm relegated to the Tahoe fashion sensibility of Levi red-tag and flannel shirts, with an alternate pair of hiking boots, the only things available in my size in Tahoe. It'd probably play like bumpkin-ville in Seattle, with its *True* Black Gothic look.

"Hey Koz...got any remorse...ya know like nostalgia about leaving Tahoe?" Hawk asks trying to make small talk on the long drive to Seattle to distract me from my grief.

"It's kinda bittersweet, but nah...I guess at some level, occasionally percolating to the surface, there's always been a deep sense of ambivalence about living in Tahoe. Such a dichotomy. The breath-taking beauty of it...the once pristine landscape before the invasion of the gaming corporations, then the real estate and timeshare developers, never far behind...with all the side dishes that come with it, including local governmental corruption and backroom dealing. The Casinos are the biggest single industry employer in Tahoe, on both sides of Stateline, Nevada and California, and they never let the respective local governments forget it," I say.

"Sounds sorta like the gaming equivalent of the one-factory rust belt mill town. Play by our rules...dance to our music. And if you ain't dancin' fast enough...we'll take all our jobs and your economy with us," Hawk says.

"Yea...but it's all really a big bluff, for now at least. Gaming is only legal in Nevada...and since only 1978 Atlantic City New Jersey. Their options are actually very limited about location...or relocation, for now. But now there has been talk for quite a while of gaming venues being expanded...and legalized and built on sovereign Indian land, owned by various Native America tribes, managed by the large gaming corporations. It's now a real threat. So there's an uneasy but symbiotic relationship...mutual benefit, but very fragile. Sorta like the bully on the playground whose behavior is mean and predatory and even though you find him contemptible, you dance to his tune to appease him...so as not to unnecessarily, at least, piss him off.

But it's a deal with the devil...the gambling...the prostitution and the drugs. And where there's gamblin', the huge potential for profit, one doesn't

have to turn over many rocks, man to find the dark and sinister underbelly of organized crime. The inherent evil in the gaming industry...ruthlessly exploiting the expertly marketed jackpot mentality, the age-old hope of hittin' *the big one*. Slots are the biggest revenue source. Always...*just one more roll of nickles* for the addicted widowed and lonely blue-haired granny's suckin' on coffin nails, feeding the voracious slots their modest retirement nest egg...one nickle at a time."

"Lonely hearts...vulnerable to anything that can distract them from the crushing loneliness in their lives," Hawk says.

"Yea...desperately seeking *some*, even if temporary joy in their miserable lives. More die from a lonely heart. Compulsive gambling, indivisible with substance abuse. The famous loss-leader casino buffets and free cocktails...all you can eat, drink...and lose, causing some serious pain and human misery including home foreclosures, destroying families under the guise of harmless entertainment," I say.

"Jesus man...you gotta a serious boil on your backside. Lance Boil...M-D, at your service."

"Thanks Doc...put it on my tab," I say.

So...like Las Vegas, only with pine cones, eh? Hmm...do I sense one of Koz's moral parables comin'?" he asks.

"Yea...sorry man. Already came and went. Interesting...until I said it out loud I guess I never realized how much it was buggin' me," I say.

"It's okay Koz. Time to jettison some baggage...and lighten your load, man. Go for it...you're on a roll," Hawk says grinning.

"And prostitution...Nevada is the only state of the 50 with legalized prostitution, with legal brothels not more than 20 miles from the state capitol, Carson City where the state legislators refuse to ban prostitution. Probably out of professional courtesy," I say.

"Hmm...the faint aroma of a business opportunity...of perhaps filling a vacuum in the marketplace?" he says sniffing the air.

"Yea...a male massage and escort service? I know you're just kiddin' but just in case, *Fogitabout-it!* Gay sex is a crime here. Some serious sodomy laws still on the books. Red-neck Nevada is still living in the Ol' Wild West, man. The wide-open, rugged individual John Wayne B-S, a mythic cowboy mentality...gay *gauchos* need not apply," I say

"So no pink necks, eh? Sounds like they're still stuck in the Fifties, man."

"Yea...the 1850s. Still the boom or bust mentality of the late 1800s, like Virginia City, 15 miles from the state capitol...the gold and silver mining boom town on top of the Comstock Lode of the 1860s. The same strike-it-rich mentality that spawned the emergence of the gaming industry in Nevada," I say.

And even though Tahoe is where I had first met Marla Dyson while producing the telethon for ACT, after Marla's death just being there, now evokes within me, a rancid bitter after-taste. Because among other things, it is initially the path that eventually led to my involvement with ACT Inc., and Captain Ahab, one J. Murdock Mahoney.

As Pauly...and Marly had bitterly lamented—I too, was far from proud of the things I had done with...and for J. Murdock Mahoney. *I wish the hell I had never met that son-of-a-bitch...*

And Marla...*for you, babe*. I still have some unfinished *bidness* to conduct with Jace Mahoney. But I'll have to bide my time, until I can prove that he's behind Marly's death.

Then I will take great pleasure in personally administering Koz-assisted Karma to one J. Murdock Mahoney...for Marly, and yes, the kid, Trey Mahoney.

And it ain't over, until I say it's over...

- Chapter 37 -

I'd been staying with Hawk for about 6 months in Seattle until I could settle with the insurance company on the house and the contents including the production equipment. Thankfully I had a business equipment rider on the homeowner's policy.

In the end, after doing research on land values, it made more sense not to rebuild my lake view home, *Casa Nevada*, but instead demolish the remains, and sell the lot to a builder. This would allow me to move on—to make a clean break with Tahoe. Because of the stunning view, the lot was prime location. It still had a useable grandfathered foundation making it be immediately build-able. A virgin lot often required extensive and costly watershed environmental impact studies and mitigation measures. As a result, I had only listed it for two weeks when I got a full price offer. So I was now, physically and financially out of Tahoe. That with the proceeds from the insurance settlement for the contents including production equipment, gave me a nice little asset to move on and start over.

Hawk continued to work at Microsoft, but was getting burned out. Big time. Excessively long hours, not getting any fresh air, sunshine or exercise, being sedentary inside all day staring at a computer screen. With Body Mass Index of over 40, he was not flattered, or amused with my comparison to Orson Wells.

In the meantime, I had reconnected with Max Mesmer, President of Mesmer Strategies Inc. the political consultant I had met working with ACT Inc. when I was flirting with the position offered by Jason Mahoney as liaison with the Entrepreneurial Corporate Caucus, or ECC. That of course, never materialized. More later on that.

While in Seattle, Max started sending me production work for some of his clients. Because I was just starting out, my rates were very competitive, which was always a consideration for *Mesmerizin' Maxie*. Even though Max was not a bad guy, he could be a real pain in the ass to deal with. But he always paid his bills in full...and on time, somewhat of an anomaly in the production business. So I put up with his constant *kvetching*.

Some of my production work, the more edgy, *angry* political campaign stuff that I had written and directed that ran on network broadcast caught the attention of some national ad agencies.

I guess at some level because I was still *very angry* at the world, for having taken Marla from me, the anger found its outlet, and projected itself into the cynical scorched earth, but highly effective, political ads that I wrote, produced and directed. My dubious reputation as a take-no-prisoners contract hit-man—a hired character assassin for the Media Mafia, was born.

Like the notorious Italian Mafia, or the Cosa Nostra, my peeps, the

Media Mafia functioned below the radar, behind the curtain, manipulating and controlling the levers of power, defining the rules of engagement. If you were “made” or a 'wise guy' insider, you were within the inner circle of power. The local politicians danced to your music, through intimidation, bribery and corruption, or they did not get 'elected'—an atmosphere of a constant tacit threat, and not necessarily metaphorically, '*sleepin' wit da fishes*' if politicians attempted to confront the status quo.

With the media, that meant that the veracity of the message delivered to the public was often subservient to the interests of the messenger, or the clients, who created vast sums of revenue in advertising for the media conglomerates.

In 1985, during the free-market deregulation free for all Reagan administration under FCC Chairman Mark S. Fowler, a communications attorney who had served on Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign staff in 1976 and 1980, the FCC released its report on General Fairness Doctrine Obligations for off-air broadcast media, which required the holders of broadcast licenses both to present controversial issues of public importance and to do so in a manner that was honest, equitable, and balanced. Now stating that *the doctrine hurt the public interest and violated free speech rights guaranteed by the First Amendment*, the ruling essentially abolished any semblance of honest, balanced content on broadcast, which would be extended to include the new and emerging content of satellite delivered exclusively on cable tv systems, like CNN, and later most profoundly, Fox News.

As government regulatory oversight of the hegemonic concentration of corporate media through mergers and acquisition by large faceless corporations was relaxed by the DOJ, and the FTC. The traditional gatekeepers of the sacred constitutional duty entrusted to the Forth Estate. Now the highly concentrated media conglomerates owned and controlled much of print and broadcast journalism media companies...subliminally shaping the content and the prioritization of *who sees what...and when...* which began to have a profound effect on the perception and opinions of the *vox populi*.

Corporate media gradually began to commingle and conflate news and information with entertainment and celebrity in an effort to distract, dissemble and polarize news to increase ratings, and therefore the CPM, which translated into an obscene increase in advertising revenue. The advertisers, very large multinational corporations like Big Oil, and Big Pharma, could now heavily influence, if not control the news cycle, and suppress anything that was potentially harmful to their economic interest or invited governmental regulation, oftentimes to the detriment of the media consuming public.

The huge multinational corporations including media which had evolved into the Fifth Estate which now included hundreds of unregulated-content satellite networks, became political kingmakers...or assassins, through political contributions and control of the content and news cycle—more sanitary and sophisticated but no less sinister and effective as their heavy-

handed Italian Mafia brethren. It redefined public moral hazard for access to true and accurate information.

I began to get some jobs doing the creative including writing and directing TV commercials for Fortune 500 companies, hiring local contract production companies to do the actual shooting...then post-producing them myself at a contract post house which was often very expensive.

The work often required travel to New York and L.A., which gave me an opportunity to spend some time with friends, most of whom lived in Marina del Rey, Santa Monica or Malibu. So I got some much needed beach time. I really didn't mind the travel because the money was very good and frankly it was a good distraction from my occasional bouts with depression over the death of Marla Dyson.

Pretty soon I had more work than I could handle by myself, and by that time, Hawk was ready for a change. So he left Microsoft with a handsome stock portfolio—Microsoft got a huge bump in revenues and stock value after the release of Windows 2.0. So Hawk came to work with me as an equal partner.

We formed a production company in Seattle, but at some point we realized, that we'd need to have a bigger space to accommodate some of our production work, including having a sound stage for chroma keying and a high-end luxurious post-production suite, where the clients could come to view the actual production work, and sit-in on the edit decision process. Even though Hawk had little production experience, he was a quick study, and dove into the technology, like most endeavors with Hawk, with passion and intensity. Since production was rapidly evolving away from analog to a totally digital platform, his knowledge and facility with computers and software programming, would be a particularly invaluable asset as we migrated into the digital production age. He had particularly good innate creative instincts in editing...something that can be taught, but only to a degree.

Looking around Seattle, we found the cost of property, plus the remodel costs to create the kind of space necessary for a first class production and post-production facility, was prohibitive. Forget about new construction.

During our visit to the Pacific Northwest, I had remembered how Marla and I were smitten with Moody Seaport, a tony little maritime enclave about 100 miles North of Seattle right on Interstate 5...about an hour and a half away, a direct shot to Seattle and only about 45 minutes to Vancouver BC. Moody Seaport had its own airport with inter-connect service to SeaTac airport and Vancouver YVR airport.

About a year after Hawk and I had been doing business out of Seattle, during a lull from getting all our regional political and congressional campaign ads done, we decided to take a trip up to Moody Seaport, just to have a look around.

Studying the maps of the area, I had noticed a very large lake just a few miles East of the downtown corridor, called Cascadia Lake. We retraced

the route Marla and I had taken almost two years earlier, through Skagit Valley, then taking the scenic Chuckanut Drive into the delightful Fairhaven area of Moody Seaport

When we arrived, I connected with a realtor that advertised they specialized in real estate around Cascadia Lake. The lake was unique, in that it was quite long and somewhat narrow, compared to Lake Tahoe. It was a beautiful decent sized finger lake about 12 miles long and 1 to 2 miles wide. Because it was essentially the reservoir for the City of Moody Seaport, the water was crystal clear, and the surrounding watershed was lush with native vegetation and cedar and fir trees, with spectacular fall colors from the Alder, Maple and Cottonwood.

After spending a few days, staying at a local B&B, Hawk and I both decided that Moody Seaport had some potential as an alternative to the high property costs, and cost of living of Seattle, along with the now infamous Seattle traffic, with an all too common major metropolis I-5 sig-alert, *overturned gas tanker on fire...watch out for flying shrapnel, craters...and body parts on the roadway*, often gridlocked at any time of day, much like Los Angeles.

So we decided to view several properties, to get some idea of property costs, running anywhere from one-third to one-half of Seattle for the same square footage in commensurate neighborhoods and amenities. About 12 properties later, after viewing assorted *bastard modern to neo-non-descript*, architectural nightmares, we realized that there was probably no existing structure that could incorporate the commercial and residential uses that I was looking for.

By the time I had spent all that money trying to renovate something, including extensively upgrading the electrical power, I could probably custom build from the ground up, including extra tall 7 foot door jamb. After 30 years, I was plenty tired of braining my gourd on 6'8" door jambs. I would design it to the necessary specs including more electrical capacity for studio lighting, with high ceilings for a light grid for the actual shooting studio, and with ample ventilation and air conditioning. Also, a complete high-end lavish post-production suite where the client could participate in the editing decision process. I would also include a complete two bedroom two full bath apartment, a nicely appointed perk for my clients to stay at when coming in town for production work.

Combining my business with my living space, included many benefits like no rent on studio space, and tax write-off advantages and on a busy day even if there was a little gridlock around the kitchen coffee pot, maybe a 2 minute morning commute—max.

Additionally, for the first time, I wanted a completely separate, dedicated workshop and studio, to seriously pursue my painting and sculpture, which I had put aside for far too long.

So we decided to look at undeveloped lots, instead of improved lots

with dwellings. We finally came across a lot, right on Cascadia Lakefront on the Southwest Shore about 10 minutes from the downtown corridor of Moody Seaport, just about a mile from the Moody Falls park, with lovely water falls, arched by a beautiful indigenous sandstone bridge built during the Great Depression. There were miles of pristine hiking trails along Moody Creek, which ultimately emptied into Cascadia Bay.

It was a large lot with just a modest seasonal cabin on it, probably built in the post-war 50s when the country was experiencing record middle class prosperity and upward mobility. It was under an estate sale; the surviving widow had recently passed away, and the family wanted to liquidate the estate including all real estate holdings for cash to divide up among the surviving children who all lived out of area, so it was priced to sell quickly.

The cabin, actually more of an elaborate boathouse was charming—it had some potential as a rental. With a little extra work, it would be big enough to give us a place to live while building the new structure. After the construction was complete, Hawk could stay there, since working together would be challenging enough so that we wouldn't be living on top of one another as well. Because he was still doing some work for Microsoft as an outsourced contractor and consultant, Hawk would keep his house in Capitol Hill in Seattle, which would also give us a base of operations in Seattle if we needed it.

After much discussion, we decided that I would buy the lot and build the production facility, workshop artist's studio and my residence on my own with the proceeds the insurance money and the sale of the lot in Lake Tahoe. The cost of the lot was about half of what I had received for the sale of the Tahoe lot, and construction costs, with the lower snow load requirement were about 30% cheaper. There would be enough money left-over to upgrade the existing boat dock— deep enough for a keeled sailboat of about 30 feet. Hawk could live there rent free in the boathouse, until he made up his mind where he wanted to finally settle down.

So we closed the deal, and returned to Seattle, where I begin sketching out some ideas for a design. I had always had a keen interest in architecture, as I started out as an architecture major at UCB, so this was a creative challenge that I heartily embraced. Now that the building lot with the setting and sun exposure was identified, I begin designing it in earnest.

So after two months I had what I considered to be a good utilitarian design incorporating both commercial and residential elements, about 5,000 square feet. But my art studio was what I was most excited about; an additional 1,000 square feet of dedicated heated workspace with lots of additional electrical, including 220VAC for an arc welder.

Twelve foot ceilings, with many overhead light fixtures with lots of windows and three roll-up full size doors, which could be completely open in the summer months. Creative Nirvana.

So now the task was to get financing, and identify a licensed

contractor, which would be required to get the construction loan. I breezed through the financing qualification because the loan to value was less than 30%.

The realtor, Vincent, *my friends call me Vinnie* Costanza who handled the purchase of the lot had a 'friend', Sonny, who also happened to be a builder who he represented as specializing in lakefront construction.

Thus, I embarked on Michaelangelo's Great Architectural Adventure; the Sistine Chapel it ain't, but it would prove to be a true test of one's faith *the Gods of Construction*.

It is not uncommon for victims of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder to block out a past trauma.

I don't remember much after the contract was signed with Santino Salvatore, La Seconda, *the second...you can call me Sonny...you know like the Sonny in the Godfather*. Even with his 2 inch cowboy cheaters, still a good foot shorter than *moi*. In our first encounter Sonny was like a male dog sniffing out the other, while not so subtly fingering the massive gold rope chain, focusing one's attention on his *Travolt-ing* furry chest, framed by an open Saturday Night Fever polyester shirt. Very Italian, with his own unique Early Disco-Napoleonic kinda look.

Besides making sure that I was aware of his manly bulging *bona fides* within the first 5 minutes volunteering, *yeap...in the good ol' days...lived in Alaska for nigh on 5 years...Kodiak, where I killed many a Griz*. Not shot, but *killed* leaving open the unspoken possibility of a *mano a mano* encounter with a Grizzly bear. A *paisan* Jersey boy ending up in Alaska? Hmm...the distinct whiff of a witness protection placement.

Not long after that joyous moment, *oh, by the way* Sonny announced, while he carefully caressed his perfect hair, that he had left wife number 2 of 22 years for a *very mature* 22 year old, and he could sure use an advance to enable him to get 2 tickets to see his girlfriend's favorite country singer. *Garth Brooks Tickets ain't exactly cheap...*he enlightened. The perfect preamble for my Homeric Home Odyssey below.

Always a quick study, it was at this point that I begin to suspect that I was being conned by a pro, coupled with the fact that he had christened his brand new 22 foot Cabin Cruiser *Koz-ation*, an apparent gift attribution. I was not flattered by the homage. I begin to sense a pair of patterns emerging, as he peeled out in his Corvette convertible with the personalized license plate "2 MUCH" serenaded with Sinatra's, I Gotta Be Me, blasting. About 2 weeks later, you guessed it, 22 days to be exact, she moved to Nashville to be closer to Garth.

2 bad.

But the good news is that Sonny had found religion to console him for the loss of his true love, and the nasty hit he took on his divorce. The bad

news—after he had converted from Numerology to The Holy Church of the Rush, as with most new converts, he became a zealot, relentlessly preaching against the evils of The Great Satan, the Liberal with daily full-volume AM radio indoctrinations playing from the time he arrived at the job site until he broke for his typical two hour lunch and nap, exhausted from the emotional drain of absorbing the feverish sermon of the day on how America was *going to hell in a hand basket...from the Commie liberals*.

The AM radio deity, Rush Limbaugh, uncomplicated Sonny's life immeasurably of all those messy little moral conundrums, replaced with much less complicated binary bumper sticker solutions: *Rush is Right...and Right is Right and Left is Wrong*. Under the circumstances, I thought it prudent to remain in the liberal closet until the project was completed, then invite the unsuspecting Sonny to a Tofu Burger Barbecue Coming Out House Warming Party with normal people.

"So...where's the beef, unh *paisan*?" muttered Sonny.

Ah, revenge is sweet, when served cold with no red meat. A true *Kodiak* moment.

After 2 weeks of his love-sick pining of love lost, no-shows and general malfeasance I'd finally had enough of Sonny the Builder's burlesque. So I made him a Godfather offer...one that he couldn't refuse. I wouldn't file a complaint with the state contractor's licensing board, and I'd let him remain general contractor of record, pay him a fixed amount essentially for doing nothing other than the use of his contractor's license to satisfy the lender, if...and only if, he promised to never show up again. Not surprisingly, with feigned indignation, he countered with an obvious bluff *two-shay* demand for more than was offered. Sonny and I reached an amicable agreement, and I never saw him again until the day of the final building inspection almost a year later when he flew in *specialy* from Nashville, where he had 'relocated' now as Donato, *you can call me Donnie*, Antonio Morandi. *Jezuz...another Donnie*. Flashing his new business card...*DAM! Insurance Broker*...my guess was if you don't pay up for protection, Broker becomes Breaker, as in knee caps.

Mick's Great Adventure like all great moral fables, needs to start by laying a proper foundation. There was no turning back...my fate was cast in cement. His name was Roy and he loved country music. His favorite: *My Baby Done Left Me in My Pickup Truck and Now I miss IT so much!* How do I know this? A cassette player with *auto-continuous-rewind-play auto-continuous-rewind-play auto continuous-rewind-play* is a dangerous, if not lethal instrumentality in the hands of a Man-child. By the time the foundation was done, I was ready to murder Boy Roy.

"Gotta a plumb bob", I innocently queried. "Ya mean Cuz'in Joe Bob? He don't work here no more." My guess is he jumped on the first Greyhound back to Bubbaville, to *ex-cape* from Boy Roy.

To Roy, a mason's level served no useful purpose other than it was the perfect Appalachia Chic accessory to compliment the rifle rack in his

pickup. He kept beating on the level muttering something about *the damn bubble won't stay put in the middle.*

The Framer's name was Rob, a dropout from Trade Tech, *majoring in Technical Writing, with a minor in Major Eastern Religions*, he proudly announced. He elevated sophistry to a new level of artistry. To him, the pre-job bid was a mere formality that was designed to get him the job. Rob never lost a job to a low bidder and he never finished a job below the high bidder.

To a Framer, a Change Order, a CO, is a more powerful tool of revenue than any other tool in his tool box. I begin to suspect that Rob was not a derivative of Robert, but more of a descriptive term of his business practices when the avalanche of CO's started. Not much of a Framer, but he was positively eloquent in his writings. "The Art of The Change Order"; he made The-Art-of-the Deal Donald Trump look like a chump. To add a small 2'0 x 4'0 window became a case of felonious "feng shui" to wit:

An architectural reconfiguration of the vertical structural members to positively amend to the ventilational capacity by eight square feet of the Southwest facing wall by means of the addition of a horizontal sill, supported by multiple cripples, a load bearing header of sufficient strength commensurate with the span which is supported on each end by a jack stud firmly affixed by multiple pneumatically injected 16p fasteners on each side to a king stud.

As your Framing/Feng Shui Facilitator I strongly urge you to consider the lifelong spiritual consequences of adding a yang without a corresponding yin in the form of another balancing window facing North.

which took longer to write than to actually do the work.

The plumber, whose charming and well-earned nickname was "Leaky" LeBrun pressure tested the system after the sheet rock was up and painted etc. Leaks? Does feces flow downhill? New meaning to the term "wet dream"...a wet nightmare.

The electrician aka "Sparky" ran several circuits in which he failed to furnish a circuit back to the breaker panel. Shocking you say?

The insulation guys aka "Larry, Moe and Curly" negligently wrapped a cold water supply line in an exterior wall so when the gas company failed to provide ample pressure/volume due to over-demand the plumbing froze and ruptured, trashing the hardwood floor and ceramic tile floor causing \$15,000 physical damage.

Ah...but the good news is that \$2,000 later, my analyst thinks my prospects for a complete and full recovery from *domicilus constructus traumati* are better than, uh...2 to one, as long as I avoid flushing the toilet in the master bath...while the lights are on.

- Chapter 38 -

New production work had ceased almost overnight just after the beginning of the Gulf War in Iraq in August of 1990. The phone had almost completely stopped ringing, and several clients had decided to postpone or cancel production work because of the precariousness of the economy over concerns that the flow of American's economic engine...the *black blood* from the Middle East would be disrupted.

An eerie air of collective apprehension had fallen over the country because of the uncertainty of the world economy. My reverie of images of Marla, was rudely interrupted when I was startled by the ringing phone, as it was coming up on the fifth anniversary of losing the love of my life, my Marla, in the explosion and fire of *Casa Nevada* in Lake Tahoe.

"Kozmick Productions," I answer hopeful that it's some new production work.

"Bonjour Michel! Comment avez-vous été mon homme de la montagne"? The familiar voice on the other end says warmly...*how have you been my mountain man?*

My gawd...that vivacious voice always twinged with a bit of irony. It could only be Annie Trudeau.

"Annie?" I ask in disbelief. We had not spoken since we had parted in Tahoe, when she had to returned to Los Angeles after our near disastrous run-in with the DEA at *Casa Nevada*.

I had never told Marla, that after about 6 months of our parting, Annie had started sending me long letters, the first of which were rambling almost incoherent apologies asking for my forgiveness, begging for a second chance. The rest were returned unopened, but they never stopped coming for almost a year. I guess that's when her male obsession with *moi*, was replaced another one—Jesus Christ.

"Well...does anyone else call you my mountain man, mon chere? Hmm?" the voice playfully says as if we had talked just yesterday.

I was in the midst of a profoundly nostalgic moment, bordering on bittersweet maudlin depression, lamenting my loss of Marla, as I usually do on the anniversary of her death. Hearing echos of what would turn out to be her foreshadowing dying declaration, *Mickey...I trust you...with my life, baby*. I had failed that trust so miserably, so completely, she had died a terrible death...because of me. *Gawd-dammit!*

I am filled with ambivalence on hearing the voice of a woman that I once had very strong feelings for, that I thought I knew and loved, intruding into my one man pity party.

"How did you get this phone number?" I rather ungraciously

respond.

"Well I'm so glad to hear your voice too," the always irrepressible Annie says with a giggle.

"Yea...sorry 'bout that. I was someplace else, way far away, when the phone rang," I say still flooded with conflicted emotions on hearing her voice stirring memories of our very serious relationship which ended with revelations of her consummate capacity for deception, toward me in particular, when I had discovered that she had been involved in dealing drugs, despite her intense assurances to the contrary.

Had I not received a tip-off call from my friend at El Dorado County Sheriff, Detective Randy Benson that the DEA was on the way over to execute a search warrant that morning, I'd probably still be stamping license plates as a guest of the state of Nevada.

*Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine...*says Bogey, when he learns that his ex-lover from Paris, another *femme fatale* who had deceived to him, is back in his life, the also vulnerable, also very beautiful Ingrid Bergman. Yes...there were some alarming similarities between Annie and Elsa. I'm filled with the same kind of conflicted feelings of apprehension and attraction—my lingering unquenchable appetite to immerse myself in the same wholesome beauty.

It caused me to revisit my strong physical and emotional connection I once had with Annie Trudeau. One of the last conversations Marla and I had had about our relationship moving on to the ultimate level of commitment centered on her apprehension and anxiety about whether I was over my deep feelings for Annie Trudeau. I remembered at the time, that the mere mention of her name by Marla had caused within me an inexplicable upwelling of emotion. *Where the hell did that come from...I thought I was over her.*

"Where are you calling from?" I ask.

"I'm in Seattle. Oh...and I got your phone number from your neighbor Tom. When I went by your old house to look you up about a week ago, he remembered me, and gave me your phone number. He told me about your house...and Marla. I somehow always knew you and Marla would end up together. I'm so very sorry for your loss," Annie says almost mechanically.

"Thank you for that heartfelt condolence. Why Seattle?" I ask with a tone of sarcasm...and wariness.

"I'm here with Y-W-A-M, Youth With A Mission, I work in administration, for the past year...one of our ships, of the Mercy Ship ministry the Africa Mercy has put into Seattle shipyards for some maintenance and repairs," Annie says.

"YWAM? Sorry...never heard of it," I say.

"Of course not. Mick when I returned home to my family, I realized that my life wasn't working for me. All of my family had converted to Evangelical Christians. They were on fire with the Lord Jesus Christ. I had a

born-again experience when I went to see Reverend Billy Graham with my family at the L.A. Coliseum...with 60,000 other seekers of the Gospel of Christ.

It was then that I walked down the isle with thousands of other lost souls, and said the sinner's prayer of repentance...

Dear Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner, and I ask for Your forgiveness...I believe You died for my sins and...

I impatiently interrupt her, "Well...Hallelujah for you! Annie," I say with no small twinge of sarcasm.

"And thanks for your heartfelt...uh condolences as well," she says with a giddy laugh.

"No offense intended...just heard this all before with you Annie. So what's with the ship. Some sort of Christian Love Boat kinda deal?" I ask, getting more and more annoyed with the sermonette.

This is the same gullible Annie Trudeau who started out as Roman Catholic, then made the religious rounds, first stop Scientology with the same rabid fervor, then Buddhism, and *gawd only* knows what else, before finally landing on the board with Evangelical Christianity. I'm sure due in no small part to her immersion in the proselytizing Christian culture of her family.

"Ha...yea, I guess you could say that. Actually, if you're truly interested in Youth With A Mission, we send missionaries throughout the world, including the hospital ship African Mercy...to preach the Gospel, to literally and spiritually heal by giving free surgeries for things like cleft palate...and the Good News, about salvation through Christ," Annie rotely recites as she had with the Scientology dogma. I begin to wonder if it is indicative of some kind of a character flaw that allows people to mercurially jump from one ideology or religion...or relationship to another? If so, then maybe Annie and I *were* meant for each other?

"What? You passed on Paganism? My favorite *ism* right after hedonism. Got something against Pagans? Cavorting in the moonlight bare-ass naked around the ol' bonfire...howling at *la luna*?" I ask.

"Well now ya tell me...sounds like something you and I could have shared...a special Pagan Eros connection kinda deal, which I'm assuming ends with wild, animalistic sex?" she says not missing a beat. Still disarmingly charming and as quick with the *bon mot* as the night I rescued her on that mountain after her near fatal accident, *eh ma cherie*?

"Never too late..." leaps out of my mouth.

"Well if I thought it could bring us back together...I'd be willing to give it a serious try," she says with a twinge of earnest.

Well there it is. So this is not just a social, *hey, howa-doin'* call. The crazy thing is deep down, I'm diggin' the idea of seeing her again and making love to her, as it's been many years since I'd been intimate with a woman, any

woman, since I lost Marly. I now realize that I had never totally been able to put Annie in the rear view mirror. A vague outline in the distance had always remained, with me in denial about it. So it would appear that women do in fact have *another level* of knowing. And was that what Marla was sensing?

Is it possible to love two, or more women with equal fervor simultaneously as I had with Sora Eagle Feather, that special one that I had let get away. Followed by Annie. And now the guilty memory of Marla starting to seep in with the rekindling of desire for Annie Trudeau. *What a piece of work is man...* as the other deeply flawed narcissistic male, the Prince of Denmark notoriously remarked.

Other than an occasional one-nighter after drinking myself stupid to try to forget how I had lost Marla...yea, I'd been tempted a few times, but nothing serious, something always pulled me back from the brink—the haunting images of her last minutes with me.

And Annie Trudeau is no ordinary woman, *my gawd*, we both had the same voracious appetite for each others' body. For one of the few times in my life I'm at a loss for a comeback as my imagination launches into full-blown erotic fantasy mode with Annie.

"Hello? Still there, Mickey?" she asks giggling.

Hmm...*Mickey* her favorite nickname for me back then. Is she just having fun with me, messin' me with the flirting? Or is she seriously making an overture to see me, and...

"Yeap...still here. Haven't been there...done that...for quite a while. Be careful what you wish for uh...*ma cherie*," I say.

"Mickey, I'd really like to see you again. I don't have access to a car. Can you come down to Seattle just to say hello...ya know...for old times sake? I love to see you."

"How long are you in town for?" I ask.

"Not really sure. The ship will probably be here for at least two more weeks. I'd normally be staying on the ship while it's docked. But maybe you could show me around Seattle and perhaps even where you live now," she says coyly.

Gawd she's good...very good. Still knows where all my hot buttons are, even the hidden ones after losing Marla.

"Okay if I bring an ol' friend, *Monsieur Wilson*?" I say not believing what is coming out of my own mouth.

"*Oui...bien sur! Sil vous plait!...my special ami, Monsieur Wilson, whom I have missed on many a dark and very lonely night*," she says again with that impishly charming giggle.

"Would you prefer that I just send *le monsieur*...or is it okay if I tag along?" I ask.

- Chapter 39 -

After a full day of showing Annie Seattle, the usual sites, *tourista* stuff including the Space Needle and Pike Market, then an intimate candlelit dinner with lots of wine at Marco's in Belltown, we arrive at Chez MAK in Moody Seaport very late that night. She's wearing *Amirage*, not overpowering, not too obvious...just subtle enough to get my undivided attention, which doesn't take much with Annie. It's still one of my favorite scents. An instant aphrodisiac *pour moi* as well, not that I...or *le monsieur* have anything to say about it. Like I said. She's good...*very good*.

All day the air has been filled with building sexual tension and expectation with increasing touching and affection. When we arrive at *Chez MAK*, it's almost 1 AM. I carry her upstairs to the master bedroom. With no verbal foreplay or pretense of reservation, wordlessly we find ourselves ripping off each others clothes with passionate desperation.

My *gawd*...she's even more beautiful than I had remembered, with the lithe hard muscles of an athlete, including her flat firm abs accentuating her svelte waist. Within seconds, I shamelessly surrender any notions of reservation or restraint. I'm just along for ride as *le monsieur* takes over from there...again.

The feral lovemaking goes on for several hours, with a few rejuvenating lapses into a half-sleep dream state, followed by more indeed Pagan animalistic consummation, our bodies vibrating in perfect synch in hyper-arousal.

Multiple orgasms punctuated by nipping and clawing, filled with groans and gasps of ecstasy, ending with both of us drenched in a full sweat. *New meaning to the term pent up demand*. Even after over five years, it's like we've never been apart. But I'm immediately filled with ambivalence. With no small twinge of guilt I realize that Marla was probably always right about Annette Trudeau. A sense of conflict begins to creep into my consciousness. *I need to dial this back, now. Dammit man*, show some restraint and self-control, before this gets out of control. *So now what?I'll sleep on it...*

In the morning when I awaken, I find Annie's back nestled again my chest with my arms around her, my hand resting on her beautiful full warm breasts. The long ago but familiar scent of our lovemaking permeates the sheets and the room. Raising her long lustrous hair from her neck...the lovely scent of *Amirage* still lingers. I gently place a wet kiss on the nape of her neck as I had done so many times before. She is immediately aroused out of a deep sleep. We kiss deeply, passionately, and it starts all over again. So much for self-control...guess *le monsieur* didn't get the memo.

- Chapter 40 -

By mid-morning, we're in the shower together, playfully fooling around a little, like we had always done in the past after a night of fervent lovemaking. It feels so familiar and natural to have Annie in my space. *My gawd*, it's as if she had never left. At about noon we finally make our way downstairs to the kitchen, with Annie wearing my bathrobe. We're both ravenous.

"Any special requests for breakfast?" I ask.

"Sure...I'd like a Big MAK...with nothin' on it."

"That'll have to be lunch. How 'bout some eggs. I can make you one of the many specialties of Chez MAK....a LEO...Lox, eggs and onions in an omelet or scramble, bagels and creme cheese, and coffee," I say

"Sounds *de-vine*. Scramble...and coffee *sil vous plait*."

"Deal. While I'm playing chef, why don't you put on some music for breakfast. Coffee's on the way, baby," I say.

As I watch the back of Annie going through the CD's, seemingly perfectly at ease and comfortable in my space, her long ropey hair still wet, glistening over the collar of my ochre terry cloth robe which almost perfectly matches her large luminous lupine eyes, I have a brief nostalgic episode of our time in Tahoe, before the *big revelation*.

Then as the music starts and her graceful body starts to sway to the rhythm of a love ballad...*my gawd*, it's Lionel Richie's Endless Love. The same music we had made love to so many times before. A song, that somehow had sacred meaning just for Annie and I, that I had never listened to with *any* other woman...including Marla.

*My love,
There's only you in my life
The only thing that's bright*

*My first love,
You're every breath that I take
You're every step I make*

*And I want to share
All my love with you
No one else will do...*

By now the coffee is ready. I turn down the heat in the skillet with smoked salmon and onions sauteing, and pour out two cups, add creme to hers

as I had remembered, walk over and placing the coffee down, reach around from the back, untying the draw on the robe exposing her lovely breasts, and place my hands under the open robe cupping her warm breasts and then sliding one hand down her taut stomach, and begin to stroke her inviting moist mound gently. While swaying back and forth, she leans back into me.

"I'm Mick...I'll be your server this morning. Can I get you started uh...on a beverage? Coffee?" I whisper in her ear.

"Remember this song, *ma amour*? It was *our* song...long ago," she coos.

"Still is...Endless Love...just our song," I whisper.

She turns to face me.

"Oh Mickey...this feels so right. I have a confession to make. I am truly sorry that you lost Marla...especially the way it happened. But...and you'll probably think I'm a terrible person...I'm not sorry to have you back in my life. *My gawd...I've missed you sooooo much. Je t'aime ma cherie...I've never stopped,*" Annie says throwing her arm around my waist burying her face in my chest.

The mere mention of Marla's name somehow causes my body to stiffen, and retreat from the embrace which Annie senses immediately.

"Oh Mickey...I'm so sorry to have said that. *Dammit...*I've ruined the moment. I was so overcome with emotion, it's been bottled for so many years...since we parted, I just had to let it out," Annie says, her lips starting to tremble as her eyes tear up.

"It's okay Annie. Here...have some coffee. Let's have some breakfast, we can talk about the other stuff later. Okay?" I say stiffly.

I guess the mention of Marla name had reeled me back to the reality of the moment and the situation with Annie. Despite my repression of the fact this was the woman whom I had once deeply loved, she had betrayed my trust. Big time. Almost causing Annie...and I, as collateral damage to get pulled into the deep vortex of the dark underbelly of the selling of drugs in Lake Tahoe, narrowly eluding prosecution and probable conviction for running a criminal enterprise, worthy of some pretty hard time.

As we sit down to eat our breakfast, she grasps my hand, bows her head, " Bless us, O Lord, and these your gifts, which we are about to receive from your bounty. Through Christ our Lord. Amen." releasing my hand with a squeeze.

Then there's that...to deal with... Or not...

Annie had been staying with me for almost two weeks, with long discussions into the night about the past, the present and eventually the future. Because of the economic slow-down from the Gulf War, there is little or no

production activity. Hawk was staying down in Seattle doing some consulting for Microsoft, which gave me an opportunity to spend some undistracted time with Annie.

She seems genuinely contrite and deeply ashamed about not having been truthful with me about her more than passive involvement with the selling of drugs in Tahoe.

There is still an undeniably deep emotional and physical connection with her which I guess was probably always there...and always would be. Some of which was perhaps due to the deep psychic connection one shares with someone, in a life and death situation, as we had that dark night of the *great blizzard* up on that mountain on that deserted highway, where I had fortuitously come along, rescuing her from a certain cold and lonely death after she had gone off the road.

"So Annie, when do you have to be back to the ship?"

"It looks like the ship will be ready for departure within two or three days. So I guess I should be thinking about getting back for staff meetings in preparation for the voyage. Looks like we're headed for the Dominican Republic...with a high incidence of HIV patients. Oh Mickey...little innocent babies born with HIV...it's so tragic. And they just keep popping them out. Sometimes it makes me want to rethink the whole idea of abortion. These poor children...they have little or no future," she says with a not so subtle patronizing twinge.

"So how long will you be gone be this time?"

"Probably be there at least 6 months. *Gawd* there's just so much misery in the world. Sometimes I just don't know how much more I can bear to see!" she says tearing up.

"Annie...do you *really* want to go back to the ship?" I ask

"What are my options, Mickey? I'm pretty much a girl without roots...or a home. I thought that it would be a great adventure to be on a ship...helping third world people who have no access to any kind of meaningful medical care, and in the process, spreading the word of the Gospel. But after spending this time with you here...of experiencing some happiness and joy in my life for the first time in over five years, I'm not so sure I'm up to it anymore. For every person...every child we help, there are *thousands* more behind them...dying. Honestly, I sometimes wonder if it would be more humane if we never showed up. We preach the Gospel...take care of a very small percentage of the ill, giving them some sense of hope in their lives, then dashing that hope when we leave," she says.

"I think that anytime you do the right thing for the right reasons, especially helping the weak and powerless among us...it's a good thing. Even though you can't save everybody...physically and I guess spiritually, that's no reason not to try," I say

"Why Mickey...you sound almost like a closet Christian!" she says.

"Annie, you don't have to be a Christian...to do the right thing. Frankly it sounds like you might be ready to jump ship, *ma chérie*?" I say.

"Ha...jump...like where? Overboard?" she asks.

"Well, maybe there's a slightly more attractive alternative," I say.

"Like?"

"Well, you could stay here with me, for a while, at least until you and I...can figure some things out. I'd be willing to entertain the idea of some kind of a trial period for us...say 6 months. But I have to be honest with you Annie. I've still got some scar tissue from our last time together. And I have some serious flashbacks...and bad episodes over the death of Marla. Frankly, I'm not quite sure I'll ever quite get over losing her...especially the way it happened. I feel like if it wasn't for me she might still be alive today." I say.

"Oh Mickey...I can't even imagine how difficult it was for you. I'm...truly, so sorry," Annie says.

"And just so you know, I'm just biding my time...for payback on that human piece of garbage that took her life...some unfinished business with Captain Ahab. When I've got the conclusive proof I need...there will be hell to pay for anyone...and everyone connected to her murder. So when the right time comes...without warning, I may have to be gone for a while. It's something that I personally have to do with my own hands...not just for Marla, but for me, to close that chapter in my life. I...I have no choice," I say.

Annie fleetingly registers concerned surprise in her eyes by the ferocity of my declaration of vengeance, then it's gone.

"Okay Mickey. I guess understand. But in the meantime I'd like us to try to live in the present. Okay? I guess, from the first time we were together, I had always hoped that we could make a good life together. I've never really been able to let go of that dream. This past two weeks have been so wonderful...so filled with hope. So yes...I do want to stay with you...and to prove to you that I'm even a better person than the one you loved then," she says falling into my arms.

I wrap my arms around her, and hug her tightly, then release her, and cradling her face in my hands, her lovely lips part, and we kiss deeply.

"Annie, there's one other thing we need to discuss," I say.

"Okay...anything. I'm just so happy I can't stand it," she says beaming.

"While I respect your right to your beliefs...and the practice of your religion...I want you to understand that I *cannot...will not* be expected to participate in your religious life. Like I have no problem with you saying grace before meals...just don't me expect me to join in, okay?" I say holding her squarely by the shoulders.

"Agreed Anything else we need to discuss before we make love?" she says smiling.

"As a matter of fact, yes...it'd probably be more fun, for me at least, if you were willing to have an open mind about my religious Pagan rites. Ya know Christianity had its roots in Paganism, so it would be like returning to the source...but without that whole Catholic guilt trip. If you're a little squeamish about the animal sacrifice part...just to demonstrate my ability to compromise, you can go shopping or whatever." I say.

"How 'bout after breakfast, we get started on my conversion...like *tout suite*. Mind if we skip the moonlit cavorting...and go straight to the animalistic sex?" she says.

I think this may be the beginning of a beautiful relationship...again.

The next day, we drive down to Seattle for Annie to give notice that she will not be continuing on the *Africa Mercy* to the Dominican Republic with the rest of the Pilgrims, and to pickup the rest of her clothes and various spare belongings from the ship.

The leadership of YWAM is not at all happy with her decision. They desperately try to get her to reconsider. First a full-blown attempt at instilling guilt for deserting her post, as if she was abandoning a sinking ship...ahead of the women and children. When all that fails, they finally bring out the Big Closer, invoking the name of Jesus Christ, and doing the Lord's work.

In a last ditch effort, to exorcise the Koz demons she has recently acquired, they form a circle around her, holding hands they intensely begin to pray, some might say prey...over her, some *speaking in tongues*. Hmm...very Pagan-ish.

I remain silent the whole time I am witnessing this exorcising exercise. I realize that although I applaud the good intentions of the ministry, that even though they do good works helping many disadvantaged and gravely ill folks, especially children, it does not come without strings attached—they must first hear and acknowledge the message of the Gospel. There is an unsettling undercurrent of cultishness in their zeal.

During the entire exit interview, they barely acknowledge my presence, occasionally casting their eyes upon me with the obvious disgust and disdain as some Satanic, corrupting influence on Annie.

On the way back home, I say, "Annie...are you going to be okay with this?"

"Yea...fine. I actually feel a big sense of relief of being off that damn boat...the constant smell of diesel exhaust fumes in the oppressively hot, confining tiny quarters. Thanks for being there Mickey. If I'd been alone I might have faltered," she says.

"Hungry?" I ask.

"Ravenous...and I could sure use a good stiff drink...or three," she says.

:: AMERICAN AMNESIA — *m.a.kominsky* ::

"Deal. As your Satanic Enabler, Anthony's Fish House on Alaska Way has a killer happy hour...coming up on our starboard, *matey*."

- Chapter 41 -

"Mickey, do realize that at the stroke of midnight, January first 2000 the Millennium Bug could totally cripple...demobilize the entire world. Total chaos...the Apocalypse ending with Second Coming of Jesus Christ. It's Biblical eschatology, Mickey...The Book of Revelations...and it's the final book of the New Testament. What does that tell ya?" Annie says.

It was June of 1999, and Annie and I had recently gotten married.

"Those *damn* Pharisees again. Not much has changed except televangelists took the wardrobe upgrade from Aramaic...to Armani. The more things change...the more they stay the same." I say.

"*Oui ma cherie*. But Mickey, I'm really serious about this...please don't make fun of me!" she says with a rare earnest.

"Okay, Annie. But maybe you could explain to me how this whole Apocalypse thing is going to unfold? There are 24 different time zones on the planet. That's right...one for each hour of the day.

The Earth rotates from the west towards the east. As viewed from the North Star or polestar Polaris, the Earth rotates counter-clockwise. So when it's midnight here Pacific Standard Time..." I say.

"Your point?" she interrupts impatiently.

"My point is a simple one of facts...common sense based on science, unless one still believes that the earth is flat, and that the sun revolves around it...which should be settled science even in the mind of the Reverend Robertsons' of the world," I say.

"Well you don't have to be sarcastic about it. Mickey...I'm scared for us...and really scared for my family in Southern California," she says

"So again, when the clock strikes midnight in the Pacific Time Zone, midnight has already come and gone like 8 hours earlier, in London, at the International Date Line, a human construct what they call GMT or Greenwich Mean Time.

So help me out here...*whose* midnight? Is the Lord working his mysterious ways on GMT? When it's midnight and theoretically the Apocalypse is devastating London, it's 4 PM from San Diego California all the way up to Seattle and Vancouver BC, including here in downtown Moody Seaport. So things here will just be normal...hunky dory? What? A Rolling Apocalypse?" I ask.

"Yea...I uh...guess so. And don't try to confuse me with facts, Mickey. This is about faith...*So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal...Corinthians 4:18...and 2 Corinthians 5:7 For we live by faith, not by sight,*" she rotely recites.

"Well hell, if this is true, then we've got an extra eight hours to party hearty before the end of the world. Hey...in honor of the Coming Apocalypse, here's a new dance step that I just put together for the special occasion...it's called the Apo-calyps-o...to a Calypso back beat," I say while busting a move ending with rather spiffy three-sixty spin with outstretched arms and, "*Ta da!*"

"Not funny...Mickey! I had hoped you could understand and honor my faith in this. But obviously you cannot. Honestly, I'm not surprised." she says with a tone of bitterness, arms tightly folded.

"Ah...I see. A pattern of religious intolerance by *moi*? For what it may be worth, I've talked with Hawk about this. As you know...he is among other things a savant when it comes to computers. Do you even know what's causing this Y2K craze?" I ask.

"Pat Robertson says it's all about Biblical prophesy," she says.

"Ah...again I see. I didn't know they knew about computers back then. Now that's what I call some *serious* prophesy. Maybe if God's Main-Man Moses had a laptop...could've skipped lugging around that whole cumbersome stone tablet thing?

Actually, there's nothing Biblical about it, except maybe the Biblical proportions of hype surrounding it. Y2K is simply being caused from the inability of the firmware chips of many older computers along with software programs, to accommodate the change in the year date field from 1999 to 2000. All very fixable," I say

"Maybe so...but it's all pre-ordained! It's in the Scripture...and Mom and Dad are preparing the family for the Rapture," she counters.

"Sorry to disappoint you, babe, but the Hawkster assures me that while this whole Y2K thing initially had *some* merit, the reality is that it will be a big fat non-issue. That the media is exploiting the hell out of it...just to make a quick buck," I say.

"Okay...I can see you don't have an open mind. So...let's just drop it. Okay?" she says.

I can see you don't have an open mind?

Annie had continued to be untruthful to her family that we were living together, because of the pressure she knew would be imposed by her Mother and Father for 'living in sin'. She rebuked overtures for visits by her family, for fear of they would discover that we were actually living together. She had fabricated this elaborate narrative that she was merely working with Kozmick Productions, which at some level became unsettling for me—that she was still capable of perpetrating such consummate deception. Again. The red warning light on the dashboard was starting to flicker.

It finally all came to a head, when her Mother and Father had announced that they were going to come up for a visit in a month, preparatory to the impending Y2K. A kind of farewell tour, before the Apocalypse. Period.

"Mickey...Mom and Dad are really putting pressure on me for a visit.

I don't think I can put them off any longer. I think they suspect that we're living together. I don't know what to do," she says.

We had been discussing marriage on and off up to that point. Because she was so distraught, my love for her had overruled my reservations about getting married.

"Okay Annie. If it'll resolve the situation...I guess I don't have a problem with us gettin' spliced, *matey*...if that would make you happy," I say.

We had quiet civil ceremony with Hawk in attendance. More of formality really. When her parents would show up it would be, "*Surprise...Mick and I eloped.*"

Annie had been working with Hawk and I at Kozmick Productions, answering the phone, scheduling and coordinating production jobs, and taking care of the accounts payable and receivable. With her disarming charm and light and airy disposition, she was a natural at diplomatically requesting payments on overdue invoices, always a major problem with production clients, who somehow were always in a state of emergency to get the production done like yesterday, yet placed our invoices at the bottom of their priority list.

For a whole year leading up to the Date of Big Denouement, the evangelical Christian community was being inundated with books and videos on the coming of uh...the Second Coming from Y2K, like the national best-seller *The Millennium Bug*. Annie was being feed a steady diet by mail of the books and VHS recordings of the 700 Club from her family, and as December 31st 1999 drew closer, each one more urgent and alarming than the one before.

The satellite delivered electronic church, Christian Broadcast Network or CBN, originated by Southern Baptist Pastor, televangelist and President Pat Robertson in 1977, was taking in enormous donations and selling Y2K related 'survival' books and videos, at record pace. Quite a nice little revenue stream, a not-so-sacred profit motive.

Annie and her family were absolutely rapt in front of the TV with a daily dose of Apocalyptic updates from the 700 Club on CBN, zealously hosted by former candidate for U.S. President in 1988, Reverend Robertson himself.

Up to this point, Annie and I had managed to get along well enough, without her practice of Christianity causing any serious friction between us. Live and let live until the closer we got to Y2K, when that dramatically began to change.

"Mickey...I think we should get all our money out of the banks before it's too late. Mom and Dad, said that Pat Robertson's been telling Christians on the 700 Club, on TV, that Y2K will cause a massive bank failure...like the Great Depression of 1929. They've been slowly pulling all their money out...so as not to attract any attention. In cash," she says.

"Really. With Pat Robertson himself, reminding all the *True*

Believers, that it's probably an excellent opportunity to move, at least 10 percent as a title of your total assets, over to CBN for payment in advance for a VIP pass in Paradise. And exactly what are your family doing with all this cash...hiding it in the mattress, like the last place a thief would look?" I ask.

"Nope...they're not stupid, ya know. They've been hiding it in the backyard...safely buried in unsold Amway Tupperware laundry soap canisters after pouring the soap out, of course.

"Of course. Hmm....new meaning to hiding laundered money?"

"Ha...ha...very funny. They said we should be doing the same thing. Unless we get our money out in time...we could lose all of it!" Annie says.

"Ah...so that Amway dealership with all those cases of unsold Amway detergent in the garage finally found a uh...*divine* purpose...heavenly revelation and fate. Annie...we've been through this *so* many times now. And frankly it's getting very tiresome rehashing this same old...same old," I say with no small degree of exasperation

"Mickey...Mom and Dad think that we should come down next week for the holidays to be with the family...for Christmas and ushering the New Year. Can we get away? What do you think?" she asks.

"Sure...I think that would be fine. But without the *we*. As you know Christmas has never been a big deal for me. Just another crass commercialization of a religious event. And...I'm guessin' your family would like you to be there to ring in the Rapturous Y2K," I say.

"Sometimes you can be so uh..." she starts to say.

"Skeptical...you were about to say?"

"Well honestly...a little stronger than that..."

"Don't confuse healthy skepticism with cynicism," I say.

"Okay, are you sure you don't mind if I go?" she asks with an air of relief.

"*Bien sur!* Positive. Annie, frankly, it seems to me that we've kinda reached somewhat of a crossroads in our relationship...again. I think this whole obsession with Y2K has revealed some major, perhaps insurmountable differences in core values...and world view. Take as long as you need to sort things out. It'll give us both a chance to decide where we want to go from here," I say.

"Mickey...are you saying that our relationship might be on the line because of my dedication to Christ?" she says with more than a twinge of confrontation.

"Annie...I'm saying that all this irrational...wild pandemonium over Y2K, and your unwillingness to entertain any alternative views based on credible science about it, has brought it to the surface. Frankly, it creates for me some serious conflict about priorities...that up to now I've been able to transcend because of my love for you. But to paraphrase your Bible...*one*

cannot serve two masters. I am not asking you to renounce your faith...your Christian religion...or your family. That would be unfair.”

"Well...how generous of *you*," she says with a bite.

"Think nothing of it. And it is also unfair that you would expect me to follow, what I consider to be blind faith that flies in the face of all rational and reasonable thinking, which frankly I'm beginning to doubt will probably ever change over time. Your assertiveness bordering on obsession about this whole Y2K deal...and our finances, long term, I think is capable of causing some serious repressed hostility...for both of us, and harm to the relationship," I say.

"Oh...Mick, I won't go if you think it's that serious. Please...I don't want to lose you...again," she says.

"And I don't want to put our relationship on the line either...but this has been building up now for several years with you becoming more and more strident in the expression of your beliefs each year. And your practice of them toward me, in no small part from your family's uh...forceful input...to try to convert me to a *believer*.

So I think it's better that we deal with this...sooner than later. I don't want to have to continually defend my reasons, to wrangle incessantly, for not being willing to make irrational decisions on things like our financial assets based on some, I'm sorry to have to say, blind allegiance to some reactionary religious thinking. So yea...I think we both need to take a step back. Okay?" I say."

"My gawd...I had no idea you were so offended by the practice of my faith! It's not fair! That's religious discrimination!" she cries.

"Fair? Discriminatory? Oh *please* Annie. Let's not turn this into some Constitutional crisis. This is just between you...and me. Not anyone else, most especially not your Mother and Father, and their uh...profound influence on your thinking. I think enough has been said on the matter...for now.

Besides, if Rev Robertson and the Evangelicals are right about their prophesy of the Second Coming Apocalypse...and the Rapture, leaving behind all the heathen non-believers like *moi*, it sorta makes this whole discussion moot. 'Cause you and your family are outta here...*sans moi*," I say with a smile.

"Okay Mickey. But you don't have to be so condescending. I can see you're harboring some hostility toward me, my family...and our faith. We Christians are no strangers to religious persecution...ya know. So I think I'll just take up Mom and Dad's offer to visit for the holidays. I'll probably drive down in the next few days. Okay?" she says coolly.

Harboring some hostility toward me, my family and our faith? Persecution? Sigh. Jesus...is it hopeless trying to reason with this kind of logic?

"Okay Annie. If that slant on this works for you...if you honestly believe that...well...

If you like, we can talk on the phone...or not. I'll definitely miss you, baby. And please give my best wishes to your family...for a speedy and smooth uh...uplifting Rapture. Okay? Settled?" I say.

"Okay...okay, I get it. Settled. I'll miss you too...but I guess it's for the best...for now at least," she says with resignation.

- Chapter 42 -

"Mickey...it's getting close to midnight. I just wanted to call to tell you that when the Lord takes us to up to heaven, that I love you...and that it's not too late for you to say the sinner's prayer...to give your life over to our Lord Savior Jesus Christ. You can still be saved...so you can be with me and my family...in heaven," Annie says on the phone from L.A. at 11:30 PM on December 31, 1999, the eve of Y2K. Annie had been down in L.A. with her family for the past two weeks, in preparation for the Great Rapture.

"Annie...thanks for the heads up. So I've got about 30 minutes to choose between the everlasting ecstasy of heaven...or eternal damnation in the fires of hell? Cuttin' it kinda close aren't we?" I say.

"There's still enough time. I can bring you to the Lord...right now!" she says.

"So...if I did decide to take the plunge uh...the pledge, how does the Lord know that I'm sincere...not just hedging my bets?" I ask.

"The Lord knows...after all the Lord is omniscient. He knows everything...what's in everyone's heart," she says.

"And don't forget the other omni's."

"Sorry?" Annie says.

"Omnipotent and my personal fav...omnipresent. He's probably listening in right now...so he knows deep down how I feel. Even if I was willing to try, I couldn't bluff da Man. Annie, I'm so sorry...but I can't do this anymore. I know in your heart you truly believe in all this...that you're doing this out of love for me, and I'm deeply touched by it. But I can't pretend to believe in something that I really don't...for you, or anyone else," I say.

"So Mickey...that's your final decision? That's how much I mean to you...that you couldn't even do this for me...for us?" she says.

"What kind of person would I be...and over time...what would you think of me, if I was willing to go along with this...to live a lie, a deception just to make you happy...to cover my ass, just in case this whole Rapture fiasco has a chance in *hell* of happening? How could you ever trust me...or even respect me, if I did. In the end, no matter how much we love each other, I guess with us, it's always been, and always will be, about trust...*mutual* trust," I say indirectly and not-so-subtly raising my concerns about her own capacity for deception.

"Oh...Mickey. I guess you have never really been able to forgive me...for Tahoe. You're making me so sad...but I guess I'm not surprised. You've always been a non-believer in the Lord, and sadly in me...and probably always will be," she says now convulsively sobbing.

"Amen to that, Annie. And since you've been gone I given *us* a lot of

thought. I've laid awake nights...thinking about how much I love you, but you're asking me to be someone I'm not. I just can't do that...no matter the consequences for us."

"Okay Mickey...it's getting late...close to midnight. Mom and Dad and the rest of the family are starting to prepare...they're calling for me. So I guess this is goodbye, huh?" she says.

"Yes...Annie...it is late...on *that* we agree. I guess someone has to say it out loud. Sadly, it's probably too late...*for us*. So I guess this *is* goodbye...one way or another. No matter how this Rapture thing unfolds, my only wish for you and your family is happiness.

Tomorrow...in the light of day, we'll all still be here...the world will still be an imperfect mess, but with nothing changed other than the calendars on the wall. After this passes, if you ever want to just talk, give me a call...or not. I'm not going anywhere...and frankly neither are you nor your family. And Annie...never forget that I loved you...with all my heart," I say.

"They're callin' for me...I gotta go now. I love you Mickey...forever. Goodbye," Annie says now crying uncontrollably.

"Goodbye...Annie," I say.

Click

- Chapter 43 -

"Mom and Dad think it may have something to do with the difference between the Julian Calendar...and the Roman Calendar...which of course would have been the calendar during the time of Christ...it had only 304 days..." it's Annie on the phone, as usual irrepressible, obstinately not giving up on us. Like I always said, plucky.

It's a week later, Annie and the rest of her family are still packed, anxiously awaiting the Apocalypse...and the Rapture.

"Ah...of course. Musta been a real bummer for all the believers. *Jezus Christ!*...a no-call no-show. Maybe somebody shoulda checked with The Omniscient One...which time zone and calendar He's on. And there's always the possibility of sun-dial error," I say.

"Well...we're all praying on it. Thankfully due to our prayers, Pat Robertson said that God spared the 700 Club on CBN...so it escaped the technical meltdown. We're getting daily updates. Still holding out hope that the End of the World is near. We're so confident...we're still wearing our tasteful understated white robes."

"Hmm...all dressed *down*...with no place to go. I'd imagine...definitely a potentially career limiting event to violate the dress code in Heaven right outta the Pearly Gates. And to quote Will Rogers...*You never get a second chance to make a good first impression,*" I say.

"Mickey...where were you...and what were you doin' at midnight? Were you thinking of me?" she asks.

"Actually I had few Heathen friends over for a P-A-P. A uh...Pre-Apocalypse Party...kind of a potluck Pagan festivity with roasted sacrificial lamb...ya know cavorting around the bonfire buck naked...with me doin' my special rendition of the Apocalyp-so which after several hours of drunken debauchery turned in a post-Apocalypse party...and the mother of all *gawd awful* hang-overs," I say.

"Mickey...you can be so...sarcastic sometimes. Mom and Dad say it's a sign of your spiritual immaturity. And they...and everyone here is praying for your soul to reach eternal Heaven with us."

To reach eternal Heaven...with us? Is she describing Heaven or my idea of Hell? I could barely get through the week with the maelstrom of religious platitudes during the family visits.

"Sometimes? Now that really hurt...that I might be losing my edge. Anyway, tell your Mother and Father, thanks for the good intentions, but the chances of me getting into Heaven? Hasn't got a prayer," I say.

"Mickey...have you givin' any more thought about...you know...us?"

"Annie...I've given it a lotta thought. I think it would probably be a

good idea for you to stay down there for a while...ya know at least until this end-of-the-world thing kinda blows over. Then we can talk about the practicalities, of where to go from there," I say.

"Oh...Mickey...I miss you so much...not being able to make love to you. I'm so confused...so conflicted. I want to come home and be with you...but...anyway...Mom and Dad are putting pressure on me to go work for a TV church...T-B-N, Trinity Broadcasting Network in Orange County on the daily P-T-L...Praise the Lord program. With my production background working with you...I got a job offer. Oh Mickey...what should I do?"

"Well Annie...why don't you give it a shot. You'd be close to your family...and living and working with fellow believers. Sounds *de-ivine*."

"You wouldn't miss me?" Annie says.

"Sure. But I would be making a personal sacrifice...to indirectly serve the Lord. Guess I'd just have to forebear my personal wants...including selfish sexual gratification...to serve the greater Glory of God. Can I get an *amen and hallelujah*, brothers and sisters?" I say.

"Okay Mickey...I get it. I'm going to say goodbye now. I'll be back in touch about where I want to go from here after I've talked to Mom and Dad on this...and we've prayed on it," she says.

"Fair enough, Annie."

"Well then...I guess this is *au revoir...adieu*, again," she says.

"*Au revoir* and *bon voyage*...and gawd bless you and yours, Annie," I say.

Click

A month later I was served with divorce papers despite the pre-nuptial agreement, with a demand for 50% of all my assets,. My guess is that the divorce was an answer to intense prayer to *Da Man...par sa mère et son père...by her mother and father*.

In someways this moment in history, Y2K and the Evangelical Christian response to it is an illustrative pivot point in history, a portent of an inchoate, pervasive culture of Fantasyland, of living in a counter-factual world of unreality.

Welcome to FANLANDIA...where anodyne fiction is preferred over grappling with painfully inconvenient and yes, stubborn facts.

Psychologists tell us that entering this world at birth, there are three essential biological needs, security and survival, power and control and last but certainly not least, affection and esteem, which some might call love. The online propagandists have over history, learned to how expertly, more importantly indiscernibly, manipulate and exploit those needs to their cynical self-serving end. The technology of mass communication has only enhanced

the depth and breadth of their effectiveness by an order of magnitude...reducing once civil discourse and honest debate to a partisan blood sport...a cacophony of rancorous polarization.

We now live in a collective intellectually incurious trance...tranquilized by the trivial, a reality essentially based on myth and fantasy, which has, through the increased empowering of technology created many more choices in life...*to have it your way*...and with that expansion of options, freedom to choose, tremendous, often overwhelming, permutations of complexity are created. With complexity comes less certainty...causing many to retreat to nostalgia, to fantasize about the the good days, especially *for the man of house, when a woman knew her place, and the man was the king of his castle*.

The origin of the title AMERICAN ALGORITHM, derives from the complete proliferation and increasing predominance of virtually every aspect of distinctly American culture by the computer-driven Digital Age, which utilizes algorithms to instruct the CPU(Central Processing Unit), essentially the brain of every microprocessor controlled device, including computers and “smart phones” etc.

These and other topics/issues to be further explored through fictional depiction in The AMERICAN ENTROPY TRILOGY: Book 2 - AMERICAN ALGORITHM 2000 - 2004.

About

Michaelalonzo Kominsky, currently lives in Bellingham Washington, near Lake Whatcom less than a mile from “Ground Zero” of the explosion of the Olympic petroleum pipeline of June 10, 1999.

His production company MetaMEDIA Communications on occasion still produces films, usually a bio-pic documentary, often about self-absorbed, obsessive compulsive creatives of which he has considerable personal insight.

When not chasin' bad guys around the page he can often be found in his studio, 'throwing some paint'. His art can be viewed at: themakgallery.com

It would be greatly appreciated by the author, if you come across any factual errors, to let the author know. Your questions and comments are welcome. Thanks.

~mak



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Epilogue

Like many progressives, after the United States Presidential Election of 2016, I was in shock, indeed total disbelief that Hilary Clinton, polling as a heavy favorite up to election night, was not declared the victor. This despite the fact she had received over three million more popular votes than Donald Trump; the margin of victory by the Electoral College, was less than 80,000 total votes over many millions of votes cast.

How could this happen? Was this just some Black Swan. A once in a generation outlier? A one-off sociological aberration? The more important question is could it happen again? There is widespread agreement among social and political scientists that the predominant proliferation and strategic manipulation of untruthful propaganda ubiquitously propagated on social media had a profound effect on the outcome of the election(s), at both federal and state levels.

So yes, indeed it could happen again...unless and until we demand that Congress pass regulatory legislation that the purveyors of internet content, most especially social media, including Google, Microsoft, LinkedIn, Facebook, Tweeter and Reddit, are held legally accountable for the curation and removal of demonstrably deliberate and nefarious disinformation and falsehoods.

This novel attempts to explain how powerful anti-democratic forces, including the state-sponsored Russian Media Mafia and government, and Alt-right propaganda mills, of which I include Fox News channel, could again execute a pernicious concerted canard to surreptitiously and indiscernibly affect, and illegally influence/modify voter behavior.

It is the opinion of many constitutional legal scholars, including Lawrence Tribe and Lawrence Lessig esteemed Harvard Law Professors, that an intentional disinformation and dissembling campaign, resulted in voter suppression through the hijacking of social media on the internet illegally tampered with and influenced the outcome of the 2016 election in favor of Donald Trump.

Art as a Powerful Agent of Social Change

Through the millennia, the innate human compulsion to connect with his fellow man beyond the quotidian task of survival through various art forms has somehow survived, despite desperate attempts by despots to silence it. Art is a meta-level of consciousness: An affirmation of the human condition and all its wonder, and it must not be left unsaid, its foibles and flaws. To create is as intrinsic in the human spirit as the biological urge to procreate.

Early manifestations of art as a powerful agent of social change can be found in the art form of the novel. The novel with a purpose is, one contends, a preaching novel. But it preaches by telling things and showing things. The preaching, the moralizing is the result not of direct appeal by the writer, but is made—should be made—to the reader by the very incidents of the story. It is the complaint of the coward, this cry against the novel with a purpose, because it brings the tragedies and grief of others to notice. Take this element from fiction, take from it the power and opportunity to prove that injustice, crime and inequality do exist and what is left? Just the amusing novels that entertain.

Throughout history, some of the greatest agents of social change have been ignited through works of fiction—including classics: Harriet Beecher Stowe (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*; or, *Life Among the Lowly*—1852), Charles Dickens (*A Tale of Two Cities*—1859), Herman Melville (*Moby-Dick*; or *The Whale*—1851), Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*—1932), John Steinbeck (*Grapes of Wrath*—1939), and George Orwell (1984—1949).

So just as the opening question in Ayn Rand's iconic Libertarian novel "Atlas Shrugged", is, "Who is John Galt?"—he is no longer a person but a symbol for Libertarian ideology and unfettered free-market capitalism. Howard Beale the anti-hero in the film *Network* (1976 - <http://howardbeale.org>) is the liberal antithesis of Galt. . .raging against the inequities of a rigged corporate system of hyper-capitalistic greed and avarice. Capitalism run amok.

It is through this ancient and sacred tradition of allegory, of striving to deliver their moral payload, that is documented as far back as the Paleolithic cave paintings of Lascaux 20,000 years ago. By connecting to the primordial instinct to share the experience of the human condition through captivating storytelling, in all its art forms, thus passing on cumulative wisdom and tradition through parable for generations to follow. I believe the highest and indispensable calling of the artist is to be a prophet, essentially a healing secular shaman, historian and conscience of civilization.

The exponential technological evolution of the forms of artistic expression now allows us to put words to music, and more cogently, words and music to moving images, and through the internet essentially dismantling the traditional broadcast paradigm from one to many, to . . .many to many. In its highest form unfettered democracy unleashed—it can promote a synergy of magnanimous ideals and enlightenment. Or sadly, a powerful force for the promulgation of malice and far too often, willful arrogant ignorance—a cacophony of disinformation; unregulated, unfettered hate speech on the internet—threatening the very core of our democratic institutions.

To the artists: Noli Timere!! (Be not afraid! The dying words of Irish poet Seamus Heaney). Speak truth to power living out loud, with your art!

Michael Kominsky 2021

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