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Aknowledgement is made to the following, in which various forms of this books pieces first appeared: ***theUndercurrent***: *Song of the Antelope*, *Ralph Hermann- A Memoir (selected excerpts)*, *A Grand Heist*, *Lennon and McCartney Sing the Oldies*, *I could've been a Ladies Man*, and *Last Testament of the Office Worker* ' ***Nynewcomer.com***: *Oh, The Heaps You'll Have*

# Party Tricks

by

Earnest Pettie

*Mellifluent Books*  
New York City, Tulsa, Ok.

For Mom, Dad, Claire, Diana and Tuffy.

Somebody had to do it, so I did it myself,  
but I couldn't have done it without your support.

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## **Ralph Hermann: A Memoir (selected excerpts)**

... I've been working as part of the Gospels Committee on the Bible for about fourteen months, and I've had nothing but disappointments. Nothing! Today my two manuscripts, "The Gospels according to Jimmy" and "The Gospel according to Blinky" were rejected flat out. Simply, because I want to get back to the heart of what was really going on, everyone got offended. Sure Jimmy and Blinky may have left the fold to become haberdashers, but their time with Jesus was still insightful.

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(From Jimmy 38:12-26)

And Jesus and his flock did enter into the marketplace and find many goods worthy of consumption. They didst walk into the aisle labeled "Express Lane" and proceedeth to be checketh out. "12:95," spaketh the clerk. And Jesus did speak, "Verily, I say unto you, Dost thou not remember the tale of the Nazarene who hath two vineyards but no wineglasses? It seems there was this Nazarene...."

The Clerk didst interrupt, "Sir, this is the express lane. Your speech is defeating the purpose of this lane...besides we don't speak Middle English." Jesus looked to his flock, smugly. "I walk amongst them, yet they know me not." And the Clerk didst interrupt again.

"Do you even have any money, sir?"

And Jesus didst look sheepish, speaking, "No, but I sayeth unto you, the man without money is the richest in the world, for he needest not purchase wedding gifts."

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I felt that the Bible was already going in the wrong direction. It was over

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500 pages and we were only half finished! Editing! Editing, I preached! But they looked at me as if I were a fool! Honestly, who would have time to read this? That's why Romance novels move so well-they're just a hundred pages.

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...So, I think James had it in for me, anyway. First, I took his seat in the General meeting. Then I read a draft of his project, titled "Revelations," and it was so convoluted! I suggested that he write another, titled, "Translations." Since then he has constantly belittled my work and occasionally given me something he calls a "wet willy."

I suggested a plot twist, at one point. I suggested we introduce a new character, "The Butler." The Butler would always "frown his brow." James, though, always the critic-may a moth nest in his left nostril-scoffed and said it wasn't in keeping with Jesus' character to have a butler. But who did he expect to serve the fish and loaves? Had we introduced The Butler, I think we could've had good fun. Sure The Butler may have been a fictitious addition, but that's why you add the disclaimer "*Based on a true story.*"

They were all against me at this point, anyway. It was all politics. I got to work one day to find that someone had written "poopy pants" on my stone tablet, but they had written it in Latin, so I had to go find a translator in order to be insulted! At times like that, I'm reminded of my mentor, Paulo, who, one day, yelled, "It's all beans!" and walked hurriedly into a wall.

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(Renaldo 15:1-10)

And the Israelites dwelt with the Parasites, and there was much gnashing of teeth, because the ticks were an annoying pestilence. And there was much singing of Psalms, because the Israelites knew no other songs. Verily, I say unto you, like so many before you, your names will be

changed, creating much confusion at family reunions. I don't think I need to remind you of the ruckus at Saul's family reunion.

Blessed are the malodorous, for they shall live all the days of their life in solitude.

(Ennui 122:1-22)

And the Lord looked down on the Israelites and they felt very small and belittled, for the Lord was always looking down on them. And Zebebeeb spake up, saying, "Lord, could'st thou stop being so condescending?" And the Israelites again sang Psalms, for they had nothing better to do. They supped that night on the Lord's Supper for they were too cheap to purchase food of their own. Again, Zebebeeb spake up, saying, "Lord, why hast thou forsaken us? You know we like Italian, yet you feed us bread and wine. Not even a good vintage, either." The Lord smote Zebebeeb, for he was an annoying, little boy of poor stock. And the stock- it was always going down, too. Not even on the Standard & Poor's 500, anymore.



## **To Mock a Killing Bird**

This week Jacque Verges announced that he'd been picked to be Saddam Hussein's lead lawyer in the ousted dictator's impending trial. Believe it or not, competition for the position was fierce, and the winner was chosen on the strength of an essay that the competition's judges had asked competitors to submit, prior to the competition. Earlier rounds included competitions in informal conversation and formal swimwear (black tie optional). Twelve finalists, all from different countries, were whittled from a much larger pool of entrants, and of those twelve, only one would emerge victorious. That man was Jacque Verges; I was disqualified due to a less than stellar essay, but I have saved the essay and would like to share it with readers.

### ***Q: Why would you make a good lawyer for Saddam Hussein?***

I anticipate a launching a vigorous defense of Mr. Hussein. If anyone ever deserved the efforts of the world's best lawyers, surely he must. After all, he did lead a country for twenty-five years, and you don't rise to such a position without some amount of merit. This is true even in the middle east, where the minimum requirement to rule a country is a moustache of sinister proportions. Most, if not all of the middle east's rulers have gone above and beyond the minimum requirements. I think with enough enthusiasm, I could convince a jury of Saddam's peers that he is scarcely as guilty as America would make him out to be.

The prosecution may want to mention his attempted invasions of neighboring countries, but such thrusts are easily parried. I would suggest to those sitting in judgement that boys will be boys. What boy has not occasionally roughhoused or been headstrong with his pals? That is simple fraternity, and in Saddam's defense I will invite many boys to testify that they have been, at times, impertinent rascals, building a strong case for my "Boys Will Be Boys" rationale.

I suppose opposing counsel will also bring up Saddam's gross exploitation (their characterization— not mine) of the UN's Oil for Food

program. First, I would like to say that it is certainly cruel and unusual to expect anyone to eat oil for food. Is it any surprise then that Saddam would attempt to circumvent such a program? It is simple human fallibility which causes us to stray from our diets. In Saddam's defense, I will parade Jenny Craig backsliders through the court, asking each of them how easy it had been to know what program they should follow but fall victim to the temptations of the appetite. I'm sure jurors will be asking themselves, "How can we blame him for this?"

The Americans love to bring up Saddam's "gassing his own people." Why do they never bring up the things Saddam did for his people? Have you ever seen the great Iraqi Jupiter Jump? A misfired missile caused the Jupiter Jump's untimely deflation, but at one point it was the Iraqi youth's pride and joy. Three out of four Iraqi children loved the Jupiter Jump, the other one out of four was afraid of getting too roughed up inside of it. To be fair, Uday loved it but was bigger than the other kids, which can be a hazard in a Jupiter Jump. How can you punish a man who builds a Jupiter Jump... for the children? While one in four kids may have disliked the Jupiter Jump, Saddam received 100 percent of his people's vote in the last election, which would be surprising unless you knew that he had regularly won student council elections by such landslides. I will bring to the stand in that grand courtroom, Saddam's Student Council Vice President who will vouch for Saddam's leadership, apparent even when choosing the theme for his Senior Prom: Arabian Nights.

If anything, with the case I'm suggesting, it would be clear that Saddam Hussein has been a victim of circumstance, so defending Saddam would be a lot easier than people have made it out to be. Clearly, all Saddam needs is a dynamic defense. I have seen *And Justice For All*, *A Few Good Men*, and *Erin Brockovich* and am prepared to provide that dynamic defense. I also have connections in the new Baghdad and could get the family a good deal on a post-trial dinner. I hope they like steaks!

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In retrospect, I don't think I ever really wanted to be counsel for Saddam Hussein. The lure of an all-expense paid trip to the Middle East is really what compelled me to enter the competition, even with the

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knowledge that I wasn't really prepared, either physically or mentally, for a swimsuit competition. Had I won the competition, I'm sure that I would have executed my job to the best of my ability, but I'm certain homesickness would have had me missing my position at the Wal-Mart Supercenter. So on the downside, I didn't do well in the competition to be Saddam's lead counsel, but on the upside, I've built enough confidence in myself that I may enter the Mr. Universe pageant, as long as it doesn't have an essay contest.

## Separation Anxiety

Two men in suits sat across from each other, separated by a thin layer of smoke in a very dim bar. The man on the left harbored an attache case under his left leg, and the man on the right had a briefcase hiding behind the front left leg of his chair. Ralph, the man on the left, fiddled with an ink pen while he considered what to say to Larry, the man on the right.

"I just don't understand it. You wouldn't think that this couple's divorce would have gotten as messy as it has." Larry said.

"Irreconcilable differences? They seem like Mike and Cindy Brady!"

"Carol- Cindy is the kid."

"I know that," Ralph said, trying to fight off the embarrassment of not knowing his Bradies. "I meant Carol."

"Speaking of kids, I think it was kids who started all this. It basically came down to Mrs. Baker wanting a kid and Mr. Baker's *not* wanting a kid." Larry and Ralph both looked at the bar, having noticed that they'd been sitting here fifteen minutes but still didn't have any drinks. Larry felt he really needed a drink to settle his nerves, and Ralph, ever-considerate, thought he too would have a drink to settle Larry's nerves.

"Well, I think that dispute stems from their slightly larger dispute: Mc Donald's versus Burger King. One evening, Mrs. Baker actually called me from a location equidistant from their local Burger King and McDonald's. She said that their marriage had been paralyzed and could not move forward unless the dispute were settled. Not only would she not eat at a McDonald's, she'd said, but her kid would never have a birthday party there, either. Needless to say, I called a cab and transported her to a place nearer the Burger King."

"I remember that! Yeah, that was the day the marriage was paralyzed. Mr. Baker called me and told me that he thought they'd grown apart, but now I know there actually was a cab involved."

"Yeah, but by then, the damage was done." Larry briefly imagined a glass full of Vodka on his table, resting on a square napkin. He'd always wanted someone with whom he could share his dreams but worried they might be too short to sustain a marriage. Ralph was married, but he hoped

that Larry would find that someone with whom he could share his dreams, and he went Larry one better by hoping that that special someone wouldn't steal Larry's dreams and run away to Mexico. A waitress walked by. Quickly.

Larry opened his mouth and eventually said, "Now that I think about it, I'm wondering whether that McDonald's and Burger King dilemma came from their previous blow-up over Pepsi vs. Coca Cola. That was a hard divide."

"I didn't think they'd ever make it past that hurdle. He refused to go anyplace that had Pepsi, which meant that he wouldn't go to his in-laws' house or the grocery store. I thought he was insane. He would say 'I'm going to go take a taste-test,' and then he would disappear for days."

"Weird." Larry tried to call the waitress but realized he didn't know her phone number. Directory assistance had been no help, and Richard, embarrassed to be seen with someone who used a cell phone, asked Larry to put it away before it rendered Richard 'trivial by association.' Larry flinched at those words, and Richard immediately felt guilty. Tenderly he pulled a flute from his briefcase and began to play, hoping to settle Larry's nerves. A couple notes into the melody, Richard flung the flute from his lips.

"It didn't even start with Pepsi vs. Coke!" he said, as the flute clanked to the floor and rolled a couple feet away.. "It began with To Be or Not To Be! Mr. Baker was in favor of To Be, and Mrs. Baker was in favor of Not To Be. She was always trying Not To Be, and she couldn't figure out how anyone who had Been would favor Being. To her it was like reading the same book twice. She was really weird. I don't know how you were able to represent her."

"Mainly, I ate boxes of baking soda whole. I don't know whether it helped, but after the first two weeks I had enough box tops to get a T-Shirt. Wow- To be or Not To Be.... that is an issue which can tear a marriage apart." Larry and Ralph had worked for the same firm, together, for fifteen years. For a decade and a half, Larry thought, they've dissolved partnerships while theirs has remained intact. Strange also, that the Bakers had retained them both, separately, but had often paid the firm with the same check. Richard had long thought it was so they could avoid tipping two lawyers. After an associate informed him that lawyers didn't get tipped, Richard quickly and quietly got rid of his "Unofficial List of Poor

Tippers.”

“Ralph, what if this rift between the Bakers actually came from something bigger than To Be or Not To Be? I know existence is big, but I think the boxers/briefs argument is even larger.... I remember two weeks after hiring me, Mrs. Baker told me a long story about Mr. Baker. She said that every night they would have a huge argument where she would yell, ‘Briefs’ and he would yell, ‘Boxers,’ and she would yell ‘briefs’ and he, ‘boxers,’ and then she would scream, ‘boxers’ and he would yell ‘briefs’ and after realizing he’d been tricked he’d yell, ‘Beatles’ and she’d yell, ‘Stones!’ Wait... what if this is actually over the Beatles and the Stones?” Even then, Larry had wondered why the Bakers couldn’t see their way toward a compromise. Why not just agree on Boxer-Briefs or the Beatles stoned?

“The Bakers are crazy, Larry. It’s time we admitted it to ourselves... I don’t even see why this is so important to you. People get divorces all the time.” Richard excused himself to visit the mens’ room.

Inside the mens’ room, Richard carefully washed his hands and splashed cool water on his face. He slumped to the floor in a corner, slightly wrinkling his suit. The trial had taken a lot out of him. First there was the conflict of interests, arguing a divorce case against his best friend. Then, there were the Bakers, a wedding made in heaven which took a turn for the worst at the Honeymoon. Sometimes, Richard admitted, he just needed to get away from Larry, even if only for a few minutes. Richard gathered himself, pulling himself to his feet, looked in the mirror one last time, and returned to the bar, noticing immediately that their drinks still hadn’t arrived.

“This is ridiculous. We don’t have drinks, yet?”

“I don’t understand it, either; they must be backed up.” Larry offered this suggestion knowing that it was the least likely possibility. “So I was thinking... I know what finally pushed them over the edge.”

Richard sat down. “What?”

“It’s not the Beatles versus the Stones, but it’s a rift even larger than that.”

“What could possibly be larger than that? It’s ruined friendships.”

“Well, we all knew of his affinity for Bugs Bunny, right?” Richard nodded. “Well, I couldn’t help but notice that she had a Daffy Duck sticker on her bumper. That is a divide which can not be bridged! Either you like

Daffy or you like Bugs!” Richard was not as impressed by this assessment of the situation.

“I don’t know,” began Richard. “There’s an entire world of Looney Tunes characters that they could have bonded over while clinging to their separate icons. I can’t buy that.” Richard nodded at a waitress who smiled back before continuing her job of inspecting her fingernails, very closely. “She made that bumper sticker, though. She made it on her Mac- she wanted to start a bumper sticker business. He didn’t approve.”

“Did you say Mac?” Larry’s gaze sliced through Richard’s attempt to make eye contact with a waitress, any waitress, and the gravity of what he’d said settled upon him as he remembered Mr. Baker’s fondness for his PC. “

”Well, this marriage can’t be saved.” Larry shook his head no. “How do you want to divvy up the house?”

“Left half for her and right half for him?” Larry and Richard shook hands and left. Their drinks never arrived, having gotten stuck in traffic after an argument on how best to get there.

## Lennon and McCartney Sing the Oldies

Mr. Findley was a man who swore he received transmissions from Interpol in a filling in one of his molars. He claimed he heard Interpol transmissions during the evening and a top-forty broadcast whenever Interpol wasn't contacting him. He usually preferred the former because of the dispatchers' goofy accents.

Findley's orders from Interpol were to go to the corner of Roberta and Swift and not make a move until he was given the signal: Lennon and McCartney were to be on the corner singing "Yesterday" for quarters. So there he stood, motionless, for three days, wondering what was holding up his contact. Eventually, Paul McCartney did wander around his corner, and Paul did a rendition of "Don't Cry For Me Argentina" the way only he could (that is to say, with a banjo made from a cereal box and rubber bands). When he finished, he looked at Mr. Findley as if he were expecting something but, after a moment, shrugged his shoulders, saying "eh" and left. Findley wanted to applaud, but this wasn't the signal, so he stood there, motionless.

It was no mistake that Interpol would contact Mr. Findley; however, the Top-Forty station, though, was more than likely a happy accident. Mr. Findley was a fearless man, the sort of man who, for example, one day awoke at an intersection to find he'd been sleepwalking. He looked around and decided that if he got in a quick nap, he could probably be at the deli in time for breakfast. And he was a master of disguise, to boot! Once, to impress a girl, he disguised himself as a bookcase to make his apartment decor appear more intellectual. It worked until the girl, while waiting for Findley to show, attempted to take a book off the top shelf and ended up punching him in the nose. But few people knew of these traits. Even his own parents ignored him most of the time. One incident which was indelibly branded in his memory was the winter of 6th grade when Findley, coughing and sneezing, sought his father, and his father said, "Cold? You call that a cold? That's lukewarm, if anything! Go bother your mother and come back when you've got a Man's cold!"

So he stood there motionless.



Eventually, Findlay began to wonder whether Interpol had actually been contacting him. Since changing locations, he had long since stopped receiving the Top Forty station-now he was getting NPR. Kids were coming to visit him, now. He was becoming a minor landmark. "Ah, how beautiful the seasons were in this burg," mused Findley, "tourism will probably be up next spring." These were the rambling of a man who was losing not only hope but who was also losing touch with reality!

His father came around to bring him back to Earth. Apparently, Findley's parents (coincidentally, they were named Findley, too) were doing some shopping in the area when Findley's father spotted him standing at the corner of Roberta and Swift. His father walked up to him and swatted him with the newspaper he'd been carrying. "Look at yourself! Why don't you get a real job?" admonished Findley's dad. Findley instantly felt 17 again, meekly offering that standing on the corner was harder than it looked. Father Findley retorted, "Anybody can stand on a corner! I did it fifteen years, and I doubled as a stop sign on the weekends for extra pay!" Disgusted, the elder Mr. Findley dragged Mrs. Findley to the subway with him, leaving Findley to ponder the situation. His father had money and power, but money wasn't the answer; neither was power; although it was probably safer to go with one or the other on a multiple choice test. His father had money and power; Findley had a cat. One looks a lot better than the other on an application for the country club.

While Findley stood on the corner pondering this, Paul McCartney sauntered up to him in the way that only he could (that is to say, wearing tap shoes). With Paul McCartney was a man who looked reasonably like John Lennon. They instantly broke out in song. Findley interrupted them "That's not John."

Paul looked nervous and said, "Sure it is." Findley shook his head, and Paul knew he was a beaten man. This also had further ranging implications concerning his planned "reunion" tour.

"Look, bub, for obvious reasons John can't be here."

"What is he, too busy?" The chess game was just beginning, and Findley knew it. The only question was did he have enough smarts to make it to the end game?

"We all miss John, but I've got this guy here, and we're supposed to sing *Yesterday*, for you."

"It's a likely story, but I don't buy it. In fact, I'm beginning to

doubt that you're Paul McCartney! How do I know you're not Ringo in disguise?" A bead of sweat trickled down Findley's forehead, and Paul stared at him in amazement. The pressure was on!

"I'm getting paid regardless. How about I do a quick *Help!* medley then split?"

"You would say something like that, Ringo." Checkmate! Checkmate!

Frustrated Paul cried an anguished, "ARGH!" and turned on his heel. He signaled Imitation John Lennon, and Paul took off in the way that only he could (that is to say, he hopped around in circles, barking, until the dogcatcher came). Score one for Findley. Zero for evildoers everywhere.

### **WHAT HAPPENED LATER:**

Interpol became engulfed in controversy for its incessant practical joking. All of Europe wondered why, if they were going to transmit to people's fillings, they couldn't put on better programming between the hours of 2:00 and 6:00 AM.

Findley's Father and Mother got on the subway.

Findley set up residence on the corner of Roberta and Swift, telling his story to anyone who passed by. He became a major-minor landmark, making enough money to break even on the postcards he had printed.

Paul McCartney launched a worldwide "reunion" tour, but Imitation John Lennon found a reasonable facsimile of Yoko Ono who ended up breaking the group up by insisting that imitation John Lennon be allowed to incorporate his real talent into the act. The group insisted there wasn't enough space on stage to set up a barber's chair, and besides, who would want to pay to watch someone get a crewcut?

## **I Could've Been a Ladies Man**

It seems so long ago now, but once upon a time, I could've been a Ladies' Man. I tried breaking into the field through many different avenues: Hopeless Romantic, Passionate Lover, Womanizer... I feel I could have excelled in any of these areas had just one of them not required at least three references. At one point, I began to feel that if I changed my name, legally, to Don Juan, I might have a bit more success. Unfortunately, I had trouble pronouncing the silent J correctly. I tried everything: whispering, lip-synching... nothing worked, so I had my name changed back to what it was originally: Don Won.

In third grade, I was off to a rousing start. I remember giving Candace Latsky a bag of gummy bears. In turn she gave me a bag of gummy bears. This was, we assumed, sex. The relationship was doomed from the start, though. You can't build a relationship on sex! I remember the next day. She didn't get to school until 11:30, which had my friends and me worried because up until then, she had been "late."

I could indeed have been a Ladies' Man, if only they would have lowered the height requirement. In all honesty, there is a girl for whom I have been holding a torch for a good many years. She won't take it back, despite my numerous phone calls and threats of legal action. This is what happens when one becomes too attached. It's difficult, I admit, to be the sort of man who wears his heart on his sleeve, especially since my appreciation for tank tops has grown so much, recently.

Possibly, I think, I was discriminated against during the interviews. I didn't go to an Ivy League school, and I refused to join a frat. Everyone knows that it's all who you know. I'm sure that had I been able to do the secret handshake, I might have been able to have been granted Womanizer status. I tried four different secret handshakes I'd learned over the years, and I even smuggled in a secret milkshake, but, as I said, it's all who you know.

Saturday Night. 3:00 AM. I look to my left and wonder who the woman is who is occupying half my bed. 3:01, I hear screams and am forcefully ejected from yet another foreign bedroom. I can't help but wonder where the love has gone. The love and my left sock. Will I ever find either of them? I think that if given five minutes, I could find the sock

under the bed. The rain falls, and I head home.

I have a roommate who began an internship program, studying under world-famous Pimp, Bowlegged Leroy. The university is refusing to give credit, but in the long-run, he will benefit more from the real-world experience than from the class-based theory. Meanwhile, I work part-time at a gas station. Is this how I expect to get ahead?

I abandoned my dream of being a ladies' man after a tragic evening last May. The scene: a dimly-lit bar. I'm speaking with a lady who has an allure only Garbo could muster. She says to me, "I hear you've got quite the reputation." I quickly responded, "Well, I've had quite a career in metallurgy... if you know what I mean." I raised my eyebrow to indicate there was, indeed, more to that statement. Unfortunately, even I didn't know what I meant. The evening ended with us trying to find a bookstore to look up metallurgy. I suppose we must all accept our shortcomings.

## The Great Secession

Laden with suitcases, Mrs. Harley stepped through the doorway, closing the door behind her, leaving behind everything that deserved to be left behind. The first to notice was her son, Lenny, who pushed open the front door of the house and stepped cautiously inside. “Mom? Dad?” he said, peering around suspiciously. The front door was usually locked even when people were home. Why was it open this time? Lenny stepped around the house, den to living room to restroom to kitchen. As he headed back to the front of the house, Lenny heard a shuffling sound emanating from the pantry.

“Mom? Is that you?” Lenny quickly tried to turn the handle of the pantry door but found it was locked. How had someone managed to lock the pantry door? The doorknob had never had a lock! “I know you’re in there!” Lenny’s quivering voice belied his doubt.

“I live here, now. Go away,” mumbled a muffled voice from just beyond the two inches of wood separating Lenny from canned goods and non-perishables.

“Mom? What are you talking about? You live in there?”

“Yes, I moved out” Normally Lenny would have argued the semantics of the statement. Hadn’t she, after all, moved *further in*? That was the last thing on Lenny’s mind, right now.

“You what? Why?”

“I’m underappreciated, underloved, and under a lot of stress, and none of you care, at all! Well, now you don’t have to care!” Lenny pressed himself against the door trying to press his voice through the porous wood.

“I don’t understand . . .”

“Well, I was going to move out, but then I thought, well, we really only have the one car, and I don’t really have any money, so I just decided to move in here. It’s not like anyone’ll miss me. The last time you told me you loved me, you were eight, and it was because you and your friends were playing Truth Or Dare.” Lenny backed off the door, stung by the smack of the unfortunate truth. Lenny looked around.

“Does Dad know, yet?” Silence settled on the room as Lenny

waited briefly for an answer that was not forthcoming. “You can’t stay in there! You can’t live in the pantry!”

“Yes, I can. It’s comfortable, and I’ve got a pet and everything.”

“You’ve got a pet in there?” Lenny asked, worried about rats.

“Well, I’ve got a feather duster, and it’s just like having a Pekingese but without the mess. It’s better, really. Why don’t you just take whatever it was you came for and leave? I’m going to be fine.”

This isn’t really practical, Lenny thought. What about mail? Mrs. Harley subscribed to many female-oriented magazines which seemed destined to just pile up, and after they piled up, they’d become a fire hazard, and after becoming a fire hazard, wouldn’t the family be open to fines from the fire marshal? Lenny didn’t know, but he was sure that his mother hadn’t thought this far ahead, either.

“Mom! What about the macaroni? You’ve got it in there! What if someone wants to make a necklace or some other macaroni craft? You aren’t being fair!”

“Thanks for thinking about me and worrying after my welfare. Really means a lot.” Mrs. Harley shifted her weight in the closet. She pulled a chain and a light streamed out from under the door of the pantry.

“Where’s that light coming from? There’s no light in the pantry.... is it on fire?”

“I put a lamp in here. A lamp, a nice rug and an ottoman. It’s not bad.”

Lenny took a seat in the living room and thought about his mother. This was the lady who had given birth to him after an alleged 29 hours of labor. He’d never checked the facts, so he just accepted the legend at face value. “Remember,” he thought to himself, “when mom built that snowman for you? But you had to outdo her, so you built a basketball team of snowmen complete with snow basketball. Why?” Lenny slumped in the chair, his conscience heavy with the memories of his youth. He thought about the time his mom had made him a Halloween costume. “Why do I have to be a pillowcase?” he’d complained. The front door opened and a pudgy head poked in.

“I saw your car out there,” Mr. Harley said, pulling the rest of his body inside. “Where’s your mom?” Lenny didn’t know how to answer, so he just sat there for a minute.

“She’s in the pantry.”

“The where?”

“The pantry.”

“With the candy?”

“And the creamed corn.”

“And the macaroni?”

“Yes, exactly.”

Mr. Harley ambled into the dining room and knocked on the pantry door.

“I don’t want to talk to you.”

Mr. Harley ambled out of the dining room back into the living room.

“Was that your mother?” he asked Lenny.

“Couldn’t you tell?”

“The voice was muffled.”

Mrs. Harley yelled from the pantry, “I don’t want to talk to you!”

Mr. Harley huffed and puffed his way back to the pantry, “What’s wrong with you?”

Silence, more silence, and just a little more silence for good measure. And then...

“This is supposed to be a marriage, you know, but you don’t treat it like one. I feel like we’ve never really been married. 29 hours of labor, I screamed and cried, but you didn’t even offer up a yelp.”

“I told you,” Mr. Harley said, “I told you time and time again. Me and the orderlies had a good hand of five card draw going. For me to have shown any sign of emotion would’ve broken my poker face. And still I ended up losing my shirt.”

“You shouldn’t have been playing strip poker! And what have you ever given me for an anniversary gift?”

“She forgets the soccer ball in ‘85,” he said to no one in particular. “Signed by Pelé!”

“They came from the store like that, Dad.” Lenny said.

“I can’t know everything, Lenny. That would be impossible.”

Lenny and Mr. Harley both began to hear Mrs. Harley sniffing from inside the pantry. Lenny felt as if he could hear her tears crashing to the floor, exploding on contact with the tiles.

“Why are you crying, honey?” Mr. Harley said.

“All I ever wanted was for you to come home and hug me, kiss me, anything...”

Mr. Harley stood outside the pantry for a moment, looking at the floor for advice. The floor didn’t have any advice to offer. “I don’t think you should stay in there,” he said, leaving to go to his room.

“I’m staying.”

Six hours later, Lenny left his perch on the sofa, making his way back to the pantry door. “Mom, I understand that you’re moving out, but don’t you think you should actually move out?”

“It’s a cold world out there, Lenny. I’ll be fine where I am. What do you care, anyway? I’ll be fine. Mrs. Cleary from next door is coming over in a little while, and we’re going to play Hearts.”

“I’m sorry I haven’t been whatever... whatever you needed me to be.”

“It’s ok. I have a pet. Dusty gives me all the companionship I need. Tell your father, though, to never darken my doorstep again.”

“I HEAR YOU!” he yelled from his room, opening his door, galumphing down the hall, his heavy hands making pendulums of his upper extremities. He banged on the pantry door, pushing Lenny aside. “You come out of there!”

“I’m not coming out! Why should I? So that you can throw me in the trash like you have the past 36 years? No, it’s time for a change. You cheated on me!”

“It’s not cheating. I amended the rules! It’s only cheating if you break the rules. I amended the rules to allow for two to four affairs apiece! You could’ve had a couple, yourself!” Mr. Harley looked to Lenny for support. “Is it my fault she never asked about any rule amendments?”

“What about our vows?” Mrs. Harley screamed. “I can’t live with you! It would be ridiculous for me to spend another minute of my life with you.” Mr. Harley began to notice a barely audible sawing sound.

“What’s that?”

“MAILSLOT!” spewed Mrs. Harley.

“I’m not forwarding your mail!” Mr. Harley said, going to his room, again.

Leaning against a wall, Lenny remembered the time he’d made



an ashtray for his mother. Mrs. Harley had taken up smoking just to keep Lenny from feeling that his effort had been in vain. Fifteen years later, she still had the habit but had long since lost the ashtray. Lenny knew he had just seen the beginning of the end, but he couldn't decide to what the ending had belonged, whether it were the end of his parents' marriage, his mom's stay in the closet, or his father's insensitivity toward his mother. Either way he'd gotten the picture much more easily than his father had.

"Mom?"

"Yes?" She asked through a handful of tears.

"I'm going to leave now."

"Ok, turn off the light when you go. I'll be fine. I've got a radio in here, and I've made a bed out of lasagne noodles."

"I love you..."

"Whatever."

"I'll be back, sooner or later." Lenny opened a drawer on a desk in the living room, pulling a piece of paper from it. He scrawled "WELCOME" in large block letters on it and placed it at the foot of the door of his mother's new apartment. That finished, he turned off the light and left. As he closed the door, he heard his father's voice bellow, "I'm serious. I'm not forwarding your mail!" But it was his mother who would have the last word.

"FINE!"

## **Dib Dib Dib Dib, Mum Mum Mum...**

A college graduate with few real prospects, a year ago I found myself in severe need of a job. I was living in Los Angeles, where every film school graduate is supposed to be guaranteed a job on a wait staff, but recession had been extraordinarily destructive in L.A., reducing many film-school-grads to begging for their California Cuisine and Atkins-approved steakwiches. Resume in hand, I walked the streets of LA, searching for Help Wanted signs. Noticing a dearth of Help Wanted signs, I wondered whether I should get into the Help Wanted sign business, but I pressed on. One afternoon, struggling down Sunset Boulevard, I saw, on a giant blue building, the largest Help Wanted sign I'd ever seen. It was a banner stretched across the massive Church of Scientology, inviting me inside. I didn't *really* want to work for a church, but since economics always trumps ethics I entered.

Passing through the front door, I began to feel uneasy. I could not quiet the philosophical questions I'd started asking myself: If one works for a church, does God sign the paychecks? What if that church is Scientology, often described as a quasi-religion? In that case, does L. Ron Hubbard forge God's signature on the paychecks?

I was wary of working for an organized religion because of the ethical issues involved. For instance, if I were to slack on the clock, would that constitute stealing from God, and if so, would it warrant a lightning bolt to the rear? If not, exactly what did warrant that, and how could I convince someone to do it? Also, since I was applying for a job at the Church of Scientology, did it matter whether I believed in L. Ron Hubbard? Sure there may exist some historical evidence for his existence, but it's all circumstantial.

Upon informing a secretary that I was there for the job, one of the first things the Scientologists had me do was watch a film about the history of Scientology. In a darkened theater, I learned that L. Ron Hubbard, among his myriad achievements, invented drinking water and used those patents to fund Scientology, a weekly get-together for movie stars and

their fans. Hubbard also is an expert at making bird calls, but that aspect of his past is shrouded in secrecy because of a scandal involving a 900-number and a *Bearded-tit* call. Next, a brainwashing section of the movie follows Hubbard's biography, but it is immediately preceded by a cartoon to allow one sufficient time to visit the concession. Get the popcorn, but stay away from the fountain drinks.

I learned that every Scientology org (that's what they've facetiously named their churches) maintains an office for L. Ron Hubbard. Hubbard, dead since 1986, is expected to make a full recovery and return to work soon. While every org is required to maintain an office for Hubbard, they are not required to stock staplers which seems a little unfair.

Following the movie, the Scientologists run both personality tests and IQ tests on potential employees. Anyone who has ever had lunch with a Scientologist is, I'm sure, glad that they weed out the boring and dumb. The intelligence test requires that you fill in a certain number of bubbles within a given time limit. The more bubbles you fill in, the smarter you are. Given the minute size of the bubbles, the accuracy of the test can not be questioned. If you perform poorly on the personality test, the Church of Scientology will do everything they can to help you improve your personality. Dancing lessons, however, are out of the question no matter how strong a case you make.

I signed a declaration that I would not divulge the inner workings of the Church of Scientology. In purely legal terms, a signed contract beats a baptism any day. Simply, it's hard to determine whether someone has been doused with water unless a well-timed Polaroid is employed. In Italy, a baptism is as good as a handshake, but the handshake is preferred if you're wearing a suit and nice shoes.

Following my intelligence and personality tests, I went on a job interview. A woman asked probing questions including "are you a communist?" Quickly, I checked for signs of McCarthyism, which include excessive drinking and sweating. Interviewees are supposed to answer right away, but I needed a moment to think. No one had ever given me a chance to be a Communist, but I could have been, I'm sure, if I'd tried

hard enough. I answered in the negative. Emphatically negative. Doubly negative. Wait, doubly negative— had I just answered in the positive?

During the interview, it came to pass that my interviewer and I became embroiled in a debate over the existence of L. Ron Hubbard. I proposed that L. Ron Hubbard existed in her mind only, and she countered that for me to have mentioned him, he must also exist in my mind. I contended his predilection for ascots was an absurdity beyond that which could be comprehended. She argued that for me or anyone to have recognized it, it must have been comprehended; thus his existence is self-evident based solely on his ridiculous fashion sense. I was beaten, but she told me she liked my Moxie (which, coincidentally was being sold at the concession stand in the screening room).

I passed the interview and was given a job offer. I was to be a floater, which should not be confused with being an angel since you don't get a uniform. Still, ethical ramifications were bothering me. Would it amount to heresy if I were to unionize the Church? I just *can't* accept intense meditation as a medical plan. I was given a job offer wherein my salary appeared to be part of a pyramid scheme, and I was being allowed to get in on the ground floor. I know I should have been happy because the potential for growth was tremendous, but I'd been burned before.

I went home and hid from the Scientologists. I didn't want to work for them, but before too long, I received a phone call. When I checked my voicemail, I heard, "Earnest, you can not run from the Church. Wherever you go, we will find you and make you to lie down in green pastures with semi-celebrities. We've made you an offer you can't refuse. If, however, you choose to refuse, please call us so that we can schedule someone else to work the concession stand in the screening room." I did not heed the call of the Church, and as punishment, I soon found myself employed at Blockbuster.

## **Last Testament of the Office Worker**

I think the lady sitting next to me is going to eat me. She keeps ogling me with a hungry look, brandishing certain table spices, and, more than once, she has asked to see a wine list. We sit confined in our own cubicles for a number of hours each day, and I believe that the separation from our fellow man has caused a widespread regression to a primitive state among my co-workers. I don't know how to defend myself-I've never condoned violence, mainly because I wasn't good at it. I've been told I hit like a girl, but after having been hit by girls, I realized that they put a bit more oomph into it.

If I am to be eaten by Brünnehilde, the next cubicle over, I only hope that she starts with an unnecessary body part, just in case. I've never needed a ring finger since I didn't wear jewelry. I said 'Didn't.' I'm already referring to myself in the past tense. Is this how it is to end? My life just flashed before my eyes, but thanks to my lack of an attention span, I missed the best parts. There was so much I wanted to do, but, as far as I can remember, "be a midday snack for a co-worker" was never one of those things. What did I do to deserve this?

I always considered myself a cunning man, but the best idea my brain can produce is to lick myself and appear to be disgusted by the taste. I licked my wrist, and Brünnehilde sent me an e-mail telling me to try the thigh. Thanks a lot, brain. Speaking of which, I guess now would be a good time to go over my last wishes. First off, I would like my brain to be donated to science, and if not science, then Goodwill. In these, the last moments of my life, I would like to tell every woman who ever turned me down for a date to go to Hell (please reference Appendix C for the list).

I suppose Shakespeare could have put it a bit more eloquently, and I hate to whine, but I don't want to be eaten! All my life I believed I was destined to be something great. I still remember the pride I felt when I received my diploma from the correspondence courses in the mail. I didn't get to graduate with my class because the mail was a couple days late, but, still, I felt proud. Now, despite having a degree in Physical Education with a minor in TV/VCR repair, I find myself preparing to be swallowed whole (preferably).

If I refuse to be eaten, I can still come to work, but will I be able

to hold my head high? How would my mother respond to the notion that, not only was I afraid to be basted, but that I felt peas would be an inappropriate side dish? My mother instilled in me the idea that I should be the best at what I am, and I can't help but wonder if that concept was meant to extend to taste.

Name. Richard Ulzer. I was born in '74 in a very small town. I'm a Libra. I never fit in where I was from; I didn't like Football. They treated the sport as religion, but I could not help but take offense at the preacher yelling "go long" as he passed the collection plate. I always hoped to be a con man, but I lacked ingenuity and the trust of my fellow man. I suppose I cried wolf too many times as a child. Wolves weren't indigenous to our area, but... Well, I must bring my reminiscing to a close... Brünnehilde friend just salted me. I forgive her, for she knows not what she does.

Bon Apetite.

## Song of the Antelope: A Short Narrative on the Collapse of Communication

He'd asked her to meet him in the freezer section. Harvey thought it was appropriate. He'd first met Jane there six months ago. She'd first met him there eight months ago. They never figured out why their first meetings didn't coincide. Harvey thought it was because he'd forgotten to set his clock back for daylight savings time. Jane assumed it was just because he was late for everything. They never agreed on anything; they'd spent two weeks arguing whether Harvey actually had a birthday or not. In the end, Harvey had to produce a cabbage his grandmother had given him for his eighth birthday in order to prove his case.

\* \* \* \*

Harvey needed to be honest with himself. The love had gone out of their relationship weeks ago. The radishes owned his heart now. Sure, it was an alternative lifestyle, but he was sure his insurance would cover it. In five minutes he was scheduled to meet Jane. How would he break the news to her? He had considered a singing telegram, but, under the circumstances, it would've been excessive. He spotted her approaching and tried to look busy.

"Hello, Harvey." He ignored her and continued to walk his dog.

"Look, I can see you're busy. I'll come back later . . ."

"No! Don't go anywhere. I've got to talk to you. Jane, there's something else. I don't LOVE you anymore. Please note the underline and capital letters. I just love you, now."

"I knew it! It's the fresh produce, isn't it?"

"Radishes, in particular . . . Look, don't cry."

"It's all so hard! How am I supposed to respond to this? Who will keep the kaleidoscope that we cosigned for?" She fidgeted with her dress until she realized she was wearing pants. "Please, reconsider. Please."

"My first love will always be the radishes, you know."

"I know," she replied.

"But I'll always love you second best. You know, like a hobby."

"That'd be fine with me. I'll always have the fish niblets." For effect, mainly, Harvey produced a whole bologna from his socks. Jane was more

ambivalent than amazed and wondered how much longer the charade would last. She hoped it wouldn't last more than two years, because she had an appointment to have her carpets cleaned later in the week. "I believe it's II Corinthians that talks about love and its relation to 100% cotton T-shirts, or maybe it wasn't II Corinthians but the ad on TV last night." Once again, words had failed her. If they kept failing her, she'd never have enough credits to graduate.

The glow of the light in the freezer section illuminated Harvey's face and his five o'clock shadow which had shown up thirty minutes late and had its pay docked, accordingly. He was pensive. He thought about how "words were but vague shadows of the volumes we really mean" and how pantomime would be a better way to express ourselves, if only we could wear hats.

"Jane."

"Robin."

"Robin. Robin, have you ever seen a rainbow?"

"Yes."

"No, I mean *really* seen a rainbow."

"Yes."

"Darn! I thought I was the only one." Once again, Harvey became pensive. He felt the need to come clean with Jane. "Jane," he started, "once again, Herff Jones has visited me at home. He tried to get me to purchase a class ring. I told him that I'd graduated in '85 and bade him 'Good Evening.'" He chose not to tell Jane that he'd politely shown Herff the door, and that Herff, having seen the door, asked to purchase it, or that he now had a gaping hole in his wall and seventy-five dollars in his pocket.

"Harvey," she returned, "he visited me, too. His solicitations were annoying, but he did buy my door." The uncomfortable silence that followed was characteristic of their relationship. Someday they'd realize it but not today. Today, all Harvey could think about was that nobody looked as good in shoes as Jane, who insisted that her name was Robin. Robin! Robin, she insisted upon being called. But that still didn't explain the collection of rare socks, she kept hidden in the freezer.

"Oh well. I'll see you in the morning," he said. But that wasn't what he wanted to say; he wanted to tell her he liked her. Not like a kid liked a toy, but like a kid liked cartoons. He wanted to tell her she was vital to



him. Instead he angled his cart toward the cashier. He looked back at her several times their eyes accidentally met-and then poured into hers such a flood of feeling as she had never before experienced. Why did that seem so familiar? He just kept walking. He walked out the door, and the chill bit his face. Nothing serious, it didn't even break the skin. Ah, the long winter in Chicago--the lights, the crowd, the amusement! This was the great, pleasing metropolis, after all- he'd read that somewhere. Harvey couldn't explain it, but he felt he'd be driving home, alone, again. He also felt that the preceding feeling was odd since he didn't own a car. He walked.

**\*\*Author's Disclaimer\*\***

When a girl leaves home at the age of eighteen, she does one of two things. This hasn't been that story. That story is the story of Louise Smallfish, the labor organizer who started the American Prostitutes' Union (APU). The APU demanded better wages, hours, and working conditions. They picketed four nights in front of America's sidewalks. Eventually, management gave in, but that is a different story.

## The Grand Heist

That night he looked like a million bucks, but of course, for tax purposes he would tell his everyone that he looked like 60 thousand bucks and claim his tuxedo as a dependent. His date was the most beautiful girl at the ball. It occurred to him between glasses of punch that having an attractive woman on his arm did much more for the reputation than having a nice watch ever could, and under most circumstances was far less expensive.

No one at the function recognized him as Jules Irving, the world's most innovative bank robber. After a couple Martinis, James Newman recognized him as his next-door neighbor, Lyle Carter, and kept demanding his lawnmower back. For most, the obvious solution to this conflict would have been to punch Mr. Newman and ask to borrow the lawn mower, but Jules was a pacifist. A nonviolent man, Jules refused to take a gun into a heist. The underground crimeworld had lauded him for his tactics of taunting the tellers until they gave him what he wanted. Taunts of "You call these low interest rates? Maybe that's why no one's interested!" and "The only thing that sucks worse than using your bank is using your ATM's!" would leave the tellers demoralized and the money his for the taking. The crime world had also endowed him with their Humanitarian award when he renounced getaway cars as being detrimental to the environment and bought a bus pass.

But that was all in his past. He was on to bigger things. He'd tried counterfeiting ones, once, but had been caught when the clerk at Bloomingdale's realized that Washington wouldn't be smoking a cigar for fear he'd catch his teeth on fire. Still, counterfeiting money was not a crime worthy of a man of this caliber! Jules smiled at his date.

She too, could have been a famous bank robber, but she never completely understood the lessons as Jules taught them. In one telling episode, she went on a heist, demanded the money and took hostages. This was textbook Bank Robbery, but the mixup occurred when she took two large ferns as hostages. While no one cared much for the Boston Fern, she

was able to use the other fern, which shall remain nameless by request, as a negotiating tool. She would release the Fern only after demanding that if she weren't allowed to keep the money, she be allowed to visit the money on weekends. Jules had specifically instructed that the successful bank robber would settle for nothing less than full visitation! No matter though. Tonight would be the night that sealed their names, Jules and Jill, in the history books.

Jill was to act as decoy. After some sparkling dinner conversation with Jo and Linda, the party's co-hostesses, Jules dispatched Jill to go about her work. Jill sauntered across the room, pulling the eyes of all the men (and surprisingly Ellen Shatner) in tow. And why not? Jill did have a certain hourglass figure that often compelled Jules to flip her upside down every hour on the hour.

Money would not be the object of this heist. In fact, it was the sheer absurdity of the heist that would make it so memorable. It was to be a grand gesture, a tip of Jules' hat to his father who had never really experienced success a Bank Robber, a Jewel Robber, or even as a small-time thief and had gone into Real Estate as a result. Jules would attempt to lift the Duchess's Graham Cracker. When Jules informed his father, he had not been too impressed.

"Why would you steal a graham cracker?" he asked.

"As a tribute. It's what you did in the thirties!"

"But a graham cracker isn't worth as much now as it was then, damned inflation! And besides we was poor, I had to make ends meet, and Frankie had offered me a good money if I could find some quick grahams."

"This graham cracker is reputed to be sprinkled with cinnamon, dad."

"Don't be a fool!"

Who knew why Jules's father was not impressed by Jules's tribute? Maybe it was their long-stressed, Father-Son relationship or maybe it was his father's professional jealousy of his son's success; possibly it was that theft of Graham Crackers no longer commanded the respect it once did. Regardless, Jules was determined to follow through with the plan. Jules

made eye-contact with Jill, giving the signal for her to launch into her Sam Kinison impression. If the Heist ran long, she would have to improvise, but this would be no problem for a woman whose improv skills were unmatched in history except by Jesus who once turned two loaves into a pizza and charged 70 cents per extra topping.

Jules slipped into the kitchen-everything was as he had imagined and planned, except for the presence of his arch rival, Teddy Long, who had one hand in the cupboard.

"I should have known..." Jules said, his words drifting out ever so slowly. After a moment's hesitation, when they couldn't decide which way to go, his words finally reached their target. Teddy turned around, box of graham crackers in his hand.

"Yes, you certainly should have, but there's no way you could have. I am twice as sneaky as you are, even when my shoes are squeaking." Teddy bit his lip, eyeing the box of graham crackers. Oh how carefully he had planned this night! This was to have been his swan song!

"I just don't see how I managed to not see you this whole night, until now!"

"Dear boy, my powers of disguise have always been unmatched. I was disguised as your chair all night long and you never noticed!" Jules swore to himself. He *had* thought it odd when his chair asked to be excused to go to the restroom, but when you have important things on your mind, the little details escape you! Jules and Teddy heard laughter coming from the main room. "Sounds like your little lady is nearing the end of the Sam Kinison routine. What's she got up her sleeve for..." Oh how Teddy loved dramatic pauses. "... an encore! Well, I don't have all night, boy, what are you going to do? Are you just going to stand there like a fool? If so, I'm going to have to make my getaway, because I told the Jehovah's Witnesses they could come over tonight."

And that was the sort of fiend Teddy Long was! Who else would actually invite the world's most famous loiterers to his home? Jules thought quickly. His utility belt! He'd worn it despite Jill's persistent efforts to make him abandon it because it matched nothing he had. He reached down and released a small bottle from its pouch. In one swift motion, Jules brought his arm up and pressed the bottle's spray trigger. The liquid shot from the bottle to Teddy's eyes.

"My eyes!" He screamed. "Ooohh my eyes!" but as soon as his

crying started it stopped. He dabbed at his eye with his finger and then stuck his finger in his mouth. “This isn’t pepper spray!” Jules quickly looked at the bottle’s label. Damn it! This was the Paprika Spray! “Ha HA!” Teddy made one of his many dramatic exits, this time into the refrigerator. This dramatic exit was followed by a dramatic emergence as Teddy realized he’d left his keys on the counter.

A beaten man, Jules took a seat on the counter in the kitchen. He supposed that he might as well go home. He stole a little cracker from the cabinet and pilfered a little piece of cheese from the refrigerator. That made him feel a little better, but it was by no means the grand legacy he’d wanted to leave behind.

## **Your Guide to Voting 2004**

Voting in the Presidential election has become increasingly important over the last fifteen years. First, they wanted you to simply Rock The Vote. Then, you had to decide whether to Choose or Lose. Now, they've issued an ultimatum: Vote or Die! How did things become so dire that not voting could result in an untimely death? It's simple. This is The Most Important Election Ever. It's a fact that has been verified by Price Waterhouse & Cooper. In fact, this will be the election to end all elections. We'll have no elections after this one, so I suggest taking a souvenir with you from your polling place. Feel free to help yourself to a number two pencil, a ballot box, or a poll worker. If you're going to vote, though, you need to be informed.

### **Picking a Candidate**

It's important to understand that your ballot will include between two and ten candidates for President. Two candidates represent your actual choices, and the others are just decoration. Voting for one of the secondary candidates doesn't mean you'll be throwing your vote away. It does, however, mean that someone else will.

The President's most important job is signing bills into law. That's why it's very important to select a candidate who can endure four years of autograph signing. This is one of the reasons I believe we will soon be embarking on a string of celebrity Presidents, starting with Oprah, running on a platform of "Look under your seats..."

You should do research on the Presidential candidates before making your choice, but please remember that all sources are not equal. The Weekly World News is not a good choice for candidate research, but the National Enquirer is OK. People Weekly is awful, but US Weekly is an excellent source. Be smart about being studious.

### **Picking a Ballot**

Now that you've decided on a candidate, you have a more important decision to make. What kind of ballot will you be filling out?

You've heard of touch-screen ballots, punch card ballots, and even optical scanner ballots but can't decide which is most important for you. Punch Cards sound as if they'd require aggression that you're uncomfortable with, and Touch Screens seem like they might require an emotional connection you're not quite ready to make. Oh, sweet torment, what a tough decision!

The best way to make a decision concerning the ballot you'll use is to seek the counsel of your relatives. After all, your decision will affect them because once you've decided on a ballot, you will probably have to move to a city or state that uses your preferred method. Once you've picked a preferred ballot, though, you're ready to vote!

### **Polling Place Etiquette**

\* When you arrive at the polling place, keep your eyes peeled for pitfalls and booby traps. If you see a lawyer with a leg extended across the walkway, don't worry. He's just there to trip you up.

\* Please don't demand a recount immediately after voting. Wait until the foul play is uncovered. The process is more efficient that way.

\* Don't cry if the polling place doesn't provide candy. If they don't give out stickers, it's OK to create a small fuss.

\* Watch out for exit polls. They're everywhere on election night, and if you aren't careful, you may walk into one.

## **The Story of Arafat's Kefiya as told by his biographer**

Before Yasser Arafat could even be pronounced dead (his aides had had an aggregate C-average in Beginners' French), internal disputes had already begun tearing his inner circle apart, his aides bickering over who would gain ownership of Arafat's headdress. The headdress was probably more famous than Yasser, a black and white bandana many predicted would start a fashion trend but failed catch on even with his wife, who was always ready with a suggestion. "How about a cap? How about a newsboy cap? Just give it a shot!"

The day Arafat began wearing the head wrap is a day that should have lived in infamy as it marked Arafat's first major triumph. Some half a century ago, in the middle East, Arafat sat outdoors, sweat-drenched, engaged in the fight of his life. His king was coming under constant attack from Herman al-Aziz's pawns and bishops. The two were playing chess on Herman's portable chess set, a cloth board and plastic pieces imported from America. As far as Arafat could see, no combination of moves would allow him the luxury of avoiding the inescapable—checkmate. Arafat always had been wily, though. To this day, his parents fondly recall the time he trained a parrot to talk back on his behalf. The parrot still is grounded, unable to have company over. Yasser's mind was racing faster than one of Saddam Hussein's Republican guards could surrender and start ordering room service.

"Eh," began Yasser, "hot day, huh?" Herman looked up at his neighbor, who Herman could have sworn resembled a marsupial but couldn't figure out which one. "Kinda wish it would just snow. Just a little light dusting..." Yasser wiped his forehead and looked up at the blazing sun propped overhead.

"Quit Stalling." Herman and Yasser hadn't known each other very long, but what Herman knew of Yasser, he didn't like very much. Yasser was the sort of man who would wake up and get the paper in his boxer shorts. Worse, sometimes he would send his wife out to get the paper in his boxer shorts. For Herman, that kind of behavior was craven, but



Herman was the first to admit that he was conservative, an accountant who enjoyed wearing the green visor even when off work. Still, the days could be long, and someone who enjoyed chess and board games could make a good neighbor. “Get back over here, and take your defeat like a man!” Yasser had wondered away from the chess board, stroking his fledgling beard, pretending to be thinking. “What are you? A man or a marsupial?!” That wasn’t a rhetorical question—Herman really wanted to know!

“Do you like magic tricks?” Yasser asked. He’d taken his time to return, hating every step he’d taken back to the chess board. Exasperated, Herman shrugged his shoulders and sighed. Yasser, delicately touched the corners of his side of the chessboard and yanked with a mighty effort, wresting the chessboard away from the game, the pieces moving just a hair’s length. Both men, initially, were startled. Yasser, though, was quicker back to his senses. He whooped a mighty whoop and yelled, “Yasser will not be beaten!” He twirled the chessboard in the air and ran for his home. I witnessed all of this; I was sitting in a nearby tree, drinking a lemonade.

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Yasser slammed the door to his house, awakening his wife. “Yasser will not be beaten.” He informed her. Groggy, she rose and politely asked him to explain what he was talking about. “This close... I was this close to being checkmated, but I am more creative than you’d think!” Yasser flopped on the sofa. “You can’t beat me, if you don’t have your chessboard.” He lazily twirled it around one finger. Yasser’s wife was less enthusiastic.

“You stole a man’s chessboard?” There were a couple knocks at the door, and Yasser motioned to his wife to be quiet.

“I was just wondering if I could have my board back.” Herman said through the door. I left the pieces there so we could finish. Well, if I can’t have my chessboard back, how about the records I let you borrow?” Herman sighed, again, and slouched homeward to explain to his wife that his imported cheap chess set was ruined. She was already mad about the Motown records.

“This is some husband I have! You give sore losers a bad name.”

“Honey, this is a badge of honor. Yasser will not be defeated! I will wear this badge of honor with pride!” He quickly arranged the chessboard on his head. “Dandy, huh?” Yasser smacked his forehead. “I left the paper out there!” Yasser ran to the window where he saw Herman waiting patiently for Yasser to return. “Will you get it? I just can’t risk it.”

“What a great man,” Yasser’s wife said as she began changing into Yasser’s boxers.

I heard all of this; I was hiding in a crawl space beneath Yasser’s home.

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Yasser would go on to accomplish many things in his life. Always present was his headdress, his badge of honor, worn to tick off a neighbor from his youth. Every time the neighbor would see Yasser on TV, he would throw a sandal at the television set, reminded of the spoilsport who refused to play fair and be checkmated. This is the story none of his aides know, though. He told them long ago it was a crown bestowed upon him by the Justice League. It never even occurred to his aides to ask what exactly the Justice League was.

## You Really *Can't* Spare a Dime

Being poor is easier than it has ever been with barriers to entry such as having gainful employment and owning worthwhile investment falling by the wayside. Having no money doesn't take nearly the time and effort it once did. That isn't to say that poverty is "in" by any means. Given the choice, at least one out of three Americans would choose wealth over abject poverty, but recession-proof jobs are becoming more and more scarce.

One recession proof job is *Celebrity*. It's an extremely difficult marketplace to enter. No matter how many pizzas you place out on tables, no one will come to your press conferences. You might think a book signing would attract an audience, but have you tried writing a book? It takes a long time! No amount of study will prepare you for the a job as a celebrity. You can pore over picture after picture of elegant poses taken in glitzy places, but getting into those places with a friend with a camera is almost impossible! You can toss a twenty dollar bill into the wind and hope that the seater chases it like a dog after a chew toy, but even that involves actually having a twenty dollar bill. That's why it's so difficult to move from "Poor Person" to Celebrity.

Another seemingly recession-proof job is *Vice President*. Vice President requires next to no know-how and very little effort. In fact, the sole requirement is having a business card which says "Vice President of the United States." The income is steady, but there are no benefits to the position. Being Vice President won't get you into the trendy nightspots any more quickly than being the guy who does weather on the local news.

Of course a lot of people were fired from dot-coms at the tail end of the nineties. They thought their jobs were recession-proof because they were part of a new economy based on web pages whose inherent worth far outweighed gold's value. (I bought a new car in '97 for thirty-six webpages.) Those employees thought they'd never be fired even when their jobs clearly were unnecessary to the functioning of the company. For instance, one popular, now-defunct search engine had retained a staff

of private detectives replete with oversized magnifying glasses. When they were escorted from their offices one December evening, one private eye said, “despite our oversized magnifying glasses, we never saw this coming!”

Many people have given up, entirely, on entering the economy, choosing to remain poor. As more and more people make that choice, competition has been increasing with surprising regularity. To be successfully poor, it’s imperative for one to establish a gimmick. A popular gimmick can mean change in the cup. One can be “the poor guy who wears fishing boots” or “the poor woman who thinks she’s Jesus’s aunt” or anyone, but with more people crowding the market, competition for identity has skyrocketed. Who can forget last year’s contest between poor guys who hate stop lights? Ultimately only one could be victorious in yelling insults at stoplights, and the man who won reaped relatively huge benefits: seventeen webpages and seventy-two cents in change. The other man went on to live in obscurity as “the poor guy who sympathizes with stoplights.”

Being cyclical, the economy will pick back up, but if you stare too closely, it’s entirely possible you’ll get dizzy. If that happens, making it impossible for you to conduct a job search without tipping over, take solace in the knowledge that there are a gang of out-of-work private detectives ready to catch you if you fall.

## Oh, The Heaps You'll Have

I have never seen bags of trash heaped as high as the piles in front of my door on 113<sup>th</sup> St. in Manhattan. I lived in Los Angeles, where you could find dining room suites in ruins on street corners. There, people leave neighborhoods like they're fleeing the Titanic, grabbing only what's important and possibly the kids, leaving furniture in their wakes. *That* is a simple explanation for roadside rubbish, as opposed to these New York piles. Manhattan garbage heaps are like crop circles, vast and mysterious.

I have lived in New York for a number of months now. Many of the things that I've encountered are things that I'm still attempting to figure out. For instance, I still have not figured out whether one is supposed to tip a mugger or not (If I'm not, why did my last mugger flip me off?). I have long since, however, ceased contemplating the walls of Hefty sacks separating me and my neighbors from the outside world. If I hadn't, I would still be wondering why I often hear what sounds like garbage trucks, idling outside my windows at 2:30 a.m. When I come downstairs, later, the trash is still there, so the garbage truck drivers obviously are doing nothing more than joyriding— well, joyriding or changing the garbage.

The garbage never smells horrible, despite its always being there. Thus I have decided that the garbage collectors *must* be changing it at 2:30 a.m. That way the garbage and the sanitation workers both manage to retain an air of mystery. Why a sanitation worker needs an air of mystery is beyond me, but it's obviously a better benefit than being able to keep the hard hat.

Early on, I'd decided that maybe we were being entrenched. Anyone who has lived outside of New York City has heard horror stories of large, New York rats. Perhaps the piles were part of a large series of trenches designed to keep us New Yorkers safe from rats roaming the streets (that Bloomberg always has a simple solution for everything!) This of course, according to my thinking, was just another front in the War on

Terror. What could be more terrifying than gangs of street-savvy rats?

Despite having lived here a few months, I still don't really feel like a New Yorker. It occurs to me, though, that maybe I need to take part in more New Yorker activities. Every night, I take my trash down to the bin marked 'Trash' every other night. That is a perfect opportunity to expand my horizons. What if I were to take those bags and use them to extend the wall of garbage a bit further? Maybe I could organize a block-wide, garbage-wall-building effort. We'd be beautifying the city, saving sanitation workers some effort, and communing as New Yorkers. New York City is what you make of it, and I'd like to make it the garbage-bag-mountain capital of the World.

I have never seen trash bags piled as high as the heaps outside my door. I don't worry or complain, though. I moved here in fall, and I know that the trash must hibernate through the winter before leaving for a better locale in the Spring. In the meantime, I have embraced it (not physically) as one of the many sights of New York that I am lucky enough to live here and see.

## **Earnest Pettie's Sure-fire Turkey Techniques**

Once upon a time, Jesus fed a multitude of people with a couple loaves of bread and a few fish. What's less widely commented on is that later most of the people who'd been there ordered Chinese, and the general consensus was that they would stop gathering in multitudes if no one would be big enough to spring for more than one entrée.

The lesson to be learned is this: You invite Jesus to your home, and he turns your turkey into an abundance of loaves of multigrain bread. Now the low-carb crowd is upset, and that turkey had cost you a day's pay, to boot. Thanksgiving must have a high propensity for sucking.

There is one thing, and one thing, alone, which can save a downwardly-mobile Thanksgiving. That one thing is a stellar turkey. After much prodding from my colleagues in the culinary community, I have decided to share my turkey preparation tips, guaranteed to leave your guests pleased or your money back.

First you must preheat your oven to an appropriate temperature. If your turkey had been a cold-natured one, you might not need to turn your oven as high. Be sure to check with your turkey provider. You will not be needing your microwave, so you may freeze it to be thawed for later use.

Long before you actually cook your turkey, you should prepare it. This usually means some combination of relaxing music and massage. Appearance is everything, which is why you definitely should do something about that turkey's unsightly wrinkles. If you've budgeted your time wisely, you should have some time to iron your turkey. You don't need starch; the potatoes will provide that. Ironing your turkey now will prove beneficial later.

A side note: The free-range turkey movement had been gaining steam among the alternative-weekly-reading set until last October, when those turkeys ran away. Most customers had pre-paid, but they paid again when their guests showed up for Hot Pockets on Thanksgiving Day.

If you've read this far without sticking your turkey in the oven, I suggest you do so. I encourage you to skip "stuffing" the turkey, which has long been used as a means to get rid of things, most notably sections of Nixon's White House recordings, which would've been lost forever had one of the dinner guests not declared his stuffing "yucky," slipping it into a napkin. Besides, let's be honest. It's cruel enough that we're killing and eating this poor defenseless animal. Stuffing it requires a level of intimacy that could only be considered perverse, given the circumstances.

I recommend preparing a small pool of gravy, one large enough for the turkey to swim in. Leave that pool near the oven. You will allow your turkey to cook most of the day with a fifteen-minute break every four hours, as per most state laws. Please be aware of all applicable local statutes; I accept no culpability for fines you incur. You'll be able to tell when the turkey has finished cooking because guests will have arrived and started asking when dinner will be. You will remove the turkey from the oven, taking a moment to soak in the beauty of your succulent delight, placing it to cool on your countertop. You might have noticed that we've done no basting. The first time I baked a turkey, that was an accident, but it led to the discovery of this technique I call "baptizing the baby." Lift your turkey out of its pan and dip it into the gravy, carefully supporting its back, lowering it into the pool. Do not smash it (imaginary) face-first into the pool; this isn't a mob hit. Now the turkey is bone-dry inside and marsh-moist outside. In your mouth, those sides will meet somewhere in the middle, which is where deliciousness lives.

Now you've arrived at the moment of truth. How will you ever serve this turkey to all your guests? Don't fret! I am providing you a sure-fire serving technique. You must fold the turkey into a small square. It may seem difficult at first, but you must just close your eyes and keep telling yourself, "It's just like origami," ignoring the shrieks of your guests and the sound of crunching bones. Your folds must be accurate and precise. It helps to have ironed your turkey beforehand because it will be difficult enough to fold the turkey, eliminating error without worrying whether people will question your technique due to pre-existing wrinkles. Once you've folded your turkey into a neat, little square, cut the square into



Party Tricks! The book.

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fourths using as large a knife as possible, paying no mind to the little boy crying about your “ruining Thanksgiving.” Unfold your squares, step back, and admire your handiwork. Your turkey now has scoring lines dividing the turkey into easy-to-serve bite-size portions. Go ahead, ask grandpa if he’d like a square of white meat. And you already know Aunt Mabel would like a rhombus of the thigh. Yes, family and folded food-- this is what Thanksgiving is all about. Read on if you’d like to know a technique for juggling mashed potatoes that is both entertaining and exquisite.

## Single Female Not In Search Of

“Single Female Not In Search Of...” read the beginning of Julie’s personal ad. She had a weekly newspaper slapped across her desk, and she was filling in the ad for next week’s paper. As her pen dripped the last dot in the ellipses, Julie wondered whether potential readers would be offended if she listed by name, occupation, and height those she was not interested in. A good question for Julie might have been “Why a personal ad?” Her response would have been “It’s cheaper than a spot on cable.”

Her first live-in boyfriend wanted to work with computers, an ambition Julie both admired and despised, often in the same breath but usually in sequential breaths. A philosophical argument flared, one night, over whether the ideal operating system could be developed. Tempers flared, papers were written, and Julie kicked her boyfriend out of the house. Before he could return, she’d changed the locks, and after some consideration, she changed the doors. Still uneasy, she changed the house to match the doors. No matter how hard her boyfriend tried to worm his way back into her life, he found he could never get more than his hand through the mailslot.

“Julie! Julie!” he would yell from the edge of the driveway, hoping to catch her attention. He would yell for hours on end. After a week, he just left a recording of himself yelling Julie’s name, returning once an hour to flip the tape. “What had he done to deserve such treatment?” Julie wondered, tipping precariously back in her chair. “Anything- he would have done anything for me, and I sent him packing.” She tilted back up and fished through her desk’s bottom drawer for a picture of the boyfriend in question, but she could only find a drawing. It was a stick figure, but she recognized the tie. “He needed someone better than me,” Julie said reassuring herself. “He deserved someone better than me. Math makes me dizzy, and he needs a woman who knows her way around a calculator.” Unfortunately for boyfriend #1, *Better Than Julie* magazine had gone out of business just before she dumped him.

A bitter breeze lifted Julie’s hair off her shoulders, tossing it into boyfriend #5’s face. Looking into the part of the sky only recently va-

cated by the sunset, Boyfriend #5 put his arm around Julie's shoulder. She stopped short and pulled away.

"I'm sorry; it's just that I've been hurt..." started Julie, causing Boyfriend #5 to start searching for his tourniquet. "I've been hurt by every man whose been in my life." Boyfriend 5 immediately pinched Julie's forearm, and she yelped in pain.

"I'm sorry; I had to do that. I felt my manhood was at stake. I needed to assert my masculinity." Julie pulled her jacket tighter as the wind picked up.

"But I thought you were different from the other guys."

"I am; I can't even benchpress a toaster."

"That makes you seem real masculine." Julie wanted to kick herself for saying that, but lacking the coordination, she just put her arm through Boyfriend 5's arm.

"Well, that's why I'm going to learn boxing."

"To affirm your masculinity?"

"No; because I've been hurt by a lot of women."

That memory faded, and Julie refocused on the task at hand: the personal ad. She would've been better off with an impersonal ad she thought while sipping on her Diet Coke. Filling out a personal ad was the second most ridiculous undertaking of her life, bested only by the time she'd shaved her eyebrows after hearing that large foreheads were in in Paris. She took refuge in the notion that her friend Carrie with whom she'd spoken earlier was slightly worse off.

"You don't need a dating service- you need a temp agency," Carrie informed Julie.. "Really, you should try this computer dating thing that I'm doing."

"What's that?"

"Well, you fill out a computer Scantron card- like on the multiple choice tests- and they put it in the computer, and the computer finds your perfect match! It eliminates all the guesswork."

"That doesn't sound reliable at all!"

"Not with the old software, no.... It had a bug that made it not find your perfect match, but this new version doesn't have that bug, and for an

extra fee, it'll plan your wedding for you."

"Really?"

"Yes, and I expect to see you on July 29, 2058, when I become Mrs... Charles Gibson... on a small island which is just forming in the South Pacific."

"That's really advanced software!"

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Growing unsure of herself, Julie yelled, "Don't put me on a pedestal!"

"I thought it would help spice up our love life!" Boyfriend Fourteen replied. He was only supposed to be a one-night stand, but he couldn't grasp the concept. When Julie tried explaining it, he responded with "But we don't stand!"

Julie knew he was well-meaning, but the time wasn't right. Not then. The time probably wasn't right, now, either, but she didn't care. She put her ad in the envelope and licked a stamp for it. A knock at the door interrupted her activity.

She hopped from her chair and ran to the door, opening it just enough for Boyfriend Twenty-Three to stick his head through the door.

"Hi Julie."

"I told you not to come back!"

"Well, it's just that... I was wondering whether I could have some sort of explanation. You ended things so abruptly."

"Abruptly?!"

"At the intersection of 4th and Main, we were in the car, planning vacation, and at the intersection of 5th and Main, I was walking home in the darkness!"

"I'm sorry. I have nothing to say to you, and I'm going to close the door."

"That's ok. I'll just sit out here and serenade you until you come up with something."

Julie nodded and slammed the door, retreating to her desk. Through the door, she heard a muted "Kum By Yah, my Lord...." Silence. "Julie?"

"Yes?"

“What comes next?”

“Kum By Yah!”

“Thanks.... Kum By Yah.” A chorus of twenty-nine other ex-boy-friends joined in harmony, “Kum By Yah, my Lord! Kum By Yaaaaaaah.”

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The responses came swiftly. Two days after her ad ran in the personals, she began receiving inquiries on a daily basis. Only one suitor sounded promising, a timid butcher named Gus. Gus proclaimed himself to be 5’6” but swore that certain shoes reduced his height by two inches. On the phone, they agreed to meet in a public place, the concession area at the local hospital.

The night they met there was electricity in the air- meteorologists call it lightning, but that really kills the romance. Gus saw Julie first. She was attempting to order a pretzel from a vending machine, but the machine refused to take her order.

“I would like one of your largest pretzels salted with your saltiest salt.” The machine sat there silently, it’s only communication a blinking sign reading ‘Insert Correct Change.’ “I don’t have to take this. You and your kind are so smug now that technology is taking over. Well, I refuse to be condescended to! If you won’t serve me, I’ll find another that will.” Julie walked away, and the vending machine celebrated in silence.

Gus didn’t know much about vending machines. He’d once wanted to marry a television and have little remote controls, but that was a different time, a different place. He’d grown since then, and he’d moved on even if the Sanyo hadn’t. Gus had learned that you can’t love technology because you’ll always get your heart broken.

“You can’t trust technology these days.” Startled, Julie whirled around and found herself face to face with Gus. “I’m serious... toasters? I don’t believe in them. You use the crust adjuster- set it at light, and the toast still comes up burned. Who’s really in control there?”

“But if you don’t believe in the toaster, what can you believe in? Anything?”

“I believe in me. Sometimes I don’t, but, luckily there are mirrors to reassure me of me.”

“You’ll never get anywhere like that.”

“Not true. I was there, but now I’m here. That’s at least 12 paces.”

“I stand corrected.”

With that, the conversation came to a standstill, so there they stood-the three of them: Gus, Julie, and the conversation. Gus took this lull to take a complete look at Julie. He felt she was like the Venus deMilo but better because Julie actually had arms! The conversation had nothing better to do, so it took a turn, and Julie asked Gus how tall he was.

“Well, 5’ 6”, but in certain shirts that can be reduced by 1 or 2 inches... a dirty secret of the garment industry. I spit upon polycotton blends.” Julie cringed, fearing for her polycotton blend blouse. “Do you want to go someplace?” Gus asked. Julie, backlit from the vending machines, smiled and nodded- paused to reconsider- then nodded and smiled. The two left the lobby side-by-side but not hand-in-hand. After the two disappeared from sight, the snack machine dropped a bag of pretzels, and a nearby Coca-Cola machine hummed in delight.

Not only were Gus’s palms sweating from nervousness and anxiety, but his palms had started pacing back and forth, muttering to themselves. Their incoherent ramblings, however, went unnoticed by Gus who was gazing into what he felt was the personification of beauty. Beauty personified took the form of a woman named Julie- she knew the way to a man’s heart was by direct entry into the thoracic cavity, and that’s where she had managed to snag Gus, using her smile as a hook.

“I couldn’t have asked for a better time, tonight,” said Julie. Her words were held aloft by pillars of sincerity. Too many times she had been hurt by past flames, and she couldn’t help but wonder whether Gus would be the next. “I just wonder, you know, because...” A wind blew out of the north ruffling the leaves, and Gus took a sip of his beverage before responding.

“Well, I can’t speak for you- I can barely speak for myself...” Gus

started.

“It’s true! He rarely speaks for himself!” whispered his official spokesperson from beneath the table.

“I would love for us to be... more... if you would just give me the chance.” finished Gus.

Julie reflected for a moment. More, he had said. More what? More friendly? More likely to build a sofa? She had no hammer, no screwdriver! If building sofas was his plan, why wouldn’t he just say so?

The night had been wonderful, it really had. Gus had a rebellious streak in him and hated the trite, so rather than start with dinner, they kicked off the date with an 8:00 p.m. brunch. Later they had gone dancing, gotten drinks and played drinking games. Whether Chutes and Ladders was really a drinking game was debatable, but Julie had felt that arguing would have killed the moment, and this evening was about anything other than simply killing time. Besides she had won the first two games, and it was too late to say anything by the third.

The walk to this gazebo had been fun too. The gazebo was hidden deep in the heart of the park, neither Julie nor Gus had known how to get there, but here they were, seated on its wooden benches, enjoying beverages. Gus was nervous, but, of course, he was nervous! The ways of the birds and the bees eluded him- how, indeed how, did birds and bees manage to hang out without stinging or eating each other? What Gus needed to realize was that Julie was, above all else, just a girl. She was not a transformer or anything- if he moved her arms a certain way she didn’t become a jet. She was just a girl, and he was just a boy, and they both wanted the same things: to someday find a perfect someone and carpets that resisted dirt and oil.

Gus slipped from his perch on the bench and kneeled on one knee before Julie, extending his hand to hers. Julie, realizing proposal might be imminent, pulled away. How many bad relationships had she been in during her brief walk on this earth? It had all started with her birth when the doctor refused to say she was a “fine baby girl,” declaring his personal integrity was at stake. All the important men in her life had never been

around when she'd needed them. Where was Ronald McDonald when her Happy Meal had seemed a bit despondent? And now this man that she barely knew had the audacity to declare that he'd like to get to know her better?

"I think we'd be better off just being friends for now."

Gus was speechless- not that he often brought speeches on dates. Mouth agape, Gus stared into Julie's eyes looking for an answer. Nothing.

"Could you move your foot?" Gus asked. Julie complied, and Gus proceeded to pick up his stomped-on heart and place it back where it belonged. He felt a little better, but the Gazebo was definitely less comfortable, now. Neither Gus nor Julie really knew where to go from here, so they sat in the silence wishing for television.



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