

## More praise for WHOM GOD WOULD DESTROY :

"Only two or three times in my life have I had a chance to read a novel in manuscript form that was much better and more original than ninety percent of the published books I read. WHOM GOD WOULD DESTROY was one of these."

- *Luke Rhinehart (author of The Dice Man)*

"This novel builds to an amazing and satisfying climax, and will provide the reader with quite a few things to ponder over several days after turning the last page."

- *Geldred*

"Thematically, not many books can tackle so many serious issues in such an absurd but meaningful way. Commander Pants touches on mental health, medication, religion, consumerism, selfishness, sexuality, reality, and Big Macs."

- *Eclectic-Eccentric*

"If you look past the laughs and the intriguingly outlandish plot, you might get to thinking about some of the ideas explored in the story... The reader doesn't have to think about this stuff if they don't want to... But you probably will end up pondering at least one of these issues, and wonder how Commander Pants managed to be so amusing and thought provoking at the same time."

- *Illiterarty*

"WHOM GOD WOULD DESTROY is one of those books that has so many themes going on (a vengeful God, consumerism, mental illness, medication and aliens) it's any wonder the story makes sense; however, the author did a great job of tying them all together using a velvet hammer disguised as a satirical storyline."

- *Bookfetish*

"It pleasantly reminded me of one of the darker Hitchhiker's Guide books – slightly surreal, yet quite enjoyable."

- *Beth's Book Review*

"I enjoyed it - this fun poke at psychiatry and religion and Mickey-D-lovin' aliens, along with a sincere but clever and witty exploration of the debate about medicating the mentally ill. It provokes thought amidst its dark humor and unapologetic blasphemy."

- *Nanny Goats in Panties*

"...But funny hi-jinks aside, we found a rather poignant message embedded in the story: Happiness may well be found in making other people happy. Simple. Easy. Okay, okay...so that particular message was imparted by a returned-to-Earth-Jesus who is having fun manipulating us sheep-like mortals. But we liked it nonetheless."

- *Reader's Respite*

WHOM  
GOD  
WOULD  
DESTROY

by,

COMMANDER PANTS

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FOR  
GAIL & GEORGE...  
TRUE SUPERHEROES



*God is a comedian playing to an audience too afraid to laugh.*

- Voltaire

*When I do good, I feel good; when I do bad, I feel bad, and that is my religion.*

- Abraham Lincoln

*I think greed is healthy. You can be greedy and still feel good about yourself.*

- Ivan Boesky

*Two all beef patties special sauce lettuce cheese pickles onions on a sesame seed bun.*

-Needham, Harper and Steers



## - PROLOGUE -

Jeremy gazed out the plate-glass window from his perch atop the step-ladder. The view pleased him. It had been too long since he had been here.

Turning his attention back to the bell, he finished hanging it, admiring its simple contours. The bell had been one of his more inspired ideas. As had been his reappearance here...now. This country. This America. This Year of Their Lord, 1987. It reeked of greed. Humanity was no longer satisfied with a measly piece of the pie. They wanted the whole damned bakery. And now, Jeremy was back to give it to them.

A few minutes later, the bell rang announcing his first customer. He watched the woman's tension slip away as she entered the store.

Smiling, He saw that it was good.

*Meanwhile...*

The phone rang.

There was no sense ignoring it. Doc knew.

It was an order: more Big Macs. He turned to find a crisp twenty waiting on the dresser. Sleet pummeled the roof as he laced up his boots.

God, he wished they'd leave him alone.







# - PART I -

## 1

"It hasn't stopped," Mrs. Zeidel dove right in. "You promised me it would stop."

Oliver wasn't surprised to find himself cornered by the old widow. It seemed to happen every time he walked in Abbey's building. Her bulls-eye accuracy had him half convinced that she harbored a radar unit, possibly stuffed down that terry cloth robe, or shoved in the toes of those tired blue slippers.

"You know I didn't promise you anything. We've been through this. I can't promise anything, Mrs. Zeidel. I've got no control over what Abbey does."

"Well, you're her worker aren't you?"

"You know I am, but that doesn't matter. What she does is up to her. All I can do is make suggestions."

"I should live so long she takes your *suggestions*. I need more than suggestions. I'm telling you, I've had it up to here with that music of hers." Her hand sliced a line above her curlers. "And the way she blares that TV, it's a wonder I sleep at all. Why just last night, so help me, it was so loud I had to stick a pillow over my head. And still I couldn't drown it out. Jay Leno," she said, giving it some extra thought. "It was Jay Leno. The man's not nearly as funny as Johnny Carson, you think?"

"Johnny Carson's a hard act to follow."

"You're not talking chicken liver. What I gotta wonder is why a man with as much on the noggin as Johnny Carson would let some putz, excuse my language, like Jay Leno, take over whenever he goes on vacation?"

"I can't answer that, Mrs. Zeidel. I guess we should be thankful that Johnny doesn't take more vacations."

"More vacations? What are you, meshugeneh? The man's already on

vacation more than he's here. Not like the old days. No, me and my Walter fell asleep to Johnny every night for twenty-two years." She smiled at the memory. "These days it's nothing but Jay, Jay, Jay. You got Jay Leno more than you got Johnny.

"What can you expect from life?" She stared up at the ceiling. "Fair it isn't. You lose your husband after forty-one years; you'd think that would be enough. But no, you gotta get *her* moving in next door. And then, like you need anything else, Johnny's gonna retire. I just know it. I feel it in these bones, and these bones don't lie."

"I don't know what to say." Oliver shifted restlessly. Why did Abbey do this to him? She had promised to meet him in the parking lot at eleven.

"What can you say, 'I'll do something?' I should live so long. I just want you should know, if it was just the noise I could live with that. I'm not one to kvetch. But there's those men too, different ones every night. 'What,' I ask myself, 'are they all meshugeneh? Don't they know anything from disease?' Whatever," she waved the thought away. "That's besides the point. The point is, these are dangerous men, and I know from dangerous men. My Walter's shop was in the schvartze part of town, you know? I tell you, I don't like to think what could happen. All I'll say is it's a miracle I haven't been raped.

"Why just last week I could hear them in there. I mean it, *hear* them. There were two of them with her. I'm not easily disgusted, but this, *this* was disgusting. I had to turn the TV way up. This is no way for a decent human being to have to live. I tell you, I don't know what I'm going to do. As God is my witness, I'm at the end of my rope."

Mrs. Zeidel had been at the end of this particular rope for well over a year now, ever since getting Abbey as a neighbor, and Oliver found himself idly wondering how long it might be. "Maybe you should call the police the next time she's making too much noise," he suggested, as he always did.

"That would be all I need, that gang of hers finding out I called the police. A big help you're not."

"Listen, I'll talk to her. That's all I can do."

"Do that," she said, then added with a voice that reeked of conspiracy:

"But don't say you heard it from me. If-"

"Hey, Mrs. Zeidel," Oliver interrupted, finally finding the will to cut her off, "I'm sorry. Maybe we can talk again next time, but right now I've got to go. I'll talk to her, I promise." And with that he started backing up towards Abbey's door.

Taking her cue, Mrs. Zeidel scurried back into her apartment. God forbid she should be seen.

Oliver knocked on the door. There was no answer. Typical. He knocked again...and again...and

The door opened and there she was; bare foot, blue towel wrapped around her head, cigarette dangling from her fingers and burgundy robe opened, revealing a hint of cleavage. Oliver tried to ignore how good she looked.

"Where have you been? I thought you were picking me up at *eleven*?"

He didn't bother pointing out that it was eleven-twenty.

"So, are we still going to Lenox? There's an ad in the *Pennysaver* for a new store that sounds cool. It's called *The Answer*."

"Sure, let's go."

"Give me ten minutes."

"I'll be out in the car," he mumbled as the door shut in his face. If it were anyone else he would have been gone.

It was *eighteen* minutes before Abbey skipped out of the building - her long auburn hair spilling out from beneath a plaid ski hat and tumbling over a loden coat, an ankle length skirt fluttering behind. Opening the car door, she breezed in.

Oliver tried to slow his breathing.

"So, what's this store we're going to?" he asked.

"Oh, some New Age place. You know, they sell Tarot Cards, incense, peppermints. That kind of stuff."

Oliver missed the joke. "What are you thinking of getting?"

She smiled dreamily, swaying her head from side to side. "I don't know, maybe a meditation tape." This time Oliver got the goof, but let it go, not feeling up for confrontation.

Putting the car in gear, he drove off.

The trip was spent in, what to Oliver felt like uncomfortable silence, making the fifteen-minute drive last an eternity. It didn't help matters that - already a nervous driver under the best of conditions - he despised winter driving. And even though the roads were snowless, he hunched over the wheel, waiting to feel his Volkswagen skid on some imaginary patch of ice.

All the while his thoughts still darted around Abbey: What was she thinking?...Was she looking at him?

Once in Lenox, it wasn't hard to find The Answer. Its big front window, overflowing with plants, crystals and pyramids gave it away. A bell rang as they entered, and its mellifluous tone hung in the air like a soft breeze. Oliver felt lighter.

There was whale song coming from somewhere.

At first they didn't see anybody, as the owner was crouched behind the counter. When he stood up they both froze, caught off guard. Neither could have told you why. There was just something about Jeremy. A magnetic quality. But a magnetic quality that attracted everybody differently. Abbey, who found herself facing a man that she wanted, fluttered in. "Mmmmm...Nice place."

"I'm glad you like it," Jeremy said.

Abbey moved closer. They talked.

Oliver drifted. It was something about the man's voice; something about the whole place that made him feel relaxed...

He heard his name being called from somewhere, and bringing his surroundings back into focus found Abbey staring at him.

"Are you ready to go??"

"Yes, of course, just waiting for you," Oliver said, the spell broken.

She laughed derisively and turned back to their host. "Bye, Jeremy. I'm looking forward to tomorrow."

The bell rang as they left.

"So, where were you in there?" Abbey asked, as Oliver pulled out of the parking space.

"What do you mean, where was I? I was right there."

"Well, you may have been right there, but that certainly wasn't where you were. You had the dopest grin on your face and it took me *three* times calling to get your attention."

"I guess I was daydreaming."

"That's not the Oliver I know."

"I suppose you're right." Silence again filled the car, but this time each minute lasted its allotted sixty seconds. Oliver wasn't thinking about Abbey.

"Listen," he blurted out as they entered Ripley, "did you feel anything in there? I mean, anything different?"

"Now that you mention it, I did feel pretty mellow. Jeremy seems to have that kind of aura."

"Yeah," Oliver agreed. They drove on in silence.

"Why are you going to see him tomorrow?" he asked a minute later. "What did I miss?"

"Oh, he's giving some sort of talk at his store. I thought it might be interesting."

"How are you getting there?"

"I hadn't figured that one out yet."

"Well, maybe," Oliver suggested, not thinking about what he was saying, "I could stay late and go down with you."

"MMmmm...I don't think so Oliver, but thanks for the offer."

This time the silence that filled the car was pregnant with the unsaid, making the minutes creep once more. Oliver gripped the wheel, staring straight ahead.

They didn't talk again for the rest of the trip.

\*

It made no sense for him to fantasize about Abbey. Oliver knew that. Still, he couldn't stop. The ironic thing was, even if she was interested - something she showed no signs of - he could never follow through. Doing that would cost him his job, a consequence that, strangely enough, he

wasn't willing to risk.

The ad that had started him in the field had made it sound so simple: *OUTREACH COUNSELOR needed to assist mentally ill population living independently in the community.* It had seemed the perfect fit; Oliver already spent his life conforming and fitting in. He assumed an outreach counselor would help these imbalanced people to do the same.

The truth, though, wound up being a whole lot more complicated, and in fact there were very few hard and fast rules to outreach.

Sadly, it was one of those few - the strict boundary between staff and clients - that made anything romantic between Abbey and himself an impossibility. Staff were staff. Clients, clients. Period. You didn't give a client your home phone number. You didn't discuss your personal life with them. You didn't see a client outside of work. If you did run into one after hours, you kept it polite but distant. The policy made sense. How effective could you be if you let someone get too close?

Although making sense didn't make Oliver's relationship with Abbey any easier, at least it made it straightforward. It was the rest of his job that left him wobbly. Working in mental health outreach called for a spontaneous, roll with the punches sort. Oliver, unfortunately, was neither. Consequently, each day for the past six years had brought with it new challenges he was ill equipped to deal with. Yet he persevered, because somehow - he couldn't really say why - the job suited him.

You might say that Oliver's main problem was that he wanted a black and white world, but found himself stuck with color. Or perhaps he simply didn't realize that even black and white worlds come complete with a palette full of grays.

And now, Abbey thought that he'd asked her out. It would be impossible for her to keep a morsel like that to herself. *Someone* would leak the news. It was just a matter of who...and when.

How could he have been so stupid, he wondered? What had he been thinking? The truth was, though, he hadn't been thinking. That man, that Jeremy, his store...something had knocked him for a loop. He hadn't been himself. But how could he explain *that* to anyone?

\*\*\*

"Roget's magic thumb?"

It was a question, and Greg stared across the table waiting for a response, the lunchtime crowd at Mindee's humming around them.

The sweat started to gather in Oliver's armpits. Greg was perfectly serious and wanted a perfectly serious answer. The problem was, Oliver didn't know what perfectly serious answer might do. He had learned long ago not to try making sense of what Greg said. That never worked. The thing to do was to give the answer that would appease him. Of course, Oliver never knew what that answer might be, thanks to the fact that Greg and that dynamic duo, Rhyme and Reason, were not on speaking terms.

In the end Oliver decided, like one might do with a live hand grenade, to lob the question back. "What do you think?" he asked.

"Think? *Think??* I can't be thinking. That's the enemy. Action, that's what's called for."

Action? Oliver braced himself, unconsciously grabbing hold of the table with both hands.

The explosion didn't come, and Oliver slowly relaxed his grip.

\*\*\*

It had been years since Doc had lived in a residential program. He didn't need anyone telling him when to get up, what to eat and where to throw his garbage. This decision had left him with one option: the Peaceful Breeze Inn, last refuge of Ripley's lunatics, drug addicts and alcoholics. The Peaceful Breeze wasn't choosy; so long as you paid your rent, you got a roof over your head. Okay, that roof might leak, but hey, it was a roof. The Peaceful Breeze rented rooms by the month, by the week and by the day. The place came complete with its own distinctive odor, one that stayed with a tenant everywhere they went. When the wind was right you could pick out a Peaceful Breezer from twenty feet. It was a combination of mildew and stale beer...*eau'de neglect*.

At the Peaceful Breeze, Doc had found his heaven on earth: nobody told him what to do, or where to puke - an all too familiar occurrence thanks to his hiatal hernia.

Oliver pulled up in front of Doc's room and got out to knock. A broken screen, slightly ajar, stood between himself and the door. Reaching for a place high up – a place he assumed Doc himself would never touch – he grabbed it gingerly between two fingers and swung it outward. As it passed, he stuck out a foot to thwart its return trip. Wood exposed, he knocked.

At first there was no response, and it wasn't until after the third try that he heard some stirring. "Doc," he yelled, competing with the television blaring behind the door, "time to get your shot."

"Be right there." The TV turned down and a moment later the door opened. Doc stood there scratching his head and squinting in the sunlight.

"We've got to go, but put on something clean first, okay? I'll wait for you in the car."

"Just put this on yesterday." Doc pointed at the sweatshirt he was wearing.

A big moist looking stain, shaped vaguely like India, took up most of the front. Oliver didn't want to know. "Well, put on something else, okay?"

"Yeah, sure," and scratching his head once more, he turned to go back in.

When he appeared a minute later, his shirt wasn't what Oliver would call clean, however it was an improvement, so he let it slide. Putting his car in gear, they drove off towards the main offices of Oliver's employer, Optima Resources. The agency occupied the top two floors of a retired high school atop Brenton Hill, and it was from this vantage that she looked down over her brood, the unbalanced of Ripley.

Oliver took Doc to visit Brenton Hill once a month to see his psychiatrist and get an injection of Prolixin, his antipsychotic medication. Like the rest of his treatment team, Dr. Smart wished that those Prolixin injections were a little heftier, however Doc wasn't having any of it. He had found the minimum dose to keep him skating on the edge of sanity and that was enough for him, thank you.

Walking up two flights of stairs, Oliver and Doc checked in with Caroline, before heading for the waiting room. Oliver got through four articles in *People* before she let them know that the doctor was ready.

Dr. Smart rose from the couch, smiling beatifically as they walked in. His omnipresent nurse, Julia, remained seated to his right, notebook poised. Her nod was simultaneously reassuring and efficient - an eerie combination.

"Hello, Arnold," Dr. Smart said, putting out his hand.

"Yup." Doc ignored the proffered hand and dropped into a chair, wiping a sleeve across his nose and inhaling loudly.

"How are you today?"

"Oh, fine and dandy."

Dr. Smart turned to face Oliver. "How has he been doing?" he asked, now using a different tone; the one he reserved for sane people.

"He seems pretty good to me." Oliver leaned towards his client, "Any problems, Doc?"

"Just the OOKlah. Same crap, different day." An alien race had recruited Doc in the late Sixties to help further their cause here on Earth. They communicated with him directly through a device implanted in the frontal lobe of his brain. Doc wanted out, but the Mother Ship kept broadcasting. It was hard.

"You know," Dr. Smart said, "if you took a little more medicine you might stop receiving those alien messages. What about five more milligrams?"

"Nope."

"Don't you think it would be worth it if it helped get you out from under their influence?"

"Suppose so."

"Then you will try a bit more?"

"Didn't say that. I said I would if it helped me get rid of the OOKlah. Is there some connection between them and my medicine I'm missing?"

Dr. Smart was stumped. With most of his patients he tried to play it straight, simply calling a delusion a delusion, but with Arnold he had

learned - from countless failures - that truth didn't pull any weight. After a short pause, he decided to try a new tack, "How about if-"

"Listen, Henry," Doc interrupted, the first name being a sure sign that he was losing patience, "if I need more meds I'll prescribe 'em myself. You know damned well that I prescribed myself morphine after that Kraut shot me in the ass."

Doc had been an Army field doctor in World War II. The fact that he had been born on D-Day didn't do a thing to upset the equation.

"Well, it's been a while since you practiced. Perhaps I could write the prescription."

"What do you mean, a while since I practiced?" Doc sounded dangerously close to indignant. "Seems to me I was awarded that '*Doctor of Distinction*' plaque just last week for that emergency surgery I did on that Thompson kid, the one with the heart murmur."

"Oh yes, I'd forgotten." This was new, Arnold practicing medicine again. Julia sat on the couch scribbling away.

"Have you been doing a lot of surgery lately?" Oliver asked.

"Only when the hospital calls."

"And how often is that?" Dr. Smart wanted to know.

"I guess no more than they need to." Doc had them again. He didn't mean to tie them in knots but, like his hygiene, it came naturally.

"Are you sure you wouldn't want to try just a little more medication?"

"I'll make you a deal, Henry. I'll try a little more if you do too."

"But, Arnold, I don't need any."

"There you go." Doc lifted himself out of the chair. "Is there anything else we need to talk about? The needle calls."

Julia handed Oliver a card for their next appointment.

"Good seeing you, Arnold," Dr. Smart said.

Doc sneezed.

"Could you have Caroline send the next one in?" Julia didn't bother looking up from her notes.

## 2

This messiah thing was such a blast. He had been right to go that route again. Not that he didn't miss the whole playing God bit - there was nothing to compare to the rush of watching the walls of Jericho come tumbling down or parting the Red Sea - but these were different times, and different times called for different measures. Today's humanity needed subtlety, mystery. These people didn't want to have their answers dropped in their laps out of some burning bush, they wanted to feel like they had puzzled them out themselves. And, to make matters more complicated, the parlor tricks of his last visit wouldn't even raise any eyebrows this time around. These people were far too enamored of science to buy into the whole walking on water or curing a leper bit. They'd be busy looking for the wires and the antibiotics.

What these folks needed was talk. Thought. Something Jeremy had plenty of. People were so damned gullible: let 'em hear the bell, turn on the charm, throw out a little smile...and BAM! Another convert! Sometimes it took a while, but sooner or later they all came back for another dose of his *wisdom*.

At the moment he was still playing it subtle; just a simple, good man who made people feel happy. The last thing he needed was for anybody to think his ego was too inflated. He knew that this latest game would only work if they thought this messiah thing was their own idea.

Still, easy or not, that didn't stop Jeremy from wishing he could push things along a little faster. Sure, he was getting a good core following, but a core following wasn't going to remake the world. To do that he would need to reach a larger audience. He would need mass.

It was one day while flicking through the channels on his TV that he found his answer. It was perhaps the most primitive production he'd ever seen. Two pre-pubescent girls sat on the floor talking to each other. With them was a definitely *post*-pubescent doll with long blond hair and a figure impossible to obtain outside the world of injection molding. As far as Jeremy could tell this doll was the star of the show, and as such the girls

often turned to her for advice. Whenever they did, one of the girls would hold the doll up to her ear while jiggling it back and forth. When the jiggling ceased, the girl would turn to her friend and share whatever jewel of wisdom the doll had imparted. To add to the absurdity, the camera seemed unable to maintain any kind of focus, blurring in and out as it tried to catch the action. Jeremy was fascinated. The show transcended awfulness and entered a realm of the absurd that he found compelling. It didn't seem to be a joke. Who would pay to run this kind of programming? He had to find out.

After the show finished - not so much ending as running out of time - a "bulletin board" of local events began scrolling down the screen. Soon this was replaced by a schedule of upcoming programs, and then five minutes later the magic words appeared. The answer Jeremy had been searching for:

**WOULD YOU LIKE TO PRODUCE YOUR OWN TV PROGRAM?  
BERKSHIRE COMMUNITY TELEVISION IS YOUR KEY!  
IT'S PUBLIC ACCESS TV AND IT'S FREE!  
COME ON DOWN!  
42 GROVE PLACE , RIPLEY.  
LET'S TALK.  
459-2223**

*Public Access* TV! Free advertising! Jeremy smiled, marveling at the possibilities. Here was the perfect vehicle to get his message on the fast track. Now he was getting somewhere. He wondered if the bell would translate to TV? But, so what if it didn't? Even without it, he was sure he could get them with a little charisma and some pseudo-enlightened karmic doodoo.

\*

Ed Lerner, a graying ex-radical with corduroy sports coat and ponytail accenting a receding hairline, was head honcho at RCTV, a roost he ruled

with a crème filled fist. As far as he was concerned, anything went, even if it did upset the morals of his staid New England audience.

Much to his chagrin this had yet to pose a problem. No one was offended. Few people were even interested. His dreams of having a local Lenny Bruce had turned into Mr. Rogers, and his dreams of Corporate Pollution documentaries had become School Committee meetings.

This wasn't to say he didn't have fun. The station attracted a fringe sort of volunteer and more than a few oddballs wandered through his doors.

Once upon a time the station had even had a bona-fide hit. The star, who went by the name *Dick Dock*, took phone calls while tied to a kitchen chair; a truly captive audience for his viewers. The show had been called *Whatever You Say* in honor of one of his favorite snide retorts (wit not being one of his strong suits). People called with gripes. They called with great ideas. They called to berate him. They called with praise. He rolled his eyes and was equally insulting to one and all, a true egalitarian...a star. As a bonus, girls would occasionally come out and tickle him with feathers while he attempted to carry on a conversation. He was very ticklish.

The show's popularity didn't surprise Ed. To him it was simply another example of what he called *LCD TV*, or *Least Common Denominator Television*.

As time passed, Dick's celebrity had grown harder and harder to deal with. He knew he was hot stuff and made sure everybody else did too. Tension squatted on the set like a big ugly toad, complete with sloppy leering grin. The toad chased camera people away. They were replaced. It chased directors away. New ones were found. It grew fatter and fatter on a diet of self-importance and intolerance. Finally the day came when its insufferable bulk filled the whole studio. It was every man for himself. The entire crew abandoned the station mid-show. Dick stormed out next - after being untied. The toad belched and a string of mystery drool slithered to the floor. It was one of the better episodes.

Dick never returned. That was three years ago.

Things had been a little dull since and, judging from his last phone call, weren't going to be changing any time soon. Some guy wanted to schedule a show to *sit and talk about life*. No guests, no calls. Hell, the guy only

wanted one camera!

"What kind of set would you like?" Ed had asked.

"Oh, whatever's there will be fine."

"Well, what do you want to sit on?"

"I'm sure there's a chair at your studio I could use."

Yes siree, excitement was his station's middle name.

\*

Jeremy and his bell, jingling slightly, showed up at the station on Tuesday. A frumpy woman reading the *National Enquirer* occupied the front desk. Her polyester outfit was more than just a fashion statement, and she wore it well. "Can I help you?" she asked, looking up at the sound of the bell, confused by the feeling its ringing brought on.

"I was wondering if you could tell me where I might find Ed Lerner?"

Jeremy's smile threw her further off balance. Happiness was an emotion she had little experience with, comfortable being the usual upper end of her register. "I think he might be in back," she managed. "I'll take you." She started to get up, unable to take her eyes off of him. Jeremy couldn't resist widening the smile and letting the bell ring once more. It proved too much. And making a slight squeaking noise, she fell back in her chair. It all seemed rather comical, that is until Jeremy noticed that she didn't appear to be breathing. Reaching down, he shook her gently. Nothing. Tenant evicted. Worm fodder. He didn't panic. That wasn't in his bag of tricks. Instead, he went into concerned citizen mode. "Hello?...Hello?" he called out. "Is anybody here? There's a woman here who seems to be ill... *Hello?*" After getting no response he picked up the phone and dialed 911, telling the man that he thought she might be dead. Thought nothing.

It was time to find Ed Lerner.

He came upon him in the back sitting alone at a computer while an unwatched TV grumbled in the background. Ed looked up and Jeremy let the bell do its stuff. Used to feeling good, Ed smiled. "Hi," he extended his hand, "you must be Jeremy."

"Yes, and you're Ed?"

"Uh-huh, let me just finish this up and I'll show you around the palace."

"Actually," Jeremy said, wearing his best *I care* face, "I just used your phone to call an ambulance. There's a woman unconscious at the front desk. I think she may be de-"

"*WHAT?!...Gloria??!!*" Ed was already up and running down the hall.

Jeremy followed at a sedate pace, realizing that there would be no show today.

\*

It was almost two weeks before he got his first show taped. It seemed the place was helpless without Gloria. She may have been called a "part-time secretary," but it was the age old who's-in-charge routine: Ed knew how to make the tapes, but Gloria knew where to find them and when to put them on. The goose that had laid the golden paperclip was gone and chaos ruled the roost.

Since the authorities were under the impression that she had died alone, an autopsy was performed. The Coroner checked off Heart Failure for cause of death (there was no box for Happiness).

Guilt wasn't in Jeremy's bag of tricks either. Annoyance better described the emotion he was dealing with.



### 3

Oliver's spoon sped around the inside of his coffee cup, something he did unconsciously whenever he was anxious and coffee was at hand. Was she playing him? On the one hand, it was possible that she was having dissociative episodes, but on the other, who knew? She was impossible to read. And the hardest thing was he might never know the truth.

"So, do you think it's worth discussing these episodes with Dr. Smart?" As soon as the sentence had left his lips, he wished that he could suck it back in, like some errant strand of spaghetti.

Abbey's face grew colder, and her nostrils tightened in disgust. "Yeah, right. I'll tell ole' Smartie Pants that I'm having dissociative spells and he won't up my shots right then and there."

Damn. Oliver had walked himself right into that one. She was right. It was probably exactly what he would do. Dr. Smart did seem to think that medication was the answer for everything, and that the only way to be assured that a client was taking their meds was to give them shots. But he couldn't admit that to her. Yet, if he didn't agree with her he came off as some jerk who said anything in the name of his job.

"I don't know," he answered after a moment, spoon still spinning around his cup, "he doesn't always just up people's medication."

"Yeah, right. Tell me like one person he didn't."

"You know I can't tell you any names."

"Yeah, yeah, confidentiality. It's a cop out if you ask me. Jeremy says that telling the truth all the time is the only way to feel good about yourself."

Oliver couldn't help chuckling inwardly at that one; like she ever thought of taking that advice.

"So, you've been seeing Jeremy?" he asked, to change the subject.

"I've been going there if that's what you mean. The guy does something to me, you know?"

Oliver saw his in and took it. "I do. It's like when I asked if you wanted some company going down to see him the other day, it wasn't what you thought."

"What did I think?"

"You know, that I was asking you out."

"Is that what I thought?"

"Come on, Abbey."

"Well, what were you doing?"

"I don't know, like you said, the guy does something to you...to me. I guess I just wanted to see him again, and going with you would have given me that chance."

His spoon slowed down, waiting for her response. There was none. She just sat sipping her coffee.

"Yeah, right," she said at last.

The spoon revved back up.

## 4

Oliver had another exciting evening planned: maybe a little TV followed by a little more TV and then maybe catch the 11 o'clock news before turning in.

It was while surfing the channels during a commercial on *Jeopardy* that he thought he saw something familiar. Going back, he saw that he had been right. There, looking every bit as calming on TV as in real life was Jeremy, sitting in a chair and talking. Oliver started to listen. It was one of those, *Of course! Why didn't I think of that?* talks. Everything Jeremy said seemed so obvious. So perfect.

Oliver sat mesmerized as Jeremy discussed how to attain true happiness: it only came when you were at peace with yourself. And the only way to be at peace with yourself was to live entirely guilt-free. He was a sponge as Jeremy went on to explain how easy this was to accomplish: all you had to do was avoid doing anything that left you with any hint of guilt. So simple. As an example he cited the man who, though addicted to cigarettes, chose to give away his last one to a stranger who asked for it. The man no longer got his nicotine fix, but according to Jeremy, in exchange he received something far more valuable; he got to walk away from the situation proud of himself.

A bell rang as Jeremy finished, and he faded out, promising to be back next week.

Oliver sat slumped in front of the TV, thoughts filled with Jeremy. He still hadn't been back to see him again. Then and there he promised himself he would. Soon.

In the meantime he got up and went for a drive. The effects of seeing Jeremy were wearing off and he felt restless. Along the way he passed Dr. Donut. He didn't stop. A donut and a cup of decaf would have been nice, but he didn't want to risk running into a client.

Coincidentally, Abbey caught the same broadcast while flipping through the stations. However what she had received from Jeremy's talk was altogether different...the best damned self-administered orgasm she'd ever had.

\*

RCTV had a blockbuster on its hands. Five phone calls! That may not sound like a lot, but in the world of Public Access television it was phenomenal, especially for a first show. *Whatever You Say* had only generated two calls after its premier broadcast and look what that had turned into. Ed was flying high. One caller had said that listening to Jeremy left her with an overwhelming sense of awe. She wanted a dub of the show and didn't bat an eye when he told her the ten dollar price tag. Could she have it today? This *was* big!

Ed found himself whistling as he worked. He felt giddy. Not only did he seem to have the makings of a hit on his hands, but he even liked the damned thing! This was no Least Common Denominator Television. This was what TV was supposed to be, people communicating ideas, sharing knowledge. Blows against the empire of ignorance. In his excitement, he forgot how lame the idea had sounded three weeks ago.

On a whim he called the lady waiting for the dub and told her to put a tape in her VCR. Then he threw *Thoughts* in a deck and aired it again. He felt good.

## 5

The hunger gnawed at her. It had grown past want; Abbey *needed* Jeremy. Amazingly, the guy didn't even seem to notice her in that way. She thought perhaps he was gay. If so, it was an obstacle she could deal with. But the fact was, Jeremy wasn't gay; he just wasn't heterosexual either. Sex was simply an issue that had never concerned him.

Actually, unbeknownst to her, Jeremy had noticed Abbey's desire. He had even noticed the way his penis enlarged and his heart rate increased whenever she was around. And, to be honest, part of him yearned to explore this sex thing. Yet, although it fascinated him, he realized that sex could prove disastrous to his plans. A messiah should be above such crass behavior. People could be so hung up about the reproductive act.

\*

The bell rang as she walked in The Answer. Jeremy was alone. Good.

"Hello, Abbey," he smiled. "It's nice to see you. How have you been?"

"Peachy. Hows about you?"

"I've been doing very well."

"Has business been good?" she asked, not caring in the least.

"Fine."

"So what else is new?" She wandered around as she spoke, picking up objects here and there and examining them idly.

"I've started taping a TV show."

"Really?" Abbey said – not letting on that she'd seen it. "What type of show?"

"Oh, a show of ideas. I speak, and hopefully people listen." From anyone else it would have sounded like hubris, yet Jeremy managed to make it humble. Abbey had never wanted anyone so badly. She wanted to see this man lose control; wanted to make him lose control.

"I'm sure they'll listen if you're the one talking." There was honey in her voice. She loved being obvious and watching men squirm, but there was no visible response here.

Although Jeremy didn't seem to mind the silence that followed, it was way too soon for Abbey's tastes. "Things seem pretty slow right now," she observed.

"Sometimes it is." He knew all about the small talk that she expected, but at the same time knew that it wouldn't be right for him.

"So," Abbey said, fed up with waiting for the conversation to give her an opening, "I've been thinking about you a lot lately."

"That's nice to hear." Jeremy could feel the blood rushing to his penis, but put the thought aside.

"Wouldn't you like to know *what* I've been thinking?"

"I'm always happy to share your thoughts."

"Well, I don't know quite how to start this one without jumping right in. The thing is," Abbey's voice slowed down, taking on the tone of satin peeling grapes, "I've been thinking about you, you know," she tried sounding a bit shy, "...physically." With this, she locked her thumbs in the front pockets of her jeans and pushed her hips forward, feeling her nipples poke through the sheer peasant blouse she had chosen for the occasion. Good. She knew what worked. Outwardly, there was no change in Jeremy's demeanor, but inwardly she could see that his khakis were stirring with the first hints of a lump. It emboldened her. "I've been having these uncontrollable fantasies about you. I don't know what it is, they kind of take over when I'm by myself. I start daydreaming and, before you know it, there you are again, touching me in different places, turning me all to jelly." She shifted her weight, creating the subtlest of gyration. "You don't think that's wrong, do you?"

"No, not at all," Jeremy said, off balance.

"Good. I hope I'm not bothering you with these confessions. It's just the fantasy is so overpowering that it can seem, you know, real. It makes me think that it's supposed to happen." She moved a step closer. They were now inches apart, her breasts almost touching him. Jeremy stood his ground.

"So, have you been thinking about me?"

"I think about you often, though not in the way you're talking about."

"Are you sure?" Abbey inched forward until she felt the reality in his pants against her.

He backed off, senses reeling. The hormones he felt were new to him. She followed, putting her hand out to touch his thigh. Jeremy was ready to tip over. There was a throbbing in his groin. He reached down, unsure until the last second whether his hand would play cop or accomplice. In the end, his better judgment won the tug-of-war. He couldn't risk it all for this new sensation, tempting though it might be. Gently, he removed her hand from his thigh.

"I am honored by your desire for me. It makes me feel," he paused, searching for the right word, "special, but it isn't something that I feel would be right for either of us right now."

"How could anything that excites two people, without hurting anybody not be right?" Abbey whined, having jettisoned the satin and grapes.

"It could feel right at this moment, but I'm fearful of what it might do to our relationship. I wouldn't risk what we have now for a moment of pleasure, even a pleasure as tempting as you suggest." He was beginning to find his feet. "Why don't we let our spiritual side grow? That's where true happiness lies."

Abbey was not used to being rejected. "You are so full of shit, Oh Mr. Enlightened One!" she ripped, changing gears so fast that Jeremy could almost hear the grinding. "You don't fool me. You want it so bad. You're so cool with all that spiritual mumbo-jumbo, but you don't know shit. You wouldn't know a good time if it sucked your cock!" She turned around and stormed out the door trying to slam it behind her, but hydraulics got in the way.

The bell echoed in her head.

\*

It was hard to tell which was steaming more, Abbey or her coffee, as she sat in a booth at Mindee's. What the fuck was with him anyway? She could

tell he wanted it. Shit, he was about to cream his pants, for chrissakes. Why did he hold off? Well, at least she was sure of one thing: the guy wasn't gay, bisexual maybe, but definitely not gay.

She looked up from her anger to see Greg come in. Really, the guy didn't look half bad. If it weren't for the fact that he was such a wingnut, she probably would have done him long ago. He wasn't what she was craving, but it was obvious she wasn't going to get that. And she needed *somewhere* to release the tension.

"Hi, Greg," she called out as he passed. "Have a seat. I'll buy you a cup."

"Cream?" he asked, looking down at her breasts.

"What?"

"Cream?"

"Sure, cream."

"Deal," he answered, sliding into the other side of the booth.

"So, what's up?"

"Chromatic Oreos, that kind of stuff. You know?"

"Uh-huh," she said noncommittally, happy at least to see that someone noticed her breasts. "They're nice, aren't they?"

"Huh?"

"Forget it."

"Forgotten."

"So," Abbey continued after a moment, "ask me how I'm doing."

"How are you doing," Greg complied.

"Funny you should ask. I was thinking about that when you came in. And you know what I thought? I thought, I feel antsy."

"Hey, I know what you're saying. I get it too. All the time. You know what it is, don't you?" He gave her a piercing stare. She returned it without saying a word.

"It's the moon," he went on. "She grabs hold and pulls. Sometimes it's like little mice tearing out all the hairs in my chest." He tugged on his shirt to illustrate. "And don't even think about stopping her. I've tried. Letters, phone calls. Nothing ever gets done."

"I don't know," Abbey said doubtfully, "I think my feeling is a bit more primal than that."

"More primal than the moon?" Greg stared at her, confused.

That's when Abbey had an idea, a brilliant *When in Rome* idea... "You could be right," she mused, not one to let inspiration go to waste. "There isn't anything more primal than the moon. Nothing at all." She trailed off, a faraway look in her eyes. "It makes me wonder...I feel so primal right now," she brought her look back home, searching Greg's eyes sincerely. "Do you think maybe *I* could be the moon?"

Greg was silent.

"You know, the more I think about it, the more I think that's it. I am the moon. Wow," she shook her head, overcome by the revelation. "But you have me all wrong. I'm not the cruel goddess you think I am. Oh, no. I'm benevolent. I would never tear out your chest hairs. I'd nibble on them, maybe, but that's all.

"Yes," she gazed off into the distance; a woman not of this Earth, "*I am the Moon.*" Stealing a glance at Greg, she could tell from the look of awe that she had hit a nerve. She tickled it: "I don't want to be that tearing, that itchiness, in your chest," she complained. "I long to be so much more. I long to be...worshiped, I *need* to be worshiped," she squirmed slightly at the word need. "And in return I shall be your sweetest dream. Would you like that? Do you want the moon to be your sweetest dream?"

"How can I serve you?" Greg asked, mesmerized.

"Let us go to my temple and I shall teach you."

Leaving two dollars on the table she got up and left, not looking back.

Greg followed, her enchanted acolyte. He'd have to get a rain check on the coffee.

\*

Meanwhile, back at The Answer, Jeremy was closing up early. He of course knew about masturbation, but had never as yet experienced the intricacies of autoeroticism.

It seemed about time to get himself some hands on experience...

...WOW! He couldn't get over it. Orgasm! The release!! The ecstasy!!! It

was fleeting, but really, didn't that only add to the joy? To soar to the highest peak and back in the sound of a heartbeat, and then gently land as the last sputterings shot forth.

Oh, the marvel! And it wasn't like other highs that immediately left you wishing for more. No, this completed you and took away your need.

Still, it *was* a need, he realized, wasn't it? And he could see how that need could become an addiction. He wondered how long it would be till it would feel good to do it again? The thought made his penis stir slightly... apparently not very long.

## 6

Ripley, population 40,000, was the big boy of Berkshire County, Massachusetts. Yet unlike her neighbors she had nothing to attract the tourist bucks. Lenox had Tanglewood, summer home to the Boston Symphony. Other towns boasted summer theater, dance companies and museums. Even the towns that had nothing had New England scenery to burn. Hence, summer and fall saw the rest of Berkshire County teeming with tourists and their tourist bucks. But not Ripley. She had nothing to teem about. Ripley was the land of the regular Joe and Josephine.

Optima Resources' Outreach office was on the second floor of the Crosby Building on Ripley's main drag. When starting the program, Oliver's boss, Stuart, had opted for this location, removed from O.R.'s main headquarters, to help foster a rebellious, fringe image for the program. And, in the ten years since starting the program he had furnished the place accordingly, until now there was a paisley Goodwill couch, an overstuffed chair, a Lazy-Boy recliner, as well as assorted mismatched tables and lamps – all sitting like islands, surrounded by a sea of plants.

Neither Stuart nor Oliver deserved credit for this sea. That honor belonged to Wendy, the third member of the Optima Resources outreach team. *The black woman with the green thumb* was how Stuart referred to her. It was she who had brought them in, one by one over the years, until now the office was a veritable jungle of greenery. There were hanging plants, plants on the tables and plants in big pots on the floor. They all gloried in the southern exposure that the office offered, and in return they lent the place a tropical feel.

Of course, no true office could be complete without the pre-requisite file cabinets and desks, but these had been relegated to a much smaller room behind the recliner. Originally this room was to have been Stuart's private office, but realizing the allure that an unencumbered living room might

provide, he had given up his inner sanctum to make it happen.

The strategy had worked, and their clients used the office as a spot to hang out and escape the outside world.

\*\*\*

"She's mean! She never lets me play with her dollies. She says I'm too young and I'd break 'em or something."

"How old are you?" Wendy asked, cajoling the figure on the couch as she would her four-year-old niece and wondering if she should call Optima Resource's *Psychiatric Crisis Team*. No, she could handle this. She had watched them work.

"I'll be six."

"And what's your name?"

"I'm *Danny*, and I like to talk."

"What would you like to talk about, Danny?"

"I want to talk about Abbey."

"What about Abbey?"

"She's not always a good girl, you know," *Danny* whispered.

Wendy put on her best surprised tone. "She's not?" Abbey always seemed tense behind her smile, and the prospect of helping relieve some of that tension excited her.

"No, she's not. She does really naughty things."

"Does she?"

"She does the *Naughty Thing* with lots of boys."

"Does she use protection?" Wendy couldn't help asking.

"What's protection?"

"Don't worry," she backtracked. "It's nothing important."

"What is it?"

Wendy felt herself starting to blush and thanked her dark skin for hiding it from Danny.

"What *is* it???" *Danny* repeated, stepping up the insistence level until there was no denying him.

"Well, Danny..." Wendy stalled, thinking furiously. "Doing the *Naughty*

*Thing* can be very dangerous and protection can help make it safer."

"How?"

"The *Naughty Thing* can hurt you."

"Sometimes Abbey sounds like she's hurt when she's doing the *Naughty Thing*. Does that mean she's not using protection?"

Wendy could feel her palms sweating. "No, the *Naughty Thing* can hurt you a long time after you do it."

"How's it do that?"

"It can make you sick."

"How?"

"Doing the *Naughty Thing* can give you germs, and these germs can make you very sick."

"If she uses protection she won't get sick?"

"Uh-huh," Wendy said, praying she wouldn't have to get into details. She had to learn to keep her mouth shut. She had seen therapists at work, and the good ones always knew when to keep their mouths shut.

"How do you use protection?" *Danny* asked, oblivious to the torture he was putting her through.

"A boy puts it on."

"Like a hat?" *he* asked innocently.

"I guess like a hat."

"Does he wear it on his head?"

"Ummmm, yeah he does." Wendy didn't like to lie, but really, she told herself, she wasn't.

"Well, I've never seen'em wearing hats, so I guess she doesn't use protection." This seemed to satisfy *Danny*.

Wendy looked down at Abbey lying on the couch in front of her, legs curled up, almost in a fetal position and found herself wishing she had the power to make this poor woman better.

"I'll bet Oliver would use protection if he did the *Naughty Thing* with Abbey. Oliver wouldn't want Abbey to get sick."

"I'm sure he wouldn't."

"It doesn't matter, cause Abbey wouldn't do it with him anyway."

"Of course she wouldn't."

"Nope. She said, '*No way*' when he asked."

"WHat!" She caught herself half way through the word and tried, with little success, to finish it casually. "Did you see Oliver try to do the Dirty Thing with Abbey?"

"The Dirty Thing? Is that the same as the *Naughty Thing*?"

"Yes, that's what I meant, the *Naughty Thing*." She had to calm down. Take a deep breath. "Did you see Oliver try to do the *Naughty Thing* with Abbey?"

"Well, no." There was a note of disappointment in *Danny's* voice. "But Jennifer told me."

Wendy knew *Jennifer*; a nine year old spoiled brat with a penchant for throwing breakable objects. Thankfully, it wasn't *Jennifer* lying on the couch.

"So...Jennifer saw him?" Wendy couldn't believe it. Even if Oliver had the desire - and who knew - he would never follow through...would he??

"Well, she said he asked her out on a date. And Jennifer says boys always want to do the *Naughty Thing* when they go out on dates."

"When did Oliver ask her out on a date?" Her mind raced. When had this happened? Is that why *Danny* was here? God, Oliver! She tried hard to show none of the anxiety she was feeling. *Danny* didn't deserve it. He was merely the messenger.

"I dunno." Her patient let out a juicy yawn. "I'm tired. I'm gonna close my eyes."

Soon *Danny* was snoring gently.

Wendy didn't know what to make of it. She needed to think. Getting up, she grabbed two plastic jugs and went to the bathroom to get some water. She always thought better while taking care of her plants.

As *Danny* slept, Wendy wandered around the room trying to sort things out:

It was possible that this was simply a case of some sort of wish fulfillment. Perhaps Abbey was interested in Oliver and had passed the thought along to *Jennifer*. Or maybe *Jennifer* thought it would be good for Abbey to see someone as stable as Oliver. Then again, maybe *Danny* just

wanted to get Oliver in trouble. She leaned against this possibility. *Danny* seemed far too naïve to invent such a devious scheme. Of course, *Jennifer* could have lied to *Danny*. This seemed the most likely scenario. But there were still two other possibilities to consider:

One was simple misinterpretation: *Jennifer thought* she saw Oliver ask Abbey out, but in reality it was something innocent. She liked this theory the best, much more than the last possibility, the one she hated to even consider...the unthinkable. Could Oliver have actually asked Abbey out? It didn't seem possible.

She wished that she could talk to Stuart, but it was the end of the day on Friday and he was already gone for the weekend. She was alone (except for whoever was snoring on the couch).

Fifteen minutes later Abbey woke up. "How'd I get here?" she asked, stretching her arms and yawning.



# 7

Oliver went back to visit Jeremy that weekend. While en route, the sky, which had been glowering all morning, made good on its threat, and Oliver found himself rushing through a deluge to get from his car to The Answer. The bell rang as he scooted inside, shaking out his umbrella.

Jeremy was standing on a ladder dusting a ceiling fan. He looked down at the ring and smiled. "Hello, Oliver. It's good to see you."

Oliver flushed. Jeremy remembered him, *and* it was good to see him!

"How have you been?" Jeremy asked, climbing down. There was something in his voice that told Oliver that this wasn't mere small talk. He wanted to know. He was concerned. It was a tone Oliver had never heard before, and it was all it took...

Out it poured; how he'd been. He started with his job, and after that moved on to Abbey. From there it was a short step to his loneliness and his boredom, his despair. He talked about his childhood, his fear of attention. He told him things he'd never known he felt. Jeremy listened, nodding encouragement at appropriate points. Somewhere around Oliver's first kiss the bell rang again and three young teenagers came in.

For a second the spell was broken, but Jeremy treated him to another smile. Once again time stood still. They were an island and everyone else faded away...

As Oliver droned on Jeremy registered every word, yet his thoughts were racing elsewhere. Could this be his first apostle, already? He was no fool, Jeremy knew he couldn't do it alone. He'd need help to spread his message. Of course, with today's technology he could probably get by with less than the twelve he'd used last time, but he'd still need at least some zealots, and this guy had zealot tattooed all over.

"Oliver," he interrupted at the first convenient juncture, "I have a favor to ask." From the look of awe on Oliver's face, Jeremy felt sure that his favor could involve self-castration with a rusty butter knife and still

receive an enthusiastic *Yes!* "I was wondering if you might be interested in helping me with something? I've started doing a television show-"

Oliver's heart thundered. "I meant to tell you. I saw the show. It was wonderful! Everything you said was so true. I had planned on coming back to see you right after we first met, but it was the show that got me here."

"Well, I'm glad that you've made it. We can learn a lot from each other."

"From each other?" Oliver asked, overloading. "What can I teach you?"

"Learning is a two-way street, Teaching is learning and learning is teaching. The two are inseparable. I can only teach if I learn."

"What do you mean?"

Jeremy reveled in the unsaid "*O Perfect Master*" in his new disciple's voice. "Every person is unique," he said, "just as every fingerprint or every snowflake is unique. Therefore each person has their own individual joy to share. I learn, *grow* would be a better word, from sharing in your own special joy. You, too, grow by sharing in mine. Together we create a full-filled circle."

"Excuse me...sir?" The outsider's voice shattered Oliver's bubble like a jack-hammer on tiffany crystal.

"Yes?" Jeremy turned, not missing a beat.

"I was wondering if you could ring this up?" One of the teenagers held up some incense, plainly feeling a bit awkward.

"Of course. That's a beautiful aroma. It's the one I use most often here in the store."

The boy's tentativeness melted with Jeremy's approval. "Yeah, I thought it was decent," he agreed, moving off towards the register with Jeremy. Oliver stayed behind, not feeling abandoned, knowing he was important.

After ringing up the incense Jeremy and the three boys talked. Oliver checked out more inventory. He didn't consider leaving. He wasn't insulted. Jeremy wanted him! Jeremy could learn from him!! He walked over to the music display and put on some headphones. The sounds of the ocean surrounded him. He sat down on the cushions spread out on the floor and closed his eyes. Waves crashed around him while seagulls called from overhead. The bell rang as the boys left. He didn't notice.

Staring at Oliver, Jeremy considered the possibilities. It would take work, but it could be done. So what if the guy didn't have the magnetism to hold an obituary on a fridge? Abraham hadn't exactly been *Charisma-Central*, and look what he'd done with him. Like Abraham, the booty that Oliver possessed was far more important than charisma: he had faith. And faith was contagious. Jeremy wanted to be a virus, and here, sitting on the floor sporting headphones and a goofy grin, was his first carrier, *Typhoid Oliver*. The first person to see him as the Messiah he was.

Jeremy smiled. He loved how things kept falling into place. First the TV show, and now a *zealot-in-training*. He wondered how things would play out this time. Would martyrdom again be his? Probably. But, this time he wouldn't wind up nailed to some cross. No, these days would call for a sniper's bullet, or perhaps a car bomb. Watch, he smirked to himself, in a hundred years they'll all have automobiles dangling from their necks!

Excitement tried to make him burst out laughing, but he knew a Messiah was impervious to excitement. All of life was excitement to a Messiah. Why should one moment have any more significance than another? Every moment was self contained; each one a new wonder to experience before moving on to the next. No past, no future, just a glorious present to live again and again!

Yeah, right.

\*\*\*

All weekend long Wendy mulled things over, shaping them, until by Monday morning she had convinced herself that *Danny's* story was either entirely innocent, or better yet nothing at all. Still, she would have to talk with Stuart. It would be irresponsible not to. What if it was true and she did nothing?

On Monday, though, Stuart was sick, so Wendy had to content herself by observing Oliver. As far as she could tell nothing was different, nothing except his babble about this guy, Jeremy. He acted like the man was a saint or something. As far as she was concerned, the whole thing smacked of cult. It didn't surprise her. Oliver obviously needed something to help

define himself. This, though, was probably the wrong thing. She'd keep an eye on the situation. If he started selling his possessions or something, she'd step in. But, until that time she had no desire to meet this Jeremy character.

Oliver seemed to have a problem comprehending this last point, and it wasn't until Wendy sharpened her tone that he stopped harping about her visiting the store.

## 8

Stuart woke refreshed, marveling at the wonders of pot. It was such a great drug; the only one he knew that never left him feeling burned out or hung over. If he had drank half as much as he'd smoked this past weekend, he'd be worshipping at the porcelain throne. And coke? Are you kidding? That would leave him feeling the crease of a Mack truck across his face. But pot, now there was a different story. Even after marathoning it, like the last few days, all he ever felt was the urge to fire up another bowl. Actually, that might not be a bad idea. He congratulated himself on having had the willpower to save some. A few hits before work would be just the ticket - the beginning of the week could crawl so miserably. He was glad he'd taken yesterday off. It was a needed break and well worth the drive from his campsite to call the office.

The smell of Mr. Coffee brewing his morning cup floated in from the next room. The world was good. There was nothing like a few days camping to make you reappraise the wonders of modern life: the shower, the bed, the microwave. They all grew special from disuse. He rolled into work at ten after nine, *Tic-Tacs* on his breath. Oliver was already out with Greg.

He immediately sensed something up with Wendy. He didn't know what, but something. He waited. If there was one thing he had learned from Outreach, it was that people told you more if you let them do it in their own time. Of course prodding had its place, but it was a fine art, and the person who needed it always sent signals. So far, Stuart hadn't received any from Wendy. He went downstairs and bought them both tea to give her a little time. Upon returning, he saw that she was ready, and from the look in her eye he could tell this was serious.

She paced back and forth spilling the whole sordid tale. It was hard for him to keep a straight face as he heard, *Danny told her that Jennifer had seen Abbey...*The pot made it even tougher to contain the giggle. He

listened to her theories about what had *really* transpired while forcing the giggle back with a chair and whip. When she finished he took a second to compose himself, waiting until he felt fairly confident that he could keep the smirk off his face, before sitting her on the couch and telling her his theory.

Well, he didn't tell her his real theory. He didn't say that he thought Abbey's multiple personalities were bullshit; that she only used them to get people going and have a few laughs at their expense. That would be way too radical for Wendy. Instead, he gave her the *politically correct, shadow-of-a-doubt, give-peace-a-chance* version, telling her that he didn't always believe what Abbey's other personalities said. Sometimes they didn't tell the truth. They could be very childish.

It wasn't even a lie. He just substituted *Jennifer* and *Danny* for Abbey.

When Wendy asked him whom he thought was lying, *Danny* or *Jennifer*, he was no longer fighting a simple case of the giggles. It was now a roaring laugh he was keeping at bay. *Crack!* She leaned towards *Jennifer*. *CRACK! CRACK! BACK, I SAY!!!*

## 9

Jeremy's presence in Oliver's life had tapped into a joy that had previously lain dormant. And whereas you or I might have felt cheated if we found that a major part of us had been sleeping for half our life, Oliver simply felt rejuvenated, reveling in these newfound glimpses of vibrancy and enjoying the way that they made each moment feel fresh and unexplored.

He was now listed as the Director on *Thoughts*. Not that this was the big deal you might think; there isn't much to do on a single shot, fixed camera TV show. In some ways it's a lot like piloting a 747: the expertise comes into play during takeoff ("*3..2..1..Roll credits...Cue talent*") and landing ("*Fading to black...Roll credits*"). In between, there's nothing to do but listen.

Ed was there to roll the credits and take care of talent cueing; that stylized roll and point of the finger to inform talent they were on. Talent cueing was all in the rotation, and Ed could rotate with the big boys.

At Jeremy's insistence the bell had been rigged with a modified drum pedal so that it could be struck with a tap of his foot. *Ding*, it rang out in lieu of opening music. That was when Oliver engaged the auto-pilot, left the cockpit, and went into the studio to join Ed on the floor...

"...try to think of life as a blackboard. We all start out with a nice big blank one, a clean slate if you will, and from then on every moment of our lives is spent filling it in. Every experience, every day, no matter how trivial, gets posted on that board and before you know it, you wind up with a blackboard like nobody else's. Think about it; who else has your unique experiences written on their board? Nobody. It makes you one-of-kind." Jeremy's voice broke with awe. "No one is like you, no one has ever been like you, and no one will ever be like you again."

...*Ding*....

"So revel in your uniqueness." (He paused, giving them a moment follow

his advice.) "But if you stop there you'll be missing the best part of all, because remember you aren't the unique one. Everybody: every stranger you see in the supermarket, every driver of every car sitting next to you in traffic, is unique too. Turn to them. Celebrate their uniqueness. Bathe yourself in their special light and let them bathe in yours. We are all beacons..."

In the studio, Oliver and Ed turned towards each other as two rare and beautiful smiles, smiles without a trace of self-consciousness, blossomed on their faces. Testaments to the gardeners art.

When Jeremy wound down his talk twenty-five minutes later both of them were transformed. What a pity that these types of transformation almost never last.

Ironically, with this particular one, it was all their experiences - the very ones that made them so unique in the first place - that fought like hell to bring back their old selves. And true change stands little chance against experience.

Oliver managed to hold onto his new version for almost a week. Ed went down quicker, thanks to all the cynicism scrawled across his blackboard.

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"...so when the priestess sacrificed the emasculated holy snake, great big gobs of the yellowest goo you've ever seen would come out, and it would start sticking to your clothes and your eyes and drip off your bicuspid and all those weird plants you water. Then, she'd hold the limp body high above her head and squort the sacramental words. The whole world would cave in for ONE, then everything would go on as if nothing had ever happened, or ever would." Greg held his coffee cup up over his head to punctuate the point.

Oliver sat across the booth from Greg, fascinated. The man could paint such vivid pictures. Perhaps that was the artist in him. Hard as it was to believe, Greg had been a fully functioning graduate student pursuing a Fine Arts degree when he had had his first psychotic break. His files alluded to clay. Lots of clay.

"What do you mean, she'd *squort*?" Oliver asked. Maybe not the best question, yet you had to give him credit, he was trying. Never before had he considered delving into Greg's delusions - having always assumed his role to be helping his clients function in society, not fostering their delusions - however he was finally beginning to sense that to deny delusion was to deny Greg.

"To Squort:" Greg spoke as though reading a definition. "The words are said with such conviction and lack of trepidation that they reform themselves, cascading with the confidence that creates truth."

"The whole scene is really inspiring," Oliver shook his head admiringly. "Is it something you experienced?" He was experimenting. Clearly, this time at least, Greg wasn't winging it. He knew where he was coming from, something Oliver had always assumed never happened.

"It's something we all experience, man. Take a look around you. Open your eyes, what do you hear?" He pressed his fingers against the corner of his eyes.

"You mean see?"

"Don't limit yourself, man. You can hear with your eyes. Hear the sights. Make them what they are. Don't be molded by what your ears tell you. If you believe everything you see, you'll never see anything." Greg was leaning across the table and pushing in and out at the corners of his eyes. "Create."

"Does that mean we shouldn't be molded by what our eyes tell us either?" It seemed an obvious question. Four years was too long to know someone without knowing them at all, and Oliver was playing catch-up.

"Don't get caught up in the bullshit!" Greg raised his voice for a second, but quickly lowered it. "It's all just input. Blah-beh-dee-blah, stuff...your underwear, a garbage disposal. I'm the pole. The wind is the wind. The pole can't interpret the wind. The wind can't be what it isn't. Don't believe the interpretation." Greg was waving around the room. "Don't get lost in it!" He started to get up.

With a jolt, Oliver saw where things were heading. "Calm down," he said, and almost in time too, but unlike horseshoes and nuclear devices, almost doesn't count in psychosis.

"Oh man," Greg moaned as he climbed up on his seat cushion.

"Sit down," Oliver pleaded. "Do you want to-"

"It's too late. You're in it. Everyone. Don't buy it all..." He sounded weary, and for a short second Oliver thought his plea had worked; he was going to get back down, but then-

"HEY PEOPLE!" Heads jerked up. Conversation stopped. "...YOU'RE ALL LIVING YOUR TUPPERWARE LIVES, WAITING TO HEAR THE BLURP! WELL, I'M HERE TO TELL YOU THERE'S NOT GONNA BE A BLURP! BLURPS ARE ALL IN YOUR HEAD! DON'T BUY THAT BLURP OR THIS BLURP!!..." Greg's gesture covered all the blurps in the world, no mean feat. "...JUST CAUSE IT SAYS '*MADE IN AMERICA*' DOESN'T MEAN YOUR POODLE'S SHIT'S ANY GREENER! LOOK DOWN!" Half of them unconsciously did. "IT'S ALL THROUGH IT! YOU SHOULD BE PUKING ON THOSE BURGERS, NOT DROOLING! WAKE UP AND SMELL THE CUM IN YOUR COFFEE!" He was climbing up on the table now, while simultaneously trying to make eye contact with his fellow patrons. The table wobbled, sloshing coffee onto it. He got his balance

"Greg-" Oliver tried, but didn't stand a chance. What chance does reason have against the freight train of invention?

"WHEN YOU LET YOURSELF IN FOR TOMORROW AND YESTERDAY HASN'T EVEN HAPPENED YET, THAT'S THE END OF THE ROAD!" His eyes continued their search for a sympathetic gaze among the other diners, but found none. It was *keep away from the man with the voice*.

As the futility of his search for eye contact sunk in, his shoulders began to sag. "I tried," he said, climbing down from the table and sounding hopeless...one man against the tide.

Oliver looked up from his placemat. "I know. Maybe we better get out of here." By now the spell was broken and people were beginning to stare at them. Since Greg only had a five, Oliver left money for them both. It was worth it to get out of there.

No one had to tell him that Greg and he would no longer be welcome at Mindee's.

\*

Oliver knew that there was no reason to have Greg assessed by the Crisis Team. Why bother? This was just his way; everything would be going along fine, and then suddenly, for whatever reason, he would careen out of control for a moment. Afterwards, it was always back to an even keel until the next outburst.

Yet knowing Greg was in no danger didn't stop Oliver from berating himself. He was sure that if only he had kept his mouth shut and stuck to his job, Greg never would have climbed on that table. Who did he think he was? It wasn't his place to explore Greg's delusions. That was his therapist's job, not his outreach counselor's.

That evening he went to visit Jeremy, and over a cup of tea related what had happened. Jeremy didn't abnegate any of Oliver's responsibility for Greg's behavior. On the contrary, he gave him full credit. However, instead of the villain, he cast Oliver as the hero helping Greg to realize his true self. It was another variation of his patented *every person is unique* pep-talk.

"Perhaps you've assisted Greg toward finding his way," he pointed out. "A flame goes out when kept in a bottle. You were simply helping him to remove the cap." (Jeremy chuckled to himself, realizing that when his work came to fruition this witticism would probably find its way into the *Proverbs* section of the Newer Testament.)

Oliver arrived at work the next day excited by the prospect of opening a few bottles.



# 10

Long ago, Oliver had discovered that the best way to reintroduce Doc to soap and water was the offer of a little drive in the country in exchange for some "sprucing up." Doc, having grown up on a farm, found the bait irresistible.

It was on an absurdly warm March morning that Oliver pulled up to the Peaceful Breeze for their latest excursion. There was Doc, already outside, sitting askew on the rocking chair, the one with one rocker missing that was always parked there. He ambled over to the car, yawning, taking one last drag on his Lucky Strike before tossing it in a puddle and getting in.

He appeared to be at his cleanest. Not that you'd want him tossing your pizza or doing your dishes, but at least he had showered and put on what looked to be relatively fresh clothes. Sure, the underwear was probably the same, but at least the pants were clean and the fingers appeared a bit less nicotine stained.

"Hey, how's it going?" Oliver asked.

"Oh, pretty good, pretty good."

"Anything new?"

"Not much."

The amenities being done, they drove on in silence.

Sharing silence with Doc was loose and easy. If you let it happen, an hour could go by without a word being said. A comfortable hour. Oliver, conscientious outreach counselor that he was, usually tried to avoid letting that happen, having assumed that Doc must be hungry for conversation, considering how little he got elsewhere. It was only in the past few days that he had come to the realization that Doc couldn't care less if they talked. And today, if Oliver hadn't come equipped with his new bottle opener, he might even have obliged him with a little silence. Too bad.

"You know," he said, as they passed McDonald's, "I've been thinking about those aliens."

"The *OOKlah*."

"Right, the *OOKlah*."

"What about them?" Doc asked, turning his head to follow the arches.

"Well, I was thinking that maybe we could get them out of your life if we worked on it together."

"Doubt it."

"It couldn't hurt to give it a try, huh?"

"Waste of time." Doc stared out the window at the passing scenery, seemingly willing to drop the subject anytime Oliver was.

"Why don't you tell me what kind of things they say?" Oliver persisted.

"No can do. Brain's been encoded with a blocking mechanism. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't."

"What if you wrote it down?" Oliver asked, refusing to give up that easily.

"Nope. Tried it. Pen won't move. They're not amateurs, you know."

"Do they have any other agents in Ripley?"

"How should I know? You think they're gonna tell me who their friggin' contacts are? I'm a peon. They don't tell me nothing I don't need to know. Hell, for all I know you're a contact." He turned to stare at Oliver suspiciously. Unfortunately, Oliver was far too occupied watching the road to notice. "Some people might think you were a little *too* interested."

There was another lull in the conversation as Oliver tried to think of some other way to approach the subject. Doc cut his thoughts short: "What are you," he asked, his voice quavering, "a CUNT?"

"What do you mean, a cunt?" If Oliver had taken his eyes from the road he would have seen how much courage this question had taken; not only was Doc a shade paler than normal, but small beads of sweat were beginning to appear on his forehead.

"What do you mean, a cunt?" Doc repeated sarcastically - yet there was more bravado to the voice than true sarcasm. "You said that a little too quickly." They rode on again in silence, and he turned away from Oliver.

A few seconds later he looked back. "I can't believe I never caught on till now. Not that I haven't always had my suspicions. You must have sensed that. That's what you're trained for, huh?" Just then he sneezed loudly,

spraying snot on the dashboard.

"That's disgusting!" Oliver snapped. "Wipe it up."

Obediently, Doc reached his hand out to comply.

"Use the paper towels," Oliver reminded him, catching what was about to transpire out of the corner of his eye.

Doc grabbed the roll that was standard equipment in the car, and started wiping absent-mindedly as he turned back to stare at Oliver.

"So you're a CUNT." The words were accompanied by a casual nod as Doc tried sounding flippant. "That's interesting. Real interesting. What have the results been so far?" He threw the towel on the floor and wiped his hands on his pants.

"I'm not a cunt!" Oliver protested, feeling cornered. "What do you mean, *cunt*, anyway?"

"Oh, that's good. You're sure you're not one, but you don't even know what one is."

"You're right," Oliver agreed hastily, trying to relax. On the heels of his experience with Greg he knew he had to tread carefully in uncharted territory. "Why don't you tell me what you mean by a cunt and I'll tell you if I am one or not?" He thought this sounded reasonable enough.

"What's this, part of the test? You can read my responses by hearing how I define a CUNT? Okay, sure, I'll bite. CUNT are friggin' scum. Lowlife pond scum. Is that what you want to hear?" He turned his head away from Oliver. "I'm so sick of this game."

"I'm telling you, I don't know what you're talking about. How can I prove that to you?" In desperation Oliver turned to look at him. Not being used to taking his eyes from the road, he drifted into the oncoming lane. Neither of them saw the Pickup bearing down on them. Its horn brought Oliver back. He swerved. "Asshooole!!" fluttered back on the breeze.

His heart pounding, Oliver pulled over.

Before the car had finished stopping, Doc opened the door and jumped out.

"Hey, I'm really sorry, Doc."

"Don't you worry about it."

"Where are you going?" Oliver called, as Doc strode back towards

Ripley at a brisk pace.

"I don't give a damn what you tell them," Doc yelled over his shoulder.

"Tell them I've had it with their crap. You do that."

"Hey, get in the car! I'm sorry! Let's talk about it!"

Doc didn't even slow down. Oliver turned his car around to follow him.

It was a quarter of a mile before he gave up, a quarter mile spent creeping alongside Doc, pleading, cajoling, reasoning...all to no avail.

Doc just kept moving, never once responding or looking over.

The next morning Stuart greeted Oliver with what could almost be described as a sneer. Oliver shrugged it aside, reasoning that his boss didn't know how to sneer.

"Have you seen this morning's paper?" Stuart asked, waving the *Bugle* as he spoke.

"No, I haven't had a chance. Is that it?"

"Sure is. Wanna take a gander? It's some pretty interesting reading."

"Okay." It was hard to miss the sarcasm in Stuart's voice and Oliver didn't know what to make of it. Stuart handed him the *City and County* section with a flourish. "Check out the *Letters to the Editor*, they're a hoot."

Puzzled, Oliver took the paper over to the couch. He opened to the op-ed page and started reading. Now you or I might have scanned the headlines picking which one to read or perhaps checked the authors to see if there was one we knew, but not Oliver. One at a time, top to bottom, even when he was sure that Stuart couldn't be commenting on Ripley's leash laws, he read on...

To the Editor of THE BUGLE: -

I find it absolutely appalling how many otherwise law-abiding citizens have no regard whatsoever for our city's leash laws. People who would never think of parking in a handicapped zone, robbing a convenience store, selling crack cocaine, or committing a drive by shooting, don't think twice about letting their dogs run free. Free to overturn garbage cans, harass pedestrians, cause accidents, and worst of all, get themselves killed. We are responsible for our dog's well being. We are the adults in this situation.

A dog is always a three-year-old child at heart, constantly reacting but never considering the consequences. Would we let our three year old son or daughter wander around the streets of Ripley unattended? Of course

not! Dogs are no different. It is shameful to show so little regard for our pets that we allow them to remain free. I personally have six dogs and try to make sure they are confined at all times. Occasionally one (or more) will get out, and I can tell you, I don't get a moments rest until they are safely home.

Show your dogs you love them. Keep them on a leash or confined at all times.

Viola Supple

Ripley, February 26, 1987

To the Editor of THE BUGLE:

I am writing this in response to a letter that was published in this column on February 24<sup>th</sup>. In that letter David Weathers espoused a vegetarian lifestyle, waxing warmly about what a wonderful world this could be if everyone stopped eating meat tomorrow. I couldn't help but wonder if Mr. Weathers had taken any time to consider the ramifications that this mass "enlightenment" might cause?

Take those poor cows he wants so much to save. What does he think would happen to all those cute, hungry bovines if we all stopped eating them tomorrow? Does Mr. Weathers actually think those farmers have nothing better to do than pay good money to raise cows that no one's going to eat? I doubt many of them are that altruistic. It seems pretty clear to me that if we, the barbaric meat-eaters of this world, stopped our evil ways, those cows would quickly go the way of the dodo.

And what about those farmers? What would happen to them if we stopped eating their cows? Does Mr. Weathers truly believe that the banks would be enlightened enough to let them keep their farms when they no longer had a way to pay their mortgages? And who else? How about all those slaughterhouse and meat packing workers? Oh, and let's not forget the butchers. I won't even start to talk about McDonald's.

Yes, quite a world we'd have if old Dave had his way. Quite a world.

I, for one, am more compassionate than that and hence plan on frequenting McDonald's and Burger King as often as I can. I care about all

those poor little cows, and all the people they help support.

I just want to do my part.

Robert Treadlow

18 Marker Way

Becket, February 25, 1987

To the Editor of THE BUGLE:

I work as a Mental Health professional in Berkshire County, and after having done so for many years there is something that I would like to get off my chest:

My job brings me into close contact with a population that lives independently in the community while trying to cope with their mental health issues. These people are constantly stigmatized and victimized by the so-called "normal" people that surround them. These "normal" people seem to expect the mentally ill people to act just like themselves; to conform and become simply another chunk of unflavored gelatin by keeping their originality shut up tight under lock and key.

This is an extremely sad situation, as many of these people have much more to offer than we are ever willing to accept.

That said, I'd like to get to my point (yes, there is a point). According to the prevailing medical theory there is a safe, easy, effective way to keep that originality from ever bubbling up to the surface and causing any inconvenience for the rest of us. A panacea for mental illness. One word that changes so many lives (for the worse)...Medication! Yes, medication to make someone fit our expectations of how they should behave. Medication to beat back any semblance of difference. Medication to help us all march to the beat of the same drummer.

Oh, don't get me wrong, there are many occasions when medication is a necessary evil. However, much of the time it is used as a simple convenience; as a way to make someone easier to deal with. Yet there is an enormous cost for the medicated: medication throws a big wet blanket over who they really are - a trade off I personally would never care to make.

If only we, the unmedicated, could learn to be a bit more tolerant, most

of this medication would become unnecessary.

Let me close by posing this question: where are all the Picassos and Beethovens of today? Who will be remembered as the creative geniuses of the late twentieth century? Where are they all?

Perhaps they're medicated.

Oliver Wendell Perkins

163 Sycamore St.

Ripley, February 26, 1987

Oliver stopped reading and stared down at the paper. That was his name and that was his address. What was going on?

He looked up at Stuart. "I didn't write this," was all he managed to get out.

His eyes traveled back to the letter, wishing it away. Apparently not hard enough, as his name still stared right back. An impostor had used it to get Oliver more notoriety in one day than he had accumulated in a lifetime.

He continued staring, finding at least one small grain of comfort: although the impostor might have stolen his name, his mind had eluded him. Those weren't his thoughts. He knew medication was necessary – overused at times, but necessary. The Oliver Wendell Perkins that had written this was a zealot.

"What should I do?" he asked Stuart helplessly.

Stuart, seeing the shocked look on Oliver's face, had no doubt that he was telling the truth. "Hey, I'm so sorry! I thought you wrote the fucking thing. This is messed up." He bit his lip, thinking. "We should at least call Penny and talk to her. She's already called once this morning."

"Yeah," Oliver mumbled, "I'll give her a call."

(One of the few drawbacks to working at Optima Resources was having Penny Faithful for a boss. That's right, Penny Faithful. But don't make the mistake of attaching too much significance to the name. Oh, it might sound straight out of some quaint Victorian children's novel, but Penny Faithful was no Mary Poppins. She ran a tight ship. Standing barely five feet in her shoes, she bore in that frame a *little man's complex* every bit as big and

ferocious as Napoleon's. And with her at its helm Optima Resources had little in common with the *Good Ship Lollipop*.)

"Can I speak to Penny Faithful?" Oliver asked the receptionist who answered the phone. How could someone do this to him? Who hated him that much?

"Hello, Penny-

"Oliver? Is that you?"

"Yes it-

"What do you mean by that letter?" she interrupted before he could finish the sentence. Her tone was not encouraging.

"I didn't write it."

"What do you mean, *I didn't write it*?"

"I mean, *I didn't write it*. Someone else sent it to the Bugle with my name on it."

"Now why would they want to do that?"

Oliver hadn't considered the possibility that she might not believe him. It was all happening too fast. "Penny, listen, I didn't write it. Someone else signed my name to their letter. Why would I write it? It's not what I think. You know me; if I felt that way wouldn't you have some idea? Wouldn't I have given you some hint in all these years? Anyway," he said, after a quick pause to gather his thoughts, "what would be the sense of writing the letter if I wasn't willing to admit it?" It certainly sounded sensible to him. He waited, hoping she would concur. Wouldn't she have to? There was silence on the other end of the line, encouraging silence; she must be weighing his words.

But Penny smelled mutiny on the breeze, and mutiny was something to be dealt with quickly and efficiently. "It seems to me," she said, "that all you might have to do is plant the idea in some of our client's minds and let them take it from there. Pretty soon everyone would start refusing their medication, and where do you think we'd be then?"

"Penny, I agree with you entirely. It would be terrible! I wish you'd believe me," Oliver's voice was now quavering, "I didn't write the letter. Someone else used my name. Maybe that's exactly what they want, what you said. Who knows, maybe it's a client who realized that the letter

wouldn't have any clout if it didn't come from a professional." Once again he thought he was making a lot of sense. "I don't know," he added, "maybe it's just someone out to get me."

"Well, whatever the case, it's trouble. I must say, Oliver, your actions have me more than a little concerned." There was a pause on the other end of the line and the sound of breath being drawn. "Especially since *this* isn't the only piece of news involving you I've received this morning. I just got off the phone with the district court. It seems Arnold Feldman is there trying to have a restraining order placed on you. He claims you pose a threat to his health. He also called you a '*menace to society at large*.' Can you explain this behavior?"

"God!" he exclaimed, unable to contain himself. It was all coming way too fast. "He's having some delusion about me, Penny. Yesterday, when we were out he kept calling me - I hope you won't be offended by this - a *cunt*. I don't think he meant it in the traditional sense," he hurried along. "It has something to do with his delusions about the aliens controlling him. He wouldn't explain, but whatever it is, it got him so upset that he jumped out of my car and walked home."

"While you were moving?"

"No, Penny, not while we were moving." He sensed it might be the wrong time to mention their near collision.

"Can I ask what made him want to get out of your car and walk home?"

"Actually," Oliver answered slowly, "it might have been my suggesting that together we might be able to overcome them."

"*Them?*"

"The aliens."

"And what made you think that? Are you now a therapist as well as an author?" The condescension in her voice was unmistakable.

Realizing the dangerous ground he was on, Oliver let the barb pass. "I don't know," he said, figuring that the safest response would be doubting himself, "I guess, looking back, it probably wasn't too smart."

"Not too smart is cutting it far too much slack." She paused, and again Oliver heard the intake of breath on the other end of the line. "Frankly, Oliver, what's been happening scares me. I'm seeing a parallel here. You've

known Arnold now for what, five years?"

"Six."

"Six then. And suddenly, out of nowhere, you offer to assist him with his delusions - certainly not the job of an outreach counselor. Then, the very next day, this letter appears over your name, and what does it talk about? Stifling personality through medication. It makes me wonder if perhaps you have some hidden agenda with this agency. And I will not have *my* agency used to forward an employee's radical, misguided ideals.

"I would like to give you the benefit of the doubt though," she went on, switching gears – an employer should always know when to turn off the steam. "You've been with Optima Resources a long time and I would hate to have anything cause a problem with our working relationship. So let's get this cleared up before it goes any further. If you are sincere that you did not write that letter, I would like to see a retraction published immediately. In regard to our other situation, I'm not sure what we should do about Arnold. Do you have any suggestions?"

"Well, I think it would be a mistake for me to go see him. He won't tell me what the 'C-word' means because he's convinced I already know. Maybe if Stuart went to see him, Doc would tell him what he's talking about. Then we could go from there."

"That sounds reasonable. One more thing, I would like to see the letter itself. Could you retrieve it from the Bugle and bring it to me?"

"Of course," Oliver said, glad to hear that his conversation with Penny was drawing to a close. "And Stuart or I will let you know what happens with Doc. I'm really sorry about this whole mess."

"Thank you, Oliver. I hope we'll be able to put it all behind us. Don't forget that retraction. Now could you please put Stuart on the phone?"

Oliver had never felt his job so threatened before, and it brought home how important it was to him. He'd get to the bottom of this, but right now he had half a phone call to catch...

"I know Oliver, and if he says he didn't write the letter, I believe him.".....

The pause was too long for simple agreement.....much too long.

"But, why would he use his own name? Wouldn't it be easier to use someone else's? Then he could stay out of the limelight and still get his message across.".....another pause. Obviously she knew why.....

"Yeah, I guess I can see your point.".....

Oliver jotted a quick note..."What point?" He looked up, catching Stuart's eye and nodding a *want me to leave?* getting back the *no stick around* gesture he was hoping for. Stuart was all right.

....."That makes sense to me."....."No, no, I think it would be better if I went."...."Okay, I'll give you a call."..."Goodbye, Penny."

"She doesn't believe you," Stuart said, putting the phone down and looking up at Oliver shaking his head, his voice conveying equal parts frustration, sadness, anger and disbelief. "She's got it all figured. Sure you deny it, you need to keep your job. How else can you make this sick, perverted dream of yours a reality? And, of course you'd use your own name. You may be crazy and dangerous, but you're not *that* bad. You wouldn't want your twisted, maniacal plot to endanger someone else's job. No, you've got a conscience; that's how she put it.

"The thing is, I can tell she's thinking about how to get rid of you. Before this is over, we may have to prove you didn't write that letter. Right now she doesn't have enough to fire you, but," he stopped, shrugging his shoulders. "Hey, don't sweat it. I'm sure we'll get it all straightened out."

"Thanks, Stuart." Oliver said, wishing he could feel as certain.

"Listen, I hope it didn't sound like I wasn't defending you or anything, but it seemed like at this point that might do more harm than good. She's so sure of herself, I didn't want to paint myself as someone blinded by his loyalty to you. This way, when we do get something, it'll carry more weight. Meanwhile, I can work on her. It's cool; we'll fix things.

"Hey," he went on in a much lighter tone, "I better get my ass to court and talk to Doc before he takes off, so you better tell me what kind of weirdness he was spouting yesterday."

Stuart really was all right.

\*

None of it made sense. Who disliked him enough to do this to him? Oliver couldn't think of anybody.

The irony was, he felt like one of those unflavored chunks of gelatin his alter ego had described; much too bland to be an irritant. He had no sharp edges to poke any egos. He was a known quantity: as safe as milk. Perhaps, he realized, it was this blandness that had gotten him chosen: the person who wrote the letter figured he'd put up less of a fight. Well, they'd see who wouldn't put up a fight. It was time to write a retraction...

Pencil in hand he got down to it, pondering every word, questioning every sentence. Was that strong enough? Did that contain any hint of ambiguity? He was at it for the better part of an hour. Crossing out words, erasing sentences, placing arrows to point at new thoughts to insert. The gods were with him, and in that hour the phone didn't ring once and not one person came through the door to disturb his inspiration. He looked down at the finished draft, smiling. It was short and to the point. They'd see who wouldn't put up a fight:

To the Editor:

On March 3rd a letter appeared in your paper discussing the issue of medication for people with mental health issues. This letter carried my name beneath it. I would like to take this opportunity to state that I HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH THAT LETTER. Whoever the author was did a disservice to myself, and all mental health professionals, by putting forth such an irresponsible proposal.

Medication makes it possible for many people suffering from mental illness to survive independently. These are people who just a few short years ago would have been institutionalized, without hope, for life. Now they lead their own productive lives within the community. This is a step that would not have been possible without medication.

So I say yes to medication, as does anyone else who has the welfare of people with mental health issues foremost in their minds.

Thank you for the chance to clear up this matter.

Oliver Wendell Perkins

It wasn't bad. True, it wasn't quite today's Oliver. Last month's model had written this - another imposter forging his signature - but right now that was secondary. Penny was watching and he had to mind his Ps and Qs.

It was as he sat down at the typewriter to formalize things, that the gods stepped out for donuts and the phone rang.

"Outreach, Oliver speaking."

"Oliver, it's me, Abbey. I just read your *Letter to the Editor*."

"Uh-huh," he said, waiting for her to continue. Something in her tone kept him from rushing in his denial.

"It's some pretty strong stuff. I had no idea you felt that way." Abbey's voice contained a respect he had never heard before. "You really can surprise a person. It took balls to come out with those thoughts. I'll bet you're taking a lot of flak for it."

Oliver knew it was time to fess up, yet this felt too good. "You're right about that," he agreed.

"I had no idea you were so empathetic to this medication shit. How come you never talked with me about it?"

"Oh, I don't know. I guess it didn't seem right." He knew how stupid it was letting Abbey believe he had written the letter, but somehow couldn't stop himself.

"I tell you, I feel pretty naïve. I mean, I always had you pegged as this guy walking around with a stick up his ass. Don't get me wrong," she added, "I don't mean you haven't been helpful. You have. It's just you always seemed...oh, I don't know, rigid. And now I find out it's like, here you were, Clark Kent, while I played Lois Lane insulting you every chance I got. And all the while you held it inside, knowing the truth, but keeping it to yourself. It must have killed you. What made you finally bring it out in the open?"

Oliver, basking in her admiration, was stumped. What *had* made him bring it out in the open? "I'm not really sure," he said after a moment. "I guess things kind of got to a boiling point. I'd seen too much; kept my

mouth closed too many times. It got to a point where I either had to let it out, or admit I was one of those unflavored chunks of gelatin." He couldn't resist quoting *his* letter. Oliver had never lied like this before, and he found the experience intoxicating.

"Say listen," Abbey asked, "you want to go out and grab a cup?"

"Sure."

"Pick me up and we'll go to Mindee's?" She paused, waiting for his approval.

"Great. I'll be over in about fifteen minutes."

He placed the letter in his bottom drawer and covered it before leaving. When the gods returned, he was gone.

On the way to picking her up, Oliver mapped out a strategy that might just keep him his job *and* Abbey's respect.

He felt alive.

\*

The early lunch crowd throbbed around them at Mindee's, but Oliver tuned it all out...everything but Abbey's voice. "Thanks for coming," she was saying. "I really needed to talk. You have no idea how this whole thing freaked me out. And it wasn't just the letter. I mean, get this, I don't usually even get the Bugle, but this morning, out of nowhere, I pick it up. I don't know why. Spooky, huh?" She leaned across the table, looking for confirmation.

"It's a coincidence, I'm sure," he answered, almost wishing he had the nerve to agree with her and turn it into the cosmic event she saw. But he had to maintain some boundaries, didn't he?

"Maybe," she shook her head doubtfully. "All I know is I haven't bought the paper in like two months at least, then today for whatever reason I do, and there you are."

"I guess that is kind of strange," he agreed, feeling it was safe to go that far.

"Whatever. The thing I want to know is, if I hadn't seen the letter would you have told me about it?"

"No," he said, after a moment, "I wasn't planning to."

"But don't you think meds are bad for me too?"

"Yes, of course I do. But I think with things the way they are today it would be stupid for you to stop taking them. You'd just be begging to get yourself hospitalized. People aren't ready for an unmedicated Abbey. It may sound sort of sick, but Prolixin is your ticket to freedom."

That's when panic struck. And with it the spoon started spinning around inside his cup. What if she had written the letter? He wouldn't put it past her. It would be her best goof ever. And here he was, the sucker playing right into it. He looked across at her, searching for any sign. But no, the spoon slowed down, if he knew her at all, she was sincere...at least she seemed sincere.

"I don't know, the meds stifle me so much. It's not fair."

"I know it's not fair," Oliver said, the spoon slowing further still - she either meant what she was saying or she was a much better actress than he had ever given her credit for.

"So why shouldn't I stop taking them?"

Oliver could tell she was talking less to him than arguing with herself, but felt she deserved some sort of reply. "Remember, Abbey, I've seen you when you've gone off your meds, and I don't think there's been one time where you haven't wound up locked on the Crane unit. I know that's not what you want to hear, but I think society has a long way to evolve before you can stop taking medication."

"I don't know," she said, a little anger creeping into her voice, "It seems to me that all you Mental Healthers just panic the minute I don't get shots. I stop, and WHAM! before I know what hit me, I'm dragged to the ER for screening, and then from there to the psych ward. It's like you're all pre-programmed to expect failure. I mean you too." She gave him a cold stare, the first one she had given him all day. "Think about it; you're always the first one trying to drag me to the hospital. That's why that letter surprised me so much."

As his spoon continued its perambulations around his cup, he explained how the letter wasn't so much about her as it was about so-called normal people learning to be more tolerant, and how until that happened she was only asking for trouble every time she went off her meds. Upon seeing the

glazed look in her eye, he decided to come at the subject from a different angle. "You know," he said, "another thing to consider is that there are lots of people who take advantage of you when you're unmedicated." (A group Oliver had often fantasized being among.) "It's not the safest situation."

"You can't take advantage of someone when they're not competing. And when I'm not taking my meds, I'm not in the race."

"All I'm trying to say is, it's inevitable; you go off your meds and something's going to happen: you'll wind up on Crane, or worse yet, wind up hurt. Of course, it's your choice, if you don't want to take them, don't. I'm just throwing out my opinion."

"Are you sure you wrote that letter?" Abbey asked, squinting her eyes with disbelief.

For a second the spoon sped up, *she had written it!* But he quickly realized that it was just her cynical side talking; he had seen that side enough to know. The momentary silence filling the booth accented the sound of his stirring.

He stopped, and sensing that her question might be the best opening he would get, took advantage of it: "You know, it's funny you should ask if I wrote it. When I got to work this morning, it was pretty obvious from Stuart's reaction that if I wanted to keep my job, I was better off denying the whole thing. And, believe it or not, on the spur of the moment, I did. Luckily, Stuart believes me. But the head of the agency doesn't. She takes it the same way you did: that I want to get everyone off their meds. It's not enough to fire me, but Stuart thinks that now she'll be looking for any excuse to do it. I'll tell you, I never would have written the damn thing if I thought it might cost me my job.

"I know I probably shouldn't be admitting all this to you," he finished, almost starting to believe it himself, "but I feel I can trust you. You won't tell anyone, will you?"

"Of course I won't," Abbey said, and for the first time ever reached out and touched his hand.

Oliver felt dizzy.

\*\*\*

"So what's the story between you and Oliver?" Stuart asked, bringing his hands up behind his head. He was sitting at the bottom of the courthouse steps, feet stretched out, comfortably soaking up the midday rays. Doc paced in front of him, occasionally taking long pulls on his Lucky Strike.

"I think that's something better kept between me and Oliver."

"Well, if Oliver is somehow involved in the alien plot, I think it's important for me to know. Maybe I can do something to help."

Doc stopped and stared down at Stuart suspiciously. "Who told you Oliver was involved in the OOklah plot?"

"Oh." Stuart paused, immediately seeing his error and back-pedaling. "Well, it seemed logical. Oliver would only tell me that you were pissed at him, and that it had something to do with his being a *cunt*. It seemed to me the one thing that might make you so pissed was if Oliver was somehow involved in the OOklah's plot."

"Did you mention any of this to Oliver?"

"No, of course not!"

"Good." Doc resumed his pacing, seemingly satisfied with the answer. "Did you tell anyone else?"

"No."

"Keep it that way."

"What's this all about, Doc?" Stuart asked nervously. "You're getting me scared." (Playing *Improv Theater* was the part of the job that Stuart loved most. No doubt Penny would never condone his unorthodox techniques, but she wasn't here...and they did get results.)

"Wish I could tell you, but take my word, even if I could you wouldn't want to know. No siree, not if the OOklah got wind of it."

"Don't worry, I can handle myself. I was in the Peace Corp, you know." Stuart unconsciously puffed out his chest, as he always did when imparting this tidbit.

"So you've told me. But believe me, the Peace Corps isn't quite in the same league as the OOklah. Once they found out you knew something, and don't kid yourself, they would, it'd be Goombye Stuart." He tossed his cigarette to the ground and crushed it underfoot to punctuate the point.

"Anyway, couldn't tell you even if I did want to, my brain's been encoded. I can't talk about it in front of anybody. Can't write it down either," he added, "so don't even bother asking."

"There must be some way you could tell me so they wouldn't find out. All we've got to do is figure that out and we're safe. I mean, once I knew, they wouldn't be hearing about it from me."

"Oh, they'd know. They'd know. You don't seem to realize who you're dealing with."

"What, can they read minds?"

"No, it's nothing like that, but they have their ways. They'd watch you. They're always watching, Sooner or later they'd figure it out and when they did, believe me, you'd wish you didn't know. So let's just drop it."

"They don't know me now, so they can't be suspicious of me," Stuart reasoned. "Maybe there's some way you could tell me without them knowing. That's what we need...Let's see, you say you can't write it down," he thought out loud, stroking his chin and talking slowly. "Well, what if I gave you my mini-tape recorder and then left. You could record what you had to say, and when I came back I could take it and listen to it alone. They'd never suspect a thing. And that way we could bypass the encoding on your brain."

Doc slowed his pacing. "You know, that's not half bad. It just might work." He stopped pacing altogether and looked Stuart in the eye. "But, you could still be asking for trouble, big trouble. The OOklah aren't stupid. Are you sure you want to get into this?"

"I'd love a little trouble. I miss trouble."

"Well, you could be getting yourself into plenty," Doc said, taking out another cigarette and lighting it.

After a moment, Stuart rubbed his hands together and started to get up. "I guess we might as well get this done. I'll go get the recorder."

"What?!" Doc hissed. "Are you friggin' crazy? We can't do it here!" He started pacing again. "Maybe this isn't such a good idea after all. You don't seem to get how dangerous this is."

"Yeah, I see what you mean," Stuart agreed - having long ago recognized the importance of being wrong in this business. "It would be pretty stupid;

going to all that trouble to hide me knowing from them, and then giving you the recorder right out in the open."

"Now you're talking sense." Doc stopped pacing again, obviously appeased. "Soon I may have a place where we can talk, but not yet, not yet. I'll let you know. For now we'll do this; you take me home and while we're driving I'll put the recorder down my pants. I'll go back to my room and record the message. I'll come back out at, let's see," he consulted the watch that wasn't on his wrist, "O-Four Hundred hours and walk over to the garage to use their bathroom. That won't arouse suspicion. I sometimes use their toilet when mine is stuffed. I'll put the recorder in the garbage there, making sure it's covered with paper. You can come by at, say, O-Four Thirty to retrieve it."

Stuart wore rubber gloves for his rendezvous - there were times when *Improv Theater* wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

## 12

Driving back to the office, Oliver considered his position. Strangely, the more he thought about the problems of the day the funnier they seemed, and it wasn't long before he found himself actually laughing out loud. The child he had never allowed himself to be was peeking out and it felt wonderful. He thought about the trouble this letter - not to mention his taking credit for it with Abbey - could cause him, but none of it seemed to matter. He'd spent his whole life avoiding adventure, but not today. For once he was going to take the ride.

He stopped for another cup of coffee en route...why not?

When he got back, Stuart was on the recliner reading the paper. He could hear Wendy in the back office typing. "Hey, Oliver," Stuart said, putting the paper down, "come on across the hall. I've got the dope on Doc."

They went across the hall to the outreach conference room, a dull bureaucratic place with blank walls and grimy windows. Two large rectangular tables were pushed together in the middle with folding metal chairs placed haphazardly around them.

Stuart sat on one of the table, his legs dangling over. Oliver, on a whim, decided to join him. He felt like they were two kids ready to drop their lines into the lazy river at their feet. Who cared that the lazy river was a dirty carpet?

"So, Doc told you what's going on?" Oliver asked when they had settled in.

"He sure did, and I've got to say, it's pretty funny. Wait till you hear it. The only way I could get him to talk was to record it. Of course, my tape recorder may never be the same." He reached into his pocket and pulled out the ziplock bag that contained the recorder. He placed it on the table between them and turned it on through the plastic...

"My name is Arnold Feldman. I make this statement of my own free will.

"For the past nineteen years I have been used by the OOklah to help

them get Big Macs, the Earth food they've developed an addiction to. At first I thought that was all they wanted, but now I know the truth, and it isn't pretty.

"I receive instructions from their mother ship which remains in synchronous orbit above the Peaceful Breeze Inn at a constant height of 6-4-9 point 4-2 kilometers. Our radars can't detect them due to an advanced cloaking technology stolen from the Romulans.

"I know that they have lots of other contacts on Earth, but don't know who any of them are. This is the way the OOklah protect themselves from discovery. They figure that even if one of their contacts manages to tell someone about them, with no one to back their story up, anyone would think they were crazy.

"Communication between the OOklah and their contacts is strictly one-way; I can get messages, but can't send them. Usually this works fine, but sometimes, for one reason or another, they start to worry about one of their contacts. When this happens a *CUNT* is sent to test them by setting up a series of situations, and then checking their responses on a Neuron Synaptic level. A *CUNT* stays undercover so the contact never knows they're being tested. To make matters worse, *CUNTS* are always people who are close to you. The name *CUNT* comes from what they do: **C-U-N-T**," he spelled, "**C**ontact **U**ndercover **N**euron **T**esters. It takes a sick, perverted person to be a *CUNT*. The same kind of person that would have become a Nazi concentration camp guard.

"A minute ago I said that I didn't know any of the OOklah's other contacts on Earth. Well, that's not true anymore. I have recently realized I do know one. Let me ask you, have you ever noticed how often you see McDonald's wrappers on the floor of Oliver Perkins' car, but you never see him eating the burgers? And have you noticed how each time he drives past a McDonald's he acts like he doesn't notice it's there? Recently, I've been seeing more and more of these tell-tale signs and they all lead me to one possible conclusion: Oliver Perkins is a *CUNT* assigned to test me. I probably shouldn't have told him I knew, but I did. It worries me. The OOklah are not to be trifled with, but what's done is done.

"I want to say more, but I can't seem to. There must be back-up systems

built into their brain encoding to prevent stuff like this from happening. I *can* say that their plot is insidious and threatens the very fabric of our lives.

"Please destroy this tape now...if you have made it this far.

"Thank you - Arnold Feldman - Contact 0 - 3 - 8 - 2 point 1."

"Pretty good, huh?" Stuart said, shutting off the tape. "Notice, you can't punch any holes in the delusion? He's covered all the bases. Why can't the government see the OOKlah ship? A cloaking device protects them. Who can back up his story? Nobody. He even manages to get in that we'll think he's crazy. And what about you, the CUNT? Well, you're undercover, of course you'd deny everything. His delusion floats on it's own sea of logic. It's perfect." Stuart's voice was filled with respect. "The question is, how can we get *you* to stop being a part of it? Any ideas?"

"Well, what if I tell Doc that I was a CUNT, but I've seen the light?"

Stuart dismissed the idea with a shake of his head. "Doc would never buy that. You didn't hear him talking to me. It was a hell of time just getting him to tell me what this is all about. He's putting up a brave front on the tape, but he's scared shitless of these OOKlah. He'd never believe that you could just up and quit, not without suffering some serious repercussions. Anyway, I'd rather not feed into the delusion any more than we have to. That would only make it more concrete. What we need to do is find a way to make him believe that you're not in league with the OOKlah, but at the same time convince him he figured it out on his own. It won't be an easy nut to crack. So far I can't come up with a thing."

"Well, our big problem is he's due for a shot next Tuesday," Oliver said, "and there's no way he'll go by himself."

"So, I guess we've got to figure out something before then."

"Have you run the situation past Wendy?"

"Nope, haven't had a chance. I don't even think she knows about the whole letter thing. Speaking of that, have you had a chance to write that retraction?"

"No, I haven't got around to it," Oliver lied. "Abbey called and we went out for coffee."

"Well, get to it. It's important. In the meantime I'll call Penny and tell her

about this CUNT stuff. That should relieve her a bit. I mean, it doesn't sound like anything *you* did. It's just getting around toward shot time and this month he's losing it a bit more than usual. The news should calm her down a bit, but she's still gonna be freakin' about that letter, so write that retraction."

"Yeah, you're right. I'll get to it."

"Did you go down to the Bugle and pick up that first letter?"

"Damn!" Oliver slapped his thigh. "I forgot all about that. I'll go over now, and then drop it off at Penny's office."

"Hey, while you're over there, why don't you check out what time they need that retraction to get it published in tomorrow's paper? The sooner it's in, the better."

"Will do." Oliver hopped off the table to leave.

The hop didn't go unnoticed by Stuart. Neither did the fact that Oliver had sat *on* the table.

\*

"Oh, you're looking for *Old Man Rivers*," the woman at the front desk informed him. "Go up one flight and to the back of this wall," she pointed beside her. "He'll be able to help you."

Josiah Rivers, 45, hated his nickname. It never failed. No one considered that *he* could be Old Man Rivers. They'd walk up, puzzled, saying they'd been told that Old Man Rivers was at this desk. Josiah inevitably pointed out that there was no Old Man Rivers at the Bugle, but he was JOSIAH Rivers, perhaps he could help? Was it a question regarding *Letters to the Editor*? Of course it was. It always was.

His newest visitor was no different. Not yet at least.

"Yes. You published a letter in today's Bugle over my name," Oliver answered after the groundwork had been laid. "The problem is, I didn't write that letter."

"Oh dear, oh dear." (Oliver couldn't tell whether he was hearing sarcasm or true concern.) "And what was the letter about?"

"The need, or I suppose I should say lack of need," he corrected himself, "for people with mental illness to take psychiatric medication."

"Oh yes, that *was* an interesting letter. You say you didn't write it?" Old Man Rivers peered at Oliver over the librarian glasses that rode halfway down his nose.

"No, I didn't, and as a matter of fact, it could cost me my job."

"Oh dear, that *is* a problem. I suppose you'll want to print a retraction?"

"That seems like it would be the thing to do."

"Well, it can't make it in tomorrow's paper, no siree. We can't just go printing retractions willy-nilly. No, no, no, we've got to research this, talk to the person who wrote the letter. Confirm the facts."

"How can you talk to the person? He didn't admit who he was."

"Hmmm, yes," he said, shaking his head, "I see your point. This *is* a sticky situation. Perhaps if I got the letter we might get some clue as to who may have written it. Let me get it and we'll go from there. I'll be back in a jiffy." He shuffled off, reappearing a minute later waving a letter triumphantly in his hand.

"Well, we're in luck, although the letter itself is typed, the address and signature are handwritten. Perhaps you'll recognize the writing." He handed it to Oliver.

Oliver gazed down at the letter and what he saw shocked him. He did indeed recognize the writing. It was distinctive: a crabby, pinched cursive he'd seen many times before..."That's my writing!" he blurted out before his censor had a chance to snip the incriminating dialogue.

"Well, that does pose a problem. Are you sure you didn't write it?"

"Of course I'm sure! Do you think I write letters in my sleep?"

"Excuse me sir, I've just met you and I don't know what you do or don't do. All I know is you come in here claiming that a letter we published over your name wasn't written by you and that the letter may cost you your job. Then it turns out that it is written in your own handwriting. So, all I can say is, I don't know what you do."

"Well, sometimes I don't know myself," Oliver couldn't help admitting after all he'd been through today, "but one thing I *do* know is, I don't write letters in my sleep!"

"This whole situation is very curious. I suppose it warrants a call to Mr. Blick."

"Mr. Blick?"

"Yes, Mr. Blick. He's the head of the editorial staff. I rarely have to call him into something of this nature. It's certainly not something I relish." Old Man Rivers was peering over his glasses again. "Are you sure you want to print a retraction?"

"I *need* to print a retraction," he said, his *joie de vivre* of a few minutes ago now a distant memory. "It's not a matter of want. The head of the agency I work for is very upset."

"Well, I suppose I'll have to make that call then. You, I suppose you can wait over there." He waved off down the row of cubicles.

Oliver wandered off, the newest shock of seeing his handwriting on the envelope beginning to settle in. This day had more twists than a Bavarian Pretzel. Every time he thought he was getting the hang of it he found himself facing a whole new direction. Penny would never believe he hadn't written the letter now, not when she saw his handwriting on the bottom. She was already convinced he had done it and here was the final proof.

Once again his mind traveled back to the question that hadn't really left him all day: who had done this to him?

Was it possible that Josiah Rivers was right and he had done it himself? No, he dismissed the thought, that was ridiculous...wasn't it?

Three minutes passed before Old Man Rivers put the phone back in its cradle. He placed his elbows on the desk and laced his fingers together, staring off into space. Oliver, thinking he detected a scowl, walked over and asked, "What did he say?"

"He's not happy. Oh no, not happy at all. No indeed."

"Well, what did he say?" Oliver repeated.

"He'd like to talk with you himself. He's on his way down." Old Man Rivers still hadn't bothered looking up, instead continuing to stare off unfocused, lips pursed and head bobbing like some velvet puppy in the back of an old lady's Buick.

Just then, a polka dot bow tie and thick tortoise shell glasses, preceding a bona-fide old man, strode up purposefully, hand extended. Here, Oliver

realized, was a sure bet for Old Man Rivers role model.

"Benedict Blick, sir," he said shaking Oliver's hand, "and I suppose you are Oliver Perkins?"

"Yes, I am. Thanks for seeing me."

"Don't thank me yet. You're causing us quite a problem young man, yes quite a problem. We pride ourselves on running a tight ship, a *tight ship* and here you are claiming we printed a letter and falsely identified its author. Now that in itself is a correctable situation; one that rarely happens, but still correctable. However, here we have the compounded dilemma that this letter is admittedly written in your own hand. It seems to me--"

"Actually," Oliver interrupted, "only the address and signature are in my handwriting. The letter itself was typed."

"Let's not quibble. The salient fact is that your handwriting was used wherever writing appeared. I'm at a loss as to what to do. What's to say that you didn't write this letter and then think better of it? Rivers, here," he gestured, "tells me that you are fearful that this letter might cause you to lose your job. How am I to know that your sole motivation for wanting a retraction printed isn't simply to placate your employer? This whole situation concerns me." He held out his hand. "Why don't I take a look at that retraction?"

"I haven't written it yet," Oliver confessed, realizing that he was beginning to perspire. "I was just asking Mr. Rivers what the deadline was to get it in."

"How serious can you be if you have yet to write the letter. I imagine you found out about it this morning?"

"Yes, at about nine o'clock."

"Well young man, curiosity has me in its throes. Tell me, why didn't you call the paper immediately to complain?"

Oliver, realizing the truth would never do, improvised: "I was going to, but I got called out on a crisis. This is actually the first moment I've had all day."

"Well, I'll tell you, Mr. Perkins, I'm not going to go printing some retraction willy-nilly. This will need some serious thought. Why don't you leave us a sample of your handwriting and then go write that retraction."

Give me a call when it's done, extension 2-2-4." He turned to go. "Rivers," he said over his shoulder, "bring that sample and the letter to my office as soon as Mr. Perkins here leaves. Thank you, gentlemen."

Oliver wrote his name and address on a piece of paper and compared the results. Even to him they looked identical.

He didn't bother asking for a copy of the letter. What would be the point?

\*

Oliver went straight to Lenox from the Bugle. He needed to speak to someone he could trust. Pulling up to The Answer he saw Jeremy standing at the door as if expecting him.

"How are you?" Jeremy asked, bestowing a smile that could thaw an ice age. As always, Oliver knew it wasn't small talk. He cared.

"I'm doing good...I think. But things have been very strange today. I came to you hoping you could help me sort it out."

"Well, come in, and tell me what's been happening. Perhaps together we can make some sense of it."

Jeremy put up some tea while Oliver related the roller coaster that had been his day thus far. He tried being as honest as possible, not only sharing the facts, but the feelings that went along with them.

Jeremy soaked it up, nodding his head at times, but never once interrupting. Unlike most of us, who feel the need to interject an occasional "Hmmm" or "Uh-huh" to prove that we're paying attention, Jeremy knew that stories always flowed smoother down an unobstructed path, so he made sure there were no bumps or turns on Oliver's.

When Oliver finished Jeremy looked at him, still silent. They sat on their respective pillows sipping their tea. Finally, Jeremy put his cup down and slowly brought his hands together, forming an arch with his fingertips. He closed his eyes, but just for a moment.

He loved this shit.

"It seems that whoever wrote this letter managed to tap into your feelings and amplify them."

"I don't know if I'd say tap exactly. It's more like I can see where they're

coming from."

"It sounded like more than that to me," Jeremy said, putting a tinge of reproach in his voice. "You know, Oliver, you're going to have feelings whether you like them or not. They're a fact of life. To deny those feelings is to deny who you are. Now I'm not saying you should go out and kill someone simply because you feel like it, that would be infringing on another's rights. But to accept who you are and what you feel is an important step toward being happy. A person who hides from their own truth also hides from happiness. Happiness needs a clear path to your door. You shouldn't block that path with deceits and denials. In order to be truly happy you must truly like yourself, and how can you like, or dislike, a stranger? Get to know yourself by trusting your feelings."

Jeremy's voice had a hypnotic effect. Most of the time it mattered little what it said, just that it said it. Hearing him now made Oliver feel like he understood - or perhaps it was the security of knowing that Jeremy did, and that was enough.

"I'm almost ready to say you're right," he said, still holding onto a shred of doubt, "but to be truthful, I'm not sure *what* I felt before today. It's all gotten so mixed up. My head's been spinning so much that right about now I can't remember where I was facing yesterday."

Jeremy smiled his wisest smile. "You embraced the ideas of the letter so quickly. It makes me wonder if it's possible that you did write it, perhaps in some altered state of consciousness. Don't forget how incredible the mind can be. It can do all sorts of things we are unaware of. You, of all people, must realize that from your job."

"I do, and I guess I can't deny I might have written it. Still, every part of me says I didn't."

"As long as you don't close your mind to the thought."

They sat sipping their tea in silence.

"I guess what I'm wondering," Oliver asked after a couple of minutes had gone by, "is do you think it would be wrong for me to print a retraction to save my job, even if I don't believe the words I write?"

"That's up to you. Do *you* think it would be wrong?"

Oliver contemplated his answer. "No, I don't think it would be wrong. I

didn't write the letter. At least the I that I'm aware of, so I should have a right to refute it. Even if they were my thoughts, it should be my privilege to keep them private. If I don't write a retraction Penny will make my life at work miserable. And, a retraction won't hurt anybody. As a matter of fact," Oliver said, thinking of a new point, "my writing a retraction will actually place that much more emphasis on the original letter. Throw it back in the spotlight so to speak and add an aura of mystery to it."

"Your reasoning makes a lot of sense, but you must be careful not to lose yourself. If your retraction refutes your identity you will be living a lie, and that can never make you happy." He placed his hands on his lap and smiled.

"Thank you, Jeremy. You always seem to help when I feel stuck in the dark."

"It's called brainwashing, pal," Jeremy felt like saying, but instead nodded humbly.

"I've got to get back to work," Oliver said, getting up. "Thanks for talking to me and setting me straight. I think I *will* write a retraction, but I'll be careful to stay true to myself."

"I know you will." Jeremy remained seated as Oliver walked out, marveling at how simple it was to manipulate these modern men. Once upon a time it had taken a burning bush to get a person to pay attention. Now it just took a gentle smile and the ring of a bell.

Forget bullets, Oliver sweated missiles over his retraction. He knew he couldn't make *everyone* happy. The question was, could he make *anyone*? Abbey would respect him most if he printed no retraction. Stuart and Penny wouldn't be satisfied with anything less than a total denial. And Jeremy would be disappointed if the letter didn't ring true to who he was. But that only brought him around to the mystery du jour...*who was he??*

At last it was done. Looking down at the final draft, he felt proud. There were elements for everybody. In a way it wasn't that different from the original letter, just clearer. It didn't condemn medication so much as society. He didn't see how Stuart and Penny could be upset.

Perhaps he needed to see an optometrist.

To The Editor:

Yesterday a letter appeared in your paper attributed to me. I would like to take this opportunity to state that I did not write that letter.

The person who did is obviously a fanatic. But as with most fanatics there is a grain of truth in what they say. In our society medicating the mentally ill is a necessary evil, not because it's always needed, but because it makes life more comfortable for the unmedicated majority. It's so much easier to deal with conformity and predictability than their opposites. We (the unmedicated), naturally conform, but the so-called "crazy" person has a streak of untamed originality running through them that's dying to get out. This person is unpredictable, and that unpredictability can put us on the spot...a terrible inconvenience. Medication drastically reduces the chances of our having to deal with that "spot," by turning the "jalapeño pepper" into a slab of "cream cheese."

Now, that isn't to say that some people don't need medication to function, they do. Without medication these people would be a danger to the population at large or to themselves. However, the vast majority of

psychiatric medication is used to create a homogenous population among a group that would not be dangerous if unmedicated, simply different. In my work as a mental health counselor I advocate medication on an almost daily basis, not for safety reasons, but because I know it is necessary for survival in our society as it now operates, a situation that is sad, but true.

In closing, I would like to say that I can not applaud what this person who has appropriated my name has written, yet at the same time I can also not condemn them with a clear conscience. I believe that, in time, we as a society may evolve to the point where medication will become less necessary, but, at least for now, it remains the only viable option.

Thank you,

Oliver Wendell Perkins

Well, he thought after reading it through twice, enough of this. It was time to run it over to the Bugle.

\*

Benedict Blick peered over his glasses, unimpressed. "This looks like more of the same blather that the original letter was filled with."

"It points to the same idea," Oliver said, "but it also says how unrealistic it would be to stop psychiatric medicine with society the way it is right now."

"I think we're quibbling here. As I recall, the other letter had much the same thrust. I can't see anything here," he said waving the letter, "to lead me to believe that this is anything but an effort on your part to maintain your current employment. And even in that regard, I can assure you that this," he once again waved Oliver's masterpiece, "will do nothing towards defusing that situation. If anything, printing it would almost surely exacerbate it. Take my advice and just leave things be with your original letter."

"But I didn't write it!" Oliver said, stunned.

"Well, I see nothing here to lead *me* to that conclusion. I'm sorry I can't be of any assistance." He turned to go.

It was then that it happened.

The little changes that Oliver had been experiencing over the last few weeks were as nothing compared to this. Unlike the Grinch, it wasn't his heart that grew two times that day, it was his confidence. Something in the injustice of the situation combined with years of pent up frustration blew the valve off a dusty spigot in his psyche marked *self*, and like that the spigot exploded.

"Excuse me sir," Oliver said, walking around in front of Mr. Blick, blocking his exit. "I believe you're missing the major issue here. It doesn't matter that I share the same view as the author of the first letter. The point is that my opinions are my own, and it should be my decision, and my decision alone, whether to share them with the general public. *I DID NOT* write the letter, that is the issue here." Oliver had never felt energized like this before. Power flowed through him, commanding attention and refusing anything less.

"But the handwriting on the letter-" Benedict Blick was on the verge of stuttering, a condition he was not accustomed to.

"Oh, come on! How easy is it to forge someone's handwriting? You know how many people have seen my handwriting? In my job, I write reports on top of reports." This wasn't anywhere near true, but Oliver was on a roll. "This whole thing is so ridiculous. It's nothing more than a witch hunt. Give me back my self, Mr. Blick. *His* letter appeared over my name, now let mine. I can't deny what I think. Maybe it's time I came out of the closet." Oliver stared, unblinking, straight into Benedict Blick's eyes.

"You're a very convincing young man," Mr. Blick said, taking a moment to gather his wits. "I suppose we don't have any way of knowing whether you did or didn't write the letter. I'll make some room for it in tomorrow's paper." Benedict Blick walked away, wondering what had just happened.

"Thank you, Mr. Blick," Oliver called out after him, "I appreciate your being so fair minded."

Walking out, Oliver breathed deep. Awake. Refreshed. Ready.

People could be so surprising. It amazed Jeremy. Just when you thought you knew them inside and out, they showed you something new. Take Oliver. Jeremy couldn't have been more surprised with the updated version that had just visited his store: this confident, self-assured, charismatic Oliver, this Oliver that actually interested him, so different from the one who had left a few hours earlier to go and write his retraction.

It reminded him somehow of Jonah's transformation, after he'd finished wiping off all that whale slime.

\*\*\*

If you're lucky there are days that make you joyful. That's the kind of day Oliver was having; unwrapping each moment as he went, enjoying every action and savoring every contour. Before now, he couldn't remember a time when life hadn't been automatic: one day following another, yet indistinguishable from its predecessor. Hours had melted into days had melted into years, an endless parade of vacuity...but this, *this* was new, and he felt a virgin to the moment as he strolled into work the next morning.

A half-hour conference table talk with Stuart did nothing to dampen his enthusiasm, and he found himself grinning like a madman as he picked up the phone to dial Penny. Yesterday morning this call would have filled him with trepidation, yet today, as he digested all that Stuart had just said, he found the prospect almost exhilarating.

*Number one on Penny's Shit List*; that's how Stuart had put it. He, Oliver, who had spent his whole life camouflaging himself to avoid inclusion on *any* Shit Lists had made the top of Penny Faithful's! Even Stuart's talk of the steam he had felt coming through the line when he had spoken to Penny only proved to excite Oliver. It felt good to be out of the shadows.

In regard to Stuart's fear that his "retraction" (Stuart had insisted on the quotation marks) would get him fired, Oliver hadn't been able to muster much dread. Not that he wanted to lose his job, but he knew that his letter alone wouldn't cause that to happen. How could Penny fire him for stating an opinion? He was allowed to have opinions. To fire him for exercising his right to free speech would just make the agency look bad, and Penny

would never want that. No, she could try to make the job hell, however that would only matter if he cared what she said, and at this point he didn't.

What Stuart had said about him encompassing the 3 C's had been right on the mark; Oliver *had* been Cautious, Careful and Considered. But not now. Stuart had tried, in vain, to convince him of the merits of this old self, but Oliver was feeling far too good about plaids and paisleys to consider going back to chameleon-wear. Even Stuart's effort to explain how Oliver's staid personality was part of what made their outreach team so strong didn't strike a chord.

When he had asked what their team would be without Oliver's anchor to counterbalance his own playfulness and Wendy's mothering, it had only succeeded in making Oliver muse aloud about why his clients had ever even wanted to see such a bland piece of cream cheese in the first place? Stuart had pointed out that perhaps it was exactly this quality that many of them were looking for in their outreach counselor; they needed the reliability that Oliver had always supplied. Although Oliver could see his point, he remained unswayed, instinctively sensing that they'd find enough in his new self to keep them connected with him.

\*

He dialed Penny's number and announced himself to the receptionist.

There were no pleasantries when she picked up. "Oliver, may I ask what are you trying to do to this agency?" she asked.

"I'm not sure what you mean. Perhaps you could rephrase the question."

"Don't be snide with me. What is the meaning of that *retraction*, if that's what you choose to call it?"

Oliver felt the steam Stuart had mentioned, however rather than intimidating him he found the effect warming. "I wrote what I feel," he said. "I don't know what else to say."

"Well, I could think of a lot more. Did you for one second think of the effect your letter could have on this agency? You're a representative of Optima Resources," she barreled on not giving him any chance to reply, "and as such your opinions on the field of Mental Health are taken as the

opinions of our agency. When you spout such utter nonsense it only makes us look like the fool. Am I making myself clear?"

"Yes, but-"

"Perhaps," Penny was a steamroller with no time for anything as trivial as *buts*, "it was my mistake. I should have made this situation clear to you after you wrote the first letter.

"So now," she continued, leaving another *but* flattened in her wake, "you've milked your fanaticism for two letters. Okay. What's done is done."

Oliver saw little reason to waste another but.

"The question is, what are we going to do about it? Part of me feels that I am totally within my rights to let you go solely on the basis of your lying about the first letter-"

He couldn't help the "But-" that slipped out.

"But," she overrode him, "the legal office informs me that I have no firm grounds for a dismissal, considering I have no real proof you did lie."

"But-"

"Of course we both know you did, but that's beside the point."

"Can I say anything?" Oliver spat out, leaving Penny no chance to stop him.

"Of course you can. Say anything you wish. I'm nothing if not fair minded. Why wouldn't I want to hear what you have to say?"

"Well thank you, I appreciate that. The thing is, and I know you don't believe it, but I didn't write the first letter."

"Oliver, if you're going to start with that again, I'm going to be forced to end this conversation. I'm an extremely busy woman and I don't have time for your petty games."

"I thought you said you wanted to hear what I have to say. Tell me, why would I be so hell bent on convincing you I didn't write the first letter if I wasn't telling the truth?"

"I'm not trying to intimate I know your mind. You haven't heard me say that, have you? Fanatics are strange creatures, and it seems to me that's precisely what you've become."

"Won't you even consider the possibility that I could be telling the

truth?" Oliver kept any hint of pleading out of his voice.

"I'll consider any possibility that strikes me as possible."

"Well that's big of you."

"I don't need to sit here and listen to you insult me about my height."

"I'm sorry," Oliver said, feeling weary. "That's not what I meant at all."

"Well, what did you mean?"

"It just seems that your mind's closed to the possibility that perhaps I didn't write that first letter."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I think I've examined all the facts and come to the only logical conclusion."

"Well, it's the wrong conclusion."

"I've had about enough of your sarcasm and if you'll excuse me, Oliver, I must be going. I am a busy woman. I have a whole agency to run, and if you think you're anything more than a very minor part of that agency, you're sadly mistaken. You know, perhaps you might want to start rethinking your current career. I really don't think Mental Health suits you. Surely not as a professional at any rate.

"Oh, I almost forgot," she said, as Oliver was about to place the receiver down, "weren't you supposed to bring me a copy of that first letter, or was that my imagination as well? I do have a very vivid imagination to hear you tell it."

"No, that wasn't your imagination, and I did go get it, but after looking at it I didn't see much point in showing you." He paused, bracing himself for the next interruption, "The thing is, the letter itself is typewritten, but the signature and address are in what appears to be my handwriting. Now just be-"

"Well, there's another point on your side, Oliver. It's obvious *you* didn't write it." The sarcasm was thick and pungent, filling Oliver's head - number one on *Penny's Shit List*. "It merely states your opinions in your handwriting over your name. Of course any open-minded person would be sure *you* had nothing to do with it."

"Penny-"

"Please, Oliver, I don't have the time right now. If you come up with any other 'proofs' of your innocence, feel free to call me. Otherwise, please

keep in mind what I said about a change in career. I think it might be best for all concerned." The phone clicked softly in Oliver's ear. At least she hadn't slammed down the receiver.

Stuart and Wendy had been reading the Bugle throughout the conversation - at least sections had been opened in front of them and pages turned occasionally, although it's doubtful that they were ready for any current events pop quizzes. Stuart folded his section and put it down. "That went well," he said.

"It wasn't too bad. I didn't really expect things to go much better."

"Yeah, I can see your point."

"You know," Stuart went on, "I hate to bring up more shit, but have either of you given any thought to the Doc situation?"

"To be honest, I haven't. This other stuff sort of drove it from my mind. You're right though, we've got to come up with something pretty quick. His shot is coming due, and without us, he'll never bother getting it. "

"How about you, Wendy?"

"I've spent a lot of time thinking about it," Wendy said, getting up, often feeling the need to walk as she talked. "But I can't see any way to do it. This whole alien delusion of his is way too fixed. I don't see how we can break it down."

"I agree," Stuart said. "That's why I've been thinking along the lines of using his OOklah delusion. I know," he said to her look, "I said I didn't want to feed into it, but the more I think about it, the more I realize that there's no way he's going to stop believing in these aliens. They're too much a part of who he is. And I'll tell you, if it's a choice between Doc skipping his shot and throwing another log on his 'delusional bonfire,' I'd choose the log any day. What do you guys think?" He looked at them for approval.

"Well," Oliver said, "I see your point. Remember the last time he stopped getting shots?" Neither of them had to answer that. It was nothing they'd soon forget... Vivisection rarely is.

"Listen," he continued, his voice becoming parenthetical, "whatever I wrote in that second letter, you both understand that I know Doc needs his

shots. Sure, I think society could be more tolerant of people with mental illness, but it's not like I think someone like Doc could ever do without meds."

"Thank God!" Wendy mouthed to Stuart - her travels having brought her in front of his recliner.

"So, what's your idea?" Oliver asked.

"Well, it could open a new can of worms, but I figured it this way..." When Stuart had finished, he looked up at them both. "What do you think?"

"So, who are you supposed to be talking to?" Wendy asked.

"It doesn't matter," Oliver said. "It's the phone. That's what's great about a phone."

"Exactly."

"Well, I for one can't see the harm. Sure, you could say it might take away any shred of doubt he has about the OOklah, but, like you said, I don't think he has any shred of doubt about them now."

"Okay," Stuart nodded. "So, what do you think, Wendy?... Honestly."

"I don't know. It's tough. I see your point, but I don't know if our job should ever be to feed into someone's delusion."

"Normally, I'd agree with you," Oliver said. "But think of the consequences if he doesn't get his shot."

Wendy shuddered, remembering them all too well. Six years ago Doc had refused his shots. After a month without them he had begun practicing medicine. Luckily for the local human population he had been a veterinarian in those days. Cats had disappeared for weeks before it was traced back to Doc. Penelope Faithful's cat, Sarsaparilla, had been among the missing.

"He's an M.D. now," Oliver said, to drive the point home. "That's pretty scary. I think we owe it to the community to do anything we can to make sure he stays medicated."

"Yeah, I know. Like I said, it's tough." She paused, considering the pros and cons. "I guess it may be the best thing to do," she concluded after another moment.

"You can use my truck," Stuart offered, knowing how immaculate she

kept her car.

"No, that's all right. I'll bring a blanket."

"Listen, it's probably just as well we don't tell Penny what we're doing. She's pissed enough as it is."

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"I'm not sure what it's about," Wendy said, shifting nervously from foot to foot. "All I know is that he said he needed to see you, and that I should bring you over right away. He also wanted me to make sure you knew that Oliver definitely won't be there. I don't know why he thought that was so important, but he did."

"He didn't tell you anything else?"

"No, he just said to bring you. He said you'd know what it was about. Why don't you throw a shirt on and we'll drive over?" The sun shone on Doc's ample belly, which in turn hung provocatively over a pair of jeans that spoke volumes about his eating and regurgitation habits for the past week. If Stuart hadn't made a point of telling Wendy to get Doc over in a hurry, she would have tried to get him to change the pants, but she knew how slow he could be.

She had forgotten the blanket, and her thoughts wandered to the cloth upholstery in her car.

Stuart stared out the window, waiting. It seemed forever before Wendy pulled up below in search of a space. He watched them park and enter the building before trotting down the hall to listen for the elevator: the first jolt was Wendy getting off at the second floor to go to the ladies room, as planned. At the second jolt, he sprinted back to the office and sat down on the couch, quickly putting the phone to his ear. He waited until Doc's footsteps almost reached the door..."No, no I tell you I'll hear Doc before he comes in. Don't worry. You think I'm stupid?"...

Doc stopped short in the hallway, as Stuart hoped he would. So far, so good.

"...No, he doesn't suspect a thing. The guy thinks *Oliver's* a CUNT for

chrissake. Can you believe it? Oliver!.....No, I tell you he has no idea. It's pitiful. I almost wish I could tell him, I mean, just to help him relax. It must suck thinking they've got a CUNT on you, but you know the score. I mean, shit, if they ever found out we knew about each other we'd be the next ones with CUNTS up our asses. I can't risk saying anything to him .....No, Oliver has no idea. He thinks it's just Doc being delusional. What else should he think?.....Of course I didn't play him the tape. What do you think I am, stupid? Better to let him keep thinking that Doc's off the deep end. That's the safest for everybody. I erased it anyway. Can you imagine if the OOKlah got hold of that shit! Jesus!....I do feel sorry for the guy, though. I wish there was some way to let him know that Oliver doesn't know a thing. But anyway, when he comes up-

Stuart's hopes for a few more seconds were dashed when Doc chose that moment to make his entrance. But what the hell, improvisation was half the fun of this stuff. He had no idea which way things would go. Would Doc challenge him, or would he pretend he hadn't heard a thing? Either way it had to be better than the current situation. Doc off his meds was the last thing Ripley needed.

"Listen, I've gotta go," he said into the receiver, "someone just came in." He put the phone down. "Hey Doc, thanks for coming." He let his face show the slightest hint of guilt.

"Wendy said you wanted to see me."

Cool. Doc had opted for ignorance.

"Yeah, have a seat." He motioned to the orange plastic chair with the four rivets, the one that as a rule they tried to steer him towards. As usual, Doc ignored the hint and moved towards the Lazy-Boy. "Doc, you know you really don't look too clean today," Stuart said. "Maybe you wouldn't mind sitting in the chair." Again he motioned towards the orange chair. Doc lowered himself into the Lazy-Boy.

"Listen, Stu," he said, adjusting himself, "if you have a problem with me being here, you let me know. Wendy said you wanted to see me, I'm here."

Stuart gave up the battle, making a mental note to avoid the Lazy-Boy for the near future. "Listen, Doc, the reason I asked you here is this: I've been giving your situation with Oliver and the OOKlah a lot of thought,

and it seems to me that even if Oliver is a CUNT-"

"Would you mind keeping it quiet?" Doc hissed. "I don't think this is something we need to share with the world."

"Sorry," Stuart apologized, lowering his voice a few notches. The thespian in him sometimes took over during *Improv Theater*, and Stuart had to fight to keep himself from projecting to the cheap seats. "Anyway, it seems to me that if the OOklah are as dangerous as you say, you might want to stay on their good side. You know, play along with Oliver and let him take you to your appointments. It's like the old saying, you get more flies with honey than vinegar. If Oliver is a CUNT, I imagine the OOklah are gonna be pretty pissed when they find out you blew him off, and, well, from what you've told me that could suck big time. So it seems to me that it might be prudent to watch your step."

Doc looked hard at him. Stuart could see the wheels whirring. Finally, when he was beginning to wonder if Doc was going to respond at all, he did: "I can see what you mean," he nodded slowly. "As a matter of fact, I'd been thinking along those same lines myself. Yup," he said, chewing on his lower lip, "that might be just the thing to do."...

Stuart loved this shit.



## - ABOUT COMMANDER PANTS -

Commander Pants lives with his mysterious wife and mysterious daughter in a rather mysterious house. In addition to his writing, he also composes music and video.

You can see and hear much more of this work on his blog at [www.commanderpants.com](http://www.commanderpants.com). Please visit. It's better than sex (okay, not really *good* sex).

His less-than-mysterious alter-ego has invented the board game, *Acronymble*, as well as having created a museum installation piece called an "*Interactive Aural Collage*."

*Whom God Would Destroy* is published independently. If you enjoyed it, please consider assisting a struggling author by telling your friends and posting a review on Amazon.com - to let those strangers know (you don't have to have purchased the book there to post a review). It's greatly appreciated.

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