

# Anguish

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a novel

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by Eddie Corona

part of the Brick Jayne universe

“Zelda... You are the best thing I have *goin’!*”

“And you don’t mind that I’m a *whore?!?*”

“I say it as plain as I need to *say* it!! You have to pick your poison, sometimes in this world and I know that you don’t care for me too much!!” Gage mused at the sky.

“I don’t *need* this shit!! I really don’t *need* this shit!!” Zelda tossed open her dress, almost enough for passer-bys to see her underpants.

Gage sat on a bus stop outside of a pawn shop on Broadway in Seattle. There was no sign of rain, and he was happy. Zelda sat next to him, and she was glad that he was there. “In this world, they talk of ‘necessary evils.’ You’re *one* of them.”

Zelda became a little upset, and almost began to hyperventilate. “And you don’t mind that I work for the *government!?*”

Gage held her tight, and said, “I *do* mind... but they’ve had me under surveillance for the last eight and a half years, and I know they want to have me smashed up in their program for coercing society to do what they *pleases.*”

Zelda sat back, looked around at the traffic... and noticed some dark clouds coming in. Gage felt a slight breeze, and knew that rain *would* be in the forecast to come. “You tested in the top one percent ASVAB, *right?!?* And they—we—want you to work for us for *free*, huh?”

“I’m one of the better computer programmers in the country... and I *know* that you want to have a slant in your games to have an anti- Arab bias because all the ‘war on terror’ and so forth, *right?!*”

“Not true, actually,” Zelda said. Gage could tell she was lying.

Gage straightened up, saw a wall of rain in the distance wanting to make its way to him, and said, “I like to make games about kids killing cops. You know *why?!?* It’s because the kids are *less* apt to kill cops after playing the games... studies have shown!!”

“You’re saying they get their *aggressions* out that way, huh?”

Gage kissed Zelda on the cheek. “And ever since I met you in the pub the other night... I no longer want to *do* it.” He looked at her face, saw a sense of belonging there, then continued, “I want to put you and *I* in the next game... and I want to be in *love*!!”

“Okay!” She said. Gage lit up a marijuana cigarette in front of her, took a drag from it, then Zelda nudged him. “You can’t *smoke* that in *public*, you know!!?”

“I can do anything I *want*!!” Gage laughed, looked at the sky, then said, “I’m the King Hopper in a game I’m developing!! It’s a game about running from the rain, and the rest of the *elements*!!” Zelda put a newspaper over her head when heavy drops approached them, grabbed Gage by the hand, and pulled him to a nearby drinkery. “I think I’ll buy you a *spot*... and listen to the rest of your story in *here*!!” She kissed him on the cheek.

\* \* \*

Gage had a dream of Horatio Sanz in which the big lug came into Gage’s apartment uninvited much like the Lenny and Squiggy characters of the old Laverne and Shirley fame, and behind him was “the Steve guy from the *90210* series” (Gage couldn’t remember his name, upon waking, but was sure his initials were “I.Z.”). Ian—Gage was sure his name was “Ian” upon rubbing his eyes—lifted his shoulder sleeve and showed Gage the insignia of the Black Crowes: two drunken crows with their wings around one another. Horatio Sanz lifted his left sleeve... and there was a tattoo of Luigi from the Mario Brothers fame... and on the other side under the other sleeve was a big picture of Mario with hearts protruding from his head. It looked rather strange to Gage, but the queer thing about it was what Horatio said: “You will design a *game* after US!!!” He stared to tremble, in the dream. “I am not as gay as I *seem* in the ‘Carol pieces’!!!” Horatio cross-dressed for some of the skits he was in, and “Carol” was a character he played. “I want you to be my ‘Luigi’... and I’m going to be your ‘*Mario*’!!!” Horatio said.

Gage cracked two eggs open simultaneously as he reflected on the rest of the dream. “Sounds kind of *queer*; now that I *think* of it,” he said to an empty room. He wanted Zelda there. He watched the eggs fry on the skillet which he should have been scrubbed of caked-on grease so long ago. “I’m going to call her *up*!!” Gage announced to no one.

He ate his eggs, called Zelda up not fifteen minutes after waking, then planned to meet her at a downtown park by afternoon. When he looked out his front door on his way to get the morning paper that day he noticed something strange. The billboard in front of his townhouse had change, overnight. It was advertising a new sect of Mario Brother cartridges. They were retro, according to the advertisement, and could be had for a cheap price.

Gage thought about buying them... and didn’t know why.

\* \* \*

“The worse of my nightmares has come *true*,” Cheese said to Dolores as he passed the boardwalk on the side. He had read *Beachworld* many years before, and he was eerily reminded of how the world had been explained in *that...* piece of fiction. “I want you to *know* something, Dolores...”

“Yes?”

“My real name is *Cheese*...”

“Don’t *say* any more. I *know*, already. *Cheese58712* is what you put down on your *internet* address.”

“It’s *more* than that! My *parents* named me, you see? I didn’t *want* the name!”

Dolores started to ask what Cheese’s real name *was*, but refrained against it.

“My *parents* gave me that name, and I *think* that you should be able to name *yourself*, you know?”

Cheese looked into Dolores’ eyes, and *knew* that she wasn’t a real “Dolores.”

“So why are you *telling* me this?!”

Cheese looked up into the surveillance monitors which scanned from the sidewalk to the ocean front. “*They* have feeds.” He pointed up into them. “*They* have feeds, and I’m talking about the *CIA*!”

“So everyone’s *dead* to you, huh?”

Cheese thought about his life outside of the boardwalk, and asked, “Do you want to take a *walk* with me?”

Dolores shook her head as if “no” but she put Cheese’s arm around her shoulders and pulled him along away with her.

As they were leaving, Cheese started to talk to her. “The CIA gives *feeds*, you see? And since I play sitar on the boardwalk, once in a while, I’m *allowed* to be out here...”

“Because they give it to the Russians, huh? The Russians and *other* ‘prominent’ world members, huh?”

Cheese changed his mental state—he felt *accused* of something—and said, “I didn’t *decide* to play *sitar*... and for everyone else to sit home watching *sitcoms* all day!!”

“You thought it was a new *Renaissance*, huh?”

Cheese changed his tone back to quiet demeanor and said, “You have it *right*!” In his mind, he knew ninety-nine percent of the population was *dead*.

\* \* \*

The thought of the polio vaccine didn’t escape Cheese’s head as he made his way to his red sports car—it was an old Vette of the eighties style—and he explained to Dolores what was really going *on*.

“There are enemies of mine, out there, but they are in the *minority*.”

“Like that polio vaccine you were talking of *earlier*, right?”

“Yep,” Cheese said. He had known that the polio vaccine was made from *dying* polio viruses, and if his memory served him correctly, they were injected into the human blood stream to develop antibodies so that when the virus came “full blown,” the body would know what to do.

“So you think that the government agents are *antibodies*, huh?”

“All the world’s a stage, but, *no!* Far *from* it!?” Cheese said. He didn’t expect an argument. Dolores seemed to be a friendly type. “I am going to *kill* them, eventually, because I have a *greater* foe in the Russians.”

“What are you *talking* about!?” She started to cry in hysterics. “I’m in a *book*—a *play*—huh!?”

“No! You’re in my next internet broadcast to the *Russians!*!”

She realized what was going on. She no longer mattered. She was an *operative*, at the very least, and the video feeds from the CIA to the former KGB members of the Russian mafia were “getting” that one of their former operatives—*agents*—was taking a twirl with “the enemy.” “You know I can have you *killed* you know?!”

Cheese didn’t know it. He went by a thousand names on the internet, and the one he liked most was “Cheese.” “Kill *me...* or kill *BOLOGNA?! I* go by two names, you know?!” He smiled at her. He knew he had her wrapped... but a dry and disdainful smile evolved from the happiness of her facial muscles, and she jabbed him in the midsection when she couldn’t take it any more—the faking of her tears, and the smiles in between.

\* \* \*

Cheese passed a billboard which was prevalent in the New England area where he worked. It was “King Potato,” and it featured the mascot of a large, brown potato draped in chive-colored attire featured with springs along the inner lining of the white section of a puffy, inner robe. He turned to Dolores and said, “That thing’s on *TV*, they say!?”

“I know. It looks like a large Humpty Dumpty... or a *Weeble Wobble!*!”

Cheese laughed at the observation and said, “I know.... but it’s *indicative* of our society!”

“The *Couch Sitters!*?” Dolores asked.

“Yes, *the Couch Sitters...* but it’s done in...”

“I know. *Vegetarian* guise!?”

“You *know* too much!” Cheese said, and lit up a cigarette.

Dolores tried to grab the cigarette from Cheese’s mouth, and said, “These are *unhealthy*, you know!?”

“To who? To you... *or me!*?”

Cheese was slated to drop off Dolores at her house... and he was bound to find the rest of his *troupe*. He had a comedy troupe which was disbanded by the Bush administration for being “too outrageous” (it was the genuine description of the CIA agent whom told Cheese to calm down on his antics).

Cheese tossed out his cigarette after seeing the dismay on Dolores’ face. He asked, “What’s your real *name*, any way?”

“*You* know that’s a *sin*!” she said.

“I know. We can’t know each other’s name if we’re to *last*... but I think we’re close to breaking through...”

“In the new *GOVERNMENT*!?” Dolores demanded with tears.

Cheese teared a bit, and said, “Yes. *The new government*!?” The new government was going to be easy to form. People had internet semblances of what the Constitution was going to be like, and it was *very* much like the old one of 1789. It was going to guarantee free speech (an amendment not added ‘til 1791, actually), and it was going to give the right of *travel*. “I have to check with the Politburo, you know?”

“The *Russian*...” she began to ask.

“*No*!” Cheese was mad. “The *AMERICAN* one!?” He paused. “I *still* have to check with them every time I get in the *car*!”

“You’re one of *the*...” She was going to say “them” but stopped herself.

“No. I’m just fighting the *fight*!?”

“Fire with fire?!”

“No. Fire with *water*... and I’m going to use it ‘til I *die*!”

Cheese dropped her off at her house. He watched her to her door, then took off. He didn’t expect to see her, any more. It was hard to see her in 2005. The old calendar was still in use, but the “real people” used the new “Fordist” calendar as adapted by Huxley in *Brave New World*. “I don’t like it at *all*,” he said to himself. And he knew that in the year 100 A.F. (After Ford), it couldn’t be any different. “I want 2112,” he mused to himself. He lit another cigarette as he regained the countryside road. “I want anything except what we *HAVE*!?”

\* \* \*

A hundred miles southwest of Dolores’ house, Cheese started to contemplate aloud all the things going on. He couldn’t turn on the radio because it was loaded with propaganda of the rhetoric which espoused that the United States was still a country. “The war in *Iraq* is over!?” he had heard thirty miles back when had gotten so bored of the sound of the rustling wind. “The war in Iraq is *over*, and we’re looking at a new war in *Iran*, pretty soon,” the radio said to him. *Perpetual war. Just like Eighty-four* written by George Orwell, Cheese thought to himself. *The Frontier Countries have no choice but to accept*

it! It wasn't a judgmental statement, but Cheese wanted to settle into a bar and to hear *nothing* of the war.

He knew it wasn't possible.

As Cheese approached what had been Louisiana, he *knew* that the French had taken over again. It was demonstrated in their signs. They advertised their ballparks, restaurants, and hotels, *all* with the red, white in blue of vertical stripes. He knew that things happened like this on the internet, and he suspected that they were organizing along the old Louisiana Purchase. *It ain't gonna last long, cuz nothin' ever does any more*, Cheese thought to himself.

As he approached New Orleans, he could see people still trying to rebuild their city. Katrina—*Hurricane Katrina*—had been pretty tough, and he had planned to help them... but it was *more* than that.

At the sight of the former Superdome, he asked a head worker, "Do you know if *Frida* is here?" People, in the modern era, didn't not go by their "real" names *anywhere*, and movie names were a popular choice to be going by as *alias*. "Katrina, anyone?" He was talking of a black lady with a maroon robe, or a white lady with a yellow, flowery dress. "Frida or *Katrina*?"

"*I did this whole mess!*" a lady said. She looked remarkably like Penelope Cruz, and Cheese knew why she chose the name "Frida"... until she said, "My name is Katrina, and that black lady over there," She pointed to a construction worker in a maroon robe, "is *Frida*!"

"*Fine!*" Cheese was mad. "*Why am I here!?*"

"They say you're from the CIA, and not from *FEMA!*!"

"Okay. Very *well*, then!?" Cheese explained the revolution to her, and he knew in his heart that it wouldn't happen... but he had at least an ounce of hope or else he wouldn't have started talking. "I'm going to shoot up some people in *L.A.* ..."

"*The former L.A.*" Frida corrected him with as she approached the car.

"Yeah! The *former* L.A., and I'm going to do this so *quick..!*!"

"Is this going to be a *quick* shoot?" Katrina wanted to know, except that she added, "Call me 'Lulu' when you leave because I'll be changing my name, and you'll want to get a hold of me in *Houston*."

Cheese hoped she wasn't lying, and said, "I'm going to shoot them up in a *porn..!*"

"Coercion?"

"Hardly! We're going to bait them back to a hotel in the Bonaventure..."

"The *former* Bonaventure?" Katrina inquired.

"No. We're going to leave that standing... *but...*"

He got confused. Katrina—*Lulu*—started making out with Frida right in front of his eyes.

"*Professional!!* It's going to be *professional...* and when you see the mayor of the city..."

"*Former* mayor of..." Frida said after smacking Lulu's lips.

"*Yeah.* Former mayor's going to have his *porn*—his *ASS* plugged—by one of our big men!"

"I like it!?" Frida said. She was amused, and *genuinely* amused. She showed Cheese ten thousand dollars in "old bills," and said, "This'll be good enough to get you by 'til *spring*, right??"

Cheese's eyes lit up at the money. "Yeah! And we have some *corp*—" ("Corp" was a term shortened as "corporate executive.") "—making some money of the *new* bills!/"

"I slept with 'im, you know?" Frida asked of the *former* mayor of Los Angeles.

Cheese didn't know if it was true. "It doesn't *matter*." Frida rubbed her breast against the shoulder of Katrina. "I'm going to *FIGHT* for you!"

"You sound like Larry H. Parker!/" Cheese could hear what Frida had said to him, though. He revved up his engine, and started to leave as soon as Katrina tossed the money-filled briefcase into the passenger-side seat. Without asking, Frida jumped into the car over the door—the convertible shell was down—and told Cheese that she was coming along. "I ride *alone*!!/" Cheese said. He expected a kiss. Instead, Frida rubbed his balls over his brown, corporate slacks... and took off again over the car door.

\* \* \*

King Potato was on a billboard sign not far from the western boarder of the ol' Louisiana state line as Cheese headed toward California. He scoffed at it. It featured the brown mascot—not in its typical clove-colored attire, but rather in a sour-cream-colored drape—and it said through a bubble, "Frito Lays go good with *us*!!/" For a split second, Cheese thought about stopping, and he knew that he'd have to resist the urge. Though Frida was appealing, back in Louisiana, he knew that she had something wrong with her *psyche*. He could see it in the way she kissed Katrina—but he knew he had to help her for the simple reason that they were "all in it together." King Potato was going to have to opt out of the plan. Cheese was born and raised as a Mormon—*Latter Day Saint* is what they called them as a kid—and he knew that very few people go to hell. That's the way he remembered it from studying at his local temple. "King Potato? I don't know if they're going to *evangelize* to you on the *OTHER SIDE*!!/" He laughed at his remark because he knew he was talking about an inanimate object. He was raised to believe in "three levels of heaven," and he was raised to believe that everyone had another chance, even on the other side. "I have to see your face for another thousand miles of drivin', but I'll forget you *someday*!/"

Cheese thought about In 'N' Out Burgers. He couldn't wait to get to the Coast. He was going to have a good time. He could feel it. "Frida? Or *Lulu*?" He pondered the happenings of the morning. "I don't know if I see you again, but if I *do*..." He cut off his thoughts and ventured his mind to Utah. "I'll take Katrina. I *know* I will."

Torture rang in Cheese's mind. *Anguish* was the afterthought of it. He knew he had been tortured, but he couldn't remember the details. As an artist, he was taught to shape himself *into* a situation, as well as out of one. He thought of Dolores from the East Coast, and he thought of the girl whom reminded him of her. *Torment*. *Pure torment*, he thought. He couldn't remember the details, but he knew he had been *tormented*.



\* \* \*

Zelda was a buffer, intended to separate Gage from his past. He didn't know how long it would last, and he didn't know if he could do it effectively. He knew that internet rumors flew rampant about what was going on in life. Since gas had hit four dollars per gallon, people saw no reason to go to school. They saw no reason to go to *work*. And since a radical group of ecologists—the West Wing Storm—took over the dominant thought-process of the nation, there was no reason to believe that things were going to return to normal. Boeing, McDonnell Douglas, and Lockheed had all signed pledges that said that if the congressional leaders of the South were to cut back from the budget by further slashing into aerospace and defense technology, they were going to create a nuclear war. Further, if the nuclear war was not to be taken seriously, they would “nuke up the Moon.” Granted, none of it could be verified because the email warnings as delivered from WWS were from “Blowme Down,” “Mike Hunt” (a vaginal reference, if said fast), and “Dipper Sween,” et cetera. The message was clear that the South would be taken out first, and *then* the Moon if people didn't take them seriously. As the nineties had matured in the prior century, many hard-working officials could not find jobs as fry cooks after massive layoffs. They were deemed “over-qualified,” and subsequently lost their homes, automobiles, and families. This time around, they would not be taken so lightly.

Gage's job, as a computer programmer, was to identify world problems and inspirations, put them into mundane solvable graphic fiction, and distribute the results to the world. He saw that people wanted cops dead in the latter part of the eighties, and designed a “shoot 'em up” mutant cop game for the arcades of the world. He saw apathy during the nineties and helped design Simpson-like scenarios through video games. As Cheese approached Gage with radical ideas, Gage had already known through Zelda that the world was on the verge of total social collapse. What he *didn't* know was the form.

An hour after meeting with Cheese for lunch—Zelda had set the whole thing up because it was her job to make sure that radicals spoke to solution-solvers—Gage started to program a game in which “blowing up the Moon” was the ultimate goal of the game player. If things were to return to normal in society, it would be a therapeutic anecdote for the video game player. If things stayed the same, or became progressively worse, it would help him identify where all the “angst” was. He would know *specifically* through sales of his games, and he would know how to further help solve society's problems.

Zelda was a torture artist, of sorts. It was her job, through corporations or otherwise, to identify insurgents, plan their demise, and then to get out unscathed. Of course, it didn't matter to her *why* there were insurgents. It was her job to make sure that there was no revolution possible, and to make sure that “petty squabbles” between warring national factions would not make the mainstream news, hence, the world would know that the United States was at peace, and practically indestructible. One of her methods was to take a-quality models to naïve young men, find out what they knew through physical play, and then to humiliate them publicly if they were to step out of line for her agenda as ascribed from her higher ups.

She knew Gage had a fetish for Natalie Maines and LeAnn Rimes, and therefore had a CIA front procure the billboard in front of his house which advertised the Mario Brothers series—a *competitor*—and she was going to work it to the point that he would commit to her, or someone that very-much resembled one of the many country stars whom Gage adored. If Gage were to go ahead with his “crazy idea” to dignify the Cheese character, she was going pawn of the Southern stars off on Horatio Sanz during an Saturday Night Live skit. It was always nauseating for Gage to see Kirsten Dunst, and stars like her, sacrifice their lips and other body parts to the degenerate sluts of the Saturday Night Live crowd, all the while, he couldn’t stop watching for the SNL commentary of the social regard. Zelda wouldn’t stop there, though. She would delve into his deeper fears, and make them true so he didn’t listen to her.

It didn’t take Zelda a full week to start sleeping with Gage as a spy. She didn’t hide the fact that she was spying, and Gage didn’t care because the passionate intimacy was good enough. He told her one night after not being able to fully climax with her, “I could be sleeping with you, or the Secretary of Defense. I choose *you* because you’re a lot better looking!!”

“And you don’t care that I’m from the government, huh?”

“I already know your tactics because I’ve been through this a few times. You find out what I like, and try to appease me. You find out what I *hate* the most, and try to detour me with it. Nine out of ten girls that I meet in the pubs are *like* you! I’m a premier programmer, and everyone knows me in the city!!”

“It’s like sleeping with a producer, you know?”

“Except that we’re a lot more honest, because they’re rooted in *fantasy*!!”

“What the hell are you *talking* about!!! Video games are *more* fantasy- oriented than films, or anything *else*!!”

“No, they’re not... because you have a *choice*!! You can choose your own ‘movie’... and when a person decides to blow up the Moon in one of our games, it’s because he has an inner ambition about *doing* so!!! But he can opt out for the *WOMEN*!!! It’s one of our provisions, and when your CIA spies go to talk to them about what they want to do in life, ninety percent want to take the ‘women route’ in place of blowing up the *MOON*!!”

“So you’re saying you can choose your own movie, huh?”

Gage grabbed her by the ass underneath the covers, and said, “You bet your *BUTT*!!” He smoked with her that night and wished for death.

\* \* \*

Strings were pulled, and somehow, Gage got a date with LeAnn Rimes (it was one of his requests to Zelda on the night he first slept with her). He knew Horatio Sanz was coming to town, because that’s the way Zelda worked. When she brought a “positive,” she also brought a “negative.” If things didn’t work right, she’d go to her contingency plan. Gage didn’t know if she was falling in love with him, and he didn’t

want to question *why* she would set things up in certain ways. “Love is blind,” Gage said to himself as he set to meet LeAnn for a date. “I wonder what’s going to happen.” He was dressed in a top hat, a traditional tuxedo with long, black tails, and tennis shoes which seemed to demonstrate that he was still “down” with the common person.

Zelda was to show Horatio Sanz the Space Needle, and she was to tell him of the heroine problem in Seattle, as traditionally told through Space Needle allegories. She was to show him the town, and if she got buzzed through her beeper phone, it meant there was trouble on the Gage/ LeAnn date. She was going to whisk Horatio over there and tell him to photo-op with her.

Gage didn’t let anything bother him. He had executives in his company he had to please that wanted “the bottom line.” That meant he had to sell video games... and he had to reach the proletariat to *do* so. He had activists that would protest his works in San Francisco if things “went too far.” In the middle, he knew that he had his work cut out, and if he were going to keep sanity for any long period of time, he was going to have to trust his instincts. He would *always* side with the proletariat, in that case.

“Do you know what ‘proletariat’ *means*, LeAnn?” Gage wanted to know.

LeAnn was shy. She sipped from a glass of wine through a straw. She said, “No!” Gage believed she was lying.

“It means ‘prolific,’ and it’s rooted in a Roman term which suggests you are the underclass of *society!*!”

“I know what it *means*, stupid!!” she said. Gage wanted to bone her.

“‘Prolific,’ unlike what most sports broadcasters would have you believe, means that you are ready to *GO!!!* You are ready to hit the *SACK!!!* And you are read to produce babies for the upper class of *society!*!”

“I know,” LeAnn said... and subtly rubbed her nose—a message to those around that she didn’t want to hear the conversation any more. She got up, got ready to leave, and tossed a hundred dollar bill on the table.

“These are no *good*, any more!!” Gage said. Microsoft had started to mint their own money, just in case Cheese’s scare was real. No one was saying any different.

“I want to have a date with you!” LeAnn said to Gage. She gestured toward her vagina when she did so.

Gage looked at her, took the cue, then said, “I want to date you *too*, again... *LeAnn!*!”

“Call me *‘Virginia,’*” she said to him, then sat on his lap.

Gage was happy—couldn’t be *happier*—but he knew these things always came to an end. “There’s a girl on the other side of town, right now, that is working to humiliate me if I get too close to you!!”

“Secret government?” LeAnn asked unexpectedly.

“*No!!* There *is* no government except the government that you say *exists!*!”

“We have our ways, but I can’t *beat* her!” LeAnn propped out her *tit*—the left one—and let Gage suckle on it for a couple of seconds. The surrounding crowd didn’t seem to mind that much. She said, “All these people are my fans, and I don’t know if you know that I set it up that way!”

Gage looked around, and was comfortable by what he saw. “I play pool with that *waiter*. What if he was the mole?!”

“I get what you’re sayin’!” She said. She slammed down her drink, and let herself out.

They were outdoors, and the moonlit sky shown of many stars. When LeAnn was out of sight, Gage knew he had his work cut out for himself. *I didn’t even ask her for a second date*, he thought. He was supposed to tell her of Cheese’s crazy idea that the South ought to be lit up if layoffs were eminent for workers in missile-defense technology. He felt he didn’t have to. There was diplomacy, and if anyone was going to get lit up, it was going to be *Cheese*.

\* \* \*

Sadomasochism was very much in vogue during the latter part of the eighties, and early part of the nineties. It meant that a man could take his wife, tie her up, and proceed to whip her at will until she was comfortable enough (*and aroused*) to make love. As songs like “Pretty Tied Up” hit the air waves, people began to believe that it was *trendy*, but more than this, an anti- OJ backlash caused husbands and wives to rethink their ways in the bedroom. As a result, shows like “Fear Factor” came into being, and masochism was the lone way of expressing human emotion. People would invite *pain* into their lives, nearly at any cost. The sadists, on the other hand, seemed to be making their ways to the jails at alarming rates.

Gage ate at his traditional café along the pier on the day after he had his interlude with LeAnn Rimes. Surprisingly to himself, he didn’t think much of the public display of affection which transpired in the public. Quite the opposite. He expected *pain*, and he expected *pain soon*.

The masochists of society, he came to learn, were actually sadistic when they came together as *groups*. The Seattle scene and the Seattle sound in general was wrought with emotions of dread and apathy. A person, or a group of individuals, could inflict pain *emotionally* by collectively singing about their angst in public. “What’s my drug of *choice*?” Gage sang from an Alice In Chains song, “What have you *got*?!” It was “Junkhead,” and he was happy to be alive.

He expected, at any minute, that LeAnn’s people would come by, sing their *own* songs, and put guilt on him that he couldn’t bear. *Please let my South be out of your SONG!!!* he could hear in his head as a possible lyric. *We have done nothing WRONG!!!* he could hear, and he could visualize the music video with all his setups from the video game to be released early next year. *I want to tell you, that I don’t want to kill you... and I have done nothing WRONG... to you!!* He could hear it clear, and he didn’t know if his mind was playing tricks on him.

He got home, after the incident, and started to write songs on his own. One of his neighbors in a

regional townhouse played guitar quite well and would put the words to songs... and he'd use them for the video games.

"LeAnn!! Where *are* you!?" He didn't care. He was waiting for Zelda to come back, and he didn't know when it would be.

\* \* \*

Long after the LeAnn series of dates were over, Gage felt good enough with his situation that he stopped believing a full-on attack on the South was eminent with nuclear missiles. Quite the contrary. He thought the South would come into the Northwest, in the form of vacationers, and they would get along just *fine!!!* At least for a while!!

When Gage could finally date Zelda, again, he said to her, "I don't know what I'd do without you!/" It was a half-lie because he was planning to get her out of his life. "Do you know how a refrigerator is made *cold!*?"

"No," Zelda said cutely. "But I bet you're going to *tell* me." She drank from her chocolate milkshake, and Gage was reminded of LeAnn drinking her wine from a straw.

"I want to *tell* you that it's because heat is *removed!*!! Actually, if they had ice, back then when they invented it, and they could import it from the North Pole every time someone needed more cold in their fridge, they could have done it *that* way... but there's a fan inside the thing that sucks out the heat as fast as it rises to the *top!*/"

"Isn't there *FREON*, and all that good stuff!?" Zelda asked. She had an inkling of refrigeration mechanics stored in the back of her head.

"No. It's been *outlawed*, and I want to tell you that by removing heat, that is all you need to produce 'cold' in an airtight atmosphere."

"So you're going to tell me about how you get *by* in life!/" She finished off her shake, then called for the check when a waitress came by for inspection.

"A *correlation!*!! Yes!! As air goes out of the fridge, people like me think of ways to apply it to *life!*!! You see?? I removed your Horatio guy from my life by submitting a fatter, taller, 'life-like' version of a *modern* Mario to the Nintendo guys—it came to me in a *dream*, you know?—and I don't think of 'im so much!! Amy Poehler and Rachel Dratch!? I can get by on them *forever* when I watch SNL, and the new cast member, Kristen Wiig, turns my crank in ways I wouldn't have expected... but the image of Horatio as 'Carol' loomed in my head, too often, when I set down to bed and tried to sleep... so I got *rid* of 'im!/"

"You're saying it's that *easy!*/" Zelda demanded. The waitress near her produced a check for less than ten dollars and she was surprised by it.

"I used to have dreams of *cops*, you know?? And the song by Cheap Trick, 'Dream Police,' used

to rattle through my head because when I was on my marijuana highs, I could see them wanting to confiscate all my materials by which I used to design my first few games!!! And when the game came out which I helped design—the one about killing mutant cops of the future—I had nothing but dreams of fast nights in Vegas, and beautiful women in *L.A.* Granted, only the fast nights in Vegas revealed themselves into my life because I soon contracted a sexually transmitted disease, but I was still able to get my ‘demons’ out of me!!”

Zelda became angry as she slipped a ten dollar bill onto the table. “So you’re telling me that you’re not going to make that game of destroying the South because of your dates with LeAnn Rimes!!”

Embarrassment crept into Gage’s face because he didn’t expect that reaction from her. Before she stood up to go away, he started to say that he thought it was what she wanted. Before he could manage a single word, she threw ice cold water into his face. “You can do it *too*!!” he finally mustered. “Get those pricks out of your life that make you *mean*!!”

Zelda knew she couldn’t do it. She had obligations to the CIA, and certain corporate fronts. “Do you know anything about *SUPERSTRUCTURE*, asshole?! There are people that would *kill* me to remain with you!!!”

“I know... but we can run *away*!!”

“You’re talking in fiction, now, because they have satellites, and they have *boats*!! Large, *DESTROYER* boats!!”

“I know... but I can dream, and when my video game comes out of us making love... they’re not going to believe you’re in the CIA, any longer!!! The common people are going to *expect* to see us together!!!”

It was a new thought, to Zelda. “I think you’re right,” she said in resignation. She added reluctantly, “I sleep with no less than thirty people a year to get information for them! What about my *life style*!!”

Gage pulled her to himself, “I’m lovey dovey, but I can get *over* it!!”

“If I can get over LeAnn Rimes, huh?”

“You’re not *jealous*, are you!?”

She shook her head “no.” It was a partial lie. “I’m a *professional*, remember!?”

“I’m a professional *too*!!” Gage said, and got up to leave after Zelda kissed him on the cheek.

“You’re a *motherfucker*!!”

\* \* \*

Two weeks had gone by since Zelda decided to move in with Gage. He didn’t expect things to last long. She was from an upper-middle class background, and he knew that she really didn’t care for him. Gage, on the other had, was from a poor neighborhood, but was gifted in the realm of math (he won a few

first place championships when he was young). Zelda disdained his background, but she admired his fortitude to stay in his hometown of Kelso for as long as he did (he could have easily gotten a job at Microsoft, long ago). She loved him, in a secret way. “Do you *love* me?” she asked him one morning when waking up next to him.

“Love is about actions, and if you say the word too much, you’re bound to die!”

“Explode?” she asked.

“No. Not *explode*, but you can’t put it on your wall and believe in it for too long.”

“*Friendship*, too. I remember you said not to say ‘friend’ too much or else we would break up in a *second*!!”

“People try to hang you with that one!” Gage got out of bed after kissing her near the side of her mouth, scratched his ass for a while, then headed for the bathroom without much thought. “If you want to join me, you can... but I have a mania about my penis if you’re not *playing* with it in here.”

Zelda laughed. “You’re *joking*!!”

Gage turned around, and knew she knew his humor.

A half our later, Gage was working on a video game project which seemed to be insignificant to him... but it mattered a lot to Zelda. When he was finished with it by month’s end, she loved him more than she could say. She was the feature character which chased a *Donkey Kong* likeness around. It was a twist on things, and it was slightly better than Donkey Kong Junior, in Gage’s mind.

\* \* \*

By the year’s end, rumors were rampant that the United States was no more. People did it in jokes, they had mock maps which carved the American West to the Russians, the North to the Canadians, and the South to the Cubans and Central Americans. People were no longer paying their bills, but amazingly, commerce went on in a ‘trust’ system (store credit was given away nearly *everywhere* in Seattle, and it was practically a return to the barter system). As much as Zelda believed she loved Gage, he knew he had to break up with her—he couldn’t handle her around, any more. When asked why he was kicking her out, he said, “See that *black* girl over there!!” He pointed to a black girl waiting at a bus stop in front of his townhouse. “She’s my *LOVER*!! When you’re not *here*, she gives me ideas about what I should be writing, and how I should incorporate my ideas into my video *games*!!”

“You’re yelling at me!” Zelda observed.

“I notice that Horatio Sanz is selling King Potato in front of my *house*, again!! And I know you have a connection about how to *do* those kinds of things!!”

“You’re paranoid, and you’re a *wigger*!!”

“Listen, bitch... I don’t care if I’m paranoid, and even *if* you’re still not giving secrets to the CIA, I have *reason* to be paranoid!! Besides, there’s something I can’t put my finger on about you that I don’t

want you *AROUND!*!”

“Fuck you!” she subtly said. She started to look around at the streets, and Gage could tell there was trepidation on her face.

“I see that you’re afraid of ‘the people.’ Has the CIA disbanded, and I didn’t *hear* about it!?”

“The Cold War is *over*, stupid!! And we don’t have a *use*, any more!?”

“The ‘war on terror’ is a farce, huh?”

“Yep!” she said.

Gage held her, but he knew he had a fugitive on his hands. “You must have fucked people *over!*!”

“I *didn’t!*!” she strongly disagreed. “They can’t *handle* themselves!!”

Gage’s tone changed. “I know what you’re talking about. I get blamed for at least one suicide or cop-shooting every month.” He considered his position with her. “I’m going to keep you around for another month—” He couldn’t believe he was saying it, because she was a beautiful physical sight to see. “—and if you stop fucking me over, we can have a *life!*!”

“A ghost of a *chance!*!” She was pissed. She knew Gage was a *Rush* fan, and “Ghost of a Chance” from *Roll The Bones* spoke of having a ghost of a chance that people could find someone else... “and make it last.”

“Fuck you, *bitch!*! I’ll have you know that I’m committed to about twenty other *girls*, right now!! On my way ‘up’... these girls gave me comfort... and solace... and they gave me things you can’t *imagine*... and I don’t... *need*... you!! So stop your horseshit with giving me mental torture every time you don’t get your *way!*!”

“You’re saying you hold the *cards*, huh!?” Zelda flipped over a real-life poker table, and started to cry after pouring herself a brandy.

“If I give in to you—if I let you *torture* me!—there are twenty thousand people, no less, that will feel it in my next *games!*! I will advocate blowing up the *White House!*! I will advocate world revolution, and I will advocate nuclear war for all *nations!*!” Gage paused, then said, “If you really want to die—suicide by nuclear war!!—keep on *FUCKIN’* with me, *okay?*!”

“Yeah! I got it!” She was dumbfounded, and a little mentally tired.

“You know I don’t believe my games do *shit*, anyway, right?” She nodded “yes,” and Gage continued, “So I’m pressing your buttons as much as you’re pressing *mine!*!”

“I caused nine *deaths* in my life, *Gage!*!”

“CIA, *right?*” Gage pondered the gravity of what she was saying. “Do you think I do more harm... or *less* harm to society with what I do?”

“*More* harm,” she said.

“Why not jail me?”

“This is not the U.S.S.R., *remember?*!”

“I got it,” Gage said. “Sometimes I question that, though!” Zelda shook her head in anger. “I still



want you to leave at the end of January, next month!” She tried to kiss him, and for the first time in four months, Gage didn’t kiss her back. “Why don’t you bone down on Will Farrell, or one of the other Saturday Night Live cast members... since you *like* them so much!?”

“I will,” she said. She started to leave, and that’s when the black lady at the bus stop started to head for the townhouse.

\* \* \*

Cheese took off from his trip to Seattle and he had hope. He thought the World Revolution was eminent, and he thought he was going to be a key player in getting things done. As it turned out, he headed toward Montana, and was greeted by an email from Gage, going by the electronic name *SOURCE98173*. It was scary for Gage to be sending emails because, he came to find, people would write in his name more often than not, and it would create a strange kind of paranoia. It was *safer*, in other words, not to send anything at all. When he was in college, he heard that Bill Clinton *never* emailed Chelsea... because he didn’t trust the service, and he didn’t trust the would-be pirates. Gage thought it was important to email Cheese because he left as a paranoid dude, granted he *should* have been since he set up and embarrassed the former mayor of one of the larger cities on the globe.

“Don’t trust anything from me for a while, Cheese.” Gage wrote. “The paranoia has died down, and I’m even second-guessing puttin’ your idea of ‘blowing up the Moon’ into a VIDEO GAME. The people won’t have it, and I’m starting to doubt that the ‘world- revolution- thing’ was any good at all. In short, they gave concessions, and I think they’re going to last!!”

Secretly, the idea lingered with Gage about designing a video game in which the end purpose was to gain enough world power to “blow up the Moon”!! It was in his head, and he thought of a cartoon he saw long ago. When he was a child, there were still reruns of a show in which a pterodactyl-like-creature shot lasers through its eyes and tail. The premise was that an *asteroid* split the Moon in two, changed the tides, and changed the face of life on the planet Earth. It intrigued Gage enough to pursue the idea, not in video game design, but rather in crude script to be worked on... just in case “writer’s block” occurred of the computer programmers’ kind. He was proud... and he was hoping that Cheese didn’t get arrested for his radical behaviors. For a temporary time, it truly looked like there was no more government in the United States of America. In a lot of ways, that was ideal because that’s how the nation was born: as United *States*. He was proud to be in Washington, and if everything was going to go back to normal, he was going to catch a game of the Portland Trail Blazers by mid-May. He wanted the old world. He wanted that *desperately*. He thought of Zelda—he missed her since she moved out in mid-January—but he wasn’t going to call her because he had other things to do. In the mean time, he put up posters of former Disney star singers—Christina Aguilera, and the rest. The object of one of his next games was going to be that the

player had to track down the various stars, and try to successfully pry money out of their accounts or wallets. They were going to be given the choice of “agent,” “salesman,” or “rocker.” He thought it would work with the public. He knew people wanted money... and people were doing the karaoke thing in *groves* hoping to be discovered. In secret, Gage believed the wave of the near future was going to be in live performances with rockin’ guitar solos, and the sort. He thought that O-Town, ‘N Synch, and the Backstreet Boys had their day. Sure, they would come back in retro, but Gage knew that things went in cycles.

The public *didn’t*.

\* \* \*

Gage woke to a dream of Christina Aguilera sleeping with all five Backstreet Boys and thought about what he’d do for the next day. He wasn’t much into torture—it wasn’t his way because he believed in karma—but he knew it existed and was prevalent in the world of the Pacific Northwest. Far to the south, in California’s central kingdom, there were a collection of cities known as “Silicon Valley.” They consisted of Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, San José, and a few other cities. They provided the world with computer microchips, but Seattle, and the surrounding area, was more renowned for the actual programming of software and video games; home of Ninetendo, Microsoft, and a few other companies. They had it “caked” up there, as Gage would put it, and the ultra-rich kept tabs on nearly everyone else in society. There was an artistic element to it, and even if your name was “Cheese” on the internet, it didn’t take long for people to figure out who you really were.

People had primal fears: homosexuality, heights, water, public speaking, near-death experiences, and poisoned food. Of the twenty major ones, *Cyborg Lot* had the spin on two hundred of the three hundred million Americans. They were easy to get. They had webmasters which spied on people during their chats and email transmissions. There were people that would just “talk.” There were viewing habits of TV, patterns of internet downloads, and people that would rattle like a can when drunk in bars and grilles. *Cyborg Lot* had them all, and they rarely shifted drastically from person to person. Cheese, on the other hand, was hard to tag because with each region he would travel into, he would have a new fear. In Louisiana, for example, he was afraid of losing women—Katrina, and the other lady whom he couldn’t remember. When he was in Seattle, he was afraid of being without money—*bartering* money of the new kind distributed by Microsoft, itself. On the way to Montana, *Cyborg Lot* came to find that Cheese was afraid of high speeds, and they got their information from truckers.

When the *Cyborg Lot* “death threat” light came on their switchboards, it would alert people around the country whom were susceptible to radical behaviors from individuals or groups. The FBI had a program called “Carnivore,” and it basically did the same thing, but for the national government. *Cyborg Lot*, though, was responsible for the private sector, and its founder, Henrietta Joan Lott was in trouble by

her own contraption. If you were caught cursing in public, a report was filed on you, and you had demerits administered. Public displays of affection were not allowed, as well, because they were said to induce envy from the general public, and that in turn by theory would cause crime to rise by people trying to get out their pent-up emotions. The inventor of the guillotine was *killed* by the guillotine, Henrietta had known, and in spite of all of her caution, she was caught in a trap she couldn't escape.

She approached Gage on the day he had his dream of Aguilera and the Backstreet Boys. She said, "You haven't filed a report on *anyone* for the last three *months*!/" She had been ousted as head of her own company, but she was unsure who did it... or *why* (it was Cyborg Lot's way to administrate pain and humiliation in secret, where they couldn't be traced). She tried to prod Gage, "Do you know anything about *changes* goin' on?"

"I'm in *love*!/" Gage said. It was a half-lie, and Gage was getting over Zelda not being around. "There are changes going on *all* the time!/" Gage yelled at her. He picked up his coffee, and asked her, "Do you still register decibels to gauge people's wrath when administering demerits?"

Henrietta shook her head "no." "That was a bad idea." Gage noticed she felt out of place, and Henrietta hurried to a new subject. "Your friend, *Cheese*, who wanted to blow up the buildings of the *South*?"

"I emailed him... and I don't think he's a threat!/"

She changed the subject again. "Do you know they have a new competitor in California's central *valley*? Something like Cyborg Lot, I mean?"

"I'm *sure*!! It was a good idea, and great minds think alike!/"

"How do they know we're not *bad*, and we only meant the public *good* when we administered our *pain*??" She had a guilty conscious.

"Well... That's the whole *thing*!! They don't know, and as far as I'm concerned, the public is going to have to make up its mind, in time. If *they* are wrong, our guys will report them, and we'll do the 'Millhouse With Lisa Thing On the Moon' to them until they stop... or we'll step it up and set them up with hookers that have bad STDs... like happened to *me*!/"

"You think it's *wrong*, somehow!/" Henrietta yelled at Gage.

"No!! It think it's a war, and if we wouldn't have done it to them *first*, they would have been controlling us from Silicon Valley a long *time* ago!/"

Henrietta calmed, and said, "I don't think it's necessarily true, you know?"

Gage looked at her face, "You got fired, huh? You got fired from a fuckin' company that you *stared*!/"

She nodded "yes."

"That's the ultimate humiliation, you know? *YOURS*, at least. I saw the list. You fear spiders, ugly persistent men... and bein' treated like a nobody in your place of *work*!/" Gage chuckled. "It's kind of funny... because no one *programmed* it that way!/" Gage lied. He did the programming on the computer,

and if Henrietta were to insult one hundred people in any given three-month period, her Board of Directors was instructed to oust her.

They *did*.

\* \* \*

Spectacular Youth was the company that Henrietta had heard about, and questioned Gage about. They worked *opposite*, somewhat, of the way Cyborg Lot worked. Instead of “penalizing” people for constant undesired behavior (cheating on your spouse, lying on your tax returns, taking pens and pencils home from work, and so on), they offered “reward systems.” A team of ten experts would contemplate whom was worth what and their criteria, ironically, was rooted in historical tales of the American tradition —Jesse James, Bonnie and Clyde, Al Capone, and everyone else down the line. If a CEO did something to rob his company of money in the form of stocks, Spectacular Youth would give a three-month window for the sake of evaluating operation. Was she or he using the money to reinvest in the country? Was it an act of defiance? Or was the transaction something that was *completely* despicable with the CEO’s intent of running from the country in shame and horror? They tried to understand and evaluate modern heroes, and they would put “price tags” on them!! “This guy is worth a hundred million!?” one officer would say. Another would say, “I’d buy him for *fifty* million... if I had the *money*!?” So, inevitably, everyone had a “price tag” which corresponded to speculated worth. On the other hand, the blatant sociopaths, would have a “cost.” “We think this guy... or *this* girl is costing our country seventy-five million per year in taxes and/or domestic product growth projections.” Of course, it wasn’t an exact science, and the central government didn’t use Spectacular Youth’s system even *once* because it was deemed too “cooky” for them, as rumor had it from a valuable leak. Nonetheless, it got on Henrietta’s nerves enough that she wanted to drive to California and have the CEO, and everyone in the company *shot*!! They valued her at twenty-five thousand dollars, and it was an insult to her. In turn, she lost respect from her inner support group just before getting fired. When a person lost social support, under the Cyborg Lot system, an exacerbated quality of existence typically followed: Moping would turn into blatant public defiance of prominent figures, and that spurred the chain reaction strong enough and *fast* enough to warrant demerits at a rate that could hardly be controlled. The only people that ever made it out of the mudslide were people that had other “outs”: Musicians whom reconnected with their bands; small business owners whom did not have everything tied up in their nine-to-five corporate jobs; mothers whom *loved* to raise their children, and whom had nice nest eggs to do so with. The list went on, and Henrietta had no “out.” Consequently, her *fears* were put into place. Newscasters, whom had direct links to Cyborg Lot, fucked with the “top one hundred worse” at any given time. They would follow them through the use of their newscasters to their places of pleasure: bars, massage parlors, swimming holes, or anywhere else. Innuendos were made about them without any proof or trace of the “downing” of any suspicious suspects. Sometimes, the top hundred would go batshit crazy

and be sent to mental asylums. Sometimes, they would react violently and be sent to prisons for fisticuffs. At times, people with “outs” would weather the storms, and wait to be taken off of the “top one hundred worse” list. Very seldom—one out of a *thousand* times—would someone be able to fight back against the system and have it work for them. The best of them were comedians whom knew when and *how* to make fun of themselves. “I was fired from *work* today... and my girlfriend left me!!!” They would open their routines with self-parody... and have the audience in their hands by the end of their shows.

Henrietta was not so lucky. She had no talents. She knew where Cheese was going. And she liked him.

Henrietta boarded her car to go to Montana. She knew Cheese was there, and she didn’t care that the helicopters would follow. She turned on the radio, and knew that the people of eastern Washington were being alerted to her presence. “Lots are for sale, in eastern Washington!! Yakima, Wenatchee, and the entire eastern section... Idaho has a place just for *you*!!” *Could be paranoia*, Henrietta mused. “And when you see the candy apple red cars from our company, get out and run to the streets because we’re ready to deal with *YOU*!!!” *Not paranoia*, Henrietta thought. In the hour since she had taken off from Seattle, she was surprisingly in the only candy apple red sports convertible on the *road*!!!

\* \* \*

Much in the same way that Gage developed an attitude of removing anything negative from his life in order to ensure a positive future, Cyborg Lot did not *alone* try to induce fear and/ or pain into people on their shit lists. Quite the contrary. For lottery winners, if the said person was reported to be unfit, Cyborg Lot would offer the participant *more* money... in the form of “wise business investments” and “free commercial products”... in order to pump people up to unhealthy levels, and knowing that falls were eventual, especially if induced by insiders. Christina Aguilera was one of the insiders, it was reported to Spectacular Youth, which was why they designated her in the one hundred million dollar level in spite of the fact that they didn’t have access to her actual financial records, many of which were kept in over-seas banks. Whores—*good-looking* ones—would mate with unsuspecting winners, and dumb professional athletes, in order to remove them from their fortunes within five-to-seven year plans. They used endorsements and unstable operating franchises. In such a way, there was never the cry of “conspiracy.” After all, how could a lottery winner or a recent millionaire athlete make such claims after having had “icing” on his or her *cake*?? It would look to the public like the person in question just didn’t know how to spend hers or his money!! And the attitude of Cyborg Lot was “the bigger they are, the harder they fall”!!! In other words, it was *more* fun for them to inflate a person’s worth... and then having it destroyed. The naïve punks, as they were known to Cyborg Lot, would not know what *hit* them!! And when they cried conspiracy after the fact, and many years later, it would be too late... and it would fall on deaf *ears*!!!

Henrietta was in Idaho, and she already knew the system. On occasion, but not too often, she

would contemplate how she would handle things if the dread was to ever happen to her. She decided that “living life as normal” would be the best route. She went into a pizza restaurant in Idaho while on her way to Montana. She liked “triple cheese pizza,” and she thought of “Cheese”—the guy she wanted to meet, whom she thought could get her out of her mess. She feared being seen as a “cock sucker”—one that would swallow semen on the first date. After all she was a CEO, and there were very few women CEOs that she knew of. To be seen as sexual in the male world was an invitation to never be taken seriously as an officer. Further, but less in the fear range, she wanted to be seen as someone that would only have sex no sooner than her fifth or sixth date with a person.

Cyborg Lot was on her, and they sent spies to the pizza restaurant they knew she was at. They had direct orders.

Henrietta ordered along. She ordered a medium pizza with ranch dressing on the side. She ordered a half litre of red wine, and she put music on the juke box which reminded her of the Pacific Northwest and Lilith Faire. She sang brilliantly as she headed back to her table. Deep inside, she was paranoid, and five seconds did not pass in which she wondered what her old company would do to her... or *when*.

“She ordered heavily,” she overheard a man say to his lady mate at a nearby table.

“I know. She comes here all the time, you know?” the lady said.

“What do you mean, ‘comes’?” the man asked.

“The sea men!! That’s what I’m talkin’ about!! The sailor from the *COAST*!! Can’t you see it on her *face*!!” the lady said.

A shrill of electroshock went up Henrietta’s spine. She was surprised she couldn’t control her own anger. She turned around, approached the lady in anger, and said, “Listen *bitch*!! There is no semen on my face... and there never *has* been!!!”

The lady looked at Henrietta in surprise. “There’s a ‘war on terror,’ you know!? And for you to talk to a perfect stranger in the way you just *did*...!”

Her male mate hushed her up. “Listen!! The vacationer, here, is just upset because she’s not as good-lookin’ as *you*, honey!!” The man turned to Henrietta. He said, “You look a *mess*!!” He waited for a reaction, got none, then said, “You just lose your *JOB*!?”

Henrietta stormed off mad. She approached the teen behind the front counter whom had taken her order. “I don’t want the ranch, any more!! As a matter of fact...”

She couldn’t hold back her tears. She left. She didn’t ask for a doggy bag and she didn’t ask for her money back. She wanted to get to Montana and she wanted to forget the life she had left behind... or the life that kicked her *out*. Deep inside she knew the latter notion in her head was the more-true one.

\* \* \*

The congressional leader of the general South whom advocated massive defense cutbacks as a budgetary augmentation of a recessed economy transpired by uncontrollable costs at the gasoline pumps was Nate Wesley. He had honest intentions, and he was well aware of the CIA's MK-Ultra program which in essence was a mind-control program for various people. He didn't suspect he was under it, though. The lobbyists were nowhere to be found—they were a thing of the past, in a lot or regards, because of outside political pressure tracing back to the H. Ross Perot campaign of 1992—and the *new* way of doing things were the private engines that pushed people's buttons. Congressman Nate Wesley of Tennessee knew immediately of Spectacular Youth upon them busting on the scene in 2004. The consisted of Cyborg Lot cast outs, and a lot of unsatisfied youth whom believed that "the media" was villainizing the wrong people. The top ten people in the group took care of the most highly profiled people, and a slew of two hundred other workers compiled facts and knowledge of the general common people. Jennie Garth was one, though she had been a hit on a ten-year series, *90210*, because the elite at Spectacular Youth only had time and energy for *current* "hot stuff." Nate Wesley, having advocated the withdrawal of funds to major aerospace companies, was valued at "two hundred and fifty thousand dollars," according to Spectacular Youth. That meant that if Disney, Fox, or the WB would kick down enough money, they would have exclusive feeds on his whereabouts and actions. For less than twenty thousand dollars, Spectacular Youth could round their army, and they could send young kids to follow him wherever he went. If he went to Arby's... they would be there!! If he were going to take a quiet drive to the Atlantic seaboard... they would *be* there... and they would listen to what he said (in some cases, they would record it with hidden VOXs), and they would report back to Spectacular Youth with speed and proficiency!! In some cases, they would try to sublimate their ideas to him. Without directly looking at the man, they would have a "loud conversation." "Channel four has the West Wing on tonight about..." They would allow the execs in their Los Angeles studios to further the sublimations with caricatured likenesses of chosen government officials and leaders. It was hard for the congressman to handle, but he had no choice in the matter.

Simultaneous to Nate Wesley's finding-out of Spectacular Youth, Cyborg Lot put twenty-five demerits on him for even *talking* about advocating less funds for the national defense. The way of Cyborg Lot was not sublimation of an alternative choice, as was the way of Spectacular Youth. They advocated pain in any and all instances. They would send "hunks" to hit on Nate Wesley's wife when he was at a bar talking of his proposals. Nate's wife would tell him, occasionally, of these seemingly coincidental occurrences, but once in a while, she would keep it to herself and say nothing at all. She was in her early sixties, and it flattered her beyond belief.

Nate's fear of the West Coast was compounded by these strange social behaviors. What had started as pure logic—the cutback of defense budgets around the country—turned into a private disdain of anyone in the national securities military process. Ironically, it wasn't Lockheed, nor McDonnell Douglas, nor Boeing which called for the mental torture of Nate Wesley and his constituents. It was called by Cyborg Lot, primarily, and the chain which ensued was indicative of the paranoia created. In other words,

Lockheed, and the rest, held their ground and waited for a fair debate in the House of Representatives. When tortured, Nate was overheard as saying, “I hope they all end up on the *STREETS!!* Every last *one* of them!!” The feeds got back to the underclass of the major aerospace giants, and a heated war of words unraveled which nearly cost the country a nuclear civil war. Nate believed, initially, that the mental torture was from the aerospace giants themselves, but in actuality, it was from Cyber Lot. The contingency plan, originating with laid-off Boeing workers in Washington State, was to “blow the shit out of the South”... and then to “blow up the *Moon*” if world demands weren’t made for all former engineering specialists. It got so far that mock negotiations took place, and the former officials would take refuge on floating, nuclear-powered “*SUPER ISLANDS*” which would make aircraft carriers look like a piss ant *joke!!!* All in all, Gage’s video game plan seemed to work, after he talked to *Cheese* of some of the intricacies. Word got out... and it was a game instead of threatening words.

Cheese met Henrietta in Montana, and he was trying to forget everything that was going on. He knew he was on radars of the internet kind, but he didn’t care because he didn’t have *energy* to care. When he met Henrietta, he asked her, “Did you learn any lessons from torturing people before they even committed any crimes?”

She tried to come on to him, but her desperation backed Cheese up on the barstool he spoke from. She said, “We’re two of a kind, *huh??*”

Cheese said, “No. I meet people like you all the time across the country. You’re the first person that had the money to take it to a national level, though. Everyone else had the *dreams!!*”

“I want it to end, because it’s backfiring on me!!” she pleaded.

Cheese looked around in the bar—there were about fifteen people in his sight, and beyond the smoke, there might have been more. He said, “Join the crowd, because all these people have jacked people’s images in one way or the other. Jim, over there...” He pointed to a man getting up to play pool. “He specializes in making it look like the Pope is having sex with young girls from around the country.” He looked at a fine, older lady in tight leathers. “Nancy, right over here, likes to put her *son* in charge of the country... and her animation is quite impeccable when he gives his salutes from the White House, itself.”

“So do we have a *country?*” Henrietta asked.

“*NO!!*” could be heard from a man with a pool stick in his hand. Nancy had subtly said “yes,” though.

“Early last year, I thought everything was to shit, and the United States would never come back!” The man with the pool stick approached Cheese as he continued to speak. “The Magna Carta was nullified and reinstated six times in its nearly thousand-year history. Our Constitution was cancelled in 1998 during the Clinton impeachment hearings... and most of us *know* that, but it made a strong comeback after the nine-eleven incident... and then it disappeared, again, last year during the energy crisis!”

“So you don’t *know!!*” Henrietta asked.



“Yep!! And it’s best that way because I’m a *master* of things when it’s *gone!!*”

“Call me by my screen name, *okay??*”

“No, Henrietta. People over here have to know that you fucked up *bad!!*” He pointed to the guy with the pool cue again. “That guy’s son is in *prison* because of you!! You fuck up people *bad*, in that institution you started!!”

“But you forgive me?”

“No. I don’t *have* to forgive you, though. *Hector*, here does.”

The man with the pool cue approached her—he had blue eyes and blond hair. He said, “I’m Hector. I’m from Saskatchewan, and I’m twenty-seven years of age!!” Henrietta shook his hand—it was greasy from working on a car, earlier—and he added, “If you want to buy me a beer, and I can tell you how to make things up with me and my *son!!*” The guy was from Georgia—not Saskatchewan—and he wanted Henrietta to help him break his son out of prison. He thought it could be done... and so did *she*, for some reason or another.

\* \* \*

Henrietta explained to “George”—she couldn’t stand to call him by his “Hector” pretense—what exactly happened with his son. “He was in a bar, hitting on one of our women. When we started the company, you had a clean slate except for looks. If you were six-two and had blond hair and blue eyes, you were given fifty points. If you were a female, you had to have at least a thirty-six bust, and a D-cup bra. That got you fifty points, and it totaled seventy-five if you had a nice smile. We looked at your worth the way so many *other* people look at your worth!! On the *surface!!* And if you had skills, that came secondary!! As a matter of fact, we found that some skills were *detriments*... like driving forklifts. The reason was that those people wanted to cling to their working-class heritages, and they didn’t want to be ‘upwardly mobile’... so that knocked off twenty-five points. At the end of the day, long story short, your son didn’t have a lot to offer us. We knew he had a history of fighting with his girlfriend... and it showed on the *police records* we were able to obtain... and when he started yelling at her in the bar—she was one of our “over hundred” people, initially, because she had a modeling background—we set things in motion. We gave the bartender a hundred-dollar-tip to make sure your son left with at least a point two blood alcohol level, and we had four good drivers in the field. One honked at him when he got on the freeway—it distracted him—another swerved toward him, and a final one was in the distance and pulled over behind your son after he crashed into the side bushes to serve as an eye-witness when the cops came to ask what had happened.”

“You said that there were *four* cars in your field!!” “George” mused.

“Yeah! *When* the cops came, the fourth one honked loudly to agitate the cops, ironically, to make sure that your son’s story wasn’t listened to.

“George” was somber, and said, “Call me *Hector*, still. I appreciate what you do, but don’t you fear *revenge?!?*”

“I *can’t*,” Henrietta said. “I lost a kid to a drunk driver when I was in my early twenties, and I swore revenge on all morons *after* that point!?”

“You’re a pretty fucked up lady,” Hector said to her. “I *like* you, and I think you’re going to be able to help me!?”

Henrietta was surprised that the tall man with the cue stick, now known as “Hector” again, didn’t get mad and thrash her. She was very *surprised*.

\* \* \*

“You really call it that, huh?” Zelda was debriefing with Gage in Montana. He had taken off in a flight to see her, and the rest of her buddies—Cheese and Henrietta were two of them.

“Yeah! Propaganda *Tube!!* Because if you watch it long *enough...*”

“You go insane, like the *rest* of us!?” Zelda finished.

“Yeah!! And the PT Cruiser I said I bought... well it was just a Propaganda Tube to find out where you were through innuendoes from the local newscasters in *Seattle*.”

Zelda looked relieved. “I think you’re saying that we’re not in a *shithole* any more for having done anything to the *government*, *ME* for defecting from the *CIA!!?*”

Gage looked startled. “You *never* defect from the *CIA*! It just dissolves and reappears!”

“Explain!?” Zelda said.

“It’s like the *Godfather III*! Closest thing I can explain! They’ll keep ‘suckin’ you in,’ and they’ll say it was in national interest to let you out... so you could go *undercover!!!* And then they’ll ‘suck you in’ when they think it’ll serve their purposes!?”

Zelda looked surprised and started to cry. “They’ve *done* it to you before, *huh???*”

“No!?” Gage exclaimed. “I mean, *yeah...* but I never believed them one way or the *other!!!*”

“*Earth First!* Tell me about *Earth First!*” Zelda said.

“I’ll tell you about *Greenpeace*, instead,” Gage lit up a cigarette—*personally rolled* from Drum—and started to smoke and explain. *Greenpeace* was an organization, formed in the seventies, that was regional in control of making sure that nuclear tests weren’t being made in the Pacific Northwest—his memory was hazy because he hadn’t had to think of it too much in the past. They didn’t recognize borders. They grew in power, and influence, and they recommended that everyone take control of his or her own regional disputes. As time went on, they became targets for the outside world. They purchased a submarine from one of the national governments—the *Rainbow Warrior*—and it was sunk by the French government after a series of protests (the *French* were vehement about continuing nuclear testing in and around the Pacific islands). It was a sad day for *Greenpeace*, and when Zelda asked why they didn’t

recognize international borders, Gage responded, “Do *birds* recognize international borders? Do *bears*? Well, *Greenpeace* is full of people that are environmentalists, and just like there are congressmen that legislate on the side of the young, poor, and infirmed, *Greenpeace* legislated in its personal governments on the side of *BEARS*... and *EAGLES*... and *fish*, et cetera!!”

“Bravo! You have a *convert*!!” Zelda said.

“No, I *don't*... because *Greenpeace* doesn't really *exist*, any more!!”

“You're saying *what*... and why are you *sayin'* it?”

“They disbanded, years ago, and the signs that they disbanded are that they no longer advocated local control of resources by the people. It became ‘Save the Whales’ ... and *only* ‘Save the Whales.’ They hit only a few national issues after they became dejected and apathetic.”

Zelda looked sick. “And that's why I'm in *Earth First*!... *now*??”

“*No*!! That's what I'm *telling* you!! *Earth Liberation Front* took over where *Earth First*! was... and *they* had been the lead when *Greenpeace* seemed mainstream, and *only* mainstream!”

“So if you make it into your *PROPAGANDA TUBE*, chances are you no longer exist, any more!?”

Gage became mad, flicked on the *television* in front of them, then said, “*Listen*!!”

The reporter from a local Great Falls station rattled, “...and the group *claiming* to have dissolved the United States government is *EARTH FIRST*! That's right, people, and you go outside and look around, you'll notice American flags, still, so don't believe a thing!! Sure, they have pirated the airwaves in selected Southern demographic sites, but it is no need for *ALARM*!! The United States is up and well, and the interruption of the President's speech earlier, was a technical malfunction, and nothing *more*!! Do not believe *EARTH FIRST*! people! Please do not believe *EARTH FIRST*!!...”

Gage turned off the TV, pulled Zelda to his side, and french kissed her for more than twenty seconds. “I'm going *home*, Zelda... to Seattle, Washington... I've seen this too many times in my life. I had reports submitted to me from *wiggers* kicked out of *EARTH FIRST*! because they were there for sexual exploitation, and nothing more. They gave me their *plans*!! I put them into motion in the form of *video games*!!”

“2084,” Zelda mused.

“It was 2084 that started the whole thing off for me, and my *buddy* designed that one...”

“You're a *robot* now, you know!!”

“If you can sustain the *revolution*, by all means, *LET ME KNOW*!!” Gage was not angry—just irate. “I can design *Berzerk 2010*, if I want to... and it'll fly... And when the folks at Atari designed *Missile Command*, it was a message to the whole audiences at arcades around the globe that *CALIFORNIA WAS UNDER ATTACK*!!”

“Nuclear missiles sent to the six cities up and down the *Coast*! I remember *now*!!” Zelda mulled over.

“*Yeah*, and ‘you the people’ had to *defend* us!!”

“I get it!! You heard it so many times that you *DON'T BELIEVE IT ANY MORE!!*!”

“Yeah, Zelda... so I'm going to go home, I'm going to call my city 'Seattle,' and I'm *not* going to call it *Washington II*, as so many Washington State *junkies* want me to!!”

“I love you, *you know!!*” Zelda said. She felt his face, and knew he needed a shave.

“I love you too, you know? And I don't like to *say* the word!”

“Love?”

“No. *'Too'!*”

She laughed, and they went home together... to *Seattle, Washington*.

\* \* \*

Gage got home to Seattle, Washington with Zelda as his mate (they performed a mock ritual known as a “wedding” while still in Great Falls, Montana). He was upset that Zelda still exhibited behavior of the torturous nature. He would eat—it was one of his vices to eat rice cakes with a lot of teriyaki sauce—and she would start to mention all his distastes. “Did you see *Horatio Sanz* on this last week's episode of *SNL*?” It sounded sarcastic to Gage. Zelda continued, “He was eating frozen frisbees from *Newfoundland!*!”

“What the fuck are you *sayin'*, bitch!! Can't you see I'm eatin', and I want to be left alone!?” Gage knew that in child psychology, it didn't matter *what* was said to toddlers—it meant the tone, more than anything else. When Gage propped himself in front of the Propaganda Tube to get more ideas for his games (he limited himself to no more than two hours of exposure per day, contrary to the regular four-to-six hours of the common person, as of late), he liked to talk like the people on the screen. “*Bitch!!* Get me some brew, and shut your big *pie hole!*!”

Zelda felt soothed by the tone of Gage's speech, and brought him a beer from the fridge, in spite of the fact that he may have been joking.

“*Tofu is legal* again, you know?”

“What are you sayin'?” Zelda wanted to know. She was genuinely startled at the statement. She didn't know when he was half-joking, purely-joking, or completely serious, at times.

“Cyborg Lot put a curse on people that ate TOFU!! They had rats and moles from grocery stores that would narc on the people that *bought* tofu!! Cyborg Lot was financed by a collective of fast food joints, pharmaceutical outlets, and sporting apparel companies, not to mention politicians of the *three* major political parties—in *this* town, at least—and some of the broadcasters from the *media!*!”

“So you're sayin' that Burger King isn't goin' to *slander* you... if I tell them that you were eatin' rice cakes and *tofu!*!”

“Yep!! I think so... because the report is out that fast food is *bad* for YOU!!—somethin' you didn't know already—and I'm guessin' that the 'health lobby' of California must have contributed more to

the Cyborg Lot think tank this month... or maybe this *year!*!”

“I can go *joggin’* with you!! And I can wear a bikini at *PUGET SOUND!!* Without worrying about their *cronies!*!”

“You bet!! But you have to keep in mind that their cronies work for *us*, now, and it *WILL* change in the future!!” Gage looked over to Zelda. He saw a look of confusion on her face. “I’ve seen it happen before, *you know?!*”

“I used to be a San Diego jogger!! I know what you *mean!*!”

Gage held her after she came to his side of the love sofa. He was still upset that she brought up Horatio Sanz while he was trying to eat. To test his theory that she didn’t want him to eat *anything*, he slowly lifted his rice cake back to his face.

“I have to take a *shit!*” she said.

*Sure enough*, Gage thought. *She’s fuckin’ with me!!!*

\* \* \*

“Why do you hate Horatio Sanz so much?” Zelda asked after dinner. She had changed into a sheer nightgown while in the restroom.

“It’s not *hate*. It’s indifference!”

“*What are you talkin’ about!*!”

“I don’t *hate*... rocks in my *shoes*... but they get on my nerves when they’re *in* there!!”

“You’re sayin’ that you don’t proactively seek to destroy Horatio Sanz’ life, *huh?*”

“Yep! And I’ll explain, now that we’re on the *subject!*” Zelda sat on Gage’s lap after taking his rice cake plate from him. He told her, “When I was young, a child—overweight, she was—liked me in my ninth grade class. ‘Joanie’ is what we called her because she had a fixation on Chachi, and *Happy Days* reruns. Her real name was ‘*Carroll*,’ ironic enough, and it’s the same character that Horatio Sanz plays when ‘e cross dresses!”

“She *did* somethin’ to you, huh?”

“Yeah!” A sharp pain went into Gage’s head. “When I was young, I was good-lookin’, and I was *smart!* I won math awards, wound up goin’ to MIT on a scholarship, but I couldn’t get a date because *Joanie* was always following me around. She would sabotage my dates, and she would say that we had a relationship that was beyond cordial!”

“*Lies*, huh?”

Gage considered things. “No! Not lies! Delusions.”

“Explain this to me, because I *like* it!!” Ironically, Zelda took off to the other room to get some bedroom slippers, and laid on the nearby couch when she came back.

“If I tell you that the Moon is made of green cheese as a six-year-old, it’s not a *lie*, right?”

“*Delusion!* I get what you’re *sayin’!*”

“*Joanie...* would get these ideas that I liked ‘er because I was popular, I was cordial... and I spoke to *all* the retards that way!!”

“I know you have a *FOUNDATION* for them!! Tell me what you’re *talkin’* about!!”

“Yeah! Some people say that Matt Dillon’s character in *Something About Mary* was modeled after me, but I can’t *prove* it!!”

“You are the least politically correct son-of-a-bitch I *know!!!*” Gage could tell she liked it, because she was shining like the midnight sky.

“I came to find that people like honesty, more than anything else! I *go* to see them!! I give them food on weekends, and I say, ‘How are you retards *doing!?*’ They yell at me in unison, and they know that I’m directing my speech at the reporters following me every time I go there. I get bad slants in the papers... but I don’t *care!!*”

“If I sabotaged you...?”

“That wouldn’t happen because you *love* me!!! And you wouldn’t want a thousand retards *on* your ass!!”

Zelda drew back, as if bitten by an ant. “Joanie had a problem worse in her mind than the... *Downs kids* that you were takin’ care of a year ago!!”

“Yeah... because she was a ‘tweener.’ She thought that she could fit in society because her eventual GED certificate, but she wasn’t accepted... and if they put her in ‘retard camp’... which I gave up a *year* ago... then we’d be accused of discrimination of *fat* people!!!”

“I like your style! I really like your *style!!*”

“And I gave it up, like I *said* I would, when I didn’t have the heart... or *energy* to do it any longer!!”

“Do you still *think* of Joanie??” Zelda asked. She was inquisitive, sexy, and assertive. Gage had hoped for Janine Garafolo so many years ago, but he was glad that he had Zelda, instead.

Gage wanted to lie, but couldn’t. “I put her in games when I need to have a *villain* whom is useless for the grander scheme of things. It keeps me honest, and it keeps me for huntin’ her down for fuckin’ up my high school prom in my junior year!”

“I remember! I think you told me that she called you in an emergency through the school principal when you were slow dancin’ with your date!! She said your mom needed you home, and you never got *over* it!!”

“You wouldn’t either, and it’d be a lot worse if I didn’t have video game design to get me out of problems as a remedy!!”

“So you yelled at the principal, that day, ‘*If that bitch so much as comes a hundred feet of me, I’m goin’ to rip ‘er fuckin’ THROAT out!!*’ I remember the story, now!”

“And the politically *correct* people wanted me rung for *that* one... but they understood my anger,

and they knew I had to get it out of me!!”

“‘Politically correct’ is a term entailing liberal dogma of things we shouldn’t say!! That’s WEBSTERS, for you!!”

“Yeah! And the liberals try to *liberate* themselves from dogma, and that’s the funny *part*!!” Gage felt like a goon for going deep into his past. He wasn’t a Scientologist, but knew that people had methods of forgetting. The Scientologists had their methods, and Gage used them when he could. When *questioned* why he chose to forget certain things, he would refer to the Buddhist lingo that he was taught. “One of the four Noble Truths, Zelda, is that ignorance is a major source of pain... and the *pursuit of knowledge* in the scope of the unknowable will rip you inside like a mean cancer!!”

“A paraphrase, of course!?”

“Yes!! And I’ll never know what Joanie was thinkin’, nor will I care... but I refuse to let it consume me like so many *other* bad things in the world.” The “Propaganda Tube” was still on, and Gage shut it off with his remote. “There are enough bad people that *they* bring us without you bringing me Joanie in the form of *Horatio Sanz*!!”

“I get it!!” Secretly, Zelda wanted out of the relationship. She had genital herpes, an insecurity that came with it, and lack of knowledge that Gage had herpes as well... just “the different kind,” as he so often put it.

“Now that this ‘war on terror’ has hit the fans, I’m starting to think of it as the new *McCarthyism*!! They are arresting people for stupid reasons, and I *think* you may be on the choppin’ block if you’re not careful as a former government official!!”

“You’ll protect me with everything you have in the form of *video* games, though?” Zelda demanded.

Gage thought he detected sarcasm, but was unsure of it. “The new blacklists, by the way, are in the form of your *credit reports*!! You can’t rent, pay insurance, or get a *job* without a mid- five hundred *score*!!”

“You’re a *psycho*!!” Zelda said. She was scared of government backlash. Gage had said that ‘war on terror’ was an oxymoronic term, and she was starting to see a glimpse of his supposed genius. To defer her feelings, she said, “You’re one *stupid* son-of-a-bitch, *too*!!”

“Everyone tells *me*!!”

She kissed him, and they slept well together that night.

\* \* \*

Zelda fixed Gage a good breakfast, the following morning. She wanted to know more of what was on his mind, and Gage didn’t mind if she was leaking it to her ol’ CIA buddies when she left for vacations. “I’m going to tell you about the fallen Twin Towers the best that I *know* how!!”

“You’re going to tell me about *Monopoly*, by Parker Brothers, because I heard you muttering it this morning when you woke up!!”

“That’s *right!!* And they had a monopoly on us, here in the Northwest, and Chris Cornell sang of it long ago. ‘And the wreck of you is the death of us *all’!!!*” Gage did his best Chris Cornell solo. He continued in rock ‘n’ roll vane. “‘Rise up gather around... rock this play *to* the ground!’ Pyromania, by the way, has a picture of a sharp-shooter aiming at a mid-management building. ‘When the walls... come *tumblin’ down!!*’ The ‘fucked up’ CIA were not the *first* to miss the cues of the fallen Twin Towers!! Even Richard Bachman in *The Running Man* as an author knew people hated mid-management, and would fly airplanes into their buildings if things got *bad* enough!! *The Running Man*, in book, by the way, is radically different than the movie starring Jesse ‘the Body’ Ventura and Arnold Schwarzenegger of California!! People knew they wanted those things gone, and Roberta Flack sang, ‘Killing me softly with *INGSOC*,’ not ‘his song’ ... if you listened *close* enough!!”

“An Orwellian reference, *huh??*”

“Yeah!! And I’ll tell you about the *original* Tower of Babel!!”

“You’re saying the Twin Towers were another *Tower of Babel!!?* A means to find ‘God’ on some *level!!?*”

“Yeah! Of course!! That’s a given... and I haven’t even smoked any *pot* yet, today!!”

“You’re crazy... but go on because I know you’re going to put it in your new game, *anyway!!?*”

“Okay!! The original Tower of Babel *fell*... not because God was mad at the people for *building* it... but because it didn’t have steel *support* beams!!”

“You’re *stupid*, you SON-OF-A-BITCH!! Why are you *sayin’* this stuff to me!!”

“Because you’re stupid *too*, but in a different way!!” Zelda scraped her two over-medium eggs onto Gage’s plate, and Gage said “thank you” when she was done. “I like you, though,” she said.

“Okay!! You’re going to get this *later*, but after a couple of months of observation!!” Gage paused after seeing a confused look on Zelda’s face. “They’re going to destroy the *new* ones!!”

“*What?!*” Zelda demanded.

“People in Philadelphia are *pissed off* that the United States government lets ‘urban decay’ happen, but they are quick to rebuild officers’ buildings of corrupt regimes in the form of corporate *enterprise!!*”

“You *hated* the telemarketers and insurance agents from the fallen Twin Towers, *huh?!*” she demanded.

“*No!* But my mom did, and when she listened to Soundgarden, I *laughed!!*” Gage chuckled upon reflection. He sang in his mother’s voice, “Hello! Don’t you *know* me!? I’m the dirt beneath your *feet!!*”

Zelda joined in, “*The most important fool you forgot to see!!*”

Gage skipped to the chorus of “Mailman.” “I know I’m headin’ for the bottom...!”

Zelda finished, “But I’m ridin’ you *all the WAY!!*” She had an amazing voice, and Gage finally felt understood by her. She broke the train of conversation, “But you *work* for a corporation!!”



“We work for a *good* one!!” Gage said.

“I wouldn’t be too *sure*!! Before I met you, I wanted to *kill* you because your video games!!”

“I know!! I can tell,” Gage said.

“So you need to make a video game of the *new* Twin Towers falling before the conspiracy reaches a *head*!?”

“Yep!! And I need to give a voice to all the people that write to me from Philadelphia... and if I do a good job, the corporate managers of the new towers will be put on notice: No more calling old ladies in the middle of the night for bein’ late on their credit card payments!!”

“You’re amazing, you know?”

“I know,” Gage shyly said.

“I *like* you,” Zelda said. She felt like she was in a dream.

“And if you manage to knock down the towers, in the new game, you become President of the United States of America...”

“And your job is *what*??” she wanted to know.

“To blow up the *MOON*!!” Gage dryly said. For almost ten seconds, neither one said anything to one another—the first long silence in more than a month—then Gage broke the silence by saying, “I hope no one takes it *seriously*!!”

“I *do*!!” Zelda said.

“You’re goin’ to have to give me your *Moon Zapper*, then!!” Gage said to her. He laughed dryly... but wished he was off the planet, maybe to Titan as it revolved around Jupiter. “I want to take a vacation, when all this is over,” he said to her.

“To your *mom*’s!!” Zelda said to Gage. She laughed, and Gage was happy with her.

“Good enough... but I can’t find ‘er now that she’s moved to *Texas*!!”

“You’re a wannabe, poseur loser, *you know*!!” Zelda said.

“So was *BECK*!! I take that as a compliment, *you know*??”

“I’m going to find Joanie and *sick* ‘er on your ass if you ever leave me!!”

“I know your kind!! I know you would really *do* that!!”

“Good night!!” Zelda said to Gage. It was ten in the morning, but she was sleepy from tossing and turning the night before. She thought a lot about the things that Gage said... and she was scared.

“Good *night*, honey!!” Gage said.

\* \* \*

“I have a meeting to go to, *Zell*,” Gage said to Zelda when she woke up from a six-hour slumber later that afternoon.

“*Yeah*?” She was still sleepy. “Who *is* it?”

“It’s the guy that ran the promotionals for all the pens that wound up in the houses which *ratted* the people out of the greater Seattle area!!”

“What are you *talking* about!!” Zelda rubbed her eyes. She scratched at her crotch, but thought it was uncouth to keep doing so for more than a couple of seconds.

Cyborg Lot didn’t trust “outside sources” when they tried to evaluate people’s behaviors and motives. They gave away free pens, mugs, and other items through a “dummy company” that would plant devices in more than ten percent of Seattle’s *homes*. They figured (and they were *right*) that it was enough to tell nearly anything about *anyone* in the region. The theory was that ten percent of all people knew someone that *knew* someone... that knew someone... of any *stature*. In other words, everyone was no less than three degrees separated from Bill Gates; they were no less than three degrees separated from Paul Allen; they were no less than three degrees separated from Mike Holmgren, Ichiro Suzuki, and Sam Perkins, for that matter. People talked, and they talked of the most interesting stories. It was easy to corroborate stories with the most sophisticated computer software, and it didn’t have to be *risked* to bug Bill Gates *directly*.

Gage said to Zelda, “I don’t want to *know* Bill Gates, but we have reason to believe that he wants to move *all* his money out of Seattle...”

“That would hurt Cyborg Lot *incredibly*!!”

“Yeah! And they want to come up with a solution to try to keep him *in*!!”

Zelda paused because she didn’t like what she was hearing. She said, “In essence, *Cyborg Lot* has become a collective *slave owner* of a lot of people in the *region*!!”

Gage became a little angry, but brushed it off. He was caught off guard by the analogy. “It wasn’t *designed* that way, but yeah... It’s a slave owner to even me and *YOU*!!”

Zelda didn’t like what she was hearing, now. “You didn’t *have* this attitude when I first met you!!”

“*BULLSHIT*!! I hid it because we weren’t losing Bill *Gates*!! We were losing ‘*CHEESE*,’ and we were losing some *nobodies* that could be replaced in a *second*!!”

Zelda drew back. She was almost convinced that she didn’t wake from a late-afternoon nap, but was rather still in it. “You’re *becoming* like them, you *know*!!?”

For a split second, Gage considered it. He approached Zelda, pulled her near him, then said, “It’s fifty demerits—I helped design the *program*—if I don’t show up to a meeting I said I’d go to!! It’s a *hundred* points for me... if I show up and just listen!!”

Zelda kissed Gage lightly, almost to get him away from her. “So you’re looking at cars swerving around you later... or showers of ‘hellos’ from pretty women around the *CITY*!!”

“You bet your *ASS*!!” Gage said. “And I know which one I *WANT*!!”

“You’re a *slave OWNER* now!!” Zelda yelled.

Gage walked to the door, nearly wanting to leave without saying a word. He was caught by fury

right before he reached the knob. “*Bitch!!* You are in the *CIA!!* And you guys are a *lot* worse than anything Cyborg Lot has put *together!!*”

Zelda was taken back. “I guess I have to say... or *think...* and the pretty ladies in the windows have free will, *too*, huh?”

“Yep!” Gage said. He headed out the door. He was happy that Cyborg Lot was finally going to come to an end as the people knew it. He was going to recommend to the source of their “promotions” that the remaining members of Alice In Chains get bugged in their houses. They were specialists at driving people crazy whom would *bug* them... or so he heard through the grapevine.

“You forgot your *hate*, asshole!!”

“I don’t *wear* one!!” Gage yelled as he made his way down the walk. Zelda bought him a *sleuth’s* hat, and wanted him to start wearing it now that she thought he was an asshole.

\* \* \*

Gage got to Seattle’s downtown area—he had taken the bus because driving in cars was no longer considered “weak” by Cyborg Lot’s standards being that even the *executives* were having a hard time paying for petroleum, any more—and he met with someone known as “Undercover Brother.” The guy looked more like Fat Albert, but the nature of his job led Gage to call him something else. “What’s *up*, UNDERCOVER BROTHER!!”

“I thought about that *joke* you told me, last time around, that ‘undercover people’ were the ones jacking off under their *covers* at *home* and trying to figure out cases!!” Undercover Brother looked at Gage, and said, “I don’t think it’s *true!!*” He put out a large cigar onto an ash tray in front of him.

Gage wanted to make a joke about it, but cut right into the meat. “I know people that know two of the original members of Alice In Chains... If we can get bugs in their houses, we can figure out what Bill Gates is doin’ just by influencing the local *TV* anchors to drop subtle references to what he may be *doin’!!*”

“You don’t *call* it the *TV* any more, *right??* The Propaganda Tube is one that they don’t *listen* to, I understand!!” Undercover Brother lit up a new cigar after licking it for moisture.

“Yeah, but their *neighbors* listen to it... and they *talk!!*”

Undercover Brother thought of the plan, and dismissed it. “I don’t like it,” he said. “You *have* to tell them—Alice In *Chains*—that we all have to be let *go!!*”

Gage was surprised. “You too, *huh??*”

“It’s a *monster*,” Undercover Brother said. “I want you to start calling me ‘Fat Albert’... like you wanted to, originally, because I don’t want to take this *assignment*, and I want to move to Montana... for a while... just like *you* did!!”

“Therapy, huh? You’d get the demerit, you know? For skipping out on this conversation!!” Gage gestured to the lady onlookers at the outdoor café where they discussed the situation. Gage didn’t know if

they worked for Cyborg Lot *directly*, or if they'd just tell the people that worked for them. Proxies were *everywhere* in the town. It didn't seem to bother Undercover Brother. Finally, Gage said, "I'm going to have to handle this one on my own. I'm going to have a *Pong* tournament downtown next month, and I bet Bill Gates comes as an undercover *nerd*! We have to make him start *feelin'* good about this town, again, and if we can keep him, we're not lookin' at people on the streets in a couple of months!"

"I like your style!" Undercover Brother said to Gage. He finished by saying, "Hey! Hey! Hey!! It's *FAAT ALBERT!*!" He laughed at his own joke, then refused to look at Gage directly in the face after putting on sun glasses.

"Bitch! Bill Gates is going to *go!!* I can *feel* it now!"

"Nah! Not set *up* in that *manner!*!" Undercover Brother said. He was looking like Stevie Wonder, to Gage, in Stevie's *older* years.

*I've gotta go and tell Zelda that it doesn't matter to the people on the streets whether or not Bill Gates stays! I don't know that I care anymore, any way!!* Gage thought. He skipped out without giving any money for his coffee or his pastry. He figured Undercover Brother would pick up the tab. Little did he know, it would cost him three demerits on Cyborg Lot's hit list.

\* \* \*

Apathy set into Gage, and he took off to Las Vegas without telling Zelda a word. He had access to Cyborg Lot's files even though he wasn't a technical employee of them, any longer (in the real sense, he was just a *subcontractor* when he designed their system). He knew of perfect crimes, in the world, and one of them was to set up fictitious bank accounts, filter off pennies and dimes here and there from thousands if not millions of people, and to tap into it when things had gone awry. Gage was not apathetic in the sense that he believed he couldn't influence Bill Gates' decision to stay in Seattle, or not. For that matter, it didn't matter to him, because he started feeling like a crony—the same kind of crony which he was *cursing* a couple of months prior.

Apathy hadn't set itself into Gage's life in more than ten years. At a point, when he believed the video game industry was no longer relevant, he started doing jobs for banks, programming their interest rate systems. A bank manager could not effectively tell if accounts should be rounded down or up. When asked, one time, why someone with an ending balance after interest payoffs got fifty-six dollars even when the estimated fifty-six dollars and fifty-four cents, Gage stated to the person, *You have to keep in mind that the absolute value of any integer rounded to the higher dollar amount would only create confusion and dissatisfaction. People like to know how much money they are bringing home. It is a lot easier to drop off the cent values when calculating their monthly statements for the utmost accuracy. If an algorithm was designed to specify particular monetary amounts beyond pure dollar status, its accuracy can easily be quantified to an accurate summation pursuant to twenty thousand characters after the decimal. But the*

*question has to be pondered, Is my time really worth knowing how much of a fraction of a cent I should have, especially in today's world of variable interest rates? The answer in most cases is "NO!" People want to know how much interest they earned, and they want it in plain dollar amounts!!* Gage did not say that it would take less than fifteen seconds to change the program so that all ending balances could be rounded up if valued at fifty-one cents or more after the dollar amount, and that it would be an infinitesimally small loss, if any, in the long run because the losses would be compensated by rounding down in roughly half of all scenarios. Instead, Gage kept things as they were, and he set up conjectured accounts to which he had the sole account number to. In his mind, it was the "greatest good" of all things he could do. If he were ever laid off of work for a long time, he would use the money to counteract other losses. He knew that geniuses had a profound effect on society, and *poor* geniuses almost always had a detrimental impact. He was going to protect society from himself, when need be, by setting up a ghost account.

Gage, when he checked his account for the first time in more than ten years, was surprised to see that he had fifty-four million dollars. All the "cents past the dollar" from the First Interstate Bank, Security Pacific, and Crocker were all dropped into his account. He set up ten other accounts for his closest buddies. The books always balanced, in these banks, because the eleven total forged accounts were factored in. The *only* way that Gage could be caught was if a bank insider learned machine language, deciphered Gage's code, and traced speculative dollar amounts. It just wasn't worth it to them... and they were more than ninety-nine percent oblivious to its makeup *any way*.

When Gage got to Vegas—he had stopped at Reno for a night along the way—he played the two dollar tables at Horseshoe's Binion. Only a fool advertises his own wealth, and he believed it deeply. He played the tables into the wee hours of the night (he dressed like a cheap *pimp*), and he ordered a lot of Heineken. To keep track of his own progress, he counted cards at the "single deck" table. When the ladies came around, impressed by his apparent slow success, he shunned them off because he had to get Zelda out of his head... and they all reminded him of her, in roundabout ways. Face cards were "plus one," he knew. Two through six were "minus one." If the deck was heavily on the "plus side" after a round of dealing from a new shuffle, he would bet ten dollars instead of two. That way, he was sure to stay at the table longer, and he could drink more "free beer." He claimed, to the other people around, that he only had a hundred bucks to go on, that night. They believed him, and they marveled that he could build his hand so quick... from just a two dollar table.

After two hours of playing at Binion, Gage got ready to take off. By then, he was settled enough that he was ready to take a "lady friend" home (a lady whom was off work, and seemed impressed by his standing). He told her how he lasted so long (at the end of the scheme, he threw away fifties, here and there, to garnish the "sympathy vote" from the crowd around him... and it broke his purse). He told the lady that face cards, when you know they're in the deck even still at an alarmingly high rate, are in the bettors' advantage because the house is more apt to bust when they are forced to take cards under "soft

seventeen.” *Small* cards, on the other hand, were in house advantage because they allowed the fourteens of the house to become *seventeens... eighteens... and nineteens*. He told her all he knew, and in the end, he told her the house still had advantage over the bettor because they had the women, and they had the *beer*.

“You’re *right*, honey!!” the “lady friend” said. “I’m here because I want to spend your *money!!*” It was sarcastic, and she accepted a wet and sloppy kiss from Gage.

When it was over, Gage tipped her a hundred dollars—she was still wearing her cabaret skirt—and said, “I need to have tonight alone, *okay??*”

“My name is *Doll*, and this is my number!” The cabaret girl slipped Gage a golden business card, and made off into the night.

\* \* \*

Traditionally, it was known that Vegas was run by the mob. Doll worked for Horseshoe’s Binion as a waitress, but she had inside motives, as well. The people on the other side of the cameras, in Horseshoe’s, *liked* Gage when he came in, the night before (he stayed not far away at the *Golden Nugget*). Doll was given a million dollars to *blow* on Gage. They figured he was a “high roller” in real life because *no one* dressed as bad as he was dressed (the plaid, lime-green zoot suit gave it away). Doll followed him to the gambling floor, the next day, when they had him on camera. She coaxed him to the Texas Hold ‘Em table, started to drink heavily, and *gave* her money away to him by betting bad hands. When other players would come to the table, she was surprised to see that *Gage* would do the same. “I ain’t so *smart*,” he would say to her aloud. “They is takin’ my *MONEY!!*”

“Yeah!!” She was sultry. “I *get* it!!” She gestured with her head to go upstairs to get a room. “Can’t buy a *thrill*, huh?” The rest of the people at the table looked at her with shock and mild interest. They knew Gage was going to score... if he *wanted* to.

When Gage reached the elevator with her, he asked. “Why was you throwin’ your *money* like that!!”

Doll, stunned, said, “I thought you *needed* it!!”

“I’m a *millionaire*, baby!!” Gage said to her. “And I speak like this when I *want* to!!” He looked her in the face, then said, “You go down there and *thank* ‘em for their hospitality... but I don’t need their *charity* any longer!!”

Still awestruck, Doll asked, “Can you help Ken Uston? I hear he’s down there, and he’s doin’ *bad!!*”

“Ken Uston was the guy that was kicked out of every casino because he was learning to count cards better than the *rest!!*”

“Yeah, but now he’s a lost *soul!!*”

“I get it... and when I get self-esteem, I’m going to *help* ‘im!!” Gage considered, then asked, “You

sure it's the real Ken *Uston!*?"

"Yeah," she said. "I don't want to talk to 'im because he gets *mad* at me!!"

"Oh!! I get it!!" By a freaky chain of nature, Gage overheard a passer-by say that "Horatio's doin' standup comedy at the *Sands*." Gage recoiled, then asked Doll, "Do you want to watch some standup comedy tonight?"

"Yes!" Doll said. They had sex in a nearby room, then Gage bought tickets for the night's show. He was going to heckle Horatio Sanz... if that's what it took.

\* \* \*

As things turned out, the passer-by had the location wrong of the night's show. Horatio Sanz performed at the *MGM Grand*, and it was a sold out show. He came on the stage dressed in a black gown, and claimed to be *Carol!!* It was great. Gage laughed from beginning to end, and didn't think of heckling *once!!* There were moments in between the costume changes that Gage felt compelled to go on stage and do the show himself, but he was drawn back. He could hear a heckler from a few seats away say at times that he could do a better job... but it was so hard to write a comedy routine. Gage suspected the guy never so much as auditioned at L.A.'s *Laugh Factory* or Pasadena's *Ice House*. He was an armchair comic, and listening to him throughout the show made him shameful of what he had planned to do: Heckle until there wasn't anything else to say.

Gage brought Doll to the *Tropicana*, they ate a great steak meal for fifteen bucks a piece, then he boned her down a half hour later. He felt good about life, and all the talk that society was micromanaged was fast leaving his mind. Right before slipping off into sleep, he thought about Zelda for the first time in hours, then asked Doll, "Do you want to watch the *Blue Men*, tomorrow? I hear they're rather queer, but I want to watch what they *do!*!"

"I've watched them, already!!" Doll said. "But I'll do it again for *you!*!" She was glad. Gage was happy he was in a better place, emotionally. "Ignorance is bliss," Doll shocked Gage with. "You're going to return to your world, and you're going to forget all *about me!*" she said to him.

"No, I'm *not!*!" Gage said. He drank from a Heineken which he had pulled from an ice bucket. "I'm going to remember you *forever!*!" Little did Doll know that Gage was a specialist at erasing his own memories from bad thoughts. He said to himself, *Maybe this is the one I keep!!*

\* \* \*

Gage stayed in Vegas for two weeks. He slept with Doll, on occasion, and when all was said and done, he signed over his sportster to her because she needed a car. He thanked her for her time, thought

he'd never see her again, then took a charter bus back to Seattle. When he got there, Zelda greeted him at the door... and she had a gleam in her eye. "You'll never guess who I *have*, here!!" she said.

"Horatio Sanz!!" Gage cried. He was happy, and added, "I saw him in Vegas, and he was *great*..." A deep feeling of dismay seeped into his belly as the real Horatio Sanz showed himself from behind the half-open door.

"He told me that he could see you during the act in Vegas, and he said you were laughing your *ASS* off!!"

"Yeah," Gage said, "But it was therapy so I didn't have to *think* of him, any more!!"

"He's going to stay here a couple of months," Zelda said. She leaned over to Gage and whispered into his ear, "He doesn't know it, but he's been an operative of ours for a long *time*!!"

"Listen, bitch!" Gage said angrily as he drew back, "In *business*, they call this a *poison pill*!! In other words, when a company doesn't want to sell, they attach negative clauses to the agreements to hike up the price, or delay for a more suitable *bidder*!!"

"I *know* what 'poison pill' *is*, Gage, and last year, you said I was the lesser of greater evils—I was 'pick your poison,' and I was the choice *one*!!" She pleaded with him, "Can't you give him a *shot*!!?"

"Bitch!! If you want to break *up* with me, all you have to do is *say* so!!! You don't have to make my *nightmares* come true, stupid *whore*!!!"

Zelda made her way to the middle of the living room, and stared into a large, mahogany mirror. While staring at her own image, she declared, "We can't *run* from each other... and I *know* about Doll!!"

"*How*!?" Gage demanded.

"*Horatio* knows, because when you chartered the bus, he planned to sleep with her... but couldn't come up with the money!!"

"Gambling debt?" Gage asked Horatio Sanz.

"No! I just didn't bring enough money to Vegas because I was afraid of *gambling* it all!" Horatio shyly said.

"I *told* you 'e reminds me of *Joanie*, bitch!" Gage said to Zelda. "Is this a torture technique implemented by Cyborg Lot or the *CIA*!?"

"No!" Zelda said. "I need *company*, when you leave, and..."

"I've gone through this my whole life... because I'm a supposed genius, honey!!" Gage ignored Horatio, and followed Zelda into the kitchen where she produced three glasses, and poured orange juice for all of them. "People try to sleep with my women because they think it'll net them 'inside information.'"

"I know! I'm *there*, actually, and I'm still reporting to the central government on a regular basis!!"

"Don't you think I know their *tactics*, though? I filter myself, and I can't decipher my own *notes* from a few years ago! It's designed so that I can make games from my short-term memory, but I leave long-term pains *behind*!!" He pointed to Horatio Sanz. "He is *one* of them, and I don't have to think of Joanie stalking me so much from *high school*!!"



“I *know* that, stupid!! You already told me!!” Zelda said to him. Horatio started drinking his juice as soon as she gave it to him.

Gage picked up his juice, and said, “Half of what I tell is *lies*... because I know they’ll be comin’ after you!! The story is true of Atari defending the California coast during the eighties, but I don’t know if their paranoia was real or manufactured!”

“You could find *out*!!” Zelda demanded.

“Yeah! I could find out—give a call to *Larry Kaplan*, or one of the guys from Activision from the eighties—but then I’d have *stalkers* on my ass trying to find the ‘real scoop’... so I sit here, I ponder the strength of Bryer’s ice cream versus *Dreyer’s*, and I think it’s genius when someone gives me something *new*... because I can go in the bars and act like a normal *person*!!”

“Oh! And Horatio Sanz is going to make you look like a *celebrity*, huh?”

“*You said it*!!” Gage said. He drank his orange juice, left the townhouse without saying “good-bye” to anyone, and boarded a flight to Atlanta. He knew he had to get away, again. On the way to Georgia, it nagged at his head that he said “Larry Kaplan from Activision” without offering the provision that the original programmers from that company were Atari defectors. He thought it might make him look like a liar or flaky when she reflected on things.

\* \* \*

Gage touched down in Atlanta, and he did the first thing *any* intelligent person wanted to do: He had a drink. After that, he sought out Ted Turner for advice. Celebrities, and the rich in general, can’t be found too easily by the common person. Gage knew there was a system, in Hollywood, where by at times you could book a “look-alike” but get the real thing. The theory was that celebrities lost touch with the real world, and it helped them reconnect. Gage thought it was a long shot, but he reached a Yellow Pages, looked under “entertainment,” and tried to book Ted Turner for an invented wedding. He was surprised to find out that a look-alike could be found, and he suspected the “real deal” could be met. He arranged with the entertainment company to meet the look-alike at a local bar in an hour’s time to interview for the gig, and prepare for festivities. When Ted Turner met Gage at a local Atlanta hotel an hour later, Gage was mildly surprised that it was the real deal.

“I need to get out of my own celebrityhood,” Gage said to Ted Turner. “I know you tried to buy CBS, you founded CNN, the USA Today, TBS, and TNT. You *know* something about this, I’m sure!!”

“I’m not the real *Ted Turner*!!” Ted Turner said. He clutched a “Coke and Jack” in front of him. The condensation on the glass amused him as he looked at drips of water pour down the sides of the bar glass.

“Stay in character, Ted,” Gage said to Ted Turner. “I need you at a *wedding*, right?”

“A thousand bucks *right now* for my *time*!!” Ted Turner said to Gage.

Gage produced two one thousand dollar bills, and put them on the bar in front of Ted Turner.

"I'm the real Ted Turner," Ted stated. "I *own* half the city, and I have to *do* this stuff to be able to still hang with the *locals*."

Gage tried to act surprised. "No *shit*!! And Jane Fonda? Is *she* real?? Or is that for P.R. reasons!?"

Gage fainted when Jane Fonda came from around the corner. Ted said, "I guess you'll never *know*!?" Ted finished his drink, and took off with Jane Fonda when it was done.

Thirty seconds after Ted was out of sight, Gage woke up. He said, "I must have *fainted*!! Too much to drink on the airplane, I guess!" The bartender mused at him. "I need those two thousand dollars on the *table*, sir!?" Gage said to him. "That's not a *tip*!?"

The bartender said, "Ted said we could *split* it!"

"Very well!! You keep my side of it as a tip, *too*, okay?" He was shocked, and wanted to get out of the country for a while.

Gage stayed in Atlanta for two days and two nights... then took off to Toronto, Canada... on a *whim*.

\* \* \*

When Gage found himself in a Toronto sports bar, he did everything *but* look for celebrity advice. As a matter of fact, he sought out the stupidist-looking person to talk to. The guy was a bumbling drunk, his Hawaiian shirt was unbuttoned past the point of social comfort, and he was rattling about the city's primary landmark which very much resembled Gage's hometown Space Needle. Gage approached him and asked, "What dark beer do they have up here? I'm from the *States*!?"

"No *shit*!?" the bumbling drunk said. Little did Gage know that he was in the Canadian parliament. "You could have fooled *me*!! Amberbock is what *I* go with!?"

"Good," Gage said. He felt at home, and promptly ordered a Hefeweizen. It wasn't dark, but with lemon slices, it was good to taste buds. When it hit his stomach, he started to talk and he didn't shut up. "There's a magic number, some Harvard grad came up with—*two hundred*, it is—and if you go past that number, you're bound to go loony, or you're bound to stop takin' care of your business. The grad found that when a professor did side work in the area of seminars, and the like, he neglected his classes, and the best of them couldn't keep *up*!?" Gage drank from the beer on occasion but he kept on, "I'm a video game designer, from down south, and I couldn't keep up with my *fans* any more, so I kept up with *myself*!! I designed every game to pass the 'inner child test,' and if it couldn't satisfy that one, I didn't submit it." After finishing his first beer rather quickly, he called to the barmaid for a half-pitcher of the same stuff. "My mom wanted me to 'make up' with this Joanie kid from my junior high school... but I didn't *know* her... and deep down, I know what it was!"

“*What?*” the scrubby parliamentary official asked, and it was the only question he asked until a soccer game came on a half hour later.

“Joanie *was* my fuckin’ *mom*!! Don’t you understand!! My mom was overweight—she was thin when she had *me*, I understand—but she was overweight when I was in grade school... and she was protecting *herself*!!”

“My mom’s *fat*,” the barmaid said to Gage when she brought him his half-pitcher.

“Yes!! All of our mom’s are *fat*, at a time, but when I told her about Joanie stalking me... I think she thought I was trying to get *her* out of my life!!” Gage poured a glass of beer for himself, then squeezed a lime wedge into it. “I think she looked in the mirror, and when she talked to Joanie on the phone—our number was listed, and I never *gave* it to Joanie!!—she was talking to *herself*!! My mom was getting lonely, back then, because my dad was long gone, and I think she was picturing having a like-minded individual around the campfires... and the dinner tables... and everything else... because she made Joanie feel *comfortable*!!”

“I feel comfortable around you!” the barmaid said. She picked up a couple of tips from the bar resultant of people’s gratuities whom had just left, then she went out to clean tables.

“But I had good-lookin’ *women* interested in me... and they *threatened* my mom in her own *HEAD*!!”

“Yeah! I’ve *been* there!!” the barmaid could be heard from across the room. “I feel threatened by *social* people, to tell you the truth, from New York City... because they don’t *tip* good... and they make fun of us at the same *time*!!”

“*Good*!” Gage said, and slipped an American twenty onto the table without thinking much. The Microsoft money that had started to print was deemed to be no different than Monopoly money, over time, and it was a collector’s item, like baseball cards. He put out a twenty onto the counter which featured the four presidents of the Black Hills. It had a Microsoft insignia in the upper-left and lower-right corners; it had the number twenty in the remaining corners. “So of all the things that I can’t forget from my past, I can’t forget my *mother*!!”

“Who *wants* to?” the barmaid asked, then poured the parliamentary official another Bloody Mary after being signaled to do so.

“Well my mom was *over-bearing*!! And I’d be in a shithole in *Kelso* if I listened to everything she said!!”

The barmaid looked at Gage with near-disdain. “What did she want you to do with life?”

“Play for the Mariners!” Gage said, and laughed. “I think it would have *paid* more, actually, but it was a long shot!”

The young, pretty barmaid poured another half-pitcher of Pyramid Hefeweizen. She said, “This one’s on *me*!!”

Gage drank, and spilled his guts that he couldn’t get over the “gorgeous CIA agent whom came to

live with him and stroked his cock on occasion.” He couldn’t remember saying it the next day, though. The young barmaid called a cab for him and arranged a hotel stay when she was off work. Gage was grateful, the next day, and never had any clue what he spilled, or to whom.

\* \* \*

Gage, on one of his better days, very much resembled Russell Crowe. He stayed in Canada for as long as he could and thought very much of living there permanently. He ventured to the bar with the attractive barmaid nearly on a daily basis, and came to know her as “*Flower*,” a nickname, he presumed. He knew that Zelda was still fucking with him because, on the seventh day that he was there, a large advertisement procured itself in front of the place where he frequented. It showed Russell Crowe and Horatio Sanz in a movie to be released by Christmas. It was called “Senior Artillery Colonel In Botswana.” It featured Crowe in a dark blue military coat of the distant past, and he had his arm around Horatio Sanz whom looked frightenly looking like the skipper from Gilligan’s Island, except that Horatio Sanz had an eye patch on. The subheading was, “You Can Run, But You Can’t Hide!!!” and Gage didn’t know if it was a spoof, or if Russell Crowe was taking a crack at nineteenth century literature, again.

“It’s the whole ‘Millhouse On the Moon With Lisa,’ thing,” Gage said to Flower.

“*What?*” she asked at first... then she poured him his daily half- pitcher of beer. “*Oh! Her! Yeah! She’s in the CIA, and ‘her people’ told executive people of the movies to set it up, right??*”

Gage didn’t know if she was serious, but he said, “*Yeah!*” anyway. He drank from his beer, and started to glance at the soccer match on television.

“*Zelda does not want you with me!!*” Flower said, “So she makes you look gay with the guy you hate the most, *right??*” Flower waited for an answer, and got none. “And the likeness on the billboard is supposed to ‘back everyone *off*,’ right?”

“Yep,” Gage said.

“It sounds so fuckin’ *stupid!!*” Flower said.

Gage asked, as he produced a twenty from his wallet, “But it can *happen*, right? If a person is *rich* enough, or if she has connections to the CIA or other *governments*, right?”

The scrubby parliamentary guy was a mainstay at Flower’s bar, and was close to them at a dinner table. He looked like he was about to pass out. Flower gestured to him with her head for Gage to keep his voice down. *Please*, the look said.

“Okay! I get it!!” Gage was mad, but not at Flower. He was mad at the whole situation. To possibly entice a rise, he asked sarcastically, “Can I have a shot of *VICTORY GIN!*?”

“*Cheers!!*” the scrubby man from the dinner table said... and he raised his Bloody Mary absently into the air.

“*Inner party! I get it! I finally made it in... and I never thought it truly existed!!*” Gage said.

Flower said, “I’m going to have a drink with you—*VICTORY GIN!*—and it’s the only shot I ever have with you as a barmaid, *okay??*”

“Yes,” Gage said. He had a shot with her, then said, “I think I’m in love.” It was with the *GIN* he was in love with. Sarcasm followed. “I’d like shot of *VICTORY TEQUILA*, as well!”

Flower laughed, and didn’t give him any.

\* \* \*

Flower took Gage home, that night, and they made love well into the twilight. When they woke up together, she told him some things he didn’t want to hear. “I’ve been talking to Zelda on my phone—the good, ol’ traditional *phone!*—for the past three days. She wants you back, and she’s surprised you could leave. Between you and me, she’s been playing these head games since she was fourteen years old. Her mom told her to play ‘hard to get’ whenever she wanted a man, and she was close. It’s *not* the Cyborg Lot tactics that you suspect! She’s just *dumb* about men, and she doesn’t know how to *keep* them! She figures that if she lets you get too close, you’ll get up and *run!*!”

“She made a bad situation worse by inviting Mister *Sanz* to my apartment, last month. They call it ‘exacerbation.’”

“Yeah! I know... but I’m a barmaid, and I’m used to talking to people!”

“So go on,” Gage said.

“She knows you’re a video game designer, and a *good* one! She knows you promised Clarise, Amanda, and Joanna possible spots on your arm in marriage when you graduated the Massachusetts Institute of Technology!! She knows you offered them no guarantees, but she’s threatened by them coming around... if they ever sought you after *matrimony!*!”

“*Wait!*” Gage said. “She’s a spy for the CIA, and she has had as many, if not *more*, past relationships as I have!”

“Yeah! But there’s a double standard, and you have to *know* of it!”

“We learned during the *nineties*...”

“Don’t *give* me that, Gage, because it was all academic and theoretical. The *real* way of the world is that women typically feel *inferior* with age... and she wants to play her head games!”

“I swear to God I *want* her to play her head games, but I can’t stand the *Horatio* dude, and I can’t stand some of her *tactics!*!”

“Like farting when you *eat??*”

“Yeah! Like farting when I eat... and if I had peace of mind, I *love* to be with her!”

“But that’s the problem with you intuitive *thinkers*, STUPID!! Read Mister Jung’s work, and you’ll know what I’m *talking* about!! You have a scheme in your head that *says* you need to be sensitive!! You have to actually be sensitive, and you’ll know what I *mean!*!”

"I get it," Gage said. He was near tears because he felt he was in a "can't win" situation.

\* \* \*

Flower took Gage deep into *Newfoundland* on a vacation he couldn't forget for years, not even if he tried. "I need you to *see* life, but in a different way!"

"I have *Encarta*, bitch. I've *seen* this area before many *times*!"

"No!! You didn't smell it, and you didn't feel the texture of the *leaves*!!"

Gage felt the texture of the fallen brown leaves, caked in mud, and decaying for having been there for days on end. The mildew-like feel reminded him of his unclean bathroom tub, of all things. "I get it... and I'm *kind* of exaggerating, because I'm from Seattle, Washington!!"

"You *still* don't get it, because you're going to live out here for a couple of weeks, and you're going to do more than just pass the leaves on your way to the sidewalk paper. You're going to *cook* with them, if you need to, and we're going to live a life!"

"You're gettin' me out of the vanity that Ted Turner couldn't do in Atlanta, huh?"

"You're not going to be hypnotized by the billboard signs, and you're not going to worry about my *bar*... which my father is now running again... for a while!!"

"Good!!"

After two and a half weeks of "nature living," Gage came up with a few theories of his own. "Those immigrants? When they marched back to the Mexican border on May Day of 2005? I think they were trying to leave, and I think they were leaving for *good*!!"

Flower snuggled close to Gage. "We *all* want to live with you, you know? But you're still fighting the frontier of the south!"

"The slavery never ended, *huh*?" Gage considered reaching for tea which was near him, but he knew he'd lose the intimacy of Flower's caress. He continued on with a raspy voice, dull from yelling at squirting animals for the past few days. "The Mexicans are free down there, and in the U.S., they are forced to work. I think it's a slave system, and I think the blacks would be next, albeit through 'free agency slavery,' if they Mexicans *could* leave!!"

Flower considered interjecting an idea, but snuggled into Gage's arm pit, instead.

"And the *media*... make it out to be that they want to be in the *U.S.*, when in actuality, they want to go home but are unable to. They were sending people back, on that day, for not having Mexican I.D., but the people claimed they left it in Mexico. I *bet* that the wall they want to build is to keep them *in*!!"

"You're crazy!" Flower said softly. She liked the smell of Gage's arm pit, but didn't admit it.

"My kind of crazy is *good*, in the United States, because I make games that are not *mind-numbing*!! If I were to start programming today, I would make a game in which the U.S. Marshals shot at people from both sides... because I think they're goin' crazy as *well*!!"

“*You said it!*” Flower got up, drank from Gage’s tea, then let him sip some. She added, “A pudgy boy by the name of *Grant Mallory* called my bar on the day that we left... but I didn’t want to tell you about it! He said he heard you came into millions, and wanted to know why you haven’t called ‘im since your elementary school graduation! I know what you’re talking about with the past following you, now!! I checked on ‘im, and the mother is a mechanic at a gas station near Tulsa! I don’t know what to *do* with you!”

“I get it all the time, but I ignore it!”

“We do that too, up here, you know!! Remember ‘That One Guy’!?”

“Are you talking about FDR, because they do that in the States, as well, if you’re not a Democrat!”

“I get it!” She thought for a couple of seconds, then asked, “What political party *are* you?”

“A Whig!” Gage said comedically. “I am loyal to the *THROWN!*!”

“No, you’re *not!*” Flower threw an old rag at Gage, then laughed for four or five minutes.

Gage cleaned the house with the musty rag when done.

\* \* \*

“The idea began,” Gage spoke as he shined an ancient wood-burning stove, “before Bill Gates and Microsoft developed Windows!”

“*Huh?*” Flower asked. “We use mostly *Macs* up here because they have their own built in operating systems!”

“Yeah!” Gage said, “But the point is that it’s an *anecdote*, okay? It’s a story meant to give you an illustration!”

“I think I know where you’re *goin’*,” Surprisingly to Gage, Flower pulled out a can of Pledge after she made her statement. Everything else had seemed so *primal*.

“So you go to Hollywood because you’re invited by a friend, and someone else hears you have *chops!*! If you have what they’re looking for, the charade changes, and you’re let in another *window!*!”

“Like the *folders*, huh? Folders inside of folders inside of folders on your Windows desktop, *huh?*”

“You know... because that’s what this reminds me of! I liked Zelda, and I knew that if I took my talent to Santa Clara to get another job in California, they would offer me a good entry-level job... but my *attitude* had to be in accordance with the rest of the company, or else I wouldn’t have been promoted to a senior design specialist, *right?*”

“I know! We pass up *many* over-qualified bartenders every year because they tend to the *truck* clubs that we try to avoid!” She ventured a peek through the window and witnessed a doe as in stiffed at protruding semi-frozen tundra. “We like the *pizza* guys, to tell you the truth,” Flower said, “because

they're friendlier with the crowds we have, and we can train 'em to pour the drinks *we* want to serve!!"

"I got ya'!" Gage said. He finished polishing the wood-burner, then said, "I can't make it into Hollywood if I *tried* because I can't or won't go through their initial hazing!"

"Homosexual relations with quasi-prominent men, *huh?*"

"Yeah! But I'll never crack the code of why *Horatio Sanz*, of all people, was the one that Zelda chose to *torment* me with!!"

Flower undid the top two buttons of her blouse, and began to speak. Nearly in dance and song, "Anguish is a state you'll never meet; torment is the place that's before your feet; when you lived long enough to know, the feeling will surely go... And *anguish* will grow like a night fire's *heat*!!!"

"What the fuck was *that*!?" Gage wanted to know. Her blouse exposed the right side of her breast by the time she ended her dictation.

"I don't *know*," and just like a girl whom heard a school bell, she snapped back into the regular world she had been in moments earlier, and went to her kitchen to put more tea on the mangy stove.

\* \* \*

"Do you understand the world of *dichotomy*?" Gage asked Flower during a long nature walk from her cabin.

"I know what you're talking about, but they allow *trichotomy* up here, in Canada!" Flower said.

"Oh! So you have *three* choices, *huh*!? The Progressive Conservatives, the Liberals, and the New Democrats?!"

"Something like *that*!!" Flower didn't want to go into detail about other alternatives, like the Bloc Québécois whom wanted to splinter from the English-speaking faction of the rest of the North American continent. It was on her mind, but she listened.

"Well, in the United States, it's not what it *seems*!!"

"Are saying that the Democrats and Republicans get *along*!?"

"No! Behind the scenes, they brand you as a sellout or a *communist*, whichever your behaviors may lie in *propensity*!!"

"*Wait*! You're tellin' me that the *labels* of the parties don't *matter*!!"

"Not on the surface because they're controlled by the Trilateral Commission, Council of Foreign Affairs, the International Monetary Fund, and the *World Bank*!!"

"So they deviate from each other in *words*, but not significantly in *actions*!!!" Flower didn't look excited.

"It's not *that*! You can't get elected unless you're *financed* from one of them... and they—the middlemen known as 'politicians'—try to tag *me* as a radical or a cream puff, depending on which one's more *convenient*!!"



A feeling of dread crept into Flower's midsection, and she asked, "What are you *tellin'* me?!"

"We're on the brink of nuclear *war* if they don't *get* it right!!"

"You're saying...?"

"Late last year, I snuffed out a plot from disgruntled would-be laid off employees from Boeing, and the like, to destroy the South with nuclear proliferation!"

"Yeah, *stupid!*!" Flower said. She thought Gage was joking, and said, "I *like* it as a video game idea!!"

"*Bitch!* These are real ideas that get processed in real people's *heads!*!"

"I get it... and you reflect it to the rest of the world!"

"That's right! Before 'they' can let it simmer in their heads to the point of an over-flowing *boil!*!"

Flower straightened up. She tried to look *proud* to Gage. She said, "We *root* for the Russians, you know? They treat us better up here!"

Gage thought of the hockey players, and wasn't surprised. He scuttled the idea away, and said, "They're *doing* it to me, and I can *tell!*!"

"So if you end up like the *MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE*... I'm supposed to *tell* someone, *huh!*?"

"Yeah... but it's *more* than that!!"

Gage designed a game with Flower when they returned to the cabin. It was mock, and it was done with pencil on paper. He explained that it started with an obstacle course in the Los Angeles Coliseum. Corporate executives were in the stands, and they wore dark suits—each holding a *shot gun*. You had to run out of the Coliseum against a field of other contestants. You approached hurdles labeled "homosexual," "sellout," "loser," "softie," and the like. If you remained still, the corporate executives would shoot at you. Depending on the simulated feel of the invisible audience in "Demographic Land," you would *lose* pride points of different values, depending on whom was watching. On the other hand, if you jumped a hurdle of a hot demographic, ratings would go through the roof, and "Sponsor Potential" would light up in the upper, right-hand corner of the screen.

As you made your way out of the Coliseum, you could go to LAX, the public library, or virtually any other place, depending on your whim. Helicopters would follow you, and if you chose "hiking" as an activity, booby traps would be set in place. You could find yourself at the bottom of a hole. Rescuers would come to your aid but, once again, particular ropes would be tossed down: "sellout," "homosexual," "loser," "softie," and the like. The game would end when you had no more pride, or when your marketing potential became so great that the execs would literally capture you with their hounds and polo ponies.

"Are you going to put *me* in the game?" Flower asked after kissing Gage on the ear.

"*No...* because I like you, and they'll seek and *destroy* you!!"

She laughed, "You're kidding, *huh?*!"

"Yeah," Gage said. He sent the proposal to buddies at his company in Seattle when he returned to Toronto with Flower. He liked her. He didn't want to see what the game turned out to be. He didn't care.

It was good. That's all that mattered to him.

"I think you did *good*, this time!" Flower said.

Gage wanted to shoot himself. *I'm still not ridding myself of the nagging thoughts!* He thought of his mom in Texas, and wanted to think of steer and ranch settings.

\* \* \*

"You can *stay* up here, and you'd be a big fish in a little *pond*!" Flower said to Gage.

"That sounds very *appealing* to me!" Gage said, "but my life is down in Seattle, and I want to be there for a long *time*!"

"Cyborg Lot is going to chew you *up*!! It's the way it *is*!!" Gage looked at her face when she said it, and knew she wasn't threatening to rat him out.

"I wonder if I've gained or lost demerit points since I've been gone!"

"*Gained*!!" Flower said. She was speculating, of course.

"Yeah! If I come back *fresh*," Gage said sarcastically, "they are going to see me as a *threat*—as someone moving in on their *territory*!"

"Only if you *believe* it!" Flower said.

"Yeah! I *get* it!"

Gage went back to Seattle, and he wanted to start a new Renaissance. He gave his money to the arts, and encouraged a better world for "all of Washington *state*"!!! He was lauded, and then Henrietta regained her post at Cyborg Lot by a quirk of fate, like outsiders of the company which she founded enticed bitterness in her behavior. She was out for revenge... but she didn't *say* anything to anyone. She changed the point scheme, and "petty rules" were emphasized over *solid* ones. Speeding on the freeway could get you two demerits... and ninety-nine percent of all people did it on a regular *basis*. Jay walking got you one demerit, and people had no idea how they were judged. Gage's benevolence of the financial kind was overlooked. Premarital sex with Zelda, Doll, and Flower netted him twelve demerits (Henrietta claimed to have a "spiritual awakening," when away, and the secular ethics were no longer paid attention to which founded the company; and *rumors* sufficed to incriminate Gage on the speculated romances). As things stood, ninety-four and a half percent of all people in the United States, as reported by Cyborg Lot, were deemed "unworthy" for the institution of work. It was a matter of time before employers changed from Cyborg Lot's principals to the upstart Spectacular Youth.

Henrietta swore revenge. She knew she could change things, if she tried enough, and she was *right*. She moved around her furniture on the night that she was fired from her own company for the second time in as many years, and yelled into the evening air, "Power for the sake of power can be *GOOD*!! Why don't you *listen* to me... for a *change*!?"

\* \* \*

Henrietta didn't waste any time the after the second occasion she got ousted. She had relied on Hollywood celebrities, early on, to form Cyborg Lot with all of their perceptions and ways of getting to know the public. She held them in disdain, and created a new company, *Magic of Land Domination*. She based it off of the pretense of the Wizard of Oz that, for selected periods of time, a person *could* control things through smoke and mirrors. She used People magazine's most beautiful people, not as objects to adore but rather, as targets of torture. She would send paparazzi to hound targets; that would be *one* day. With every day that passed, there would be a new celebrity. The "most beautiful" would get day one on the calendar. The runner up would get day two. Number three on the list would get the third day. In a good month, for Henrietta, thirty-one celebrities would be picked on in various means—thirty-one celebrities whom could have helped her save her job at *Cyborg Lot*, but chose not to. Each month would institute a new method of torture. January, of course, was "paparazzi month." February was "ethnic guilt month." March was "get off your ass and help the poor month." April was "stop lying to us about so many *things* month." So *on*, until the repetition of the following year.

Henrietta did not require membership for her company—she knew that was the best way to build things—and she implemented *comedy* to get things done. In that way, she knew she was safe from libel and slander suits. It was understood, though, that getting under celebrities' skins was the end goal of her operation, and the most successful of the paparazzi, magazine editors, general members of the public, or talkative family members would be featured in her internet columns. She had the organization already in place in the name of Cyborg Lot's clientele list, and she knew she'd have a cakewalk with *certain* celebrity members (she knew some were more prone to opening their checkbooks than others). Ironically, David Geffen caught wind of the plan and recommended Henrietta Joan Lott to his company, *Dreamworks*. They decided to cast her in a movie, she got out plenty of aggression, and became one of the better b-list actresses in Southern California.

When Henrietta made the list for People's most beautiful in 2007, she was caught off-guard, and she nearly croaked. The following January, the paparazzi found her in a drunken stupor coming home from a New Year's Eve Los Angeles party, and she was caught mumbling in a ditch. After making headlines of nearly everywhere, the publicity was enough to have her cast as an a-list star for years to come.

\* \* \*

Henrietta thought that she could return to Seattle without so much as a negative thought in the summer of 2007. She wanted to explore old times, and she wanted to consider "what could have been" if she never started *Cyborg Lot*. She looked up Gage, but found that he was no longer with Zelda, though

Zelda stayed at his old townhouse. She traveled to a computer dating service and thought they might know something about Gage's whereabouts. The computer dating service, with information from *Cyborg Lot* of all places, told Henrietta that Gage was in Canada... for a two hundred and fifty dollar fee. It was inaccurate, of course—Gage was in Bellevue settling in a new home, and Henrietta was left looking for *Cheese*. She contacted him via phone to the place he was staying at last in Grand Falls, Montana. Cheese came down, and Henrietta told him of all the “craziness” that was going on in her life.

“I’m supposed to bang at the glass every time you *talk*,” Cheese said to her. “You cracked the top thirty, last year, in *People’s* most beautiful, and it *is* July!”

“*Magic of Land Domination* went *defunct*!”

“No, it *didn’t*!”

(*cling, cling, cling, CLING!!*)

“Hear *that*?! They still know who you are, and they don’t *like* you!?”

“Bitch, I am going at two million a *film*, now!”

“Save your emotion for the screen, because you’re caught in a trap that you helped *create*!”

(*cling, cling, cling, cling, cling, cling, CLIIING!!*)

“And I don’t have to tell you who they *are*, do I?”

(*cling, cling!!*)

Henrietta got up, and ran out of the restaurant. She met a man on the street and said, “It’s *happening* to me!”

The man lifted his eyebrows. He said, “It’s happening for me, *too*, and if you come back to *my* place... it can be happening for *both* of us!?”

She ran to someone else—a *hotdog vendor*—and screamed at him, “I’m Henrietta Joan Lott of *Cyborg Lot* and the Hollywood movie screen! Would you like my *autograph*!?”

The hotdog vendor looked surprised, then said, “I’m *Bill Gates*!! Would you like to be on my *website*!?”

She walked down the street, wanting to talk to someone... but eerily felt like people around the pier were walking *away* from her. She ran up to a man as he unboarded his family from a large car. “Did you watch *Clerical Dance*, last year!? I’m the star of the *movie*!! I can get you and your kids in *movie* parts!?”

“I don’t know what you’re *smokin’*, lady, but you better get away from my *family*!?”

Cyborg Lot turned Seattle against Henrietta, and her worse fear was kicked into place: not being recognized for things she’d done.

“I *get* it!?” she finally said. She took off to her car, and intended to drive straight down to San Francisco without a night’s rest. The man whom she most recently yelled at, called for his family to get back into their car. He had a *Far Side* cartoon pinned to his driver’s side visor. In the cartoon, a man stood on a box. He was yelling at a surrounded crowd in which everyone had turned into vampires. In the

distance, two movers transported a large mirror. In the reflection of the mirror, there was no crowd—only a single man ranting about the looming vamps.

“We did it just fine,” the man said to his children. “It doesn’t feel so good, but if she took control of that company again, we would *all* be down shit creek because ‘er *tactics!*!”

“I hear ya’, *daddy-o*,” one of the children said. She licked from a vanilla ice cream cone, and started to wipe her sticky hands on her contiguous brother.

\* \* \*

The man whom insulted Henrietta by not acknowledging the newfound silver screen fame went looking for *Cheese*, when all was said and through. He dropped off his kids with his wife, and Cyborg Lot told him where he could *meet* Cheese: Bainbridge Island. Over there, he said that Katy Holmes had sent word that Henrietta Joan Lott was not only a threat to Los Angeles, but a threat to *Seattle*, even still. Of course, Katy was suffering from a form postpartum depression, and didn’t know it. Nonetheless, the man with the kids at the pier spoke with fluidity that surprised even himself. “I *know* this land... because I grew *up* here... and when Cyborg Lot came into being... I *cheered*, like everyone else. It was *good* to know where Bill Gates was shopping... even when he was on a business trip to Baton Rouge! It was *good* to know that, and I liked *judging* him! ‘Are you using *styrofoam*, Bill, because I *will* report you for a *demerit!*’ Stuff like that!!”

“You’re *obese*, guy! I bet you haven’t had a good life since *high school!*”

Scott, the man with the *kids*, thought about his life then said, “You’re *right!* And I think Cyborg Lot had something to *do* with it, eventually!!”

Cheese shook his head. “*No*, it’s not that because we’re *programmed* different! Some of us are going to grow up to be Mister Olympia... and some of us couldn’t cut the squad for the Huskies if our daddies *paid* the place!!”

“It’s a state school, Cheese! I don’t think they *operate* like that!!”

Cheese shook his head again then said, “There was a point back in 1997 or 1998 when a good deal of us knew that internet was here to stay!! Back in the eighties, they ran war simulations, and the kid flick *War Games* was the culmination of a lot of paranoia. People did not get off the internet, though, and back then, they just called it ‘computer modem dialogue.’ When they realized the internet was in the common persons’ hands for good, they started to change the *rules!*!”

“The *death* threats... and things like *that!*!” Scott stated.

“You’re right! The death threats... and the suicide cults... and the spontaneous kinky sex, unless you were a privileged millionaire!!”

“I *get* it!! For the first time, I realize I was let *out* on something!!”

“You got it... but you’re not completely *getting* it!!”

“I’m at a new level, *aren’t I*, Cheese?”

“Yes!! Because we know that you know that we know who you *are*!! And that can be dangerous if you start to blab to the people at the warehouse where you work!!”

“So you know I can act... like I pretended not to know Henrietta, and you think I’m not going to tell because *Cyborg Lot* would be on my ass!!”

“In a lot of ways, yes!!”

“Back when I was first on internet—1996 was the first year I could afford a real computer—I checked out the porn... and I knew that there were lonely ladies that needed my helping... so I tried to join the *FBI* and I volunteered to help in any *sting* operations. I know, when I look back, what it really *was*!!”

“*What?*” Cheese asked. He thought he knew the answer, but wanted to hear it from Scott.

“I wanted to see the girls first *hand*!! I wanted to jerk off to them behind surveillance cameras, and I wanted to pin the perversion on the ‘*newcomers*’ to the scene!!”

“A lot of men are like you, Scott, and that’s why we study anthropology! It gives us a better understanding of the world around us in a human sense.” He could tell that Scott wanted to hear more.

“The cops that *arrest* us... We know that they are *aroused* when they do so, and they are sexually *charged*!!”

“Frustrated at *home*???” Scott asked.

“Yes!! And the worse of the cops send terror into no less than three people on a weekly *basis*! We’re talking about innocent *people*, though, and not *bank* robbers!!”

“*So?*” Scott asked.

“If I had an episode four *years* ago, even, in which *Cyborg Lot* told my wife to start fuckin’ with me... and I went off on her in *public*!!”

“You’d be deemed bipolar for the rest of your *LIFE*!!”

“And the irony is that they don’t *hire* you, after that point!! Slippery *slope*!! And they put you on medicine after you lose your job and are found on the *streets*!! That medicine typically costs the state eighty dollars per *pill*—eighty dollars per day you could be using to get yourself out of a *hole*!—but they use it to further trap you!!”

“Until *Cyborg Lot* gets you off their *shit list*, right?”

Cheese looked ashamed. “Ironically, *no*... because *Cyborg Lot* was trained to give you a starting point based on physical characteristics, and *subtract* thereafter, based on *behavior*!!”

“This sounds like the *tabloids*, if you asked *me*!!” Scott claimed.

“Yeah! Like the tabloids... and if there was a mechanism to *balance* things, it wouldn’t be so bad!! In Hollywood, they have *award* shows!! Over here, we’re lucky if Spectacular Youth claims that you’re a renegade instead of a *dissident*!!”

“I know what you *mean*,” Scott said. He bit into a sandwich he had been holding but was afraid to eat during their conversation.

\* \* \*

“So the stats are *unreal* as to what Cheese was telling me!” Scott told his lover on the night that he conversed in Bainbridge. “Roughly five percent of the population are deemed ‘job capable’ by 1997 standards, yet more than ninety percent of all people *work!*!”

“Because of all the drugs, stealing, and other unfortunate incidences that have been dug up by Cyborg Lot, right?” Odelia asked.

“Yeah! And what happened was a *phenomenon!!* When one person tanked—when they dropped below acceptable status, and were subsequently fired or forced to resign—they invariably got *other* people to get fired... *by setting them up!*!”

“Yeah!? I did it!! I should *know!*!”

“Of the five percent that are left that are ‘acceptable,’ ninety-seven and a half percent of them... never *narced* on anyone to Cyborg Lot!”

“Yeah!! Makes sense because that *Ratt* song!! ‘What comes around *goes* around!! I’ll tell you *why!*!!”

“Yeah!! But Cheese is *one* of them... and I came to find that he’s one of six people in the United States who does not have a major demerit infraction against him!”

“So he *sped* to the office... in order to try to *save* people, huh?”

“Yeah!! I get it... but it goes *further!*!” His wife started to nod off. She was feeling tired, but Scott said it any way: “We’re on the verge of *AMNESTY* when the whole thing goes *down!*!”

“And *Cheese?*”

“He gets left *alone!*!”

“The farmer and the *dell*, huh?” She laughed, and went to sleep.

\* \* \*

“So what you *had*, Gage, was a situation in which the corporations were fighting for *people!*!” Scott said. He ate from a cheese sandwich with only mayo at a park near Gage’s townhouse.

“And one by one, they were fallin’ off like *flies!*!” Gage observed. He ate peanut butter and apricot jelly. Chips were near his feet on a checker board cloth.

“So my *wife* out there...” Scott waved at her as she threw a frisbee to their labrador retriever. “She fell off sometime in 2002. She got in an argument... with her *boss*... about what ‘really happened’ on nine-eleven!”

“And she ‘yelled’ just a little too loud and it was enough to warrant twenty or so demerits, *right!*?”

“And the loss of her job, and the loss of our second car... and the breakdown of one of our *kids!*!” Scott waved to his daughter as she chased the dog chasing their son. “And the kid couldn’t handle it at *school!*!”

“So she was deemed a bad *mother*—insult to injury, *right?*—and that was another ten demerits, or so, *huh?* Common *story!*!”

“Yeah! But it gets weird, because we found out what really happened in *practice!*!” He looked at Gage eating his sandwich, and knew Gage really didn’t want to be there any longer. He continued though, “One by one by one by one, they fell off like *houseflies*, and Cheese was left with a handful of other people. In the Bible, *Lot* was going to be saved at the expense of all that was going on in Sodom and Gomorrah, if he could just refuse to look back at the city as he left it... Of course, his *wife* couldn’t resist, and was turned into a pillar of *salt!*!”

“Yeah! I know the story because I have Christian groups all the time write to me and tell me I need to make more *Bible* games, and that’s *one* of the stories!”

“They had to have *ten* people in Sodom and Gomorrah, or else the Lord was not going to *save* it!”

“You’re saying the Arabs fucked up our shit because they couldn’t find ten decent people in the United States, or at the very least, *New York City!*!”

“No, I’m *not* saying that, because I’m just thinkin’ this through as I’m *tellin’* you, but...”

“I know! It’s speculation and an unstable Christian, such as Timothy McVeigh, could have acted in accordance *with* them, no different than Saint Peter slicing off the ear of a Roman *official!!!*”

“Have you read the *Turner Diaries*? Because it was a major influence for his actions, and they *say...*”

“I don’t need to think of it any more, because in my personal research, I *know* that more than just the Arabs wanted those buildings tore *down!!* They were playing Monopoly with people’s *lives* up there, for *Christ’s SAKE!*!” Gage couldn’t believe he was getting emotional over the issue. “I wanted them torn down, but in a video game in a *safe* way!!! Because I was jealous of the executives, and the power they *possessed!*!” Gage cried softly.

“I know!” Scott said. “But the point I need to make, or else it’s all *futile*, is that unless we learn from our mistakes—from our *real* mistakes—it’s no good, and gone to *waste!*!”

“So don’t *lie* any more?” Gage asked.

“You belong to a company that has *power!!* The law states that any agency which *acts* like a government will be treated like one!! You are prone to be scrutinized for discrimination on the basis of creed, and religion, *and* you...”

“Have to insure domestic tranquility!! I know what you’re saying, and it’s a careful road I have to *go* down!”

“The last thing I need to add is that people were fought over like *land* was fought over in the FRONTIER *DAYS!* In other words, as people dropped off like *flies* in regards of suitability for work, the



fewer people became greater in *demand*... and whether Cheese liked it or not, he found himself on *BILLBOARDS*... advertising products he didn't *like*!!"

"Like *shaving* cream during his 'beard era'! I know! And they used his likenesses because they knew he could be '*had*' that easy!!"

"You *got* it!!" Scott said. He hadn't felt intelligent in *years*. He felt good, that day. Gage, on the other hand, felt like an adult for the first time since he was seventeen, and he received his acceptance letter for *MIT*. Since then, he had been a kid playing in a grownup's *world*.

\* \* \*

Odelia spoke to her friend at a café, open and honestly, for the first time in *years*, definitely since she was fired back in *2002*. Before this, she was always worried that *Cyborg Lot's* people were out there, trying to decipher what she was saying. She said, "Back in *1997*, Cheese told my husband, they had figured out that internet was here to stay... and cell phones *too*, for that matter!!"

"Tell me something I don't *know*, Cake!! They call you *Cake* on the streets still, *you know*!?"

"Well, *honey*, it has a point because I have to tell you about what's happening *next*!!"

"I already know because I'm on internet *too*, *you know*!? You're talking about..." Doris played stupid, and tried to get *Odelia* to spit out her answer.

"*Well*, the early era of the internet—the first ten *years*—were consumed by fat people making bad rumors about people they were *jealous* about!!"

"You're forgetting the *eighties*, honey, because the internet was around back *then*!!"

"But not in mass *form*, bitch!! You don't know what I'm *sayin*', and you have to factor in the 'cell phone phenomenon,' because it influenced the ear and era *greatly*!!"

"Okay!! Fat jugs are sitting home rattin' on their bosses for sleeping with neighborhood women, when in reality, they are jogging at the local *park*!?"

"Yeah!! And the fat *whores* are behind the internet chat which spurned paranoia... because emails are being *sent* to these guys implementing them for sexual activities that they are not even *part* of!!"

"I know what you're talking about, because if I had a sexual experience, I would want it real, and not *imagined*!!"

"You got it!! But it eventually caught up to them because the first to the party are the last to *leave*!!"

Doris looked up into the taller buildings which lined the street, and was sickened. "I can *feel* them, you know? I can *feel* the fat bastards up there... *gossiping* about us as they look *down* on our conversation!!"

Odelia poked her head to the left to take a peek around her table's umbrella and said, "*Yeah*! And the *first* wave of it all was 'political correctness'! If you called them '*fat*,' back then, you were in danger of

a demerit, at the very *least*!!”

“I *get* it!!” Doris said. “We have *America* again!!” She got up, excited and ready to leave.

“Please pay for the bill, *hun*,” Odelia said. She was mad that she couldn’t talk to more people.

“*Fat fucks*!” she said in the direction of the tall buildings.

“Hey! To avoid getting caught in the same trap, we have to *celebrate* a few of them, you know?”

“John Popper, John Candy, and Jim Belushi, *huh*?”

“Yeah!! Or else we’re in danger of bein’ *sideswiped*, again!”

“I got it!! And I’ll pick up the tab!”

Odelia paid for the tab, and felt things were turning back to normal, again. In 1998, she had gone rafting no different than she had gone six of the seven prior years. She omitted to invite her neighbors whom very much resembled the current day’s *Drew Carrey* enclave, and she was sent “revenge notices” from anonymous email sources. She later found out that her neighbors sent those emails to *all* the neighborhood people whom engaged in physical social activity. *Skiers Beware! And Bicyclists, Too!!!* The next door neighbors “speculated” they were all part of militia cults, and sent emails to selected targets for eight hours per day until the thrivers were destroyed, socially. Since it couldn’t be proven where the emails were coming from, and since they weren’t direct in their threats, it was hard to prove malicious intent in specifics when high-profile people were named. Instead of penalizing their actions, *Cyborg Lot* snatched them up and made them prominent members of their new team. They got paid to gossip, and it wasn’t until the recent fall of many of the innocents that everyone collectively found out the nature of the rumors, and the shot mentalities of persons originating them.

“Topsy turvy *world*!!” Odelia said into the air as she watched her friend walk away. Secretly, she hoped her friend would hide her reborn snobbery because she knew it could turn at any time.

\* \* \*

On January 19, 2009, Rudolph James Galvin was sworn in as President of the United States of America. He was truly an independent, and made his way from the corporate world, of all things. He did what Pat Buchanan and Jesse Jackson failed to do many years back: Win the presidency without holding an elected office. He was born in Kansas and thirty-seven years of age when he took office. To a lot of people, it was a surprise, but he related the story of how Brian Cashman of the Boston Red Sox was able to take over as G.M. and turn their team into a World Series winner while he was still in his *twenties*.

Many people didn’t recognize the United States, any more, and he knew it. He addressed the Washington D.C. crowd during his first public speech, “Many years ago...”

“You’re a *loser*!!” someone from the crowd yelled.

Galvin continued, “... we had a country called the United States of *America*!!”

“I *hear* ya’!!” someone yelled. The crowd swelled with jubilation.

“It is back... and it is alive and *well!!*” the new presiding officer of the country said.

There were firecrackers lit off in the far distance, and Galvin pretended to duck and cover, as if *shots* were fired. He straightened himself up, and said, “This *will* be an office worth *holding*, again!!” Everyone roared before he finished, and he said nothing else to the public for his first hundred days. His V.P., Loretta Jane Wilder, squeezed his hand as they stared into the evening sky. Cheese watched from a television monitor twenty-five hundred miles away... and *laughed*.

\* \* \*

“A hundred years after the election of Rudolph James Galvin and Loretta Jane Wilder to the most distinguished office of the land, the United States was dissolved. It had lived long, and people were grateful that there were no nuclear wars; there were no mass suicides, as people had speculated there would be; there was no great outbreak of civil war, as some had thought was inevitable. Everything had gone great, and the transition from traditional fuels to solar power was amazingly smooth. The only problem of the transition was the dealings of the people with the priests of *Syrinx!!*”

“What the fuck are you *sayin'!!*” Gage asked Cheese. “If there was a Rush-styled video game, it would *definitely* have to do with the struggle between the oaks and the *maples!!*”

“I know what you’re sayin’, Gage-boy!! I’m going to write that *in!!*”

Gage’s partner in his splinter software company, *Virtual Fantasy*, became Cheese. They waited for the awaited world revolution day in, and day out. It never came in the form they thought it might... so they speculated on the future.

Distant, to the east, Rudolph James Galvin tried to implement a government that was new and refreshing to the American people. To Cheese, Gage, and their wives (Gage married Doll, over time, while Cheese settled with Flower from Toronto, Ontario), it was very much like they’d imagine the *early* American government was: Only a handful of people truly believed the government existed and was relevant in daily affairs. As history told it, it wasn’t until after the Civil War that people stopped seeing themselves as Virginians and New Yorkers primarily, but rather, as *Americans*. It wasn’t until after Rudolph James Galvin was elected that his vice-president stated that the country would have a new “America Wide Web” and it would unify the continent as a functioning entity, again. Therefore, it was argued, that people would see themselves as *Americans*, primarily, instead of “CITIZENS OF THE *WORLD !!!*”

It was all hokey, to Cheese, and it was political speak... but it held a grain of truth. The early government had to convince the common person to think *greater* than him- or herself; the *latter* regime had to *shrink* mentalities to be able to solve local *problems*. “I don’t want you thinking of fixing water systems in Nepal unless you are *goin’* there!!” Mister Galvin said to a group of college graduates at Cornell in May of 2009. “I want you to think of the mess in *Jersey*, and what you might do *there*, for a change!!”

He got applause, but it was fleeting. He was a regionalist, and he expected congressional leaders to take charge of their own districts, if need be. Some said it was a copout of power. Others said it was a return to the nations' old roots. Cheese and Gage didn't care. They mocked the future of the country in their latest video game, and it felt *good*.

\* \* \*

Gage and Cheese took their respective wives on a vacation to Portland, Oregon in the summer of 2009. As they crossed the bridge not far from the *Rose Garden*, they ducked into a comfortable bed 'n' breakfast while they fueled their car (they rented a hybrid, for the trip). Gage asked Cheese while he scooped some eggs benedict onto his spoon (he liked to eat with only spoons whenever he went on vacation, he came to find *after* coming back from Toronto a couple of years prior, "Have you ever noticed that we're turning *Muslim* in this country?"

"What are you *talking* about?" Cheese asked. Their wives sat quietly by at another table—the men could barely hear their conversation—and Cheese propped one of the poached eggs in front of him onto a soft, hot English muffin.

"I mean you played '*Ghost of a Chance*' for your wedding dance song... and *Doll* and I played '*Love Is*' by Vanessa Williams and Bryan McKnight! Doesn't that say we don't expect love to last... and for our relationships to have a *chance*!?"

"I was only bein' honest with the *crowd*!" Cheese said. "More than half of all marriages end in divorce, nowadays, and I was preparing for a solid four or five years... if even *that*!!" He bit into his egg/muffin.

Gage glanced through the large window and didn't know if he was looking into the Columbia or Willamette River. Jet skiers flew by on occasion, he took notice. "'They say it's a river that circles the Earth... a beam of light shining to the *edge* of the universe!!! It conquers all, but it's a mystery!'" Gage recited the lyrics to Doll's chosen song to which they danced at a double wedding in early 2008. "'Love breaks your *heart*!'" Gage said.

"You're not singing in key, and I *don't* think you have the lyrics in *order*!'" Cheese said. "Mine was easy! I asked myself, 'What would *Spock* play at his wedding!?' Easy!! *Rush*!'"

Gage laughed, and the women joined them not much later. "I *still* think we're *Muslim*, as a nation, because we're going to end up with four wives *each*!'" Gage pulled Doll onto his lap, and they had a good time together when they rented boats. A boxing match was scheduled that night at the arena along the way. They thought they might catch it... or take a longer drive to Sacramento, and visit the Arco Arena.

"I *know* what's going *on*!" Cheese said after yelling for the check from a semi-attractive, middle-aged waitress. "The peak of literacy coincided with the invention of the *television*—mid-fifties, more or less—and we were given good *stuff*! Elvis! The *Ricardos*!! The whole enchilada!... and when it was a

supplement for life, people *lived*!! When they started to watch four-to-six hours per day on a regular basis, I think they forgot how to *live*!!”

“Why did *you* stop watching TV, *Cheese*???” Gage asked him.

“It was recreation and *poverty*!! I grew up with the TV on the blink, half the time, and I was forced into social extracurricular activities half the time!! When I learned how to juggle, and when I bought a unicycle at a *thrift* store, it changed my world because I started to travel with *freaks*!! They didn’t watch TV, so *I* didn’t watch TV! Simple!”

Gage watched Cheese polish off the last of his muffin, then said, “For me, it was easy *too*!! I was a video game designer, and I knew the *field*!! The people that loved video to market for the passive went into television. Those that wanted to market for the *active*, went to sporting events, *freak* shows, and anything that had to do with living life to its *fullest*... in order to get good *ideas*!!”

“I don’t agree with what you’re *sayin*’,” Cheese said to Gage. “I mean, wouldn’t a TV marketer go to the same *events*!?”

“*Hardly*!!” Gage said. “Look at *King of Queens*, and trace back your memory to the *Honeymooners*!! They are designed to make the fat man feel comfortable in front of the *TV*!!” Gage felt a tinge of guilt, then said, “If I didn’t have a fat-fuck stalker by the name of *Joanie* on my *ass* all the time, I probably wouldn’t have had a disdain for them... but that’s why we’re on *vacation*, right?”

“*To forget it all*,” Cheese said. His wife, Flower, whom Gage had slept with a couple of years back raised her water glass.

“*To forget it all!!!*” the other three said in unison.

“I feel like a fuckin’ *snob*!” Cheese said.

The group decided to camp in the neighboring woods—Albany or Mount Hood, depending on which way they wanted to travel. That would do them good, for a couple of days, and they thought it would be good for their systems.

“I’m ready for a *hike*!!” Doll said as they left the establishment.

\* \* \*

The year waddled on, and the four whom had been hiking outside of Portland opened up a soup kitchen. It had been a Halloween store and it was slated to be a *Christmas* store next, and it was located in a strip mall between Seattle and Longview. For the month of November, it became a soup kitchen, and it offered amenities of turkey and everything else a person would expect for Thanksgiving. It was meant to relieve the group of self-imposed guilt, and it was meant to last no more than a month.

“Have you noticed that the people don’t *like* us, here?” Doll asked. She dressed professionally, every day—professional sport coat, ruffled blouse, and long, black skirts which never went above her knees. She wore dark, sheer nylons, and they drove Gage crazy.

“Yeah,” Cheese said to her, “but that’s why we do *charity*!! So that we don’t have to go *home* with these people!!”

A man approached the two of them—Gage was just now returning from the back after a shared break with Flower—and he said, “Listen...” He wanted to say “bitch” but was unable to. “We are *grateful* that you are here!!”

It was their third day in the soup kitchen, and things were going relatively as planned—quite *smooth*, even—until Dolores came into the place with Joanie, from Gage’s junior high. “Listen, *bitch*!!” Dolores said to Cheese. She grabbed him, tried to kiss him, then said, “I didn’t think you’d get *rich* off all that shit you were selling us... about the country *ending*!!”

“I didn’t get *rich*, *hun*!” Cheese said to her.

“We tracked you down because we heard you had a P.R. wedding for the *public*!!” Dolores said. “We even have *photos* of you!!” Dolores looked down to Doll. “You could have done *better*, you know!!”

“Actually, that’s my *partner*’s wife... and he’s the one that got rich from personal investments!!”

“I *get* it!!” Dolores said. In the middle of the madness, Gage’s mental light bulb went off, and he thought “*I Get It*!” would be a great name for a video game. Dolores continued though, “You want to love us and leave us... and I am carrying your *baby*!!”

Flower laughed at Dolores in hysterics. “I have *been* with him every day for the last nine months, if not the last *eleven*!!” She laughed some more, then poured Dolores a medium-sized bowl of soup.

Dolores turned to Joanie and said, “Let’s take the soup and *leave*!! He’s not going to believe that you are carrying *Gage*’s baby!”

Gage shuddered. “Here’s two thousand dollars!! Please don’t see us any more!”

Flower became upset at the ease by which Gage tossed his money. She demanded, “Are you going to give *Scott*, over there, two hundred if he doesn’t like the *soup*!!” Scott had come in to repair the light fixtures. He happened to stay for the soup.

“*No*!!” Gage said. He reached back into his wallet, and tossed two more thousand at Flower without saying a word.

Flower picked up the money without a thought. She said, “I’m going to buy me some *shoes*, and I’m going to go shopping in downtown Seattle when it’s all *over*!!” She kissed Gage gently on the lips, and Dolores was shocked because she was led to believe that her husband was the other guy, *Cheese*.

Cheese turned to Doll and french kissed her in front of Gage and Flower.

Dolores got mad, and started to steam out of the room.

Doll yelled to her, “Hey, *bitch*!! Want to see my *tit*??”

Dolores turned around, and Flower propped out the left side of her boobie from an unbuttoned blouse.

“I *like* it!!” Dolores said. She was embarrassed, humiliated, and thought she just got off the lot of a bad NC-17 movie.

\* \* \*

“Do you know how they took down Michael Moore?” Gage asked Flower on the way to Seattle. He closed up shop at six p.m. instead of seven so she could go shopping on time. “They put billboards of Britney Spears... right in front of his *house!!!* And they hired her to photo-op with him on occasion. When the press stormed him after leaving his home, on occasions, they would make sure to put Britney Spears’ picture in the background. That way, people no longer thought of Michael Moore, but rather, Britney *Spears...* and the ‘guilt by association’ theory was that if he didn’t move out of his house—if he stayed there, day in and day out—he was *affirming* that he was a pervert, in some ways, because he refused to move!”

“The actuality,” Flower began, “was that he didn’t have a choice... unless he wanted to *move*, every month!?”

“Yeah!! But it goes beyond that, because the press found out what he liked to eat—they didn’t need Cyborg Lot’s files—and they had Dakota Fanning do spots with it miles away in *Hollywood*. It was surface on the internet, and the *juxtaposition* of the two incriminated him as a *child* pervert, when push came to shove. *Association*, once again, in the guise of somethin’ quasi-innocent: *ENTERTAINMENT!!!!*”

“So you’re sayin’ you don’t have a *choice*,” Flower said, “and when you kissed me back...”

“It wasn’t because I *love* you in the same way as I used to in *Canada!* I had to play the crowd because I’m a public *figure...* again!?” The two sped under a sign with Cheese and Gage advertising their company’s latest video game. “I can see for *miles*, but only if you *let* me!?”

“I need to be your *eyes*, I understand,” she felt nervous, “but why did you marry Doll instead of *me!!!*?”

“I don’t *like* Doll!! I like her as a person, I mean, but I knew she was the only person I *could* marry when I met her in *Vegas!*!”

“Because she’s a performer, and she’s used to it!?” Flower wanted to cry, and Gage detected it.

Gage said, “Dolores and Joanie are the first in a *slew* of people from mine and Cheese’s past that we’ll *see!*!”

“I know!” Flower said. She leaned over, and kissed him.

Gage felt lucky. He felt ashamed, *too*. “They should have built *arks!*!” he said about the homes as he passed them on the highway. He didn’t have any clue that they were enjoying their lives again, now that Cyborg Lot was nearly a lost memory.

“Not long after the movie, *Singles*, I never wanted to be in a serious committed relationship, again. I think I *did* well!?”

“We have to *cover* for them, Flower! We have to show them that *couples* can make it... because it’s what’s cried for in the public *eye!*!”

“I know what you *mean!*!”

\* \* \*

As December rolled around, Gage and his group closed up shop at the soup kitchen. By and large, it was a good experience for them in the aesthetic sense: It just *felt* good. They went to Woodland Park, together, two weeks before the end of the year, and they strolled around while they talked about the future of the city and the company they had. Since the Dolores and Joanie incident, they became more and more comfortable swapping one another’s spouses, so long as they thought the crowd wouldn’t catch on around them and make things too uncomfortable. Mostly, this would happen when out-of-towners would see them and ask if they were the people from the billboard signs. They would pose for them to take a picture, and they would make sure they had their proper *wives*.

Gage strolled with Flower—he was becoming increasingly more happy that he chose her over Zelda to marry Cheese; it was all done for P.R. reasons, initially—and he contemplated the following year. “Kubric says the *aliens* are comin’ next year!!” He looked into the night sky, and he slipped his hands around her waste.

“I don’t think the aliens are *out* there, *buddy!*!” Flower said.

“I know... But don’t you think they’re *somewhere!*?”

“With as many stars as their are grains of sand on the beach,” She looked over toward Green Lake, “*Yes!*! They’re somewhere out there, but not close *by!*!”

“Do you *know*, or do you *believe!*!”

“I know I don’t *care!*!” Flower said, and she allowed Gage to smooch her on the neck.

Gage drew back from her after he was done. He headed for a picnic table, and gestured for the others to come. He said, “Not far from here, there are many satellite dishes which, in unison, beseech the night sky to give them a call. They *want* the aliens, and they are ‘trained’—if satellites could be *trained!*—to look for abnormalities!!”

“You don’t believe in the aliens, *either!*!” Flower said to Gage. “I can *tell!*!”

“It’s not that I don’t *believe* in the aliens—that they’re *out* there!—it’s that I think it’s the bad *signal!*!”

The thought hit Flower like a brick to the head. She was learning to *think* like Gage, and it scared her. “You’re saying it’s like a *bear* trap, and the aliens are a lot smarter than *bears!*!”

“*Yes!*!” Gage said. “I’m sayin’ *if* they are out there... we will never *know!*!”

A meteor broke into the Earth’s atmosphere above them, at that time, and they wished on it as a falling star. “I like the coincidences you’re *around!*!” Flower said to Gage. For the first time since the soup kitchen incident, she felt more comfortable around Cheese. She squeeze him, and Gage took off to *Green Lake* with Doll, *alone*.



\* \* \*

New Year's Eve quickly approached. Flower got a hold of a *Recycler* and brought home to Gage and the gang a Commodore 128. "What can you do with *this* thing?!"

Gage went to a redwood desk in the foyer and pulled out a laminated paper from underneath bills and receipts. The writing on the paper looked childish, and reeked of numbers and symbols.

```

10  CLR  SCRN
15  PRINT "EIGHT BALL": PRINT
20  INPUT "QUESTION", A$
25  C$= LEFT$(A$, 4)
30  IF C$= "DOES" OR C$="WILL" OR C$="CAN " OR C$="SHOU" OR
    C$="COUL" OR C$="MIGH" THEN GOTO 50
35  PRINT "INVALID QUESTION"
40  FOR W= 1 TO 760: NEXT W
45  GOTO 10
50  LET X=INT(RND(0)*7)+1
51  IF X=1 THEN PRINT "YES"
52  IF X=2 THEN PRINT "NO"
53  IF X=3 THEN PRINT "MAYBE"
54  IF X=4 THEN PRINT "SURE!"
55  IF X=5 THEN PRINT "FORGET IT!!"
56  IF X=6 THEN PRINT "REPHRASE THE QUESTION!"
57  IF X=7 THEN PRINT "I DON'T KNOW!!"
58  FOR R = 1 TO 800: NEXT R
59  GOTO 10

```

"It was the first program I ever designed, and it was intended for a VZ-200—not a Commodore 64, but I can probably adapt it, *any way!*!" Gage said.

"I *like* it!!" Flower said.

Gage spent the next two and three quarter hours designing games for the group from a primitive computer language called *BASIC*. The 64 was essentially the same thing as the 128 which Flower brought home. He was familiar with its language, and he had a good time playing around with it. In the end, they didn't play "Black Ball" too much—a variant from the original "*Eight Ball*"—but rather, they played

“Jupiter Lander,” and had a good *time*.

Before midnight, Gage said to Flower, “I feel like a fuckin’ *nerd*... but these things got me my start... and they invariably bought those *pearls* around your *neck*!!” He tried to joke, but felt like the *Hulk* (it was his second favorite comic as a kid behind *Spider-man*). “You wouldn’t like to *see* me when I’m *angry*!!”

Cheese asked, “Where the fuck did *that* come from!!”

“Shut up, *dipshit*!! You are talking to my inner child, and zits or *no* zits... I feel like a fuckin’ *moron*, again, and I am highly insecure!!”

“I’d suck your cock,” Flower said to him, “but I don’t molest little *boys*!!”

Flower, Cheese, and Doll took off into the midnight city, and Gage stayed home. He played Advanced Dungeons and Dragons into the wee hours of the night.

The next day, Gage gave away his new antique computer to a neighbor. “I don’t *need* this, any more!! I’m goin’ to start wars with the *Russians* if I *keep* it long enough!!”

“I *hear* ya’!” the neighbor said. He didn’t have any clue what Gage was talking about.

\* \* \*

“Tell me, again, how you came up with *Jock Murder*, the first game you submitted to *Sega*!!” Doll said to Gage. They were at a bar in the east side of Seattle. New Year’s Eve was the following night.

“After I designed *Eight Ball*, I started writing all these *other* games—most of them were good, and most of them rudely resembled Atari’s games, of old. I had one that was like *Surround*, I had one that was like *Jupiter Lander*, the game we played on *Commodore*. I had one that was like Intellivision’s *Star Strike*! Most my games were *good*, and I started getting picked on by the *jocks* for being so *smart*!!”

“But you’re a big *man*, Gage!” Doll said. She slipped a glazed dough nut hole into her mouth. The bar and grille they were at offered those up for free instead of peanuts.

“*Yeah*, but when you’re *smart*... I’m going to tell you about *Neitzsche*.”

“I’ve heard about him,” Doll said. “He said that if Jesus had lived to be his age... he would have repudiated his doctrine!”

“*Yeah*!” Gage said. “He *also* believed that Charles Darwin wasn’t right about the survival of the species. He said that the strong—the *physically* strong—are inevitably left out of the loop because they are ganged up upon by the rest of the social groups they are *in*!!”

“So *you*, bein’ strong *and* smart... were left out of the loop for a while!!” It was a new thought to her.

“*Yeah*!! And now that my *dick* don’t work right...!” Gage began.

“*Doesn’t* work right,” Doll corrected.

“*Yeah*!” Gage said. “Now that my *dick* doesn’t work right, ‘they’ are letting me reproduce, if I

want to!!”

“I get it... and I feel *sick*!!” Doll said.

“That’s not *all*, though!! I made *Jock Murder* to get *along* with them!! I made fun of them, but in a *fun* way!!”

“And your first record was *Freedom of Choice*, and you liked Devo’s song, ‘Jocko Homo’!!”

“Yes!! You get it!! I didn’t mastermind *Columbine* because I designed the game I made, *Jock Murder*, more than ten years before it *happened*!!”

“You’re saying these things are *eternal*, huh? That the jocks make fun of the nerds... and the nerds get revenge... like in the *Revenge of the Nerds* movies, huh?”

“No, ironically!! If we are treated good from society—if the economy is strong, and we don’t feel used, like we have to compete for each other’s resources—we get along *fine*!!”

“So you said something about a *water* hole, the other day?” Doll mused as she ordered a beer (*Hefeweizen*, of course).

“Yeah! I was watching *Discovery*, one day, and there was a baboon that had his arm mangled—it had been bitten *badly* by a crocodile trying to share the same water. It sat there, sad, and I couldn’t get the image out of my head. I *knew* that the Sahara was growing every year because we saw satellite pictures in one of our classes, but I didn’t understand the *impact* until I watched that documentary!!”

“So you’re saying you’re competing for *resources*, huh?” Doll asked. She subtly directed her breasts toward Gage, and it was subliminally a come on.

“Yeah!! Always *has* been this way!!”

Doll leaned over, tried to whisper into Gage’s ear, but he wouldn’t have any of it.

“*Devo* stands for ‘de-evolution’ and it’s an attitude that a lot of us *nerds* had, back then!! We didn’t rock ‘n’ *roll*, we didn’t like *jocks*, and we *sure* didn’t like PRINCESSES, like *you*!!” He tried to direct his anger at Doll, but found it projected toward the pretty barmaid whom was serving them drinks. “Sorry, ma’am! You remind me of my lover, *Flower*, at times!!”

“You’re a *nerd*, you son-of-a-bitch!!” Doll whispered into Gage’s ear.

“That’s where you have it *wrong*!! Nerds don’t sky dive!! And they don’t climb to the top of drive-in movie picture screens in drunken stupors to shoot the shit on a thin plateau!!! They don’t go on beer runs, and they don’t dine and *dash*!!”

“So you *rebelled* during your college years!!” Doll asked.

“Yeah!! And that’s why everyone’s afraid of me except Joanie, Samantha, and Matilda, all whom saw me shit the figurative diaper while I went to grade school with them. I *still* talk to Sam and Matilda on the phone, and they greet me with nerd lingo every *time*!! ‘Syntax error! Improper looping procedure!’ Samantha says when I call her... then she lightens up, and asks me questions of the day!!”

“And you went on armed *robberies*!! You broke into schools!! And you slugged around at adult *strip* clubs!!!!” Doll said.

“I don’t know what you’re *saying*, lady!!” He turned to the bartender, “Cut her *off*!! I think she had too much!!” Gage kissed Doll on the cheek. He said, “Don’t tell my *mom*, if she ever asks you about the things I’ve gone through. She still thinks I’m nerd material, I’m sure... and I wonder about it myself, half the time when I’m not thinkin’ of *Zelda*!!”

“You ought to give her a *call*!!” Doll said.

“*Who*? My mom, or *Zelda*!?” Gage drank the rest of his beer, then considered a sober binge for a while. He bought a *Tool* CD on his way home, and listened to it all night.

\* \* \*

New Year’s Eve approached, and Gage with his gang headed to Vancouver, Washington. On the way there, Doll said to Gage from the backseat of a mid-sized, white sedan, “I have the *roller* eye, if you guys want to drink, right now!!”

*(Pssft!)*

*Gage opened his drink without much hesitation.*

*(Pssft! Pssft!)*

*Doll and Flower opened up their beers not too much later.*

*(Pssft! Pssft!!)*

Cheese opened up two beers and said, “I have the *beer* eye, and today, I’m startin’ it with a double *fister*!!” He held up his drinks, then started to pound them alternately afterward.

“I did some *research* on... *JOOOOANIIE*, Gage!”

“Don’t *tell* me!!” Gage said.

“She’s still in *love* with you!!”

“*Yeah*!! Tell me about it!!” Cheese yelled. “That’s the bitch that came in with *Dolores*, huh?!”

“*Yep*!” Gage said. He was embarrassed and started to drink healthily from his bottle. He turned up the CD player, which played *Appetite For Destruction*.

*I make a fire and I miss the fire fight!!* the speakers blared.

Doll, undaunted, laughed then continued with her story. She yelled, after leaning up to Gage’s ear, “*I LOVE CHA CHI*!” It’s on her website, still!! *‘I LOVE MILES KRAFT!’* And, *‘I LOVE GAGE TURNER!!!’* It’s sick, but it’s a photo copy of her original *Pee-Chee*, and she has a picture of you... when you still had *ZITS*!!”

Gage screeched the car to the side. He got out and yelled at Cheese, “*You* have to drive, and *I* have to borrow your *girlfriend*!!”

Cheese, without thinking, ran to the driver’s side door, and Gage skipped to the back.

Gage made out with Doll all the way to Vancouver. Cheese kept Flower company by putting his hand on her leg upwards of her crotch the whole way there. They listened to the *Scorpions* after *Appetite*

*For Destruction* was over, and they listened to *Queensryche* after that.

It was a good night for all of them. Vancouver had a mild Kubric theme as the clock struck midnight... and the group traveled into *2010*.

\* \* \*

Gage, Cheese, Doll, and Flower flew to Vegas after ditching their car in Vancouver (it was a rental, and they were tired of tight quarters). Doll knew where to go... and they went: Casa Malaga!! It was located not far from Excalibur and the Tropicana. It was a run-down, ol' hotel, but the *stories* were good behind it (it's where Doll lived for the first two weeks of her Vegas experience). They went to *54* in MGM, and they had a great time. They traveled in helicopters, and for a while, they forgot that they were high-profiled people in Seattle. When the group was there for a week, *Cesar's* was the next stop, and they watched a heavyweight fight for the *ages* (a white man nearly beat a *black* man for the IBF title, and *Flower* was especially surprised that it almost happened; but Gage said to her that Tommy Morrison could have done the same thing, if he hadn't contracted the human immunodeficiency virus). Gage called Zelda, wished her well, and focused the rest of his attention on Flower, for the evening. He asked her about the "anguish poem" which she had recited while in *Newfoundland*. Flower didn't want to comment on it, so *Doll* contributed what she believed about anguish. She went on, "A lot of people in this town are *happy*!! I look around! I see them *smile*!!" She paused, let out a breath of smoke (she stopped smoking while in Seattle, but "old times" brought her back to an old habit), and said, "But there's a *different* between having fun and being *happy*!!" She pointed to some of the people on the streets. "*Those* people had fun!!" She pointed to the people in the casinos. "Those people are *happy*... because they know their limits... and they don't let themselves get caught by the *sharks*!!"

"It's sustained! I *see*!!" Gage said. He drank from a Heineken right in front of a security guard and felt completely at ease with it.

"I want to tell you that *anguish* is the same thing, though!!" Doll looked around. She pointed at one of the people on the streets—a scrubby man whom looked like he hadn't won a thing in three days. "That guy is being *tortured* because he lost all his hands... and he has to wait for the rest of the group to play out their winnings so he can go *home* in a few days!! He'll *pretend* to have fun, to keep up a good *face*, but he's being *tortured*!!"

"And your point is *what*?!?" Flower demanded.

"That guy that yelled at the top of his lungs a half-hour ago—I overheard him say that he lost ten *thou* and he couldn't make it up without selling his new *house*!!"

"He's going to be in *ANGUISH*... because he's going to lose his family, his job, and everything he ever *loved* about life!! It's prolonged, in other words! I like what you're *sayin'*," Flower said. "I know what you're *talkin'* about!!"

“Yes!” Gage said, “And when it ends, it feels like the magic of *heaven!*!”

They thought of Cyborg Lot, and realized they were coming down to a plain because none of them had mentioned it since the New Year. Cheese cut the silence by farting.

\* \* \*

After a couple of weeks in Nevada, the four decided to take a trip to Provo, Utah for skiing. They picked up a hitchhiker, not far out of Henderson, and they had a great conversation with him the whole way over there. The white, mid-sized sedan they had used was *nice* going to Vancouver, Washington the month before, but it grew a little crowded, and they opted for a Cadillac—*powder metallic blue*—on their way to Utah... even though they knew the energy crisis would create a strange backlash if certain media members caught them on their voyage. The straggling man filled the middle, back seat well and they had no regrets, nor guilt, about renting the larger car. He opened by saying that he was an economics major whom had to find his way back to BYU (he had gambled his return money away, and his friends left him in the dust after they saw him sipping from a beer). “Money is a *religion*, people!!” the guy said. “If you worship it, it controls you worse than... *CHURCH!*!”

Gage said, “You’re *Mormon!*! You mean ‘Temple,’ *right?*!”

“How did *you* know?!” Jimmy Boston asked. “Anyway, I want to tell you what I know of things, so we can compare *notes!*!” The guy explained that the tax system was all wrong. He said that if you taxed a hundred percent of the people ninety-nine percent of their wages, they would have so little money to spend after the crunch that it would bring the economy to a standstill. Accordingly, if you taxed them *one* percent of their wages... not enough money would be generated in order to run the national government, unless major tariffs were *reinstated*. He said that in between the two extremes, people had their *dilemmas*. The Democrats were saying that taxes were too low, and the Republicans were saying that lowering taxes would speed the economy to an optimal level. Any person versed in calculus could understand the proximities of imaginary locations circumventing an upward hump-shaped curve spawning from the subordinate extreme relative to the higher norm. Furthermore, he speculated that intuition alone was not sufficient enough to guarantee a solid and stable economy when factoring in unexpected variables which were no doubt thrown into the loop... such as the second *Gulf War*. He said that in the same way that it was impossible to tax a hundred percent of the people ninety-nine percent of their wages, a man with all of the money in the world could not be expected to do *nothing* at all... and a lot of people at BYU wanted him, Jimmy Boston, to sit on his savings forever (at least until graduation) instead of gambling with his life. “I bought a *dream*, and I bought some experience over there in *Vegas!*!” Jimmy B. said (he shortened his name for them, on occasion, as he spoke regarding himself in third-person at times). “I bought a *dream*, and I came to *know* something!!!”

“*What?*” Doll asked.

“You can’t win ‘em all, but more than that, you can’t expect to live like the *lowly*, either!!”

“You believe that you’re blessed by having us pick you up, *huh?*”

“*Yeah!!*” Jimmy B. said. “I mean... if I looked like those people in the alleys pan-handling for food, you no doubt would have passed me *up*, huh?” He looked around. “But I have a suit... I have a *tie!!!* I am *equally* irresponsible, but you picked me up because I look the *part!!*”

“*Yeah!!*” Gage said. “I liked your suit, and I thought you could bring us some good times by hopping aboard!! We were *starvin’* for somethin’ new!”

“I can take you to *Temple...*” Jimmy B. started to say.

“*No need!!*” Gage said. “We’re not on a religious voyage! It’s a *skiing* voyage that we’re on!!”

Jimmy B. closed his thoughts by saying, “I have as *much* in common as those guys on the *street*, back there, because they have nothing to lose... and I have nothing to *gain!!*”

“Shut *up*, Mormon boy!!” Gage said. “Just kidding! We talk like that to each other around here!! It makes us *loose!!*”

“Good!! Can I have some *coke...* when we stop at the next gas station?!”

“Cocaine, or *Coca-Cola!!*” Gage asked.

“The *latter!!* I’m used to drinkin’ nothing but 7- *UP!!*”

The “Rocky Gang,” as Jimmy Boston dubbed them, skipped out on skiing in Provo and headed straight to Veil in Colorado after dropping off their newfound buddy. *Cheese*, having been raised Mormon, stayed quiet for much of the religious discussion because he didn’t want to open *wounds* and start holy wars. He drank beers, at times, and mused at the large hills around them. They had a great time on the road trip, and then they skipped to Taos, New Mexico after a week of skiing. Mild guilt crept into Gage’s stomach at times during the trip, but he got over it. He knew he was due for a long vacation.

\* \* \*

“Let me tell you how they are working the anti-*nuclear* people, people!!” *Cheese* said to the rest as they headed down a New Mexico highway. Wind rustled through their hairs as the top was down on a rented convertible. “They are disparaging them through *ad hominem* remarks. That means, they are ‘takin’ it to the *man!*’ It’s *Latin*, you know?”

“Oh!! *Cheese*, shut *up!!*” Flower said from the back seat. She was half-wasted with cherry-flavored wine coolers.

“They want to call them ‘gay,’ ‘sellouts,’ or ‘*trash*’ of any kind!!”

“Like the *OJ* scientist!! I know!! You told us the *story* already!” Doll said. She was half-drunk in the back seat, as well. “You said that the guy whom testified to the ability using DNA samples accurately was disparaged because he had used LSD before!!”

“I *know*,” *Cheese* said. Gage was asleep in the passenger’s seat next to him, and *Cheese* had the urge to poke him with his finger for waking him up. He could tell more about the story, *Cheese* was sure.

“But a guy that brings home a *Moon* rock... still brings home a *Moon* rock, *right?!*”

“*Yes!!* We know what you’re *saying!!*” Flower said lazily. “The mental state doesn’t matter, and he *science* is still there... and the *method* to finding out what it is really doesn’t *MATTER!!!*”

“Unless you’re in the torture chambers of *Nazi* Germany, *right?!*”

“*Yep!!*” Doll said.

“Okay!! I met a girl back there at Taos whom was saying that she *specializes* in making people gay... for their ‘own *good*,’ she said!!”

“I *know!!* I’ve done that *too!!*” Doll yelled.

“Shut up, *whore!!* You’ve never done such thing!!” Flower said to her. She polished off her wine cooler, then broke open a piña colada one. She had a good time as they sped along the highway.

“They *take* these people—the anti-nuclear protesters, and so forth—and they humiliate them so they never show themselves in *public* again!!! Or at the very least, they are afraid to speak on political *issues!!*”

“Tell me how it’s *done*, bitch!!!” Flower yelled to Cheese.

“Okay... They get you on their sets, they offer you marijuana and drugs when you’re home... and they break you *down!!!*”

“Like your *mom!!*?” Flower asked. She spit some piña colada cooler at Cheese’s neck.

Cheese brushed off the comment and thought the squirt of wine on the neck was actually *refreshing*. He continued, “This lady I spoke to on one of the lifts—she was five-eleven, and very *beautiful!!* I would do her in a second, and I’m married to both of *you*... back there... in a collective held by *Gage*, whom is currently asleep as we speak, *right?!*?”

“Your *mom*’s asleep!!” Doll said. She didn’t have the enthusiasm that Flower had though.

“This lady had short hair, was brunette, talked about her *g-spot* as if it were a vestigial penis... *and* then casually said that *cows* actually use their *appendixes!!*”

“How *strange*, bitch!!!” Doll said. “Why are you *telling* us this?!”

“She had short hair, and when we got off the lift—you two were getting hot chocolate down at the lodge—she kissed me!! I closed my eyes, and I knew I was kissing a *man*, though!!”

“What are you *saying*, Cheese!!?” Flower demanded.

“No! I felt her breast, but I was seducing her... and I could tell she wanted me to know that there was a vagina down there—that if I kept kissing her, I wasn’t going to ‘bump helmets,’ as someone once said before a *Cinderella* show at the Whisky a *Go-Go* many years back!! I knew I had a sexy *lady*, but she was telling me with her motions and her *looks* that it was a step into homosexuality—the want; the *desire* to kiss the tall sultry lady with the dominating attitude!! She reminded me a bit of Amanda Donohoe... and she let me in about porn shops, after feeling her breasts, there’s a secret way of knowing things!!!”

“I already *know* this one!!” Doll shouted. “I was born near Vegas, and I wound up *working* there!!”



“So she tells me that there’s ‘five levels of porn,’ and the highest I could get to was the third because I don’t have the inside connections, and I would *never* have the inside connections!!!”

“So Nicole Kidman, Halle Berry, and June Jones—former coach of the *Atlanta* Falcons—all have porn videos under secret names!! What’s the big *deal*??”

“Our *friend*, here, Mr. *Gage* was an anti-nuclear protester when he was young because he went to *Greenpeace* rallies! They are *working* on him, they said, and they *DON’T* care that he did it as a kid or that he does or doesn’t believe in it any more!!!”

“Okay!! I get it!!” Doll said. “By the way... What could I *possibly* know from watching a Nicole Kidman porn video made under an assumed identity?! What more can I *know* of her!! She’s *done* nude shots!!”

“She talks of ‘*Bill*,’ in one of them obsessively, and everyone knows that ‘Bill Jones’ of the porn video underground is *always* a euphemism for Bill *Clinton*!! I know it’s stupid, but you could know his body parts in *specific* if you watched long enough!! They’re meant to give us codes about what the world is really about... but I think she gave me a little more information than I wanted to *know*!!!”

“So if I *go* in there!!!” By coincidence, the car was passing an all-night porn shop along the road, and Doll *pointed* to it, “They would give me a Nicole *Kidman* video, as Kitty Ditty, or somethin’ like *that*!!”

“Yeah... if you know what to ask for, and if you had the ‘right’ attitude!!!” Cheese said.

“I think it’s a *vacuum*, and I think they eventually want *you* to be with the ‘*special*’ people as *well*!!!” Flower said. She tossed her wine cooler out of the car and onto the pavement at fifty milers per hour, then she started to puke along the car’s interior.

“I don’t *care*, any more!! All I know is I was kissing the Amanda Donohoe look alike... and it felt *good*!!!”

“I hope you’re not turning *gay*, Cheese!! That would fuck us all over because you’re such a pushover for the *women*!!!” Flower said. She laughed, and then the car pulled over so they could scrub vomit off the inside door panel.

\* \* \*

Gage finally woke up when all the puke was scrubbed from the car, and he asked, “Did someone *throw up* in here?”

The convertible blared along the highway, and Cheese didn’t slow when he reached one hundred and five miles per hour (one hundred miles per hour was his self-imposed speed limit, and he brought with him a Radio Shack “highway patrol detector” everywhere he went in his suitcase to position on the rental cars’ dash). Flower asked from the back seat, “Do you ever wonder why you didn’t win a Nobel Peace Prize for averting a third world war through your *video games*??” She tried to coax his recently-resurfaced

vanity—it hadn't been there since high school—as they passed a *Virtual Fantasy* billboard.

“No!” Gage said. He licked at his cotton mouth, and wanted a drink of water or lemonade. “They say that ‘luck’ is the intersection of timing...”

“And good *fortune*?” Flower asked.

“*Yeah!* Somethin’ like that... and I just didn’t have the good *fortune!*!”

“I heard all those guys are *pricks*, and you wouldn’t want to hang around with them in real *life!*!” Doll said from beside Flower. Secretly, she was getting sick of riding in the back with her.

“*Yeah!* Exactly! And I threw my name in the hat, but it was never picked *out!*!”

Flower said something stupid. “Me and Doll call your *sleuth* hat your ‘hate’!! Does that *bother* you?!”

“Just don’t call it my *asshole*, and I’ll be *happy!*!” The four of them sped along, and they were happy. When they reached California, they came into a mild surprise: State agents were checking people for tainted grate fruits. Gage was half-drunk when he reached them, and Flower was driving the car by then. Gage asked the woman whom seemed to be in charge of spot-inspecting the cars as the whizzed through, “My *girlfriend*, back there, has some nice...”

“*Don’t say it!*” Doll said.

“*Grate fruits*,” Gage said. “Are you going to inspect them?!” He didn’t look at the lady for her reaction, but rather swiveled his head to Doll in the back. “You still have those *GRATE FRUITS*... from back in New Mexico?”

Doll looked down at her breasts, and mouthed, “*These??*”

Gage shook his head “no.” He whispered, “*Make somethin’ UP!*!”

“I have grate fruits in my *pants!*!” Doll said. By then Flower had sped up, again, because she was waved by.

Stupidly, Gage asked, “What are the grate fruits in your *pants?*!”

“My *penis*... and *balls!*! The imaginary ones that you left *behind!*!” She winked at Gage, and he liked it.

“I’m going to put my penis and balls wherever I *can*, then!!” He talked in stupid drunk talk all the way to Barstow, and then decided to split from the group. He wasn’t feeling well, and he took a bus to Ontario where he chartered a flight from their international airport to Vancouver, British Columbia. He planned to vacation there for a week... while he rebuilt his system’s antibodies.

The rest of the group headed to Los Angeles, and Cheese told Doll and Flower exactly what had happened with the former mayor of the city. He even showed them the video tape. When all was said and done, Flower kept the tape and wanted to be exiled from the group. It was too crazy for her, and she expressed the sentiment to Cheese and Doll. “It’s even *more* crazy out there *alone!*!” Cheese said. “There’s power in numbers, and Gage chanced things by takin’ off alone! When things settle down, if we ever have a normal economy again, we can go our own ways for times, here and *there!*!”

“On Thursday, they *come*, huh?” Doll asked.

“Yeah!! On Thursday, they *come*!!” Cheese said. Flower asked what it meant and Cheese told her, “It’s a *Twilight Zone* reference, and it has to do with an episode in which a leader of a shipwrecked crew which had traveled to another planet had to live together for many years! All the while, the leader spoke of Earth, and its beauty! Most the people on the planet weren’t *born* on Earth because they had been gone for so long, and they didn’t know what it was about!! When they were finally going to be rescued, the leader let them know that ‘on Thursday, they *come*!’ and it was the name of the episode.”

Flower laughed.

“The rescuing ship came and went,” Cheese said, “and the leader stayed behind because he couldn’t handle that they would all be broken apart upon return to their native planet... and secretly, I don’t think the guy could handle that he’d take orders from ‘inferior officers’ on the voyage home!!”

Flower laughed, again. She said, “You don’t want to *lose* us, huh?!” She was drunk, and Cheese was happy. “Because you’re the *commander*, now, and I’m the slut that wants to get home to my house up *north*!!”

Cheese was rattled then said, “You’re *stupid*!!”

They laughed... then drank from the wine coolers on the roadside.

\* \* \*

Gage spent a week in Vancouver, British Columbia and bought a 1974 Ford Pinto from a rural farmer for his trip back to Seattle (the man had claimed it had low miles on it because it was used primarily by an elderly, passed-away auntie). Gage liked it because it reminded him of the AMC *Pacer* in *Wayne’s World*, and Mike Meyers happened to be Canadian. On the way home, he stopped at a gas station, then fueled up. While there, he noticed a leak coming from the rear gas tank—*Ford*, back then, didn’t know it’d be an engineering hazard to put the fuel tank in the back—but he kept riding, and then he stopped along the side of the road when he wanted to take a leak. A trucker, dazed with a long night’s drive, veered to the left... then the *right*. Gage saw him in time to scream. Had the truck hit the rear of the Pinto, insult to injury would have been compounded because those particular cars were known to explode on impact when smashed from behind. Instead, Gage was swept off his feet in the literal sense, and he didn’t see Cheese, Doll, or Flower ever again... except in a three-second vision just before his mind faded to black.

Cheese, Flower, and Doll learned of Gage’s demise through the news. They didn’t watch a lot of his purported “Propaganda Tube”—they had a good vacation, and didn’t *need* to—but they found out quick because neighbors told them to turn it on. They were planning a big celebration for him when they returned to Seattle. The celebration was not cancelled. Jim Henson had wanted a celebration at his death, instead of a funeral. Gage was the same way, and Flower said during a toast, “We have not *lost* Gage, and we all *know it*!!”

Doll said, “*Cheer, cheer!!*!”

Cheese said, “He’s like Max Headroom, now, and when we play the video games he was featured in—the *coded* ones—we can play with our friend, *GAGE!!!*”

“You’re a *jackass!!*” Doll said to Cheese after he was done.

“Why don’t you put a *cork* in it!!?” Flower asked Cheese.

They slept together that night in the bed Gage shared most the time with Flower alone. The three of them tugged at one another’s genitals most the night and then remained together as buddies in the apartment for the remainder of most of the year.

*They liked it.*

\* \* \*

High up in the thoroughs of Canada—not quite Saskatchewan; not quite Newfoundland; and not quite British Columbia—there was a place called *Gas City*. If a person were to find it from a satellite in a photo, it couldn’t be found because it was more of a state of mind than anything else. When living in *Gas City*, a person had no rules; no *country*; no motivation to live, at times, but all the while he or she had *every* reason to live. It was right next to the Devine, and at the same time, it was far removed from any church on the planet. It was *Gas City*.

Doll, Flower, and Cheese went to *Gas City* because they couldn’t escape the press. They couldn’t escape the accusations of Gage’s death... and they couldn’t escape the condolences of people whom didn’t believe that people—*loved ones*—could be celebrated, adored, and *cherished*... in spite of the fact that they didn’t walk the Earth, any more. To many, they had to be *mourned*, and in many tragic cases it seemed appropriate.

With Gage, Flower found that it didn’t matter. She believed he lived a full life. With Doll, it didn’t matter. She had seen her share of death, in her days in Vegas, and Gage was one in many of a long chain of people whom she thought she’d meet and get to know... although he was one of her favorite ones. With Cheese, Gage was not a *friend*, but rather, a political partner ready to take on the world if need be although through different methods than *he* used.

*Gas City* was a place that you could go... and walk the streets with holstered guns. You could go into the forests and not worry about anti-NRA moms coming to your doorstep because you had brought home a fowl... or a deer... or anything else suitable for cooking. You didn’t have to worry about *Burger King* mocking you through commercials if you chose to be a vegetarian raising your own fruits and various agricultural crops. You didn’t have *Playboy* trying to take off your top, and you didn’t have the *Christian Coalition* trying to keep it on. For that matter, you didn’t have Sheriff John Brown to shoot, for no apparent reason, because there *was* no Sheriff John Brown. In essence, you could do anything you *wanted* to do, and so long as you didn’t violate the animal instinct of another person, you were relatively safe, save

the elements and the wildlife, at times.

Gas City was a great place, and it was named for reasons that Cheese, nor Flower, nor Doll knew about. It was *Flower*, though, that had heard of the place, originally, from all her expeditions to Newfoundland. The reason *Gas City* could not be found and put on a map was that there was no *certainty* of it. In other words, what you had to do was to go to the northernmost towns and cities of Canada, ask for its location, and if you were *lucky*, the locals could tell you where it was. If *spy* satellites from above tried to locate it, it was futile, because sending troops, scouts, or media would result in a wild goose chase. Alexander the Great had many cities which donned the name of *Alexandria*. Gas City, when “discovered,” turned to *Woodland*, *Snowdrift*, and many *other* locations. The real *Gas City* was a state of mind, at least the way *Flower* understood it.

Flower had gone to her cabin in Newfoundland with her two other buddies, and she asked the locals of the closest feed market, “Can you tell me where *Gas City* is??” If the locals, even when prospective citizens and travelers were *Canadian*, didn’t believe you needed to be there, they would lie and say it was a place that *resembled* Gas City, but was far off on the map... or they would deny knowing about its existence... or they would set you on your way but sabotage your trip by informing rangers about your motives or methods. Flower was able to find it, though, because the locals knew she had to have a getaway. She was leaving the press in Seattle, and she was leaving a friend in a Kelso cemetery. They gave her great directions, and they warned her not to get too ornery with the locals... because people would get shot, and it was not much different from the old American West in that regard.

Flower went to *Gas City* with Cheese and Doll. It wasn’t far from where she suspected it would be from childhood rumors. When they got there, they purchased a tree saw of the traditional swivelly kind by bartering clothes, fuel, and food. They built their own log cabin not far from where the town center was. A church *appeared* to be in the middle of town, but it was really a tavern with a sharp steeple. People prayed at home, or they didn’t pray at all, the three of them came to find. It was a triumph to complete their home by deep winter, and it was a rush to *live* in the place. As the days went by, Cheese was reminded of Buddhist meditations as he had read from the books and he thought he might want to achieve *nirvana*, some day.

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Toward *Gas City*, totemic remnants of grandeur vision went through Doll’s head. She could see a pig’s head with its snout nose rotting on a high wooden stick. As a matter of fact, it was high enough off the ground that she could see the puncture marks of where the spear went into the decaying vessels’ neck. The flies were many, and there were deer in the background. The *eye* on the pig was lopsided, as if it had been cut by a knife inadvertently, or otherwise by whomever chose to decapitate the *noggin* from the remainder of the body. The cheeks were flush, but they puffed unordinary outward as if a bacteria had set

into the flesh. The ears were not large, and the few hairs on the head were white. The face seemed to want to talk, but could say nothing because of maggots climbing out of it.

Doll snapped herself out of her vision on the day that the survivors of the dubbed “Rocky Group” traveled to *Gas City*. She asked if anyone had read *Lord of the Flies*, and the others had said that they hadn’t, though Cheese volunteered he had watched the movie. Doll asked the other two people what they thought living in complete wilderness would be like, and if they should make any ground rules before anything hit the fan in a proactive way.

*Yeah!* Cheese had said then. Doll reflected on it while she split wood for the town’s centralized furnace. *Don’t fuck with the natives, because they have rules that go years back... instead of DAYS back!!! You’re stupid!* Doll had told him that day, and they moved on.

After chopping wood for the centralized furnace, Doll made her way to her new log cabin. Though it didn’t have a furnace like the one in the town lot, it had a place in the far corner with a stone fireplace (the locals showed them how to effectively build one). It didn’t have enough wood, and Doll wondered why she chopped wood for the *others*—for the natives in the tavern—before she chopped wood for her own kinfolk. It was simple. It was voluntary taxing, and if people didn’t do it on their own, there *would* be no *Gas City*—no place of magic where there “are no rules”... but she thought it created a paradox... because there was a rule in her heart to help others before she would help herself... if they were *worthy!!*

Doll had never had a sculpture class in her life, but she had an axe and she had a lot of time. She took one of the cords of wood from the back of her cabin, and she set to work. It took her two days, but she effectively carved out a pig’s head. It stared at her from the back, and she put molasses on it to draw the wildlife. She wanted to recreate, in her head, that hideous face which she kept seeing. She wanted it to be more innocent than her vision... so that when she left *Gas City*, she wouldn’t think of it any longer.

Doll prayed. She didn’t *tell* anyone, but she *prayed*. She didn’t want her group to become like the band of kids from the deserted island in her head. She knew it would take just one snow-in at the wrong time... or an accident hiking from a key member. Things *could* get savage.

She prayed they *wouldn’t*.

\* \* \*

“Gage, never for a second, believed that *Zelda* was on his side,” Cheese said to Flower and Doll as they roasted wall nuts and chest nuts on the fire. “That’s why he married *you*, Doll!!”

“I *know*,” Doll said, “but he said they went through a *ritual* of marriage in Montana when he was up there!”

“That doesn’t mean a thing because there was no real minister, and the *witnesses* took it as a joke!” Cheese thought about the ceremony. “I *think* he thought the world was ending, and *Zelda* was going

to be his only wife if it *did* end!!”

Doll asked, “Do you think she was really in the *CIA*?!”

“I don’t think that mattered, because she didn’t *know* if she was in the *CIA*... and she didn’t *care*!” Cheese said before grabbing some more nuts from a large potato sack.

“Clandestine *agent*, huh? The kind that gets initiated through innuendo and indirect *come on*, huh?” Flower asked.

“I’m sayin’ that she was trapped, and no more than Gage wanted to be with her, she wanted to be with *him*!”

Doll was upset, “Two people in a tight *spot*, huh?? But I think *he* loved me... as much as he *could*!”

Flower said, “On the way to Seattle from the soup kitchen, one day, he told me he loved you... and you were the only one he could marry because of your... *habits*!”

“I like *that*!! I really *like* that... but he was always tellin’ me that he thought he was surrounded by *enemies*!! In a lot of ways, he sounded like a rock star... *whom couldn’t trust anyone around him*!! But he designed *video* games, and I think the same qualities *applied*!! People wanted to be in his *games*, you know??”

Flower said, “He told me, straight out when I was in Toronto, that if you were pretty enough and of child-bearing age, he would *sleep* with you... to figure out what you’re about... and he donated five percent of his time to the ‘lowly’ so he wouldn’t lose touch with his *roots*!”

“He had a rich uncle that wouldn’t support him while he was at MIT,” Doll said. “The motherfucker, one night, had that gall to call *Gage* in the middle of the night to demand his time. He said, ‘I need to work at one of my new Carl’s Junior/ *Green Burritos*!’ The motherfucker must have been stupid or out of his mind because he *didn’t* know that Gage was one of the premier *video game* programmers of our *time*!! So the guy, because he had *money*, thought he could order people around and...”

“People value time and *money*,” Flower said. “Gage talked to me about this, as well. He said he spent his *time* like people spend *money*: As if it was *valuable*... but the ‘*rich*’ motherfucker was so stupid that he couldn’t *see* it!”

“And Gage put him as a ‘rich villain’ in one of his games! It’s a good *game*, if you play it!! It’s called ‘*Tirade*,’ and it features a *semblance* of the stupid motherfucker!”

Cheese quit roasting chest nuts and turned to the two, “The guy had *CIA* connections, I came to find, and *that motherfucker* was the one responsible for bringing Horatio Sanz to town through *Zelda* every time that Gage tried to remove the guy from his life. *Zelda* was a mole—Gage *knew* it—but he slept with her because the sex was good... and he’d have a mole around him one way or *another*. ‘Why not a *feisty* dame!?’ Gage always asked me!”

Doll changed her demeanor, “You don’t think he had anything to do with the *truck* driver wrecking *in* to him, do you?!”

“The guy was diabolical and *despicable*!! I don’t think he knew his ass from a *hole* in the ground, but that’s the way the power establishment *stays* in power!! They dare you to take them on, and when you try, they snuff you out before you can *win*!! I think it’s chickenshit that the guy chose a blood *family* member to pick on, but that’s the way they had it set *up* for a while!!”

“I’m not a *Christian*,” Doll said, “but I remember Gage ranting about the final days being ‘brother against brother,’ and ‘sister against sister,’ and things like that!! You don’t *think*...?” Doll reached down for roasted nuts instead of finishing her question.

“Don’t *think* of it, right now!! The guy was lost, and he relied on Gage’s ideas while he studied in Massachusetts! He was a self-made millionaire, and that’s what new money *does*!! They can’t think for themselves, so they leech off of other *people*!” Cheese softened, “I don’t think it’s *wrong*, but it drove Gage crazy and destroyed any sense of ‘family’ he had in his head. I’ve worked for *management* like that, by the way!! People that take *your* ideas, use them as their own, then get promoted in order to squash you more!!”

“It’s a good thing we’re away from *civilization*, right now!!” Doll said. The three of them shut up, started to watch the fire... then Flower headed for the dining area to return with fermented juice. They drank from it, and had a good evening.

\* \* \*

Early in the morning, Doll was out with Flower splitting more wood. The town tavern had enough, so they spit the wood for themselves. Doll said to Flower, “*Cheese* was tellin’ me—thank God he’s *asleep*, inside!—that the uncle of Gage was like racin’ a V.W.!”

It was the spring equinox, Flower mulled over the fact that the day would be equal to the night yet didn’t verbalize it, then said, “I know!! ‘*Red Barchetta*’ is what I think of ‘cause we’re up here in *Canada*!!” She thought of the lyrics, didn’t recite any, then added, “Cheese told me that thing happened to him in real *life*!!”

Doll asked, “The part of the *Red Barchetta*, or the...”

Flower said, “The *other* thing!!”

Doll snapped back into the story, “So the V.W. pulls up next to him... he has a *Vette*, at the time!!”

“‘*Not an ‘83 because there IS no ‘83*,’ he told me in a story.” Flower said.

“Yeah!! But the V.W. wants to race him... and Gage cruises along in the *Vette*—a *rented* one because he never like to *buy*!!—and the guy has the audacity, later on when he sees Gage at the next stop light, that he *beat* him!!”

“Gage got that stuff all the time ‘cause he was *wanted*!” Flower said. “He said it was like owning the Yankees, and being able to pick from the crop because everyone wanted to wear the Yankee pinstripes, at a time!!”



“Yeah!!” Doll said. “If I owned the *Devil Rays*, I might have a harder time recruiting players, right?!”

“Yep!!” Flower said, “but the old uncle didn’t *have a clue* about it!!”

“So the uncle *tortured* Gage through the CIA through connections because he couldn’t get Gage to operate one of his *Carl’s Juniors*, huh?”

“Fuckin’ sad to say, but *yes!*!”

“*I hate* the motherfucker, and I’ve never *met* him!!” Doll said. She was so angry that she split a cord into a couple of mashed chunks with a single chop.

“I think the *worse* part of it is what Cheese speculated!!”

“*What?*” Doll asked.

“The motherfucker was *baitin’* him!!” Flower said. “He *wanted* to get under Gage’s skin, and he wanted Gage to commit a real murder instead of just programming them into *games!*!”

“Good thing Gage was smart!! I would hate to see ‘im in prison, right now, because some *NUMB FUCK* was trying to irritate him so bad!! I’m glad he had *programming* to turn to!! It’s *one* way to express your *libido!*!”

“Between you and me, Doll, I don’t think Gage’s uncle was worth two *cents!*! He was a piece-of-shit loser when he stumbled into his millions, and more ink on his bank statement didn’t change his *character!*! The guy was a *NUMB FUCK then*, and I think he’s a numb fuck, *now!*!”

“Say what you want,” Doll said. “I’m going to *forget* this all when we head back to the United States in the *summer!*!”

\* \* \*

One of the day’s chores was to melt snow and then to boil it for daily water. Doll and Flower set out to complete that task by mid-day so they could head to the tavern for a shot each of whiskey or bourbon. They continued to talk to one another, “*Oedipus Rex* was a Greek story about a man whom eventually fell in love and married his mother, granted it was accidental, and on unidentified pretenses. The ‘Oedipus complex’ is coined from the fact that male boys fall in love with ladies very-much like their mothers. The ‘*Electra* complex’ is the same thing, but with daughters toward their fathers,” Flower said. “The theory is that fathers and sons are fighting for female attention, while the daughters are always looking for a *father* figure! I think Gage had a strong male figure in his life as a dad, and the uncle was jealous of it!!”

“I don’t get it!!” Doll said.

“Actually,” Flower began, “the more I think of it, it was the *uncle* that was jealous of Gage’s success... and couldn’t *handle* it!!”

“So they started to compete with him in the family, and that’s when Gage shut them all *out!*!”

“Yeah!” Flower said. “When there ain’t enough of me to go around, I’d rather be left *alone!*!”  
Flower sang/ said.

Doll’s eyes brightened. “Guns ‘n’ *Roses!*! I hadn’t heard them in a *long* time!” She was having a good time, up there, and was glad she was in *Gas City* for the first time since their arrival.

“The uncle didn’t *get* it!! Gage tried to please *everyone*, and when he couldn’t, he *withdrew!*!”

“*Zelda* liked him a lot, I can tell!” Doll said. “She’s the only one that let ‘im go and please as he *wanted!*!”

“You know who *else* did?” Flower asked. “His *mother!*!”

Doll laughed. She knew it was mostly true. “I wish I could have him here right now to split *wood!*!”

“Yeah, *whatever!*!” Flower said.

\* \* \*

Cheese woke up in time to see two semi-happy drunks come from the town tavern and asked them about questions on his mind. “I had a nightmare about Gage, and I want to tell you what it was *about*,” he said to Doll. He felt like killing her, to be honest with himself, and thought it had to do with going stir crazy of a local kind.

“What do you *want*, Cheese?!” Doll demanded.

“When the power establishment collectively kills a race, it’s called *genocide!*! When Pharaoh and Caiphas killed would-be special sons, it was called *infanticide!*!” He paused to think if there was a special word for what he thought was going on. “Is there a special word for when ladies want to kill everyone of the *male gender!*?” He looked at Flower’s face, and started to think he was getting paranoid.

Doll looked at the axe hanging from Cheese’s hand and had a moment of fear she had never *had* from him. He started to bang down on some wood.

Flower approached Cheese and tried to console him. She asked, “What’s *wrong!*?”

Cheese said, “It’s *Scientology*, okay!? They teach you to forget your bad memories, and even though I was raised Mormon—we both believe in aliens, *supposedly*—I had *neighbors* that had read L. Ron Hubbard’s work and they *taught* me to forget certain things... but now I’m *remembering!*!”

“Nicole Kidman and Tom *Cruise* were Scientologists, *remember!*?” Doll said. “They divorced, and the way that Nicole Kidman dealt with her memories and *emotions*, early on was by making *Dogville!*!”

“Tell me about it,” Cheese said. He felt hopeless.

“Of all the movies in Hollywood, that one in particular stands out in my mind about what we *should* do!” Doll said. “It was no *blockbuster*—the budget must have been a hundred dollars, no more, for the set notwithstanding the cost of actors and film crew—but it dealt with her *emotions!*!” Doll said.

“It’s where she’s ‘doin’ it’ with the whole *town*, huh?” Flower asked. “And she has a friend

named 'Tom' that she's trying to forget, *huh??*" Flower added. "I *watched* that one!!"

"I *get* it!" Cheese said. "You're tryin' to *forget* us, and that's why you took off to the tavern *without* me!!" he said.

"No!!" Doll was mad. "You were *asleep*, and we didn't want to wake you *up*!!" She saw the confusion on Cheese's face. "We thought it was *courteous*!!"

Cheese didn't trust them, but it wasn't because what Doll said. It was the dream of Gage. He said that he had to get out of *Gas City*, and when he returned to the United States, it was practically hopeless because people were hunting him down. Further, in the dream, Gage showed Cheese all of his enemies. They were women from the island of *Lesbos*, and Cheese was left thinking of the Wonder Woman cartoon. It was something they were mulling over in video game form before Gage bit the dust and became part of the undead. Finally, in the dream, Gage said he'd talk to him as Victor Pascow of *Pet Sematery* fame. Cheese didn't like what he was hearing, and was trying hard and fast to forget it.

Cheese waved the lady duo for them to go into the cabin without him. He started to split wood when they went into the door, even though the girls had done enough earlier that morning. He piled the wood high and large that evening, and they didn't have to split wood again for the entire week.

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Late at night, Doll brought some fermented juice to Cheese, tried to sooth him, and started to talk to him about what was going on in their heads, "We have the opportunity for the first time in our *lives* to live like we *want*!! No more do we have a spend an hour every morning tending to our hair and our makeup!! No more do I have to shave my *arm pits*, if I don't want to!! No more do I have to worry if I'm on the *rag* and who's going to find out about and treat me *different*, even though everyone down there in the States *says* they don't discriminate against people during their cycles!! No more do I have to be *hit on* by my bosses, and no more do I have to listen to *you*, if I don't want to... unless you want to gamble with killing Flower and me both, and making it out of town *safely*!!"

"I know what's going on!!" Cheese said. "I had a mullet when I was younger, and I know what it's like to have *tangles* in your hair!!"

"You don't quite *get* it!!" Flower said. She reached for a coconut bowl-like cup and started to drink from her fermented juice. "I have freedom, and I'm not going to give it up 'til I *feel* like having my cigarette lit for me at a bar... or a car door opened for me in the parking lot... or *anything* a lady can get if she's good-looking!! I'm not going to give this up and *bow* to *you*, Cheese, as it's like to be taken home from Disneyland before the park is *closed* as a kid... when the thing is only *half-over*!!"

"I get it," Cheese said. He was rattled. "If I grow my hair out, up here, maybe I can feel what *you* guys feel!"

"It's more than *that*," Doll said to Gage as she approached him and gently stroked his arm. "You

have the *muscles*, and when someone hits on you ‘cause they like your looks, you can *pound* them!!” She drew back to get a picture of Cheese in his entirety. “When you feel infirmed—when you get your first douse of the *cold*, and it’s only me and Flower to support you, you’ll *know* what I go through!! You’ll know what it’s like to not be able to call your buddy, do some ‘male bonding,’ and have everything be okay by talking about the *bitches*!!”

“You’re *mad*,” Cheese calmly observed. “You’re mad at every male that has ever done you wrong... and you’re taking it out on *me*!!”

Flower started to cry, and set down her drink. “I play ‘hard to get’ as a tactic, you know?”

“When the *rich* do that, they *annihilate* people for not *playing along*, I came to find!!” Cheese torted.

“That’s what I’m trying to *tell* you, Cheese,” Flower said. “We don’t have *money*, up here, but...”

“When I was a kid, I used to *play* that game!” Cheese said. “I used to hit the girls on the playground I liked the *most*!!” Cheese drank from his cup and continued, “And I used to like to see them *chase* me... all the way around the *playground*!!”

“I used to *play* that game, Cheese,” Flower said, “but up here, it’s only *us three*!! And if I’m not careful with you, I’m going to fall in love—”

“We’re *married*!!” Cheese said.

“—and it’s going to complicate our survival status!!”

Cheese recoiled, “You’re saying it was a *front*, down there, for the public... and up here we have to keep delicate because Gage isn’t here to make... *Doll* happy, huh?!”

“*Yes*,” Flower said. “I already talked to her about it... and we *don’t* need any bizarre love triangle!!”

“*Fuck off*!!” Cheese said. “I don’t need your new *order*, either!!” If Cheese had been in Seattle, he would have taken off to a pub. Instead, he was trapped by the cabin, and let Doll soothe his back with a soft massage. He didn’t have sex with either one of them for a week and a half.

\* \* \*

Two weeks had gone by since Cheese “went through the motions” with Flower and Doll on separate occasions. It was a ritualistic experience, in a lot of regards, and was meant to keep *trust* in the group. He went to the tavern, on occasion, and was a happier man when he was there. He didn’t *say* that he had sex, but there was a glow in him that was reminiscent of the feeling when he was a youth and could remember catching fly balls for the first time. Back then, it was his tendency to let them fly over his head in the outfield... then he learned to *approach* the balls as they came, and he believed he was an individual *winner* for the first time in his life.

Doll and Flower opened up to Cheese about how they behaved in the weeks after they had sex

with him (no longer did Flower feel *married* to him in the same way she felt in the States because it was more of a “high school companion” feel to her, again). She said, “We put *parameters* around you!! If you feel too bad, it’s usually me that comes and lifts you up!!”

“And if I *feel* good, I notice that Doll shoots me down!!” Cheese mashed fruit into a bowl and squeezed pulp once in a while. “Is it a *system*!?”

“We didn’t come *up* with it, but it’s been goin’ on for a long *time*!!” Doll said. She added, “You’ll never see Brad Pitt on the streets in Vegas because it’s socially irresponsible—a hooker would take ‘im in for free in a *second*!!—but to see him with Jennifer Aniston for so long sent *trembles* up our spines, and it was some of our duties, or so we felt, to break them *up*!!”

“A ceiling and a *floor*!!” Cheese observed. He squeeze from fruit and tossed pulp into his mouth on occasion. “It’s enough to drive a man *senseless*, you know?”

Flower demanded, “Because you can’t be a king in the *United States*!!?”

Cheese sharpened, “Everything I was led to believe was a *LIE*, down there!! ‘You could have it *all*!!’ is what I heard over and over, but when it came to it, there was always something *else*!! Another hoop to jump through... or another *hurdle* to clear!!”

“You’re thinkin’ of that *game* that you developed with *Gage*, huh?” Flower demanded. “I *like* that game!!”

The three of them played charades when enough fruit juice was squeezed for the fermenting bowl. It was a lot of fun, and Cheese stopped thinking about designing video games with Gage for the rest of his retreat to the great northern part of the hemisphere.

\* \* \*

“I remember *Zelda* telling me, while in Montana, that it was a CIA tactic of ‘*insurgents*’ to limit their power with false associations. ‘*Lisa On the Moon With Millhouse*’ is what we called it, all the time, and she carried a picture with that caption in her wallet! You *know* the tactic, because I’ve heard you *talk* about it before, but what is that all *about*!?”

A few days had past since the charades, and Flower and Doll started to open up a little more to Cheese about “the ways of the *female*.” “The *idea* is that we can *scare* you!! In other words, I first witnessed it with Gage at the time he saw me in Toronto with the Crowe/ Sanz billboard in front of my place... and everyone that watched the *Simpsons* knows Millhouse liked Lisa, but she didn’t like him back... and when she challenged authority, *Burns* got revenge on ‘er by laser shooting her image to the Moon with *Millhouse* on it!! It’s what we *play* with you guys when we feel you have to be *controlled*!!”

“Don’t you know that it causes *torment*!?” Cheese demanded. “And we want *revenge* when it’s pushed too *far*!?”

Flower cut his train of thought with sharpness, “They say—*anthropologists do*—that women are

into ‘*rapport*’ and men are into ‘individualism.’ It was argued that if we could have a woman *PRESIDENT*, in the United States, we would have less war because we’re *talkers*!! We don’t declare war first, and ask questions *later*!!”

“Yeah!! But you guys *torment* to the point of *madness*!!” Cheese said.

“Would you rather have nuclear *proliferation*!?” Flower demanded. “We *would* do that... if you *wanted* it!!”

“You’re saying that we really don’t want it, but we *threaten* it!!?” Cheese demanded.

“Read the *eighties*!!” Flower said. “All threats; no *action*!!”

“You’re a *son-of-a-bitch*!! And I think that Gage would be *alive* today if you guys weren’t the way you *were*!!”

“And we’d be gettin’ raped in the pubs by *date-rape* people like you, I *know*!!” Flower said.

“I *would* do that!” Cheese said. “I’ll admit it up here because there’s no authority to take me down, but I *would* do that... if left unchecked!!”

“I *know* you, Cheese,” Flower said to him. She put her hand under his chin. “And that’s why we save you from *yourself*, sometimes!!”

“Thank you, *mom*!!” Cheese said. He was grateful for the conversation, but he felt in pain. He slept well that night, and it was Flower that soothed his belly... much like a man would sooth a wild *crocodile*!!!

\* \* \*

Nearly in a premonition, *Cheese*’s prayers were answered. A new girl had come to town, and they were calling her “Hollywood”—a made up name, no doubt, and something Cheese figured she got from the internet. Cheese started hanging out at the tavern a lot more, by then, and it looked like *Hollywood* had her miles on her: She was roughly thirty-seven, according to Cheese’s guesstimation, and she was tall and slender. She had gone around the track, and just like the ladies that hung out in Alaska, she was sought out after, but she was not mugged (*Cheese* knew, from stats in his head, that Alaska had a ratio of men to women at about ten to one because of the severity of the work, *that-a-way*). Hollywood played Cheese, and she played the rest of the locals whom would come to see her. Flower and Doll got used to it, after a while, and they stopped going to the tavern with Cheese (they claimed to be Cheese’s *sisters*, which angered Cheese at the beginning, but not as he knew Hollywood more). He asked her, after about three weeks of bringing her drinks (one of the locals had hops and yeast in his backyard, and would bring authentic beer to compete with Cheese’s homemade fruit fermentation), “How *can* I get in your pants!?” All the locals, by then, knew that Flower and Doll had put a figurative chastity belt around Cheese, and they knew he was joshing from what he told everyone. “I *want* to get in them!!”

Hollywood looked at Cheese slyly. She wanted to joke, and then said, “You’re going to have to do

a lot *better* than that, hun!!” She smoked a cigarette from zig-zags and locally grown tobacco.

“What I’m trying to *say*,” Cheese said, “is that I’m staring to turn *queer*, up here, because my lady friends from back home are *NOT PUTTING OUT!!*” (People laughed, in the section close by.) “And I might as well wear your *pants*... if we’re going to be *neighbors!!*”

A genuine look of surprise and dismay fluttered Hollywood’s face. “I came up here to get *laid!!* You could *tell* me the truth that you want to get in my pants for a different *reason!!*”

Cheese shook his head madly “*NO!!!*” “The ladies, you see? They have a pact that if I get laid by anyone else besides them, up here, they’re going to cut it *off!!*”

“The *pecker!!*” Hollywood asked.

“*No!!* The ability to drink at the tavern... and then I’ll be left chasing chickens and wild *gooses* around the property we *live* at!!”

“*Geese!!* It’s pronounced ‘*geese*’ when it’s said in *plural!!*”

Cheese evaluated her, then said dumbly, “You have a lot to *learn!!* Over here, it’s called ‘*gooses*,’ unless the *fry cook*, over there, says *different!!*”

The fry cook, from behind the counter, waved his hand in agreement, then went back to the sandwich he was preparing (*Cheese* was going to pay for it with a jug of fermented juice).

“Okay!! I get it!! You’re *locals*, already, and you’ve only been here a *year!!!* Or less!!” the lady said.

Cheese figured it must have been a vacation spot for Hollywood, then asked, “Are you local, *too?*”

“*Yes!!*” Hollywood said. “Three miles, northwest, when all the snow starts to melt, there’s a creek that makes itself known... and it uncovers my *cabin!!* I think I’m here in *time!!*”

Cheese didn’t know what to think, but he knew the movie “Chicago” was filmed in *Canada*, of all places, and he had heard that Vancouver was the “Hollywood of Canada.” He didn’t know if it was true, he didn’t care... and he started to feel that Hollywood didn’t want him around (she flicked ashes in his direction, and didn’t give an apology).

\* \* \*

Doll went crazy. That’s the only thing that Cheese could figure. She tied him up, and when Flower was just waking in the late morning, she started to shove bananas into his asshole. Cheese screamed. He looked at the semi-wet roots which held him upright to a large log. He had been told that he’d have kinky sex, and he started to doubt things when Doll tied him with his face *toward* the log... instead of away from it. The fireplace near them crackled with soft embers, and Flower rubbed her eyes when she heard him scream (she hardly panicked, and thought it was part of a charade). She whispered something neither one of them could hear, “Have you gone *mad!!*?”

Doll had gone mad. With jealousy? With rage? With bitterness?? Misunderstanding?? If she were to ask herself honestly and wait for an answer, she knew she couldn't come up with one. All she knew was that she was mad at Cheese, she wanted *Gage* there, and she *loved* to shove bananas into his asshole.

"Doll!! What are you *doin'!*!" Flower finally asked over Cheese's screams.

"He's been *cheatin'* on us with that *HOLLYWOOD* girl!!" Doll chortled.

"We didn't put *out*, for a while, because we agreed to keep it *platonic*, remember?" Flower asked.

"Yeah!!" Doll said. "But I *busted!*!" she said over screams from in front of her.

Parts of bananas were coming out of Cheese's asshole when he finally said, "*Mercy!*" That's the secret *word*, right?" In sex play, he knew that there were "secret words" in case the game had gone too far. It was prevalent during the eighties, and Cheese screamed for mercy, not knowing the right words to change things.

"Are you havin' *fun!*!" Flower demanded. She felt taken because she thought Cheese was up there by his own will... and she suspected he *asked* for the bananas.

"I don't want to *eat* THOSE!!" Cheese screamed. "She said she was going to make me *eat* those!!" Cheese's head was twisted back, and he was looking at the fallen plumage. The splayed peels looked as if they came off a dupey bird's wing-set. "*I...*"

"I'm goin' to get you *down!*!" Flower said. She went to the fireplace and retrieved a knife from the top of it.

"You're no *fun!*!" Doll said to Flower.

As Flower headed back to Cheese to tear apart the roots with the knife, she said, "You're *nuts*, now, and I think it went too *far!*!" After tearing the roots from Cheese's wrists, he curled in a ball on the floor and started to pant. He didn't say a word. Flower said, "I don't need this... and I can't wait for the *helicopter* to come!!"

Every summer the copter would come to *Gas City* and pick up stragglers as well as making sure that everyone was healthy. The group—*Cheese, Flower and Doll*—had gotten there mostly by horseback, but the ride in was by large motored vehicles—lories which carried their goods and their possessions.

Cheese, when he was finally able to speak, asked in the direction of Doll, "What were you *thinkin'*?? Because I was expecting a *blow job!*!"

Doll couldn't say anything. She had *revenge* on her mind, and if she had to ask herself personally, she couldn't tell why. *Hollywood*? Flower? She didn't know who bothered her most. She said absentmindedly, "Those bananas don't *stain!*!"

Cheese was rubbing his head. He said, as he regained his feet, "I'm not worrying about the *stain!*!" He reached into his asshole, and grabbed a glut of bananas which hadn't yet fallen out.

\* \* \*



Cheese was mad at work on his den table. He had a white pad of paper (*Flower always made sure that she brought plenty of pads of paper with plenty of pencils on ANY of her long-term vacations*) and a pencil that went a hundred miles per hour. He yelled up at Doll, “I’m *not* going to let *Virtual Fantasy* go under!!” He had left the company under control of understudies before darting north. “I’m going to get to the end of why *Gage* died... and I’m going to make one last game, for him, if it’s the last thing I *do*!!”

“Are you still working on the *Carmen Sandiego* one??” Doll asked.

“No!! It’s ‘*What About Rick?*,’ and it’s a combination of the *Better Off Dead*... movie with the *What About Bob?* movie, in video game *from*!!” Cheese continued to scribble.

“‘*Ricky*’ from *Better Off Dead*... is what you’re basing it off of? And it’s a *stalker* game, like *What About Bob?*?” Doll made her way off the hay couch and onto the deer rug. “You’re saying that *Horatio Sanz* killed *Gage*, in a lot of ways, and you’re getting back at him through *video game* by having the ‘*Ricky*’ character, whom looks remotely like ‘im, *right*???”

“Yeah!! But I didn’t think it *through*!!” For a couple of seconds, Cheese halted his mad writing, and approached Doll with a stern look, “I *haven’t* gotten over it since you stuffed bananas in my *asshole*, and I know what *pain* is like... for the first time in my *life*!!”

“*Anguish*, would you say?? We can have *Flower* come in and recite the poem for you again, if you *want*... because it seems to make you happier when she *does*!!” (*Flower* stripped during some of her recitals in order to keep Cheese from leaving them in an angry rampage.)

“I think *you’re* the stalker, in this case though, *Doll*!! And even though *Gage* went through it by having *Zelda* always bringing up *Horatio Sanz*, I can *sense* it!! If I step out of line—if my *hair* is combed wrong one day when I get back—one of the *Hollywood* celebrities are going to come after me... and they’re *ruthless* when you’re *DOWN*!!”

Doll understood, for the first time. “You’re going to hit them before they hit you, *huh*??”

“No, bitch, ‘cause you already *did* that!! I was going to stay up here another *year*, if that’s what it took to get back my peace of mind, but the *thing*... Since you did the *thing*!!” Cheese cried, a little, and Doll felt regret.

“I don’t know what to *say*!!” Though she felt bad for him in real life, she felt deeply *happy* that she had over-all control of the situation... and she imagined, for the first time in her life, what it might be like for a *male* to have raped someone... and bragged about it in prison. “I didn’t *rape* you because you...”

“You can *quit* with the guilty conscious!!” Cheese said.

“You’re going to talk about ‘windows of opportunity,’ *huh*??”

“Yeah!!” Cheese said. “But it’s opposite now because you did somethin’ *baaad*!!”

“I had an opportunity to be with you as a *person*!!” Doll said with slight sarcasm. She rose from the deer rug, rubbed the underside of his chin, then said with more mild sarcasm, “I could have been your wife with *Flower* up here!! If I didn’t fuck things *up*!!” The latter part, she said with anger.

“I know what you’re *doin’*, honey, but it’s not right because I was *good!!* I was goin’ around the country not long ago, and I was tellin’ people—the *COMMON PEOPLE!!*—how to live when the revolution took hold!!”

Doll said with embarrassment, disdain, and confusion, “I don’t know if you *know* this, but everyone wasn’t on *board* with your revolution!!”

“You *Vegas* people are all alike!! You don’t care what happens outside of your desert, and if someone left home to his family broke from gamblin’, you’d be *laughin’!*!”

Doll was at a loss for words. She didn’t agree with what Cheese said, and wanted to tell him that it didn’t matter anyway because it was an outlet. Finally, she managed, “I didn’t see you complaining when we were there with *GAGE*, you *bitch!*!”

Cheese wanted to embrace her. He wanted everything to be the same when they had all been together. He wanted it to be like when the wife-swapping was going on. He knew things were wrong, and he didn’t know how to fix things. He stepped aside from Doll, and he started to work on his video game again. Like a three-year-old boy, he started to complain openly about his life as he wrote things down, “And the *doll* is goin’ to come and *save* the...”

Doll interrupted him. “Flower is coming!! I can see her through the window!! Don’t tell her... *that...*” Doll looked into the face of Cheese as he looked up to her, and she realized that he lapsed back into a world that she couldn’t reach. She said, “I’m going to give you some *ice cream*, when we get home, *CHEESE!!*!”

“I don’t *want* ICE CREAM!!” Cheese yelled. On the surface of his mind, he knew he wanted Doll dead. He didn’t want to kill her. He wanted her dead. He wanted her dead from his life, and he dreaded going back to Seattle. Deep down, he didn’t know if he would ever live as an adult again in his life. It was *hard* when push came to shove and the crap started to hit the fan. He wanted to finish the latest video game and he wanted to rejoin the circus after it was done. He wanted that *bad*.

\* \* \*

It was two days before the town lorry would take the villagers to a different town. Some people would get supplies, there, and others would catch a semi-annual flight from a helicopter away (if you had to leave in an emergency, otherwise, there were snowmobiles for the winter, and motorbikes for the summer, not to mention *ATVs*). The night before, there was an aurora borealis that made the trip nearly *worth* it, to Cheese (with his asshole having been jammed with bananas, and all, in the weeks prior). For Flower and Doll, they were glad they went, but Doll still had troubling ideas which she could not pin. They started to talk about language, and they started to talk about reintegration. It was daytime, when they spoke, and for the first time in six months, Cheese felt he didn’t have a duty in the *world*—no cutting of blocks, and no taking the juice to the tavern which wasn’t far away. They spoke of language, and they made contingency

plans, just in case they should separate (it was *heavy* on their minds to separate because the tension was too much... and Flower, knowing they'd separate for at least a while, was at ease because she'd be working with her dad again at *their* pub in Toronto). Cheese opened it up, "They say to not use 'you' language when you talk! It makes people feel defensive!/"

"I heard this before," Flower said. It was new to Doll, and she stayed quiet. "Go on, though," Flower said. "You probably have a *point*!"

"I feel angry when you put bananas in my asshole!" That's what I'm supposed to say... but I *know* it doesn't work out that way because... I'm not supposed to say, 'You get me MAD!/' I remember that!! I'm supposed to say, 'I feel angry *when*...'"

Doll said, "Cheese!! I *know* what you're *sayin*'!/" She split wood even though she didn't have to. "I *know* what you're *sayin*'!/"

"The memory *remains*!! Don't you understand, *Doll*!!/" Cheese exclaimed. "The fuckin' memory *remains*!/"

"Language, or no language," Flower said, "I don't think Cheese is going to get *over* that!/" Cheese went to Doll... and kissed her. It was a good kiss, but it wasn't a *great* kiss. For a split second, Flower felt *rage* and even though the marriages Gage set up were supposed to be fronts (*for the most part for the public's eye*) she thought, *You are kissing my husband, you son-of-a-bitch!!!* She asked, "Are you *done*, yet!!?/"

Flower yanked a lock of Doll's hair out. Afterward, Doll said, "This is what I was tryin' to *tell* you, Cheese!! I'm a *widow*!/" She looked over at Flower, and said, "This *bitch*, right there!! She took it seriously—the whole *marriage* thing!!—and I had to shove bananas into your asshole to hide the affection that was growing inside of me, minute by *minute*!/"

Cheese looked at her in the face. He said, "I don't buy it for a *minute*!/" Deep inside, he was happy. He believed she confessed something, and he believed that Flower actually liked him. He thought about how things could be, when he returned to Washington State to talk to students about programming for his company, and it didn't matter. For a split second, it didn't matter. "I'd like to go home with you, Flower... for a week, then head to Vegas to sleep with *Doll* for a while!/"

Flower said, "Bad *idea*!/" She was flustered, and when the copter picked them up, they hardly talked to each other.

Cheese wondered if they would see each other again; Flower didn't care, and Doll just wanted to get drunk. Doll said, "I'm going to have me some cheap shrimp cocktails, when I get home, and I'm going to have me a couple of *Heinekens*!! I bet it makes me *happy*!/"

They all laughed. At the landing in Toronto, they all laughed in unison for the first time in what seemed like *ages*.

\* \* \*

Cheese decided to go to Portland, Oregon initially instead of Seattle, Washington for preliminary come back because he sensed too much *tension* in his body and on his *skin* after returning to “the big, ol’ city *place* thing.” He wanted to unwind, and he wanted to debrief, but a lot of his connections had waned in his time away from home. Contacting Katrina and her partner skipped across Cheese’s mind, but he thought to do something new. He went to a café which had internet hookups, and he tried personals for someone in the region. He advertised a new spot in his company, *Virtual Fantasy*, and declared he wanted a secretary “who was willing to do windows and empty waste baskets.” In all reality, he wanted a woman to talk to and he figured that by attempting to interview a secretary, his odds were increased from advertising for a programmer’s job. He met with a couple of people within twenty-four hours of the day’s ad, and they were both male (he never tried to specify gender when advertising for legit operations out of fear that the feds would have him shafted, an irony when he thought of all the “crazy” stuff he had done). By the third interview, he knew he did the right thing because “*Jet*” came to talk to him. She was tall, slender, and she had a look of seriousness on her face (he met her at the same bed and breakfast where he had vacationed with his three other buddies for what seemed like so long ago). He looked out the window, on occasion, at the jet skiers and asked her the obvious, “Do you *ski*?? Do you *jet ski*??”

“No!!” Jet said “I mean, yes, I know how... but I’m really a *blonde*.”

Cheese looked at her black hair. “I’ll be honest,” he said as his nervous hands reached for the coffee in front of him. “I want a *friend*, at our company, before a secretary. If you and I get along, I’m prepared to pay you more than what a typical secretary gets paid around here!”

Jet played stupid because she had read that *Virtual Fantasy* was based in Seattle. She asked, “Are you moving operations down here, or are you opening up a new office??”

“I want to move the whole fuckin’ *thing* down here!!” Cheese said. He put the coffee down, and some of it spilled over the top of his mug.

She didn’t have to play stupid, any more. “I know your partner died... and I know you have bad memories of a lot of the things that have gone on.” She straightened up, “I’m *willing* to be ‘stupid,’ if you need me to be... and I’m willing to design *video* games if you want me to.” She saw a look of doubt in Cheese’s eyes. “That *application* I submitted from my web address was not *inaccurate*!! I do not have a certificate, yet, but I *AM* studying to be a video game designer!!” She saw satisfaction in Cheese’s eyes. “I would be *perfect* for you!!”

Cheese didn’t feel strong as a person. He wondered what Flower was doing in Toronto, and he wondered how Doll was getting by in Nevada. He had a strange urge to tell Jet to walk away, and he was going to call *Zelda* for company. He fought through his thoughts, and after putting a twenty on the table for the price of their coffee and a few pastries, he said, “I want you to *work*!!” He pulled out a handful of notes from the briefcase near his feet. He felt stiff, but he continued along, “I need these submitted to my company in *Seattle*—over-night mail would do, but make sure it’s certified so I have peace of mind—and I

want you to let them know that they'll be working up there for no less than another year!!" He looked at *Jet* in the face because he saw confusion. Cheese mustered all the courage he had, then said, "Between me and you, I'm closing up shop, up there, and I'm moving things over here!! I can't *bear* it over there!!"

Jet felt apologetic. She reached for the papers in Cheese's hands, then conceded, "I didn't mean to go too far when I researched your company!! I'm sorry about your partner, *Gage*, and I'm sorry about..."

"You don't know anything about *bananas*, do you!?" Cheese asked.

"No!!" Jet said. In actuality she had heard a rumor, unsubstantiated, that Cheese had a fixation on making his own fruit drinks. She didn't know if was true, and she didn't care. "I heard something about wine coolers, and I heard something about you making your own *liquor*!!" Jet said. She saw Cheese's eye light up. "Cross my *heart*, that's all I heard!!" She crossed her heart, and Cheese was becoming attracted to her.

"You didn't hear anything *about*..." Cheese began.

"*Nothing else*!!" Jet said. She detected embarrassment, and said, "You don't have to tell me more because I'm your *secretary*!!" She leaned over and thought to kiss Cheese on the lips (he was looking attractive to her *mutually*), but read from his top paper, instead. "'*What About Rick*?' it says. Video game idea??" she asked.

"Yeah!!" Cheese brightened. "But it's the opposite of *Where In the World Is Carmen Sandiego*? because, instead of chasin' someone around the world, you are *running away from* 'im!!"

Jet mouthed the final four words that Cheese said because she knew the concept without having previously been told about it. She felt she was in the perfect place because she "vibed" with Cheese—an important characteristic to her. "Truth be known," she said to him. "I'll work for you for standard wages, if you want me to... because I'm starting to like your company!!"

For the first time since co-founding *Virtual Fantasy*, Cheese felt like a real video game designer—a *coveted* one—and he kept his joy inside. He pulled out two one hundred dollar bills, and said to Jet, "Here's for your *time*!! She accepted the promissory notes. "I want you to set up shop for me, and I want you to find an office that is suitable for you, just as much as it is for me!!" Cheese slipped Jet a napkin with his cell phone number on it, even though he had business cards in his pocket. "Call me at this number when you find a place, and I'll write the checks, dot the i's, and cross the t's!!"

Jet was happy, and she believed like could be good. She thanked Cheese after accepting the number, and made her way out of the room.

Cheese thought about the fictitious accounts that Gage had set up—three of them were still active by his surviving inner circle. He thought about Jet as she headed out through the door. *I think she might be a millionaire... if she's lucky!!*

Cheese looked at the jet skiers going by, and he thought about the possibilities for the day. He enrolled in a gym, later that day, and he bought himself a punching bag for a home he planned to buy in the region. When he settled into his *Motel 6* that night, he said aloud into the sky, "I think I've found a new

start!!” He sipped from a wine cooler, repeated himself, then went to bed without changing into pajamas.

\* \* \*

Prior to meeting Gage, Flower would only play “traditional music” in the pub her father owned. That meant yodeling, various medieval lute playing, and some singing which was reminiscent of the area. After getting to know Gage, then later having intimate relations with Cheese and Doll, she began to play *eighties* music as she worked. “*Always somethin’ there to remind me!*!” she sang as she cleaned off her tables. She tried to not think of the other two, and was only vaguely cognizant that they were right under her conscious level.

A patron came in and said, “Did you know that Cheese hired a new person for his *job*??”

Flower looked at her, went to the door where she had just came in through, and said, “Sally!! I’m going to need you to leave if you don’t respect my wishes about not hearing about Cheese and Doll for a few months!! Okay??”

“*Okay!*!” Sally said. She ordered a Bloody Mary, just like her father liked to order. She started to watch the television and tried to drown herself in the day’s affairs *nationally*.

Flower knew that Canadian radio stations were mandated to play no less than thirty percent of original native music over there. She listened to *Roman Holiday* from the background speakers, and wondered for a moment when the last Canadian band played. Finally, the old song ended and a new one began. Brian Adams. *Oh!! Thinkin’ about those younger years!!* Flower thought she was going mad for another moment, then headed back behind the counter to put on more yodeling. “For a *while* ma’am, you’re going to have to listen to *other* stuff!!” She put the yodeling on, and felt a lot better.

There was an urge to call Cheese, but it was their agreement that they would live apart from one another for a while. It had been years since she’d been to the *Sky Dome*, and she thought her best way out of the situation was to go to a baseball game. She bought tickets, later that day, and didn’t mind that she felt like a recluse when there was no one to hold her during “Take Me Out To the Ballgame”. It was fine for a while her, and she submersed herself for the next month and a half in her work: Nothing but promotionals and cheap *wine*, all to get the customers in so she could forget the past.

\* \* \*

Doll reclaimed her waitress occupation in *Las Vegas* when she returned to the States. When Gage had met her, she was wearing a cabaret outfit and worked at *Binion’s*. She sought out work at *Schlooze*, and found it without *difficulty*. It was neither on the Strip, nor in Old Vegas. It was near the outskirts and Doll knew she could return to her days of three-thousand-dollar-per night prostitution if need be. It was her

favorite time when push came to shove because she met some of the world's most interesting people. If she was a twenty-dollar Mount Vernon whore or a hundred-dollar Hollywood Boulevard one, she wouldn't have *met* the people that she had met in Las Vegas: Foreign dignitaries, corporate leaders, and mayors of far-off cities. She met them... and she had a good time. That was good for her.

With Doll, it was never about the sex but she enjoyed it greatly when it was with right person. It was about power to her and knowing she could control the world at the whim of her instincts when her rendezvous partners left. She knew where they were building certain buildings before the press would get word of it. She knew when crops were going bad and she knew when economies would be shut down. She knew when to place bets because she knew when athletes were going to be traded unexpectedly... often before they knew themselves. She wasn't in it for the money though, and she knew of it deep inside. If she was in it for the money, she could have retired many years ago. Similarly, she knew that she would be "cut off" from the information if it was smelled on her that she was using the it for personal profit... so she recycled and she played the tables when she needed to. She gave back the money that the casinos gave to her and when a new "unsuspecting person" came to town of decent relative worth, she would low the blow on him (or *her*, on occasion) and let the money go in a semi-intoxicated trance and like magic, she would get word about who to bet on, or what stock to go after.

She was working *Schlooze* and knew that life in Vegas was in the dark—a city could only hold "all the secrets" for so long—and she enjoyed all the aesthetics that she could for her second consecutive vacation. She met with men, and instead of prying for knowledge that would net her wealth, she would try to look for *Gage*—she missed him dearly—and if she could find him, she was going to marry him in a shotgun wedding... if that's what it took.

She called Cheese on occasion, but she purposely dialed his old number which had been disconnected—the same number which he still carried in his pocket in outdated business cards—and she hoped she could fire up conversations which were evocative of times past. She would get the "wrong number" on occasion and she would ask, "*Is Cheese there???*" For fleeting moments, she would fool herself that Cheese would actually come to the phone, and they would plan a lunch together in Seattle for later in the week. When the person reported that it was a "wrong number," she would hang up without word... and contemplate calling the real Cheese, as she had heard unsolicited information through the grapevine that he was now located in *Portland*.

Doll slept with many men for the first couple of weeks that she was back in Vegas. She settled, then moved to the outskirts of the city. She had plenty of money from the account Gage left her with, and she knew she wouldn't have to lift a finger for a long time if she didn't want to. She bought horses, and she tried to live like she had lived in *Gas City*. Even though the climate was different, she found herself comfortable with many new livestock bought for her stalls and barn situation. On occasion, she would be tempted to shove bananas into her ewes' assholes, but that would pass over the days.

\* \* \*

“So a record producer comes up to this guy, Doll tells me,” Cheese said to Jet. They were at the bed and breakfast where she interviewed with him, and they found that they thought a lot better together there than at the office which she had picked out for him to rent. “And he gets mad because this guy won’t *sign* with him!?”

“You’re talking about the girl whom shoved *fruit* into your butt, *right??*” Jet drank from a cocktail. It was red, and Cheese couldn’t remember what she ordered, but it looked better than the watered-down pineapple drink in front of him.

“Yeah, but I have to tell you the point with this story because it’s *important!!*” Cheese looked at her, looked at her drink, then continued on. “The guy in Vegas had been doin’ his act for fifteen years, or so—he played five instruments at *once!!*—and he didn’t want to *leave!!*”

“And the producer was guessin’ that he would *jump* at a deal, right?” Jet asked. She licked at the top of her drink because she was still overcoming brainfreeze.

“*Yep!!* And I figured right then and there, when I was remembering the story last night... that I had to *change* the video game that I submitted to my company to complete!! I am after Horatio Sanz, in a lot of ways, because I believe his association to Gage drove him into an apathetic *hell!!* So I attack ‘*Ricky*’ from the *Better Off Dead...* movie because it reminds me of the Sanz guy, and the *Sanz* character reminded Gage of *Joanie*—a girl whom I haven’t told you about *yet*—and I’m lost in a hall of *mirrors...* ‘til it *hit* me last night!!!”

“*Yeah?!*” Jet asked. She was genuinely excited, she took out a notebook from an attaché case by her feet. “I’m *ready!!*”

“So I’m in a dream, and I have a *shackle* on... but the shackle is really a bowling ball... and like I told you that ‘*What About Rick?*’ was going to be a combination of *Better Off Dead...* and *What About Bob?* in motif... the shackle represented my *pain!!*”

“Like *Bob* was tied with the rope at the end, and thought it meant *more*, right?” Jet observed Cheese nodding, and then dared not break his train of thought. She let him continue and pushed out “Don’t Hassle Me—I’m *Local*” from her mind. It was written on a shirt of Bob as played by Jim Belushi in the movie, as she remembered. Later, she would go home to check on the credits and find out she was wrong about the star’s name.

“*Yes!!*” Cheese said, and his voice rose to a shrill as he finished, “The fuckin’ bowlin’ ball is the *pain...* but ‘*What About Rick?*’ if it has to be made... must be of the *bowling BALL!!* And the fuckin’ shackle that represents my *PAIN!!!*”

Jet laughed from the inside, waited to see if Cheese was done with his explanation, then said, “I’ll submit it by *noon*, okay??” Jet faxed the idea to *Virtual Fantasy* in Seattle, and expected it to be great. When the game was released as a commercial hit before Christmas, that year, Cheese was satisfied... and



Jet was sleeping with him as his roommate.

\* \* \*

It used to be that when a person or persons got on *Cyborg Lot's* “purging list,” a program was kicked in which would doom their eventual plans for the upcoming era. First, it would be reevaluated what the person liked. Next, their *fears* would be gauged. Thirdly, *Cyborg Lot* would commission no less than one hundred participants to foil the scoped target. Fourth of all, *Cyborg Lot* would allow the participants to cooperatively agree on a time period for said punishments. Finally, “severity levels” would be established for ceilings and floors. Brad Pitt, if he were to ever make *Cyborg Lot's* list, would ironically have a higher floor than most people would have in their highest ceilings... just to keep things in perspective. *Likes* would be removed, fears would be induced, and rotations would be set up to make sure that targets were taken care of. If the floor was reached, a buddy of the system would come in with a mild desire—just enough to keep the subject going, and to keep the subject for crying out for mercy. If a ceiling was reached after pleasure was administered, heads would roll within *Cyborg Lot* because it was never their goal to make people feel *good*, as an overall mission. Contrarily, they felt like they were the private cops of the world. If you *called* on them, you better have had a good *reason!!* And if you were wrong in your assessment that someone was messing up, you were in danger of being on their list yourself.

After the second release of Henrietta Joan Lott, *Cyborg Lot* went through a period of self-evaluation, to say the least. Many of its members were on its “purging list,” and they were supposed to have amnesty. It didn't work, as things went into practice during the course of a few years' evolution. “*Glasnost* and *Perestroika*” were terms that were spoken inside of *Cyborg Lot*, and they thought they could learn lessons from the Russians after the fall of communist rule in their country.

Cheese moved all of *Virtual Fantasy* to Portland, Oregon. In a perfect world, *Cyborg Lot* would have treated the move no different than any other move around the country, but in practice, Cheese knew that you had to be careful of moving industry from Seattle because of *bias*. Because of *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* in the *Cyborg Lot* way, Cheese was left with a window, and he used it for charity. When he took many members from Seattle and offered them Portland homes, he donated a million dollars to various foundations. It felt good on the inside because he didn't feel prodded by *fear*. He knew that it was the right thing to do, and being that he loved Seattle at a time, he wanted to maintain bridges instead of burning them down.

Doll stopped reading the paper when she bought a ranch outside of Vegas. She became friendly with a husky woman neighbor from down the road. They would get feed together, and they would talk about various things ranging from potholes to cloud formations. Doll was surprised, one day when her neighbor buddy brought her a paper... and a new video game. Christmas had passed, a couple of days preceding the fuckin' gift exchange thing, and the video game was wrapped in traditional paper... which

was nice for *Doll* because it brought her back to the days of eggnog and decorated Christmas trees. She looked at the video game cover, after it was unwrapped, and said, “Holy *fuck*!! That’s me on the *COVER!!!*”

A cartoon version of Doll was running away from a hooded monster. On her ankle was a shackle. Connected to it was what appeared to be a bowling ball—a *marble* one of caramel color themes—and it had “*Rick*” featured on it with dark red paint. The top of the cover was clear: “*What About Rick?—by Virtual Fantasy.*” She loved it, and put it on her mantle piece. When her neighbor dwelled around her front yard a little more than expected, Doll came out and gave her some eggnog. She said, “I don’t have anything to give, but this is goin’ to have to *do!!!*”

The neighbor was grateful. She dropped an extra copy of the day’s newspaper on Doll’s porch. The headline read, “Virtual Fantasy Moves To Portland—They Are Comin’ Your Way *Next!!!*” It was from the entertainment section, and the new game was featured.

\* \* \*

The New Year passed, and Flower spent some hollow moments as she cleaned glasses before the evening rush. She thought about her New Year’s Eve party—there were a lot of people there—and she thought about the enjoyment she had. She *had* these great feelings, but just like her and her buddies talked about, it was fleeting and she was left looking for something more sustainable from the inside. She cleaned her glasses, she thought about a Vegas trip to see Doll, and then it hit her: She needed to see *Cheese* first, because she was going to go her own way by the end of the year. By the next New Year, she was going to have friends that didn’t *know* who Cheese was... or *Doll*, for that matter. She didn’t know if she had to legally divorce him because the laws were different in Canada... and it didn’t matter to her.

She cleaned her glasses, and she listened to music CDs that were reflective of late seventies disco. It irritated her, and she turned to her traditional yodeling after fifteen minutes. “Slowly, I will lose all the thoughts that have driven me mad over these past couple of years,” she said to an empty room. It hit her that she needed to be in *Hollywood*. She remembered, as a kid, that that’s where *everyone* went when they felt lost. If they wound up on their feet, it didn’t matter because they gave it a shot. If you had a past to run away from Hollywood was the place. Flower was going to give it a shot, she was pretty sure, after tying up any loose ends with Cheese and then with Doll (it even occurred to her that *Doll* ought to go to Hollywood with her, but that thought was pushed out of her mind when she thought of the mess that had begun with the “banana shove incident”). She started to check the wine glasses for fingerprints and mildew when the image of *Hollywood*—the lady from Gas City, and not the city itself—popped in her head. That lady was *happy*, on some level. Maybe she could lose herself in Hollywood, the town, and become like Hollywood, the unknown actress... by going back to *Gas City* on occasion. It sounded stupid, but it was doable.

Flower hosted a shit load of people that night in her bar. There were twenty-five screamers, and

there were ten or so *quiet ones* who loomed in the background. By the end of the night, she forgot all about her Hollywood plan and she started to think about moving to Michigan to work in the auto trade.

\* \* \*

Doll did not bother to read the article which proclaimed *Virtual Fantasy's* new game. She looked at the cover picture, was glad that Cheese was still in business, and then smiled to herself in the mirror. She kept with her norm to not watch much television, nor read many papers. She had a lot to think about, and she had a future she was unsure of. She sang a Pretenders' song as she dusted off her coffee, "...*the phone, the TV, and the NEEEWS of the world... got in our house like a PIGEON FROM HELL!!!*" She was thinking of the picture she had with Cheese—it was in her wallet—and she was thinking of the one in the paper. They were similar, but the one in the paper seemed to make him a little more *happy*. He seemed to have a little more going on. She reached past the coffee table and into a night table drawer. There was a group photo of herself, Flower, and Cheese. They were happy, and in the background, there was a large banner which read "*WE'LL SEE YOU ON THE OTHER SIDE, GAGE!!!!*" They were as happy as they knew how to be.

Even though Doll abided by her creed not to watch a lot of TV—there was one in the attic just in case there was a national emergency and she *had* to know what was going on—she still had the images of *Happy Days* in her head... and *Seinfeld*... and *I Love Lucy*... and *Three's a Company*. She thought about some of the episodes, and thought it would be clever to submit a script to New York if things got too sensory-deprived. She had been a fan of Saturday Night Live, as a kid, and even though Cheese and Gage hated the Horatio Sanz cast member, Doll was quite fascinated by Eddie Murphy and the entire SNL tradition. She thought she could be a *writer* for the show if she was clever enough with all of her life's craziness.

Doll thought about an episode in *Seinfeld* of which George's worlds were colliding. In other words, people from *one* aspect of his life were started to meet *other* people from his life in other regards. Doll wanted an assumed identity when she moved to New York (if that's what she chose to do) so that *Cheese* wouldn't show up to the set and put her in her place as a mere supporter of one of the greater video game designers to live, and someone that was no more than an average prostitute. She wanted to develop scripts, and she was sure she could do a good job.

Doll thought about all the screwed up things she had been part of. When she was younger (*she had voluptuous tits as a teenage girl*) she played truth or dare with neighborhood boys—Edward Vincent was one, Vincent Edward was the other, and it made everyone in the neighborhood laugh. Vincent Edward said to Edward Vincent on one cool evening night after daring her and her friend, *Betty*, to go into the jacuzzi for a skinny dip to "throw the towels *high*... like in *Three's a Company*." Edward Vincent didn't know what he was talking about until it was too late. By then, Vincent Edward tossed the towel to Doll,

and before her or her friend knew what was going on, their *breasts* were exposed over the bubbling water. It was the first pair of tits they had ever seen, and the neighborhood kids were all jealous thereafter.

Doll thought about *another* episode of *Three's a Company* (the one she had thought of with the towels was when Janet and Cindy skinny dipped at the beach in Santa Monica, and Jack tossed them towels high in the air while talking to Mister Ferley). Doll learned her *revenge* schematic theme from that show. Whenever a “hot shot singer” would come into town, she would get one of her homosexual buddies to come and watch him perform. It was thoughtful of the time when Larry sang at *Jack's Bistro* and was lauded by burly men whom dressed like the Redskins' *HOGS*. They tossed flowers to him, in that episode, and when Doll had her buddies do that to newcomers of Vegas, one of two things would inevitably happen: They would turn around and leave, never to come back; or they would stay, humbled from their thoughts that they would be the newest lady's man of the town.

Doll thought about all of her influences—the episode of Janet cuddling a puppy in the kitchen while talking to Jack... and their landlord, Mister Ferley, thought they were in the middle of hanky panky because of his ear glued to the door. She thought about it all, then decided to bake a cake from scratch. She had planned to get her ideas down to paper. When she was done with the cake, she was so satisfied with the way it turned out that she forgot all her ideas, and contemplated being a highly-paid *mettre deux heures à* at an upscale casino. It was a good idea, to her, and she wanted to go for it.

\* \* \*

Cheese didn't plan to see Doll or Flower until May—he had his calendar booked up with tours promoting his new game, and he had a romance with Jet which he was working on. Something bugged him about a photo which Jet brought him. She didn't know Doll too well except through wallet photos, and some pictures which were scattered around the house, here and there. She knew she had lived in Vegas, at a time, but she didn't know that that's where she was at because Cheese and Doll lost contact with one another for many months. She was brought photos by employees from *Virtual Fantasy* whom had worked with Doll before the group took off to northern Canada. The photos appeared to be *surveillance* photos, and they seemed to show Doll in distress in her front yard (a *large* one with many livestock animals). They showed her in confusion. They showed her in distress. They showed her flipping off the *air planes...* or helicopters, or blimps. They showed her in a lot of awkward positions.

Cheese knew that it was revenge. A typical paparazzi member focused on limelight celebrities in Los Angeles and New York areas. To focus on the former wife of a departed video game engineer reeked of hounding and gross agitation. It was uncouth. Cheese was going to go to Doll, he was going to find out whom was doing what to whom... and he was going to get his revenge.

“I doctored those photos myself,” Doll said to Cheese when he showed up to her doorstep a couple of days later. “I was lonely, and I knew you'd come!.”

“And you sent them to my employees because you knew they’d give them right to me... and you gave them to no one *else*, right??” He was assured by Doll’s look. He felt good, actually—practically flattered. “I wanted to *see* you, Doll... but you pissed me *off* right before we left *Canada*!!”

“The *banana* thing still, huh??” Doll asked. She wanted to smoke a cigarette but recalled she had none in the house. She went to her fireplace and opened a wooden box. There were large cigars in there. She licked one, and lit it up.

“I have something you should *see*!!” Cheese threw a manila folder at Doll. Inside was the crude drawing of something he hoped to submit to Nintendo. It was called *Donkey Kong Ballistic*. The large iconographic ape was throwing bananas at would-be pursuers along the streets in what appeared to be New York City. Cheese said, “It’s the only way I know how to *handle* things!!”

“I was talking to my neighbor—she brings me *feed*, and other things like that—and she was saying she watched a Hilary Duff movie, recently... and the co-star—the “love interest”—was a guy which looked like *LaLaine* from the Lizzie McGuire series!! It’s *art*!! I know she’s trying to disassociate with certain things in her life... and I like your *style*!!”

“*LaLaine*, huh??” Cheese asked. He scratched his head because he didn’t know what the fuck she was saying. He snapped back into his thought process because he wanted to get to his ultimate point. “That *LaLaine* chick...? Never mind!! Anyway, I want you to *raise your voice* whenever shit goes wrong... like it did, recently... and I want you not to be afraid to *call* me!! I’ll be on the dark side of the Moon, for a while, and I’ll be livin’ it up with my pyromania in my next *game*... which I’m designin’!! I’m going through a metamorphosis as an designer, and I want you to be *there* for me!! I’ll be on the dock of the bay in San Francisco, next month, and I’ll be singin’ to the *Moon*, and everything else!! I’ll be *barkin’* at it!!”

“What the fuck are you trying to *get* at!?!?” Doll asked. “I didn’t ask for a *lecture*!!”

“We live and learn, and then sometimes it’s best to walk away!! Me? I’m hangin’ on—my only place to *stay*!!—at least for *now*, anyway!! I worked too hard for my illusions just to throw them all away!!”

“So you’ll be out in the cold because you’d rather be left alone than when someone is houndin’ you... and you’ll be lookin’ for some shelter or just another friend so you don’t fade *away*!!” Doll wanted to cry, because she was speaking Cheese’s talk—it was *programmers’* talk, or something, “And I won’t have sympathy for the devil, so that when I have my nineteenth nervous breakdown, you’ll be out there with the *COCK SUCKERS’ BLUES*!!”

“I think you went too far on that one!!” Cheese said, but he smiled. “I’m going to be around, and it’ll be a long time, but when I don’t look back, I don’t want you cryin’ to *AMANDA*!!”

“What the fuck are you *sayin’*!?!?” Doll demanded. “Who the fuck is *Amanda*!?!?”

Cheese didn’t say anything. He leaned over to kiss Doll, and said, “Susudio!! I’m goin’ to be *back*!!”

Doll yelled at him as he pulled away, “I’m going to call mental *health* if you don’t leave pretty soon!!!” Cheese froze in his tracks and turned back to her. He lit up. Doll liked it, then added, “I was just kiddin’ I’m the disease... and you’re the *cure*!! Remember that, *okay*??”

“*Yep*!!” Cheese said. He went to *Planet Hollywood* in Las Vegas and had a good time. He drank enough to black out, that night, and intended to kill as many brain cells as he could. He was surprised when he woke in a hotel room, the next day because he didn’t remember checking in. He was further surprised when he could hear Doll singing from the bathroom in shower as he could picture water raining down on her belly. He yelled to her, “*Bitch*!! Stop *singin’*!!!”

She sang on. It was Bette Midler’s “Wind Beneath My Wings.”

\* \* \*

Cheese got back to Portland, had debriefing sessions with Jet a few times, and went about his work the same way he *always* went about his work. He got a call in his office not long after resettling in, and it was from a buddy in New England, not far from his contact, *Dolores*. The buddy said, “I am off *Cyborg Lot*’s list!!” He sounded happy.

“*Chore*!!! I know you’re happy, but you never wanted to *dignify* them or acknowledge they *existed*!!” Cheese waited for a response.

“It got hard after a while. I was in *Baskin Robins*, and they were telling me what to *order*!!”

“The *Couch Sitters* and the *Stragglers*, huh?”

“*Yeah*!! You *know* how I hate strawberry ice cream because it reminds me of one time when I cut myself as a kid, and didn’t realize I bled into my *chocolate chip* until I had already started *eating* the stuff!!! I was happy, back then, and it was one of my early *parties*!!”

“So they sent people and always ordered *strawberry* when you went... and tried to get you to *order* strawberry when you went!!!”

“It’s *easy*!! My neighbor would cue them in—he had connections to a thousand people in my neighborhood in the guise of *NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH*!!—and I couldn’t get so far as a couple of *miles* without people hounding me everywhere I *went*!!” Chore laughed from the other side of the phone because he could truly feel that it was over, in his life—the *pestilence* from the outside world.

“I would call you *paranoid* if I knew it wasn’t true, Chore, but you...” Cheese reached for a glass of water because his larynx was still incredibly raspy from singing so much on the bus home from Las Vegas.

“*Hey*!! I called because...” Chore began to say. “I want to *tell* you...” Chore changed his mind. He was confused. Simultaneously, he wanted to tell Cheese about what he came to learn of *Cyborg Lot*, and he wanted to ask for a job. He could tell that Cheese was happy, and he refrained from his requests.

“*What*??” Cheese asked.

“A ‘Hollywood celebrity’ found out that I was organizing against them,” Chore said. “I was protesting rainforest wood on the sets of movies like ‘*Medicine Man*’ and other things!!! That was ironic because the movie was about saving the fuckin’ *rainforest*!!! And Zucker got a hold of my people—that’s what they told me in the office one day—and they said I better ‘*watch out*.’” Chore paused, then said, “My life was never the same, since then. I had cars follow me, and they had apes hit on my women at bars—a figure of *speech*—and grown men would come on to me, not to mention my aunt and my *grandma*!”

“The ‘Hollywood celebrity,’ I’m pretty sure,” Cheese said, “started to develop in your town—new roads, new houses, new *businesses*—and she or he left you out of the *loop*!.” Cheese poured himself another glass of water from a cooling tank which was close to him. “Very typical,” Cheese said, “and I came to find out that a donation of a million dollars to *Cyborg Lot*’s system—their *account*—would put two hundred demerits on anyone, regardless of who that person was, or what he had done!”

“So you’re not going to *hire* me, huh? Because you’re trying to leave it behind, *huh*??” Chore asked. There was mild disappointment in his voice, but he understood. “We said to trust no one over thirty when we tried to take over for what came to be an unsuccessful revolution in this country—a complete overthrow of our *government*—and I am on the *cusp* of bein’ thirty!! I can’t trust *myself*, sometimes, and I don’t blame you for...” Chore believed it was futile to continue on.

“I’m going to send you five hundred dollars to get you on your feet,” Cheese said, “and I’m going to send you my new video game... but I’m *not* going to risk being hounded by *Cyborg Lot* again by sending you more money or inviting you over here to *live*!”

“I understand,” Chore said. He genuinely understood, and was grateful. “Send it to my grandmother’s or my cousin’s, *okay*??”

Cheese sent Chore seven hundred and fifty dollars after hanging up the phone. He knew that things would have to fade in the revolutionary sense or he would wind up dead or insane. He was in love with Jet but he thought that it would only last a few months. He wished for the best of times, and he started to design the next wave of his computer games.

\* \* \*

A few days after Cheese left Doll at her ranch, Flower flew to her (she had heard where she lived after Cheese got home to Portland and called her at the tavern). Cheese started to set up Jet as a high-level corporate executive. She had been a good secretary, and her video game design was amazingly exceptional. Cheese believed she could run the company, if and when he were ready for retirement. He said to Jet at a morning diner (*it was five thirty, the Sun would be in full shine in an hour, and he was waiting for the six o’clock breakfast crowd*), “I want to review the five levels of communication with you.”

Jet rapid-fired them:

“One... *Hi, says one person! Hello, says the other!! Basic acknowledgement!*

Two... *Hi, how are you!? Fine, says the other! A little information exchange!*

Three... *Hi, how are you?! Sick, actually, but I think I’m gettin’ over it! Little personal information!!*

Four... *Hello, how are you?! Sick, and I think girl at the cubical next to me has cooties!! Opinion given!*

Five... *Hello, how’s it goin’?! I want to bone DOWN on your ass!!! Total intimacy, as much as possible!”*

Cheese acknowledge her memory skills, and then added, “It gets a little more sophisticate than that, and I need you to *help* me!.” Jet looked uncomfortable. “We’re not going to do this now, but I want you to envision the next time we’re at a *lunch* spot!”

“I know!! Drop words, *right?! And see who perks up their ears, and see who believes what about whom... and it doesn’t matter what you or me believe, right?!”*

“Yeah!” Cheese surprisingly added, “It’s the *fat guy* mentality, and you have to follow what I’m about to say...” Cheese went on to say that the old archetypal character whom couldn’t be made fun of in public was the *four-eyed* guy—the one with *glasses*—but because of contacts, radialkeratotomy, and *laser* surgery, there were no more of them, or very few. The *new* guy you couldn’t make fun of in public was the *fat* guy, and it was reflected in the Drew Carrey show, and things along those lines. Cheese said, “*Cartoonists* are fighting back, though, and you’d notice that on the surface of *Family Guy*; it’s a ‘politically correct’ sitcom, but the *character*—the supposed *protagonist*—for those of us whom understand artistic expression has a set of *balls* hangin’ from his *chin*!”

Jet laughed and said, “That’s a double *chin*, stupid!”

Cheese laughed because she laughed, but it was an *enlightening* laugh. He knew that she liked him. He continued, “If you watch *The Wall*, by Pink Floyd, you’d see flowers come to life—one representing a penis, and the other, a *vagina*!! It’s hardly hidden, and cartoonists do this all the *time*!” Cheese watched her eyes brighten, then said, “*I do it in my VIDEO GAMES*!”

Jet felt embarrassed because she hadn’t known how for the expression went. She was very much sensory oriented and if a team ended a game with more points on the scoreboard she would call any of the losing team’s members “sore losers” if they tried to chalk it up to a “*moral victory*.” She added, “It sounds like the *Simpsons* episode when Marge was mad at the Itchy and Scratchy cartoonist and protested the studio... so the cartoonist, in turn, made a mad *beaver* which looked very much like Marge in a following Itchy and Scratchy *episode*!”

“You *got* it!” Cheese said. He was excited because a family of five came into the diner and was ready to be seated. Cheese guessed they must have been traveling across the country because they were tired, and they were dressed differently than a lot of the locals. Cheese said to Jet under his voice, “I’m goin’ to say three phrases over the next five minutes loud enough for them to hear, and I want you to read their expressions when they hear me!”

Two and a half minutes later, in the course of an exaggerated fabricated sentence, Cheese said



something about “*Virtual Fantasy*.” Jet acknowledge that the family seemed to lighten up, nearly as if the boy in the group had one of the company’s cartridges. Cheese said something about “*national leadership*,” and Cheese didn’t need Jet to report the families expression because almost as if cued, the family started ranting about policies, income tax, and the *budget*. Two minutes after Cheese talked about national leadership, he *cried* out “*Hollywood*”... and the family, within thirty seconds, started buzzing about *Tinseltown*, high-priced movies, and the rising costs of *popcorn*.

Cheese paid the morning bill, then headed out of the establishment with Jet. On the way to the car, Jet asked, “What just *happened* in there!?”

Cheese wanted to say that he was in the CIA, but it wasn’t completely true. He had learned of the tactics from Gage, whom in turn learned them from *Zelda*, whom was in the CIA directly or otherwise—he really couldn’t remember. Instead, he said, “I’m feeling the *vibe* for my next game!! I know people are mad at the national government, but they are not angry. I know that Hollywood has jacked up prices too far for them to afford professional amusement in lieu of a regular attendance—I went to a *diner* to get ‘*middle America feel*’—and I need to keep my games cost-ranged *reasonably*!! I know that they have *heard* of *Virtual Fantasy*, but they do no know it’s a household word in parts of the Midwest where a tornado game sold like hotcakes late last year!?” Cheese stepped into his car. When Jet joined him on the passenger’s side, he said, “I know that I need to get home, get some rest... and design my *game* for them!?”

Jet asked, “What if they *knew* you were from *Virtual Fantasy*... and they were turning your *crank*!?”

Cheese said, “I read sarcasm, sincerity, and a million other things!! I *know* they like me, and even if they knew I was officially the *CEO* of the company, now that Gage has passed... they still *see* me as the creative drivin’ force behind the *games*!?”

Jet shook her head. “It’s *confusing*!?” she said.

Gage drove off into the morning Sun, and said, “You’re going to be well versed in it in four or five years!!! I can feel *it*!?”

Gage played Foreigner’s “Long, Long Way From Home” on the way to the house which he shared with Jet. *It was a Monday... day like any other day!!!* He sang, and he was happy for fleeting moments.

\* \* \*

Cheese stood around the fireplace at the home he shared with Jet. He had a glass of burgundy wine in his hand, and he told her about how he came to know *Gage*, the originator of *Virtual Fantasy*. He said to her as she sat down on the rug to listen, “I was dating *Nancy*, back east, but I know that Nancy wasn’t her real name because the internet explosion had just taken place... and back *then*, they didn’t use *doll-part* names, and parts of *machines*, and the like!! They just used ‘Nancy,’ or ‘Fred,’ or whomever you would *come* across!?”

“And Nancy introduced you to *Dolores*, huh?” Jet asked. She sipped from sparkling cider because she didn’t want to get sick with alcohol.

“Yeah!! And by the time I realized that it had reached the point of ignition—the final *drive*—it was almost too late. I had talents—juggling, and the sort—and I knew that I had to be part of the new *nation* that everyone was talking about after the *fall*!!”

“I know what you mean because we were scared out here, *too*!!”

“But the corporate executives wound up snatching me up... but before that, there was *Gage*, and I met him through a friend of a friend of a friend of a *friend*... and if you say that word too much—‘*friend*’—you set yourself up for mild disappointment, and I learned that from *Gage*, as well!!”

“So don’t say you’re a *friend* to me, *right*!!?”

“*Yep*!!” Cheese said. “When you’re sixty-four, like *Paul McCartney* said, you *come* to me... and *maybe* you can call yourself a *friend*!!”

“I *know*!!” Jet said, “but it’s not our *fault*!! Because we get picked off by the same corporate executives whom financed your *business*... and the same ones which gave you loans to buy the houses and *cars*!! And the ones *that*...” Jet saw confusion in the person she tried to talk to. She said, “You’re *not* a hypocrite!!”

Cheese cried. “For fleeting moments, I thought I could break the system... and I thought I could have someone... *and make it last*!!”

“They control things, Cheese,” Jet said, “and just like you picked me for my manners or my *breasts*... they are doin’ the same thing... and when they see I’m a good corporate executive for you... they are going to offer me somethin’ I can’t *refuse*!!” Jet’s declaration startled Cheese. “And when they do,” she drank her sparkling cider, “I have to *accept* it or I’m going to wind up on *Cyborg Lot*’s hit list... and I *know* it!!”

“A *SLAVE*!!” Cheese said. “Just like Jim Morrison had warned us about so long *ago*!!”

Cheese cried for a while then went back to design a few games. There were three in the works, and he knew that he could drown himself in his work if he tried hard enough. He didn’t suspect it would happen any time soon.

Jet was a specialist, like *Zelda*, at turning corporate executives gay. With *Zelda*, it was through perception, and the Horatio Sanz association toward *Gage*. Cheese hadn’t told her about the Amanda Donohoe look alike he had met, but he didn’t need to. It was prevalent in the female underground to find the “up and coming males,” trick them into homosexual activity, then use the evidence against them when the time would come for them to skirt out for another woman, job, or place of residence. Jet was thinking things over, and she was contemplating that the “homosexual tactic” was not the right one. She saw Cheese break down in front of her, and she thought that she might have his button if he ever turned against her: He was afraid of the world... she knew it, but he had a great front... and a decent *personality* in public.

\* \* \*

Flower and Doll sipped tea. Doll's dining area had a nice wooden floor with a fine finish. Flower observed it then listened to what Doll was saying. "*NOW*, in 1973 was pushing the Equal Rights Amendment so *much*!!!"

"I know!! We heard about it in Canada," Flower said.

"We got close... but we didn't push it *far* enough!!"

"You're going to tell me why my husband, *Cheese*, is not coming to visit me... and why he stormed off without giving you much *heed*, aren't you??"

"In 1973, there was a secret mission of women from *NOW*—the National Organization for *Women*, if you don't have a chapter up there in Toronto—and people wanted to make men *gay*!! They wanted to make all men *gay*!!"

"Because the returning vets from Vietnam were going to strong-arm them into having sex much in the way that they were pushing for prostitution in Saigon, and so forth, *right*??" Flower drank from her tea.

"*Yeah*!! But I don't think you have the same problem in *Canada* because your guys didn't fight in *Vietnam*!!"

Flower became enraged, "Our men are *hockey* players and they can kick most of your asses on any given day of the *week*!!"

"What keeps your men from raping *women*?!!" Doll asked.

"*Common sense*!!" Flower said. She wanted to leave, but knew that a long flight home to Toronto was her only logical choice at the moment. "If they *rape* us, they'll wind up in *prison*!!"

"Over here, we're subversive... and I *know* it!! We women know how to break down the men... and I *laughed* when *Cheese* was first figuring it out on the way home from *New Mexico*!! I was calling him a *bitch*, and he was going about his story like a ninth-grade little *girl*!!!"

"You're a *whore*!!" Flower said to Doll. "You are a fucked up *whore*!!"

Doll calmed. "We would have had a *lot* of women raped... if we didn't use that tactic, and we did it *well*!!"

Flower asked, "So the *men's* subversion if there is one... is that they'll *commit* to you... but they really mean '*house prison*,' right? They really want to cage you like an animal... or like a captured *Viet Cong* soldier, *huh*??"

"It's not that far, but we exported a *race* problem, *you know*?? Our guys were fighting... and *killing* each other on the streets, over here, and we sent them to Vietnam to play their *war games*!!" Doll felt delirious but she knew that it was true. She had heard it from one of her "clients" when she was an expensive hooker.

"So *we* in Canada... are to believe that you're for *capitalism* when we read your history books... but you were on the verge of another *CIVIL WAR*... so you exported your poor and young to Southeast *Asia*,

huh? And the crossfire was not as accidental as it might have *seemed*, huh??"

"Yes!!!" Doll said, "but Cheese caught on that we're really not on his *side*—the females of this country—and he started to *threaten* me the last time I saw him!!!" Doll pulled out the video game her neighbor had given her for Christmas. "This is *me* on the cover, and he's giving me the stalker '*Rick*' as my *torture!!!*"

Flower looked at the video game cover and was amused by the art work. She said, "It's pretty good *actually*, and I think he wants to forget about '*Ricky*' like he told us... so he's..." She looked deeper into the cover. "That *is* you!!!" She looked at Doll's face. "The *mole* gives it away!!!"

"He's playing our game, and he's *winning*, Flower!!!" Doll pounded her tea onto the table. "He's conniving, deceitful, wily, devious... and he's *better* at it than us... because he has the *video game company!!!*"

"I'm afraid of him, you *know?!?*" Flower said, "but he's my *husband!!!*"

Doll grabbed Flower by the arms, "We had a *pact* that we wouldn't be plucked *OFF* by them!!!"

"The truck driver was set *up* by me!!!" Flower cried. "I *did* it, and I knew he wouldn't be busted *because of...*"

"He's doing *five* years for involuntary *manslaughter*, Flower!! He's doin' *time!!* He didn't get away with it!!!"

"My guys put *money* on his books!!!" Flower said. "He'll come out and hunt for us *again!!!*"

"Why *him???*" Doll asked.

"Because I *like* him!!!" Flower didn't want Gage around any more because she believed he was too nerdy for his own good. She found a rugged trucker on the internet while in Los Angeles with Cheese and Doll and wired him the money to off *Gage*. "I *like* the trucker!!!"

"I'm not sure I *want* the pact, *then!!* That was my *husband*, you fuckin' *WHORE!!!*"

"I *know*," Flower cried. Her blouse was dripped with fallen tears. They formed maroon drops around her breasts and Doll found them mildly alluring. Flower continued, "And I want you to *see...*"

Doll got it. She finally saw the hypocrisy of not letting Flower get back together with Cheese, but *whining* about it—that *Flower had offed her own husband in a secret pact made by many women so many years back*—did not do any *good*. "Fuck *NOW!!!*" Doll screamed into the air. "They have killed my *husband...* and they'd kill me next if I became one of their..."

"*Stepford wives*," Flower said.

Flower french kissed Doll and tried to get her to see that they didn't need men in the house. Doll was mildly amused, but it didn't fulfill her inner emotions. Doll said to Flower, "*Go to him, Julia!!* I found out your real name on the *internet* a long time ago and I want you to *go to him!!!*"

Flower cried.

\* \* \*

“So the damsel in distress looks like Jennifer Aniston!! Write that *down*!!” Cheese said to Jet. She scribbled and he continued, “And there are *seven bars* on the top of the screen...”

“I *have* that already,” Jet said.

“Okay... *Avarice* gets ten, because people are *born* with the want for money if you asked anyone whom listened *to*... Waitress, can I get a *refill*??” Cheese flagged down the waitress at the bed and breakfast which he never got sick of going to. “And *pride* starts at *five*...”

“*Why don’t you just start them all at the same number*!?” Jet demanded.

“I like your *attitude*!!” Cheese said, “but you have to let me finish my thought, or I’ll lose it all *completely*!!”

Jet jotted down her note, and pulled out a napkin because that’s where she kept her side ideas when Cheese was in his *mode*, as she thought of it.

“So *gluttony* has to start at *two* because all the fast food restaurants want to believe that we don’t have a problem with *eating* too much... and they’ll come *down* on my ass if I don’t *have* it that way!! And anger, sloth, lust and envy all start at *one*!!” Cheese drank his coffee. “*That way*, we all have something to *avoid*...”

“And the *villain* played by *Donkey Kong*, no doubt...!!” Jet said. She looked at her pastry and didn’t want to eat it out of fear that she’d be screamed at for not paying attention.

“*No*!! Stop makin’ *fun* of me!!” Cheese said. “It’s an *archetype*, keep in mind, and before *Donkey Kong*, grown men *always* wanted to club the *figurative* woman with a club and drag her by the hair back home to his *cave*!!”

“I *get* it!!” Jet said, “and your *club* is your company and if I don’t take down dictation you’re going to *fire* me!!”

Cheese was upset for a second and a half, then he laughed at the perception. He continued, “And I want him to look like *Gage*, not because I don’t *like* Gage but because I’m trying to get over his *memory*!!”

Jet looked at a picture of Gage which Cheese propped onto the table. “You said that *Gage* was a gentleman and he never did so much as lift a finger to hurt a *fly*!!”

Cheese shook his head in disappointment. “You don’t understand because it’s not the actual *memory* of Gage that I’m dealin’ with!! I see ‘*im* at night in visions tellin’ me that I’m not doin’ enough with the *company*!! I hear him in my dreams and when I wake up, he says that I wasn’t *effective* in my *revolution*!! I *mourned* him for a year and I want to get rid of his *memory*, now!!”

“So you’re givin’ it to me and the rest of the *country*, huh??” Jet smiled. She liked his idea.

“*Yes*!! I didn’t think it through like that, but *yes*!! I want to give it away so I feel no guilt about not ‘*tellin’ his story*’!!”

“That’s a fucked up *story*, *BITCHY*!!” Jet had been told the tale of when Doll was calling Cheese a bitch on the way home from New Mexico not long before, and she took to the liking of it. “I *like* that...”

*bitchy!!*”

Cheese leaned over the table and gave her a kiss. The video game was a success in the independent stores around the *country*.

\* \* \*

Flower served an omelet to Doll—she had been living with her for many months, and they took turns cooking breakfast for one another—and mulled over her thoughts of Cheese’s most recent game. It was a hit in the Vegas strip malls—Flower found herself quite *social* in Nevada, and Doll remained reclusive in spite of having lived in the area most her life... and Flower asked about something she had heard back in Canada. “They said that the people whom were interviewed after the falling of the Twin Towers—the ones whom were slated to work there in the *not-too-distant* future—were not *disappointed* that they did not have lofty offices, and all the amenities which a sky rise would offer!! You know *why?*!”

“*No!!*” Doll said. She suspected she knew, but she wanted to hear it from Flower.

“They knew it was going to *happen!!* They didn’t have the *plans*, but they...” As Flower set down her plate she was interrupted.

“*Were they hated that bad in there??*” Doll asked.

“The word is *resentment* and not *hatred!!!* And the people on the street *knew* that they were resented, and the people working inside were *oblivious* to it!!!”

“The people out here *hated* them... because they’d make their chickenshit remarks from more than two thousand miles away—*YOUR INSURANCE IS DUE!!! WE’RE GOIN’ TO FIRE YOU IF YOU DON’T SUBMIT YOUR PROPOSALS!!!*—and we *laughed* at them on them on the floor when the whole thing *fell!!!*” She looked around as if there might be agents in the vicinity, but continued any way, “And we were *scared* for a couple of months because we were called *terrorists* for even *laughin’* about it... but we had no *plans!!* We didn’t know it was going to *happen!!*”

“We were *resentful*—not *hateful*—in Canada because they didn’t have jurisdiction over us and maybe that’s the *difference!!!*”

“*FUCK YOU, MISTER INSURANCE MAN!!*” Doll said in a mad speech. “*WHERE ARE YOU NOW!!!?*” She laughed heartily. “Are you still going to *fire* me!!!?” She laughed but it diminished. “Because I really want to *know!!!*”

“He who laughs last, laughs *best* and I guess you pulled one *over* on them, *Doll!!!*” Flower said. She was mad not because Doll was laughing in her presence but because she didn’t have the same victorious irritation. She said, “I *hate* you Americans!!”

Doll was caught off guard. “*See!!!* You felt the resentment, *too*, but it took many years *later!!!*”

Flower plopped down the most recent game from *Virtual Fantasy* and she left out the door to have a cheap cocktail... and sea food buffet. “*Fuck you!!!*” she added before she left. She was heading to the

Strip for some *food*.

\* \* \*

Cheese developed a game by the name of “*Kinder- Gentler Machine Gun Hand*.” It was a reference to a lyric from a Neil Young song. Jet didn’t like it but she helped program it. She was primed for taking over the company... and then Cheese took off for Los Angeles to make his way out of the heads and tails from the whole social *circumstance* in the country. He didn’t advertise himself when he moved into an exclusive apartment, and he didn’t have to worry about being hounded if anyone *did* find out he was coming into his own as a *video game designer* because Los Angeles had its share of stars with Hollywood as its neighbor.

Cheese traveled the streets, and he let his facial hair grow. He wanted to feel the *vibe*. He had been out there when he was younger, and he wanted to reconnect to make sure that the *angst* in his games was reflective of the feeling on the streets. He didn’t want to blatantly represent the American public of California in his video games *because* it was a recipe for disaster. He hadn’t felt *patriotic* in years, but the fact that he was never arrested for the speech he expressed through his games showed that it was still *alive*—the country he had been born into was still alive, and maybe there was a shred or *semblance* of the old Constitution.

He went on a “tour of star homes” when he got to L.A. He didn’t like to feel like a tourist but the image of Jennifer Aniston haunted him since he released his game. He wanted to know if she was like “*Rachel*” from the *Friends* show or if she was like the *bitch* which the recent tabloids portrayed her to be. When he was on the bus, he started to talk to other people whom had traveled from the Midwest, and various parts around the country and world. As the tour guide traveled past Jennifer Aniston’s home, he started to rattle about Brad Pitt and the “infamous” breakup. The guide said it was “American royalty coming to and end.” Cheese wanted to cry because he could see the sadness in all the eyes around him.

“I made a game about *vanity*, you know??” Cheese asked.

“You from *Hasbro*!?? We get your kind all the *time* in our parts!!” a scruffy man said.

“*No!!* You from Kansas, by the way??” Cheese asked.

“*No!!* I’m from *Missouri*, and they say we’re all in *MISERY* out there, if you know what I *mean!!*” The man seemed proud that he made a pun.

Cheese laughed lightly. “You mean Stephen King ‘*Misery*,’ right???”

“*Kathy Bates* lives in this town, and we all *like* ‘er!!” the man said. He stiffened up, then said, “I’m an *agent* for some of these stars, if you have to know... and I cast them in *movies!!*”

Cheese didn’t know if he was listening to a lie. He said, “I *wish* I was an agent for the *stars!!*”

The man showed Cheese a badge from within his coat. “I’m really an *agent*... for the *stars!!*”

Cheese understood what the man was saying and he shut up for a while. “I *like* Jennifer Aniston

and I put her in one of my *video games*!!”

“The *SEVEN* one, huh?? I think you’re makin’ fun of Brad *Pitt*, in that one!!” He shifted in his seat.

“Subconscious, you might be *right*!!!” Cheese’s thought changed. “Why do you trust who I *am*, any way!!?”

“Why do you trust that this is a real *badge*... and not a fake *Hollywood* one!!?” The man pointed to some souvenirs which were worn by some people in the front of the bus. “When that guy turns around, you’ll notice that his hat says *FDNY*!!!! You can buy those on Hollywood Boulevard, *you know*??? And you don’t have to be workin’ for the New York *fire department*!!!”

“This whole land is *pretend*!!!” Cheese declared. “I *know*!!!”

Cheese was happy but he knew that below the surface, there was reality to it all. The emotions were real... but they were disguised in the form of *fiction*, *allegory*, and *tales*. He knew... because he was doing the same thing with his games. He didn’t want to admit it.

\* \* \*

*Cyborg Lot* was fading into America’s collective long-term memory, and *Spectacular Youth* was coming into the forefront of its consciousness. When Flower was on an errand in the heart of Las Vegas, they hardly hid any of their operatives. Three ladies—no more than twenty-one in age—came up to Flower. One in bright, riddley clothes said, “I am from Spectacular Youth! I have been paid twenty thousand dollars to send you to Los Angeles! Stop!” She wasn’t reading from a script but it sounded like she was delivering a telegram, nonetheless. “Your friend, *Cheese*, is in Los Angeles and he’s at an apartment near Fairfax and DeLongpre! Stop! He does not request your presence in public, but he keeps referencing ‘two women whom left him behind’!! Stop! We have recognized your group to be a great one respecting American youth... from the people at our company!! Stop! We would like to send you to Los Angeles and we would make it in your best interest to do so financially and otherwise!! Stop! We know you are millionaires but we know that you request a sacrifice financially!! Stop!! We will donate twenty thousand dollars to a charity of your choice and we will give you the opportunity to meet anyone from our clientele list which I will give to you!!! Stop!! This is not a trick but ‘expect the unexpected’ when you get to Los Angeles, California!!! Stop! There are variables out of our control!!!” The young lady produced twenty thousand dollars in front of Flower, and put them at her feet. They were all in thousands, and Flower was surprised.

She said, “I’ll take you up on it!!” When given the list of people whom she and Flower could meet, she was impressed to see two of the top directive talents; three of the best producers she was aware of; a half-shabby author; and many *a-list* stars of the male and female genders represented fairly equally.

Flower wanted to faint... and she arrived with Doll to Los Angeles within the week.



\* \* \*

Before going to Cheese's apartment, Flower and Doll stopped at a café. It was a good one. Doll started to talk to Flower about the *rumors* she was hearing on the bus heading for L.A. She said, "Did you know that *Rigor Mortis* was done to stop the Germans from killing American soldiers in World War II?"

"I must have been asleep on the bus when you heard *that* one!! Tell me..." Flower said.

"Well!!! In World War I, the Germans were killing us *unnecessarily*!!" Doll said.

Flower interrupted. "War is *HELL*!!!"

"And Rigor Mortis—a character on the big *screen*—was sent to give the Americans a way to *die*!!! Exaggeration!!!" Doll said.

Flower felt flush. She said, "I'm going to hear a thousand of these *stories* while I'm over here, *aren't I*!?"

"The idea was that when an American got plucked off while running across the battlefield in Normandy, or somewhere else, they would throw their *legs* up into the air... like *Rigor Mortis*... to make fun of whomever *shot* them!!!" Doll said. She stirred her coffee with her finger. It had cream in a swirl. It looked like caramel ice cream to her, similar to the *shackle* on the recent game she started to play.

"You better shut *up*!! Because..." She looked around and no one was wiggling out onto their conversation. Flower quieted to hear the table behind them. The conversation was of aliens dressed in *cop* clothes which were *poised*, willing, and *ready* to take over the world. Flower said, "Never *mind*!! Keep talkin'!!!"

"You used to be a normal *person*!!!" Doll said. She talked about *Twilight Zone—The Movie* for twenty some odd minutes then paid for her coffee with a hundred dollar bill. It all seemed normal.

A month later, Doll, Flower, and Cheese were all living together again. It was in a Bel Air home, and Cheese invited Jet to live with them. He thought it would be *great*. They played tennis, together, and they learned how to sing in a band!

\* \* \*

"The Universal lot is like the *CIA* headquarters!!!" Flower said to Doll one day. "There are more than fifteen thousand *movies* in a stored *vault*!!!"

"You're *shittin'* me, *right*?" Doll asked. They were at home in Bel Air, and Doll was smoking a cigarette. She tossed it after realizing it had a break and couldn't be dragged upon correctly.

"*No*!! They're stored and Nicolas Cage is in one with Tiffany Theisen... and *Brad Pitt* does one with Jennifer Aniston... but they don't have it at *Blockbuster* and they will *never* have it at

BLOCKBUSTER!!!"

"It's how they met... I bet," Doll said. "I wouldn't release personal films to the public *either*, you know??"

Doll looked depressed to Flower. "*Cheese* had an obsession with Jennifer Aniston, so that's why they showed me *that* one!! I wanted to see a *secret* film of my idol, *Clint Black*!! They didn't have 'im, but they showed me a crude Western of Tim Allen as a sheriff from a lowly, Texas *town*!! That means that we can be in the *movies*, Doll, and they won't *talk* about us!!!"

"We can '*make it*,' in other words!!" Doll said, "And if I fuck up, it goes in the reels to never be *released*!!!"

"It's quite opposite than that actually, *Doll*!! They make these movies as if they're *home* movies!! They're meant to be *good*, and if word gets out that..."

"*I'm datin' Mel Gibson, I wind up makin' it to the SCREEN*!!" Doll was happy.

"*Yeah*!" Flower said. But she was disappointed. She was a Danny Glover fan and thought that Mel Gibson was a *nerd*. She liked him in the *alien* movie, but thought he overacted in the *Lethal Weapon* series.

Cheese came and broke their conversation. "*Doubles*, anyone??" He was playing with Jet. They had taken a liking to her and wanted to beat her up when she was with Cheese alone. Typical female stuff. "Jet tells me *here* that they're making a movie of my *life*... but they're using disguised *references*!!" He drank heavily from glass which encased raspberry tea. "It's a *seventies* flick, and it's called *The Banana Airline*!!!!" Cheese felt *good* in society, and he felt wanted.

It didn't occur to Flower that she was *anything* to anyone. All she did was support Cheese and Gage support an American revolution of the cultural kind. She was referenced in the movie as Cheese's love interest. "Am *I* in it??" she asked.

"You'll have to buy a *box office* ticket, *honey*!!" Cheese said. He felt like a poor man's *Humphrey Bogart*. "That was my *bogus* impression of *Bogart*, by the way!! Can I *hump ya* '!!?"

"You're a fuckin' *nerd*, still!!" Flower said. She felt *good*, though.

"They're going to *rape* me, the women are, but I'm prepared to be a *star*!!!" Cheese was happy. Little did he know he was half right.

\* \* \*

Flower, Doll, Jet, and Cheese arrived at the Universal lot that night at around midnight. They were supposed to "play" with things. There was no script, but a writer was on hand just in case plot lines were expected to be derived. *Spectacular Youth* invested a million dollars into making sure that the four had a "legitimate shot" at expressing themselves and they were going to ride it out as far as it could go. Two directors were on the set—one of the horror genre, and the other of action/ thriller—and as the movie

developed *spontaneously* they were to leave one of them behind. Flower had in mind that it was to be a *Western*. They used a blue screen in the back and they used props from around the various bends. Doll wanted prostitution referenced but she did not want to play a prostitute *herself*. *I'm going to stretch myself*, she had said to the others. Cheese didn't care what he was going to do so long as he got to kiss no less than two of the women—one would mean that he was “taken,” and the girls wouldn't talk to him if the movie was ever released. Jet didn't care about anything but it was important for her that *wardrobe* was appropriate to her family back home in Portland. In other words, short skirts, high ruffles, and a lot of *makeup*. She wanted to piss off aunts and uncles in other words.

The movie was made and it featured a couple of extras trying to make their breakthrough. They had been hired from a place not far from where *The Tonight Show* was filmed on a street called “*Flower*” of all places. One of them was a chubby jock reject and the other was former a wannabe drug lord from an Iowa suburban town. The chubby jock always wanted “the hair pie” as he put it, and the minor drug lord wanted to “rule the world”!!!! Cheese was to interrogate them both in a Western jail and was to make conclusions about whom was whom. He spit water into the chubby boy's face. “Who the fuck are *you!?!?*” Designing video games became Cheese's *forté*, yet he was surprised he could translate that creativity into an acting technique without having previous rehearsal experience.

“I'm in the *agency*...” the fat boy blubbered. He couldn't think quick enough and he was trying to improv that he was in a *casting agency*.

“*CUT!?!?*” the horror genre director snickered. “You have to say ‘clan’ or ‘*posse*’... because *agencies* were not *known* back then, you *DUMB SHIT!?!?*”

Cheese had thought he had done something wrong, but snapped back into character when the director said to “roll ‘em.” “You are a pussy looking *guy!?!?* How am I supposed to *cut* you... if you're *cryin'* so much!?!?”

“*You're*...” the fat guy blubbered.

“*CUT!?!?*” the action/ thriller director yelled. “I'll take *this* one, *Bob!?!?*” The other director got off of his seat and made his way to the far door. The action/ thriller director yelled to the script writer, “I'm going to need centering around four renegades who don't know their way in *town!?!?* They don't know *law*... and they are just as bad as Jesse James, if not *worse!?!?*”

“*Cut!?!?*” the other director said sarcastically before letting himself out the door.

The other director continued, “*You!?!?*” He pointed to Doll. She mouthed, *ME??* He said, “I need you in a low-cut dress with a high midriff for your wardrobe selection!! You're going to *appear* to be a whore, but you're really baiting the passer-throughs to give their perversions away!!! If you think they'll bone ya' on their first meetin', you're goin' to have your renegade *sheriff* buddy, here, *SLICE THEM UP!?!?*”

“An action flick gone *wrong!?!?*” Doll said. “I kind of *LIKE* it!?!?”

The director whom remained thought it was ironic that the *horror* director left... instead of him.

Inside, he knew it was a chance to break into a new *field*. “*Finish the fuckin’ set now and we’ll take five—FIFTEEN make that!!!*”

“As I was *sayin’ fat boy!!*” Cheese said. “I am the *sheriff* of this town!!” He produced a long blade from a grip whom had one accessible to him during the yelling and description of the scene. “I am going to kill *you...* Slowly!!” Cheese grinned. ““*SLOWLY*’ is my name, and you won’t know a *thing* about it five *minutes* later!!!” Cheese lowered the blade to the fat boy’s stomach. He pierced the top fabric of his jacket but no more. The kid cried in front of him.

“*Take!!!*” the director yelled.

The chubby boy ran to the bathroom. The other people stayed around and celebrated an emotional beginning to what might be the next *Blazing Saddles...* or *Pale Rider...* or... *Young Guns*.

They thought about the film!!

\* \* \*

During the course of the next three weeks, the movie was shot. It’s end title was “*The Rocky Gang*” and there was a subtle tribute to *Gage*, of course. At the end of the movie, Cheese attacked his fear of being sought by paparazzi if he were to ever make it *big* enough... so he had the same flabby kid from the opening shoot try to steal Flower, Doll, and Jet posing as his entourage of girlfriends. The lard-like *kid* in the opening scene, escaped by throwing his boot into the jail window then running the opposite direction after diverting the sheriff’s attention. The sheriff swore to never let his guard down again—he had taken a piss, and didn’t observe how tightly he tied the ropes around the fat kid’s wrists to the chair he was on—and when they met again in the last scene the pudgy kid died, ironically, from falling off his horse onto his head. Cheese wanted it so that he didn’t have to *kill* the perpetual *follower*—he would merely *witness* his demise. Cheese wanted the fucker dragged around the town by a connected lasso to a horse because he thought it would be great physical comedy in a satirical sense but the director pointed out that too many Westerns had people croak by getting dragged by their own carriages, trains, or anything else with *locomotion*. Cheese agreed, and the picture wrapped with success and comfort.

Doll, Flower, Jet, and Cheese took off to Doll’s ranch in Nevada when all was said and done. It turned out that *Spectacular Youth* was looking out for its own interests. They didn’t see Cheese as a mere video game designer/ *CEO*—they saw him as an *entertainer*, and a good one. When he was moping around town, they invested a couple of million dollars so that the tabloids didn’t get a hold of him, and when his three lady friends came along, they had a hit movie on their hands.

“The Rocky Gang” reached number four at the box office the following year during Christmas season. It was a good film for them, and they enjoyed one another’s company. They had wild sex one night, together, and then they went their different ways. Jet took over the company from Cheese in Portland; Flower and Doll moved to Florida together; and Cheese sputtered to New York... “*just to see*

*what was there,*” as he put it.

\* \* \*

Cheese lived in Manhattan for three months and realized he didn’t want to be anywhere else in the world. The flat where he lived ran a ten million per year, and he thought he could afford it so long as it wasn’t permanent. He subscribed to he L.A. Times because he was fond of the experience he had during the filming of the fuckin’ goddamn movie which began to drive him crazy. Rudolph James Galvin was doing well in the polls he read, and Loretta Jane Wilder picked up the slack where he couldn’t be. The Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum was going to be *Corona Extra Field* if everything went as planned when the NFL came to town and many purists thought it was wrong—practically *sacrilege*—to screw with something that was *good*. Cheese translated the commentaries in his head and he felt *attached* to California, still. He thought of the girls but he thought more of the new people he was going to meet.

Zelda, after many years of tracing Gage, wound up at Cheese’s flat one day and asked him about all the things going on. “Did you see my *movie*?” he asked Zelda when she showed. He had a copy of it on traditional VHS on his coffee table, and he gave it to her. “You’ll *like* it if you *didn’t*!”

“I didn’t come here to talk about the *movie*!” Zelda said. She let herself in. For a while, she doubted that Cheese wanted her there.

“I *know* it’s about the CIA or you wouldn’t have *come*!” Cheese said. He felt perky, and he wasn’t going to let outside influences mess up his life.

“I *know* who you *are*!” Zelda said.

“An *artist*!! Just like *Gage* before me!! And you’ll kill me by breaking down my mind and everything I *believe* in!! You do it all the *time*!” Cheese cut wind almost to make her mad.

Zelda was dumbfounded by the sequence of actions she just witnessed. She was at a loss for words, and was surprised by it. She waved her hands when she could smell the stink. It was *bad*.

“I *expect* to be seeing a poster of a person that looks like me... *draped* all over New York City... and I expect to be pictured with people I don’t really *like*!” Cheese’s *rank odor* started to bug even himself. “I know how far to *go* with people... and on a personal level I got Gage out of my head... and I got *his* tormentor out of my head... but you are here to remind me of it and it doesn’t surprise me that you throw it in my *face*!”

Zelda confessed. “I can do that—*yeah*!!—or I can disparage one of your love interests with pornography, or blatant vanity on the covers of *Time* or *Newsweek*! We have our moles, and they still *work* for us most the time we *ask*!”

“Is it really a national security interest that I live alone like a *slob*, now?? Is it that *important* to you guys to *FUCK WITH US* night and *day*!? ‘No rest for the wicked’?! Is that what’s fuckin’ goin’ *ON*!?”

“I don’t know what to say and I have been sent orders by my *SUPERIORS!!!*” Zelda unbuttoned her top blouse fasteners. Her blouse was practically see-through, anyway.

“You’re good *lookin’*... but that hasn’t worked on me since I was *seventeen!!*” Cheese tried to block out when Doll seduced him into being tied up in *Gas City*.

“I’m going to *go!!*” *Zelda* said.

She looked good to Cheese, but Cheese could sense that his bliss in New York City was coming to an end. He was glad that he paid the year’s rent in full but he didn’t plan to stay for more than twelve months. He put on a CD by *Silver Chair* when she was gone and played the song “*Tomorrow*” a few times for himself. He didn’t feel like Little Orphan Annie, though. He wanted to go to *Broadway* to see the actual hit show when he was done.

\* \* \*

Colin Ferrell was in a feature film called “*Phone Booth*” and it represented a guy trapped in a pay phone with a marksman’s sniper pointed at him. Cheese got rid of all of his cell phones—he had *three* at a time; each for work, personal, and recreational reasons—and he found himself clamoring for attention. He thought of Doll and Flower in Florida, and thought it would be good to give them a call. He stepped into a New York City phone booth, brushed aside any paranoia he had associated with *la pelicula*, in his head, and called information for the city of Miami. He learned over the course of a half hour of calls, that he could reach them at a resort in Fort Lauderdale. When he paged them at that resort, the brushed him off and told him to come down in person. Cheese took off to Florida without an intention to ever go back to the Manhattan apartment even though he still had rent paid. He arrived in Florida, and he was grateful to be under the *Sun*. “What are you *doin’!*?” he demanded of Doll. She had a nice tan and she seemed rather bright in spirit.

“*I missed you!!*” Doll said. She seemed happy to see Cheese, and then she detected dismay on his face. “Are you *upset*, or somethin’!?” She lowered her eye glasses to get a better read of his eyes. She put down her drink and got off her rubber lounge chair.

Cheese thought, *How long before she starts shoving bananas up into my asshole when I’m asleep, I wonder!?! Cheese brushed off the thought, then asked, “It’s the drink!! I’ll have one!!”*

Doll screamed to a waiter as he made his way around a pool, “I’ll have another *BANANA DAIQUIRI!!*”

It was enough to wake Flower up. She had a foil-covered reflective cardboard on her chest, and it looked as though the tan on her face was going to turn out fine. Cheese thought it was cute the way her sun tan lotion was smudged on her nose. She looked like a kewpie doll, and her hat did the trick!!! It was straw, and hid her beautiful hair. Cheese missed her. Flower said, “You’re really going to order him a banana *daiquiri*, aren’t you!?! You *whore!!*” She flagged down the waiter with a beach towel. “*WAITER!!*

I'll have a *cherry-flavored* daiquiri instead of a *banana* one, *okay!?!?*"

"Make that *dos!!*" Cheese said. He wanted to shoot himself in the fuckin' head because Doll took off to the waiter and yelled into his ear, "*I forgot!!* He's apprehensive of *BANANAS!!!*"

Cheese laughed. He dove into the pool without removing his shirt or sandals.

\* \* \*

After Cheese dried himself off with Doll's towel, he slammed down his two daiquiris rather quickly. He started to speak loosely when a mild buzz hit him, and he yelled for two *more* daiquiris. He started to ramble about New York City and Zelda. "So she's a *virus*, you see?"

"I know what you *mean*," Doll said. She had enough conversations with Gage before his passing in which she never wanted to hear her name again.

"And I *know* this from my youth, actually. When I was a juggler, I was surrounded by a good group of *people*. People wanted *in*—I'm talkin' about *outsiders*, here—and I didn't have *room* for them. Even if they rode a unicycle on a *rope*, I already had my troupe lined *up!!*"

Doll interrupted, "You're *joking* about riding the bike on a *rope*, right?"

Cheese diverged, "Some people would ride on a painted line and *claim* to be able to ride on a tight rope... but I didn't have time to *witness* it... because I already had my troupe, and I *liked* it!!"

"*Cheers!!*" Flower said. She yelled for another drink.

Cheese continued, "So this issue of ability wasn't *exclusively* it!! I didn't have room for them... and they swore *revenge*, some of them did, and they did it in an interesting *way!!*"

"*Like a virus!!*" Doll said.

"*Yeah!!* And the way a virus works, all of us know, is to get into the cell... replicate mitochondrial DNA in its own *form*, and..."

"I think you mean *RNA*—the codes for *making* DNA—Cheese," Doll said.

Cheese was shocked that she would *know* such a thing then continued, "*Yeah!!* And then it destroys its host by making incompatible *networks!!*"

"Until the white *blood* cells—the *PHAGOCYTES*, if you will—come and scoop them away, *right??*" Doll asked. She sipped from her cocktail.

"How did you *know* such a thing??" Cheese asked.

"I studied to be a *nurse* before I went into prostitution," Doll casually said. Onlookers gave her a glance but Doll believed they thought she was joking. "It *paid* more to be a prostitute, so I stopped *studying!!*"

Cheese continued with the analogy, "So the virus comes in—it doesn't give a fuck what happens to the *cell* it's in!!—and it destroys the whole fuckin' shit and spreads its disease!!"

Doll said, "I don't think you need to talk so loud, because a couple of them over there, really think

I'm a *prostitute* by now!!"

Flower laughed. She got up, took the towel off her waist, and dove into the pool.

Cheese finished his story. "The *fuckers*—the outsiders who couldn't make it in my troupe, and didn't have *minds* to think for themselves in forming their *own*!!—started to jack my world by befriending the fringe, influencing them to sabotage my shows, and rubbing it in my face through laughter when I *would* mess up!!" Cheese pretended to have a collared shirt on with a tie on, mimicking *fixing* gesture, "I was pretty *good*, you know!?"

"So you're saying Zelda is a *virus*!?" Doll demanded.

"Gage never hid that he believed so!! He had an agenda—make good games for people he *loved*—but the national government in the form of the CIA *sent* her!!! Gage told me one time that it was like choosing herpes simplex one, or herpes simplex two—one of them is *worse* than the other, from what he reported to me!!" Cheese looked Doll in the face for guilty reactions if she might have either. In the times that they slept together there was never an outbreak, so he was never sure. He couldn't read anything because Doll still wore the sun glasses. Cheese said, "He chose herpes simplex *one*—the lesser of the two diseases—because the national government would have sent *gum shoes* to follow him night and day, *otherwise*!! When it boiled down to it, *they* couldn't design digital games to reach the masses!! They were specialists at doing one or the other—technical stuff or blatant propaganda—but *Gage* chose the lesser of the available hardships!! He lost his life, but I don't think he regretted a *thing*!!"

"I don't think he was a loser, *you know*?? I think it was the people in the government whom couldn't get the job done *themselves*!! Gage was always trying to help people, and I think it was a fault of his in the end, because he couldn't satisfy enough *people*!! In the end, the people with the *guns* won because they went to *Zelda*, and I'm sure she had a couple of *quick-pistooled* gum shoes behind her... just like *you said*!!"

"I'm forgetting about him, now, *you know*?" Cheese said. His drinks arrived, and he started to sip hastily. He looked over at Doll, and thought to himself, *I have to get rid of YOU, now, too... because you remind me of GAGE... and all the things I need to leave behind*!! He raised one of his two cocktail glasses then said, "Here's to stayin' *FRIENDS FOREVER*!!"

"*Cheers*!!!" Doll said. Beyond her a few patrons hooted, and raised their glasses as well. The warmth of the alcohol felt good to Doll's stomach. It felt good for Cheese to see her happy. He marveled that she could have tortured him so bad in Canada with the "banana thing" as they started to call it.

Cheese's ideas swooshed like the chopped ice in the drink in front of him. *You're a buffer, now!!* he said to himself about Doll. *Fuck, this is a good drink!!*

\* \* \*

Flower, Cheese, and Doll made their way to Doll's hotel room (*Flower had one across the hall*



from her for privacy), and they started to talk. Cheese brought a brief case with colored pencils in it and a couple of large designer white pads. He said, “I’m going to start designing *video* games again and I’m going to submit them to Jet using the over-night mail. I told her she doesn’t have to use them... when I let her take over the company and I don’t care if they go to production! Nonetheless, it helps me to get by in life by expressing myself through imaginative means.” Cheese opened up his white pad book, and said, “I’m working on a game that’s like a spin-off of *Mars Attacks*!! You know the sequence where the military commander gets *blasted* by the aliens?? Well, they say to watch what you wish for because it might come *true*!! I think the *feds* wanted me to be so fuckin’ *patriotic* in the game designs that they forgot what patriotism is: BRAVERY and FREEDOM!! It’s in our *Star Spangled Banner*, and we sing it every time we watch the *Olympics*, right?! Anyhow, I have a game in which an alien blows up a military commander, then the *PRESIDENT* gets up in a riff and declares ‘*unpatriotic behaviors*’ illegal!! That includes blowin’ up the *flag*, right?? So you’re supposed to stop the *FRENCH* from invading, *right*?? Because they think we have no more NATION since the *CONGRESSIONAL BUILDING* is blown up!!—keep in mind I’m goin’ off the *MOVIE*, here!!—and they want to take *over*!! If the French successfully reclaim the *Statue of Liberty* that they gave us back in 1886 and they raise their flag over the White House lawn, you have lost the *game*!!”

“I don’t *get* it!!” Doll said. “The anti-*French* backlash is over since the *nine-eleven thing*, and I know because people go into the *Paris* resort on the *Strip* in *groves*... *again*!!”

“Yeah!! But their flag is *RED, WHITE, AND BLUE* as well as *ours*!!! I have it so that *if* the flag is raised on the White House lawn, you can submerge it within thirty seconds and if you *BURN* it... you can win the game because the *ALIENS* in the game, *don’t like the FRENCH, EITHER*!!!”

“I don’t *get* it!!” Doll said. She yelled to Flower, “Call for *room service*!!!”

“I have an *artist* that makes the folded-over flag look as though you *might* be burning an American one!!! And if *that* doesn’t piss off the feds enough to stop sending *Zelda* my way, *nothing will*!!!”

Doll looked at the plans. She said, “I *like* it!!” She scanned the drawings and said, “I like that you’re using *color*, now!!”

Like so many pretentious people, Cheese didn’t care any more. He said, “*Fuck it all, right*??” Room service showed and they brushed through decent times.

\* \* \*

“Patriot Fire” came out not long after Cheese submitted it (three months was *good* for *Virtual Fantasy* and Cheese was rather pleased). He kept a single share of stock in the company for token reasons. He was getting along with Flower and Doll better but he felt he was wasting his life away. From a distance, he was proud of Jet. He wanted to be back together with her, but he could *sense* that *Zelda* would show up at his door. He looked at the video game’s cover and was proud by what he saw. A man who looked too

much like Dick Gephardt wearing a French beret was being blown to smithereens. The aliens loomed in the background. A limp red, white, and blue flag hoisted in the front of the White House lawn. And the machine gunner closest to the viewer... *looked exactly like Cheese!!*

Cheese was proud. He didn't want to tell Flower or Doll about it because he was losing interest in them, day by day. He wanted to leave. He wanted to *go*. He wanted to be in the Caribbean Sea and he wanted nothing to do with the two mates he came to live with over the years. He thought of Pop Warner football, and he thought about how fun it was to be on a team back then. He believed his pretension was taking over him, and he wanted to do something about it. A *yachting club*? He didn't know. He heard about the *mountain* clubs where grown men went into the wilderness together in order to get into touch their primal nerves... but he felt he had enough of that in *Canada*. He wanted to join a club but *golf* didn't sound appealing to him. In the end, he settled on the *Steiners*, a group of "*know it all*" people whom only wanted to sit around all day and talk about their own accomplishments.

*That suited him.*

"Hasta la *vista!*!" he said to Doll and Flower on the day he decided to leave them. He didn't know if he would ever see them again in his life.

\* \* \*

Long before Cheese had met Doll or Flower, he had *feared* the term "sellout." *Cyborg Lot* knew this but they didn't ever try to attach it to him... because he was a good guy to the *people*. He believed that when a person reached the age of thirty he would be *lucky* to not be working for corporate America. In other words it would be ideal to be sitting alone on a lake in a boat *fishing* all day... but the way to ensure this thing was to be good to the *people*. If you could get them on your side—*rock stars* did this all the time—a person could get to the cusp of thirty and wouldn't have to worry about *anything*. There were exceptions, of course, and many people believed Steven Tyler was one of them. *Few* people made it well into their fifties while simultaneously being in good graces with the general public... at the same time that they were in the public *eye*. Cheese wanted to make it to the lake; he *didn't* want to be a rock star.

Flower and Doll were irate and annoyed with *Cheese*. He had joined the *Steiners*, and he talked vaguely about the "women who screwed him over." "*Take my girlfriend, for example...*" he would say to open many of his speeches (he hoped to be a comedian, in *time*). "*Take HER!! I really mean it!! Take her!!*" It was acknowledging Rodney Dangerfield and then he would talk about "Comedy 101—A List Of All The Opening One Liners." He talked about traffic and he talked about *sweat*. He talked about big ears and he talked about falling down in the literal sense. He talked about a *lot* of things, and at the end of his speeches, he usually *felt* like a comedian—like the people he had *praised*.

Flower and Doll didn't *like* being made fun of. They set Cheese up and they didn't need the money, but they involved corporate America, *anyway*. They set up, through agents, Cheeses' first few

comedy skits. He would be at the Laugh Factory in Hollywood, and then he would go to the Ice House... just like he always wanted to do. Doll and Flower sent “fans” to try to get Cheese’s autograph. They wore corporate T-shirts and they would have other friends take pictures of them together. It made Cheese *look* like a sellout.

Doll and Flower got the idea from “Pretty In Pink.” When they were younger, they knew that companies tried to “sublimate” products to audiences. It was called “product placement,” in cinematographic lingo. The movie “Twister,” for example, used only *Pepsi* products, and the unknowing viewer would see an occasional *Mountain Dew*—a subsidiary of Pepsi. Also, only *Chryslers* were used... the exception being for the “*bad guy*” as played by Cary Elwes (the bad guys *never* drove the corporate car by theory, because of bad association made by the viewer). Flower and Doll talked about it all—they had learned a lot from the studios—and they talked about Elwes last great performance according to them. He was in a movie called “Saw” and was strapped to a iron pipe for a couple of hours. It cracked them up when (*at the end*) he said he was going to “bring someone back.” His rear was to the camera, and Doll yelled, “*You’re only goin’ to bring a DOOKIE... from the other room, you idiot!*” They thought it was great. In “Pretty In Pink,” Molly Ringwald’s character argued with “Ducky” about modern life. They were in a record store and there was a *Maxell* poster behind them. It was known that if a person sold short as an artist, she or he would *limit* options available in real life. If it went too far, no one would take the person seriously. Flower and Doll contemplated it when they watched that scene. In actuality, all the innuendos were about *Maxell*, and the symbolism was *corporate America*. It didn’t happen all the time, but it *happened*.

Cheese would do standup comedy, and Doll and Flower would place “Dead Heads” in the front of the venues—that would be to throw everyone off... and when an “opening” was available someone would yell, “*I need a PEPSI!!*” It would make Cheese look like he was supporting Pepsi Cola and everything they were associated with. Pepsi *paid* people for “cool” and the people whom were paid by and large were associates of *Spectacular Youth*. In turn, these people would pay Doll and Flower—they didn’t need the *money* but they did it out of principal—and they would make fun of Cheese behind his back (they didn’t know how he was taking the whole thing). Flower and Doll said to the people at *Spectacular Youth* that Cheese was *defecting* and they had to keep him in the country in order to maintain America’s top icons. The authentic reason why Cheese “played along”—he *knew* people were out there but didn’t care—was because it had gotten too far about the sexual come-ons from men... or from ladies whom he believed to be working for the CIA. He was retarded, in a lot of ways. Cheese knew that “stupid” and “retarded” didn’t mean the same thing. For that matter, “*ignorant*” didn’t mean the same thing as “stupid,” but people pretended that they did. “Ignorant” people *ignored* things or other people they shouldn’t have ignored. “*Stupid*” people didn’t have the capacity to ignore them to begin with. “*Tardy*” people were always late for something, and “*re-tarded*” people had a habit of being late all the *time!!*

Cheese was retarded, and he knew it was happening as he observed the process around him—

that's why he was so *funny* because he was reading the crowd, and telling them what they wanted to hear. "So my *girlfriend* tells me that she shoved bananas in my asshole because she thought I'd *like it!!!*" (Laughter *always* on that one!/) "And I come to *find...*" Cheese would feel them out. He'd tell a different crowd a different thing to figure out why he felt so *messed up*. A handful of people in the audiences genuinely knew that he had bananas shoved into his asshole by Doll, a former lover whom hailed from Las Vegas. Others would laugh because other people were *laughing*. Others would laugh because it was *safe* for them to laugh—they had bananas or other things shoved into their *assholes*, and they thought it was funny—and they were grateful they had an outlet. Still, others were oblivious to everything going on and they couldn't fathom a grown woman shoving bananas into a grown man's *asshole...* and they laughed because it was like a *cartoon* to them!!

Cheese loved it, and the corporate symbols around him he didn't mind. He took it with the territory, and didn't know that Flower and Doll were trying to sell him out. They had a good time, all for different reasons, and when Cheese was done touring small California clubs, he met up with Jet in Portland and thanked her for a good job running her company. She pulled out a Pepsi in front of him at the bed and breakfast where they usually ate at... and Cheese didn't think to wonder why.

\* \* \*

Cheese was thinking about his life—he was thinking about his childhood, in *particular*—and he was wondering how he turned out the way he did. "Truth be known," he would tell people, "I don't know who the fuck I *am!*!" He went to Manhattan, quite often, but didn't rent apartment flats. He stayed at hotels, and he went to talk to the locals at Central Park. He didn't care if they knew who he was, and he didn't care who *they* were. As a matter of fact, that was part of the problem... *that he didn't know who he was*. He was a *video* game designer—that's what he would have said with confidence a year earlier. Flower and Doll seemed to turn on him, he got out all his aggressions in the form of comedy, but he found that whenever Jet would talk to him... she would ask about "the two ladies." When Dolores would talk to him through email... she would ask, "*What happened regarding Gage...?*" Whenever he would visit his hometown in a small, New England suburb (or was he from *Indiana* because he spent part of his youth there as well?) people would ask about the company they heard that he formed... with *Gage*. They would ask a lot of stuff and when he would tell them he wanted to start a softball team or a *bowling* team, they would laugh... and say that they *HEARD* he started doing comedy as *well!!!*

No one took him seriously and that was okay. He was sorting through things and he came to find that there was a *benefit* in losing two of the more beautiful women he had ever know—three if you counted *Jet*. The *benefit* was that he got to shed their *demons*, as well. Doll ran from thugs in Las Vegas... even though there were good people she had contact with... and their *memories* through her were lost. Flower ran from desolation—the *opposite* trait of what Doll was going through—and Cheese didn't have to hear

about her forlorn *stories* any more.

Cheese threw croutons at birds and he threw part of his hotdog bun (it was *turkey* hotdog but he no longer asked what kind of meat was inside). He looked at the remote old-timers and he remembered swearing that he would never be like one of them. He looked at his future in a lot of ways, and he *knew* it. It was the fights... and it was the chicken and the egg, *as well*. Was he to blame for going with Doll by asking for sexual relations from her? Was Doll wrong for shoving banana chunks up into his ass? Was the *society* to blame that didn't give them a proper living environment? Was it Flower's jealousy when she woke which prompted Doll to feel guilty for their sexual exploration? Could the Las Vegas night club where they married be blamed for instilling *guilt* onto them to be devoted to one another in fidelity? Might it be that there was no problem at all out of the *norm*... and calling them up might arouse a *ménage à trois*? Could it be possible that they were just getting older and physiology wound down after a while? Cheese didn't *know*. He didn't *care*. He contemplated, but he didn't try to find any answers.

He gave birds their bread, and he felt better. It was strange, but he felt better.

He headed to his hotel and stopped at a small video rental place. He wore dark glasses, and he wore a heavier coat than the weather dictated he ought to wear. He rented "The Rocky Gang" and he had a great laugh. There, he drank from a six pack of beer... and had fun like he was seventeen.

\* \* \*

Eventually, Cheese got nerve enough to talk to the old-timers at Central Park. He tossed the bread crumbs onto the floor and he listened to one of them, "So that *building* over there, *you see*?? It has the real *Superman*... and he goes by 'Clark Kent' when he comes out here, and he's on the *ground*... but from up there... he gives 'em *hell!!!* And it's what you *young* people call an *allegory*, because he doesn't *fly* in the typical *sense*, and..."

Cheese interrupted because a thought surfaced in his mind. DC Comics were responsible for *Superman* and it originated in the time of World War II... and it featured heroes and villains which were black and white—*distinguished* from one another *significantly*. Marvel Comics on the other hand originated from the time of Vietnam and *their* characters and villains were a little more *blurred*. Batman had his weaknesses with women and he could be *shot*. The thugs on the other hand, had a *semblance* of explanation as to why they were doing what they were doing—it was almost *justified*. Cheese brought up the idea to the old-timer, "So I have this idea for a *game*—a *board* game, if you will—that Batman is receiving a call from four to six sources continually on a regular basis because *Gotham* is running rampant with crime, and he can't *take* them all!!! He sits home, and he thinks he's better off for it because he's avoiding all the guilt of the few places that he wouldn't arrive to!! Further, he's thinking of *Cat Woman*, and he thinks that maybe he ought to date her *more*—he maybe he should go to Cat Woman's and relieve a lot of *stress*!!" ‘

“You sound *stupid*, boy,” the old-timer said. He popped some cheese corn into his mouth. “But you’re not far off from the *truth*!! I’ve seen it happen three or four *times* in my life that a cop sit by and do *nothin*’ when I can hear the screams of a lady bein’ *raped* in this park... or at least the *appearance* of it... ‘cause a thug from the bushes start to mug another man *at the same time*!!! And I think to myself that it’s a *setup*—a conspiracy—because the man in the far off distance with the lady is just tryin’ to have *sex* and can’t have it at home... while his buddies are in the bushes with a diversion... because next week it’s *their* turn to flirt with the Puerto Rican hookers *around* here!!”

“You’re *stupid*, old man!!” Cheese bit into his hotdog. “That’s not the way it *works*!!”

The old-timer raised his eye brows. “Oh, *is* it??” He started to pant and faked like he was having a heart attack. He did it long enough to encapsulate Cheese’s attention and in the distance... a man started to *run* with a lady’s purse. A cop whom had thought the old-timer was having a heart attack—*Flippo* is what Cheese came to know him as from that day—was diverted from his regular rounds while walking by, and didn’t see the distant “robbery.” Flippo said, “*False alarm*” as he wheezed and panted back into a normal breath. The cop wished him the best health and then started to walk the beat, again. “*Got ham* in that hotdog, son? Or is that one of the new *TURKEY DOGS*??” He smiled when the patroller was far enough away. “That was a close *call*, huh??” He pretended as if nothing happened.

“*What just happened*??” Cheese demanded. He admired the *smile* of the old-timer because it was wrought with empty spaces in front add up top. It took *confidence* to smile that way when having set of nice “*pearly whites*” was not in the cards.

“That was a *financial* transaction in the business sense!! Once in a while it gets too far, and then you hear about it in the *papers*!! But that lady... with the *purse*... don’t like her *husband* too much, *you see*?? And she was willin’ to give that boy all that she *had*, and when I started to pant she gave him a nod and wink, he took the purse and *ran* for it!!!”

“I *get* it!!” Cheese said. He rubbed his temples. “I feel *faint*,” he said. He really felt *faint*.

“*Flippo* is my name, and you’ll see me around here, on occasion. I make my way to the other side, every couple of weeks, and I do it this way as much as I *can*!!”

*I hate this fuckin’ world!!!* Cheese thought. He tossed the rest of his turkey dog onto the floor, and watched pigeons eat up the bread. He hoped *squirrels* would come by and eat the rest of his meat.

\* \* \*

Zelda didn’t have to talk to Flower and Doll about kidnapping Cheese. She set up Henrietta Joan Lott and she had her go to prepare a remaining Rocky Gang’s hideaway in Canada. Flower and Doll got word considering that Cheese was at a hotel in New York City. They sent a radio station van—it rated at a million dollars to get it done—and they said that Cheese was a big winner. Cheese didn’t hear the radio station promotion but the people in the area, when they heard about that, did *nothing* because they believed

he had won an enormous sweepstakes. All it took was one of their DJs to entice Cheese to come into his van—it had a large radio station decal on the side of it—for him to get going to Canada... *for the promise of a Led Zeppelin box set*, and he was sent on his way to up *north*.

When the radio station van crossed the border, he was handed over to Doll and Flower. They airlifted him to the spot in *Gas City* and even though Cheese didn't trust them anymore, he didn't see a viable way out of it. He knew that if he resisted and called Canadian law enforcement, it would be an international incident, and he didn't want that. Further, even if he *could* escape them and go back to the United States, they would be tracking him with their internet dogs and their ways of screwing up his life in public.

The cabin where they had stayed had new posters on the wall. They were massive, and they depicted Cheese spewing out his routine in various night clubs. More often than not, there was somebody with a corporation T-shirt in the front couple of rows and it would blatantly be juxtaposed to Cheese in the background. Doll said to Flower, "He's a *sellout*, you see?!"

Cheese yelled, "*Get it over with!! Whatever you're going to DO to me!!*"

Zelda didn't have to tell Flower and Doll about a woman's contempt. They felt it naturally, and though they had felt tinges of it in the past before meeting Cheese, it was in full rage when they saw him again. "Put him in the *bath tub!!*" Doll yelled to Flower.

Flower rushed to a bucket of nine volt batteries and carried them with her into the restroom. There hadn't *been* a bath the first time they stayed there, yet Henrietta Joan Lott made sure that "amenities" were *updated* a bit (they *had* used to sponge bath themselves from a bucket in that room from boiled snow water, or from water at the well which wasn't far off).

"I want you to *feel* something," Doll said to Cheese. Near the bucket where Flower had went was what appeared to be a photo album and a large picture book. "*These* are the things you *pained* us with!!" She reached for a tape recorder which may have been designed as far back as the seventies and grabbed it as well. On the way to the restroom, she plopped in a cassette which had been in her pocket.

Cheese headed to where Flower was at, and gently laid himself into the tub. Flower poured three large buckets of water into it then and Cheese started to see what she intended to do. He didn't get scared but he looked at Flower with trepidation.

Doll followed Cheese, and chained his wrists to the neighboring post. She looked down at the water... and plopped a couple of nine volt batteries into it.

*Cheese didn't feel very much but he became timid... bordering on prettification, as Doll reached for more batteries!*

Doll started to open the photo album, and she said, "These are the people you were with... and *these* are the people that started to *FUCK* with us after your *shows!!*" The album showed a perfect lineage. The people in the front rows wore their corporation T-shirts to the clubs... then they changed into "backstreet clothes" as Doll and Flower would say, then they would talk to people in gloomy alleys,

subsequently *those* people would be photographed around Doll's and Flower's homes.

Doll dropped another nine volt battery into the water.

"*These* are the guys whom wanted to rape us, *Cheese*, and they said they *would...* if they ever caught *us...*" Flower started to cry. She felt like she was in *A Clockwork Orange* as much as anybody else in the room. She feared that Henrietta Joan Lott would come into the restroom and see her cry.

Doll said, "These *picture* books are when you '*made it*'!!! You made it into the limelight and I *don't* know if you're aware of it!!!" She cried. "You made fun of us, and you made *money* making fun of us!!!"

Cheese yelled, "I didn't *need* to make money!! It was a *byproduct*!!!"

Doll dropped five more nine volt batteries into the water. Cheese started to feel the shock.

Flower said, "I *think* he's right about the money... *but...*?" She stopped crying but every now and then, and uncontrollable *sniffle* would come out of her nose.

Cheese said, "I *don't* want to fuck you *over*!!!"

"I *killed* Gage!!!" Flower finally blurted.

Doll reached for a cattle prod from behind her toilet (it had no plumbing, but made for a good *ornament* most the time as they were there the first time, being that they liked to crap at the woods most the time, to avoid house *smell*).

Cheese looked into Flower's eyes with disapproval and mild confusion. He said, "You were in *L.A.*!!!" He looked further and knew it was the truth. Doll plopped nine more nine volt batteries into the water. They shocked Cheese, "You fucked yourself *over* when YOU *DID THAT*!!!" Cheese yelled. "Don't you know that the *competition* has killed you *for the part* of him that *remains*!?"

Doll watched Cheese shake his head at them in disbelief and she was tempted to jolt him with the prod behind her.

Flower flipped through the photo album Doll had been holding. "You fucked me over right *here*!!!" She pointed to a photograph which showed Cheese drinking from the Pepsi cup of one of his fans. "You said you would never *SELLOUT*, Cheese!!!"

Doll electrocuted Cheese with the cattle prod and he stiffened in the water while he fought off pain. He thought he was going to have an orgasm if they kept it up.

"That was not my *cup*!!!" Cheese blurted, "And and I said I *hoped* I never would sellout because it happens to the *best* of them!!! And to tell you the truth, I don't know if I *did* because I was confused during that whole *tour* of comedy!!!"

"We need to *do it*!!!" Flower said to Doll as she winked.

"Have to do *what*??!" Cheese required. He felt the nuisance of reoccurring mild shocks, and said, "Get it *over...* *WITH*!!!"

They shocked Cheese three more times with the cattle prods (Flower produced hers from underneath their *rug*). "Say you're fuckin' sorry and *mean* it!!!" Flower demanded.



Cheese yelled that he was sorry. He *meant* it.

They had sex together in the hour that they started. It was good for them and Henrietta Joan Lott didn't have to show up with a shotgun... *an hour later*. She was directed to look at her watch, check if an hour passed in which she heard no word, and she was to shoot Cheese in the head. Privately, she planned to shoot Flower as well; and keep Doll as a erotic captor, but she got a *page* on a traditional beeper of the older kind and she flew out without a single word to them. She was proud of the imagery she left behind.

\* \* \*

Flower, Cheese, and Doll sat out on their log cabin's *roof* on the night that Cheese got electroshocked into oblivion. They were watching a meteor shower and Cheese was rubbing at his asshole (Doll put some stuff in there before uncuffing him from the bathroom post—they were *strawberries* and whipped cream). Cheese looked into the sky and said, "I don't think *Amnesty International* is going to like what you *did* in there, *Doll!!*"

"Are you going to leave me *out!??*" Flower asked. "It's free *publicity* if you make it into their *newsletter!!*"

"That's not *all!!*" Doll said. "It's practically paradoxical *hypocrisy* to get reported concerning *them!!!!* Because they start torturing you with their *guilt* tactics!!!! And they know *guilt* better than anyone besides the Catholic church a lot of people *say!!*"

Cheese shook his head, and looked into the sky. "*Michael Stipe* is from that group, and so is..."

"*Sting*, and a lot of other *people!!* What's the big *deal!??* Are you a canary in a *coal mine!?* Didn't you like the *sex* when we were through *shocking* you?!?"

Cheese rubbed at his ass, and he saw a *large* tail of a falling star. He said, "I just didn't like the *strawberries!!!* That's all!!! Because it's more *mental* than anything *else!!!* I can't drink a banana *drink* anymore!!!—I tried in *Miami!!*—and *now* I don't know that I can eat *strawberries!!*"

"Fuck you," Doll said.

"*Look!!* There's a *meteor!!*" Flower said. She wished they would stop fighting, and for three seconds, her wish came true.

Cheese broke the silence. "Did you know that Jesus Christ was born in *four*, Before Christ?!"

"You're *stupid!!*" Doll said, "And you shouldn't be talking about things you don't *know!!*"

Cheese added, "Well the Gregorian Calendar, by which most of us use, was created in *fifteen hundred* or so, *Anno Domini!!* It was created because they were off in years, and they couldn't predict *crops*, correctly!! It's because the *leap* year, they came to find out!!! And they started *over...* and before that, they had went by the *Julian Roman* Calendar which centered it's beginning around the birth of *Europe* and the *Pirate Twins* or something along those lines!!! And it had something to do with the Tigris River and stuff I really can't *remember!!* But they *said* to themselves that since they were starting over that they

might as well start at the birth of *Christ!!!* And so they estimated with all their records that Christ was born *fifteen* hundred years *prior* on a precise incremental *scale!!!!*”

“You said that he was born *four* B.C., *right?!?*”

“So they *later* found out that Haley’s Comet comes every seventy-six years and they *think* that the *Star of David* was really *Haley’s Comet* close up!?”

“You don’t *buy* that shit, *do you?!?*” Flower asked Cheese.

“They can predict solar eclipses well into the *future*—centuries, even—so I don’t *doubt* it... but if you did the math on *Haley’s Comet*, you would find that it came toward Jerusalem around *four* B.C.!!! So the massacre of the infant *young*...”

“You think that ancient soothsayers and Isaiah were really ancient *astronomers*... and Isaiah was predicting that the *next* time that Haley’s comet came around... that ‘*one would be chosen*,’ et cetera!?”

“Well, you’re *close* because it took a few *revolutions* of the thing... but it *worked!!!* And if you know that the *Millennium Baby*—the tike made the cover of *Newsweek* magazine, recently—is a *well-grown* now and is living a different existence from anyone else on the *planet!!!!*”

“Because he was born at *twelve-oh-one* on *New Year’s* this past millennium, *huh?!?* Right at the strike of...”

“I’m starting to *buy* it,” Flower said, “but why would they have had to *crucify* Jesus for being born at the time of the *comet?!?*”

“Jealousy,” Cheese said. “Caiphas was covetous and there was nothing he could do about it!?”

“So his daughter asked for the head of Jesus’ *cousin* and was still jealous that she wasn’t the center of *attention*, huh?!?” Flower urged.

“I think I’m going to have to give you more *electroshock!!!!*” Doll joked. They laughed together—not *heartily*—and they headed into their cabin after watching a few more comets. Doll liked it; Flower and Cheese slept together, that night, but it wasn’t sexual.

\* \* \*

It was bright the next day, and Cheese started to talk about his youth. He said, “I don’t really like you guys, and I think you *know* that!?”

Doll looked surprised, and almost dropped her breakfast plate. She ate eggs with a cranberry side.

“I don’t like you and these things *happened* to me since I was *young!!!!*” Cheese looked down at his eggs, but didn’t eat yet.

“My uncle had a son from another marriage—I *called* him my cousin but he really wasn’t—and the guy as a few years *older* than me!?”

“You were *picked* on,” Flower inserted.

Cheese continued without much acknowledgement, “So the guy used to come over for the winters

—he liked our cabins in the Northeast—and he used to spend the *vacations* with us!! It’s funny because I was born in Idaho as a *Mormon*, but I don’t remember that land at *all!!* My cousin used to come from over there, and every meal up to the *Christmas* meal he used to pick at my *food!!!* Right in front of my *uncle* and right in front of my *dad!!* He used to say, *I have to check this for poison!!!!* like I was the *KING*, or something... and then he’d put mayo on my *chicken*, and I didn’t *like* mayo!!! And then my dad would expect me to *eat* everything and it was *torment!!!*”

“You really miss *Gage!!* I can *tell*,” Doll said almost sarcastically.

“But I *swore* that I would never see him again and when he came over for the next few winters, I used to beg to *swap* me with *his* family for the holidays... but they never *did!!!* And he would do the same fuckin’ thing *every* Christmas... and then I thought of *Gage*, yeah, because he told me it was a ‘pick your poison *world*’ and I thought about my cousin, and I thought of people like *you!!!*”

Flower and Doll stayed quiet. They even began to eat their breakfasts.

“So I swore to never *see* ‘im again, and when I got old enough, I pushed people like that *out!!!*” Cheese finished off the eggs in front of him, then laid his fork down. He put his knife sideways next to it then laid a cloth napkin on them.

“So you’re sayin’ that *we’re* like the cousin, and we’re testin’ your food for *poison!!!*” Flower asked.

“*No!!* You guys *are* the poison!!” Cheese said. “Like *Gage* said!!”

“That was *Zelda* he was talkin’ about!!” Doll said. She finished her eggs as well then laid her napkin the same way that Cheese did. He thought she was a copycat.

“But you guys are to *me* what *Zelda* was to *Gage!!* And you’ll never understand it because I have a ‘*one and done*’ *mentality* and I always *have* since I was right out of high school and I joined that juggling click around the EASTERN *SEABOARD!!!*”

Flower looked shocked, and then jabbed Gage, “I don’t see how you could reject us—this *pair* of beautiful *WOMEN!!!*” She cried.

“It’s about continual *appeal*, I hate to say,” Cheese said. “I was trapped in a situation I didn’t want to *be* in... like so many youths *are*... and desperation held us together—me and my cousin—but I didn’t want to be around ‘*im* any more than he wanted to be around *me!!!*”

“So you looked for people that could *juggle*... and administrate tricks on the *boardwalk*... and that glued you *together*—the sense of *inclusion* that everyone wants!!!” Flower asked. She started to think of her youth, and she knew what Cheese was talking about.

“*Yeah!!* Because they say that nothing unites people more than a common enemy, but I found that to be problematic over time because... *What happens when you defeat your enemy?!!* You’re left alone and you look for new *people!!* But if you have an ability for something in demand like the *Rolling Stones* you can last a long *time!!!* And it doesn’t matter if you *like* the person next to you because I found that when I’m on the boardwalk, I’m in love with the *audience!!!*”

“I have a gift for *bartending*,” Flower shrewdly said.

“I have a gift for *prostitution*, bitch!!” Doll said. “What happens when my clit is too used to be any *good* any more!!?” Doll requested.

Flower looked at her in shock. Coldly, nearly sarcastically she said, “*You’re going to have to find another talent... if you’re going to be around Cheese, he’s trying to say!!*”

“You can’t teach an old dog new *tricks!!*” Doll yelled.

Cheese shook his head in disagreement. For the rest of the night, Flower talked to her about all the bartending tricks she knew. It wasn’t only about what to mix, and what liquor belonged where. You had to know who was a threat on the roads, and you had to know how to *curtail* rapid drinking when you knew somebody was “off the edge” as Flower put it. Doll listened, and by the end of the night, they agreed to open a bar together near where Doll’s ranch was outside of Las Vegas—it’d probably be *Henderson*—and Cheese thought to himself that he never wanted to see his cousin even still, and he wondered about the couple of girls in front of him. They fucking tortured him just to *look* at them. He wondered their motives. “I’m going to fuck you guys *over* if you ever put bananas or *strawberry* cream into my asshole again!!” He hoped for laughter and got some... but he still didn’t want to see them *any more*.

\* \* \*

Doll, Flower, and Cheese traveled on a charter bus from Toronto to New York City. They had decided that the “bartending idea” was a bad one. They couldn’t get along, and Cheese explained himself the best he could. “Simple dilution. That’s the best way I can explain it!!”

“You’re going to have to say *more*,” Doll said. She sat next to Cheese from a window seat half the way back in the bus, and Flower sat at the end of a seat *across* from Cheese in the same isle.

“I had a teacher, when I was younger, that gave us lollipops every day of class for the first ten days. He used to brag that it was from ‘his own pocket,’ and I must have been twelve years old. I got along with him, then, and so did everyone else... and then we were running *sprints* by mid-year, and I always expected that one day, ‘out of his own pocket,’ I was going to get lollipops to get my mind off the *P.E.!!!* I went by, and by the end of the year none *came*. With each passing day, though, it was dilution. It’s like adding water to a good *drink*. Drip by drip, the original doesn’t *taste* as well, in most cases!!”

“We *treated* you well!!” Doll said. “That was at the *beginning!!* That’s what I’m hearing and you think we’re not good enough to be *around* any more!!! We’re *diluted!!*”

“I think you guys are working for the CIA!! I think *Zelda* is behind the *scenes*, somehow!! And I think you are being rewarded in the *future* to just *humor* me!!” Cheese said. He felt a tinge of grief when there was no denial.

Cheese tried to change the subject. “Did you ever notice that our country only sends mercenaries or *missionaries* over seas in large *groups*!?? I thought it was funny because both utterances *sound* the

same!!!"

Flower didn't laugh. She looked out of the bus windows on the opposite side from where Cheese was sitting.

Cheese became semi-serious again and said, "You guys keep giving me *flat tires*!!"

"No we *don't*, Cheese!!" Doll said. She clutched at a bag of salted nuts on her lap.

"I don't mean it *literally*!! There was a *Nature's Way* cartoon, or something along those lines, in which *Lewis and Clark* are traveling across the country, and Lewis continually perturbs Clark by stepping on the back of his shoes—they call it a "flat tire" still, I *think*—and Clark writes about it in his journal that he doesn't *believe* it's a coincidence any more... that he's *fucked* with so much by the other guy!!!"

Flower cried.

"So when we get back to New York City, I expect to get another hotel for a long extended period of time, I expect to hit the club circuit again for a while, and I expect *you guys* to continually keep tabs on who I've seen, what I've *done*, and what I plan to do!! I expect that if they're good ideas, you're going to *fuck* with me!!! But I'll be *damned* if I'm going to sit home and be *paranoid* about it!!!"

Flower said, "You *got* your freedom, *okay*???" Inside, there was a lot of truth that Flower didn't like Cheese for whom he was and whom he wanted to be. She didn't care about his emotional well-being or at the very least, she was disconnected with all of his emotions to the point in which she only caused him sorrow. "I'm going to drown my *longings* in *L.A.*," Flower said. She didn't expect much of a response.

Doll was baffled and *befaffled*. She put her head on Cheese's shoulder and wanted to cry. She said, "I want your inheritance—that's the *truth*—but it's not the most important thing in the *world*, to me!!!"

Cheese thought for a few seconds, then said, "At least you're *honest*!!!"

Cheese decided to work at a soup kitchen for the first few weeks that he was back in New York City. It didn't feel as good when he was near Longview... but it *worked*. He purged his emotions, and he was near a state of satisfactory leisure.

\* \* \*

Cheese was near bliss, and he knew somehow that *ignorance* was associated with bliss... some way in a former life. He grew his hair; smoked a lot of pot; and put *album art* all over his apartment flat (even though he swore he would never rent for long periods, again, he found himself tossing away enough money for a full year at the place where he had lived *originally* in New York City). Sib stared at him from a *Boston* poster as he plunged himself into the music of the past and heard the phone ring. He walked past a semi-dried ejaculation stain on the carpet and then jogged to the phone. As he answered he looked into the mirror across from him and turned down his *Chicago* CD via remote. When he heard Doll's voice on the other line, "Are you watching *TV*???" she wanted to know. "Jet is on her way over and I'm here in southern California with Doll!!!"

“What is it?? A *Moon* landing!??” Cheese grabbed at some buttered pop corn in a bowl and he let half of the handful slip out of his grippers.

“No! Cheese!!! The Moon is going to be blown *up!*!” She wanted to hear laughter but heard none of it.

“You’re jokin’, *right??*” Cheese was somber and his heart picked up the pace a half step.

“No!! The Russians got a hold of your *plans...* with *Gage...* and they decided to *nuke* the Moon because they said that in one their isolated *instances* there was no use of *living!!*”

“It must have been one of the former Soviet Republics!!! Because when we researched the game... the *Russian Federation* had their shit *together* with protocols... and the like!! Is it DEFCOM *FOUR*, yet!?!?”

“Yeah!! The man says if you have any fallout shelters in the Midwest, go to them *now!*!” Doll diverted to yell at Flower to shut up and turn up the TV. “He says in New York City—in *metropolitan* cities—you need to stay put, tape your windows, and *then...*”

*Kaboom!!!*

Cheese heard an explosion from on the phone. He had planned to go to *Rent To Own* to watch a major tennis match the following week. He didn’t have a *TV* but he could *hear* from Doll’s line that things were going *on!*

*Kaboom!!*

Cheese looked out at the sky. He could see what looked like fireworks... from the *Moon!* “*If you get caught between the Moon and New York Ciiiiity...*” he sang. “I’m goin’ to jack *off*, Doll!! Tell Flower I said ‘*HI*,’ and tell Jet I thought she was a good *lay!*!!!”

Cheese got off the phone and started to *masturbate* to the fireworks in the sky!

The destruction of the United States and the rest of the planet Earth began within twenty-four hours.