

CHAPTER 1



The Kidnapping of Holly Hobbie

*M*y name is Guy, and I once killed somebody.

There. See? I said it. That wasn't so hard. Certainly not as hard as actually performing the act, no matter what the psychologists and reformed criminals say. Yet, despite my acceptance of the situation, I was always hesitant to confess my crime. Not because of fear, I don't think, but because I simply never found reason to: not to job interviewers, not to coworkers at the Steak 'N' Shake (drink the shakes, avoid the steaks), and not to late night radio psychiatrists.

Actually, that's not entirely true. There was one opportune moment when I did admit to having killed somebody. After all, it's quite difficult to keep something like that bottled up forever. It's something unique to impart, something to generate interest, and every now and again I had to refrain from becoming the hit of the party. I was compelled to generate such interest during my first freshman orientation class in college. Our professor stood behind a rickety, wooden podium at the open end of a tight horse-shoe of desks. She told us to state from where we came and something interesting about ourselves. I watched as the students hurriedly scoured

their lives to find that one nugget of personal data that, at once, provided the requisite degree of interest while simultaneously being devoid of any meaning whatsoever.



This exercise was not new to me. The first time I recall having to introduce myself to a crowd of strangers was in kindergarten. Back then, I stood and said, “My name’s Guy Lindsey, and I’m five years old.”

It was easy when I was five, as the only interesting thing about me was my age. There were no great “life stories” to tell, no worldly experiences to share and no baggage to display, and Lord knows I hadn’t yet killed somebody. Although, now that I think about it, that would’ve made for some big discussion in the teachers’ lounge come lunchtime.

“One of my new kindergartners stood up today,” Mrs. Piper would’ve said from behind a thick, gray cloud of cigarette smoke, “a boy named Guy Lindsey, and he said—”

“Yes, I know his parents,” Principal Steele would’ve smiled, carefully nodding his head in that polite, principalesque way. “Fine people. Salt of the Earth.”

“Well, their boy stood up in my class today, and he said, ‘My name’s Guy Lindsey, and I once killed somebody.’”

“Hmm.” Principal Steele would’ve still been nodding his head, practicing for parent/teacher conferences. “Interesting life, for a five year old. Did he say who he engaged in this inappropriate behavior with?”

“With *whom* he engaged in this inappropriate behavior,” Mrs. Piper would’ve corrected.



As the semicircle of freshman confessions worked its way around to where I was sitting, I wondered how they would handle mine. My classmates were saying things such as, “My name’s Kerry, and I hope to produce propaganda for the Democratic Party,” or “My name’s Shawn, and my goal in life is to become co-editor of the *Phi Beta Kappan*.” I guess they were still under the impression that college prepared them for work of this sort...or, in fact, work of any sort. Damn English majors. Even before I’d completed my first and only entrance application, I knew my money would be better vested in a digital camera or a nice wristwatch. One with that Indiglo, perhaps. Shiny.



See, the thing is, I cared about as much for these people and their goals as I did about...say...little Terry Hogan back in kindergarten when he announced who he was and that he, like everyone else in the classroom, was five years old. I completely forgot Terry Hogan’s name until about a week later when he pointed out we had the same style shoes. That Terry Hogan was five made no particular impression, but the fact we both wore brown Hush Puppies was something concrete upon which a five-year-old could base a friendship.

To cement this, I offered him a Life Saver. Life Savers were like medicine to me, and had been since I could remember. And not those fruity kinds. I hated that crap. They never tasted like they were supposed to. Cherry didn’t taste like cherries, it tasted like red. Grape didn’t taste like grapes, it tasted like purple. Orange didn’t taste like oranges, it tasted like...okay, but I’ve made my point. Even worse was the next trend towards fake flavors. I guess the scientists in the Life Saver and fruit drink labs couldn’t get their products to taste like anything at all, so they started inventing flavors or smashing them

together in weird and unnatural ways. Watermelon-grape! Tangerine dream. Super Berry Sensation. What the hell is a super berry? Forget all that crap. Flavors cannot be invented in a lab. I mean, pity the child on Parents' Day at school...

"My mom's a scientist, and she's working on a cure for cancer."

"My dad's a scientist, and he helps to launch the Space Shuttle."

"My dad's a scientist, and he invented the flavor Super Berry Sensation."

It's just wrong.

For great tasting Life Savers, there's just one simple rule; the name must have an O. Pep-O-Mint. Cin-O-Mon, Wint-O-Green. I explained this to Terry Hogan, he understood, and we became best friends until just before sixth grade when he moved to Toledo.

Good thing, too. He'd never have to learn that I would end up killing somebody. Not that anyone else did, really, save for the murderer, who has since forgotten, I'm sure. Oh, and that person to whom I confessed, and who has certainly also forgotten by now. But I maybe could've confided in Terry. Honesty is a curse of friendship, which is why I now try vehemently to avoid making friends.



It was almost my turn to offer an interesting life tidbit to the other college freshmen, so I prepared for my first public announcement that I was, in fact, a killer. I guess I always found it much easier to be honest with total strangers. No one would've believed me anyway, and they would've forgotten my name within a week.

When it was nearly my turn, the guy sitting next to me stood and claimed, with a peculiar lack of emotion, "Name's Papa Shango, and Papa Shango know voodoo."

That was the first and only time he referred to himself as Papa Shango. I mean, yeah, it was obvious he was lying about his name, but his real name was equally odd—the Arbiter. And after that day, the Arbiter was the only moniker he'd use.

I was so flummoxed by the whole Papa Shango thing that, when it was my turn to stand up, I could only say, “My name’s Guy Lindsey, and I’m five years old.”



Honestly? I was much happier when I was five. Life was good when I was five. My mother, having just given birth to her second son, was happy. My father, having just been promoted to department chair at the college where he taught physics, was happy. My little brother, having just been born and therefore having no clue yet as to what was going on, was happy. And because everyone around me was so happy, then hell, I was happy too!

And then I was introduced to corporal punishment.

I remember it as clearly as some can recall where they were upon learning that President Kennedy had been spanked...I mean shot—although I’m certain many can recall where they were when Kennedy was spanked, too. As for *my* spanking, I was in kindergarten, sitting unassumingly in the third row beside my new best friend Terry Hogan. The other students didn’t like to sit beside Terry because he was born with a cleft lip and palate. He still had a scar above his upper lip, giving him a minor speech impediment. This bothered the other kids, and even Mrs. Piper seemed to grow impatient with him when he spoke. I didn’t understand their actions; Terry was a good guy.

Certainly not the kind of guy who would kill somebody.

On the other side of me was a girl with long, flat brown hair and legs like broomsticks. She would eventually turn me down for a date in junior high because, she explained, her mother told her she wasn’t allowed to go out on single dates until she was sixteen. She would eventually get pregnant at fifteen and drop out of high school. I certainly hope *that* hadn’t been a group date. Either way, I believe she’s now working the accessory counter of some department store in the local mall, and despite (or maybe because of) all the makeup she

wears, looks twice her age. Her legs no longer look like broomsticks, though. Very nice. I just can't help but think of how much better her life could've been if she'd gone to see that movie with me.

I wish I could remember what movie it was.

When she was sitting beside me in kindergarten, she wasn't pregnant. She was just looking at me with that "Aaawwwwwmmmmm, you're in trouble" look all five-year-olds get when someone just did something heinously wrong and everyone else is glad it wasn't him...or in this case, her. My crime was what Mrs. Piper would constantly refer to on my grade card as "speaking out of turn." Imagine if, throughout life, people could only speak when it was their turn. If someone swore, would he then lose a turn? Could someone go twice in a row if she said something particularly nice? That'd be pleasant, as only polite, interesting people would get to talk a lot. No more presidential addresses, no more post game interviews with professional athletes.

I felt the desire to line-jump when Mrs. Piper drew a line across the chalkboard. In little boxes beneath this line, she wrote all twenty-six letters of our alphabet. I don't know why, but the boxes reminded me of clothespins, and I felt compelled to let the whole class know. As Mrs. Piper was leading us through the lesson, I simply stated, "It looks like my mother's clothesline." What's the big deal about that?

Well, Mrs. Piper sure thought it was a big deal. She was over me like a hawk on a field mouse, and before I could find an old tire or cinder block under which to hide, I was bent over her knee, looking at shoes that were nothing like mine. Actually, the hawk analogy is somewhat inaccurate because Mrs. Piper looked more like a crow. Despite being at least in her sixties, she had jet black hair and sharply angled glasses that formed a perfect triangle with her pointed nose. With her manner of dress, she would've looked more at home as a 19th century school marm, or at least a guard at an East German female prison. She spanked me six times, but it wasn't the pain that made me cry. It was the humiliation. Not even my parents had the

nerve to spank me in public, yet this woman had somehow been authorized to humiliate me in front of my peers as if we were back in medieval England and I'd just denounced the King of Bretagne.

I knew right there that I would never call Mrs. Piper "friend."

As it came to pass, I ended up considering very few teachers to be friends. In first grade, I was spanked now and again because, as far as I could tell, things that I found to be funny, others didn't. I wonder how people such as Andy Kauffman made it through first grade. It's been said that laughter is the best medicine, but apparently only when it's prescribed by teachers or parents or anyone else in authority. When the teacher laughed, we all could. But when it was just me, it was "speaking out of turn;" a spanking offense.

I finally learned this lesson by second grade. Like all the kids who got citizenship awards at the end of each week, I sat at my desk in the third row and never said a word and minded my own business and only spoke when given authorization by the woman with the wooden ruler at the front of the room. I thought I finally had the system licked, but then my report cards started claiming something else that greatly disturbed my parents; the "speaking out of turn" comment was replaced with "lacks concentration."

There's just no way to win in second grade.

Although my parents would constantly discuss this with me, I never got spanked for it. Thus, I avoided corporal punishment all through second grade.

Well, nearly, but I separate this spanking from all the others I received in school because this one actually taught me something. With this spanking came the most important lesson I've ever learned.

It happened like this. It was during the spring, and although the sun was just starting to shine on a regular basis, it was still fairly cold outside. Therefore, as grades one through three returned to the building from lunch recess, most kids were still wearing coats, hats and gloves. Upon entering the hallway, all the boys removed their

hats. I was still cold, so I kept mine on. No sooner had I reached my classroom when my teacher, Mrs. Garvin, a slightly younger, tighter version of Mrs. Piper, scolded me in front of some other kids for leaving on my hat. She delivered a well rehearsed speech about how it's common courtesy to remove one's hat when indoors, but she never explained why. She then yanked the hat from my head and said I couldn't have it back until the end of the day. I didn't understand that punishment because I was inside now, and I wasn't going to need it, but I didn't point this out. I was afraid it might be deemed funny, and I didn't feel like getting spanked.

Once the scene was over, we all headed to the back of the class where the cloakroom was located. I was hanging my "cloak" when I saw a girl still wearing her hat. I can't remember her name, but I can remember that her hat was a hand knitted, blue and white atrocity that covered her ears and the back of her neck. Having just been taught this lesson, I felt I should spread the good word and promptly relieved this girl of her fine chapeau. Just as I was about to explain it's not courteous to wear one's hat indoors, I suddenly got that strange feeling of being a mouse again, this time trapped between the floor and the downward arc of a broom. Before I could react, Mrs. Garvin grabbed me by the arm and marched me out into the hallway.

"Whaddid I do?" I yelped, still holding the girl's hat in my hand. "You said we ain't allowed to wear hats inside."

"*Are not* allowed, and that rule's for boys only," Mrs. Garvin explained as she spun me around the doorway. I tripped over a pile of boots and lunch boxes and slammed my shoulder against the wall. "You should know that. Now you stay in this hallway until you feel you can behave as a good young man."

She then tore the hat from my hand and stormed back into the classroom. Before she shut the door, locking me out of her cell, I saw that the girl who owned the hat was crying. What's up with that? It pissed me off. I mean, look, I had no problem with getting yelled at, and I preferred it when my punishment was sitting in the hallway.

But that girl really got on my nerves, crying over something that stupid. All the injustices in the world—already apparent to a second grader, even—and she was bawling over a stupid little hat that was pretty ugly to begin with. It angered me to the point that I wasn't content to just sit there and lack some concentration for a while, enjoying a fine Life Saver. I hated crybabies, and I was going to let her know. After searching around, I found her lunch box nestled in with the others. I knew it was hers because she was the only one in school with a lunch box that promoted Holly Hobbie. I remember this because, in first grade, it was one of the things for which I got spanked for finding funny.

Making sure that Mrs. Garvin couldn't see around the cardboard cut-out of the little, red-headed leprechaun that guarded her door, I picked up the vintage, metal Holly Hobbie lunch box and hid it behind the large cooler that chilled the milk for the kindergarteners. I then slumped against the wall and waited for Mrs. Garvin to come out and end my "punishment."

I don't know if I thought that would be the end of it, but it of course wasn't. The brat started crying again the next day, and Mrs. Garvin explained to the class that the girl had lost her lunch box and would be in trouble with her parents if she didn't find it. She then asked for volunteers to help in the search, and I—like the chump I was—raised my hand. Yesterday I just wanted to see the crybaby suffer, but here was my chance to be her hero. Mrs. Garvin was clever and didn't pick me right away, but I was eventually chosen to join Holly Hobbie's search and rescue party. We were let out to the hallway where, after pretending to search around a bit, I found the lunchbox. I marched triumphantly into the classroom, the prize held high above my head as if it were the Stanley Cup.

It didn't take me long to realize my mistake. No sooner had I relinquished the prize when Mrs. Garvin turned on me like a revolving door.

"I knew it was you, Mr. Lindsey. I felt you might have hidden it yesterday when you were in the hallway," she scolded. "You just cannot seem to stay out of trouble, young man."

Mrs. Garvin always called me "Mr. Lindsey" and "young man" when she was yelling at me. I think she believed that if she referred to me as an adult, then she could punish me as an adult and not as a seven-year-old child.

"I chose you to find that lunchbox because I was sure you would go right to where you had hidden it, and I was right." Actually, she was wrong. As I mentioned, I purposely pretended to look in some other places before I looked behind the cooler. She could've at least given me that much, but I knew there was no use arguing. She was too busy revealing her evil plot like the villain in a James Bond movie. All she needed was a cat to stroke. "Before I send you to the principal's office, I want you to apologize to Pussy Galore."

Okay, Mrs. Garvin didn't really didn't call the girl with the hat Pussy Galore. I'm sure that grade school teachers are strongly cautioned against using the word "pussy" in the classroom. But for lack of a name better than "girl with the hat," I thought I'd carry the James Bond analogy one step further.

"I'm sorry for finding your lunchbox," I apologized to Pussy (see what I mean?). I thought my joke was kind of funny, but Mrs. Garvin sure didn't think so. Neither did anyone else in the class. They all sat stone-faced as Mrs. Garvin again marched me to the hallway. I wished my best friend Terry Hogan had been in my class that year. He would've laughed. Even though our shoes were no longer the same, he still would've laughed. As it were, I was now aware that I was to be spanked. I'd just told a joke, after all, and I needed to be brought swiftly to stern justice.

Mr. Steele was very calm about the whole thing. I sat in his secretary's office and listened to Mrs. Garvin's muffled babbling as I watched the secretary beat out punky rhythms on her old, dark green, metal typewriter. She had really long, dark red fingernails, and

she typed very slowly so she wouldn't break them. Either that or she was just a really lousy typist.

Mrs. Garvin soon left the office, shooting me a wicked look as she walked past, and Principal Steele asked me to come in. He told me to close the door, then ordered me to sit in the chair across from his desk. I did both, popping a Wint-O-Green Life Saver in my mouth; I needed something to enjoy throughout all of this. Mr. Steele then repeated the events of the day, and asked if they were all true. I said, "I suppose," and kind of shrugged.

"You suppose," he repeated. "Then how do you suppose I should punish you?"

I was going to tell him that he should spank me, mainly because I knew he was going to anyway and I at least wanted to get something right out of all of this, but I instead just said, "I don't know."

"You don't know." He repeated. He was doing a lot of that. "Well, I have a good idea."

He opened his drawer, and I knew he was going to pull out a paddle. I wanted to see what else he had in that drawer, to see what else principals considered important enough to store with their paddles, but he was too quick. He was walking towards me before I had time to get up from the chair.

"You're wearing a Cub Scout uniform," he pointed out. He was right. I was. "Would you care to tell me what it means to be a Cub Scout?"

"I don't know," I told him. I really didn't know. I only joined because my best friend Terry Hogan did. And in Cub Scouts, everyone wore the same shoes.

"You don't know." He was driving me nuts. I felt I was about to be punished by a parrot. Polly want a spanking? "Well to me, being a Cub Scout means being honest and trustworthy."

I almost started to laugh. I didn't know that Mr. Steele, at his age, was still a Cub Scout. He should've at least earned his Wolf Badge by now.

“Do you think that hiding [that girl’s] lunch box was an honest and trustworthy thing to do?” he continued.

“I don’t know,” I said, knowing he was about to repeat my answer. He did, but he also told me to lean over my chair. Again, I did as I was told.

Principal Steele was unique at my grade school in that he seemed to spank kids with intent to inflict pain rather than to just make a point. I was crying after the first hit. I lost my Life Saver after the second. By the fourth, I couldn’t even remember why I was there. As Mr. Steele climbed up to five...six...seven whacks, I learned the most valuable lesson of my entire life:

After doing something wrong, no matter how horrible and no matter what the reason, never admit it to anybody. Ever.

Before I left the principal’s office, my butt burning red through my well pressed, navy blue Cub Scout pants, Mr. Steele told me he wanted me to write a paragraph on what it meant to me to be a Cub Scout.

I wrote the paragraph that night.

I quit the Cub Scouts the next day.

CHAPTER 2



The Red Rooster

I rarely saw the Arbiter throughout my first year at Floodbane College. This is surprising, as Floodbane wasn't all that big a school. It enrolled only about fifteen hundred students, fifty percent of whom were freshmen. Funny thing is, only about half these students survived that first year. Floodbane always took in more freshmen than it could house and feed, knowing many would drop out. At the open forum with the president of the college (an event held the second week of each school year because the president believed the students wouldn't have yet found much about which to complain), the question as to why the college grossly over-enrolled freshmen was invariably asked. In fact, because it was only the second week of the school year, it was pretty much the only question asked.

"...and that's why there never have been and never will be spoons in the cafeteria," President Tunney enforced, pounding his fist against the podium. He then lowered his head to stare over the top of his bifocals, out at the twelve or so students who gave up their Saturday night to voice their concerns. That was another belief held by the President; schedule the open forum at ten o'clock on a Saturday night when most of the students were otherwise engaged in their weekend vices. In fact, it was rumored that to ensure this result, the

President bribed the bar owners to offer twenty-five cent pitchers of beer, and he reduced security by half so there was less chance of the frat boys and sorority girls getting themselves caught in positions that would require them to attend a school hearing, thereby forcing the President to leave the solitude of his mansion more than his customary once or twice a year. It all worked so beautifully.

“Now I’ll open up the floor to your questions,” the President said as he waved his right hand before him, sweeping it across the podium to indicate that his “your” meant us. With this gesture, the twelve of us suddenly became highly uncomfortable, cowering away from any questions we might’ve raised as if asking them would result in some sort of electric shock zapped through our chairs or a two ton weight dropped on our heads. So, instead of voicing our concerns, we stared at our laps or scratched the backs of our necks or performed whatever eccentric habits we’d developed to help us cope with such situations. And those of us who had no eccentric habit developed one on the spot. Mine became squeezing my palms together quickly, thereby producing a flatulent sound which would’ve gotten me spanked quite often back in Mrs. Garvin’s class, I’m sure. I should point out I only resorted to this nervous habit because I had no Life Savers handy.

Finally, one girl stood up. She wore large, round glasses and had a large, round butt that seemed to sigh with relief when all the pressure was released from it as she stood. Looking at the girl, I’d never felt so sympathetic towards a butt before. But I so respected her for having the courage to stand before the President that I didn’t think it fair or polite to place all my attention on her ass.

“I have a question, Mr. President,” the girl began. “I’m currently liv—”

“Please, miss lady,” the President interrupted. “You need not be so formal as to call me Mr. President. You can call me just President.”

The girl stopped for a moment then turned to look at the rest of us to see how we were responding to this request by “President.” We

weren't responding at all, and she wouldn't have been able to tell if we had been because we were seated so far apart. The forum was being held in the one thousand-plus seat theater that was named after President—President's Performing Arts Theatre for the Performing Arts—and those of us in the audience were a good fifteen to twenty feet away from one another. Compounding this, the lighting had been brought down so far that it only served to show us how large was the butt of the person talking.

Realizing she was getting no feedback from the other audience members, the girl struggled onward. "President, I'm—"

"Thank you," President interrupted once again.

"Excuse me?" the girl asked.

"Thank you," President repeated. He didn't even change his inflection. He repeated it so solidly that he sounded like a wax dummy in a history museum—a Ben Franklin or a Fonzie—who did nothing more than say "Thank you" each time some youngster pushed his button. "Thank you for calling me President."

"You're welcome?" the girl said with hesitant politeness. She then stared about her again as if trying to remember what she wanted to ask. I was relieved that her eccentric habit didn't involve the production of flatulent noises.

After another second or two of uncomfortable silence, she remembered, "President, I'm currently living in a room with three other girls, whereas...now don't get me wrong, I love them and we get along very well, like sisters...but the room is designed to hold two girls. There are only two beds, two desks, two chairs, two closets."

"Why do you only have two of everything if there are four of you in a room?" President asked. He seemed awfully concerned.

"The room only came with two of everything," the girl explained. "That's all we were assigned."

"Then why do you have four girls living there?"

"Because that's what we were assigned."

"I thought you just said that you were only assigned two."

"Right. Two of everything."

"Then you were assigned two roommates?"

"No. Three."

"So there are only three of you living there?"

"No. Four."

"How do you get four?"

"I have three roommates, plus me is four."

"How many roommates do *they* have?"

"Well, they each have three as well."

"All three of you have three roommates?"

"All four of us have three roommates."

"If four people have three roommates each, then that's...what? Twelve girls in one room?"

"No. Mathematically, that'd actually be sixteen girls."

"How can you fit sixteen girls in one room?"

"We can't! There aren't sixteen of us! There are four of us in one room!"

"And you're upset about that? Think of the girls who have sixteen roommates." A pause. "I know I will. Why, they'd have to share a—"

The Dean of Students quickly stood up, whispered something in President's ear, then returned to his seat. President looked ahead and said, "Let me understand this. There are four women living in one room, none of whom have any roommates. Is that correct?"

"If I say yes, will you understand that there are four of us living in one room?"

President answered, "Yes," as if that should've been obvious.

The girl was trying so valiantly to keep her cool through this. "Then yes," she said, holding out the S like a snake hissing.

"So then what's the problem?"

"The problem, as I stated before, is that the room is designed to only hold two girls!"

"And yet you're living with four girls?"

“I’m not! I’m living with three!”

At this point, some guy in the very back sung out, “Where the kisses are hers and hers and hers and hers...” I didn’t get the reference at the time, but only because the conversation between the freshman girl and President had me captivated. I sensed she was about to blow her cool and pull a gun from her purse and kill everyone in the room, and apparently the Dean of Admissions sensed this as well; he stood once more and asked President if he could speak. President agreed and, although he didn’t leave the podium, he did push the microphone over so the dean could be heard.

“We in the admissions office, located on the first floor of Admissions...if you ever need to discuss any problems you’re having about financial aid and class scheduling, or if you just need help adjusting to college life or need a friendly ear onto which you can pour out all of your problems onto, we’re always there for you between the hours of nine and eleven in the morning and from one to four in the afternoon by appointment only except for Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

“We at admissions realize that there’s usually always a student housing problem during the first semester. To keep the rising costs of tuition down, we over-enroll to compensate for the students who quickly realize that college life is not for them. Because our dropout average averages half of our freshman dropouts, we over enroll so that those who stay will not be left without a roommate.”

“But why do so many students drop out?” the girl asked.

“Inadequate housing accommodations, mainly.”

And so it went at the yearly President’s Forum at Floodbane College. Nothing was ever really discussed, so nothing was ever resolved. In fact, most of the students didn’t even know that the forums existed because they were never promoted. I only attended that one my sophomore year because I happened by the theater the night it was being held. My original intention was to go to the student union to play some video games, but the game room was closed.

The game room in the student union was a peculiar enough place. It sported two bumper pool tables, a skeeball game (the prize tickets from which could only be redeemed for more skeeball tokens), a 1980 *Flash Gordon* pinball machine that was missing the left flipper, and two video games—Crazy Climber and Dig Dug—from the early eighties, both of which suffered from intense phosphor burn-in. And although Floodbane refused to buy more up-to-date machines, it did have technicians come in to install the anti-drug message that comes up at the end of most video games. It's the one the player reads after losing the game which reminds him or her that, "Winners don't use drugs." I always found this to be quite curious. Having just *lost* a video game, children all across America were being told that *winners* don't use drugs. Do the math.

Anyway, when I asked why the game room had closed so early on a Saturday, I was told by the janitor that President was on campus. To celebrate, the student workers who ran the place decided to shut down early and go out with their friends to get drunk on quarter pitchers and maybe take a couple of girls back to their frat house. I asked the janitor if President Tunney's (I didn't yet know to refer to him only as President) visit was cause for this type of celebration. He just shrugged and continued to mop as he explained that it made more sense than the previous week when the boys decided to close down early and go out with their friends to get drunk and maybe take a couple of girls back to their frat house in honor of the cafeteria adding chipped beef gravy on toast to the breakfast menu that morning. I disagreed with the janitor on this one; that chipped beef gravy on toast is good eating.

After I became aware of what a debacle the forums were, I realized the only way the Floodbane system could be changed was if people were to actually attend these things. And the only way to accomplish this would be to publicize them. To do that, I'd have to get on the newspaper staff.

And so it came to pass that, two nights later, I made this suggestion to the newspaper's advisor at the organizational meeting. Having no idea who I was or what I was doing there, he asked, "Do you really want the whole campus to know that you had absolutely nothing better to do on a Saturday night than attend President's Forum?"

Thus, the revolution was quelled. I slumped back in my creaking, wooden seat and watched as the advisor listened to the other pitches and systematically reject them. Of course, most of them were pretty bad. One student proposed doing a semester long study of the differences between male and female college students ("Because they're funny," was his justification, "like females get drunk to party and males get party to drunk...get...dr...you know what I mean."), and another thought a whole page of Mad-Libs would increase sales...despite the fact that the papers were already free. But good ideas or not, most students quickly realized they'd rather be out getting drunk than scraping for a position on *A Daily Planet*.

I never did find out why the paper was named *A Daily Planet*. It perplexed me not because of its relationship with Perry White's paper (Floodbane dropped *The* from the name and replaced it with *A* in order to avoid a lawsuit from DC Comics, which came anyway after naming the campus literary magazine *The Aquaman*), but instead because *A Daily Planet* was published only once a week. Always had been. Any logical thought would've led to the paper being named *A Weekly Planet*. As I was quickly discovering, logical thought wasn't part of the curricula at Floodbane College.

The few of us who refused to retreat from the meeting were assigned positions by default. The editor and his main assistants were given positions based on previous experience on the paper because, as the academic advisor stated, "They're used to the threats." The rest of us were assigned our duties completely at random. This is how I became co-copy editor with the Arbiter.

As we were filing out of the room, I found myself side by side with the guy who told my freshman orientation class that he knew voo-

doo. My curiosity piqued; had anything more exciting happened to him since then? Despite the fact we sat next to each other throughout the duration of that freshman class, we never once spoke. I saw him occasionally in the cafeteria or walking around campus, but even then I never stopped to talk. He was usually surrounded by a group of people, and I hated groups of people. Groups of three were actually too large for me. Any more than that and I'd usually just sign off like a UHF channel after midnight (I wouldn't sing the National Anthem, though). I rarely left my dorm room and certainly didn't participate in any of the social mixers on Friday and Saturday nights. It was probably because of my reclusive nature that my dormmates would throw beer bottles at my window and yell at me for no apparent reason. Their actions upset me at first, and I went through many packs of Life Savers, but I quickly turned them to my advantage; it was impossible for me to hold onto a roommate. I went through three in my first month, and then managed to keep a single room for the rest of the year. Even as some freshman were sleeping on floors in rooms with three other students, I was by myself. It took me a while to convince the Housing Department of the Admissions Department that this was for the best, but after someone attacked my door with an aluminum baseball bat one Tuesday morning at about four, I was able to persuade them by using the personal safety clause in the College Handbook. I was a health hazard. I later learned they allow homosexuals to live alone, but I chose not to use that excuse. I was sure my dormmates would then take the baseball bats to my head instead of just my door.

Incidentally, the drunken freshman who attacked my door tried to tell the resident assistant that I had attacked my own door. Imagine that. I didn't even own a bat.

Because of my social status, I was surprised when the Arbiter struck up a conversation in the hallway of the student union.

"Hey buddy," he greeted.

I turned to see if he was talking to me, then replied with, "Yeah?"

“Going to be partners,” he said, offering his hand. “Name’s the Arbiter.”

For some reason it surprised me that he introduced himself this way. “I thought it was Papa Shango.”

The Arbiter stared at me blankly. “Why would you think that?”

“That’s how you introduced yourself in freshman orientation last year,” I explained.

He continued to stare at me for a moment, then eased his expression. “Wonder why.”

I shrugged. “My name’s Guy Lindsey.”

“Guy Lindsey...wait. You *were* in that orientation class. You sat two feet away and never once said, ‘Hi,’ or ‘How was your weekend,’ or ‘If that freak teacher doesn’t shut her bulbous mouth I’ll scream like a little school girl in a carnival fun house,’ or anything.”

“That’s because you were sleeping most of the time,” I explained.

A smile curled in the corner of The Arbiter’s mouth. “Think the only time you spoke all semester, in fact, was when you introduced yourself.”

“That’s probably true. I can’t remember back that far. I try to forget the past.”

“You know they say if you forget history, you’re doomed to repeat it.”

“They also say that ignorance is bliss.”

The Arbiter thought about this a moment. “You know, when you think about it, they really do contradict themselves a lot. They also say ‘don’t throw good money after bad,’ and then they turn right around and say ‘in for a penny, in for a pound.’”

“Or ‘all that glitters is not gold,’” I added. “They’ve had a lot to say over the years. And besides, history is going to repeat itself no matter what. It’s those who remember it who are doomed.”

The Arbiter raised his eyebrows, then turned back ahead. When we reached the end of the hallway, I threw open the door hard enough so that he and I could both get through before it closed. The

early fall wind greeted us immediately, lightly cleansing us with sprinkles of mist from the fountain in front of the student union. To the left of the fountain was a sign which said simply "Student Union." The building, like most others at Floodbane, had no formal name.

"Can even remember what you said at orientation," the Arbiter told me as his white shirt began to glow a fluorescent purple in the electric-blue light of the fountain. "You said, 'My name's Guy Lindsey, and I'm five years old.' Thought it was hilarious."

I didn't recall anyone finding it hilarious. "I don't remember you laughing."

The Arbiter thought for a moment. "Papa Shango no laugh."

"Well, whatever," I responded. "And how about you? Do you still know voodoo?"

The Arbiter did laugh this time. He laughed quite heavily in fact. He had an honest, genuine laugh that made me feel like he really did find my question funny. It'd been a long time since I heard a laugh like that, and it kind of made me happy...even though I was expecting Mrs. Piper to swoop down on me from out of the darkness for making someone laugh without first getting her permission. I could see now why the Arbiter always had so many people hanging around him.

Although he was by no means muscular, the Arbiter was in pretty good shape. He stood nearly six feet and looked to weigh about 180 pounds, only slightly chunky around the middle. His face was stern, accented by eyes that were blue. Not light blue or midnight blue or any other variation of the color. Simply blue. His dark brown hair was neatly trimmed and combed on top, but tattered wildly behind his neck, causing it to sprout forth from behind his ears like weeds from under a fence. I couldn't tell if that was natural or had gotten that way from lack of grooming.

Looking at him, I could tell the Arbiter was the kind of guy strangers wouldn't hesitate to approach for directions.

“Hey listen, you got any plans tonight?” the Arbiter asked.

I was shocked as hell. No one at Floodbane had ever asked me to do anything. I was starting to worry.

“Why?”

“Just wanted to see if you wanted to hang out.”

“You’re not gay, are you?” I asked.

Again, he laughed that genuine laugh of his. “No, but there’s a lot of life ahead yet. It’s just that most people are out at the bars tonight to take advantage of the ‘free beer for every pitcher’ deal.”

“How much are the pitchers?”

“Seventeen bucks.”

“Seventeen...! Do they get to keep them?”

“No.”

“Hardly seems like a deal to me.”

“People don’t need deals to get drunk, they need excuses. But anyway, everyone out will already be drunk, and it’s only fun to hang around drunks if you get to watch them get there, you know?”

“No.”

“Once saw some guy get a shot glass stuck in his mouth. The moron was trying to do a blow job, only the glass slid inside his teeth. His lips wrapped around it like a snake swallowing an egg, and the suction held it there for the next five minutes or so. Almost had to call the fire department to get it out. You just can’t write a joke better than that.”

“So if it’s so funny, why don’t you want to go tonight?”

“Wrestling’s on.”

“You’re a wrestling fan?”

“Yeah, why? You know someone who isn’t?”

I can’t say I was surprised by this. His reference last year to Papa Shango certainly indicated he was a longtime fan. Yet most people don’t readily and proudly admit to being fans of professional wrestling. No matter how high it may climb in the peaks and valleys of its popularity, wrestling will always be considered the “fake” sport. A

second-rate or even third-rate form of entertainment geared towards juvenile and immature audiences. To the “educated” or “real athletes,” wrestling fans were like drug users; they acknowledged their existence and may have even known a few, perhaps dabbled in it themselves in college, but really hoped none of them were relatives.

Yet there I was outside of Student Union Student Union at Flood-bane College, and I felt like I was about to come out of the closet. “I love wrestling! Who’s your favorite wrestler?”

“Hate them all.”

I stopped walking for a moment. I needed my brain to sit perfectly still so I could try to figure this guy out.

“Then why watch it if you hate all the wrestlers?” I asked.

“Love wrestling,” he explained. “Just hate wrestlers.”

“I don’t understand,” I confessed as we started walking again.

“Sure you do,” the Arbiter reassured me, “you just don’t know that you understand.”

“I don’t understand that, either,” I confessed again.

“That’s understandable.”

I accepted this, and the two of us continued up the sidewalk until I could no longer hear the fizzing of the fountain water splashing into itself. We were quiet for a moment before I was suddenly overwhelmed by my total lack of comprehension of what the Arbiter had just told me.

“No! You mean to say that you watch wrestling every week and yet you hate every wrestler?” I asked, knowing that this wouldn’t help anything at all.

“Exactly,” the Arbiter said.

“Isn’t that kind of like watching another TV show week after week and hating all the characters?” I continued, thinking I was cornering him in his own philosophy.

I wasn’t, and I would have to get used to that.

“It’s also like enrolling for classes here and hating all your professors,” the Arbiter added, “or voting for president and hating all the candidates.”

Up ahead, a sports car turned onto the road and headed towards us. I think it was playing some kind of heavy metal or rap music on the radio...I could only hear the bass and the drums.

After it passed, I turned back to the Arbiter. “You’ve never liked any wrestlers?”

He thought for a moment. “Well, no. Not since the Red Rooster left.”

“The Red Rooster?!” I almost yelled. “All the thousands of wrestlers throughout history and the only one you pick to like is Terry Taylor?! Why?!”

“No, hated Terry Taylor. Liked the Red Rooster.”

“It was the same guy,” I explained.

“Know that,” the Arbiter explained. “Hated the man, liked the incarnation.”

“Why?”

“Felt sorry for the Red Rooster,” the Arbiter said. “He had to play such a pathetic role. All the time clucking. Ain’t no grown man should have to cluck for a living.”

I stared at him for a good ten seconds, but he didn’t return my gaze. Instead, he merely said, “Suppose you liked Hulk Hogan.”

“The greatest of all time. Well, before he went south...then came back north,” I replied. “The Immortal Hulk Hogan. ‘I got something deep inside of me. Courage is the thing that keeps us free.’”

“The immortal prima-donna showboat. He only knew six maneuvers, and two of them involved cupping his hand to his ear,” the Arbiter argued. “You only liked him because everyone else did.”

I started to laugh at this point. There we were, two college students who had never held a conversation before, and five minutes into our first we were arguing about professional wrestlers, one of whom had the same name as my best friend in grade school. Close

enough, anyway, as Hulk Hogan's real name is Terry Bollea. I don't know what my friend Terry's real name was. Instinctively, I looked down at the Arbiter's shoes. They were white Asics...exactly like mine.

The Arbiter was wrong about why I liked Hulk Hogan, however. He was my best friend Terry Hogan's favorite, and he and I used to get together every Saturday to watch wrestling on cable. We started watching it in third grade; one year after I'd been spanked for hiding Holly Hobbie and three years before I would get spanked for the last time in my life.



It wasn't my parents who smacked my adolescent butt for the final time; it was Mrs. Patera, my sixth grade teacher. It was kind of sad because, until that day, Mrs. Patera had been my favorite. I bet her a quarter every Friday throughout the fall that our community's high school football team would lose. They ended up 2-8 on the season, so I cleared one dollar and fifty cents.

I can't remember on what I spent my winnings, but I'm sure I don't have it anymore.

It was all a big joke to me and Mrs. Patera, and it gave my dad and her something about which to laugh on Sunday mornings in church (as if the children's bell choir weren't already enough). I soon came to realize that most of my classmates didn't share the humor. I guess it was because some of them had older brothers on the team. One kid even served as the spit boy...or whatever they call the chump who runs the water bottle out to the players while they're in the huddle.

The student who harbored the most animosity towards me was Heath Millard. His dad was the John Stuart Mill High School health teacher and, therefore, coach of the John Stuart Mill High School Fightin' Golden Sandies. There was apparently a rule at JSMHS that all health teachers had to coach football...or maybe that all football

coaches had to teach health. Either way, both positions were always filled with incompetence.

The Fightin' Golden Sandies claimed only two victories a year for something like eight consecutive years, and never from the same teams. We managed to beat every high school in our conference, just never during the same season. The head of the athletic department was constantly hiring new health teachers to try to take care of this problem, but it was all for naught. Our boys just seemed to have it burned into their flunking-but-still-eligible-to-play minds that they were only required to win two games. If they won them early on, they'd slack off the rest of the season. If they lost the first eight, they'd defy the odds and close the season by beating teams they had no right to beat. I realize now I should've bet Mrs. Patera much more than just that quarter. As a kid, however, betting more than a quarter would've probably led the school board to think I had a gambling problem and, therefore, a lack of parental supervision which would've landed me in a home, my parents in jail, and my story on a Lifetime movie with Meredith Baxter stretching her acting wings by playing the lesbian social worker who saves me despite a broken home and an alcoholic father who hasn't been able to forgive his wife for dying of a brain aneurysm seven years before.

Because of the lackluster football, the highlight of each game was the marching band show. John Stuart Mill had one hell of a marching band. They had won so many area marching competitions that the only way they could get invited after a while was as "featured performers," removed from competition so another school could win. To see the John Stuart Mill High School Marchin' Fightin' Golden Sandies Marching Band was the only reason I ever went to the football games, and it was my dream to one day be down there on the damp, evening grass, looking up into the stadium lights as they reflected tiny, shimmering crosses off the brass of my very own Conn trombone.

To admit this dream to anyone, however, would have achieved the same results as if I were to...oh, wear Mrs. Patera's underwear to school one day, especially with Heath Millard in class.

It's not really like Heath and I hated each other...yet. I doubt anyone even really hated another student in sixth grade. Well, maybe Hitler. Hitler probably hated people in sixth grade.

“Mrs. Fraulich! Mrs. Fraulich! Do not call on zee second row, only zee sird row! Zee people in zee second row are weak unt shtupid! We in zee sird row are superior at zee arithmetic unt zee shpelling!”

Heath and I were complete opposites and had absolutely no business even belonging in the same phylum, let alone classroom. Unfortunately, the few friends with whom I was left when my best friend Terry Hogan moved away to Toledo were better friends with Heath. And because Heath was the coolest sixth grader around, I had to pretend to like him in order for his friends to pretend to like me.

I think Heath was aware of my true feelings, which may be why I was always the target for his jokes and snide comments. I had to take them. I had to suffer through them in order to suffer through his friendship so I could remain friends with people who really weren't worth it. I was in sixth grade, and kids who don't have friends in sixth grade get sent by the school board to homes they've never seen as they watch their parents sign those aforementioned Meredith Baxter movie deals with Lifetime executives...assuming Lifetime has executives.

Now that I think about it, I could've single-handedly jump started Meredith Baxter's career.

Want to know how bad it was between me and Heath? He ate fruity Life Savers, the freak. The few similarities Heath and I did share began to dissolve in junior high when the unpopular were finally weeded out from the popular, and they completely eroded in high school when he became a Fightin' Golden Sandie and I became

a Marchin' Fightin' Golden Sandie. Our differences were accentuated by the fact that he excelled in everything while I wallowed in mediocrity. Only a sophomore, Heath Millard was already the starting varsity quarterback. At that same time, I was still the last chair trombone player. This made no sense to me, either. I spent every free moment I had practicing that damn trombone. I practiced in the band room during study hall when I should've been studying. I practiced in my bedroom at night when I should've been sleeping. I practiced at the dinner table when I should've been eating a pork chop.

I marched in front of the mirror and down the hall. When mom called me to dinner, I'd march to the table. I stood at attention when spoken to, and I stood at parade rest when I wasn't spoken to. When I walked to school, it was in beat with the John Stuart Mill High School fight song (a highly militant arrangement of "Onward Christian Soldiers"). When I took notes in class, they were in the key of B flat. I realized early on, I think, that this was all for naught, but that only made me work harder. I often wonder why the band director didn't just kick me out. Maybe he liked my dedication, or maybe—like most everyone—he simply didn't know I was there. There was little else I could do, anyway. Trombone was all I knew, so I clung to it like Captain Lawrence of the Chesapeake barking, "Don't give up the ship!" as the British took it in the War of 1812.

But then came Ann Penella.

It was at the beginning of my sophomore year—immediately after I'd again scored last chair in try-outs—that my destiny with Ann began to take shape. Because I was in the practice room running over the tryout piece again, trying to figure out just what the hell went wrong, I missed the sign-up for bus seats to the away games. By the time I got to the list, the band buses had all been filled.

It didn't surprise me, really. I mean, I got along okay with some of the other musicians, but it's not as if we ever hung out. I certainly could not have expected them to save me a seat. It would've helped if I'd had some enemies, they might have assigned me to another bus

just to make sure I didn't end up on theirs. Instead, I was completely forgotten by everyone. Although the band probably wouldn't miss me, the spectators would surely see a hole in the marching line if I weren't there. Realizing this, I took my dilemma to the band director.

Mr. Bravo's door was open after class had ended that day, so I slowly stepped in. The room smelled like that musty area of the basement where dad kept his *Playboys* (do all dads purposely do a terrible job of hiding their smut?), and there were scores of music sheets scattered about his desk and the shelves behind it. The afternoon sun shone in from the single window behind Mr. Bravo's desk and reflected light off the spot on his head from which his hair was cowardly retreating.

Hearing the music scores slide beneath my feet, Mr. Bravo turned around. He looked at me quizzically, then picked up his grade book.

"Guy Lindsey," I pointed out, trying to save him the time.

Mr. Bravo didn't reply and instead picked up his sectional listing.

"Last chair trombone," I continued.

Mr. Bravo still made no sound, but raised a pudgy finger to run across his two chins. He then grabbed the chart for that week's marching band show.

"Number thirty-nine," I added.

His eyes immediately lit up. "Ah, yes," he beamed. "Nice glide step."

"Thank you," I smiled, knowing he was probably mistaking me for someone else. "Mr. Bravo, I have a bit of a problem."

"You're not satisfied with your tryout?" he asked. He definitely wasn't confusing me with someone else.

"Well, no, I'm not satisfied, but that's not my problem," I explained. "All the buses are full, and I didn't get a seat."

"Well, I'm not driving you home."

"I mean the band buses...for the away games."

Mr. Bravo once again adopted a look of confusion and moved his finger from his chins to scratch just behind his right ear. “How did this happen?”

“I was rehearsing and everything just kinda filled up,” I shrugged.

“You rehearse?” Beat. “Well, what bus are your friends on?”

I paused. “They’re...uh...they’re scattered about.”

Mr. Bravo stared at me for another moment, then stood up. “Well, let’s go check those rosters,” he suggested. He pointed for me to exit his office, then followed, stopping for a moment to straighten the picture of John Philip Sousa that adorned the wall beside the door.

The sign-up sheets had been taped to the chalkboard behind the conductor’s pedestal. When we reached them, Mr. Bravo again brought his hand up to his chins and rubbed them slowly, enjoying the percussive sound his fingers made as they scratched against the stubble beneath his bottom lip.

After staring at the sign-up sheets for a few moments, he pointed out, “You’re not on any of these.”

I was suddenly worried that someone else may be watching this. Rehearsal had been over for a while now, however, so the room was empty.

“No, sir,” I replied.

“They’re full, too,” Mr. Bravo pointed out.

“Yes sir,” I agreed.

“Well, I don’t think we can justify getting you your own bus, could we?”

I was going to answer him when, in one fluid motion, almost as if he were conducting “Durango” or another piece from the opening show, Mr. Bravo turned his head just a bit to the right, grabbed a pencil, wrote my name on a piece of paper, then headed back towards his office.

“Now you’re on a bus,” he said as he disappeared back into the hallway that led to his sanctum. I just stood there a moment, staring blankly at the area where he’d been standing just a moment before. I

envied his power to completely rid himself of problems with a simple flick of the wrist. For a moment, I thought perhaps I should become a band director upon graduation. But the remembrance that I couldn't play a single instrument with any sort of effectiveness muted this thought.

Sighing dejectedly, I stepped forward to see onto which bus I'd been placed. The sheet he'd signed had been taped up separately from the others, so I should've realized immediately that something was amiss. I also probably should've noticed a problem when I began to scan up the list to see with whom I'd be riding. They were all girls. When I reached the top of the paper and saw that the heading read "Cheerleaders/Dance Troupe," I shouldn't have been shocked.

But I was.

There I was underneath eighteen dancers and...



"...twenty cheerleaders!" The Arbiter yelled from the second floor lounge of Sophomore Male Male Dorm. I flushed the toilet of the lounge restroom, quickly washed my hands and walked into the TV room that forever reeked of the beer spills that had dried into the carpeting.

"What?"

"That stage must be jam-packed with twenty cheerleaders!" he exclaimed, thrilled with his discovery. "Look at them up there, all flipping around!"

"So?" I asked. "What happened to wrestling?"

The Arbiter turned to me for only a moment. "Listen. All for watching a bunch of fat, hairy, sweaty men jump all over each other in the middle of the squared circle, but this..." He pointed up to the TV. "Go..." he squinted to see the name on the banner behind the two tiers of shapely legs stacked across the screen, then added, "Hiedeger High Orangemen cheerleaders!"

“What is this then?” I asked, flopping down on the dark blue couch beside the Arbiter, causing dust to erupt forth like ash from Mount Vesuvius.

“National Cheerleader Championships,” he explained. “ESPN2. Orlando. Florida. United States of friggin’ A.” He seemed enthralled.

I watched a few moments, but failed to see anything more than a bunch of teenagers throwing each other around a room to some messy synthesized beat.

“Oh, come on! That was a terrible basket toss,” the Arbiter shouted out, using the new terms as quickly as he learned them. “Let’s see some height! Let’s get tight, girls! Big ‘G’ little ‘o’! Go! Go! Go!”

“I don’t see what’s so interesting about this,” I continued to gripe. I had this thing against cheerleaders. “Look at ’em all, smiling and shouting like they actually care about what’s going on. They don’t mean it. They’re probably all a bunch of skanks.”

“They sure are, God bless ’em,” the Arbiter smiled. “Each and everyone of them. Can you imagine it? Thousands of high school girls converging on Sea World in Orlando to flip all over each other...oh man! It’s hard to be humble when you can jump, cheer and tumble!”

“I think you’re enjoying this a bit too much,” I pointed out, but the Arbiter was oblivious to my comments.

“Can you imagine what it must be like to be a guy cheerleader down there?” he asked, not taking his eyes off the girls in the short blue and yellow skirts, which seemed an odd choice of colors for a sports collective called the Orangemen. “Can you imagine what it must be like to be away from home, probably for the first time in your life, and you’re surrounded by thousands of great looking girls—the crème de la crème of high school Homecoming Queens all across this nation—and they love you just because you’re a guy and you’re a cheerleader and you can execute a basket toss! V-I-C-T-O-R-Y! That’s the Orangemen battle cry!”

“Yeah, but most guys only become cheerleaders because they’re gay and aren’t interested in girls,” I offered.

I was thinking back to the guy who played the Fightin’ Golden Sandie mascot in high school. No one knew what a Golden Sandie was, so they dressed this guy up like a blonde, Swedish Girl—the kind of woman who was more suited to a butter label than a football helmet—and gave him boxing headgear. The head gear proved to be a blessing, as he was beaten up often. High school kids will do that to a guy who looks like a Swedish butter churner. If he wasn’t gay before that, the constant beatings for it would certainly convince him he was.

I was also thinking of that cheerleader school bus I rode in high school, and the incident on it that set off the chain events that lead to my killing somebody.

The Arbiter brightened at my generalization of the sexual orientation of male cheerleaders. “But that just makes it better for those who aren’t! There are probably three guys there who were just sitting around one day in study hall, maybe in the cafeteria after finishing off some pizza and green beans, trying to figure out what activity they could do in order to get scholarships, something like volunteering at the nursing home, transcribing repeats of *Murder, She Wrote* to the deaf, and one of them jokingly suggests they become cheerleaders! They’re hitting each other on the shoulders like guys do, and they’re laughing because they know they’re going to get to cop a lot of cheap feels, and yet the girls all think it’s so...no wait! One of the guys joins because his girlfriend’s a cheerleader and they split up on the bus on the way down so now he’s got all week and thousands of girls to use to get his old girlfriend jealous! Oh man! God bless that boy! God bless that boy and all those girls around him! God bless everyone on the TV screen right now! God bless TV! God bless pixels and cathode rays and Philo T. Farnsworth!”

“Can we just go back to wrestling?” I pleaded.

“Sure,” the Arbiter replied as he flipped the remote back to World Wrestling Entertainment. He dropped back in his chair as if the channel had never been turned in the first place and immediately started to write something in a hard, gray folder that he always carried with him. I remember first seeing him with it in that freshman orientation class, but I just thought it was a regular notebook. After the semester was over, he still had it with him. Even when I saw him in the cafeteria, he was still carrying it, sometimes writing in it as if documenting what he was having for dinner that day. The thing never left his side.

The wrestling match on TV eventually ended, and I asked the Arbiter if he wanted to turn back to the cheerleaders.

“Hate cheerleaders,” he replied.

My sophomore year became rather important to me, as it was then the Arbiter became my first real friend since Terry Hogan moved to Toledo. The Arbiter and I worked exceptionally well together on the newspaper staff, and it was assumed the two of us would serve as co-editors when we were seniors. Most would’ve been satisfied with just the Arbiter taking the position, but he made it quite clear to everyone that he and I were a team. As he often explained it to them, “Got things that need to get done here, and Guy’s the only one who can help.” And unlike some other people in my past, he didn’t hang out with me out of pity. He wasn’t ashamed to be my friend.

Oddly enough, no one seemed to mind when the Arbiter insisted he’d only work if I worked with him. He had somehow achieved the type of status where just about anything he wanted was okay by most others. If not, it was futile to oppose him. Maybe it was his brutal honesty that made it seem he never had any ulterior motives. People seemed to respect that even as he criticized them. But although he’d achieved this power to influence others without trying, he didn’t abuse it.

I still wonder if this was because he was just a nice guy or if he really just didn't know he could have.

The drawback to all this was the Arbiter's popularity. He was never at a loss for people with whom he could hang out. That's not to say everyone liked him, but those who did liked him a lot. On the other hand, those who didn't flat out hated him. These people always seemed to be the extremists. Stereotypes, the Arbiter would call them.

"Stereotypes are there for a reason," the Arbiter explained to me one night while we were lying on the fifty yard line of the football field for the Floodbane College Football Players.

An aside. "Football Players" actually was the team name for the Floodbane College football team. No one really knew why. As with just about everything else at Floodbane, there was no documentation on how the team name came about. The theories were as numerous and varied as the explanations on the disappearance of the dinosaurs, the most popular of which was that Floodbane just neglected to choose a mascot. I mean, that's the Floodbane "Football Players" theory, not the dinosaur theory. I'm sure no one believes the dinosaurs became extinct because Floodbane neglected to choose a mascot.

Anyway, the name "Football Players" was then assigned by opposing teams because they needed something to hang on their banners to announce who they were going to destroy on Saturday. The alternate choice, "Talent Enhancement," just proved too difficult to chant.

It had been proposed numerous times that the name be changed, but this never got any further than a letter to the editor of *A Daily Planet*. The suggestion was always rebuked with the same argument, which usually came as a form letter from the current president of Floodbane:

Dear Student:

Thank you for your suggestion regarding the changing of our team mascot for the Floodbane ~~Normal School~~ College Football Players. After careful consideration, we regret to say that the mascot cannot be changed at this time as it is economically unfeasible. The money we save by simply using a third string defensive lineman as the sideline mascot instead of investing in a costume were our mascot, say, a penguin or a lug nut, is being invested in special endeavors which will ultimately keep the tuition down for you and all the students of Floodbane ~~Normal School~~ College...~~the first students in the history of this fine institution.~~

Please understand that, as we receive hundreds of suggestions a month, we are unable to send you a personal reply. This rejection is in no way a reflection of the quality of your suggestion, and we encourage you to send suggestions to other heads of things at Floodbane ~~Normal School~~ College in the future. For 10¢, 50¢, \$1.50, \$5.00, \$5.05, \$15.75, \$50.00, we will critique your suggestion and offer pointers on how to make other suggestions that may or may not get implemented in the future. Simply enclose a check and a photocopy of the suggestion in the enclosed envelope. Be advised that suggestions will not be returned and become the sole property of Floodbane ~~Normal School~~ College. Good luck, and study hard!

Yours,
President

Naming the team Floodbane College Football Players paid off in other ways as well. Swept up in the political correctness myth of the early nineties, Floodbane College sued their longtime rivals, the Ramirez College Night Stalkers, after they posted a banner which

read "Kill the Floodbane College Football Players!" Representatives from Ramirez College claimed the banner was only meant as a battle cry to inspire their football players to victory and that they didn't intend to actually kill anybody, but the courts didn't see it that way and decreed that the banner violated the Floodbane College speech code. Ramirez College was forced to forfeit the game. However, no one at Floodbane bothered to document this, so the game still showed up as a loss for the Football Players.

Incidentally, the Night Stalkers were taken to court four other times that year by animal rights activists after posting banners that read "Club the Gein College Seals," "Harpoon the Chikatilo University Whales," "Net the Albert Fish College Dolphins" and "Cage Up the Chase College Calves in Cramped Quarters So That Their Meat Stays Tender, Lean and Red."

Yeah, Football Stadium was rife with scandal and ignominy. Perhaps that's why the Arbiter insisted that we go there every now and again, just to lie down on the fifty yard line and talk about things such as stereotypes.

"All stereotypes have concrete foundations," he continued. "Women are considered to be bad drivers because many of them are. Men are considered to be insensitive because many of them are. Blondes are considered to be dumb because many of them are. That doesn't mean that every blonde is dumb or that all women are bad drivers."

"Or that all men are insensitive," I added.

"No. They all are," the Arbiter corrected. "Only it doesn't matter because they just don't give a damn. You'll never see a million men marching on the White House lawn because they're portrayed by the media to be insensitive. Four hundred thousand, tops, would march. The rest just don't care. Too much wrestling to watch on the TV."

I found Orion's Belt in the stars as the Arbiter continued.

"The problem with stereotypes is that some people use them to judge individuals. You can't think a woman's a ditz and a bad driver

just because she's a blonde female, but once you actually learn that she *is* a ditz and a bad driver, you can shrug it off and just say, 'Well, she is a blonde female after all.'

Hearing him say this, I suddenly realized how true this philosophy was to the Arbiter's life. Girls who belonged to sororities always had fun with the Arbiter. Sorority sisters retched at the sight of him. Guys who played sports thought the Arbiter was great. Athletes abhorred him. People who worked for Floodbane College respected the Arbiter. University faculty and staff wanted him expelled. And amazingly, the Arbiter looked at all these people with indifference. He greeted his friends and enemies with equanimity.

When I first brought this up to him, he replied with, "What's it matter, anyway? They're all just ants." I didn't know what he meant by this, but that's the way it was with the Arbiter. I could never fully comprehend the guy, and wasn't entirely sure I wanted to.

It was his enigmatic nature that most pleased him, I think. Like Cicero, the guy had complete control over every faction of his life. Because of this, he inadvertently found himself in control of a lot of other people as well. The one exception to this was Rhonda Vorhees.

I was there when the Arbiter spoke with Rhonda for the first time, and I remember recalling that if they ever got married and had children and grandchildren, they'd have a wonderful story to tell them about how they met.

It was a Tuesday morning in late September, not even a month into our junior year of college. The Arbiter and I were on our way to Student Union when we saw a woman approaching us. I recognized Rhonda because she'd been in a couple of my classes. It was more than that, though. *Everyone* knew Rhonda. She was the girl about whom all the guys fantasized while they masturbated at night. The next day, as these future captains of industry would plod down to the lobby and slump lifelessly onto the cigarette burned sofas, they would brag about how great Rhonda had been the previous night. The guys returning from the shower would agree, saying she was just

as great for them, and they'd then call their buddies back in the dorms to see if Rhonda was good for them, too. According to the guys at Floodbane College, Rhonda Vorhees was having sex at a frequency on par with the Romans under the rein of Bob Guccioni's Caligula, or at least on par with Gene Simmons of KISS.

All the sororities, therefore, did everything within their power to get Rhonda to pledge just so they'd be able to get more boys over to their houses and, in turn, more pledges. The fraternities tried to convince her to become their "Little Sister" just so their fantasies would be more believable than the next frat's. But Rhonda never entertained these offers. She turned them all down with languid and non-malicious ease, and had therefore developed many enemies across campus.

But this did not turn Rhonda into a bitter person. She was pleasant in class, and those who actually knew her always spoke highly of her character. Yet it was difficult to get to know Rhonda. In a way, her affability had built around her an impenetrable barrier.

I liked this about her. She was wonderfully gregarious with complete strangers who merely wanted to find the time or discuss the weather, but when the questions slithered on to "Hey, what's your major?" or "What are you doing this weekend?" she'd pull away as if she'd just been offered a piece of candy if only she'd climb into the El Camino. Rhonda never judged people by their actions, but by their intentions. I was sure she was the one person who wouldn't label me "killer" just because I'd killed somebody. Perhaps this is the reason, as our friendship would grow, I would become strongly compelled to confess to Rhonda that I had once killed somebody.

Well, one of the reasons.

Rhonda was a great judge of character, too. She seemed to only have to listen to one sentence from people to know from where they were coming. First impressions were everything with Rhonda Vorhees. It certainly would've saddened me, I'm sure, to see the impression I had made, but I was dying to see how the Arbiter fared.

“Who *is* she?” he asked in almost a whisper, heavily stressing the “is.”

I was kind of caught off guard by this. As I mentioned, even though Rhonda had reclusive tendencies, everyone knew who she was. This is why I didn’t answer the Arbiter’s question.

“Isn’t she something?” I said instead.

“Who *is* she?”

“She was in my art class my freshman year. I used to slide my desk over closer to hers during the slide presentations just so I could pretend we were at the movies.”

“Who *is* she?”

“She was also in my biology class last year. She always—”

I was interrupted by the Arbiter’s hand clenching my shirt just below my right shoulder. I turned to look at him to see what he was doing, but he was still staring fixedly at Rhonda. “*Who is she?*”

“What, are you serious?” I asked. His lack of a reply indicated he was. “Her name’s Rhonda Vorhees. She’s a junior with us. She hasn’t been in any of your classes?”

“Would’ve flunked them if she were,” the Arbiter replied as he let go of my shirt.

Recognizing his sudden obsession with her, I decided that I’d save him the trouble. “Forget it. She’s not known to be the socialite.”

“It sure is a beautiful day, isn’t it,” the Arbiter pointed out.

He was right, it was, but it had been all morning. I couldn’t understand why he chose now to point it out. “I suppose,” I agreed, looking up at the cloudless, blue sky. The last scents of the damp, morning grass were just now starting to fade from the air, and a light, fall wind was gently brushing the flowers and trees. “Kind of cold, though, I think.”

“No, it’s perfect,” the Arbiter stated, still watching Rhonda as she came closer to us. “It’s a beautiful day.”

I guess I should’ve known he hadn’t been talking about the weather, but I’d never seen the Arbiter act this way before. I’d seen

him around a lot of other women, some of whom were just as physically attractive as Rhonda, but none had ever evoked this melodramatic response. In fact, other than hyper excitement, this may have been the first emotion I'd ever seen him display.

"She does have a great body, doesn't she," I offered.

"Body?" the Arbiter asked. "Haven't made it past the hair."

It was long, red and curly. Striking, but I played it coyly. I'm not sure why. "What about it?"

"That red," the Arbiter continued. "Haven't seen a red that absolute since that last Arizona sunset."

"When were you in Arizona?" I asked.

"Never," he replied.

I didn't believe in love at first sight. Even with Ann back in high school, it took me nearly a year to fall in love with her...or to at least realize I had. The whole concept of love at first sight just seemed ridiculous. Love was too multifaceted to be achieved in one meeting; a fleeting glance across a crowded room. To me, love at first sight was a notion created by romance novelists so they could skip the courtship and get right to the sex. Observing the Arbiter at that moment, however, had me reconsidering my beliefs.

Rhonda was now only about thirty feet away from us, and I'm sure she could tell the Arbiter was staring at her. She seemed to be making an effort to look away, but her eyes kept coming back. I looked almost perversely forward to the encounter. I was sure the Arbiter was about to say something so romantic and honest that it would completely demolish every wall of the beautiful, Bavarian castle Rhonda had built to protect herself. He probably would've too, had it not been for the bicyclist.

He had been coming up from behind her quickly, and, upon catching up to her, lowered his hand to grab her ass. She jumped at his touch, and he laughed as he sped by her. It took Rhonda only a second to compose herself, but by then all she could effectively do was call him a "Jerk!"

That made me smile; a woman who still chose “jerk” over the more familiar expressions available to college students at the time.

At her comment, the bicyclist looked back at her and laughed harder. He was still laughing when he turned forward just in time to ram his face hard into the Arbiter’s gray folder.

The bike continued to roll forward before veering into the grass and flipping over next to a well manicured shrubbery. The rider, however, was lying on the concrete at the Arbiter’s feet. He grimaced with pain as he rubbed both his backside and his nose for a moment, then looked up at the Arbiter with a face as red as Rhonda’s hair, almost camouflaging the sliver of blood that trickled from his nose.

“The fuck you doing?!” he barked. I believe he was trying to sound intimidating, but—as he was still lying on the concrete, rubbing his butt—it was hard to be threatened.

“You wrecked your bike,” the Arbiter helpfully pointed out.

“I’m gonna wreck your ass,” the bicyclist barked as he painfully climbed to his feet.

“That’s fine. It’s insured.” The Arbiter was completely unfazed by his threat even though the bicyclist stood a good six inches taller than he. That’s not to say the bicyclist was a muscular guy, but he was in good shape. His black hair sat flatly atop of his head and was cut down to stubble around the ears and in the back. There was something odd about his face. He wasn’t disfigured or anything, but he just didn’t look...right. Kind of like how a skull never really seems to be in the shape of an actual human head. He was wearing a fraternity sweatshirt with plaid shorts that didn’t match and deck shoes with no socks. He looked like the kind of guy the Floodbane College Public Relations Office for Relating Public Matters to and for the Public Relations—easier remembered by its initials FCPRORPMPR...well, perhaps not—would photograph incessantly for the brochures that were sent to prospective students, leading them to believe that only casually cool people attended Floodbane.

I had never seen the bicyclist around campus before, so I didn't know his name. Yet his demeanor left me uncomfortable. I had this ominous feeling the Arbiter had just made a mistake.

My fears were temporarily put to rest when the guy retreated to his bike instead of following up on his threat. Rhonda had reached us by that point, so we three stood side by side, watching as the frat boy picked up his bike and turned back to us.

"Let me just say this; if you assholes broke somethin' I'm gonna report you to my dad and he'll sue your townie asses for everything you got." He then gingerly stepped onto the bike, whiped his bleeding nose off on his sleeve, and started to ride away...being careful not to sit down.

The Arbiter turned to Rhonda who announced—quite emphatically, "I can fight my own battles."

The Arbiter raised his eyebrows a bit. "I don't doubt that for a second."

I was dying to see how his first words impacted her. The response wasn't quick in coming, however. The two of them stared at each other for a second, then the Arbiter smiled. Rhonda didn't change her expression, but she also didn't turn away. Not even when she said, "Hi, Guy."

I was shocked that she remembered my name. "Huh? Oh...uh, hi, Rhonda." I suddenly felt as though I should introduce the two of them. "Rhonda, this is—"

"I know," she interrupted. "You call yourself the Arbiter."

"No," the Arbiter countered. "That's what everyone else calls me."

Something suddenly struck me as odd, as if I were listening to a record I'd heard a hundred times before, and it just now skipped.

"Then what do you call yourself?" Rhonda persisted.

"Me. I. Myself. Whichever is grammatically correct."

Finally, Rhonda smiled. And when she did, that may have been when I...well, her hair *was* a majestic shade of red. Deep orange, really. I don't know why I hadn't noticed it until the Arbiter pointed

it out. Her skin was pale, but only to the point that it highlighted her hazel eyes which slanted slightly inward towards her nose as with heroines in Disney cartoons. Her face was soft and comforting like a mother's voice as she sings her child to sleep, and I suddenly felt ashamed and sexist for only noticing her body before. Then I started to feel guilty for lusting for her face now. I was so overcome with guilt as I looked at Rhonda that I started to blush and had to turn away.

The silence made me nervous, so I tried to think of something clever to break it. I couldn't find anything, so I just stared at the concrete and kicked at a couple small rocks.

After a moment or two, Rhonda finally spoke, "It's good to see you again, Guy. We should go to the movies again soon."

"Yeah," I agreed, then stopped. "Huh?"

"Art class."

I was floored. Completely floored. "How did you..."

"During rococo, you asked if I wanted some popcorn." She then turned back to the Arbiter. "It's nice to finally meet you Arby," she said with that sweet smile. I thought for sure the Arbiter would be offended at her bastardization of his name, but he instead seemed encouraged by it.

"I'm glad to have met you also," he beamed. "Maybe I'll clothesline someone again for you sometime. Clothesline, DDT, northern lights suplex...whatever draws the big pop."

"It's a date," she said as her smile widened and she turned and continued her walk. After a moment, she turned back towards the Arbiter. "A date or a pay-per-view."

He and I watched her walk away, and I again felt remorse for staring at her this way.

"Let's go," I suggested as I turned away from her, blushing again.

"Not yet," the Arbiter insisted, not moving.

"Why not?"

"Watching the sun set."

The Arbiter's courtship of Rhonda was a joy to witness. I think this was partly because I knew that she was eventually going to feel for him the same he had immediately felt for her. It was like watching a critically panned Hollywood blockbuster; the good guys were pleasant to look at and easy to love; the bad guys were bumbling idiots and very funny, and no matter how convoluted the plot, there was always the underlying awareness that the hero and heroine would end up together.

The other reason I enjoyed watching the Arbiter romance Rhonda was because he appeared to genuinely be in love with her. I'd seen this type of behavior from guys before, but there was rarely ever love involved. And sadly, most of the women they were romancing were so wanting that they were never able to see the actual intention. But the Arbiter was genuine (Rhonda would've burnt him at the very start had he not been). There was no deception here. No hidden motive. No intent to inflict pain as Heath Millard wanted me to do to...well...



It was during the spring of our sixth grade year, and we were all out at Heath's house for his birthday party. Heath was always having parties, but this was the first one to which I'd been invited. I didn't want to attend, but my parents were thrilled I'd finally been invited somewhere. Anywhere. They RSVPed Mrs. Millard a mere moment after opening the invitation.

Although Heath's birthday fell on a Thursday that year, the party took place on Saturday morning. I can remember the trepidation I felt as I walked up his driveway, carrying his gift (for under \$5.00, read the invite) in one hand as I turned to wave to my mother with the other. She waved back, and, once the front door swung open for me, backed the car onto the country road and drove away.

Mrs. Millard was the woman at the door, and her tight, leathery face cracked a smile so loudly that it frightened a flock of robins from the telephone wire above.

“Hello there, young man,” she greeted me, reaching out her hand to take my gift. I didn’t like her smile. It was too much like Heath’s.

“Hi.”

“The other boys are already inside,” she explained as I passed her and stepped into the house. It reeked of cats and cigarettes, but was otherwise exceptionally clean. The floor was a polished, light brown wood with assorted rugs spread throughout. Every corner had some type of stand sporting all manners of country home knick-knacks, and each wall was decorated with family pictures (mostly of Heath), paintings or clocks. It was obvious they’d been living in this house for a very long time.

I never saw one cat to explain the smell, but ashtrays were abundant. As Mrs. Millard directed me through the hallway and onto the back patio where Heath and his friends were playing a game, I passed three ashtrays with cigarettes still burning. No one acknowledged me as Mrs. Millard scooted me through the screen door, Heath’s friends were too busy watching some small kid whom I’d never seen drop a clothespin into an empty, two liter Sprite bottle.

“Come on, moron, drop it,” Heath chastised.

“It’s too hard for me,” the boy whined as if he’d been explaining that all day.

“Everything’s too hard for you,” Heath insulted. “That’s how come you’re still in fourth grade.”

“I’m in fourth grade because I’m small,” the boy explained with false pride that was obviously instilled by his parents.

Heath wasn’t going to let him hold on to that. “Sure, that’s what your Uncle Vince told ya because you’re stupid and you believe it. You know you’re stupid, right?”

“I guess so,” the kid shrugged.

“Tell you what,” Heath offered. “If you get the clothespin in the bottle, then you’re not stupid. But if you miss, you’re the biggest moron on the Earth. Deal?”

“But you missed,” the kid pointed out.

“But I’m allowed to because I’m not stupid. Because you’re stupid, you’re not allowed to miss. Now drop the damn clothespin. You’re the last one, and we can quit this stupid game after you’re done.”

The kid nervously stood over the bottle and stared down past the clothespin to the opening of the bottle like a B-17 bombardier down to a German armory. Although I didn’t know the kid, I was pulling for him. I knew what it was like to be on that end of Heath’s hostility. After a few moments, he let the clothespin fall. It hit the lip of the opening and bounced off to the right, much to the glee of the other boys at the party. They were all making fun of him now, but the kid looked like he’d heard all this before. I think it was only because I didn’t join them that they finally noticed I was there. Seeing me, Heath asked if I wanted a turn at the bottle.

“Aren’t ya done?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Heath replied.

“Then why’d I wanna play?”

“If you’re not gonna play with us, then why’d ya come over?” Heath demanded. He sounded angry with me.

“But you’re not playing anymore,” I explained, trying not to hurt his feelings.

“That’s ’cause you’re being such a wuss,” he stated as he looked around to the others. They were all taking his side, of course, even the small kid who seemed relieved there was someone else for Heath to attack. “You ruined the game for all of us.”

All I could really do at that point was say, “Sorry,” even though I had no idea for what I was apologizing. That’s another lesson I learned early on in life; apologize often but never change. I wish I knew who’d taught me that so that I could thank him or her...or them.

After a few more minutes, everyone had arrived for his party. I was surprised there were no girls there, seeing as how Heath was so popular with them, yet I wasn't going to ask him about it. I didn't intend to talk to him at all. After the first conversation had failed, I decided to just sit in the background and wait for my mom to pull back into the driveway.

Once everyone had arrived, Heath asked his mom if we could play in the woods behind their house. She seemed to purposefully glance at all the birthday decorations—which I'm sure she paid for and hung up herself—then sighed deeply.

"Go ask your father," she suggested with a shake of her head. Her raspy, heavy, tired voice indicated she'd realized the same thing I had; it was just no use arguing with Heath Millard.

Heath brightened at her response and immediately led us all downstairs to his father's den. His dad was sitting in a tall, leather chair, reclining back so his head was almost level with the television set in front of him. The room was paneled with a fine, polished, fake mahogany, and the carpeting was deep red, casting a somewhat dreary, musty feel over the entire area. It smelled as if they'd finished the basement without bothering with waterproofing. The ceiling was low, and aside from the TV, the only light in the room came from a trophy case along the back wall. There were three shelves inside the cabinet, each of them about four feet long. On each one were two trophies. Save for the bottom one that only displayed one trophy and a ribbon. I almost started to laugh when I saw it; such a huge treasure chest and so little treasure. It seemed that Mr. Millard was about as successful an athlete as he was a coach.

I was about to go over and look at the trophies when Heath asked, "Dad, can we all go play in the woods?"

"What did your mother say?" his dad questioned after a long pause, not turning away from the golf tournament on TV.

"She said it's okay with her if you didn't mind," Heath replied, smiling over to one of his other friends.

"Then I don't care," Mr. Millard replied. He still didn't turn from the TV set. He was watching a middle aged man in pale, yellow slacks sink a putt for birdie.

"Thanks, dad," Heath said as he turned to head back up the stairs. Before he did, though, he grabbed me and positioned me between his dad and the TV. The man already seemed annoyed with my blocking his view, but Heath compounded this by saying, "Dad, this is Guy Lindsey. He's the one who was always bettin' against the Fightin' Golden Sandies all last year."

Heath chuckled to himself as he and the others went back upstairs. I couldn't seem to leave. Mr. Millard's angered eyes were holding me there as if in a tractor beam from a sci-fi movie. I guess that power came from game after game of glaring at referees, players, parents and such. He was also that odd combination of fit and fat at the same time...like John Belushi or Meatloaf. I wonder if either of them ever coached.

After a moment, Mr. Millard finally said, "You don't like my coaching?"

I was twelve years old. What did I know about coaching?

"I'm not really—"

"You think maybe my switch to a four-three defense wasn't a good move, maybe?" he persisted. "Well listen, I had gaps to fill, son. Every now and again in this life, a man...well, he's got some gaps to fill."

"Sir, I really don't—"

"We had to get some deeper penetration into the line. Our weak safety was getting exploited on the crossing routes, so we took the weak side backer and flipped him over...made him an elephant. You see, son, every now and again a man's gotta become an elephant. Gotta fill them gaps."

"Maybe I should—"

"Then we took the interior lineman, stunted with the weak side end." At this point, Mr. Millard was using the remote control, a couple beer bottle caps and a matchbook to diagram the play on the cof-

fee table. Throughout his description, he would periodically glance around for another item that could represent a halfback, a lineman, or whatever. Unable to find anything, he'd tear another match out of the matchbook. He did this three or four times, and he seemed newly surprised each time that he couldn't find another bottle cap. "That gave us a match up advantage in case they decided to come off the corner and allowed us the time to red dog with our strong side corner. You see, son, every now and again, a man's gotta be his own dog."

"What's that mean, sir?"

"You're all a bunch of armchair know-it-alls," he spat, still working out plays on the coffee table. He seemed to be taking out an awful lot of frustration on this sixth grader. "You all think you can do a better goddam job than the coach. Everyone's gotta get his two cents in, but no one ever wants to drive the bus. You understand me, kid?"

"Yes sir," I lied. I found myself scavenging my pockets for a roll of Life Savers, but found nothing. By this point, I just wanted to get out of there.

"Then they expect me to be a good coach while they give me that goddam health class to teach," he continued. I didn't think he was talking to me anymore, so I started to slip away. "How the hell can I be expected to coach a football team when I've got five classes to coach? Huh? How can a man concentrate on the nickel package when he's gotta worry about whether or not little Johnny Blue Jeans understands about goddam spirochetes?"

Mr. Millard faded away as I cleared the top of the stairs and softly shut the door behind me. Mrs. Millard was nowhere around, but a new cigarette was burning openly in a cereal bowl serving as an ashtray on the kitchen table. There appeared to be some crusted corn flakes along the side of the bowl. I scooted out the back door and watched Heath and his gang disappear into the woods.

Although I could barely see them through the trees, I could hear them yelling excitedly. I'd heard Heath talk about the creek that ran

through the woods behind the house, so I assumed they were playing in there. I decided to follow them. I mean, what else was I going to do? Talk stunted weak sides and syphilitic bacteria with Mr. Millard?

It didn't take long for me to regret my decision. No sooner had I stepped into the woods when my chest suddenly felt as if I'd been stung by a wasp. I began to scream and swat at it frantically. I was spinning and stumbling around trees until I eventually caught my foot on a root or rock or something and fell hard to the wet, dead leaves on the woodland ground. The sharp pain in my chest wouldn't go away, so I didn't quit swatting at it until I made damn sure that wasp was dead. After a moment more of this, I noticed the gang was approaching me, laughing. I quit slapping my chest and just laid there, panting and crying, until the others were standing directly overtop of me. The only one I was looking at, however, was Heath. And I wasn't even really looking at him, I was looking at the BB pistol in his hand.

"Some shot, huh Guy?" he asked as he knelt beside me. "Where'd I get you?"

I didn't say anything. I was trying too hard to stop crying.

"Shit, you're not gonna tell my parents are ya?" he said, suddenly pulling away from me. Heath was the only grade school kid I knew who sounded effective when he swore. "Aw man, ya can't do that! They'll take my gun away! Fuck, Guy, don't narc."

I couldn't believe the situation. He was standing over me with a BB gun, I was lying flat on my back, and yet *he* was afraid. For the first time since I'd known him, Heath was afraid.

"Please, Guy," he nearly cried. At any minute, I expected him to drop down and just start bawling. "Please, don't tell, man. My parents'll whoop my ass and they won't lemme have anymore parties. Come on, Guy! They'll take the gun away!"

He showed me the gun up close. Or at least the barrel of the gun. I realized that Heath's plea was more of a threat. It worked; I was scared.

“I won’t tell,” I said weakly. The pain in my chest still made my voice crack.

“Cool,” Heath said with a cocky laugh, his fear disappearing in an instant. He then waved his gun in the air and turned back in the direction from which he came. “Come on! Let’s go find that frog.”

All the others followed him, leaving me alone again. I was still lying on my back, looking at the trees all around me. They’d just recently sprouted their leaves, so they were still that perfect shade of green against the blue, late morning sky.

Once the guys had all left, I pulled up my shirt to see how bad the wound was. The BB hadn’t lodged in my skin, and it didn’t even leave a hole in my shirt. This upset me because now, if I did want to tell on Heath, I would have no proof aside from the mark on my chest. There was a small white circle where it had hit, and the skin surrounding it had turned bright red, but this would soon fade away.

After spitting on my fingers and rubbing the saliva—the elixir of childhood—into the wound, I pulled down my shirt and stood up to see where the others had gone. They were back at the creek where they’d been before I was shot, so I also headed in that direction. When I reached them, Heath shocked me by handing me the gun.

“What’s this for?” I asked.

“Shooting things,” Heath explained.

“Why’d I want it?”

“Before you got in the way, we had this frog we were gonna kill. Now we can’t find it.”

“So why are you giving me the gun?”

“Cause you’re gonna shoot my cousin Mick over here.”

Heath pointed to the small kid of whom he was making fun during the bottle game.

“No, I’m—”

“No, see, it’s because of you that we can’t kill the frog. We already shot you, so that’s no fun no more. So we decided that you should shoot Mick ’cause you already got shot.”

"I'm not going to—"

"We could always just shoot you again," Heath threatened.

"I don't wanna do it," I whined. I didn't mean to, but that's how it came out.

Heath was all over it. "*I don't wanna do it,*" he mocked, multiplying my whining by ten. "Quit bein' such a fuckin' baby, Guy. Come on, Mick likes it. He likes to be hurt, dontcha Micky?"

Mick smiled and nodded, "Shoot me. Bang bang!" The other kids all laughed.

"Come on, Guy, quit bein' such a wuss. He wants you to do it. It's not gonna kill him or nothin'."

Heath was right. It wasn't going to kill him, but it would hurt. Believe me, I know. Still, I tried to raise the gun, pointing the barrel in Mick's direction. But then I turned to look at Heath, and I saw that smile on his face again.

It was at that moment that I felt hate for the first time. I hated every boy who stood there and watched as Heath tried to talk me into purposely hurting some kid I'd never even met. I couldn't understand this. Why was this fun to them? Then I began to wonder what Heath was thinking when he shot at me. Moreso than the pain, I found myself hurt by the thought that they all laughed at me, that hurting me was entertainment to them. And even better than that was the entertainment of making me inflict the same pain on someone else.

At that moment, I fully understood what kind of person Heath was. I knew he had no compassion or respect for anything around him, and my anger turned to fear. I wanted to attack Heath right there and point that gun in his direction, but I was afraid. I was afraid of my anger and of the hate, and I just wanted to get away. I threw the gun down and ran as fast as I could, and I could hear them calling after me.

"Guy! Guy!"

They didn't want me to come back, they just didn't want me to tell on Heath. They were afraid I'd run to Heath's mom and show her my chest and tell her about Mick.

"Hey Guy!"

I wasn't going to narc, though. I'd just have to deal with the problem even more, which would entail dealing with people. I was suddenly afraid of everyone. I was afraid of Heath and his friends. I was afraid of his dad. I was even afraid of his mom and her cracking face. I couldn't trust anyone anymore.

"Guy, come on!"

I ran right by Heath's house. If I slowed down, another BB would sting my back, I was sure. In one afternoon, Heath Millard destroyed my faith in everything I'd been taught by those in whom I was supposed to have trust. If one kid was capable of this, wasn't everyone?



"Guy! Guy, are you coming or not?!" the Arbiter shouted from outside my room. I looked over at the door, then said, "Yeah, hold on," as I stood and grabbed my purple and black "Billy Bishop Goes to War" varsity jacket. I'm not sure why I had it, or even who Billy Bishop was. All I can figure is that he never made it back from war or else I wouldn't have his jacket. I opened the door, and the Arbiter was standing there, tapping his foot and his watch in synchronized jest.

"Cripes, man, what were you doing in there?" he asked. "Been standing out here screaming your name like some kind of freak. What'll your dormmates think?"

"They'll wonder why you don't have a baseball bat," I smiled as I shut and locked the door. The Arbiter and I left the dorm and walked to President's Performing Arts Center for the Performing Arts to see the opening of the Floodbane College production of Sophocles' *Antigone*.

Rhonda was playing the title character.

CHAPTER 3



“The Far Side of Crazy”

But before I get to *Antigone*, there’s one more thing I’d like to explain about the Arbiter. Well, not really explain, but simply mention, since I certainly could not explain it.

Of all of the Arbiter’s peculiarities, there were two which I’m certain would’ve crystallized every single thing about him had I been able to figure them out. One of these was his incessant desire to climb radio towers, which I’ll get to later, and the other was that he wrote critiques of the performances of dead actors and sent them *to the dead actors themselves*. Not to “the estate of” or to a surviving family member. No, these were letters written directly about the dead actor and mailed directly to the dead actors...well, as directly as that’s possible, anyway.

It was this trait that most perplexed me, perhaps because I had to discover it on my own. The Arbiter seemingly wanted to hide it from me. I knew he preferred to watch old black and white movies over anything current, but that didn’t seem too odd. A lot of people lock themselves in their houses with their fifteen cats and sip a fine four or five glasses of brandy while watching Blondie marathons on AMC or TMC or whatever. I think all the shiny colors in modern movies confuse them. But unlike most others, it ends up the Arbiter chose

black and white movies because it was almost guaranteed that at least one of the actors was now performing on the silver screen in the sky. In fact, he wouldn't watch any new movie until he learned that at least one of the actors had passed on.

I believe *Poltergeist* was his all-time favorite.

I hadn't known the Arbiter for long before I began to notice he always disappeared after the movie was done, and I wouldn't see him for at least half an hour afterwards. The whole thing intrigued me. I knew if I could figure out what he was doing after the theater lights came up or the VCR started to rewind, then I'd finally understand what made him...him.

Of course I was wrong, because when I did find out, it only confused me all the more.

I uncovered the mystery the weekend after he'd first met Rhonda at the beginning of our junior year. He had been noticeably distracted since that day, so I guess I shouldn't have been surprised that he slipped up so badly that Saturday night.

We had just finished watching Laurel and Hardy's *Their First Mistake* on AMC when the Arbiter grabbed his gray folder and climbed up from the floor to sit at his study desk. He sat there for quite a while listening to some classical piece on the Aiwa stereo that sat on his dresser along with his jarred collection of high-bouncing balls; the type that can be bought in supermarket gumball machines for either twenty-five or fifty cents, depending upon the state of purchase. The Arbiter had over a hundred of these substantial orbs of potential energy, all seeming to strain against the various sizes of jars that confined them.

"Grieg," the Arbiter suddenly exclaimed without looking up from his writing. "Peer Gynt Suite Number 1, Opus 46."

He was referring to the music on the stereo. The Arbiter announced every piece that came on when he was listening to symphonic music, feeling it was his duty to educate me in the classics. It kind of worked, I suppose. I mean, if somebody played me a piece of

symphony music, I wouldn't be able to tell him what it was. If he said, however, that he was going to play me *Allegro ma non troppo* from Symphony No. 6 in F major, Op. 68, Pastoral, I would say, "Ah! Beethoven!"

I'm the same way with Life Savers. Tell me I'm getting a Pep-O-Mint, and I can't exactly recall the taste. But pop one in my mouth and I'll announce, "Ah! Pep-O-Mint."

Perhaps Beeth-O-Ven would've made a good flavor of Life Saver. Beeth-O-Ven, Tchaik-O-Vsky, R-O-Ssini.

I suppose that after nearly seven years of trombone playing, I should've been more adept at recognizing the classic composers and their works. Unfortunately, my ear was about as bad as my tonguing, and all classical music just kind of ran together. Actually, pretty much all pieces or songs within any specific genre of music sounded the same to me.

As the Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra was finishing the second movement of Grieg's suite ("Death of Ase," to be exact), the phone rang. Answering it, I wasn't surprised that it was a woman calling for the Arbiter. I was shocked as hell, however, to hear exactly which woman.

"Yes, is Arby there?" the woman asked.

"Rhonda?" I guessed. I knew the Arbiter had spoken to her a couple of times, having gone out of his way to make sure he would run into her on the sidewalk or in the cafeteria or beside her car in the parking lot, but neither of them had made any sort of contact with one another over the phone.

Hearing her name, the Arbiter dove out of his chair and landed beneath the phone, denying me the chance to momentarily pretend she was really calling to speak to me. He kneeled there with his head bowed and his hand outstretched for the receiver as if he were about to receive Communion, so I handed it to him saying, "This is the call of Rhonda. Take and speak in remembrance of her."

“Hello, Rhonda?” he greeted as if he’d been expecting the call all day. He was still on his knees and remained there for the entire conversation. “Nothing much, I was just writing a letter...No one important, really. How about you?...Doesn’t sound like...Really? For what play?...Of course. Sophocles. It’s the third of the Theban Plays...I’m full of useless information. I’m a bastion of useless information. For instance, did you know that in the Academy Awards in 1983, *Ghandi* beat out Disney’s *Tron* for best costume design?...No, I’ve never seen either movie. I’m not sure if I can yet...Sure...Sure...Sure I have, but not since high school...I got kicked out...No, it wasn’t anything like that. The director kicked me out because I skipped a rehearsal to attend a Lions Club father/son banquet...No, my dad wasn’t a member...Can’t remember his name. Food was good, though. Swiss steak and mashed potatoes at Perkins...Absolutely not. Why?...You mean now?”

Men often talk about how the birth of their first child was the most incredible event they ever witnessed. Seeing the expression on the Arbiter’s face right then is still mine.

“Of course it’s not a problem! I’ll be right over!...No, that’s okay. I know where you live...Because I’ve been stalking you since Tuesday. I’ve stolen your toothbrush, and I’ve been dressing up like a clown and hiding in your closet so I can watch you sleep...Yeah, that was me. I’ll be there in five minutes...Okay, bye.”

The Arbiter hung up the phone, let out a whoop and a yell, then grabbed a jar of high bouncing balls and threw them up to the ceiling. They careened all around the room, and the Arbiter nearly fell over them as he scrambled to get to the door.

“What’s going on?” I managed to ask before he got out of the room, preceded by four or five balls.

“She wants help memorizing her lines for *Antigone*,” the Arbiter beamed. He then repeated himself slowly and quietly. “She wants help memorizing her lines for *Antigone*.”

Then he was gone.

As soon as he shut the door, I turned to look at his desk. His gray folder was still sitting there, open to what he'd been writing before the phone call. It took me only a moment to overcome any reservations I may have had. I sat myself in the Arbiter's chair and, as the high bouncing balls continued to roll about my feet, I started to read what was written before me:

To: STAN LAUREL

From: the arbiter

Re: *THEIR FIRST MISTAKE*

Comedy is a messy business.

That's probably why comedy teams tend to turn so viciously on each other. Abbott and Costello. Martin and Lewis. Laverne and Shirley. With drama, there are enough intrinsic shadings within a given performance to afford an actor(s) the opportunity to plausibly claim a modicum of artistic success regardless of the apparent objective merits of such a belief.

With comedy, they either laugh or they don't.

Every day becomes a referendum on your very soul. Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. But if you are part of a collective—specifically, one-half of a two man team—how can you not yield to the overwhelming temptation to start looking at the other guy? He's all the time bumbling through the set-ups and then stepping all over your punches. His timing has gotten worse than the fellow's who stopped by the Presidential box at Ford's Theater to ask, "Other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, how was the play?" His idea of contributing to the writing process is saying that you ought find a way to inject more references to Joan of Arc at the top of the act.

He thinks you need to use more puppets.

But not you and Oliver Hardy, Mr. Laurel. You seemed to have a real genuine affection for each other that transcended professional respect. It's a tricky dynamic to capture, isn't it? But you always seemed to add just the proper amount of...whimsy to your line readings sufficient to keep your relationship with Mr. Hardy from becoming condescending or mean-spirited.

Maybe the best example of how this closeness manifested itself on film was in this sweet scene from *Their First Mistake*;

Mr. Hardy played a newlywed whose bride was upset with the amount of time that he was still spending with you:

Laurel: What's the matter with her anyway?

Hardy: I don't know. She says I think more of you than I do of her.

Laurel: Well you do, don't you?

Laurel: We won't go into that.

Laurel: You know what the trouble is?

Laurel: What?

Laurel: You need a baby in the house.

Laurel: What's that got to do with it?

Laurel: Well if you had a baby...you could go out nights with me.

As the film unfolds, Mr. Hardy and his wife do, in fact, adopt a baby; however, she eventually files for divorce with the claim that your character is the "other woman." You and Mr. Hardy wind up raising the baby yourselves, lying in bed together with the baby strategically placed between you. Finally, you deftly reach into your pajama top and pull forth a baby bottle which you have been warming against your breast.

It's...huh. Mr. Laurel, there is sort of another interpretation of this picture, one that perhaps can be taken up at a later time.

Before I could get the letter back in the folder, the door swung open and there stood the Arbiter, looking down on me like an executioner with ax in hand. He suddenly appeared more physically imposing than usual. He always was muscular, yet slightly paunchy; like a Greek statue. His peculiarly blue eyes scanned the room and, like always, led me to believe he was thinking of hundreds of things and trying to decide which thought was most specifically calibrated for this particular occasion. Choosing one, he walked over to the desk, picked up his gray folder and—smiling all the while—said;

“Touch that again—”



“—and I’ll put your head through that window,” Heath threatened, standing over me a second more to make sure enough band members, cheerleaders and dancers standing outside the school bus witnessed my public humiliation.

But let’s backtrack, as I wouldn’t hear this particular threat from Heath until our junior year of high school, quite a few years after the party for Heath’s eleventh birthday. I only bring it up now because it’s a prime example of how life with him did not get any easier. Oddly, as the sixth grade school year went on, Heath seemed to become more embarrassed by the fact that someone deserted one of his social gatherings. It was almost as if—at the age of eleven—he already had enough cognitive awareness to be insulted by someone leaving him at the altar, even if the bride was someone as insignificant as myself...not that I ever considered marrying Heath; although, I do look strikingly crisp in white. Anyway, Heath started to insult me behind my back instead of just to my face, therefore causing my friends-by-proxy to ignore me on purpose. This actually made me feel better about myself. At least now I was worthy of being ignored as opposed to just forgotten.

As my already minute social life became all but defunct, my self-image greatly improved. My fear had turned to feelings of superior-

ity. I believed myself above all these people; above all my classmates, their friends, their brothers and sisters and cousins. I was better than all my teachers, from Mrs. Piper to Mrs. Garvin to Mrs. Patera. I was better than Mr. Steele who taught me to never tell the truth. I was certainly better than that girl who sat beside me in kindergarten and turned me down for a date in junior high then got pregnant when she was fifteen and dropped out of high school to end up working in a department store at the local mall. I should give that girl more credit, though, as she was an instrumental link in the chain of events which led to both the greatest and worst moments of my life. Yet she was hardly pivotal to my life in sixth grade. In sixth grade, she was only a moron. They were all morons. Especially Mrs. Patera, who—with only a month to go in the school year—deemed me a troublemaker who deserved to be spanked.

She pulled me into a small room across the hallway from her classroom and quickly shut the door. The walls of the room were constructed with brown bricks, and the floor was black linoleum. One bare, dim light bulb was fastened high on the wall above a large, thick, wooden table which held scientific gadgets and books far beyond the reading level of grade school students and probably most grade school teachers. There was a shelf against the wall opposite the table, also containing numerous books that were stacked haphazardly. I had the feeling no one had used these materials in years, and I began to wonder if anyone had even used the room. In all honesty, I didn't even know it existed until Mrs. Patera marched me in there with her paddle jabbing into the small of my back like a pistol. I half expected a one-eyed German named Gunther to come in and proclaim, while smacking a riding crop into his palm, "Vee have vays to make you tock!"

It wasn't the spanking I was fearing so much as the aftershocks I knew would rumble up behind. As I have mentioned, Mrs. Patera went to my church and was a good friend of my dad's. They were

going to talk about this, then my dad would talk to me. This spanking was going to be a problem for a good while to come.

What bugged me most about the whole thing was the thought that, whereas I was going to be spanked, Heath Millard was sitting on his candy-ass at his little desk, laughing with his friends about my fate, smilingly sheepishly at the better looking girls; the future cheerleaders who secretly yearned for the day when he'd catch up with them and reach puberty so they could lose their virginity to him out behind the football locker room of John Stuart Mill High School.

If I seem bitter, it's because I am. I get that way when I haven't had a Life Saver for a while. They freshen the breath *and* the heart.

"I don't understand what came over you," Mrs. Patera scolded, still expecting me to explain why I chose to fight Heath Millard on the playground that day instead of play four square or cartoon tag like all the other good boys and girls. I wasn't about to explain this to her. She wouldn't understand. She was a moron.

Therefore, "I don't know," was all I said.

Mrs. Patera seemed disappointed in me. She frowned and looked as if she were actually going to apologize for what she was about to do. She didn't though. She just tried to make me feel guilty by saying, "I expected better of you, Guy. Wait here."

She left me alone with the dust and dirt that layered the artifacts abandoned in the small room. I think she was pulling on me what my father always used to when punishing me. After I'd done something wrong—something like lowering my little brother down the laundry chute with an extension cord or cutting the pictures out of his *Playboys* and selling them to the neighborhood kids—my dad would send me to his room to think about what I'd done. I hated that more than the spanking. He was always fair, though, my dad. He never punished me without just cause.

I wonder if he would've spanked me for killing somebody.

All I could think of as I waited for him to come in and spank me was which belt I was going to have him use. That was my dad's cruel-

est child rearing habit, forcing my little brother and I to choose the belt with which we were going to be spanked. It was an awful scare tactic that would've caused the child psychologists to "go ape shit," to borrow my dad's own expression. They would've written books about my father and used him as a prime example of how not to raise children. I don't know if they were right or not, but I do know that when dad spanked me for doing something wrong, I never did it again.

This couldn't have been what Mrs. Patera was up to, though. She only had one belt, and I'm sure she wasn't about to take it off in a private room with a sixth grade boy. I mean, it's not like I was attending a Catholic school or something. I never found out what she did when she left that room, not even six years later after I won the church scholarship to help pay for a couple books at Floodbane. She stopped me after the service to congratulate me, and we joked about how—after teaching for nearly thirty years and raising two children and one grandchild—I was the only person she spanked in her entire life. Even then I didn't ask her why she left the room for those few minutes before she came in and whacked me five times for punching Heath Millard. I really didn't care.

Likewise, Mrs. Patera never really found out why I punched Heath. I don't even know if Heath ever fully understood what made me snap that day, even though he purposely provoked it. All I know for sure is that he learned nothing from it. Maybe I should've had him pick which fist I'd use to hit him.

We were out at recess when it happened. The other kids were on the playground, behaving as kids should, but Heath and his friends managed to convince me to sneak behind the bus garage with them. Apparently, Heath had been back there a couple of times before and had set up some sort of hut with old tires and cardboard boxes. There were a few empty cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon lying nearby, but I have no proof as to whether or not they were his.

As we approached the boxes, my "spider senses" started tingling. Why was I back there? I wasn't particularly fond of these people, and I'm certain they didn't care much for me. Maybe I was just trying to prove a point, trying to let Heath know I was a man and I was ready to take him on anytime, anywhere. Yeah, and maybe I was an albino lingerie model.

When we got closer to the box, I could hear the soft, unmistakable mewling of a kitten. It actually sounded more like crying, and it sort of frightened me. Knowing that Heath had set this all up, I was sure the kitten's future would not be all that glamorous. I felt as badly for the kitten right then as I eventually would for all the girls in high school who went out with Heath; even that girl who sat beside me in kindergarten and turned me down for a date in junior high. Although she was no friend of mine, I wasn't about to wish upon her an evening with Heath.

Oh, there's another philosophy of mine which I'd learned by early high school: nothing brings people together faster than a common enemy; for instance, the Indians siding with the British in the Revolutionary War because they hated the Colonists, Stalin joining Churchill and FDR to stop Hitler, or Michael Hayes teaming with Tommy "Wildfire" Rich to fight Terry Gordy. Or was it Terry teaming with Tommy to fight Michael? Or did Michael or Terry team with Steve O. Or Steve Keirn? Hell, all I remember is someone smashed someone's tin cup, and many piledrivers ensued.

Away from the wrestling ring and back behind the playground, Heath did not seize the kitten by its neck and swing it high above his head to slam it onto a log as did young Noboru in Yukio Mishima's *The Sailor who Fell from Grace with the Sea*. Instead, he carefully picked it up and held it against his chest. He let the others pet it, then he pet it himself. The kitten clawed at his shirt, trying to gain a foothold higher up his body. Heath let it have some slack and the kitten managed to get up on his shoulder. It balanced itself precariously, shaking as I had after Heath asked me to shoot his cousin. The others

all laughed at the kitten's pitiful display, and Heath pulled it reluctantly off his shoulder then put it back in the box.

"Come on, guys," he said as the kitten started to cry again. "We can't get caught back here."

The others agreed and took one last look at the kitten before we all started back around the bus garage. I didn't understand why Heath bothered to take us all back there, especially me. None of them were talking to me anymore. I was beginning to think maybe this was Heath's way of making up for all those months of treating me as if I didn't exist. Maybe he just wanted to show me that he could be a humane guy. I was beginning to feel kind of embarrassed for the way I'd acted at his house, and it actually occurred to me that maybe I should apologize to him. The kitten's constant crying wouldn't let me do so.

"That cat sure sounds unhappy," I said. The others smiled at my comment. I didn't understand that.

"Yep," Heath agreed, not turning to look at me. "I haven't fed it since Monday."

I stopped moving as the others started to snicker. It all was obvious to me then. The only reason Heath took me back there was to piss me off. I obliged him.

"I'm doin' a science project for the science fair," Heath continued. "I'm doin' a project to see how long it takes to starve a cat to death. Whadda ya think of that, girl?"

I didn't have an answer for him right away, as I wasn't really thinking of the kitten at that moment. I wasn't thinking of any of the other guys there. It was just me and Heath. That's the way he wanted it. If I hated him the day he shot me and asked me to shoot his cousin, now I despised him. I loathed and abhorred him. At the same time, I feared him worse than any nightmare or unexplained shadow in my bedroom at night. I feared him because he was real and I couldn't call my dad in to scare him away. My mom couldn't turn on the

night-light and make Heath disappear. I had to confront this fear myself, and I had to do it now.

Heath and his friends had cut around the garage, laughing at my inability to do anything about the situation. They quit laughing a few seconds later when I was suddenly on Heath's back, swinging my fists at the back of his head. One landed hard enough to knock him to the ground, and I dug a knee into his back as I continued to punch him in the side of the head. I wasn't saying a word all this time; I was only crying. I cried harder as I hit him harder, and it never occurred to me that when he fell forward we came into sight of all those on the playground. The teachers were running towards me, but I knew I had a few more seconds to let him know I wasn't going to take this anymore. His friends could've ended it much more quickly, but for one reason or another, they chose to not get involved.

I continued to pummel Heath until a large pair of hands yanked me off of him. I was still swinging and kicking and crying, but I was connecting with nothing but air. Voices were yelling, and it sounded as if some were cheering, but I could not make out who was doing what. All I knew was that I was shaking like that frightened kitten, and I had this overwhelming feeling that although I was going to be severely punished for it, I'd just done something great for mankind.

Have a nice day.

Good or bad, I had finally taken control of Heath Millard. In that brief moment of violence, I had shown him that he couldn't just push people around and play with their emotions and get them to do whatever he wanted. I was proud of myself, and as the red heat cooled from my face and I was set back on the ground, I found that I wasn't afraid of the punishment that lie ahead.

The crowd that had gathered around was now quite large. There weren't a lot of fights in grade school, so the few that did take place were PPV size events. Everyone would be talking about it for the rest of the day, and no one would again place Heath so highly on the social pedestal. I'd exposed him for the coward he was.

Wrong again, Guy.

Once Mrs. Patera had picked him up, Heath immediately turned to me. I expected him to be in tears, hopefully even bleeding. Instead, he was smiling. I'd just given him the beating of his life, and he was smiling.

And then it all sank away. There was no glory, I wasn't the victor. He hadn't hit me once, yet he somehow won the fight. Any control I thought I'd gained was a mere illusion. Heath had probably planned the whole thing. He'd most likely even set up the entire kitten scenario just so I'd attack him and get in trouble. With one, twisted smile from Heath, I had become the bad guy.

He even went back to get the kitten before we were taken inside. He claimed he'd found it back there before I attacked him.

"I don't know what Guy was trying to do," he said as he stroked the kitten's soft back. Even the kitten wasn't coming to my defense. It was purring and rubbing its head into Heath's chest as if it had been in on the plan from the very start. Damn cat. I hate cats. "But all I know is I found this kitten."

"He was gonna kill it!" I nearly screamed. "He hasn't fed it since Monday! He's starving it for the science fair!"

"Mr. Lindsey," scolded Mrs. Garvin, the other recess supervisor that day. It was the first she'd spoken to me since second grade. "The science fair isn't for another three weeks. The kitten would be dead by then."

Okay, was I the only one getting the point, or was I the only one missing it? Perhaps Heath's intentions weren't as he stated. In retrospect, I probably should have considered that most grade school science fair projects are about something like photosynthesis or vitamin C absorption; not many eleven-year-olds make it to districts via Tabby's carcass.

But truth or not, I knew any argument I could raise was futile against Heath's charm and his lies. Everyone had flipped over Heath's valiant deed, especially after Principal Steele—as if wanting the kit-

ten to serve as my scarlet letter—agreed to let it live in our classroom until we found a good home for it. Heath was a hero, and I had become the village outcast. The only dignity I could salvage came from not again explaining “what came over me,” as Mrs. Patera had put it. She wouldn’t understand the reasons for the intense hatred I harbored for Heath. No one would have believed my stories, anyway. They would’ve thought I was lying to save face, just like that girl who turned me down for a date in junior high did after Heath got her pregnant.

We grew to have so much in common, that girl and me. I wonder if she has ever killed somebody, and I still wonder to what movie I wanted to take her.

The spanking was supposed to teach me a lesson, I suppose, but all it did was reinforce my belief that I should never admit my wrongdoings to others. I had, in my anger, explained to Mrs. Patera out on the playground why I attacked Heath, and it brought me nothing but the disapproval of my peers and a spanking from my teacher. My story was truth, but this still didn’t matter to anyone. The truth is only that to the person who tells it. Everyone else does with it what he or she wants.

This is why, justified or not, it took me so long to admit having killed somebody.



And this is why, despite my growing desire to do so, I still couldn’t confess my killing to the Arbiter and Rhonda. It felt odd, wrong, like my peculiar desire to try LSD, but the itching to talk to my new friends grew slowly more intense. Looking back at my freshman year, I’m sure I wouldn’t have been able to announce it in that orientation class even if the Arbiter hadn’t thrown me with his Papa Shango introduction. Not to those morons. And speaking of morons...

Ends up that the apartment Rhonda would take during our senior year was directly above the guy's whom the Arbiter had smacked in the face with his gray folder one year earlier.

His name was Jayson Fayme. Jayson Alexander Fayme; the type of name that would look great on a framed, juris doctorate degree hanging on a law firm wall. I think the best way to describe Jayson is to insert his name into a generic joke I had heard at the beginning of my college career:

Jayson Fayme was at a party, and he goes up to this guy and asks him, "Why does everyone hate me before they even meet me?"

"Saves time later," the guest replied.

That's the way it was with this guy. I kind of felt guilty for hating him the first time I saw him. I mean, all he did was what everyone else on campus had always wanted to do, that being to grab Rhonda Vorhees' ass. Jayson at least had initiative. But the more I got to know him, the more I realized I had no choice but to hate him. He was a living example of the Arbiter's theory on stereotypes. He fit them all. Drunken frat boy, spoiled rich boy, prejudiced white boy, sexist male boy...outside of his fraternity brothers (and even their friendships were conditional), I don't think there was one person on campus who liked Jayson.

Save for President, of course.

President adored Jayson. More accurately, President adored Jayson's family. President adored any family that sent a total of seventeen members to his school, seven of whom came within the last fifteen years. The only buildings on campus that had actually been assigned proper titles (save for President's Performing Arts Center for the Performing Arts, of course) were named after the Faymes...buildings in which they had never been! Entire pamphlets were dedicated to the Faymes and circulated about campus, the town, the state and the country. A popular Floodbane myth rumored that a C-130 Hercules cargo plane full of Fayme family pamphlets

dumped its cargo regularly over third world nations that held reincarnation as a hallowed belief, just in case the natives should come back in their next lives as the children of a wealthy Floodbane College alumnus.

Because of his family's reputation on campus, Jayson was exempt from all Floodbane rules and regulations. He passed every class without attending, he won athletic scholarships without participating in any sports, and he was even absolved from the sacred Floodbane Speech Code. It was perfectly acceptable for him to ride his bike around campus and grab the ass of whomever he chose. Hell, he probably got credit for it as an independent study.

Still, despite Jayson's multitude of character flaws, he did have one miniscule, yet slightly redeeming quality.

The boy was totally harmless.

No one paid him any mind. His professors conducted class as if he weren't really in the back of the room blowing bubbles in cans of beer through a straw in his nose. His peers continued their conversations as if he hadn't just jumped into the middle of their group and belched, laughing hysterically. Even his frat brothers ignored him when he'd attempt to French kiss the TV while watching porn tapes, fashion shows, or the occasional rerun of *Double Trouble*. They had only allowed him to pledge because he had such good standing with President, after all, and President secretly agreed to have any and all current charges against the fraternity dropped if Jayson became a member.

But when he reached junior status, it finally became impossible for me, the Arbiter and Rhonda to ignore Fayme. For it was during that year that he swiped the editing job at *A Daily Planet* away from the Arbiter and me, it was during that year that he rented the apartment beneath Rhonda's, and it was during that year that his stupid, grade school crush on her became an obsession not unlike those displayed in graphic detail in direct to video movies starring Gabriella Hall or Kira Reed.

I guess I could understand the crush part, for I'd had my fair share of crushes before I swore off relationships with women. My first and still most dear was on Penny Robinson from the old TV show *Lost In Space*. I'd always watched repeats of the show in grade school with my best friend Terry Hogan before he moved to Toledo, and I'd quickly developed an intense crush on the young, pure, neglected Penny. Although I continued to have more crushes on more women—mostly TV and movie stars, of course—I never really got over the fairer of the two Robinson daughters until I met Ann Penella on the cheerleader bus on the way home from a high school football game.



It was the closest I ever came to love at first sight, the kind the Arbiter experienced with Rhonda. Actually, that's somewhat inaccurate with my situation; it was closer to love at first sound or love at first action. The night it seemed that everyone within a stone's throw was throwing the stone at me, Ann spoke to me, even shielded me. Yet I couldn't even manage to thank her, and that's how I knew I was doomed.

It was on the school bus on the way back from our first away-game my sophomore year of high school. The ride to Nietzsche High to take on the Fighting Orange was uneventful enough. I just sank down in one of the swamp-green seats about midway back, staring fixedly out the window the entire trip. I could hear some of the girls complaining that I was on the bus while others opted to make fun of my hair or my acne or anything else they could see over the seats, but I ignored it well.

As I've said, they were all morons.

Young, pretty, nubile, extremely shapely morons.

On the trip back, however, the cheerleaders and dancers got vicious. After the Fighting Golden Sandies had just been humiliated by the Fighting Orange, I made a break for the bus, believing if I got

the back seat I'd at least only be susceptible to attack from straight ahead. I'd played Risk™ enough times with my family to know it's pointless to try to fight a two front war. Well, that and to attempt defending Europe, but that strategy isn't really conducive to analogy.

It didn't take long for me to realize my mistake. The chaperons had sought quieter haven in the center and front of the bus, and the girls who had become cheerleaders and dancers because they had school spirit and not because they wanted to get laid more often were up front with them. Thus, I was trapped in the back with the Arbiter's stereotypes.

The girls were giggling and yelling and singing, snapping each other's bras, flipping each other's skirts and flirting with lesbianism as they showed one another how their boyfriends kiss. There was no way I could just look out the window this time, and no thoughts of nuns or dead puppies could stop my erection.

Two of the girls saw me staring at them, and they started to giggle even harder. They then stood up and strutted to my seat. One girl reached over, hovering her not-quite-yet-developed breasts in my face while she grabbed my trombone case and passed it up to the girl in front of her. All the girls were watching now, laughing and cheering them on as if at Chippendales. I was petrified. Literally.

"You're kinda cute," one of the girls said as she dropped herself on my lap, running her fingers through my hair that'd become flat with grease from wearing the band helmet for so long. She gasped in disgust and rubbed her hand on her friend's uniform.

The cheerleaders howled.

Her friend was one of the dancers, so she was wearing shimmering, nude tights under her skirt. I know this because she sat down next to me and grabbed my hand, placing it on the inside of her thigh. She then clamped her legs together around my hand, rocking back and forth while moaning in mock ecstasy. I thought for sure that the chaperones would hear her and put an end to all of this, but the noise was either drowned out by the laughter and the hip hop

music blasting from some boom box or else they just didn't give a damn.

Cars were passing by, spinning their lights around the bus like a strobe light flashing on a mirror ball in a Tokyo nightclub. It was enough to let the girls see the sweat that was pouring down my face.

"I can feel how hard he is!" the girl on my lap yelled. She sounded overwrought, but she didn't move.

At that comment, the girls in the surrounding area started laughing about how turned on I was and what the two girls should do next. I heard something about my sweat, then the cheerleader lowered her face to my neck. I could feel the moist heat of her breath, and it made me shiver. She quickly pulled up and made the same noise of disgust she had earlier, this time sticking her finger in her mouth as if to induce vomiting. The other girl, with my hand still viced between her thighs, reached over and placed her hand on my knee. She inched it up slowly between my leg and that of the cheerleader on top of me, and it was driving me nuts. I hated both these girls. I hated them all, but I was too damn excited to do anything about it. I was in every teenage boy's wet dream, and it was a nightmare to me. This was the first physical contact I'd had with a woman, and I had no idea what to do.

A car passed us as the dancer continued to slide her hand up my thigh, and in one brief moment I could see her face as clear as day. It was the girl who sat beside me in kindergarten and turned me down for a date in junior high, and who later became pregnant with Heath Millard's baby and dropped out of high school. She displayed total revulsion as her hand slid further up my thigh. I was too weak to stop her. I felt like I was about to explode, and everything around me became all hazy. I could no longer feel the girl's hand on my thigh, just this pulsating sensation in my lower abdomen, as if my heart had fallen into my pelvis.

In the background, I could hear someone saying to cut it out, that enough was enough. The laughter had started to die out, but the

girls kept moving and the pulsating didn't stop. It was getting uncontrollable now, and I could no longer make out any faces or even shapes. I think I heard the dancer announce that I was going to "spurt," and then the cheerleader jumped off my lap. The other girl was still making her way back to us, still trying to get everyone to quit. I focused all my energy on her and managed to make out that she was also a cheerleader, not a chaperone as I'd expected. I felt relief for just a second as my guardian angel flew closer, then I felt the dancer's hand on my groin.

Then I ejaculated.

Then I passed out.

When I awoke, I was still in the back seat of the bus. My trombone case was back on my lap, pressing something damp into my groin. I touched the wet area of my band pants, and then I remembered what had happened. I was too humiliated to move. The last thing I wanted was to face the girls who'd done this.

They had shut the radio off now and were no longer singing and giggling. Most of them seemed to be asleep, the others continuing to talk softly to one another. Taking advantage of the sudden peace, I rested my head against the back of the seat and shifted my position to try to pull my wet underwear away from my skin. I could hear the sound of the tires spinning on the asphalt and the gears grinding when the bus driver turned or applied the brakes. I closed my eyes and pretended I was again five years old in the back seat of my parents' car with my baby brother sleeping in the child seat next to me as we returned home from Grammie and Pop's, listening to some pop song on nighttime radio. It comforted me, and I soon fell back asleep.

When I woke up again, we were back at John Stuart Mill High School, and most of the cheerleaders and dancers had already disembarked. The few that remained were in the front, waiting for everyone to get out of their way. I watched as they all stepped off the bus,

wondering who'd eventually come back to make sure I hadn't died or something.

It ended up being the bus driver.

He was halfway down the steps when he turned and saw me, then sighed heavily and trudged his way back. He stood over me for a second as if he couldn't even tell if I was alive, but then decided to find out by saying, "Hey, son, we're home. Ya gotta get off."

"I know," I said. "I'm going." I grabbed my trombone and stood up, causing my sticky underwear to again press up against my skin. It was making me sick.

"You sure is a lucky son of a bitch, ridin' this bus with all them girls," the driver said as he turned around and walked to the front.

"I sure am."

I avoided everyone for the rest of the night; as I didn't want to explain the dark spot on my band pants. People already had enough reason to make fun of me. I was pretty sure the girl who'd made me ejaculate realized what happened, but I thought I'd play it safe just in case she did pull away in time. I waited until everyone was out of the band room before I put away my trombone, then I waited until everyone was gone before I called my parents. The band director normally had to stick around for the last student's parents to arrive, but that never seemed to be the case with me.

As I sat on the curb of the high school parking lot, all I could think about was how Heath Millard would've handled what had just happened had he been in my place. Or what about my best friend Terry Hogan who'd moved to Toledo? I kept running through the event over and over, only I kept replacing me with other people. I didn't want to have any part of it, but I sure wanted everyone else to. I knew they all would've fared better than I.

Suddenly there was someone behind me. Before I had time to even fear that it was another cheerleader, I heard, "Hi Guy." The voice was soft and hesitant, like a child's when approaching a fright-

ened, abandoned dog. I turned to see who it was, but her face was blackened out by the floodlight behind her, casting a halo of light around her head.

I didn't say anything.

"I'm sorry about what happened on the bus," she continued after a moment. "They can be real immature sometimes."

I still didn't talk. I was afraid of what would come out.

"They're okay, though, most the time. They didn't mean anything by it. They were just trying to have fun."

Hearing this, I turned away. Now I didn't even *want* to say anything.

Sensing this, the girl sat down beside me. "Who am I kidding? They're bitches, right?"

I looked back at her, and now I could see her face. She was smiling at me warmly. I really believed she felt bad for what had just happened, and I felt safe for the first time that night.

"I'm Ann," she greeted. "Ann Penella."

I knew that. Everyone in school knew Ann.

"I'm Guy Lindsey."

"I know," she said. I looked at her inquisitively, so she added, "I saw your name on the bus list. I was wondering what kind of moron would sign to ride the cheerleader bus."

She laughed lightly at her comment, so I smiled. I continued to look at her, but I couldn't find anything to say; I was afraid I'd look like a...well, like the fool on the bus. I was spared the awkward moment when my father pulled his restored, forest green 1970 Chevy Impala into the lot. He rarely took it out, so I was quite surprised.

"That's my dad," I said with relief.

She continued to smile. "Take it easy, Guy."

"Thanks," I said as I stood up. I felt as though I should add something, so I did. "You too."

“I will,” she agreed, standing as my dad stopped the car in front of us. “And Guy? Get off that bus before next week.”

I smiled, got into the car, and shut the door. My dad asked who she was, so I told him it was just some girl who didn't want to wait alone. He seemed disappointed it wasn't something more. I couldn't tell him why she was talking to me, as I didn't really know myself. I also didn't know why I wasn't able to talk back to her. I guess I just wasn't that good at conversation. I hadn't been good at it in grade school, I still wasn't in high school, and I never even acquired the art in college. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why I became so impressed with the Arbiter. He always seemed to know exactly what to do and say no matter what the situation.



Thus bringing me back to the night when he and I went to see Rhonda in *Antigone*. He had visited her on and off a couple of times beforehand, mostly to help with lines and once or twice just to get something to eat at Panthemom's Pizzeria and Restaurant down the road from our dorm. But he hadn't yet taken her out formally, and he had yet to kiss her or even hold her hand. All they'd done was talk, yet each time the Arbiter came to my room afterwards he was more in love. Each time I went to his room, there were more high bouncing balls on the floor.

We took seats close to the front of President's Performing Arts Center for the Performing Arts. Although I was a junior, it was the first time I'd been in there for an actual theater production, having before only attended that forum of President's my sophomore year. I didn't like theater too much because it didn't seem real to me. There weren't enough graphic depictions of sex and violence for it to accurately reflect life in modern America. Not enough bus chases and full frontal prostitutes and sword fighting skeletons and the like. There's not one play by Edward Albee, Stephen Sondheim, or even Rogers

and Hammerstein that couldn't have benefited from a good bus explosion.

"Oh what a beautiful morning/Oh what a beautiful—"

BOOM!!!!

Now *that's* theater.

So I confess I wasn't looking forward to Floodbane's production of the Sophocles classic. All I knew about the story was that this one woman insisted on burying her brother properly even though they dug him up at one point after she'd already buried him. Rhonda played this woman. I liked that concept, but I was sure she wouldn't end up getting hit by a bus.

The Arbiter, on the other hand, was waiting for the play to start in much the same way that a father waits for his daughter's name to be called at graduation. He seemed so proud of the whole thing, but not in a patronizing way. He was in love, after all, and as I sat there in the maroon-colored theater, lit up brilliantly by the three chandeliers, numerous stair lights and the Floodbane College Coat of Arms projected onto the main curtain, I realized I could no longer remember what love felt like.

That made me feel safe.

"Did you send her flowers?" I asked the Arbiter. Although I didn't participate in theater, I still knew some of the traditions.

"Of course," he replied, staring intently at the curtain in front of him. "Always on opening night."

"No other nights?" I asked. I was just making conversation.

The Arbiter turned to me with a "get real" type of look. "It's love, not obsession," he explained.

"You're the one using her toothbrush," I joked, referring to his first phone conversation with her.

He laughed.

"What did you say on the card?" I continued to pry. Most people would've thought this to be a rude question, but I knew the Arbiter

wouldn't mind. His life was open for anyone who cared to look. He knew most people wouldn't.

"Not much," the Arbiter replied. "Just said, 'Good luck, Macbeth.'"

I laughed. "Really?"

He shrugged.

"That's bad luck to say 'good luck,'" I reminded him. Along with knowing the traditions, I also knew the superstitions. None of them made much sense to me, and the 'good luck' vs. 'break a leg' well-wishing made the least. But actors are a passionate lot, and the superstitions, no matter how ridiculous, are always taken as gospel. In fact, "Hell, it's bad luck to mention *Macbeth*. You've cursed her!"

He smiled. "Pretty eager for the play to start. Dying to see what'll happen."

I dropped my head into my right palm and shook it back and forth. I was suddenly terribly frightened for the entire troupe, but...I was also much more interested in seeing the play. I'd grown so used to feelings of impending doom that it had become one of my favorite things. And maybe now that bus accident really would happen.

But no, the play came off without a hitch, and Rhonda was great in it.

"Rhonda's performance made me want to bury my dead brother!"

—Kerry Von Erich, *A Daily Planet*

Aside from the fact that no one screwed up, I sort of enjoyed the play. I mean, there were no sword fighting skeletons or anything, but the whole play was centered around the nobility of death and how people react to it, so I guess that was good enough for me. It made me think that perhaps the person I killed in high school shouldn't have been buried. Some people just aren't worth the effort.

When the play was over, the Arbiter and I waited in the lobby for Rhonda to meet us. I was sure she'd be mad at the Arbiter for the

note he had left with the flowers, but I was again way off the mark. It took her a while to emerge from the hallway that led to the dressing room; she had to remove her make-up and hang up her costumes and all. When she finally did come out, she walked right up to the Arbiter, put her hands on his neck and—for the first time—kissed him full on the lips.

The Arbiter was pleased.

"Hi Guy," Rhonda greeted me as she released the Arbiter. I don't think he wanted quite yet to win back his freedom.

"You did a great job tonight," I said. "I mean it."

"Thank you," she gracefully accepted, and then turned to look squarely into the Arbiter's eyes. "And thank you, Arby, for the flowers. They're beautiful."

"I'm glad you liked them," he smiled. She was still holding onto his neck.

"And your note was hilarious," she continued. "The others were all freaking out. They were ready to cancel the whole show because of you!"

"Told you," I smirked to the Arbiter.

"I can hardly wait to see the tape," Rhonda added. "I'd like to see if anyone kept looking into the rafters for fear of falling sandbags."

I was puzzled. "I thought plays weren't supposed to be filmed."

"They're not," Rhonda agreed, "unless they're either bad productions of Andrew Lloyd Webber musicals on PBS or potential enrollee recruitment films for second rate theater departments at small colleges. Anyway, you guys will have to watch the tape with me sometime."

"That's not likely," the Arbiter stated.

"Why not?" Rhonda didn't seem hurt, but she was taken aback.

Knowing of the dead actor rule, I was curious to see how he'd be able to satisfy Rhonda without lying to her.

"Same reason I won't watch wedding or vacation videos," was his reply.

“Fair enough,” Rhonda smiled.

Unbelievable.

“Guy, you’ll watch it with me, won’t you?”

“Sure,” I shrugged. “Although I’d be more interested had a few sandbags actually fallen.”

“We’ve got a few more performances, Guy. Don’t give up hope. Oh, that was hilarious, Arby. They all hate me now, I’m sure. Only you forgot to mention whistling, so I just whistled away!” Rhonda started whistling a tune I didn’t recognize, again mocking theater superstitions.

Apparently, the Arbiter didn’t either as he asked her, “What piece is that?”

“Song,” Rhonda corrected. “The Far Side of Crazy.”

“Must be Mozart,” he said.

“Wall of Voodoo,” she added, as if that was supposed to explain something. “They’re not together anymore.”

The Arbiter and I looked at each other blankly.

“You wouldn’t like them, Arby,” Rhonda told him, reaching over to shake his chin. “They’re a rock band.”

“I thought you don’t like rock music,” the Arbiter questioned.

“Not so much,” Rhonda confessed, “but Wall of Voodoo is good.”

“Why Wall of Voodoo?” I asked. I knew this had to be some kind of character defining trait that would help me understand her that much more.

She sang her reply.

“In a circle, we place ourselves. It’s the human thing to do
It’s a cruel play, a lifelike stage. Tell me it’s the same for you.”

So much for understanding her. No wonder she and the Arbiter hit it off so quickly.

“When I die, are you going to see that I get a proper burial?” the Arbiter asked. Kind of a maudlin question, I thought, but Rhonda didn’t seem to mind.

"Will people try to stop that?" she asked.

"One never can tell who will hate me by the time I'm dead," the Arbiter pointed out.

"Well, maybe I'll die first...then I won't have to worry about it," Rhonda smiled.

The Arbiter finally got off this subject with, "Well, on that note, I'm hungry. Want to get something to eat?" the Arbiter asked.

"Sure," Rhonda replied.

The Arbiter then turned to me and asked, "You coming?" in a manner that answered his question for me.

"No, you two go ahead," I said. "I have to go back to my room and find something to do so that you two can be alone."

They laughed.

As I watched them leave, walking hand in hand through the marbled lobby of the theater, I found myself laughing at the almost surrealistic aura that surrounded them. I mean, it made sense they would hit it off, but not so suddenly, and not in such a big way. Not in a theater lobby after he'd just written her a note that—in the mind of most actors—could have caused the entire theater to crumble down faster than the walls of Jericho. I mean, I had at least offered her popcorn, right? Love like this just didn't happen...unless of course a bus were about to hit them both.

But they didn't need to hear my prophecies of doom. Maybe it was just me. Maybe it was just because of the way my only romance had ended a mere year and a half after it began.

It ended with blood in the grass.