



When Groinkians Attack!

By Arthur Kilcup

October 12th, 2005 - From an anonymous Internet newsgroup posting:

A small, black, two-foot long pig, of the Asian Potbellied variety, escaped its back yard confinement by poking on the gate's latch with its snout. Later, eleven big and burly, male cops had surrounded the pig, circle-like, but the little porker outfoxed them.

Using moves that only an O.J. Simpson-type can execute, the pigskin zigged left, faked a right, then zigged back left, slipping between an officer's legs and making his touchdown . . . uh . . . getaway. Final score: Cops 0, Pigskin 1.

This elusive pig, nicknamed The Bacon Bandito by the media, has been on the loose for two weeks now. "We'd better catch him soon!" said Officer Morton Moldon. "He seems to be losing weight!" The pig's owner, Mr. Zeke Footache, nodded agreement.

When questioned by the media as to how he had come to own the pig, Mr. Footache said, quote:

"Funny 'bout that, you betcha. Dumb porker just appeared a couple weeks ago. Sorta out of the blue, you might say. I got up to go and find my TV remote . . . always losing the damn thing, dontcha know . . . and when I went to sit back down, there he was, big as life, sitting in my chair!

"Sorta strange, dontcha think? Well, it being late and all, I didn't know what else to do with him 'cept put him out in the sty with my other porkers. Well, I went to check on him right after the eleven o'clock news and there he was, a-poking' and a-pryin' at the gate's latch!

"By the time I got over to where he was a-pokin' and a-pryin', he had popped the latch, and man, he was gone! Lickety-split gone, you betcha! It took all I could do, I'll tell ya, to keep the other hogs from following right after him, you betcha!"

If only it had ended here, as nothing more than a general interest item on the web.

But it didn't . . .

COINCIDENTALLY--or is it?--A second pig, owned by one Amos Blossomfarten, farmer, had also escaped into this peaceful town, much to the consternation and deep chagrin of the local police force. Their problems, one might say, were now doubled.

Now big city folk might regard this little event as beyond insignificant, but to anyone familiar with small town living, this was very serious business.

Decent folk can't have pigs rooting around their garbage cans, scaring their kids silly, peeing and crapping on their porches and, in general, making a damned nuisance of themselves. And dear reader, if you've ever hit a two hundred pound porker with your car you'd know why these folks, especially the ones in blue uniforms and badges, call out the marines. Help! Help! S.O.S.! Mayday! Mayday! You betcha!

Unhappy Troopers, one and all.

MEANWHILE, at Police One Headquarters, the new one over on One Police Lane, not the old one across from *Ray & Roy's Sporting Goods and Delicatessen*, nor the other one they now refer to as the Police Annex, you know, the one over on River Place, across from *Sadie's Sewing Sircle*, Police Chief Buzz 'Badges' Melrose was prepared to address the eleven failed pig catchers. The Chief was not in a good mood--the media saw to that.

Chief Melrose, at fifty-three, looked more like a mid-manager in a steel mill than he did a cop. He was a portly, balding man with a grandfatherly face and a huge shock of white-gray hair.

The Chief always wore three-piece suits with the vest usually bunched up between the buttons that gave ill fitting a new meaning. None of his officers ever commented on this to his face, for they knew the grandfather image was nothing more than that--an image. He was as fierce as they come.

Chief Melrose now eyed the men as they filed into the room. Sorry friggin' lot, he thought, and I'm stuck with 'em. He glanced to his right, looked out the window and saw the sign. The sign! As he looked at it now, he thought: What an embarrassment that was . . . and is. He could see they still hadn't repaired the damn thing. What a surprise.

The sign, which stood in front of Police One Headquarters, its legs buried in grass, was right alongside the highway. It was a large sign, as most signs go. It measured a whopping five-feet wide by four-feet high. Made from glass, plastic, and steel, it had a whopping price tag, too.

The sign had four flashing colored lights across the top, similar to what you would find atop a police cruiser. Today, only one light, the second from the left, was still capable of blinking. That this was the work of vandals, there was no doubt. Real great, thought the Chief, for a sign less than a month old.

The sign had been one of the Chief's pet projects and he took the damage to it personally, as if the culprit had also punched the Chief's lights out. He now looked at the lettering and felt his Irish come up. The lettering had also suffered from the vandalism.

The original lettering had been in crisp white type on a deep blue field. On both sides it read: **HEADQUARTERS** on the top line, with **POLICE ONE** directly underneath, both lines flushed with the side that faced the building. Beneath were the words, **IN HERE**, also flushed with the first two lines.

Each **IN HERE** had an arrow that pointed to the building. The arrow was either before or after the words dependant on the direction drivers would view it, from the West or the East. In the Chief's sentimental heart, it was to be a beacon, if you will, to all those who drove by.

Got trouble and need the police? Here we are! Right here. Line forms on the left--no waiting! And see? We ain't hiding *our* light under any old bushel, you betcha. The sign was big and it was baaad, too. Until . . .

Until, about three weeks ago, when the vandal (or vandals) had struck. Someone, they still hadn't a clue as to who (person or persons unknown), had taken Krylon Blue #4 spray paint (the color was a near-perfect match--could this be clue one? A demented Interior Designer who just up and went postal?) and monkeyed with the crisp, white lettering. On both sides.

He, or she--or they--had chosen the letters to blue-out, so to speak, carefully and most deliberately. Now anyone who drove by was treated to the strange surprise of a sign that read: **HEAD LICE IN HERE -->** from either direction, East or West.

The county board of directors had assured Chief Melrose that the sign would be repaired just as soon as there were extra funds in the budgetary coffers. The Chief, as experienced as he was, rough-estimated *that* to mean sometime just shy of thirty-seven years. Longer, if you took the time to count weekends.

Now that all eleven men were present and accounted for, the Chief made his opening remark. It made them all snap to attention. Even the two that slept woke up.

"You damn fools couldn't catch a cold if you stuck your head, soaking wet, into a freezer and left it in there 'til your damn ears froze up!" The Chief paused to let the vivid

image sink in. "And now we have two pork chops on the loose!" He paused again and scanned their faces to make sure they knew he was a mite pissed. He was satisfied, so he went on.

"Damn it all to High Holy Hell," he snarled. "If we don't catch these two ham hocks . . . and soon . . . we'll be the laughingstock of the whole town. Make no mistake 'bout that!" He scowled as he looked the group over, as if he dared any one of them to open his big yap about that little truism.

"Make that the nation, Chief!" said one Officer Casey, who now nervously handed a copy of *USA Today* to his superior.

"Damn it all!" was the only thing Chief Melrose said when he saw the screaming headline, in all capital letters, over an inch high, on the front page:

SMALL TOWN COPS FUMBLE PIGSKIN!

The Chief had only scan-read the first paragraph, but it told him all he needed, or cared to know. The writer of the nasty piece, using many football references, clichés, and metaphors, had made it quite clear to any reader, that when it came to catching pigs, the local cops of this small, middle-America town had neither great offense nor even adequate defense.

And the eleven cops involved had no idea even, of how to set up a useful scrimmage against a witless pork chop that-- the reporter gleefully reported--wasn't even wearing a helmet!

And right at the tail end of this first paragraph, for the entire world to read, and now read by the Chief, was a snide, tongue-in-cheek sentence mentioning the possible need for a new coach. The Chief thanked his stars for the absence of his picture.

The Chief's face was livid as he looked back up. "Well, gentlemen, we're *lucky!*" Then he added, in answer to the quizzical facial expressions before him, "They could have said 'Pigs can't catch one of their own!'" No one laughed. And the only sounds for a long pregnant minute were the whirr of an air conditioner and a faint rustle of papers being pushed around on a desk somewhere.

The Chief broke the silence and turned his attention to Officer Morton Moldon. When Moldon saw the Chief look directly at him, he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Moldon had a look on his face that said: "Oh, no lord, why me?"

Moldon, at forty-two, and the father of three, looked as if he belonged in an accounting firm. He attire was always immaculate. And his tall, slender figure didn't hurt the look, either. He had a boyish face that belied his age; with a head of brown hair that he kept in a Marine drill Sergeant's style.

He and his wife, Mandy, were married twelve years ago and the two of them fit together as well as Laurel and Hardy. And both liked to fun it up, if you get the drift, and anyone in their vicinity was fair game to their playful antics.

"Moldy," the Chief said. He had used the officer's unflattering nickname. "I'm putting you in charge of this pig shit! No pun intended!" He scanned the officer's face to see if he had his full attention. "And I will hold you personally responsible for any more failures! You understand me, Moldy? You gettin' my drift?"

The Chief's eyes fairly burned with anger. "Catch those pigs, Mold, before Leno and Letterman use our sorry asses for funny fodder!" Again no one laughed, you betcha.

Moldon reddened and looked visibly shaken by the chief's directness. "Yes, Sir! Consider it done, Sir!" As he stared at the Chief, he looked ill and in need of serious medical attention.

This was due, in part, by what Moldon now saw on the Chief's face. Fear! In letters an inch high, all caps, and right on his front page. He had never seen it before.

Not even during that little episode with the diarrhea, when the Chief had mistakenly eaten six Ex-Lax thinking they were Easter chocolates and--understandably, everyone agreed later--had had a major Number One accident during his mad--and very unsuccessful--dash to the John. From then on, he was lovingly referred to as Poopy Pants by the officers--but only behind his back, you betcha.

Now Fear, like diarrhea, has a smell that is truly unique and all its very own. And Moldon could now smell that fear smell. And he didn't like what he smelled! Nosirree Bob! Much the same way he didn't like the smell he had smelled on the day of the Ex-Lax smell. His nose now visibly wrinkled up at the thought.

Shitty stuff all 'round, thought Moldon, right shitty stuff. And he knew he now stood in it right up to his small- town cop's ears.

The Chief seemed to mellow a bit. "Good . . . Now, Sherlock, get a move on! Do the usual . . . APB's, house to house searches and two car roadblocks." He studied Moldon's face for a brief moment, then added:

"Also, check the airports, train stations, and don't forget the bus depots this time." His slate-blue eyes narrowed. "And Moldy? Rev up the canine squad, put SWAT on standby alert and issue an extra shot gun to every black and white." His eyes narrowed even more to almost a squint. "Also, Moldy, be sure to check down by Darby's farm. Old Sam Darby now keeps pigs again . . . and who knows? . . . Birds of a feather, eh?" He was back to a scowl as he watched the officer write.

Moldon felt the Chief's eyes on him as he wrote it down as fast as he could and tried his darndest not to forget anything. For the Chief would sooner kill a man than have to repeat himself. At least that was the general consensus.

As 'Moldy' scribbled away, the Chief turned to face the other officers, his face red and angry like.

"And men, be careful out there! Watch your step! You know what they say, a pig is much smarter than your average dog!" The Chief waved his hand in a gesture that signaled his dismissal of this forlorn crew. Moldon scribbled away.

As the officers proceeded to remove their respective asses from the seats of their respective metal folding chairs, the Chief heard mutterings, rumblings, and grumblings. They reminded him of a high school class that had just been told to read pages one through two hundred ten over the weekend. For a finals test on Monday.

There was no question and answer session for this group. Everyone knew what he or she had to do and it was simple: Not fail again. Catch these two pigs before the complaints started to pour in.

As they moved toward the door, none of them knew just how right the Chief had been in his meant-to-be-flippant remark concerning the porcine brain.

Two officers stopped just outside the door to look over the notes they had taken. The taller of the two said to the other, "You buying this shit, Harv?"

Harv looked up from his notes. "What shit? You mean the pig smarter than dog shit?"

"Yeah." He had said it almost as a question. Doubt was evident in the small response.

The shorter officer shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. There's strange shit in this world, dontcha know? Like last summer . . . remember the county fair when I played renta cop?" The other nodded. "Well, you remember the two-headed chicken . . . and the two-headed calf, dontcha?"

"I saw the chicken, but I didn't know there was a two-headed calf, too."

"Oh, yeah. Crazy stuff he was. I never saw anything like it!" He paused, then added, "Although, there was that time . . . I was just ten or so . . . when my folks took me on a vacation with 'em to Oklahoma. And, you know, we went into town one day and took in one of those penny arcade places. You know what I mean?" The other cop nodded. He knew.

"Well, they had this big old chicken who could play tunes on one of those zi . . . lo . . . phone things," he paused, "with its beak!" The other cop, with an amazed look, said, "No shit?"

"No shit. She played it pretty good, too. She'd just stand there a-pecking and a-pecking and the tune would pop out. Recognizable, too. Well, at least *Row, Row, Row Your Boat* was."

The other cop thought a bit. "Now you mention it, that reminds me of a pig I saw as a kid at the fair. He did songs, too. Grunted them out, he did. Did a great rendition of The Girl from Ipenema. It went sorta like . . . grunt grunt grunt. . . grunt grunt . . . grunt grunt . . . grunt grunt . . . " " "

Just then another cop walked by and remarked. "Aaaah! The language of love! You two should get a room somewhere!" He laughed and walked by. This chilled the chitchat some.

"Yeah, strange shit out there," the shorter officer said. "And just maybe, maybe mind you," he glanced around, "ol' Poopy Pants could be right!" They then went their separate ways with their 'see ya later's' thrown back at each other as they walked.

Thus ten officers, the town's finest, though not the town's fastest, nor, you betcha, even the town's brightest, and now under the command of the intrepid Officer 'Moldy,'

prepared for the harsh battle that lie ahead. Against two defenseless pigs, no less.

But it was a battle some would live to regret . . .

"Peek-a-boo, I see you!"

"SEX CRIMES DIVISION, Detective Clu Sniffer here. How may I help you?" he said into his desk phone. He had said it crisp and business-like, as if he had said it many times before.

As usual, Detective Sniffer had his trusty old, yellow pad, legal size for sure, and a yellow jacketed pencil--a number two, thank you--newly sharpened and at the ready. He licked the point of the pencil with the point of his tongue in preparation to take notes.

With over twenty years on the force, the last six worked in SexCee (or Sexy, as most officers called it) Detective Clu Sniffer had seen it all, heard it all, done it all, and considered himself the epitome of organization, logical thinking, and preparation. To put it another way, he tried to live up to his name: Clu Sniffer. Sherlock Holmes was one of his favorite fictional detectives. In a solid second place was Hercule Poirot.

A female voice responded. She sounded elderly to him as she said, "Could you hold on a second, Detective Sniffer, my neighbor's damn cat is peeing on my prize Azaleas again!" He could picture it. So he grinned.

He held on and gave the pencil tip a fresh lick. He heard her say from way off in the background: "Shoo! Shoo!" a few times. Then a more distinct: "Mangy beast, stay on your side of the fence!" He continued to hold and gave the pencil a few more absent-minded tongue licks--just in case. No caller was going to catch *this* detective off guard, you betcha.

His full first name, if one has to know, is Clubert. His parents named him after his grandfather, Clubert Farney Framingham Sniffer. Yes, the same Clubert F. F. Sniffer who once owned the now infamous *Cee Double Eff Ess* ranch. To most folks, he was known affectionately as Clubby.

The CFFS ranch raised live-stock, but its sideline business, it was rumored, was raising men's peckers by supplying them with, as was said by most folk at the time: "The purdiest fillies this side of Hell!" It was also rumored that Clubby himself, no less, did most of the first time filly interviews. Just to make sure, mind you, they lived up to the popular saying. Granny Sniffer, sweet naive thing that she was, never knew of her husband's interviewing prowess.

Old man Clubert closed up shop, at least the seamy side of the business, before any charges could be filed and he spent the rest of his days denying, and trying to live down, the rumors. This lingering stain on the family name was the main reason young Clubert chose law enforcement as a career.

Oh, a word to the wise: Call him Clubert, Club, or even Clubby, and you'd better have your hospitalization insurance paid fully up. Or a burial plot all picked out, ready and waiting.

When she came back on she sounded winded. "I'm back," she breathlessly cooed. "Thanks for waiting, Detective. I know your time is important." She took a quick breath. "But some beasts just show no respect for other people's property!"

He commiserated. "So true, Ma'am! It'd be nice now, wouldn't it, if cats only had a mind to know better?" He poised the pencil over the pad.

"I meant my neighbor!" she huffed. "He has less brains than his cat, he does!"

He felt chastised, so he changed the subject. "How can I be of service Ma'am?" He licked the pencil again. *Lick, lick!*

Having just passed his forty-fourth year on this planet, Detective Clu Sniffer had no illusions about life, but he did have a fear or two. His primo fear, numero uno, you betcha, was getting older. The thought of it preoccupied his every idle thought.

Somewhere, he knew, there was a recent photograph of his grandfather just doing its damndest to make him a twin. Which was ironic in a way, because Sniffer *did* resemble his Grandfather when the old man was young. He had cut a dashing figure. Tall, handsome, a rugged face, a smile fit for commercials, and a muscular Adonis-like body that young folk today would call hot. Detective Sniffer still had most of the above intact, but life was doing its best to change all that.

Sniffer knew he was already starting to show the creeping-up-on-you signs of aging. His once enviable crop of red hair was now pushed into a bad comb over, with not enough red hairs available for use, to keep the scalp from showing through--in far too many places.

The wrinkles on his face, especially those around and under his eyes, seemed to him to become more visible with each day that passed. Why, just last week he'd seen himself on the TV and there he was--as big as life! --On the six o'clock news, being interviewed by some dumb-ass reporter about the Bacon Bandito fiasco. He thought he was looking at old man Clubby himself. Got his attention, it did.

If someone asked him, right this minute, what had been said, he couldn't give them word one. All he now remembered about the entire affair was watching a balding, getting-older-than-shit Detective fidget fretfully and constantly adjust his older-than-shit tie.

It was as if he had viewed a stranger. A stranger who somehow, some way, and without his permission, had become the Detective, Clu Sniffer. A Clu Sniffer-type, old-as-shit stranger who was in a Hell-bent race to the grave! With its sick mind made up to take him along, just for the ride. It felt to Sniffer as if his older self was kidnapping him.

His second fear, that of failure, was a bit more palatable since he felt he had a bit of a handle on it and some control over the end result. He had never failed, so far anyway, in his career. He had solved every case assigned to him, due he believed, to his organizational skills and his ability to pay attention to even the smallest detail. Just like a Holmes. Maybe better.

Hell, he had made Detective in less than three years, dontcha know? The only officer in the history of Police One to have done it. The closest being three years and one month.

However, and there's always a however in life, he had lately started to worry that maybe, just maybe mind you, fear number one was beginning to intrude on fear number two and, hand in hand like ill-fated lovers, they would jump off a cliff and take him with them. He had had that dream more than once.

Old age, he knew, could easily lead to mistakes, and mistakes, he knew, could lead to people saying: "Poor old Detective Sniffer! The day he got older-than-shit, he started making one mistake after the other, you betcha, and next thing you know BLAM! He goes and swallows his nine-millimeter! Found him right there, we did, at his well-organized desk, face down on his trusty old yellow, legal-sized pad, right alongside his box of yellow-jacketed number two pencils--all newly sharpened, dontcha know?"

"Could you repeat that Ma'am?" He hadn't heard a word she'd said. Attention, so it's said, is one of the first things to go on the fast road to being older-than-shit.

"I said Detective, it's Ms. Henrietta Higgambotham-Smythington here." Her named rolled so easily and accurately off her tongue, Sniffer deduced she had practiced saying it for quite some time. Nothing gets by Clu Sniffer. He licked the pencil again. *Lick, lick!* Then he scribbled her name down. Or attempted to.

He scratched his head and looked down at his nearly indecipherable notes. "Well now," he said, perplexed. "Ms. Higgam . . . hoggem . . . uh . . . Ms. Sy . . . ming . . . ton, what seems to be the problem?" Memory, so it's said, ranks right up there alongside attention in the getting-older-than-shit brigade. *Lick, lick!*

"Smythington, Detective! Smy . . . thing . . . ton!" She sounded exasperated. Then, as if she now talked to a dim-witted moron, she repeated her entire name, spelled it out, letter by letter, slowly--oh, so slowly--and with more patience than most folks possess.

Sniffer licked the pencil again and wrote the corrections. Shit, he thought, what a name. Then he tapped into his vast organizational skills and wrote below the newly scrawled name: Ms. H -- S. As a backup, just in case, you betcha. *Lick, lick!*

He was now ready. "Got it Ms. Higga . . ." He looked farther down the pad. "Ms. aitch hyphen ess." He paused and expected an interruption. She offered none, so he went on. "Again, Ma'am, what seems to be the problem?"

Ms. Henrietta Higgambotham-Smythington heaved a long sigh. Sniffer read this as a sign that no more lessons would be forthcoming. For which Detective getting-older-than-shit was very grateful. *Lick, lick!*

She sighed again and said, "I just saw a dirty pig, Detective Sniffer," she sighed once more, "peeking in my bathroom window, with me just coming out of the shower and all." Then she sounded excited. "I nearly died of fright, I did!" He tried to picture the scenario as he wrote. *Lick, lick!*

Sniffer deduced the woman sounded frightened, annoyed, irked, and in general, highly excited and agitated. Perhaps with a soupcon of anxiousness thrown in for good measure. Such were this detective's infinite powers of deduction using just mere auditory input.

He knew if he could also see, feel, smell, and taste this woman, at this very moment, he would know more about her than she knew about herself. Of course, he reminded

himself, one had to be careful, too.

He well remembered the time he had been called on the carpet by Chief 'Poopy Pants' when the way he had handled a suspected murderess had pushed the *feel* and *taste* envelopes an inch too far. *Lick, lick!*

"Please try to be calm, Ms. Higgem . . . Huggim . . . Ms. aitch hyphen ess." He hoped she would continue to overlook the abbreviated familiarity he had applied to her name. "Our best officers are already working on it. In fact, Ma'am." He licked the pencil. "They have some pretty good leads that, even as we speak, they're following up." He paused to let his words sink in. He gave the pencil another good lick just in case it was now desperate. Then he went on:

"Now, Ma'am, can you describe this dirty old pig?" He again licked the point of the pencil with his tongue, his legal-sized yellow pad in place. Ever organized were his motto, his mantra, and his reason for living. For outliving dying. If lead poisoning didn't get him first that is.

"Well, where do I begin?" She paused. "Let me think." She paused again. "Oh, yes! I remember. He had red, beady little eyes that seemed to glow brightly as he ogled my poor old naked body up and down!" He heard her gasp. "I felt ashamed. So ashamed . . . what with me all wet and totally naked as the day I was born . . . and all glisteny like that." She took a deep breath then added:

"I couldn't cover myself up fast enough, I can tell you, but I had trouble finding my robe so I'm sure he got a real good look, he did." She paused once more and caught her breath again. "But to continue my description of this depraved and sorry soul, let me say that he was just over five feet tall. I know this because he stood a head higher than my prize-winning Rhododendron bushes, with a red tee shirt . . ." Sniffer jumped right in.

"Ma'am, excuse my interruption, but I'm a bit of an amateur gardener myself . . . love growing Mums . . . so tell me Ma'am, why do you put red tee shirts on your Rhododendron bushes?" He took a quick breath. "If it's to keep away the birds, try using aluminum pie tins. You know, the ones that come with those store-bought pies?" He paused to let her think about that. She was. "They really do the trick, they do! Oriental gardeners swear by 'em!" He was pleased at his attempt to lighten up the serious situation a bit.

"Detective!" she said in an exasperated tone even a deaf man could fathom. "I meant the man, not the bushes! My word!"

Before Sniffer could offer any form of an apology for his gaffe, she said, "I think the tee shirt, the red tee shirt *he wore*, Detective Sniffer, had 'Semper Fi' printed on it."

She spelled it out. He wrote it down. He wondered if the *eff* should be capitalized. She went on. "In white letters I think . . . I mean, I couldn't see very well as the room was somewhat steamy and my eyes aren't what they used to be . . . *if you know what I mean, Detective Sniffer!*" She had emphasized the last part rather huffily, that's for sure. He underlined *Semper fi* three times. *Lick, lick!*

He said softly, "I do Ma'am. I sure do . . . And Ma'am? . . . You say he was five feet tall? That's one tall pig, Ma'am! Nothing at all like the other one, that little Bacon Bandito

fella . . ." His words were cut short by Ms. Higgambotham-Smythington.

"OTHER ONE?" She said it so loudly he pulled his ear away from the phone a bit. In a normal voice she said, "You mean to tell me there are two dirty pigs running around looking in God fearing people's bathroom windows? Oh, my God!" Sniffer took a quick glance at the phone's mouthpiece.

She raised her voice. "Detective, you'd better send someone 'round here right away, you hear me?" Then yelled. "*Right away!* I'm scared witless and I demand some form of police protection! *You hearing me, young man?*"

Christ, Lady, he thought, the whole friggin' county heard you!

"Oh, yes'm," he said gently to calm her. "I hear you ten-four, Ms. Higgem . . . uh . . . Ms. aitch hyphen ess. I'll send around Officer Moldon. He's our best man for catching these dirty old pigs, you can bet on that!" Then he thought of question.

"Ma'am? If he was behind the bushes how did you get to see the letters on the tee?"

"He . . . uh . . . stepped out from behind the bushes and just stood there in my walkway. I got a fair look at his chest then, I'll say. Oh, and then he said oink three times and ran away." Clever hog, thought Sniffer.

He wrote down her address and they said their respective goodbyes. He had a look on his face that showed just how relieved he was to have hung up the phone. He placed the pencil into the pencil box with the other sharpies. Point down, eraser up--for safety, of course.

He gave his notes a quick scan, picked up the phone and hit two-two, the squad room's interoffice number. An officer answered on the first ring. "Squad Room! Officer Morton Moldon here!" His voice was crisp and snappy. It also sounded very young. Sniffer knew it was Moldy's phone voice.

Shit, thought Sniffer, did I ever sound that alert? Sure I did. Before my bullshit fears kicked in, that is. Well, Moldy, old buddy, two can play at this game.

Sniffer held the phone tightly and took a deep breath. "Moldy! Detective Sniffer here!" he growled in his best I-can-sound-as-young-as-you-can voice.

"No shit? *The Detective Sniffer?*" Moldon said.

Sniffer ignored him. "Get your sorry ass over to Ms. Higgem . . ." he looked down at his notes, "Ms. Henrietta Higgambotham-Smythington's place." He had said the name quickly and accurately. As a young Detective would. Pleased with himself he went on and sounded as brisk and as young as they come.

"She's had a big, dirty old pig looking in her window and sneaking peeks at her coming out of the shower. Could be that farmer Blissom . . . uh . . . Blossomfarten's escaped hog."

He glanced at his notes. "And Moldy, be careful, man! This pig is over five feet tall! You'll get a better idea of his real height by measuring her Rhododendron bushes . . . seems he's a head taller than they are." He checked his notes again. "And Moldy, this hog has somehow managed to squeeze its fat ass into a red tee shirt!" He paused and expected at least an "Huh?" from the man. When none came, he continued:

"One small detail, Moldy, the red tee has Semper fi printed on it." He spelled it out for

him, which he didn't know was unnecessary, as Moldon was an ex-Marine. "In white letters, according to Ms. Higgem . . . shit, Moldy, go see her and get the details."

He was just ready to hang up when he remembered something else. "Oh, and while you're at it, reassure the old bat that we're doing everything possible, etcetera, etcetera. You know, the usual bullshit-for-the-public crap. And Moldy? Before you go, put out an APB on this big pork chop. Who knows, eh? We just might get lucky!" He gave Officer 'Moldy' Moldon the woman's full name and address.

"Gotcha, Detective Sniffer. I'm on it . . ." He'd hung up. Goodbyes were unnecessary.

Officer Moldon scanned what he had written: Ms. Henrietta Higgambotham-Smythington 1411 Magnolia Lane . . . BaRm window . . . 5' pig . . . red T . . . Semper Fi . . . meas. rhodos. Semper Fi was underlined twice. The world, thought the young and alert Morton 'Moldy' Moldon, has definitely gone frigg'in' bonkers!

With Moldy "on it," Sniffer leaned back in his chair, put both hands behind his head and looked toward the ceiling. He chuckled to himself at the Rhododendrons-in-a-red-tee-shirt mix-up. Fool woman, he thought, she needs some work on her grammar, that's for sure.

For now at least, Sniffer felt like the old Sniffer, meaning the young Sniffer--if you get the drift--and his fears, both numbers one and two, thank you, were put on hold--on the back burner, as it were. He smiled at the ceiling. He thought back on how young and forceful, so very in charge, he must have sounded to Moldy. He smiled again.

Shit, Sniff, old buddy, he thought, you're back on top of your game! With this uplifting thought in mind, he put both hands on his desk, looked down at the yellow pad and said, silently to himself, but with his lips moving:

"Mizz . . . hen . . . ree . . . etta . . . Hig . . . gum . . . both . . . um . . . Smy . . . thing . . . ton." This younger-than-they-come detective would keep Ms. aitch hyphen ess somewhere in his mind as a backup. Just in case, dontcha know . . .

"I feel pretty, oh, so piggy!"

AS HE REMOVED the realistic, pig-like plastic mask, Bertram Burlappe Balliwick smiled to himself. He stood there and looked in the bathroom mirror at his three day old stubble, his slick and oily, unruly mop of brown hair and the potbelly that he could never seem to lose.

Even after three whole-hearted trips to *Crusher's Gym & Pasta Pit* . You know, the gym with the sawdust-covered, *gen-u-ine* Italian marble floors, in the newly built family restaurant section.

Balliwick looked at himself now and knew he was stuck with that Buddha-like belly forever. He was hip to Crusher's plot. Fatten 'em up on pasta so they want to work it off at the gym. Then they work out, get an appetite and eat more pasta. Crusher's cycle of death, thought Balliwick, it's his fault I am the way I am today.

He also knew he'd never have any success with women *without* the pig mask. It gave him the bravado he required. Or needed. Or, to put it more correctly, lacked. With the mask in place, Balliwick felt like a superhero with the power to drive women wild.

Wild with fear perhaps--but hey! --He sure got their undivided attention, now didn't he? Something he never got in real life. Women treated him, in a face to face, as if he was invisible and mattered about as much as a fart in the old wind.

Oh, he had tried spiffing up. New clothes, styled razor-cut haircut, even regular shaving. Hell, he had even put a shine on his old shoes. But after a month of that nonsense all he ended up becoming was a better-dressed invisible man, at least where the ladies were concerned. He believed it was their fault he was the way he was.

He picked up the pig mask and ran his fingers over its glisteny plastic surface. He gave a squeeze to the very realistic, large bulbous snout. "Buddy, old buddy," he said aloud as he held the mask out at arm's length with the snout faced toward him. "You're my one real true friend! Semper Fi, buddy!" He kissed the pig face. "And old pal, didn't we have fun tonight?" The mask didn't know and cared even less.

Oh, he thought, the look on that woman's face, that Ms. Higga . . . as I peeked in her bathroom window! Priceless! Caught her naked as a jaybird, I did! All wet and shiny!" He grinned. Then said out loud to the mask, "She had even called me a pig!" He giggled.

And no truer words had ever been spoken. He was, in all manner of speaking, a pig. But he was a pig that was damned proud of the fact.

"Pig! Pig! Pig!" he now shouted out loud. He loved the words so much he called them out again. "Pig! Pig! Pig!" He now danced around the room, the pig mask held high over his head. He looked up at the mask as it looked back down at him.

"Pig! Pig! Pig!" he said one last time, out of breath from it all. He went over and sat on the couch, pooped out, the mask held pig face up in his lap.

Well, he thought, we shall just see who has the last laugh, or should I say . . . hee hee. He looked down at the pig mask and spoke out loud, " The last oink!"

This tickled him so much he said it again, but gave it a new wrinkle. "Last oink! Oink pig! Oink! Oink! Oink!" He repeated this over and over as a mantra, even as he opened a can of Campbell's for his dinner.

He said his newfound mantra with each spoonful he took straight from the can. He was so enthralled by all of this that he missed the irony of what he was eating: Pork and Beans! Seeing irony was never Bert Balliwick's strong suit.

"Oink pig! Oink! Oink! Oink!" he said again and again.

The pig mask's new "buddy, old buddy" was unaware that two real, honest to God, real-life pigs were roaming the area. If he had been, he mightn't have been so smug, nor as happy, for even in this aspect, his thunder would be stolen and credit, if due, would go elsewhere. Such is life, they say, for pigs of all stripes . . .

"All we need is a room somewhere!"

THE BACON BANDITO had caught up with his counterpart, old man Blossomfarten's hog, and they were cleverly concealed from prying eyes in a small apartment over on Columbus Street. How they got access to the apartment is not known, but as it was

vacant, though furnished with everything but a bed, there was a good chance that it had been left unlocked.

Of course, the three flights of stairs would pose no problem for these intrepid porkers, what with them being smarter than your average dog, that is.

The Bacon Bandito made the first attempt at communications. But there was one small problem--they did not speak the same language . . .

"I know a man when I see one, don't I?"

THE POLICE CRUISER just sat there, motor idling in the pouring rain, its dome lights off. It was parked ostentatiously; in fact brazenly one might say, in front of *Earl's Donut Dunker's Shoppe*. The new one where Mason Drive crosses Columbus Street, not the old one on Magnolia Lane. Nor the franchised one over on Pritchard Avenue.

Corporal Grinnan "Grinny" Fuggit sat behind the wheel and dunked the last soggy piece of his third chocolate covered donut into a rather tepid, quarter-cup of java--made to his specific tastes, which were exactly one and one half sugar packets, two creamer mini-cups--never stirred--thank you. The Corporal was a true creature of habit. And proud of it, too--if you asked him.

As he wiped chocolate from his fingers with a wet-wipe, his thoughts turned, as they did every time after his work night ritual of Earl's donuts and coffee, to his sweet wife, Cantella.

Married over twenty-three years, last time he looked, they were still madly in love with each other. They had no children and, if truth were known, they were just fine that way, thank you. They had each other. For Corporal Fuggit, it just didn't get any better than that. Cantella felt the same way.

And Fuggit thought that was lucky for him. He, at forty-one, was very tall and gaunt. With a face that flaunted a large hawk-nose and small, close-set eyes. He sure didn't regard himself as something Cantella should write home to her Momma about.

His handsomest feature, if truth were told, was his hair. He sported a full, always barbered, crop of black hair. It helped somewhat in distracting people from his other facial features. Cantella thought he looked just dashing. What with the streak of white that ran right of center from front to back. Cantella, unlike most folks, was not reminded of a skunk.

As to his overall look, some folk might be reminded of an undertaker. Some might feel he looked evil. Still others might put one and one together and come up with an evil-looking undertaker. Take your pick. He looked like all three, but with a skunk hat on.

Shitty night, Corporal Fuggit thought, even for ducks. He savored the heavenly chocolaty aftertaste that now swirled around and over his tongue and palate.

He asked himself: What was it the APB had just croaked out over the radio? Oh, yeah, not one pig on the loose, but two, for crissakes! And one of the porkers was last seen wearing a red tee, of all things. And a big hog, for sure! Over five feet tall! Fucker must weigh a ton.

He'll be a cinch to spot, he thought, even in this deluge. But stay alert, Grinny, he reminded himself. Some perps use the old lose-the-shirt trick to throw you off and make identification tougher. He really didn't think a hog was smart enough to know that old trick, but you never know, now do you?

He'd had that old ruse tried on him more than once, you betcha. But in twenty-two years with the Boys in Blue, not one of those perps ever fooled him. Not old Grinny.

He thought of himself as the epitome of alertness and awareness. Both were, to his way of thinking, the foundations of good police work. Ever vigil was his motto. Why, hadn't his darling wife embroidered the Latin *Pollice Verso* on one of his baseball caps! That it means a thumbs-down gesture of condemnation fully escaped the attention of both the Fuggits. Ever vigil, you betcha. Just not when it comes to Latin.

Through the arcing moves of the windshield wiper's swish-slap-swish, -slap, a movement caught Fuggit's eye. A man. He walked casually as if he hadn't a care in the entire world. He was soaking wet and hadn't thought of the need to use an umbrella, even in this downpour.

Funny looking guy, thought Fuggit. He took notice of the red tee shirt the man wore, which was soaked through right down to the man's skin. A fact obvious to the trained eye of Fuggit by the two pronounced nipple bumps on the tee's wet surface.

Though the hard rain greatly blurred his vision, Fuggit could still make out the printing on the man's chest: *Semper Fi*.

Now ain't that a coincidence, he mused, same words as mentioned in the APB! Must be a Helluva lot of ex-Marines in this part of town!

At the same time that Fuggit had seen the man, the man, one Bertram Balliwick, had spotted the patrol car. Act casual, Balliwick thought, walk slowly man, slowly. Unguilty-like. Be cool. Don't arouse the pig's suspicion. Not tonight of all nights.

Tonight he had plans, big plans. He was headed for a certain house on Columbus Street. Where that big chested, flaxen haired schoolteacher lived. One Ms. Pooty Prissyfoot. The same Ms. Prissyfoot that had failed Balliwick and made him repeat kindergarten. And grades one through four. And half of grade five.

She's to blame, he thought, for the way I am today. Well, I'll show her. I'll show her real good, I will. Tonight's her night for the pig man's revenge! He smiled in the rain as he kept his eyes on the cop car.

Balliwick felt the pig mask rub up and down on his over-grown, can't-get-rid-of-it gut. He had tucked the mask neatly under his favorite tee, both as protection from the rain and, as a precaution, to conceal it.

He rubbed the mask through the tee's wet surface and at the same time, glanced downward and saw *Semper Fi* in reverse and upside down. He had never been a real Marine, but oh how badly he had wanted to. He had tried to join up, but fallen arches or something they said. Too bad, he thought, that spiffy Marine uniform would really help with the ladies.

Damn Marines, he thought, they're to blame for the way I am today. Well, I'll show 'em. I'll show 'em all! He fingered the mask through the tee's surface to be sure it hadn't

slipped and, if one had to know the truth, he felt a great sense of security emanate from the mask's realistic, porcine-like snout.

As he squeezed the snout, the calm he felt was so strong it could have rained down wet chicken shit on his head and Balliwick would have just sang and whistled. In a truly unguilty-like way, naturally.

Dumb shit! Thought Fuggit, Too stupid to come in out of the rain. But it's none of my affair. As far as Corporal Fuggit was concerned, if it didn't oink and walk on all fours, he wasn't at all interested.

As these two ships passed each other in the rainy night, Fuggit's thoughts turned to more important matters. Did he have enough money to buy one, maybe two donuts and a very carefully assembled cup of Joe? He sure did and he most assuredly would . . .

"We have nada in common!"

MEANWHILE, the two pigs, the Bacon Bandito (a name he truly loathed), and the other--name still unknown to him-- had foraged and found an abandoned army cot, complete with mattress, and enough straw to make two makeshift pillows and totally cover the bedroom's floor to a layer of two inches thick. Sty, Sweet, Sty!

To the Bacon Bandito, it was obvious that the stranger wished this encounter could become . . . well . . . more intimate. But the Bacon Bandito had no inclination in that direction, especially because his companion was of the same persuasion--male.

So, with grunts and pig-like maneuvers to forestall any funny business, the Bacon Bandito tried to stop the other beast from its amorous advances. He soon realized that his newfound friend had not read his cryptic, pig-like signals as a thanks-but-no-thank-you answer.

Thus, he stood up on his hind legs, a maneuver that caused him great pain, turned to his companion and looked him squarely in the eyes. Then he said, in plain English, "Look kemo sabe! I'm not into that funny business. No. Nein. Nay. Nix. You get my drift, porko?"

These words, spoken so firmly and menacingly, had an unusual effect on the unknown. First, he did not have the capacity for human speech and to hear it come out of one of his own kind shook him to the core. And second, he finally did get the gist that he was being rejected. And that didn't sit too well with him.

So he did the only thing he could do. He let out a huge grunt, followed quickly by a hoarse oink, then another growly grunt--and charged directly at the Bacon Bandito.

Thus began, as any farmer can tell you, the animalistic, no-holds-barred, fight-to-the-death, rutting ritual of a male hog in heat. A heated male hog that won't take nay or even nein for an answer . . .

"Round up the usual suspects!"

AS BALLIWICK, now wetter than water, neared his destination, his previous victim was well out of the rain. She now sat, quite dryly, in a room at Police One Headquarters.

Ms. Henrietta Higgambotham-Smythington hated police line-ups. She hated them even more than she hated teenagers with spiky orange and purple hair. And argyle socks. Not to mention rap music, body piercings, Regis Philbin and Kathy Lee (as a combination), and survival shows with half-naked gorgeous women whose nubile, rock-hard bodies made hers look like a burlap sack crammed full of tennis balls.

And speaking of things hated by Ms. H-S, if you threw in Alex Trebek with that sneery, know-it-all shit-eating grin of his, cop shows, thong bathing suits, wife swapping, newspapers in general, and marmalade in particular, you would only have touched the surface, the ice berg tip, if you will, of Ms. Henrietta Higgambotham-Smythington's most unfavorable things.

While we're at it, let us also add pita bread. And feta cheese, crunchy peanut butter, black panty hose, dieting, sex and men, just to give a clearer picture. And of course, it should go without saying, dirty old pigs who poke their shiny red, beady little eyes into a sixty-six year old widow lady's bathroom window, catching her buck naked, wet and all glisteny and such.

The fact that this was her first police line up did not alter her hatred of the event. Not even one whit. Nor a jot or even an iota. For she could even hate something she'd never seen, done or knew diddly about. You betcha.

The room was insufficiently lit by a ten-watt bulb that dangled from the ceiling in the middle of the room. Ms. Higgambotham-Smythington had to squint just to barely make out Sniffer's large, hulky shape, even though he stood a mere two feet from where she sat.

A light went on in the room next door and she knew she now looked at the room through a large panel of glass. Hmm, two-way glass, she thought, just like on Hawaii 5 Oh.

She peered into the room now visible on the other side of the glass. It looked empty to her. Empty that is, except for two burly cops in uniform who looked extremely bored by the whole proceedings.

Oh, and a desk and a lamp. And a wooden platform. And an area rug. A writing pad, four pencils, a phone, an intercom on the wall and two chairs. A wall calendar, four coffee cups, two spoons, a rag of some sort and eight phone books. There were a few other items, but who notices such ordinary, everyday things in an empty room?

"They won't be able to see me," she asked. "Will they, Detective?" She wanted to make dead sure she had been correct in assuming it was two-way glass, like on the TV, and not just plain old grocery store plate-glass. She wanted an assurance that the police weren't about to let some piggish pervert see just *who* it was that identified him. No point in that now, is there?

Sniffer said in a reassuring manner, "They won't be able to see you Ma'am, no how. This is two-way glass Ma'am, we can see them, but they can't see us." He walked over and tapped on the glass. "You see Ma'am, the bright light on their side of the glass and the dim light on our side of the glass makes a refractory type of . . . "

"I don't need a science lecture on two-way glass, Detective!" she said briskly. "Let's get this nonsense done and over with! I've got a million things to do at home to get ready for this Sunday's *Big And Bad Baker's Bake-Off and Gambling Bazaar* being held at *Our Lady of Impossible Dreams* church." She glared at him a bit, then continued:

"Not to mention the new locks I'm having put in and the new Venetian blinds for my bathroom now that I've been the victim of a window-peeking pig pervert." She searched her purse for her shopping list. "Lordy, I almost forgot! I need new bingo wet-markers, too!" She gave up on the purse. "Never enough time, there's just . . . " Her words trailed off as she thought of the millions of things needed to be done between now and Sunday.

Sniffer brought his right arm up and reached out to press a button on the intercom box on his side of the two-way, refractory type glass. The intercom made a noise much like an old man clearing the previous night's phlegm from his throat.

"OK, Casey . . . graaaaaak-ack . . . 'em . . . graak-aaaaack . . . Now!" he growled. Officer Casey, burly cop number one, obeyed and brought 'em in, or more to the point, he herded 'em in.

Five real live hogs, huge and as ugly as sin, and as sweaty as a cheap hooker on a July night in August. Over a ton on the hoof if they weighed a pound. All blinked rapidly in the bright light.

Amazingly, and in definite defiance of all human logic, the ton-plus of pork chops, bacon, and ham, assembled in a nearly perfect police line-up type row, all faced front, as it were, with ten beady eyes that blinked away to beat the band.

Large tags, with the numbers one through five loosely scrawled in Magic Marker on them, dangled swayingly from each huge neck. The number three and five hogs were out of numerical order, but no one, in either room, seemed to notice this discrepancy. Or, if they did, they kept it to themselves.

Ms. Higgambotham-Smythington gasped. "What's this nonsense?" She gave Sniffer a look with her nose wrinkled up as if she had just smelled a dead skunk's ass. "Is this a joke? You funning with me, Detective Sniffer?" She crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm not one who takes kindly to having my leg pulled, you know! I have friends in high places, young man and if you think I'm going to . . . "

"No Ma'am! No joke! . . . No funnin' either!" He looked directly into her eyes. "This, Ma'am, is very serious police business! We're here to see justice done!" She seemed to relax slightly, so he went on:

"And Ma'am, it's just possible that one of these pigs just might be the one that peered at you, naked and glistening wet . . . uh . . . you that is, Ma'am, not the pig . . . through your bathroom window. You'll be serving justice Ma'am, if you'd just keep an open mind and give these fat porkers the once over." Damn!, he thought, I could do with a grammar lesson or two myself!

She looked more than just piqued. "Detective Sniffer," she said curtly. "What I saw was a *real* man, not a hog! I know the difference between a man and a pig, I should say!" She threw her head back and to her right, in a huffy way. "Why, I'll never forget those red, beady piggish eyes and that huge snouty nose if I live to be a hundred! I don't . . ." She suddenly stopped, looked perplexed and just stared at the Detective, her eyes wide.

Then a bit more composed, she said, "Oh, lordy! I just listened to what I just said! Could it have been a *real* pig? I mean the bathroom was steamy and my vision isn't what it used to be . . . I mean . . . I . . . I do . . . I don't know what I mean anymore. I know . . ." Her voiced failed her and trailed off. She put her head into her hands. Sniffer looked lost. He felt lost, too.

A time later, she looked up at Sniffer. "Yes, I remember now," she said. "You're right, Detective Sniffer, it was a *real* pig! Had to be now I think about it. That huge piggish snout! Those red, beady pig eyes! Only a true, God's to honest, real-life pig could ever look like that!" She stared open mouth at Sniffer, then blurted out:

"Oh, my God! Oh, my God! I was ogled, naked," she put a hand up to her mouth, "by . . . by a farm animal!"

She put her face back into her hands, the vision of that pig who had stared red-eyed at her wet, glistening nakedness was now fully in her mind. Oh, my God, she thought, and there are now *two* of them out there somewhere! She looked woefully back up at Sniffer.

Sniffer said gently, "That's all right, Ms. aitch hyphen ess. At least we're now on the same page." He paused and smiled kindly down at her. "Now, Ma'am, all you have to do is take a look-see at these five . . . uh . . . suspects . . . and see if you can pick out the perp . . . that's police talk for perpetrator, Ma'am . . . from among this motley crew." He pointed a thumb in the direction of the ham and bacon collection that still blinked for all they were worth.

She swung around in her chair to better face the glass. "Thank you," she said, "for your kind understanding, Detective Sniffer. I'll try my best." She took a pair of glasses from her purse, put them on and did her best look, with a squint for better clarity. Sniffer sighed quietly. Shitty work, he thought, but someone's gotta do it.

After a minute or so, she looked up at Sniffer. "I think it's number four, but he's a little too far away from me to be positive. Is it possible to have him come a little closer to me?" She had brought only her reading glasses with her.

"Glad to Ma'am." He again reached for the intercom button. "Casey . . . graak-aaack . . . four . . . graack . . . graa . . . aaaaaak . . . aaaaak . . . ward!" he barked into the intercom.

Now, your average cop might have said, "Huh?" But Casey, with over twenty-eight years in service, knew how to read between the gracks. He now knelt before suspect number four and did his best to coax him forward. The hog blinked very rapidly and sweated profusely.

"Now little fella," he said in his kindest, sweetest "talk to the animals" voice. "If you'd

be so kind as to take three or four steps forward, I'd be most appreciative, I would." All suspect number four did in response was blink a few times. *Blink, Blink*. Not one to quit early, Officer Casey repeated himself in the same sweet, gentle voice. *Blink, Blink. Blink, Blink.*

Then, Casey lost it. "MOVE YOUR FAT ASS THREE STEPS FORWARD YOU HUNK OF LARD OR I'LL RIP BOTH YOUR DUMB EARS OFF!" *Blink, Blink. Blink, Blink.*

Twenty minutes later and pig number four had yet to step even one pace forward, let alone three or four. But he wasn't inactive--oh, no! The bloated porker had farted numerous times, peed a deluge twice, and crapped twice all over the wooden floor, much to the chagrin of all concerned, especially officer Casey who was surely on the wrong side of the glass at this particular moment.

What with the four other pigs that followed suit by farting, peeing, and crapping for all they were worth, too. Casey felt like he was in Hog Hell, you betcha. If my ex-wife, that evil, vindictive bitch, thought Casey, ever finds out, she will laugh her fool ass off over my current situation, make no mistake. *Blink, Blink. Blink, Blink!*

Finally, in exasperation, desperation, and frustration, and with the only good sense shown this far, Ms. Henrietta Higgambotham-Smythington stood up and walked over to her side of the glass and peered into a room that was now miles from empty, if you get the drift.

A moment later, she turned to Sniffer and said softly, "He ain't the one, Detective Sniffer. None of 'em are!" You can now safely bet that pig farts and pig pee and pig crap were added to her lengthy things-I-hate list. Right up there alongside them new-fangled computers, VCR's, and cell phones, you betcha.

As she sat there and watched Casey and the other officer in their efforts to herd the hogs out without getting too much slop on themselves, a strange thought popped into her head.

She knew that hippies once referred to cops as pigs, and she also knew the cops sometimes put one of their own into a line up. Do you think . . . ? . . . Was there . . . ? She wondered.

Meanwhile, far from this particular porcine stench, in some other part of town . . .

"Chop, chop, pork chop!"

THE TWO PIGS were in mortal combat. That's the only way to describe it.

Supremacy, as practiced by these beasts in the wild, couldn't be any more barbaric than the in fighting that was being waged at the moment. First, the stranger--name still unknown--was besting the Bacon Bandito, and then it was the other way around. However, the end result was a foregone conclusion, for brain combined with brawn always wins the day. In fiction, at least.

The Bacon Bandito, with deft kicks and chops that only a Bruce Lee could properly apply, quickly ended this rutting dance of sex and death.

Thus with the unnamed one on its back, its glazed-over eyes pointed at the ceiling, the Bacon Bandito got up on his hind legs once more and began to polish one of his ripped nails. He looked down at the animal he had almost beaten half to death and sighed aloud. "Damned pig! You've ruined my manicure!"

The other pig, semi-conscious, heard the words, but could draw no meaning. His understanding of human speech was very limited, though he understood the one word "pig" to be a reference to himself, as he had heard farmer Blossomfarten use it often. It lingered in his piggy brain for exactly five seconds before he lost all consciousness--and life.

The Bacon Bandito wasted no time. He dragged the dead pig into the other room and tossed the carcass onto the straw-strewn floor. Then, he slid back a small panel of pigskin just above his hoof. He produced an electronic device known to no human. A circular metallic object three inches in diameter.

The device required no manipulation of finger or hoof, fortunately for him, but only needed the soft grunt-like sounds he now made. Sounds that were definitely, most definitely, not human. Nor Earth pig, either, for that matter. A light blinked rapidly on the device.

"Grakka gran gu Grok!" he said. "Grikka gris gra gra Gron." Then he heard back in a crackly, cell-phone-going-under-a-tunnel sort of way: "Grobba gal gri gra Gron!" They spoke this way for a few more minutes before the connection went dead and their unusual communication was lost . . .

"It's his animal magnetism!"

BAM! The karate chop to the back of his neck caught him totally by surprise.

One minute he was 'phoning home,' the next he was on his belly, head buried in a straw pillow, powerless and helpless under the oppressive weight of the larger and now superior creature. All he could do was squeal helplessly in protest.

He had heard the creature's grunts and knew whom it was, and whom it would eventually turn into. But for now, his primary concern was to stay alive. He felt its hot breath on his neck. Later, he would be the superior one, but right now it was better not to resist.

For the creature was now a mutation in process. A transformed "being" in process. A transmutation, if you will. It had been beamed down and transmutated, similar to the Bacon Bandito, but unfortunately, because of being rushed to the scene in answer to his unfinished and frantic communication, the transmutation hadn't taken proper effect. The creature was in limbo, caught between both the male and female pig halves. A malefem in the works. And uncontrollable. And deadly.

The Bacon Bandito knew the transmutational situation would correct itself in time, once Earth's gravity fully kicked in, but for now, the creature was dangerous. Its mind was warped.

Being half male pig, it wanted to use its male member and being half female pig it was driven by libido, old-fashioned lust. Later, it would call the Bacon Bandito, Sir, but for now it had to be handled very carefully. Or it would kill him. Before or after sex.

The Bacon Bandito realized it was futile to fight the stronger creature. For starters, the Bacon Bandito's pig-body model, although more agile and swifter, was also much smaller and no match for the hugeness that now confronted him.

The brute was immense! It was obvious the wearer hadn't taken earth's gravity into consideration when it had undergone the pig-body transformation. Thus in total surrender, the Bacon Bandito let the dumb beast have its way with him. It was that or die. How bad could it be, anyway? But lordy, he thought, does this huge, smelly pig-beast have to be so well endowed?

Later, after they smoked a cigarette, and the mutated creature was now more pig-normal, and had apologized profusely (it said it had only a dim memory of the event), the Bacon Bandito, his anus area still tender, stood up and brought the other alien up to speed on his progress:

"First, even though it may appear that humans *do* taste good, they are *not* the hunted species, after all. Those old video transmissions that featured four-legged beasts, dinosaurs, lions, whatever, chasing hapless humans must have been false. Propaganda, perhaps, to mislead us." The other alien nodded. Made sense. Propaganda. Leave it to these savage Earthlings to . . .

"Second, our choice of the Earth pig . . . as the closest resemblance to ourselves . . . and thereby the easiest to transformate to . . . wasn't such a hot idea. In this gravity they prove downright heavy, cumbersome, and slow. Very unlike the species of our home planet where the beasts basically float like feathers. No--this choice was a bummer." The other agreed. He reached down and felt his plump pig belly. Heavy as heavy can be, you betcha.

"But Sir!" he said. "I guess, for now at least, we're stuck with them. Right, Sir?"

"Unfortunately," the Bacon Bandito said, "you *are* right, Lieutenant Junior Grade Grin." He had used Grin's rank and name. This pleased Grin for they had yet to trade landing stories and this was a step in that direction. Back to normal, so to speak.

"But Grin, old friend, we are Groinkian soldiers and, as such, we know how to make do, don't we?" Grin nodded. Then they were interrupted as the Bacon Bandito's hoof lit up and buzzed.

Grin sat there as his superior told the Major on the other end that Grin had arrived, safe and sound. He left out his head-in-the-straw-pillow-with-ass-in-the-air part.

As Grin listened half-heartedly, he thought. He liked the fact that his superior had called him old friend. In spite of his earlier transformation miscue, which he now only dimly remembered. Save for those joyful squeals of pleasure his superior had made each time Grin plunged his pig pole, to the hilt, into his rear. He really had forgotten the rest.

Grin heard a harsh static-like sound as the intergalactic connection broke off. "I'll try again later." Gron said.

While his superior fiddled with his hoof, Grin looked at him. It's better, he thought, if I keep how much I *can* remember to myself. But he sure does have a cute little piggy bubble butt, now doesn't he? This pleasurable thought was interrupted when his superior officer spoke again:

"Now, where was I? Oh, yes . . . Third . . . was it third? . . . Yes, third. Regardless of anything, we have to finish our mission and get back to the ship in the equivalent of Earth's seventy-two hours (actually 71.7424563452222222 hours, but who's counting?).

Their mission was in three distinct phases, with none of the phases less important than the others. The Bacon Bandito outlined the phases to Grin:

"Phase One: Capture, by any means whatsoever, an Earthling. Fatten it up and serve it as a gourmet meal to our Fleet Commander, Major Grok. As a test. If it meets with his approval and it undoubtedly should, Earthlings will prove to be a valuable trade commodity in our part of the galaxy." Grin nodded his agreement and said, "They'll make fairly good slaves, too."

He knew that slavery was still very much alive on at least six planets in their part of space, seven if you included Groink. The Bacon Bandito nodded, then continued:

"Phase Two: Determine the best way to cook and serve these Earth creatures." For this, an entire battalion of Groinkian gourmet chefs was already standing by, all eager to try out their latest recipes for Earthling Slave Supreme.

And, to be sure, graft still played a major role in their intergalactic political circles. Who could turn down one of these succulent morsels? Especially if cooked properly. By a gourmet chef, of course.

The Bacon Bandito went on. "Phase Three: Find the best place, or places, to land our full invasion fleet." The Bacon Bandito had recommended the Grand Canyon, but he had yet to hear back from the higher ups on its approval.

Now, it should be pointed out that no Groinkian had ever tasted human flesh. But it's akin to the fact that many pirates had never touched nor even saw a Spanish doubloon; they exist so they must be good--so the legend goes. Where that legend started nobody knows, but it was a similar legend about Earthlings that brought the pig-like creatures here.

And they would be damned if they were going to leave this planet--not after the amount of travel time it took to get here-- without a full cargo load of Earthlings, some dead and freezer wrapped, some living and caged. The exact percentages of each to be worked out later after a panel of official High Central Command tasters made their opinions known.

After a quick consultation, their smarter-than-Earthlings brains decided that "Phase One" should be accomplished first. To this end, all they would need is a car to transport the victim and their trusty Grun-guns. Set on Stun so as not to damage the fine meat.

But, for now, all they could do was wait. For permission from a space craft--eighty miles or so, above their heads--to carry out "Phase One." It couldn't be simpler.

The Bacon Bandito pulled out his communicator and tried once more to make contact. It resulted in a no-go. Shit, he thought, we must have underestimated the denseness of this planet's atmosphere. He made a mental note to report on that fact later. It would be greatly appreciated.

Now, he thought, if the bozos on the spaceship were only smart enough to figure that simple fact out . . .

"Even educated pigs do it!"

BALLIWICK, soaked to the bone, entered the alleyway that led to the back of 745 Columbus Street, the apartment building where Ms. Pooty Prissyfoot resided. It also led to the back of Earl's Donut Dunker's Shoppe.

He donned his pig mask and felt the familiar power, energy, and confidence it bestowed upon him. Though achy and shivering, he shinnied up the drainpipe, which led directly to Ms. Pooty Prissyfoot's bedroom window. It was rough going, especially in the rain, and if it hadn't been for his skid-proof deck sneakers he probably would have failed in the task.

As he neared his goal, Balliwick could hear noises. When he was directly to the left of the chosen window, the noises became more decipherable. Grunts of lust and squeals of pleasure. Sex! Or something close to it.

Now, although Balliwick had never had sex, to the best of his knowledge and with someone other than himself, there is something genetically wired into the human brain that told him what he now heard was it. Or something like it.

Holy shit, thought Balliwick, Ms. P is being *screwed!* And from the sound of it, *really* being screwed! He heard: *Grunt! Grunt! Squeal! Squeal!*

Man, he thought, this guy's an animal! And as of now, there ain't no longer nothing prissy about Ms. Prissyfoot, that's for sure! Man, he must be pounding her a new asshole!

Something funny though about the guy's grunts, thought Balliwick, they don't sound very human. Come to think of it, neither do the squeals. Confused, Balliwick did what he does best in these situations, shrugged it off and promptly forgot about it.

He had to see for himself. So, he held on to the drainpipe with his left hand, reached over with his right and pushed aside the sheer curtains that shielded the room from his view. The room was way too dark to see very well. Damn! He thought, as he squinted to see better.

All he could make out was the guy's huge butt as it moved up and down and pounded and pounded. And grunted with abandonment as it drove poor Ms. Prissyfoot into the mattress. *Grunt! Grunt! Squeal! Squeal!* Then Balliwick noticed another sound had added its voice to the cacophony, the *Squeak! Squeak!* of the bed. He didn't know it was an old, rusty Army cot.

It was also being pounded by this big-assed evil brute. Thus the full symphony now played *Grunt! Squeak! Squeal!* over and over. In a heated tempo of abandoned, no-

holds-barred, animalistic rutting. Balliwick stared; his eyes wide open as he listened to the music of lust. Or something close to it.

In other words, he heard lust in G-Major. As if the melody had been arranged by a crazed Mozart on speed, with a Gene Krupa on weed at the drums, and a Barry White on coke singing the bass. Conducted by Satan himself. This was the sexual symphony Balliwick heard as he peered into that open window, in the rain, as he held perilously fast to a skinny drainpipe.

As his eyes *Grunt! Squeak! Squeal! Grunt! Squeak! Squeal!* got somewhat accustomed to the darkness, Balliwick could see the two of them were going at it doggy-style. Although he couldn't see clearly, it looked as if Ms. Prissyfoot, on her stomach, had her head buried into--straw? --as she squealed in sheer pleasure. You whore, he thought, you rotten ass whore.

The guy, one large mother with an ass the size of Kansas, was all over the new whore's backside. *Grunt! Squeak! Squeal! Grunt! Squeak! Squeal!*

Poor Ms. Prissyfoot, Balliwick thought, she's takin' one Helluva poundin' from this animalistic pig of a fiend. And from those squeals comin' outta her, enjoyin' it too.

At this moment, Balliwick started to cry. It should be me, he thought, me pounding the whore. If this damn brute could learn to pound a mattress so could I. Ain't exactly rocket science, dontcha know? Hell, it ain't even brain surgery.

He was sorely tempted to climb through the open window and challenge the brute, but the size of the guy talked him out of it. He was also tempted to scream something at them through the open window, such as, "*You hurt my Ms. Prissyfoot, you rat bastard, and I'll sue your rotten Kansas-size ass off!*" but he couldn't figure how to explain his being on the drainpipe. That, and again--the guy's size.

I can't stand this no more, thought Balliwick, it's . . . it's . . . un-American! I may be the world's biggest pig pervert and totally depraved, but man, even *I* draw the line at this blatant carnalishness. It's like watchin' your folks play slap and tickle! You just don't do that in America! Foreigners might go for that sort of thing, like those French pigs, but us red-blooded Americans know where to draw the line. It's even in our Constitushun or somethin.'

As Balliwick shinnied back down the drainpipe, his tears lost in the rain, he could still hear the *Grunts! Squeaks! Squeals!* of their illicit coupling. *Grunts! Squeaks! Squeals! Grunts! Squeaks! Squeals!*

Balliwick hit the ground and ran. "No no no!" he screamed as he ran, his hands covered over his ears to drown out the carnal symphony which seemed to follow right behind him and at the same time echo in his brain.

The sight he had just witnessed would take a lot of whiskey to blot it out of his memory. And his knowledge that Ms. Prissyfoot had actually *enjoyed* that pig's brutal, animalistic thrusts would require a brain transplant to remove. If even then.

It was doubly unfortunate for Balliwick, his viewing this incident. First, that he had gone to the wrong apartment is understandable, given his intellect. Second, what could have been, for Balliwick and for Ms. Pooty Prissyfoot--well--true love is always a

mysterious force and now that hope has been dashed all to pieces.

What he is left with, what has burned itself into his brain, is the picture of Ms. Prissyfoot taking a rear-end pound-a-thon. Was it fornication? Not of the normal kind, he was sure. But he wasn't sure, absolutely sure, about what it was that he had witnessed.

All he knew was that the whole affair had hurt him deeply and all he cared about now was a swim in some of that memory-blotting, bad-knowledge-in-his-head-ridding kind of whiskey.

He stopped his run and now walked to where he knew he had to go: *Ernie's* . . .

"I'm buying!"

BALLIWICK was in *Ernie's Lube & Pizza Palace*, the one on Main Street and not the one on Primrose Avenue. Nor the new one over by *Marvin's Algonquin Table Revisited Inn & Auto Detailing Center*. He wanted to drown his sorrows with a fifth of Wild Turkey and a six-pack of Cuban Hatuey Beer. But he settled for house scotch and draft beer. Money being what it is, and all.

He was on his third boilermaker; a shot of whisky dropped into a glass of beer, and was well on his way to feeling no pain. However, even if he had been stone cold sober, he would have been oblivious to the event that now took place far above his head, far above anyone else's head, if truth were told.

He ordered another boilermaker--from Ernie himself, no less. "Hey Ernie, you shilly sit, shet me up . . . "

When Ernie gave him a "you've had enough" thumb down, Balliwick yelled at him, "*Gimme another drink, you rat bashtard, or I'll shue your rotten ass off!* . . . "

"Somewhere out there . . ."

EIGHTY MILES, give or take a few, above the Earth's surface, a cigar-shaped, pink-pig-colored spacecraft, the length of two football fields, give or take a few yards, moved silently through the vacuum of space. It was as lit up as the moon by the Sun's direct rays. That is, if viewed from the northeastern states.

It was commanded and operated by an alien race of pig-like creatures--the Asian potbelly pig comes to mind. However, they stood much taller than Earth pigs and were a tad more human in appearance because they wore uniforms and walked on two legs, not four.

Their hands were human-like except for a large, pig-like, split knuckle that sat at mid center. At one time, six-inch curved horns had sprouted from each knuckle, but evolution had decided, at some point in time, they were no longer needed for defense.

Their language, to the human ear, would sound like nothing more than guttural pig-like grunts, with an occasional guttural pig-like squeal thrown in for good measure and clarity. Groinkian clarity, that is. For these pig-like creatures were from the planet Groink and that's how their speech would sound to the human ear.

Any human that heard one of them say: "Grunk greenk grokka gru gank gu gu gritta," a very popular Groinkian saying, would never be able to decipher its real meaning, which loosely translates to: "Humans taste great cooked in olive oil and butter!"

At the con, his usual place of command authority, Major Grok asked his second-in-command, Captain Grik, "Gro gol gicku ga Gziska Gron?"

Captain Grik replied, "Go, gir! Grunky gilla gur. Glomma grutta gi gos, gra ga grinn grunka grogga groosa grim gon." This displeased Major Grok no end and he showed his disappointment visibly by a quick rotation of his large snout in a decidedly clockwise direction. A sure sign of Groinkian pique. Counterclockwise means: "Kiss me, I'm coming!"

"Grun! Grik! Groun go grooky grunks! Glisso ga go gi gizzita grogga ga." the Major said. This left Captain Grik without any illusions to his superior's feelings. Then the Major, his snout in a now faster rotation, said, "Gruva grabbis ga go guttil go gras gris. Gri gottiggaga gassic glom?" To which the Captain said, "Go, gir!" For earthlings, an untidy translation would be:

Major Grok: Have we heard from Lieutenant Gron yet?

Captain Grik: Yes, Sir! Just an hour ago. He said he was having a problem, but before he could say what the problem was, the transmission ended.

Major Grok: Shit! Grik! This could be trouble! Try boosting our signal output, Captain. Oh, and be sure to plot coordinates that place us in a high static field. No point in getting sloppy at this stage, now is there?

The question was taken rhetorically by Captain Grik, so he only said, Yes, Sir! (Or "Go, gir!" in Gronkian.) To brush up on your conversational Groinkian, buy a copy of *Groink On \$5 a Day*, edited by Professor Griffle, PhD, pocket edition.

As Captain Grik worked a computer console, they spoke further. The Major reminded the Captain that thousands of their kind was already on the planet, in Earth-pig form. They had dozens of command center cells already established on the surface.

Hell, he told him, they even had a fleet of trucks strung out from one side of what the Earthlings called America, to the other. Their mission was in full swing and the Major sure didn't want, or need, any undue problems at this stage of things. If that Lt. Gron screws things up . . . well, he just better not, that's all. If he knows what's good for him.

Meanwhile, back on Earth . . .

"Why dontcha try that again, Piggo?"

CORPORAL FUGGIT was not about to make the same mistake. His first sighting, which went unnoticed, or rather not called in by him, did not--most certainly did not--bring him any accolades when he casually mentioned it at the stationhouse.

It wasn't his fault, not really. The stupid APB definitely said to be on the lookout for a five-foot tall *pig* in a red Semper Fi tee shirt, not a man, for crissakes. And make no mistake; he still wasn't convinced that what he had seen *was* a pig. Damn thing walked like a man, looked like a man too. He had eyes, didn't he?

Then again, it *had* been raining. Real hard too, he remembered. And he knew a pig is a right smart creature. And what he saw *did* perfectly match the APB's description, right down to the white Semper Fi. Well, he thought, fool me once piggo, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me! He prayed for a second chance.

So, there he was, back on the street, back in his patrol car, and back in front of *Earl's Donut Dunker's Shoppe*, the scene of the crime as it were, all eyes and ears, in wait for that tell-tale tee shirt, which he now referred to as Semper *Find* to jog his memory, and to keep him alert. I'd give them all an attitude adjustment, he thought, if I could just spot that window-peeking swine one more time. He prayed some more . . .

"Now, put one finger to your nose!"

BALLIWICK stumbled out of *Ernie's Lube & Pizza Palace*. The fact that he was drunk (commode-huggin' drunk would be more accurate) wouldn't escape a blind man's eye, as he was wove perilously from side to side and swung a half-full bottle of Tequila over his head. He was using the Tequila to wash away the seventeen boiler maker's aftertaste that even now plagued his tongue and their thousands of taste buds. Vile bile, dontcha know?

"You're a shilly sit, Bertie, old shum . . . uh . . . chum," he said aloud to the cold night air. "And I think I's gonna frow up!" But even in this state of drunken stupor, Balliwick still had some of the fine southern manners his dear late mother had taught him.

"Son of mine," she would say as she took a swig from the whiskey flask she always kept in her apron--"for purely medicinal purposes" -- "It ain't a proper gent that upchucks on the pavement! People's gotta walk there and they don't want no slop to be a-stepping into!" Thus with his dear old Momma's words echoing in the liquor-sodden recesses of his mind, Balliwick upchucked, but in a most gentlemanly fashion. Momma Balliwick would have been so damn proud of her little Bertram...

"It's Pavlov's cop!"

A HALF BLOCK AWAY, Corporal Grinnan Fuggit's alert bright eyes peered through the patrol car's windshield so as not to miss a thing. But as he scanned the street up and down, and side-to-side, he was having an inner emotional battle.

I'd be more alert, he thought, if I had me some of Earl's coffee and donuts rights about now. But that would take time away from his vigil and Corporal Fuggit knew he couldn't risk doing that--no sir! Not after the ribbing he had received back at Police One headquarters.

Bastards, he thought, won't give a man a break for making an honest mistake. The taunting really hurt him, especially the new nickname they had christened him with: Grin-And-Fuggit-About-It. That the name would stick he had no doubts. Not even a small one.

Stay alert, Grinny, he told himself. He continued his observation of the totally deserted street, --not a soul in sight--with his determination *not to fail* set on full throttle. He didn't have too long to wait.

A man, who visibly staggered all over the sidewalk, came into Fuggit's windshield view. He swung something that resembled a bottle over his head as he sang at the top of his lungs:

"Miss Pissyfoot is a whore! Ain't gonna love her no more! 'Cause I shaw her on the floor getting porkered by a boar!" He sang this over and over, somewhat to the tune of "*It Ain't Gonna Rain No More, No More*" as he flip-flopped from pillar to post.

This action alone, disturbing the peace, would have been sufficient grounds for Corporal Fuggit to have made an arrest, right there on the spot. No questions asked.

But what got Fuggit's adrenalin *really* started were two little words: Semper Fi. They were printed in white silkscreen ink on a red-dyed cotton background, on the very chest of the man who was, indirectly at least, and unwittingly for sure, responsible as the catalyst for the nickname he would forever have to live down.

As Fuggit stepped from the patrol car onto the sidewalk, he looked skyward and said, "Thank you God. I won't screw this one up again. You can bet on that!" He couldn't wait to see their faces when he hauled this miscreant into the stationhouse.

If, at this very moment, a person were to look closely enough at Corporal Grinnan Fuggit's face, they would see a cop salivate . . .

"It's elementary, my dear Grin!"

WITH LITTLE TO DO BUT WAIT, the aliens played catch-up. "So, what delayed the mission, Sir?" Lieutenant Junior Grade Grin, still in pig-body form, asked the Bacon Bandito, his superior officer, who was now in a full dress uniform befitting his Lieutenant's rank.

The Lieutenant knew they couldn't run around in their military uniforms in public, but he missed the look and feel of them. And how could it hurt to wear it around the house? He looked in the full-length mirror that was on the back of the bathroom door. At just under six feet, he thought he cut a handsome figure. He admired the image that now looked back.

"Grin," he turned toward him. "I'm not proud of the fact that I was caught completely unawares very soon after my arrival by some hick." He buttoned the last button on his tunic. "But this farmer human grabbed hold of me with a device that even our Muxi-flakers wouldn't break."

He looked back in the mirror and did a little pirouette then looked back over his shoulder to view his rear. Nice, he thought. He didn't mention that the so-called device the farmer had used to grab him the Earthlings called hands. As he looked himself over, he spoke again:

"Remember, I thought we were the superior beings, but that didn't turn out to be the

whole truth," he held up a hand when Grin looked as if he wanted to rebut that remark.

"Wait! I know we *are* the superior beings, but the transformutated shape that we're using *is not* . . . that's what I'm talking about!" Grin understood. He nodded.

(All of these words were spoken, naturally, in their native Groinkian language, so a decent translation has been provided here for the reader's sake.)

"Well, I am amazed, Lieutenant Gron, Sir," said Grin. "That you've adapted and have survived as well as you have, all things considered." He did look truly amazed to the Lieutenant. "For example, Sir, how are you driving their vehicles with these clumpy hoof-like appendages?" He pointed to his pig's foot.

"Elementary, my dear Grin, elementary!" He grinned at Grin. "During my short captivity in the sty . . . that's what they call the living quarters for this beautiful animal . . . I found the floor covered with printed materials, papernewses I think they call them."

He glanced at the mirror again. "And because I've been instructed on their printed language, as well as the verbal, I read everything I could lay my feet on." He gave a little chuckle at his pun. "There was a tremendous amount of material on these . . . uh . . . paper devices. They seem to be a primary commodity that are sold everywhere without the least regard to secrecy.

"At first I thought the sty was the living abode of the *human* creatures, but that's not the case, as you can see from our present surroundings." Grin nodded as his eyes swept the room.

"Well anyway, Grin. I realized how important it would be to employ such a device to drive a car, especially when I made my escape and I studied the problem for well over twelve minutes, Earth time."

"And your solution, Sir?" He showed a vast amount of uncertainty.

"This!" He raised his right hoof and pointed to the bottom.

"Rather rudimentary, I must say, Sir." Grin was now looking at a thick dictionary that the Lieutenant had taped to the bottom of his shoe. He had another one on the other foot. They would allow Lieutenant Gron to reach the gas and brake pedals.

"Yes! But effective my dear Grin, effective, although it does make walking somewhat chancy." He lowered the hoof when a light blinked on his communicator and drew his attention.

After a very short Groinkian conversation with the Mother ship, Lt. Gron turned to his underling. He seemed excited when he said, "You heard?" Grin nodded.

"Good!," said Gron. "Get us a car, while I change clothes and set my Grun-gun." With permission and blessings from above, Phase One, get an Earthling, was now underway . . .

"Yes, but can you dance to it?"

A SHORT TIME LATER found one Corporal Fuggit less than ten feet from the singing and weaving Balliwick. A car crawled slowly and silently in their direction. It escaped Fuggit's notice, undoubtedly due to the fact that in his 'epitome-of-alertness state', his

gaze was transfixed solely on Balliwick. And his alert mind on the chance to correct his former error.

The car also went unnoticed, understandably, by the singing and weaving Balliwick, even as it pulled alongside him and both front doors quickly opened. And two pig men emerged, one from each front door.

Things happened pretty quickly after that and the very last thing Corporal Fuggit would remember, exactly ten minutes later, mind you, was someone singing the same stupid lyrics over and over, at the top of his drunken voice:

"Miss Pissyfoot is a whore!
Ain't gonna love her no more!
'Cause I shaw her on the floor,
getting porkered by a boar!"

Sung somewhat, to the tune of *"It Ain't Gonna Rain No More, No More."*

Corporal Fuggit, newly nicknamed Grin-And-Fuggit-About-It by the folks at headquarters, wouldn't remember the car with the two pigs, the smaller one at the wheel. Or that the smaller pig had pointed something resembling a TV remote in his direction.

Or the flash of light that emanated from the 'remote.' Or the two pigs who grabbed Balliwick, roughly and surely and as bold as brass, and fairly tossed him into the car's trunk. And, with the deed done, Corporal Grinnan Fuggit would have no memory of the car as it roared away and, as Paul Simon once wrote, vanished in the black of night. To paraphrase, of course.

Back behind the wheel of his black and white--how he got there he didn't know-- Corporal Grinnan Fuggit was groggy and felt lost. He had the sudden urge for a chocolate donut and a carefully constructed cup of Earl's Joe.

Perhaps, he thought, a little nourishment would clear my mind and it might, just might, drive that persistent song from my brain. Then, like a siren's call, the blinking red and yellow neon sign, the very same one that says: IF YOU CAN'T BEAT 'EM, EAT 'EM! outside *Earl's Donut Dunker's Shoppe*, beckoned him. *Blink, blink . . . Blink, blink . . .*

"It only hurts when I twinge!"

THIS LITTLE over-before-you-know-it action was also observed by someone who *hadn't* been zapped with a TV remote.

Directly above the scene, in a third floor apartment, right next to a vacant one, a Ms. Pooty Prissyfoot had heard someone singing loudly in the street below. She went to the window and saw the street singer. He looked somewhat familiar, but her memory failed to place him.

But when she spied the red tee shirt, it brought back the sordid memory of the peeping tom that her friend, Ms. Smathing . . . Smothing . . . uh . . . Henrietta had briefly described on the phone a mere ten minutes earlier.

Ms. Higgambotham-Smythington had been, so she had said, convinced by the police that what she had seen was a *real* pig and *not* a man. Ms. Prissyfoot wasn't as sure. She couldn't picture a hog who stood on hind legs and peeked through a window, bathroom or otherwise.

Especially a five foot tall hog who wore a red tee shirt! Poppycock! thought Ms. Prissyfoot, Poppycock! Poppycock! Poppycock! This was her vilest curse word, her being a school teacher and all. And in her brief conversation with Henrietta, she had used it only nine times. Well below her norm.

Now at her window, the sight of Balliwick brought real strong suspicion to her mind. The coincidence of both a hog *and* a Bert Balliwick wearing matching Semper Fi tee shirts at the same time, or even different times for that matter, hit a sour note in the logical, school teacher mind of Ms. Prissyfoot. She didn't believe in coincidence.

As she watched him weave and yell something at the top of his lungs, in a sing-song fashion, she remembered him. A bad one, if her memory served. Always in trouble, even in kindergarten. And grades two, three, four, and half of five.

Yes, she thought, if anyone was capable of peeking into windows, Bert Balliwick sure was. A bad boy. A really bad boy, this Bert Balliwick was. What this bad boy needed, she thought, was a strong-willed woman to turn him around. A woman who could show him the error of his ways and teach him of the many joys life has to offer.

Fine literature. Museums. Theatre. Gourmet cooking. Lectures on psychobiology by a handsome professor named Gunter. And other pleasures. Oh, how she missed those other pleasures!

She felt a shiver go through her body as she watched this really bad boy. Then she experienced a *twinge*, then a *stirring*, then that *strange, indescribable feeling* that hadn't visited her in many years.

That strange indescribable feeling that men know nothing of, for they lack the ability to tap into their softer, more sensitive, feminine side. Men can yang it, but they can't yin it! In general, that is.

"Oooh," she whispered in the chilly night air. "You bad, bad, boy you!" She now thought of what *she* would do if this really bad, bad boy peeked in *her* bathroom window, caught *her* buck naked (*twinge!*), and wet (*twinge! twinge!*), and glisteny (*stirring!*) and all.

With his beady little male eyes just a-brim with male lust (*twinge! twinge! twinge!*) just from the sight of *her* still voluptuos--even at thirty-five--and totally nude (*stirring! twinge! stirring!*) body. (*twinge! twinge! twinge! strange, indescribable feeling!*)

She shuddered involuntarily and another "Oooh!" escaped from her lips. Oh yes, she thought, *I'd* know how to handle a Bert Balliwick--any day of the week and twice on Sunday.

She sprayed on her best perfume, *Hot-to-Trot by Mario of Paris* --you know the kind that goes for twelve bucks a pop, sold only in those upscale, tony stores like *Bunderhooter's Emporium*, the one in the Sunset Mall, not the one across from *Clara's Clam & Chicken Casino* on Mulholland Drive.

She gave an extra spritz into her still voluptuous and firm, thirty-five year old cleavage. Then she rubbed her breasts together and moved them up and down and all around to get the perfume's essences flowing. *Twinge!*

Satisfied, she leaned out the window as far as she could without risk to life or limb and waved an arm to get his attention. The rush of the cool night air hardened her nipples a tad. *Twinge!Twinge!*

"Yoo hoo, Bertie," she called. "Up here!" This mating call of the twinging, stirring, and shuddering horny-assed schoolmarm received no response. He sang, if that's what you could call it, too loud to hear her. She yelled it again even louder, but received the same result.

As he got closer, she could make out some of the song's lyrics: "Ms. Pissyfoot is a whore . . . ain't gonna . . ." Funny, but it reminded her of an old song about rain or snow or hail or something. She couldn't place it.

That the song was about her, she had no doubt. Her name, mangled as it was, was fairly spat out from those lurid lips. But the rest of the song's lyrics confused her. The whole conjecture, the subject, eluded her as she could not recall having *any* carnal knowledge of a boar. Last week, or any week before that.

Perhaps, she thought, he meant bore. Or boor. For both words, in anyone's thesaurus, accurately described her ex-husband, Earl Doody, owner of *Earl's Donut Dunker's Shoppe*.

Could Balliwick, she thought, have witnessed the two of us somehow? It had been over twelve years ago, far too long to have caused the creation of this dirty little ditty. No--this couldn't be. It just didn't ring true.

And at no time in her life had she ever been referred to as a whore. A cocktease, yes, but no one could, not if they were honest, pin the label of whore on her.

Saying the unwholesome word in her mind made the word somehow fascinating. She mentally repeated the word to herself: Whore . . . Whore. *Twinge! Twinge!*

Below, Balliwick sang: "Ms. Pissyfoot is a whore. . . ." She mentally repeated: Whore. Whore. Balliwick sang: ". . . is a whore . . ." She, aloud now: "Whore. Whore" *Twinge, twinge!*

And wouldn't you know, they both said and sang the whore word at the *very same time!* And as each twinge, stirring, and strange, indescribable feeling cascaded over Ms. Prissyfoot, she found herself in tune with Balliwick. He wove and sang, she shuddered and sang. To the tune of "*It Ain't Gonna Rain No More, No More.*"

Both sang at the top of their lungs. And both sang for completely different--oh so different--reasons. Yin and yang, yang and yin.

For reasons known only to the Greek's Eros or the Roman's Cupid, or also, perhaps, Larry Flint, Xavier Hollander, John Holmes, and Tracy Lords, to mention but a smattering, her singing along with Balliwick fueled the erotic thoughts that now sped through her mind. And made her a tad wet, too.

Way beyond yin now, she leaned out over the window ledge even more to better observe and to get the now desperate attention of her Bertie, her hunk of burning love.

Her really bad, bad boy, who she was now ready--was she ever!--to give some really good yinning to. And she'd show that really bad, bad boy how to use his yang for all it was worth. You betcha.

That's when she saw the others. First, the officer approached and yelled something at her Bertie. Then, unbelievably, two more men--in pig masks of all things! It was surreal. And it all happened so quickly.

The bright light from the TV remote that hit the officer and made him fall to the ground. The two pig-men who tossed her hunk of burning love into the trunk of a waiting car. Then the car roared off and vanished into the black of night. Then only the sound of silence. It was as quiet and peaceful as a bridge over troubled waters. To paraphrase, of course.

The last thing Ms. Prissyfoot heard, just before the car roared off, was a muffled voice that came from the car's trunk: "*Lemme outta here, you rat bastards, or I'll shue your rotten assches off!*"

She wrote down the license plate of the car that now held her Bertie. Then she made a quick phone call to the police. When she went back to the window, the officer was gone.

And the game, as someone once said--though who knows why-- was most definitely afoot . . . or ahoof . . .

"You've got that special after-gloat!"

WITH THEIR DASTARDLY PLAN percolating, the two pig-like aliens had nothing more to do at the moment but kill time. So, they reminisced over their quite successful kidnapping of Balliwick, their first such attempt, but if all went in accordance with Hoyle, certainly not their last. Not by a long shot. They had plans.

Lieutenant Gron couldn't wait to contact the other Groinkians aboard the space vessel and fill them in. They'll be all ears, he thought, when I describes this particular Earthling's luscious and very bulbous Buddha-like belly. *Yummy, yummy!*

Gron was now in his true pig-like, but very humanoid, Groinkian form. Grin had also wanted to transform back, but Lieutenant Gron had ordered him to stay as he was, you betcha, more to assert his authority than for any sort of practical plan he might have in mind.

Lieutenant Gron started the let's-relive-it-and-gloat-shall-we-? ball rolling:

"Did you see the look of surprise on that cop's face?" he laughed. "It was priceless! When I zapped him with the Grun-gun, I thought I saw him actually salivate!"

Grin laughed heartily. "What setting did you hit him with?" he asked.

Now, Grin's knowledge of the Grun-gun was very extensive, probably much more than Gron's. He'd bet that Gron, the superior-my-ass Groinkian, wouldn't know that this particular Grun-gun was the Model 8.06.07, version 2, and fully field-tested. Not one of those Beta prototypes they usually throw at you, expecting you, the user, to work out all

the bugs for them. He was also sure Gron wouldn't know the difference between a Beta Model Grun-gun and a chicken salad sandwich.

"I had it set on Stun, Memory Loss, Ten Minutes." They both laughed. "There was no point," he had tears in his eyes, "in killing the cop by using the Evaporate Six setting,"

Grin nodded in agreement. Gron now said, "I read in one of their papernewses that cop-killers arouse what they call *too much heat*. And," he laughed, "we don't need them frying our bacon for us now, do we?" After this was said, the two aliens didn't just laugh, they roared. You betcha . . .



"Hi strangers, new in town?"

BALLIWICK, with a humongous effort, opened his eyes and blinked. Ow! It hurt just to blink. Musta been some party, he thought. His head felt as if it was split in two. His short-term memory was a jumble, a total mess.

Only fragments of memory came to him: Two men in pig masks, just like his own. They had wanted to drag him off to a party somewheres. A pig mask party, he guessed.

But they were nasty drunks, especially the little, runty one. And neither would sing along with him even though he knew he would have, drunk or sober, asked them both

very politely. As Momma had taught. Party-pooper pig men, he thought, who needs ya?

He looked around but saw only blackness. Had he gone blind, he wondered, blind from the Tequila? He'd heard a man could go blind from alcohol. Why couldn't he see? He felt what seemed to be a cot of some kind under him. He reached down and felt cloth.

"*If you've blinded me you dirty rotten bastard pig men*," he said aloud. "*I'll sue your rotten asses off!*" He shook a fist at the air. "*You hearing me?*" He turned his head to his right and saw a horizontal sliver of light. He blinked and blinked until he could see a little better.

The room he found himself in was unlit. What lighting did exist came from a large horizontal gap at the bottom of what appeared to be a heavy wooden door. And the floor of the room looked as if it was covered in kindling of some kind, such as straw.

As his eyes adjusted to the dimness, he looked around. His eyes hurt. They burned. He was thankful for the dimness, though. A bright light right about now would have caused him intense and immense pain. If not outright real blindness. Of that he had no doubts.

"Aaaaaaaaaaargh!" he screamed when he saw a lumpish, black shape on the floor near his feet. It stared back at him with shiny, beady, devil-like eyes. He was sure he was about to die. Killed by this amorphous creature with the eyes of Satan.

"Go away! Leave me alone!" he shouted to the strange mass as he cringed in fear and drew both feet up off the floor. "Please don't kill me!" His legs were drawn up to his chest and both arms were held out in a defensive posture. But nothing happened. So he tried a different tack. He leaned forward and looked down at the shape.

"*If you kill me, you rotten bastard,*" he screamed. "*I'll sue your rotten ass off!*" He was now in a furious litigious mood. The black shape refused to respond. Or to move.

"You deaf or something?" Balliwick yelled. "You big, black blob of shit, you."

No answer. And nothing happened. The mass refused to budge. Or to discuss the legal ramifications of their upcoming legal battle.

Balliwick decided to just sit there and await his death. But nothing happened. Was the creature just playing a cat and mouse game? For some reason, he didn't think so. It would have made its move by now. Maybe. No maybe about it. It most certainly would have done something by now. And it hadn't even tried to take even a nip out of him.

This thought put a small glimmer of bravery into him so he reached out to touch the mass with the toe of his right shoe. *Poke. Poke. Poke.* Nothing happened to him. Death wasn't home. Or maybe it was asleep. And the next poke would wake it. And, being annoyed at the intrusion into its rest, it would rise up and tear him apart. Nah, he thought, it probably ain't even there.

It's a trick of light, he thought, an illusion of some kind, an hallucination, like the DT's can cause. He just had fifteen too many boilermakers, that's all.

He tried to blink the illusion away. Still there. He closed his eyes real tight for a long minute then opened them. Still there. And it still looked at him with the unblinking eyes of Hell. Still big, and black, and amorphous. Still unmoved. Still there.

He was about to try another tentative, but harder poke, when the heavy door opened and bright light filled the room. He tried to see who was there but it was like looking into the sun. Blinding!

He raised a hand to shield his eyes and in doing so, saw that the mass he had poked was a large pig. It looked dead. Or, at least not in the mood to kill a Bert Balliwick.

From where the Sun was, he heard a conversation. But it was in a language he couldn't fathom. Petrified, he just sat on the cot and listened. And studied the pig.

"We should congratulate ourselves, Grin," said Lieutenant Gron. "He's a fine specimen!" He ran his tongue over his lips as he eyed Balliwick.

Grin nodded and said, "Sure is, Sir. And get a load of that superb belly! He won't need much fattening up, that's for certain." He waited for his superior's response.

"True." said Gron. "And Major Grok should be very pleased with our first "Phase One" accomplishment." Gron then looked as if in deep thought. "But, Grin?"

"Yes, Sir?"

"Before we hand him over, let's interrogate him somewhat. It can't hurt to turn in some more data on these Earthlings at the same time, now can it?"

Grin smiled. "Not at all, Sir, not one bit. And I have the "Questions-To-Ask-Earthlings" form right here, Sir." He tapped his brief case.

To Balliwick this sounded like just so much gobbledygook. The only sure thing he could discern was that one of them sounded feminine and the other bass.

"OK, Grin. Get our little fatted calf in the mood for a wee chat."

"Yes, Sir!" He turned toward Balliwick.

"Get off your dead ass," Grin's bass voice barked in English, "you sorry sack of shit! And stand at attention!"

Balliwick didn't need to be told twice, you betcha. Maybe he never served in the military, but any Marine drill sergeant would have been proud of how Balliwick snapped to stand stiff attention, in a blur from a seated position, and in direct violation of Einstein's premise that mass cannot travel faster than the speed of light or it will turn into energy and blow itself up.

And the "Yes, sir!" he threw in, in mid-flight as it were, was beyond impressive. Of course, when he brought his right hand up in a smart salute, one might say the guy was just crapping-in-his-pants scared and ready to play kissy-ass all over the place.

The two alien creatures came out of the sun and stood directly in front of Balliwick. With the bright light on his right, Balliwick could see the two clearly now. Immediately, even old Balliwick surmised they were aliens. No doubt about it, he thought, these two guys are aliens!

Then he did what all the Balliwick's of the world do in this situation. He crapped his pants and peed. Simultaneously and without ceremony. But if the aliens noticed it, you would never know it. They said nothing.

Balliwick, his salute hand still up at full tilt, looked at the two pig-like creatures. A tall one and a smaller one. Human-like and standing on two legs just like him.

Somehow he felt no fear. No threat, either. They reminded him of some of the

strange creatures he had often seen on Star Trek, odd looking, yes--but Earth-friendly, too.

Humans and aliens playing at grab-ass. He was sorry now he hadn't better control of his bodily functions. Well, he thought, maybe they won't notice. Or maybe, he thought again, they'll take it as some kind of Earth greeting. After all, I am in full military salute mode now, ain't I?

His eyes took in their uniforms and he was astonished. The pig people looked magnificent! Bright blue tunic tops with black and gold trimmings. Gray trousers with wide blue stripes that ran down each side, a smaller stripe of gold in the middle. Snappy, thought Balliwick, just like the Marine dress uniforms. Only somehow better.

And medals! Both had a bunch, but the smaller of the two--well! -- He was fairly festooned with them. Balliwick felt as if he had just been inducted into a new branch of the military that would surpass even the Marines.

"Put that arm down, Earthling!" the taller one said in his harsh bass voice.

"Yes, Sir!" said Balliwick as he obeyed in military style, to be sure, with a sharp outward snap of his arm. He had been right! Aliens! The thing had just called him Earthling! Wow!

"Now," the higher voice said. "I am Lieutenant Gron. With me is Lieutenant Junior Grade Grin," he pointed to his right. "We will now ask you some questions and if you lie to us, we will kill you before the full lie leaves your lips," he now placed both hands on Balliwick's shoulders, "Do you understand, Earthling?"

Balliwick threw another "Yes, Sir!" at him. They seemed to like that so Balliwick made a small mental note to use it as often as seemed militarily appropriate. He made another small mental note to tell them the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me, God! Cross my heart and hope to die. On my Momma's grave, bless her soul.

But, hey, thought Balliwick, a Lieutenant and a Lieutenant Junior Grade. Wow! Military for sure, you betcha. Eat your heart out, Marines!

They asked him a batch of question to which Balliwick knew every answer. Name? Age? Sex? Height? Weight? Hair Color? Eye Color? Race? Address? How long at current address? Telephone Number? Last place of employment? How long at last place of employment? Reason for leaving last place of employment? Armed Forces Served? Highest School Grade Completed? Any college? Any Criminal Record? And so on.

Balliwick answered in military smartness with "Yes, Sir's!" thrown out all over the place, with the appropriate "No, Sir's" where called for. What Balliwick didn't know or care about, was where the alien pig-like people had gotten this life-or-death, ask-the-Earthling questions. A job application form for Seven Eleven.

Question time came to an end. And, seemingly satisfied with Balliwick's answers, Grin, the taller of the two aliens, reached out and gently patted Balliwick's stomach. Grin gave a glance in the direction of his fellow and superior officer. They exchanged knowing smiles. "Filet!" said Grin in English. Gron smiled and said, "Grigga Guttla, Grin!" Balliwick smiled. They liked him! And he had passed their difficult test. Now, if they only forget to check for flat feet . . .

"Now my friend," the senior officer, the feminine-sounding voice said. "We're going to bring you a sumptuous meal that we know you will really love." He smiled at Balliwick.

"Thank you, Sir" said Balliwick. "I am a mite hungry, Sir!" He threw them another snappy salute. And to his utter amazement and absolute great delight, they *both* saluted back! Wow! He thought, Just like in the Marines. Only better! Much, much better. Wow!

As the two alien creatures headed for the blinding sun, Balliwick's fear surfaced when heard one of them say, in English, "Gotta get 'im good an' guttier for our Grok." But when this was quickly followed by "Getta gitta godda grutta Grox," or something to that effect, he was pretty sure he had merely misunderstood.

The door closed and Balliwick heard it lock. Then to Balliwick's delight, a ceiling light came on. As Balliwick sat back down on what he now saw was a small army cot, he spoke in a whisper that only a dead mass of pig, like the one now lay at his feet, could hear:

"This ain't so bad!" He looked down at the pig. "I might be a prisoner or something at the moment, but I'm good with the Southern charm and they seem to like me." He reached down and pulled on the pig's left ear. "If I play my cards right . . . who knows? . . . I just might end up a Lieutenant . . . Or a Major . . . or . . . why not? . . . A Captain!" He tugged playfully on the pig's other ear. "In their space army!" The pig's eyes looked directly into his but didn't even so much as blink.

Thus filled with new possibilities, as he sure was, he reached out with both hands and lifted the pig's big, heavy face off the floor. He cradled the head between his hands and looked directly into the sad sack, lackluster eyes, which were now mere inches from his own. He then said, this time louder than a whisper, much louder, more reminiscent of a snappy Marine drill sergeant's bark:

"Get off your dead ass, you sorry sack of shit! And stand at attention!" Hell, no harm in practicing for that soon-to-be Lieutenant-ship, Major-ship or Captain-ship, now is there?

Delighted with himself, as he sure was, Balliwick felt something beside him on the cot. "Hello pig mask!" he said. He picked it up to fondle the snout a few times before trying it on.

Perhaps it would impress Lieutenant Gron. Show a little pig-like kinship or something, if you will. He squeezed the familiar porcine proboscis. Balliwick felt the magic it possessed immediately. Power! Delicious and corruptive power.

Slowly, and with great reverence, he raised the magical pig mask and pressed it to his unshaven face. Ugh! Double fucking yucky ugh! His entire face felt the lumpy and still moist stickiness of his own, and very recent, vomit.

What goes around, Balliwick, comes around! Geez, Balliwick . . . any self-respecting Marine knows that . . .

.
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"But can you do the Ugha Mugha?"

BALLIWICK felt better, a whole lot better, if you must know. He was now fully sober, helped in part by the passage of time and the 'sumptuous' meal provided by his captors.

The taller, feminine sounding alien had served him, pardon the pun, right proper as far as Balliwick was concerned. And yes, Balliwick had loved the meal just as the aliens said he would. Even better than one of his favorites, Hearty Choice's Grilled Chicken Breast & Mashed Potatoes.

That it was take-out he had no doubts, for he couldn't picture the two magnificently dressed military-like aliens slaving over a hot stove. But, he thought, for take-out, it sure was fantastic. Roast chicken, mashed potatoes, smooth gravy, pearl onions, carrots, and a nice slice of apple pie. He didn't eat that well too often, he could tell you.

They had offered him seconds, fairly insisted, they had, but he refused, not wanting, as his Momma had taught him, to make a pig of himself.

He looked down at his roommate, whom he now knew was not merely unconscious, but was quite dead. But even dead, it looked very natural lying there on the straw covered floor. As if it was only asleep in its proper home.

Balliwick felt a prayer of some kind was in order, but not being able to recall one or one that fit, he simply said aloud: "This little piggy went to market. This little piggy stayed home. This little piggy had roast beef. And this little piggy, bless him God, had none." He crossed himself the way he had seen them do on TV, and he was sure that what he had just done had helped the big fella get into hog heaven.

Thus well fed, sober and with nothing to do but think, Balliwick sat on the army cot and thought. There were things bouncing around in his mind that he didn't like, not one bit.

For starters, the alien who delivered the meal had made a few wisecracks about fattening him up. And the way the alien had of constantly patting his belly and smiling didn't sit too well either. Not a bit. Then there was the comment one of them had made on their first encounter, something again about a gut and their Grok or something. Maybe he *hadn't* misunderstood. He tried to remember the exact words. No go.

But he now felt uneasy and he didn't know exactly why. The fattening him up talk or something. Farmers talked like that when they were fattening up a turkey for the upcoming Thanksgiving. Then . . .

HOLY SHIT! thought Balliwick, when full realization finally dropped in, THEY WANT TO EAT ME! And serve me up, fat and proper, to their Grok thing. Now our Bertie may not be the brightest bulb in the box, but even a blind pig will find a truffle now and then.

"Well," he whispered to the dead pig. "*If these pig-faced bastards eat me . . . I'll sue their rotten pig-faced asses off!*" The dead pig offered no argument to his legal threat.

Balkiwick looked around the room and took in the straw-strewn floor, the cot, its blanket, and the pig. He then formulated an escape plan. Now was it a good plan, like one you or I might conceive? Or a master spy, such as a MacGiver, might dream up?

Well, as plans go, some people might say it sucked big time, was totally hare-brained and had the chance of a snowball in Hades. But other people might also say, any plan beats no plan at all. Everyday of the week and twice on Sunday, you betcha!

Balliwick worked quickly and with great purpose. He took off his belt and proceeded to hone the big, brass buckle on the concrete floor that waited for new rugs to be put down. The work went surprisingly fast as in less than ten minutes the buckle was indeed razor sharp. He pinged it with his right thumb. Ouch!

He reached down and placed the buckle's sharpened end against the pig's fleshy stomach. He pressed it into the skin. Then he cut and he cut and he cut. Pig blood and pig entrails poured out all over his hands, his trouser legs, his shoes. And the straw-covered floor.

He cut some more, with a stop here and there to pull out a heart, a kidney, a lung. *Yuck!* A pig brain! *Double Yuck!* He flung these very bloody items under the army cot. Again the work went surprisingly fast.

In less than half an hour he had almost completely hollowed out the large dead pig. Then to hide the pig-bloody floor, he grabbed up numerous clumps of straw. You learning anything, Mister MacGiver?

He sat back to admire his handiwork. He inspected the area for any tell-tale signs of pig blood. Well done, Bertie, he thought when he couldn't see even a trace.

He then shuddered thinking about the next phase of his escape plan: Hiding inside the dead pig's hollowed out carcass! Ugha Mugh!

But a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do, dontcha know? So Balliwick grabbed his pig mask, stuffed it under his tee shirt and crossed himself, just like on TV. He thought: Save me Momma! Save your ever-loving Bertie boy.

Thus with pig blood all over his hands and pants and a red tee shirt that now had only a few white letters untouched by pig blood, MPE FI, Balliwick did the Ugha Mugh.

He went in feet first, which is the way MacGiver probably would have, and when he was half-in and half-out, he whispered conspiratorially into the dead pig's right ear, "Eat me? In a pig's eye they will!" Then the rest of him disappeared into the pig and he was nestled all snug and cozy, safe and warm. Totally hidden.

Now, hiding inside a hollowed-out dead hog's carcass isn't so bad. That is, if you like being up to your eyeballs in pig blood, remaining miscellaneous pig entrail bits, and a stench that could knock the balls off of a brass monkey. Shit! All old Macgiver ever needed was a screwdriver, some Scotch tape, and a thumbtack!

Our fearless hero, ensconced as he was, still prayed to his Momma. With no idea just how long he would have to wait. Two minutes would be too long for Mister MacGiver! He also had no idea if his plan would even fool the Smarter-Than-All-Earthlings aliens. So, as he held his nose, he waited. And waited.

Both answers came to him one hour later. Though he was almost unconscious from the heat generated by his own body, and from breathing in the charming air-choking odors, he heard the door to his straw-strewn sty open, followed by the alien's gobbledygook-like chatter.

The aliens spoke only in Groinkian. Not knowing Groinkian, Balliwick listened in great fear and horrifying dread. A translation is supplied here for you other Earthlings who also might not be as fluent in the Groinkian language as you ought to be (and please, and on your own time, at least learn how to ask for directions to the *Groinkian Gallery of Semi-Nude Statues*):

Gron: He's gone!

Grin: What? How can this be, Sir?

Gron: I don't know! Perhaps he somehow picked the lock. He looked as stupid as a bag of hammers, but perhaps we underestimated him. These Earthlings, Grin, may not be as stupid as we give them credit for. Damn and fuck it all to Hell, Grin!

It was here that Lieutenant Gron, a mite miffed, one could say, kicked the dead pig squarely in the head with the tip of his steel-tipped military-style boot. *THWUNK!* Since it didn't give him the immediate relief he sought, he kicked it again. *THWANK!*

Now, Balliwick might have let out an expected "Ouch" or somesuch, but that first kick, planted right in the middle of the top of his head, knocked him out for the count. The second kick was merely icing on the cake, if you get the drift.

Grin: Sir, I suggest we take the car and hunt this man down. If he gets to the authorities . . . "

Gron: Grin! Get the car started! I'll do a quick search of the other rooms. And Grin? Let's dump the uniforms!

Grin: Yes, Sir! And Sir? What should I do with the dead pig?

Gron: Who cares about the . . . oh . . . uh . . . have one of the orderlies, Grin, throw it in the Groat-Sturnacker. (Loose translation: Blackened Toast device.)

Grin: "Yes, Sir!

Grin turned to leave and said, under his breath, and surely low enough so as not to be heard by his superior: "Gruse Gonky Ge Gron, Gra Gro." (This Smarter-My-Ass Lt. Gron is an idiot!)

Move over MacGiver! Bertram Burlappe Balliwick is in town! If he didn't die from those steel-tipped kicks, that is.

Ain't it funny how life sometimes turns out? If the two pig-like aliens had lingered just forty one more seconds, maybe forty two, they would have heard the world's first dead pig moan.

Thank your Angel, Bertie! And your Momma.

And all those MacGiver reruns you've watched . . .

"So long, suckers!"

BALLIWICK'S further escape, for escape he finally did, was nothing short of miraculous. The two Groinkian officers, Gron and Grin, had unknowingly assisted in this endeavor when they gave the command, to a newly landed subordinate, to have the pig's remains destroyed. Now, normally that would have meant a quick pitch into the Groat-Sturnacker

which would have reduced the molecules to less than ashes, but then we'd have no Balliwick to speak of.

Fortunately for our Balliwick, the underling (a slave-gossix--see Glossary) had a very loose interpretation of his superior's command, coupled with a burning desire to try his first Earth cuisine--barbequed pig.

With that in mind, he had loaded the pig carcass into one of the their delivery trucks (they had a small fleet of them on earth for spying and reconnaissance purposes).

All the trucks had the words G.O.D. in large letters on their sides. Those letters, the aliens thought, gave the conveyances some prestige, as they had gleaned from their initial investigations of Earth that the term had a deeply religious significance.

However, after they had arrived here, further investigation uncovered the fact that the term meant Guaranteed Overnight Delivery. They thus assumed that these Earth creatures really had a thing for getting from point 'A' to point 'B.' A noble trait. But they had not yet developed true space travel.

It was on this misconceptions that the Groinkians had placed airports as places of worship and thus avoided them. Not in deference to the lowly Earth creatures, but to ensure that *if*, just *if*, mind you, the Earthling's G.O.D. was *really* omnipotent--they wouldn't step on his toes and incur his wrath.

In any event, the Groinkian slave-gossix took the unconscious-in-a-dead-pig Balliwick to a public campground where there were barbeque setups, for the purpose of having his very own picnic. And, like many other Groinkian infiltrators who venture out in public, he wore a mask given to him by his supply Sergeant. A semi-realstic version of Richard Nixon.

To further the disguise, he cleverly wore one of those Groucho Marx-type glasses with the big nose and a moustache under it. He thought he blended right in.

Our Balliwick's luck held, as in the time it took for the alien to get his charcoal going (and don't we know how that nuisance can go) Balliwick had awakened, gathered his wits, which didn't take long, and ran as if the devil was after him. And, one could say, he really was.

The gossix, completely unaware of Balliwick's departure, went about his business and had succeeded in cooking the remains of the pig. Though his barbeque sauce would leave a lot to be desired, considering he-she-it had used green chili peppers instead of red tomatoes in its creation.

Earthlings: Make a note to add color-blindness to the list of Groinkian shortcomings. Who knows, it just might save the planet . . .

"Quiet in class, children!"

IT IS PRUDENT PERHAPS, at this point in our little story, to pick up a smattering of Groinkian knowledge. One must know one's enemy to defeat them, now mustn't one?

That said, let us first start with the word Groink. It is a word that is impossible for any Earthling to pronounce. Humans lack the throat structure necessary to do the word full

justice. To understand this, let me just say that it is similar, though not exactly so, to the problems the Chinese have with the letters 'R' and 'L.' "Rotsa ruck on your erection!," comes handily to mind.

Compare this to the fact that most Groinkians have no trouble with the word whatsoever. It would seem as if they've practiced saying the word for a long, long time. You betcha.

Now I've spelled the word out for you, dear reader, as best I could, in an imitation to its actual sounding, as if the word groin had a "K" nailed to its ass. But that also doesn't do it full justice. Close José, but no cigaro!

A better idea, to fathom the actual sound of the word, is to do a little experiment. As an aside, dear reader, if I could do this for you (you lazy shit!) I would. But this being print media, I can't--so I won't!

That said, gentle reader, here's your assignment: Take an egg, large size mind you, not the wee-wee ones you find over at *Werner Von Schtup's* egg farm, nor the super-duper ones they now hawk at *The New-Southerner's Supermarket & Grocery 1 Stop*, you know, the big one that's across from *Bessie Frommer's Antiques A-Go-Go*. And not the old one they tore down recently. Well, anyway...

Drop the egg from an exact height of three feet, measuring for accuracy with a dressmaker's wooden yard stick. Now if that old egg happens to land smack-dab on the bass strings of an acoustical guitar--voila!--you have a very close representation, relatively speaking of course, of what the word Groink sounds like when uttered by a native-born Groinkian.

But even that still fails to do it full justice for, in a word, the word's exact sound still remains elusive. Some words in our own world do that too, if it must be told. And it must!

The words BANG! (or BLAM!) do *not accurately* describe the true sound a gun makes when fired. Listen next time more closely. Things (even bodies) do *not* go THUD when they hit the floor. SCREEEEK is certainly *not* the exact sound fingernails make when scratched across that damn Fuck-It-All-To-Hell blackboard. Mice do not really SQUEAK. All close, but still no cigar, Alphonse.

These sounds, and many more just like them, are impossible for us to spell out in words or, for that matter, to sound out phonetically and capture their true essence.

Even the many onomatopoetic words we use frequently in our feeble, though well-meaning attempts to imitate the sounds around us, fall short:

Do balloons *really* go POP when stuck with a pin? Do bees *really* BUZZ? Does breaking glass *really* make a TINKLE sound? Do snakes *really* HISS? One has to answer, and rightfully so,--no, no, no, and no. Try listening real hard to these sounds sometime. Next time you are confronted by a hissing snake, try listening more intently. You'll be surprised!

Now students, at this point I will go and refresh my drink while you gather up that large egg and that guitar, acoustical-type, of course.

Sound of twenty-five year old Chivas Regal being poured into crystal-cut Old Fashioned-type glass (Sloush sloush). Sound of fridge being opened (Squink). Sound

of ice being pried from tray (Scriiitch). Sound of one cube being dropped into glass (Splush tunkle). *Sip, sip!* Sound of fridge door being closed because it was forgotten (Slam!). *Sip, sip! Aaaaaah!*

Well I'm back!-- *Sip!*--And I know that those of you who took advantage of the recess to perform our little experiment now have a much better idea of what the word groink sounds like. *Bully for you! Well done! Cheers! Sip, sip!*

We now turn our attention to the shructure--uh--structure--of the Groinkian culture or society, if you will. To merely say that they are a militaristic society is to give the meaning short shrift. One might, quite erroneously, picture a civilian population supporting a military armed-forces. Far from it! Bullshit! Or, as Ms. Prissyfoot would say, "Poppycock!"

For, you see, *every native-born Groinkian is in the military!* Soldiers--of course--but also cooks, bartenders, waitresses, you name it, all have a name, rank, and serial number.

All serve the High Central Command, the supreme leaders of this entirely militaristic planet. Thus the echelon of command would be, with the highest first:

HCC officials, military officers, followed by all the rest--the ones who serve. The only status being that of one's military rank. "You! Yes, you! The one pumping gas over at *Ernie's Lube & Pizza Palace!* Straighten that tie, Private!" To which the "You!" in question would have only one answer: "Yes, Sir!" If he knew what was good for him, or her, that is.

Groinkian economy. What a hoot! Ain't nothing like it on this here Earth, and in all likelihood, there never will be. Not in our lifetime, that's a given! For you see, the Groinkians use *no currency!* There's no money. Not a peso, a franc, or even a good old American dollar. Or a Groinkian twenty dollar piece. *Nada! Zippo! Zilch!*

If a Groinkian needs something, say food or a new color TV, they just go and take it! Simple as shit and twice as easy. (I'm sure this has vast appeal to all you shiftless slackers out there, but not so fast lazy ass!) Somebody has to produce the goods, the food, and all those color TV's. Those somebodies are slaves, of which there are two very distinct types: Native-born Groinkian slaves and imported slaves.

Let us take the imported slaves first. Groinkians capture these slaves by making pirate-like raids on nearby planets. Brought to Goink in huge cargo craft, they do all of the hard labor. They work in the mines, at the many plantations, and in every other endeavor requiring hard work and long hours. Long hours meaning sixteen hour days, seven days a week.

They toil this way in the knowledge that if they miss even one sixteen hour day they will be hit with a Grun gun set on the Evaporate Six setting. Thus getting sick, even one day, is a death sentence. No calling in with the the fake flu.

Some of this horrible sorrow takes place in Groinkian slave compounds. Picture a round structure, ten feet high and as wide across as two football fields, made out of a concrete-like substance, the ceiling nonexistent, and traversed by many catwalks, where guards look down, alert-as-all-Hell, Grun-guns set on E6.

Enter the compound and you will find no wall of any description, only large, square support columns. Neither will you find any beds. The slaves sleep on the floor, on the large, wide leaves of the Grippa-grippa bush, the species grown in the Glinna Valley, not the inferior and smaller plant found in abundance throughout the Groinkian countryside. Fairly rife alongside the highways.

Hundreds of imported slaves occupy each compound, of which there are untold thousands such structures baking in the Groinkian sun. And if someone were to look down upon the slaves from the catwalk, with or without a Grun gun, a sardine tin would surely come to mind. *Take note, slackers!*

Imported slaves thus have a very shortened expectation of longevity, with eighteen to twenty-five years, maybe, being the norm. A short life span, for sure, but way too long when it comes to the brutality they're put through. The smallest infraction of compound rules, such as talking in the mess line, or waving yoo-hoo to a friend, brings a quick suffering of the whip, the billy club or a sharp kick with those steel-tipped military-style boots. And usually, partial-amnesia is *not* the end result.

The Groinkians also breed some of the imported slaves with two other purposes in mind: As a foodstuff (*yummy?*), and to replenish the constantly, and understandably, dwindling work force. Attrition being what it is.

Slaves bred for food have the better life of the two. For starters, they are forced *not* to work! Working builds muscle, and muscle leads to meat that is tough and stringy. And as any Groinkian chef, of any rank, officer or neophyte server, will quickly tell you: "*That's a no-no!*"

Secondly, they are housed in much better quarters, quarters that more resemble apartment-style living, with real beds and most household amenities, such as toasters and waffle irons and, now and then, it's been rumored,--a teflon-coated frying pan.

Thirdly, they are very well fed, *you betcha*, with the key words being *very well*. Seven days a week, twenty four hours a day, they have their pick from a veritable gourmand's feast.

The choicest Groinkian food, as prepared by the finest gourmet-style Groinkians chefs is at their beck and call. And it's an Eat-All-You-Want buffet! In fact, the *more* you eat, the *better* the Groinkian guards will treat you. Want to watch color TV? Eat up! Need a haircut? Eat up! Want Lee's Press-On Nails? Eat up! *You luscious, fattened-up plump little darling!*

Unfortunately, this Life-O'-Riley existence is also short lived as they are herded to the slaughter houses at exactly ten years of age. I don't have to tell you here what a Groinkian chef would say about old meat, now do I? Didn't think so.

On the other hand, the native-born Groinkian slaves tell an entirely different story. Slaves they are, but the word doesn't say it all when you consider they can go anywhere on the planet they choose to, no questions asked.

And do anything they want to do, so long as they don't step on the toes of a Groinkian officer or official. Thus they have complete and total freedom, so long as their chores are done, that is. For they too have a name, rank, and serial number. They are the grunts,

as it were, of the Groinkian military, with Corporal being the highest rank they are allowed to attain.

To more fully appreciate and understand the native-born Gronkian slaves, we must delve into their background. They first appeared hundreds of thousands of years ago as a Groinkian hybrid. How this came to be is buried in the sands of history, but one scientific fact is known for sure: *They be weird!*

Falling into two distinct classes, which loosely translates from the Groinkian as gossix and gammix, they have the sexual apparatus, full genitalia mind you, of both sexes but without the ability to reproduce. As sterile as a cork bottle-stopper, if you will.

The genre may be further broken down into two very distinct classifications: The larger, masculine-looking gossix, and the smaller, more feminine-looking gammix.

Gossixi, (Plural) at well over six feet tall, on average, and weighing around two hundred pounds of solid muscle, are used for heavy-duty work, but not on the scale associated with the imported slaves.

In contrast, they only have to put in a normal nine hour workday. That they thus produce eighty percent of all needed goods, should now come as no surprise. Many are employed as those aforementioned grunts of the military, doing general grunt work, guard duty and strongarm assignments. Others are used as sexual surrogates by officer's and official's wives, not to mention any single Groinkian female seeking a little excitement. *Twinge! Twinge!*

Gammixi, (Plural) stand, on average, at five-feet-five inches. They are often put to work (again only nine hours a day) doing household chores, such as sewing, cooking, and cleaning.

They are also used in the rearing of their Master's children. And being as beautiful as Groinkian women can be beautiful, they will eagerly answer the military call to duty when it comes to serving--and servicing--officers and high officials. *Oink, oink!*

In further contrast to the imported slaves, it should be noted that gossixi and gammixi are not only *not* mistreated by their masters, they are esteemed and revered! In fact, it is a crime, punishable by E6, to mistreat one of them. Their work efforts too, are also greatly appreciated by all Gronkian uppercrust and they are often rewarded with extra time off, a sort of shore leave, if you will.

One last lesson on these hybrid Groinkian-slave creatures and I will dismiss the class. They are incapable of possessing anything even remotely resembling an angry thought. Hence, violence is not a part of their intrinsic nature.

Oh, they'd kill you in a New York second and eat pizza off your sorry-ass, dead carcass, but only if ordered to do so by a superior officer. In other words, they would carry out this form of assassination with quick, mindless dispatch and, when the mission was accomplished, they would go in to do the laundry or cook dinner.

Now this placid and serene creature did not come about by any act of nature, you betcha. They are raised, if one could call it that, to be this way.

With their otherness (two ballies *and* a hole) noted at birth, they are taken to a special hospital for rearing and training. Here, they receive no education, other than the fact

that, from the moment they speak word one, they are taught to serve and follow orders.

To this end, they are shown great amounts of nurturing and love. Geared, nurturingly and lovingly, of course, to their future of a lifetime of military servitude. Into which they are inducted at aged ten and furnished with a smart, magnificent Balliwick-Will-Love-It! uniform.

There is a pitfall in all of this, however. A wee problem. Having a dumb, unsophisticated creature on your hands, especially one of those, let's say, huge gossixi, could lead to trouble, no matter how much nurturing and love you've fed it. Their brain, as brains go, could do a flip-flop one fine day and an officer, or high official, if you will, could find himself, or herself, with their head ripped off and both feet sticking out of the Groal-Sturnacker! This wouldn't do, thank you.

But no free Groinkian need fear this little scenario. No sirree! Not after Dr. Greevo, a full Lieutenant, PhD, and anatamist, mind you, discovered a method for replacing part of the cerebral cortex with a wee Eat-Your-Heart-Out-Intel-like chip, no bigger than a grain of salt, that controlled, it was said, and history bears it out, any and all propensities for violence.

That his advanced work in such matters received the planet's highest accolades, the prestigious *Glossix for Scientific Gossix and Gammix Research* award, the one in use since AD 1973 and not the one that fell out of favor due to that horrible sex scandal involving--well anyway, not that one!--should come as no surprise.

"Class dismissed!"

"Show me the way to go home!"

BALLIWICK had to stop running. For one thing he was totally out of breath and, for another, he was truly confused. He didn't know it, couldn't know it, but it seems that one of those kicks--perhaps both--that Lieutenant Gron executed had hit poor Balliwick hard enough, and at such an angle, so as to give him a rare form of partial amnesia. (See: *It's All In Your Other Mind* by Dr. Fügenfaster, PhD, *Psychology Right Now*, June 2012, page 233-275 for an in-depth analysis on his ground-breaking methods for treating, As Fügenfaster puts it, "this rare, but *frequently occurring*, psychological disorder.")

You can also find it at www.Psychobab.edu. It's fascinating reading for all you PhD wannabees out there.

This semi-amnesia, if you will, affected Balliwick in a strange way. He knew his name, but not where he lived. He knew someone was after him and meant him harm, for sure, but he didn't know why. Or just who they were. He knew he loved Virginia ham and crispy bacon, but somehow now feared pigs. And he couldn't erase the rotted flesh smell from his nostrils. Even with a Vick's inhaler spray, in the family size.

In his present state, the details could flip over at any time. At one moment, he might think the aliens his best friends, piggy-pals, and the next, the truth. This turn of events could prove quite nettlesome if Balliwick were ever to meet up again with his alien captors.

As he hid behind a dumpster, Balliwick regrouped his thoughts. He looked down at his gore covered clothes and he knew he had to go home and get cleaned up. A stranger passing by would have looked upon a man covered with blood and gore, with vomit on his face, who smelled like Satan's armpit. Or asshole. Take your pick.

Where do I live? he thought. He searched his now fractured memory. No go. His home address remained elusive to him. He could picture an address in his mind, but it was hazy, out of focus. It swam around in his brain like a sperm without an egg. Going nowhere. Like that word that's always on the tip of one's tongue that isn't *really* on the tip of one's tongue, but we say it is.

Then, as sometimes happens with this rare semi-amnesia, it came to him. Like a bolt out of the old blue: 1411 Magnolia Lane. His home! Had to be. Why, he could now even remember the bathroom. It was decorated all in blue, his favorite color.

Funny, he thought, I can only picture it through a window of some kind. But no matter. He now had somewhere to go. And a nice blue bathroom to get cleaned up in. Thank you, Momma, he said to himself.

He felt something lumpy under his tee shirt, pressed against his stomach. He lifted the front of the shirt and pulled the object out. A pig mask. Yuck. It looked uglier than usual, being covered now in pig gore. And the sight of it rang no memory bells for our Balliwick.

It merely disgusted him just to look at the ugly, sloppy thing. Ugh! he thought, as he, with a deft swing of his arm, tossed the mask and what ever magic it once possessed, onto the top of the dumpster.

Then without the waste of even another second, he set off for his home, the one with the bathroom. The one he now remembered. The one with his favorite color . . .

"I can sew that in a minute!"

"WELL, HOW ABOUT THAT? The pigs are back!" said Detective Clu Sniffer.

This was said to Police Chief Melrose in a matter-of-fact way, as if it were a daily occurrence. Sniffer clutched a computer printout in his right hand.

"Let me see that!" the Chief barked as he snatched the paper from Sniffer. He scanned it. The report gave the information that one Ms. Prissyfoot, a school teacher, had called in to say she had witnessed a kidnapping. Right in front of her building. She had seen it all happen.

Two men, the report told the Chief, one tall, one short, in pig masks no less, had kidnapped an ex-student of hers, one Bertram Burlappe Balliwick, a guy she said was real bad, and they had put him into a car's trunk. And roared off into the black of night.

And an officer had been shot or something. With a TV remote, no less. And when the car had roared away, she had taken down the license plate number and called the police. By the time she went back to her front window, the officer was gone. Just gone. One minute he had been there, the next, just gone. Poof! Gone.

When the Chief finally looked up, Sniffer said, "Chief, I've checked. We've had no report of an officer being shot. None. Zippo." Sniffer took a step closer to the Chief's desk. "And the only officer in that vicinity was Fugsnot, and he's alive and kicking . . . somewhat. True, Fugass might choke on a donut and die some day, but for now he says he saw nothing amiss." The Chief just stared at him, chewed his lip and seemed to be in deep thought.

Sniffer picked up a pencil from the Chief's desk, twirled it around and said, "And Fugballs was less than a block from where this was all supposed to have taken place." The Chief hadn't heard him or, if he did, had chosen not to respond. So he went on, more forcefully.

"Chief? I think perhaps the school marm maybe had a little too much unwinding-after-class vino, if you get my drift. Or maybe she's just looking for a little attention. You know, have the boys in blue in so she can show 'em her Sharon Stone impression. Get her jollies a tad, if you get my drift. Chief? Fuggy is sure he . . ."

The Chief said, more to himself than anyone else, "Hmmm, just two of them." Then he looked up, totally ignored Sniffer and addressed the room:

"Pay attention!" Everyone did. "Get a roadblock set-up, here! . . . here! . . . and one here!" He stabbed at the command center's wall map with his expensive pointer, the one with his full name, Chief Busby Havelock Waterford Melrose, engraved in gold on it. The very same pointer he had received as a gift from the mayor himself, dontcha know? Sniffer felt ignored and shrugged his shoulders. It was now the Chief's show.

Officers scurried to follow the Chief's orders and for a moment it seemed chaotic. But the Chief knew that all operations began just this same way, in what he usually referred to as organized chaos. A phrase he was proud of for having coined.

Sniffer approached the Chief. He had something to say. Someone, he thought, has to stop this mad crap and put it in perspective. His attempt never got the chance.

Proud of the way he had taken control of the situation, the Chief slapped the pointer to his side. Doing so, the pointer's tip, as sharp as a razor, caught a loose thread and caused a fine, but sure, four inch tear in his thousand dollar Brooks Brothers suit. The suit had been custom-tailored to his rotund shape, with extra cloth built into the vest front.

Everyone in the room saw the action, Sniffer included, but none dared comment on it. The Chief least of all. Sniffer frowned. This was not the moment to brunt his superior.

It was at this precise moment that another man entered the room unannounced, unknown to all, and walked directly up to Chief Melrose as if he was expected by him. He wasn't.

The Chief glared at the intruder as he surreptitiously fingered the rip. The man's eyes followed this action and he responded with a small chuckle, which created an air of tension that even the pointer's razor sharpness would not be able to cut.

"Who in Hell are you?" Chief Melrose demanded. He was pissed at this intrusion and wanted to regain his authority.

The man said simply and calmly, "We have to talk, Chief!" He reinforced his words with the show of a small black leather wallet that he deftly flipped open to reveal an identity card and a badge. They matched. FBI.

"Oh, great!" was all Chief Melrose could muster up . . .

"Heeeeeeeeere's . . . !"

THE SUPREME COMMANDER looked as impatient and fidgety as a child waiting for his Mother to check the Halloween candy for razor blades and needle-punctured wrappers before she would let him have any. "C'mon, Ma, I don't care if I die! Gimme the Mars Bar, at least."

He now paced back and forth, hands clasped behind his back, on a posh Supreme Commander's carpet that was covered in pink roses. The roses were set off delicately against a light blue background. His glixizza made a swish-swish sound with his every step and a definite ka-woosh when he made his turn arounds.



The Supreme Commander of all Groinkians. His normally white, fountain-like Glixizza has been dyed in the latest fashion colors. It has also been starched to maintain its shape.

He looked down as he paced and admired the roses, his choice. Ms. Grilla, his personal Supreme Commander's secretary, had heartily recommended red Fuschias on a green background, but he felt it was too jarring. And besides, it definitely clashed with his natural rosy-pink flesh tone and light lavender eyes. He was now glad he hadn't listened to her. Once more.

His meeting with General Grus, his personally appointed OCE of AIF: OPE (Overall Commander Elite of All Invasiary Forces: Objective Planet Earth), wasn't for another five minutes and he just hated the wait time. He paced some more and started to count the roses.

At three hundred nineteen roses, the secretary buzzed and informed him of the General's arrival. Ah, he thought, showtime!

General Grus entered. At five feet ten inches tall, he was considered a runt by Groinkian standards. But he gained a few inches when he stood on his many decorations and medals.

The Supreme Commander spoke first. "Ah, my dear Grus, it's been way too long!" They had had lunch only the day before, but the General declined to correct him.

"That it has, Sir, that it has. Way too long, Sir." The Supreme Commander swept a hand toward the chair in front of his desk. "Please be seated, my old friend."

(If the reader is wondering why the Supreme Commander's title is always spelled out and not abbreviated SC, let me just say, here and now and once and for all, that that would be a foolhardy disrespectful gaffe and, as such, punishable by death.) i.e. see the latest Groinkian Code of Military Honor and Fine Dining Guide, Sixth Edition.

Seated across the official Supreme Commander desk from each other, the Supreme Commander gave the General the reason for the meeting:

"Grussy, old chum, I'll get right down to it. As you know, quite well, the invasion of the planet Earth is right on schedule. As we speak, a warrior vessel, under the capable command of Major Grok, is in hover above the planet and is in standby for further instructions." The General nodded. Indeed, it was his original plan.

"And as you are also aware, we have many pig-body tranformutations already in place on the planet's surface. We now await their preliminary report . . . and bye the bye, I think your choice was an excellent one.

"Our early collected data tells us that the pig is beyond the zone of suspicion to Earthlings. To the contrary, they actually revere the dear beast. They've devoted many years of colorful films and books to one in particular they affectionately call Porky. And the Earthlings seem to completely overlook the fact that he stammers something awful.

"And he blatantly lies to them. He closes every story with 'Th . . . th . . . that's all folks!' but five minutes later, there he is again. Now, if the Earthlings can trust a stammering, lying pig such as this, they certainly trust pigs, now don't they?" The General nodded.

"I thank you, Sir," the General said, "for liking my choice, but I must point out the gravitational limitations. As . . . I'm sure . . . your infallible memory will recollect, my original invasion plan report, the OIPR, mentions. There exists a ten to fifteen percent, plus or minus, error factor. Earth's gravity *could be* denser than our own. Pigs on Earth might not flit about through the air as they do so nicely on Groink. In fact, Sir, they might not float at all."

"I appreciate your candor, General, but I believe that will prove to be a minor point. Now, to get on with it. Your plan for the G.O.D. vehicles has been fully implemented, in case you are unaware, and they are now strung across the entire country of America.

"Twelve spy and infiltration cells are now fully operational and they now wait for a rendezvous, to be determined, for the the reception of additional pig-body tranformutations." The General nodded, smiled and said, "Excellent, your Excellency."

"Actually, Grus, now that I've said it out loud, your earlier mention that these particular body types might not float, as I have seen Porky Pig do more than once, could

deserve a closer look. No point in making a mistake at this point in the game, now is there?" The General agreed.

The Supreme Commander reached under his desk and brought forth a large portfolio. He unzipped it, spread it out on the desk and opened it to the first glassined page. He had placed it upside-down in relation to himself for the General's perusal. The General leaned forward and rested an elbow on the desk.

"Hmmm." He said as he read what was on the page: Additional & Various Transmutational Body Types for Planet Earth Infiltrations---- Data Electronically Captured From Fifty One Years of Earth Television Transmissions into Deep Space. It had an approvals box with four signatures in it and a large TOP SECRET, stamped in purple, across the top of the page . Someone had done their homework.

"Someone has done their homework, Sir." The General said.

"Yes, Grus, it is quite fully detailed, as you will see. Now, just in case our pig clones pose an unforeseeable problem, let's review what we have here, shall we? . . . Now, although the data collected has been very carefully scrutinized for accuracy, as you can imagine, we have found it impossible to put it all in any sort of chronological order . . . with a few exceptions . . . as the captured transmissions didn't usually come in with a date stamp attached." He paused and turned the first page over. The second page showed a chart that occupied three columns across.

"However, my dear General, your old friend and school chum, Professor Glunk, has created a quite logical progression. And being as thorough as his reputation suggests, has thrown in a complete hierarchy of the Earthlings food chain--so to speak-- from the lowest of low to the highest of high. Thus, if we were to use these alternate body types, should need arise, they would be placed into every conceivable level of the human's society, from the lowest life form to the highest." The General smiled. The idea's shotgun approach appealed to him.

"Tell me, Sir," the General said. "What is the objective of the body clones? I have yet to be filled in on that phase of the plans."

The Supreme Commander thought a time. "Well, I won't go into every possible use for the transmutations at this time, but suffice it to say they are valuable. Once they insinuate themselves into all levels of the Earthlings social structure, they can supply us with much needed data. To know your enemy is to defeat him, eh?" The General nodded.

"And, when the time is ripe, they can cause untold chaos and disturbances, from the small annoyance to the larger and catastrophic sabotage. They will also be in a position to cause great confusion among the Earthlings thereby making them mistrustful of their own kind. They won't even trust their own mothers!"

"I see, Sir," the General said. "Well, I won't take any more of your time on this matter. I can read the full report on that phase of the plan later." The Supreme Commander nodded.

The General tapped the chart. "I see here it has been determined that the lowest possible life form is something the Earthlings call lawyers. Do we have data to support that assumption, Sir?"

"Oh, yes, Grus, we know exactly why this is so. Bear with me. From the captured electronic transmissions, looked at in their totality, one can easily surmise that humans worship at their television sets, a device they use for the personal capture of transmitted electronic signals.

"They spend many hours each day paying homage to their various gods. And they have many of them, to be sure." He shook his head at the General when the man attempted to turn the page to see what was coming up next. The General complied and was grateful that the Supreme Commander hadn't winced at him. He now listened attentively.

"Their minor gods are called talking heads. These gods, and there are far too many of those in my personal opinion, reward the ignorant humans for worshipping them by apprising them, with truths, some half truths, and some outright lies, of the day's happenings. How silly.

"If you turn the page . . . now . . . you'll see some stills we pulled from the Earth transmissions." The General turned the page and saw Walter Kronkite. At least that's what the typography beneath the picture called him. The Supreme Commander continued.

"The humans then display even more affection by showering the talking heads with fine clothing, expensive cars, and delightful living quarters." The General was all ears as the Supreme Commander continued.

"If you're wondering, General, what all this has to do with your question, if you'll still bear along with me, all will dove-tail neatly into place." The General nodded.

"Now . . . the human's major gods. Humans show these their undying affection for them by laughing at almost everything these gods says, however inane, stupid, or irrelevant. They call these gods comedians. Sometimes standup comedians." The General turned a page. There he saw a major god called Robin Williams. In a balloon above his head were the words: Nanu nanu.

"When the Earthlings have paid sufficient tribute to these particular gods, they get rewarded by seeing the god appear in person on their television screens. They will show up, here and there, and act out little parables, performed in what they call sit-coms, that they've created to elicit the laugh response they so crave. This has all but replaced the human's ancient ritual of slaughtering animals for the god's pleasure.

"It was from reviewing these major gods in action that led Professor Glunk to the irrefutable conclusion that lawyers are, indeed, the lowest life form. All the higher forms look down upon them with great hatred and derision. Indeed, even one of their earliest authors had a "kill all the lawyers" attitude.

"And the major gods feed this human hatred with derisive statements they call jokes, or now and then, one-liners. Or, on rare occasions, gags. For instance, General, one such example is: What do you call a lawyer who is tied hand and foot and is at the bottom of the ocean?" He waited. The General pondered while he looked at a picture of an

ordinary guy in a three-piece suit. He held onto an attache case.

"A drowning man, Sir?" He didn't see any humor in the situation. Or in the guy in the suit.

"No, Grus! That would be most logical, to be sure, but the answer the god gives is . . . a beginning."

"I see, Sir. They *really don't* like lawyers very much, do they?" The Supreme Commander shook his head and his glixizza swished magnificently. "Not a whit, General, not a whit"

The General asked, "What do lawyers do with their life's days, Sir?"

"We haven't yet ascertained that precisely, but it appears the only thing they can do well is talk." The General said, "Not very productive, are they? Perhaps that is what keeps them at the lowest point." The Supreme Commander nodded and said, "Could be." He went on.

"Now, dear General, there is one major god I think you will find very fascinating. Professor Glunk thinks this major god must be quite angry with the humans as he has not appeared in any recent transmissions. Whatever, you will find this particular god to be most unbelievable!

"We have nothing like him on Groink, nor has there ever been anything like it in our entire history . . . this god has the power to know the answer to any question . . . however arcane . . . however enigmatic . . . *before it is even asked!*"

The General's eyes were opened wide in pure unadulterated astonishment. "Is this true, Sir?" he asked as he turned the page. And there he was, this unbelievable god. He wore an ill-fitted turban and held a piece of white paper up to his forehead. The General surmised it was an envelope. There was no name beneath the photograph.

"Absolutely! I have seen this unbelievable wizardry myself. Many times. And each time . . . he gets the answer correct! He has never missed in all the hundreds of times I saw him do this impossible feat. All he has to do is take the envelope, which houses the question . . . and has been, I have to tell you, in a hermetically sealed mayonnaise jar . . . and merely place it to his forehead . . . the way you see him doing there . . . and faster than you can say, voila! . . . he comes up with the correct answer!"

"That is truly amazing, Sir. Tell me, Sir, does this particular major god have a name?" The Supreme Commander told him that this god went by many names, and as such, they had yet to figure out his main moniker. Professor Glunk was still at work on it and although he was heavily in favor of calling the god Heeeeeeeeere's Johnny, data was still coming in.

"Now, General, back to the social structure. I won't bore you with the details of how our esteemed Professor determined the rest of the hierarchy. Suffice it to say it went along similar lines. You may read his remarkable notes and reasonable rationales in the back of the portfolio later, at your leisure, if you desire more input." The General took a glance at the rear of the portfolio. He nodded.

"As you can see, Grussie, the societal list is quite lengthy, but for now, I will just hit upon some of the key ones. Just above lawyer you will note two that are tied for the next

higher place entry. Insurance sales people and car sales people. Remind me later to tell you a few cute jokes about these two! They are a riot!"

The General now looked at two men who, although somewhat similar overall to the lawyer's picture, wore much splashier ties. And the car salesman wore a loud, checkered coat over striped trousers.

The Supreme Commander continued. "There now follows a very large group which includes bartenders, chefs, plumbers, and others of that ilk. Way above this grouping in the hierarchy, are what the Earthlings call professional sports figures.

"They get handsomely rewarded for playing at games that the other humans are too lazy to play at themselves." The Supreme Commander reached down and tapped a picture of Larry Bird.

"Slightly above this classification are rock stars and movie stars, with a minor offshoot they call rap stars. They do all the singing as the rest of the humans seem to be tone deaf. This group's rewards for these efforts fluctuates wildly depending on their popularity at any given moment." The General now looked at three photographs on one page. The names Jagger, Taylor, and Dogg were under the appropriate picture.

"And General, speaking of popularity, Professor Glunk used it to position the next two classifications. Although they are not rewarded as much with the luxuries of life, as say, rock stars, they are eagerly sought after by the male humans who revere them and shower them with affection. One grouping is called prostitutes, the other is called aspiring young actresses."

The two sample pictures the General now looked at had Xaviera Hollander under one and Mitzi Thunder under the other.

"Of the two, the aspiring young actresses are more revered. They keep them confined, as it were, in a place called Hollywood. I use the word confined rather loosely, as there are no bars keeping them in. In fact, they are free to leave whenever they choose. But the affection lavished on them seems to keep them prisoners of the self, for none have ever left, as far as we can so far ascertain.

"If you will turn the page, General, you will see the highest life form on the planet Earth. This delightful creature is literally swamped with affection, luxuries, and other rewards too numerous to mention. Being beyond famous and known world-wide, this creature could easily rule the planet, but so far this option has not been cashed in."

The General turned the page and looked at Britney Spears. He had a question.

"Speaking of rulers, Sir, do these Earth creatures have a leader?"

"Ah, yes, a leader! As you well know, Grus, Earthlings are very savage, warring creatures. They have immense hatred for each other. Sometimes based on nothing more than differences of attire, or length of hair. With this kept in mind, the leader they put in the highest position of power is chosen from the meanest, most savage, and most deadliest among them.

"And the savage who possesses the most amount of deception, which is used to project a facade of sweetness and innocence, the better to camouflage his true nature. In this place called America, he is referred to as President." The General stared at this tricky demon: George W. Bush.

"You are right, Sir, he does look deceptive. How on Groink did Professor Glunk figure out that he was, in reality, so deadly, Sir?" The Supreme Commander swivelled his chair around and pushed a button on the wall. A panel slid silently upwards to reveal a large televiewer screen. Another button was pushed and an image immediately formed. It showed the demon Bush as he rushed to a helicopter surrounded by bodyguards.

The Supreme Commander hit another button and the image changed. Again the savage Bush and the bodyguards. Another button punched. Again Bush and the guards. He did this three more times with the same results, Bush with the guards.

"As is apparent, my dear General, the humans won't let this dangerous creature even go out in public without heavily armed guards to see to it that he doesn't hurt someone."

The General nodded. "I see, Sir, yes I do. He's obviously even more dangerous, Sir, than the savage Virks who inhabit the mountain caves of Yizza." The Supreme Commander nodded.

"Well, General Grus, get to know this most savage of all the Earth savages very well. He is the Earthling we will have to contend with when, and if, push comes to shove. Get to know all his wily ways, all his clever tricks . . . for he most assuredly won't go quietly into the deep, dark night."

The General studied Bush's photograph again. "I'll study him well, Sir, very well. If he has a weakness, any weakness, I'll ferret it out. And then I'll use it to smash," the General banged his fist on the desk. The man across from him jumped back a foot, "his beady little eyes in!" The Supreme Commander liked that attitude, even if it did almost give him a heart attack.

He stood up. "Well, my General, I have another engagement to attend to . . . Oh, we must have lunch sometime. As we used to do so long ago, before all this invasion stuff began."

"I'd like that, Sir. It has been too long, Sir." He saluted. The Supreme Commander grunted in acknowledgement as he punched a button on his desk and turned the glassine pages. The General headed toward the door.

"Grilla!" the Supreme Commander barked as he studied the page before him. "Cancel my next appointment and have my car stand by! I'll be at Giffo's place if anything important happens." The General heard this as he opened the door on his way out.

The pictures on the desk before the Supreme Commander were labelled Xaviera and Mitzi. Giffo's was a well-frequented slave gammixi cathouse . . .

"Why a bathroom is called the head!"

MRS. HENRIETTA HIGGAMBOTHAM-SMYTHINGTON was in her garden, the love of her life, doing the chores she felt were necessary to grow prize-winning flowers, such as Azaleas, not to mention Rhododendrens.

She had finished her winter mulch chore, three-inches-high of mulch around each tree, two-inches-high over the garden beds. For the trees she used the big chunk-chip mulch, but for her precious, prize-winning garden beds only the smaller, fine-chip mulch would do.

She preferred chip mulch to the more common shredded mulch. Shredded mulch, she believed, and she would know, smothered plants, made watering less effective, and even though it cost less than the chips kind, gave a haven to the bad bugs and other insects that were a gardener's bane. And, to her at least, it smelled funny as it rotted out. Ms. aitch hyphen ess knew gardening, you betcha.

She was on her knees, a bulb planter tool in her right hand. She'd punch a hole in the soil, drop some bulb fertilizer into it, and plop in a bulb, pointy side up, you betcha.

Then she'd cover it back up with soil. It was hard work and she perspired, for sure, but it was a work of love to her that went back many, many decades.

Whoever says gardening is relaxing has never tried to plant six hundred bulbs, one hundred each of Tulips, Crocuses, Anemones (Blanda type), Lilies of the Valley, Fritillarias, and Chionodoxas (Glory-of-the-Snow), each specie fussy about its planting depth.

Relaxing? You betcha! If having your hands covered in calluses while sweat pours down your back is your idea of relaxation.

And strangely enough, or maybe not, if anyone now saw our sweet, dear Ms. Henrietta Higgambotham-Smythington, all callused up and sweaty, on her knees punching one hole after another, smiling like an idiot, constantly wiped her brow, humming an unknown melody, with a happier-than-a-pig-in-shit look on her face, they might guess her ideas on the matter of what constitutes relaxation and what doesn't.

And, also strangely enough, she was being watched by someone. Because her wide-brimmed straw hat blocked out the sun, and most of her view, she saw only the person's lower trouser legs and shoes.

Now, normally, our beloved Henrietta was a trust-all-souls type of gardener, but the pervert-in-the-bathroom-window episode had unnerved her and she was, one could say, just a wee bit antsy. The trousers and shoes, being covered in only-God-knows-what, made her gasp as she looked up. She said fearfully, "Wh . . . What do you want?"

The man, if he was a man under all that only-God-knows-what, just stood there and blinked at her, a where am I? look on his messy face that only lost souls can muster up. On his chest, untouched as it were by the any of the slop that covered him, were two white letters: M E.

Taking in the full spectrum of him, our sweet, bulb-planting gardener, for reasons probably known only to a Mother Teresa or perhaps anyone with a maternal instinct, felt

no fear of the stranger. He looked so pitiful. Like something the cat dragged in and forgot to kill. He blinked some more. Then in a croaky voice that sounded as if it hadn't been used much lately, he said, "Do I live here, Ma'am?"

"No!" she said harshly. "This is my house! I live here." She stood up and found she was a bit taller than this dishevelled creature. "What on earth happened to you, young man! What's your name?" She said this so unafraidly and so forcefully, the man snapped to attention.

He answered the second question first, "I'm Bertram Burlappe Balliwick, Ma'am." He saluted her with a drill sergeant's dream salute. "And Ma'am," he held the salute firmly and unshakingly, "I can't remember what happened to me!" He finished the salute with a drill sergeant's snap. "Tsk, tsk, tsk." was all she said.

Sometimes in real life, a lot of conversation is unnecessary and trust-all-souls type of people know their duty, know what must be done, when confronted with forlorn creatures covered in only-God-knows-what.

This whole exchange, as brief as it was, had the effect of bringing out Ms. Henrietta Higgambotham-Smythington's best Mother Teresa-style of maternal instinct. She took him by the arm, turned him around and steered him toward the house, her house, the only house in the world with a bathroom window, and a bathroom, that he remembered as being home.

"You're going to get a right proper bath, young man," she said emphatically. "And a right proper clothes washing. Then after a right proper meal, we'll get to the bottom of this, mark my words!" He blinked again and said, right properly, "Yes'm."

She marched him, right properly, into the house and right into the bathroom. She stoppered the tub, turned on the water and looked him squarely in the eyes.

"Give me your clothes and I'll put them in the washer!" She just stood there.

Bertam Burlappe Balliwick didn't even hesitate. "Yes'm!" was all he said as he stripped down right there in front of her, shyness never a part of the equation.

Naked now, he handed her his clothes, which didn't add up to much: A tee shirt, trousers, shorts, the briefs type, and socks. As he undressed, he missed the looking-at-it-way-too-long glance she had given to his very large, very thick--even though flaccid--male appendage. All he did was blink a few times, like a deer caught in headlights. Naughty, naughty, Henrietta! *Twinge! Twinge!*

She ordered him to get into the tub, this naked young man with the bigger-than-most-men's wee wee. She ordered him to soap up and stay put until she could get back to give him a proper wash up, mark her words. She ordered. He obeyed. Master and slave. Does it get any sweeter? Not for a sixty-six year old widow lady who hasn't had it in decades, you betcha!

Now if the *Guinness Book of World Records* cared to time it, they'd have a new speed winner in the Get-The-Wash-Started-And-Get-Back-To-The-Naked-Man-With-The-Huge-Penis-In-My-Tub classification.

To say she was horny doesn't cover it. She was smokin'! Just the sight of that oh-so-unreal large, male member had aroused in our dear, sweet Henrietta the primordial lust

of the ages. It was as if God had answered a spinster's prayers and had dropped a large-pricked plum right into her lap. And lordy, lordy, was she ever hungry! And she just loved plums. Especially the large-endowed ones served on top of nuts. You betcha!

She returned to the bathroom, in record time for sure, and saw that he hadn't gotten too far with the soaping up. *Goody-goody!* The tub's water was now gore-colored and it looked as if he was sitting in a tub of blood. Which, you could say, he was.

"Now Bertram," she said, "You just sit there while I change this water and get you fresh. OK?" He nodded as the water started to drain out.

His penis area, *Goody-goody!* soon became visible to her old widow's eyes. *My, my!* was all she thought, as new, fresh water started to refill the tub. *My, my! My, my!*

She took the soap in hand and scrubbed him all over, right properly, she did, including a scrubbing-it-way-too-long action around the plum with nuts area, which, if truth be told, had the usual and expected effect on one Bertram Burlappe Balliwick.

It grew and it grew! Then grew some more! *My, my!* In full anger, it reached well over ten inches. Ten and a quarter inches, if accuracy is your goal. Collectors of pornographic films would easily be reminded of Jeff Stryker, at his peak. *My, my!* Its girth was as thick around as a woman's wrist. The bulbous head, with a wide, flared ridge was--you--guessed it!--plum shaped. *My, my!* The member stood straight up, pointed at the ceiling and was half exposed above the now clean, clear water. It looked very similar to those photos that show the Loch Ness monster. *My, my!*

For sure, our heroine had never seen anything like this in her entire life, not that she had much experience for comparison. Her now dead husband, on his best day, and at full mast, had *half* the length of the magnificent piece of manhood she now beheld--or more like, ogled.

And her husband's Wham-Bam-Thank-You-Ma'am-Gotta-Snore-Now attitude sure didn't add to her sexual fantasies. Nor did his Only-Need-It-Once-A-Month posture. If she had known, as a young woman, that men with things like this existed, she sure as Hell, Heavens-to-Betsy, would have thought differently about accepting the marriage proposal of one Wellington Frobisher Higgambotham-Smythington, Esq.

Girlishly now, and with soapy fingers, she reached down and proceeded to wash the plum-like head. *Twinge! Twinge!* The thought of using a wash cloth for this task never occurred to her. Fingers do a much better job anyway, dontcha know? *Twinge! Twinge!*

Balliwick moaned. He had a dream-like look on his face. His eyes merely blinked. He was now totally enraptured by his first--was it? Can't remember! Don't care, either!--male-female encounter.

That the female was almost three times his age, old enough to be his grandmother, and not what anyone, drunk or sober, would call a beauty, didn't matter to him, either. For now, anyway, his Nessie monster was in control.

So here was our hero, clean as a whistle and hung like a horse, ready to be towelled off. She ordered him to step out of the tub. He did, and stood before her, buck naked, all wet and glisteny. His beady little male eyes brimmed with male lust and his ten and one quarter inch woody, big around as a woman's wrist, pointed in her direction. In a

bathroom that, sure as shit, seemed very familiar to him.

She ordered him to towel off his top part. She'd see to his bottom part, she told him as she handed him a big, fluffy, terry-like towel. He dried his top. She dried his legs. His stomach. His cute bubble-like ass. *Twinge! Twinge! My, My!*

Then gently, so gently, she dried his scrotum and his large member swayed mere inches from her face over the top of the towel. Then, for reasons probably only known to a Monica-of-the-oval-office type female, she kissed the tip of his penis. *Smooch!* Balliwick moaned, so she did it again. *Smooch!* And one more, to grow on, and for good luck. *Smooch!* Balliwick became a moan-fool, he did, with each gently planted kiss. *Smooch! Smooch! Smooch!*

If old Welly, she thought, could only see me now! He'd do a double spin in his grave, that's for sure! This thought so invigorated her, that she decided, right there, right in her very own bathroom, all decorated in blues, her favorite color, to do to Bertram Burlappe Balliwick something only very, very--very bad girls did with men.

She took his engorge penis into her hot--oh so hot--sixty-six year old widow's mouth! How's them apples, Mister Wellington Higgambotham-Smythington, Esq.? she thought as she went farther along the shaft. Her mouth crossed the bumpy ridge--what some folks kiddingly refer to as a speedbump for the lips--and slowly continued downward.

Balliwick let out his loudest moan yet. This so emboldened her that she started going up and down feverishly. Her tongue swirled around. She clamped her lips here and there and changed the pace, slow, then fast, then slow, then fast. Her head bobbed up and down as she sucked to beat the band. Her saliva ran down her chin. Her heart beat faster and lustfully, lost in the task at hand--her first ever blowjob.

His too, but he didn't know it. The little shit didn't care, either, if truth be told. *Anyone for a cold shower at this point in our little tale? If not, proceed at your own risk!* And those who consider this section too vulgar may skip to the next story section. Or burn this book right now. Take your pick. *You have been warned.*

Balliwick reached down and put both hands into her white, granny-like hair. He held her fast this way while he methodically sawed in and out of her mouth. He moaned a good one and picked up the pace.

One inward plunge hit the back of her throat and animated the gag reflex. She let out a gurgle and almost upchucked, right there on her blue bathroom rug. He sensed this, and being the gentleman he was at this particular moment, made his plunges shallower. A whole lot shallower.

She read this as some form of rejection, which it certainly was not. Thus our sweet Henrietta decided to take the--uh--plunge, so to speak.

After all, she thought, how difficult could it be? So, slowly, very slowly, she pushed her mouth farther down the shaft and took quarter inch by quarter inch. When the plump plum head nuzzled her gag reflex again, she chose to simply ignore the urge to regurgitate.

Mind over matter, she thought to herself, that's all it is. Five inches! Then six! Then Seven! God, she thought, does this darn thing have an end?

It was right about here, at six or seven inches, that a buried thought entered her mind:

Thank goodness he's not Rasputin the Monk!

Long ago, when old Welly was still capable of bitchin' about the weather, she had read in one of those fact books on people, places, and things, that Rasputin was said, or rumored, to have thirteen manly longer-than-should-exist inches. Even the czarina of all the Russias, Alexandra, was said to have sampled the lengthy pole. Just how many times is unknown, but her undertaker could not remove the smile from her face. So it's rumored.

Well, Henrietta had trouble picturing a thirteen inch schlong in her mind, so she promptly went to her sewing room and got out her wooden yardstick. As she held it out in front of her, with fingers at both ends of thirteen inches, she let out a gasp.

My God, she thought, that damn thing would go in one of my ends and come straight out the other! That thought gave her a few girlish twinges, no doubt, fantasies being what they are and all. But let us not leave Balliwick . . . uh . . . hanging. OK?

With her now nearing the eight inch mark, this buried thought insinuated itself a tad more. She thought: This one still might come out my other end! She felt an involuntary shudder in her anus area.

Eight inches swallowed! Then Nine! Tears were in her eyes as she fought off the gag reflexes natural inclinations to dislodge the massive invader.

And Balliwick wasn't just moaning now. He was A-MOANIN'! if you get the drift, and his legs shook like a rubber goose's. They had started this involuntary wobble when she had reached inch five on the penis-shaft scale, in case you're interested and must know everything.

When her lips pressed against his curly pubic hairs, at exactly ten and one quarter inches--remember?--he let out a "Sooey!" that would have called any hog, even a stone-deaf one, down to dinner! It felt so good he did it again. "Sooey!"

So there they were, this mismatched pair, doing what is being done in millions of bedrooms every night of the week. Yeah, you wish.

He moaned and "Sooeyed" as she worked at what her late husband considered sick, depraved, unnatural--icky-poo!-- and a sin in the eyes of God. You watching this, old Welly? she thought, You seeing your old Henny in a new light?

With this thought in mind, she moved her mouth back up to the speedbump and without so much as a bye-your-leave, took the plunge again, going right down, as some say, to the fur, in less time than it takes to say Welly. Balliwick yelled, "Sooey! Sooey!" *Spin, spin, spin.*

When his climax came, it came with a deluge. Balliwick held her head fast and withdrew his penis to where only the plum-like head remained in her mouth. He then let out another "Sooey" that was probably heard in all neighboring counties, and he unloaded.

His first spurt hit the back of her throat with enough force to remind her she *still had* a gag reflex. Many spurts soon followed and flooded her mouth with sperm as thick and

lumpy as yogurt--no fruit on the bottom though.

She swallowed audibly, and more spurts refilled her. She swallowed again. And, as she felt the throbs that took place under the thumb she held at the base of his penis, she knew more was on its way. And more was. Jiminy Cricket, she thought, it's like being force-fed from a damn fire hose!

She swallowed again--Refill please! Thank you!-- then she swallowed for the fourth and last time. Her Bertie, it seemed, was now fully drained. Finally, thank you. *Spin, spin, spin!*

He withdrew his penis from her mouth and, to her utter amazement, and very unlike old Welly, he was still hard, erect, woodified, call it what you will. The damn thing still looked ready for more action. *My, my!*

"Ma'am," said Balliwick, a moon-eyed look on his puss. "That was unbelievable! Absolutely unbelievable! So unbelievable! Thank you, Ma'am. Thank you, thank you, thank you, Ma'am! Unbelievable!" He looked dreamy-eyed at her, having left no unbelievables or thank you's for anyone else's future use.

Still on her knees, with her hand at the base of his unWelly-like pole, she looked up at him.

"You may not believe this, young man," she said. "But that was my first time ever doing *that*." she paused and ran her tongue lasciviously over her lips. "And my first time ever tasting sperm, mark my words! Very Strange taste it has, it does." She licked her lips again.

"Sorta reminds me of salty onions!" she said. Then they looked directly into each other's eyes and laughed. That sweet, gentle kind of laugh, the kind shared by lovers everywhere. *Spin! Spin! Spin!* And Henrietta now added salty onions to the very short list of her favorite things. Right up there with large-pricked plums and hairy nuts.

"Now," she said. "How's about I rustle you up something real good to eat?" She stood up and gave his--amazingly, *my, my!*--still hard penis a playful squeeze. He moaned.

"And my sweet Bertie, I want you to show me later just how well you can use this precious thing of yours . . . in the normal way," She bent over and planted a smooch right smack dab on his indented little, inny-like pee hole. "OK?"

"Your wish," he said, "is my command!" He gave her one of those drill sergeant's dream salutes, the kind with a right smart snap on its tail end . . .

"Look! Up in the sky!"

"CHIEF, ACCEPT IT OR NOT," the FBI agent, Tom Bookem said, "but, you've been invaded! How long . . . we don't know yet, but as you can tell by these printouts supplied by our space agency, NASA, the coordinates lead right to this general area." He handed Melrose three NASA printouts.

The Chief gave the photos a cursory glance and slapped each one, in turn, onto his desk. Two photos were similar. Each showed a blob-like, silvery thing as it streaked

across the sky. Each silvery blob had a long, thin smoke-like tail that trailed behind. The third photo depicted a grid of some sort with green criss-crossed grid lines, an inch apart, on a glossy black background.

On this grid was a streak of blobby grayish white that ran diagonally from left to right and reminded the Chief of the first two photos. It also reminded him, with its long thin trail tail, of sperm.

He looked back up at Bookem, a quizzical look on his face. "Flying saucers, is it?" His voice was tinged with doubt.

"Not really," the agent responded. "It's more . . . cigar shaped. That was to be expected." He reached down and pushed the green-grid photo toward Melrose. "As you can easily see, Chief . . . where this cigar-shaped object crosses the Y longitudinal axis here . . .," he pointed at it, "and the X latitudinal axis here . . .," he pointed that out, too, "this baby is smack dab in your bailiwick . . . somewhere." The agent awaited the Chief's response to this plainly obvious and simple fact.

Melrose asked incredulously, "You've seen these before?" He stared down at the green-grid photo. All he still saw was a long-tailed blob of sperm.

The Chief looked up at Bookem as Moldon picked up one of the sky photos and studied it. Moldon rotated it as if he was having trouble deciding which end was supposed to be up. The Agent shot Moldon a look as if he had just discovered the missing link. He then looked back at Melrose.

"No," the Agent acknowledged. "Not an actual sighting anyway, but NASA feels certain that, for the distance this object had to cover, the obvious shape would be cigar. Or, at the very least, become a cigar shape as it attained high speed. Earth's atmospheric pressures being what they are, you see."

Chief Melrose didn't see, nor did he have any inclinations to begin now. He was an experienced senior officer and knew he would have to throw his full weight into the situation. With caution, he thought as he looked at the cock-sure young man sitting across from him. "I see," he said. "Interesting, most interesting."

He turned toward Moldon. "Moldy? What do you make of those photos?" Moldon thought a bit then picked up one of the photos.

He looked puzzled. "Chief, this one here? . . . the one of the grid? . . . Looks like a picture of a large sperm to me." The Chief smiled and nodded his head slightly. Bookem just sighed and glanced at the ceiling. Moldon grinned at the Chief, not realizing how funny he had just been.

The FBI man was thinking: Why me? And why haven't I heard from London by now. Shouldn't they be on this as well? Why did the Americans always do things first? Why is Chief Melrose the dullest pencil in the box? Why am I surrounded by dumb hicks!

It piqued him, but he let the thoughts die, for now at least. He instructed his assigned aide, an elderly man three times his age to, "Be Mother, please." Where he came from, this simply meant to pour more tea. No sugar, slice of lemon, please.

This was the beginning of real trouble for the planet Earth.

Almost simultaneously, but several hundred light years away, there was also trouble.

wet--oh, so wet!--while she watched old Welly, at six feet under, you betcha, spinning like a top on steroids, with both his eyeballs popping out of his Wham-Bam-Thank-You-Ma'am-Gotta-Snore-Now face like some damn-fool cartoon frog drawn by a truly demented artist. *"Theo! Did you get my ear-mail?"*

So, sweet dreams, Henrietta. And better dreams, Bertie. For something wicked this way comes . . .

"All clones look alike to me!"

I DON'T BELIEVE IT! I don't fucking believe it!" he said as he took four more stomping steps.

This was said by the Supreme Commander, the top Groinkian in all respects. He answered to no one as there was no one higher. On a whim, only his whim to be sure, he could make any law a law merely by saying it's now the law.

He did not need popular approval, or committee approval, or any other approval for such action. And he held the post until his death, usually twelve thousand years as Groinkian longevity goes. Further, he-- and it was *always* a he--was not elected to the post as much as he was born into it.

Upon his death, a replacement would be found from the one or two male Groinkians born, every thousand years or so, with the white glixizza that sprouted from the top of his head. Because all other Groinkians were born totally bald, and stayed that way until their death, he was fairly easy to pick out. And, so far at least, no female has ever been born with the glixizza.

At birth, the glixizza is a mere six inches long. Its thousands of stark white, stiff bristly-like hairs, that grow fountain-like on the newborn's head, would easily remind one of an albino porcupine.

Over time, the glixizza attains a length of two to three feet, splayed out magnificently all around the head, the white bristles arcing upward and outward in fountain-like fashion. At the tip of each bristle is a silvery, star-shaped formation. The casual observer would be reminded of a dandelion's flower head that had its bottom portion blown away by a make-a-wish breath.

Any Groinkians with the glixizza who are not made the Supreme Commander, automatically become High Commanders in the Groinkian military. They assume this post at aged fourteen and are ranked as High Commander, Junior Grade. From then on they are educated and trained for eighty-six years, at which time they are assigned a Power Level.

Those born with the glixizza are known to be, and testing has proved it out, approximately five thousand times smarter, or more intelligent, or logical, take your pick, than the average Groinkian. This particular Supreme Commander, when aged two, had invented the Golix-Girgit, a food converter capable of turning any food into any other food in seconds. Don't enjoy meatloaf? Poof! Filet mignon!

The Supreme Commander, it should also be noted, has no name other than Supreme

Commander, though if hearing anyone talking to him, the name Sir!, with the exclamation point fully pronounced, would come to mind. It also goes without saying that displaying even the slightest disrespect, whether by accident or design, means kaputsville for the displayer.

And now, as this Supreme Commander stomped back and forth as childishly as any spoiled brat would, everyone within his vision trembled in fear. Afraid to stay and more afraid to leave.

His glixizza moved swishingly through the air as it followed him around the foyer of the Grand Hall. The staging area from where he was just about to make a most important speech.

He was to address the top echelon in Groinkian society, plus every ambassador that had been recalled just for this moment. His speech was to cover the diabolical plan that his High Commanders had so craftily created. The plan to bring back the jewel in the crown, so to speak, the Earthlings. As a food stuff and as slaves.

Time was of the essence. And he was being made to waste it on some nonsense, someone's mistake. Heads will roll, he thought, mark my words. He had made heads roll before, thousands of them. Just ask any Groinkian whose minor mistake had come to the attention of the Supreme Commander. If you can contact the afterlife, that is.

He thought back to the meeting that had taken place just this morning, which in Earth time would be about seven weeks ago. There he had witnessed the key element in their plan, the transmutations that had resulted in the pig-like creatures now roaming the Earth planet.

During this meeting it had been discovered, through preliminary feedback, that the pig body disguise was a poor choice. Understanding this, and moving quickly in the decision-making department, he had ordered up a myriad of new transmutations.

He had ordered General Grus to personally see to it that the transmutations were done to absolute perfection. Or, he had told the General, instead of us doing lunch, you will be lunch. General Grus got the subtle message and assured the Supreme Commander that he would put a super rush on the job and the clones would be ready for his inspection within the next few hours.

The General knew full well that making the transmutations this quickly meant they could only stay in that body form for twenty-four hours or so. But after approval they could be reworked. And, according to the main plan, there was plenty of time to do that.

Four hours later the new body types stood before the Supreme Commander, in rows of battallions. They were being presented to him by a Lieutenant Grool, who now saluted him in greeting. The Supreme Commander merely grunted, his usual way of acknowledging a salute.

The Lieutenant explained each of the battallion-groupings in turn. "This first group, Supreme Commander, Sir, are called," he looked at his notes. "Puerto Ricans." He pointed to a variously dressed group who now stood at attention, in rows ten deep by thirty wide.

"Note the coloring, Sir, the wariness in the eyes, Sir. Every detail has been faithfully

reproduced, Sir." The Supreme Commander eyed the group as the Lieutenant lowered his eyes in a show of respect.

The only time it was permissible to look directly at the Supreme Commander was when one was speaking to him. Still looking down, the Lieutenant presented a color photograph for the Supreme Commander's critical comparison.

"Where will you send these, Grool?" the Supreme Commander asked as he tossed the photograph to the ground in a sure sign of his displeasure.

The Lieutenant looked up. "New York, Sir!" Oh-oh. He had said it a bit too curtly, which he now saw had caused the Supreme Commander to visibly wince. That wince, a well-known wince feared by any Groinkian, forced Grool to elucidate on his response.

"Initially, Sir," he now looked directly at the Supreme Commander, "we had planned on Puerto Rico, an island that first produced these fine specimens--well--at least the prototypes, Sir." he bent down and picked up the color photo. *Wince, wince!* He continued.

"But we have since learned that New York actually has *more* of them," he paused and pointed out New York on a small full color map, "so it was thought best, Sir, that they land where there are a quantity of them. To cause less suspicions, Sir." He now looked at the ground and remonstrated himself for being so stupid as to pick up the photos in a mid-sentence to the Supreme Commander. Sweat was forming on his snout. *Wince!*

However, his answer seemed to be satisfactory as the Supreme Commander hadn't stuck two of his fingers directly into the Lieutenant's eyes, a move the Supreme Commander had learned, and liked, from watching one of the earlier Earth video transmissions showing Larry, Curly, and Moe in their heyday. He was now known to use this move whenever mildly provoked, which didn't take much to get him to that point these days.

"And this group, Grool?" the Supreme Commander inquired as he sauntered over to the next battalion. "Aren't they too scantily clad? Won't they stand out wherever you send them?" *Wince, wince!*

The Lieutenant looked up and said, "The gixisor will supply those answers, Sir!"

The two questions burned into the Lieutenant's brain as he spun the gixisor, a metallic, circular shaped object that now adorned his head. A small antenna poked out from it.

It would, he hoped, bring forth a suitable--and non-provoking!--answer. It wouldn't take long, he knew, but even milliseconds can prove an embarrassment when keeping a Supreme Commander on idle. *Wince, wince, wince!*

Come on, gixisor, he thought, don't make the man wait. He tapped two fingers on the device as if trying to get its attention. Come on!

It was at this moment that he wished he had gone for the desktop gixisor version, rather than the portable. Though the portable, he thought, did give him a rather rakish air.

"Well, Grool?" *Wince, wince!*

Grool tapped the gixisor again, looked up and said, "Sorry, Sir! Any second now, Sir!" He looked away, directing his gaze at the female battalion.

As he waited for the gixisor to answer, Grool looked over the grouping and tried to see them the way the Supreme Commander now saw them.

All females. And all, as the Supreme Commander had correctly noted, scantily clad, with each specimen's eyelids aflutter and lips suggestively pouted--- as they had been instructed.

So far so good, the Lieutenant thought, what could be wrong with this picture? His gixisor beeped and talked to him through his earpiece. Relieved, he looked up at the Supreme Commander.

He said confidently, "California, Supreme Commander, Sir!" *Wince!*

"Los Angeles to be exact, Sir!" he quickly added because the first answer had not arrested the now very pronounced wince. Grool lowered his eyes.

"Dressed like that?" *Wince! Wince!*

Grool looked back up. "Absolutely, Sir!" He trusted the gixisor hadn't been wrong. Perhaps, he thought, the Supreme Commander *Wince! Wince!* wasn't familiar with the latest Earth types. So, looking back up, he said.

"The Hollywood area is chock full of them, Sir. Actresses they're called, Sir." He noted, with great relief that the wincing had tapered off somewhat, for some reason. He lowered his eyes.

The Supreme Commander mused to himself, "Actresses! Ah yes! Now I recall. Aspiring young actresses. Quite good, Lieutenant, quite good. Excellent choice." The nearest row of actresses were able to see one very relieved Lieutenant.

The Supreme Commander walked over to one of the nearest actresses and extended his arms. As he squeezed and fondled both breasts, as if testing two melons for firmness, he shot the Lieutenant a slightly dreamy-eyed, half-lidded look and said:

"Most excellent choice, Grool. Quite convincing! *Squeeze, squeeze.* "And very realistic!"

If, at this very moment, the Lieutenant could have raised his eyes, he would have been the first Groinkian to see a Supreme Commander salivate. And the last one, too, you betcha.

There were more groups, or battallions, but none as diverse as these. In any case, the plan, the very good plan, to infiltrate the human society was underway. With the Supreme Commander's full salivating approval, of course. Even if he was pissed at this necessary, but very unwelcomed, waste of his time . . .

"Bye, Bye, Bertie!"

IT WAS MORNING. Mrs. Higgambotham-Smythington opened her eyes. The first thing she saw, the first thing she saw every morning, was her three foot tall Raggedy Ann doll as it sat, as it did every morning, quite primly in her Grandmother's old rocking chair. The same chair old Welly had wanted to take to *Bessie Frommer's Antiques A-Go-Go* to sell.

She had told old Welly, right adamantly, that she'd sooner sell *him* than part with a family heirloom. Fool man, had only dollar signs for eyes, he did.

As was her morning ritual, she spoke aloud to the red-mopped doll:

"Morning' sweetheart. Hope you slept well. I sure did." Then she remembered: Oh, my stars! Bertie! She turned to look at the bed space beside her and expected to see her wonder-log man. No Bertie. Just a clump of bedcovers and a pillow, thrown sideways, it seemed to her, in great haste and carelessness.

He is probably, she thought, fixing breakfast. She rethought it. Or, more likely, being a man and all, in the bathroom dumping his mornin' rain.

She got out of bed, stretched a good stretch, yawned, and gave the doll's mopy head a playful tussle. "Now, dolly," she said. "You just go and enjoy that nice old rocker while I find my Bertie." She gave the rocker a good push.

The sweetheart doll, who had been a silent witness to the previous night's bedroom shennanigans, now rocked witlessly as her big button-eyes shined throughout each arc. As she watched the doll, Henrietta donned a robe.

She then checked the bathroom. No Bertie, but it was obvious to her that his mornin' rain *had* been dumped and he had forgotten to flush. "Men!" she said aloud as she jiggled the lever and watched the yellow swirl make its churling exit.

She stood there and watched, making sure the damn-fool-thing, her name for it, did its job. The damn-fool-thing was less than two months old And if truth be told, she hated it. Never worked as well as he old one. Always have to flush the damn thing twice. Save water my ass, she thought. No doubt about it, this damn-fool-thing was surely on the Things-Hated-Most-By-Ms.-Henrietta-Higgambotham-Smythington list. Right up there in between loose dentures and feminine itch.

She checked the guest bedroom on the same floor level. No Bertie. She headed for the landing's stairway to the downstairs and called out: "Bertie! Bertie! Where's my Bertie!"

A feeling of loneliness and dread came over her. "Bertie! Yoo hoo!" she called again on her way down the stairs. "Where you hidin' Hon?" No response.

She reached the kitchen. No Bertie. She heard a noise from the laundry room. Bertie? she thought. She looked and headed in that direction. She looked into the room. No Bertie. Only the neighbors damn-fool cat pawing and scratching at her backdoor screen.

"Shoo! You mangy beast! Now shoo!" she hollered. "Get your mangy ass back on *your* side of the fence!" The cat just pawed and scratched again and again as if the screen were a cat's best friend.

She picked up a green soap scoop and flung it hard at the back door. It hit the glass section on her side of the door and made enough noise to give the cat her message. The mangy beast shooed, undoubtedly headed for the safety on his side of the fence. "Good." she said.

She then noticed that the lid to her top-loading dryer was in an up position, when it should have been down-- her usual way of doing things. She went over and felt a slight

twinge of apprehension as she peered into the washer's cavity. It was as empty as Raggedy Ann's brain. Her Bertie, it seemed, had grabbed up his newly-washed clothes and flown the love nest.

Benumbed, and fighting back tears, she walked zombie-like back into the kitchen to fix herself breakfast. The zombie fixed her usual: Two eggs,--over easy, mind you--two slices of crispy bacon, two slices of white-bread toast, and percolator coffee.

The zombie sipped orange juice--as was her habit--with pulp, thank you, while the bacon sizzled. She did all of this mechanically, wotj not a thought given to anything--even a Bertie one-- so adeptly that one could easily get the idea she had practiced it for a long, long time.

As she ate, her spirits brightened. My Bertie, she thought, is probably just out there looking for ways to find out who he is, what with his amnesia thing, and all. Sure, that's it.

She now remembered last night's supper conversation. He had talked, between ravenous-like bites, in a crazy fashion. Some nutty nonsense about two pig-faced men chasing him and a bloody pig mask, bless my stars! He couldn't really remember it exactly, he had said.

His memory was going in and out, he had told her, as in a bad dream, like something conjured up by Alfred Hitchcock. He had also mentioned to her something she thought was absolutely preposterous. Someone, he was sure--but who that someone was he didn't know--had turned him into a pig--at a campground family-style barbeque setting, no less. Heaven preserve us!

As she remembered this now, she felt a whole lot better. She had no doubts that her Bertie had a few memory problems--don't we all?--but they had made a connection. One, she felt, that would last and last, and get them through this muddle.

Two people, she thought, don't make love as *we did* and just chuck it out the window with the bathwater. No sirree! Her Bertie would be back--you can make book on it.

He hadn't run out on her. He needed her. Desired her too, if you must know. Why--hadn't he told her he loved her right after one of his cute little "Sooeys" of his? You betcha, he had!

She was sure she had heard *that!* Nothing wrong with her hearing, you betcha.

She was sure he would return. Just as sure as there was a Raggedy Ann doll just who rocked back and forth in her upstairs bedroom, in her dear, sweet old Grannie's rocker. The heirloom. The same one that her damn fool Welly had wanted to . . .

There is an old, old saying, older even than Raggedy Ann: Be careful what you wish for...

"I'll bring the teach an apple!"

"ROBBERY AND BUNCO DIVISION, Detective Clu Sniffer here. How may I help you?" said the detective into his desk phone. The same desk phone he used when taking calls for all the other divisions, such as Sex Crimes, Homicide, Auto Theft, or any other division they felt like throwing at him. Being a small-town cop, he had to wear many hats.

This call was about a minor robbery. Some kid had stolen a kite. Bold as brass, in broad daylight, mind you, the kid had just up and walked into *Fernando's Bait, Tackle & Dry Cleaners*, the old one over on Kilroy Corners and not the brand-spanking-new one near *Harriet's Heavenly Hash & Trucker's Stop*, you know, right across from the new stop light they put in on Kilroy--and just grabbed the kite and ran out with it, as sweet as you please.

Fernando himself, mind you, now told Sniffer all about it. How he now regretted that he had put in a small toy section over by the Coke and 7-UP machines, seeing as how it was too close, way too close, as he put it, to the front door.

How anybody, just anybody, mind you, could just reach in And brazen as Hell, make off with something. Fernando was out sixty seven cents and sounded as if he expected the detective to launch a thirteen-state manhunt for the culprit. With the end result being a good public hanging. Sniffer cut into Fernando's diatribe. "Gimme the pertinent details, Fern."

What an ass, thought Sniffer as he licked a pencil, the friggin' guy probably still has his first buck and it's been machine-sewn to his shorts!

Sniffer listened. And wrote. Below Fernando's store address he put the pertinent details: One kite . . . red . . . question mark. A kid . . . blondish hair . . . question mark. Blue polo shirt . . . question mark. Blue denims . . . question mark. The only thing he wrote that lacked a question mark was 67¢. Fernando was sure and positive about that fact.

While Fernando droned on about these kids today, Sniffer went back to his pad And next to the kid's question mark, he pencilled in: Under 50! Thus Inspired, he put the word Weapon! next to the kite's question mark Then gleefully, one would expect, next to the other two question marks he wrote Kid Not Naked!!! He tripled underlined these last three words.

After Fernando had hung up, Sniffer admired his handiwork. Then he wrote some more: Get out an APB for a Not Naked Kid, under fifty, and armed with a sixty seven cent fully loaded, some-color kite! He chuckled out loud and thought: Shit! Shoulda asked Fernando the calibre of that kite!

"What's so funny, Sniff?" It was Chief Melrose, with his large, craggy head poked through the doorway. The man looked tired and older than normally. His gray-green eyes look dilated.

Startled, but still chuckling, Sniffer looked seriously at his superior and said, "Big robbery over on Kilroy, Chief! Fernando's place was hit. Perp made a clean getaway." He stood, went over to the Chief and handed him his yellow pad. As he did so he thought: You look like shit, Chief. On a bad day.

"You think robbery's a big joke, Sniff?" the Chief said sternly as he snatched the pad. He looked down and did a quick scan. A big grin appeared on his face, followed by a hearty chuckle. He too appreciated a little levity now and then, just like every one else--more so after the day he'd gone through.

Then, as if he had suddenly become the main feature in a mind-reading act, he said

in a serious voice, "You forgot to ask old man Fernando the calibre of that kite!"

They both got a good laugh out of that remark, with Sniffer's laugh a bit louder due to the fact that he was in on the irony of the mind-reading trick and the Chief wasn't.

The Chief still chuckled as he said, "Sniff, I'd like you to do a follow up for me. Go interview a teacher over on Columbus about a kidnapping. Of one," he fished a piece of paper out of his inner coat pocket and gave it a glance, "of one Bertram Balliwick. She's a witness to it. Saw it all, she says." he handed Sniffer the report sheet. Yeah, thought Sniffer, you're tired, Chief.

"And Sniff?" He had forgotten that Sniffer had seen this document before. In fact, he had actually been the guy who had first showed it to the him. "Find out if she knows more than what's on that paper." He gave the report in Sniffer's hands a snap with the back of his hand. "She seems pretty sharp . . . I mean she had the presence of mind to get the tags ID under a trying time . . . but maybe she's forgotten to tell us something. OK, Sniff?"

Sniffer said smartly, "You got it, Chief!" He rose and put on his suit jacket. But the Chief wasn't done just yet.

"And Sniff? Here's a little something I'd appreciate your mulling over in that Sniffer trap of yours. We'll talk fuller on it later, but for now at least, just chuck it into your memory banks." The Chief had Sniffer's full attention.

"Think about this, Sniff!" He lowered his voice conspiratorially. "We've got pigs coming out of the woodwork. First the Bacon Bandito shit. And 'bout the same time, Blossomfarten's hog ups and goes AWOL. Then that Smythington woman says a pig is looking in her window. And now, if you saw it in the report, the schoolmarm says the two perps were wearing pig masks, for crissakes!" He paused and took a breath. Then, in almost a whisper:

"Some funny shit is going on here Sniff, real funny shit. Now, I don't know what it is exactly, but I don't believe in coincidence. Especially when it times itself with a visit to me by," he looked at the detective and tried to read his face to see if he was giving what he had just said credit or thinking that his old Chief had seriously gone round the old frigging bend and was now as funny as a loaded kite, with or without the calibre known. Sniffer looked serious to the Chief, so he finished the sentence, "by the damn FBI no less!"

"I'll give it some real good thought, Chief!" Sniffer felt it was better not to worry this overworked and heavily taxed man with a little chitchat now about the FBI.

"Good. Good," the Chief said. "You do that." He then held a cupped hand up alongside his mouth as if he didn't want anyone else to hear. He whispered, "Now, I'll go prep S.W.A.T. on that Fernando Kite Caper!"

One man just stood in Detective Clu Sniffer's office and laughed, while the other laughed all the way down the hallway he now used to get him to Ms. Prissyfoot's place. And the man, who went down the hallway, even as he laughed up a storm, did think-- yes, he did! --that his superior, his Chief, had indeed, finally gone totally fucking bananas, with a shit-load of bonkers on the side, just for shits and giggles . . .

"I can pound harder than you can pound harder!"

MAJOR GROK sat in his overstuffed, plushy-type chair at the con, as it were, staring at four buttons on a console that sat below a five-foot square televiewer screen. The first two lower buttons were lit up, the white Power-On and, above it, the yellow Standby. The ship was now ready to receive a telepicture from millions of miles away. Now all Major Grok could do, really, was wait.

His report, an assessment of the situation, included the escape of Balliwick. As Fleet Commander he could be held responsible, even indirectly, for the mistake. And mistakes, he knew, were intolerated. He now waited, anxiously, with the matter fully in the hands of his superiors, the higher ups, the HCC--High Central Command.

The right arm of his posh chair had a cup-holder-like appendage attached to it, one similar to those found in many cars on Earth and it now held the Major's favorite beverage. A life-extending, greenish, viscous-looking, and very sweet, tea-like liquid called grocka.

Just how long it extended one's life--years? Decades? --No one knew, for it was impossible to conduct research on the matter. But Major Grok, at two hundred and thirty-seven years of age, and considered a young 'un by most Groinkians, didn't have that in mind now as he picked up the cup and took a long sip. Aaah! That tastes great, he thought.

"Grik," he said, taking another Aaah! Tastes great sip. "It's been a Helluva day, hasn't it?" He spoke in Groinkian.

"To be sure, Sir," Captain Grik responded. "To be sure!" Then, because he sensed his superior was in the mood for more conversation, which was understandable, he thought, given the circumstances, he stopped his work at the console before him and turned his chair fully in the direction of his superior. They looked at each other--two old friends who now shared the moment.

"It's funny, old friend," Major Grok said. "How things work out." He took another sip. "You may not know it, Grik, but if all goes as I expect it will, this will be my first failure!" He held up a hand to silence his subordinate from giving the consolation of rebuttal he knew was on his old friend's lips.

"And you know Grik, I now know *why* I've never failed!" To Grik, it sounded as if his superior had equated the Gron Earthling-escapes-mistake with the foregone conclusion that the High Command would regard it all as an intolerable failure.

Captain Grik moved his lips. Again the Major's hand came up to silence Grik's eager-to-give contribution. He took another long sip of the liquid. He then cradled the cup in his lap, and wrapped both hands around it.

"I've never faced anyone, any race of beings, who had the ability to beat me! My only planetary opponents have been primitive, ill-equipped and out-gunned idiots!" He paused to let it sink in. "And these Earthlings may not be as stupid as we give them

credit for, Grik!" He stopped to let Grik get that consoling foot of his in the door. Grik felt that the Major had prepared himself for the axe man.

"Major, you can't . . ." Captain Grik was halted by a buzzer sound. The third light on the televiewer, the red one, lit up and started to blink, the signal that a transmission was on its way and would arrive in approximately ten minutes. They both stared at the red light as it blinked.

"Grik, my old friend," The Major sounded serious. "I made Lieutenant when I was just about your age," he knew Grik was twenty one, "and I've been involved in over a hundred successful campaigns. Not bragging now, mind you, just making a point." he smiled at Grik.

"And I can tell you, old buddy, victory is very heady stuff, and failure sucks the big time!" He paused for effect. "But learn this, Grik," He emphasized it with a wigwag, up and down movement of his forefinger. "From one old warhorse to another, no matter what is going to happen, success or failure," he paused and took another sip, "never, but never," he paused again to draw it out then said quickly, "wash your underwear in coarse soap powder!" He smiled as Grik laughed out loud at the inanity of the sentence. Then he added, "For it makes your scrotum itch something fierce!"

Grik laughed. "One thing I've learned from knowing you, Sir," he bowed his head and put his right hand's palm to his forehead in a salaam, "is how to go with the flow!" They both laughed at his use of Earth slang. Grik flipped the hand frontward to finish the salaam.

They made more small talk, which further eroded the ten minutes of waiting time. Then a low horn sounded as the fourth and last button, a pale purple one, lit up and started to blink. It was Showtime!

Captain Grik didn't know whether to remain seated or stand at attention, for he had never been on the business end of a High Central Command face-to-face. He watched his superior for a cue. A few seconds later, when Major Grok stood, so did he.

They both now stared at the televiewer's giant screen. Its blackness yielded first to dark purple, which quickly turned to blue, then just as quickly, to gray. An image began to form in a swirl of colors. A face tried to appear. At first it shimmered. Then it glowed. The face image wobbled left and right, and then jiggled as it started to come into focus. Before the face was recognizable Major Grok knew who it was.

"Holy shit Grik!" he said quickly to beat the clock so as not to be heard by the incoming image. "They don't come much higher! I mean . . ."

"The Supreme Commander?" the Captain asked, his usual Sir! left off.

"No, Grik, we'd have to be Generals to . . ." He swallowed the rest of his statement as he heard the large screen speak.

"Good day, Major Grok," the man said. "This is aitch cee one pee el. How are you are?"

HC1PL stands for *High Commander of the First Power Level* . This level has six members who report only to the Supreme Commander. All other lower Power Levels report to these six members. The lower Power Levels, second through to the last, vary in

number on any given day, depending on the number of Groinkians who are at least one hundred years of age and have the glixizza. Thus we have the Groinkian chain of high command.

The man on the screen sported a glixizza that had been dyed dark purple. This made the silvery star-shaped formations on each bristly tip stand out dramatically. He wore his glixizza parted in the middle, as many High Commanders fancied, and it now had the look of a split fountain that arced left and right. The arcs ended a foot or so away from both sides of his head and framed his face. It looked elegant and magnificent. And it made a slight swish-swish-swish sound whenever he moved his head.

Lordy, Grik thought, Grok is right! They don't come much higher than this.

This, thought the Major, could signal bad news. Terrible news. He now rubbed the back of his neck, the place he knew an axe now had its eyes on. Oh, well, he thought, time to wash my soiled underwear.

"I'm fine, Sir," said Major Grok. "And you, Sir?" His legs felt like Jell-O and he was overwhelmed with the sudden urge to pee.

"Just great, Major. Couldn't be better! Our recent error aside, that is!" Ouch! That fucking axe was now sharper. And closer. Oh, Hell, thought Grok, I've gotta take a shit now, too!

"About my report, Sir. I would . . ." The HC1PL cut in.

"Yes, Major," he looked serious, "about your report. Well, let's see now, shall we?" He cleared his throat. "The High Central Command's inner body has gone over it with a fine tooth comb, you can be sure of that, and after comparing it with the hundreds of other intelligence reports we've received from all over that location the Earthlings call America, we have come to a decision." He stopped, lifted a cup and took a sip of the green stuff. His glixizza swayed slightly and swish-swished.

Oh, yes, the Major thought, the axe is now ripe and here it comes, buddy. Well, let 'er rip and cut my head off before I piss and shit my pants at the same time! The HC1PL continued.

"Major, before I give you our decision a few words are in order. First, let me tell you, your report was given the highest marks. The highest. By all who reviewed it, in fact." That's right you fucker, thought Grok, throw me a bone before you cut my head off! Classier that way.

"And it weighed heavily in your favor during our other consideration, your centennial review for promotion." He paused, looked down at something then looked up and went on. "Therefore, I personally want to congratulate you, *Colonel Grok!*" He saluted and ended the salute with: "Long life to you, Colonel Grok!"

Grok just stared at the large screen, speechless. On rubbery legs. And now he had the urge to urinate and defecate at the same time.

Finally, he found his voice, "I . . . I . . . I . . ." It was all he could get out and it sounded moronic.

The Groinkian military's newest Colonel just stared at the screen, a blank expression on his face. The man on the screen now moved his lips and said something, but it was

coming to the Colonel through a space vacuum. He heard nothing and felt lucky he could still see.

Mother, he thought, your baby boy is mute and deaf and needs a toilet! Somebody shoot him, please! This crazy thought helped him regain at least some lost composure. He could now at least, once again, almost hear.

" . . . up to me." the screen said. "And you can thank your lucky stars, Colonel, that this Earth failure could not be considered in your evaluation. We were only allowed to, by our laws, consider your past record which, as you well know, we found to be impressive, quite so. Spotless, in fact." He looked down at something.

The screen then wobbled and vibrated. It went in and out of focus, but the voice was still audible. "Now, Colonel, back to your report. We, meaning the High Central Command, of course . . . fully agree with your in-depth assessment and analysis of the situation." The focus worked again. The picture now showed the man on the screen as he took another sip of the green stuff.

When he heard the words, 'fully agree,' the new Colonel breathed a sigh of relief and read this as good news. In his report, he had played down the escape and made it seem a mere triviality. He had recommended they ignore it completely and simply proceed with the invasions plans as originally outlined.

He had whitewashed the officers involved. He had blamed the mistake on the choice of the clumsy, cumbersome body-type tranmutations: the Earth pigs. That choice, he well knew, had been made by some High Command official, but he had adroitly side-stepped *that* fact in his report by a mere hint at culpability. His subtle blackmail scheme had obviously worked.

The High Commander now spoke again, "And Colonel? Under separate transmission we are sending you new and revised orders. For security reasons I won't now go into more detail here, but you should receive it in a few minutes. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sir!" No more was necessary.

"Oh, and Colonel? Before I forget. Some more good news. Your gona (wife*), Grinda has had five healthy babies, three girls and two boys!" He beamed at Grok. "And she's doing just fine. Congratulations again, Colonel!"

*A word is necessary here concerning the word "wife." It is not quite accurate as on Groink there is no such thing as marriage. With Groinkians living, on average, twelve thousand years, marriage is unthinkable, if not downright ridiculous. "Honey, what are you planning for our ten thousand four hundred and thirty sixth anniversary?" Would dust symbolize the event?

Females can bear children through aged ten thousand, on average. At aged fourteen, Groinkians are assigned, by contract with the High Command military, a pair-mate for twenty years (Groinkians use the terms gono for male and gona for female, with goni for the combined form). At the end of the twenty years, they can keep the arrangement (called a gonotta) or terminate it, as they wish.

If terminated, they are assigned another gono, or gona, for another twenty years and

so on. During each twenty-year contract they are forbidden to part company. By law, it is punishable by death if they do. The longest recorded gonotta arrangement has been sixty-four years--so far.

Law permits Goni to have as many lovers as they can handle, but their choices are limited to gossixi and gammixi because these do not reproduce. Goni who have committed, and are found guilty of adultery, are quickly and summarily executed.

"Sir," said the Colonel. "We expected seven. Were there prob . . . problems, Sir?" He held his breath and feared for the worst. He had been gonottaed to Grinda, his gona, for thirty-five years now, and he loved her deeply. Grinda returned this love.

"No, no, no, Colonel. No problems whatsoever. Grinda had the seven, but two of the babies were hybrids, that's all. One of each, it seems. They've already been placed in a hospital-retraining center. You won't, as you know, be returning in time to see them on the AVP, the Allocated Visitation Plan, but I can arrange a live taping of them if you wish."

The colonel wished. Their goodbyes were said, in a military manner and the screen returned to its blackness as all four lights died out at once.

It was Captain Grik who spoke first, "Well, well, well! Congratulations, Sir!" He started to salute then changed his mind. "No! Make that double congratulations!" He now saluted twice in rapid succession. He stood in the same spot as before. The new Colonel returned the double salute and sat down in the plush con-chair.

"Thanks, Grik, thanks," the Colonel said. "And shit, Grik, I can tell you that for a moment there I thought I was a dead man! Almost shit my pants, I did!" He laughed. The Major laughed, too.

"Well, Sir," said Grik with a wink. "It seems even failure has its rewards!" They both laughed again, glad to be back to their normal routine and out from under the watchful eye of the big muckity-muck of the televiewer screen. Grik started toward his place at the console.

"And speaking of doubles," the new Colonel said. "How about I mix us two!" Captain Grik nodded. Even though the Colonel had used the word "I," Grik, a slave to proper command protocol, went to the wet bar. "Colonel, Sir? Grudu?"

The new Colonel nodded. "Why not? If we can't celebrate now and then, what the fuck are we doing living?" Grik smiled at this and poured the green liquid into two large cups.

Grik made a round of drinks of the life extending liquid, but hot, the way some Groinkians preferred it, and with a shot of an alcohol-like liquid, grudu, in each. Grudu would put a fine buzz in a dead horse. Kickapoo Joy Juice, as Al Capp might call it.

The alcohol, made from the roots of the grudu plant, the one that's always found by the banks of the Gi River and not the one--forget it!

Captain Grik took his cup and made the first toast:

"To failures, may they always promote us! And," he raised his cup, "to promotions, may they never fail us!" They laughed and took simultaneous swigs. They felt the lightning-quick buzz immediately. It was now Colonel Grok's turn.

"Never cry over spilt milk!" he said this in perfect English and then back in Groinkian, "That's what those Earth folk say, those shilly . . . uh . . . silly well-armed, intelligent bastards!" He giggled and took another sip. "They say this to minimize *their* failures. Your turn, Grik."

Captain Grik sipped then said, also in English, but with a Texan's drawl, "No point in locking the barn door, Tex, *after* the horse has escaped . . . now is there?" Colonel Grok let out a huge laugh. Grik also laughed. They looked at each other and laughed some more and tears started to form in their eyes. They continued their English practice. *Sip, sip!*

"Anuthah day, I say, old chap," said Colonel Grok. "Anuthah doll-ah!" he had used a veddy British accent. *Sip, sip!* "You go, old beano."

Captain Grik said giddily, "A rolling shtone fathers no horshe!" At this, Grok fell out of his chair and laughed uncontrollably as his knees hit the floor, which he now began to pound with a fist.

"What! The shtone fathers no horshe!" he yelled between laughs. "You're right Grik, if that *fucking* male shtone only shtopped its rolling, it'd knock that horshe right up, it would!"

Captain Grik joined his superior on the floor; he too doubled up by laughter. Control was impossible for both of them now. They were, you could say, juiced. And they were now zigzagging between Groinkian and English, sometimes both in the same sentence. *Sip, sip!*

"And Grik," continued the Colonel, his laughter unchecked. "Your damn shaying is not the shame as the others!" He held his stomach. "It doeshn't fit in with the resht, you shilly sit! It uses the wrong tenor!" He held his stomach tighter, tears in both eyes, and pounded some more.

The Captain agreed. "You're right Shir!" he said, his voice raising as he also held his gut. "I used the wrong tenor! I shoulda used a shoprano!" he yelled out. "A fucking shoprano!" He roared a laugh, then added, breathlessly, and loudly: "The kind of shoprano rolling male shtones have the shtones for!"

Captain Grik now also pounded a fist into the floor. It looked as if they were both trying to nail a stubborn carpet down that simply refused to stay flat.

"Grik, my old friend, my dear old friend," said the Colonel primly as he wagged a forefinger up and down as if remonstrating to a child. "It's common knowledge that shtones that can fuck a horshe can't shing a note, shoprano or otherwise!" He pounded the floor, and then looked at Grik. "Sho what the fuck would shee in him?"

Grik shot him a quizzical look and said, "She she? You shaid he was a male shtone!" *Pound, pound, pound!* Both now had intense stomach pains.

Just then, a Sergeant passed by the open door of the two-man control room. He glanced in, but continued on his way. He didn't realize that he was the first being in the universe to see two Groinkian officers beat the shit out of a defenseless rug. All he did as he walked away, as he head shook from side to side, was mutter, under his breath, "Officers!"

Captain Grik held up a hand, its palm out. "Wait! Wait! Wait!" he said. He sounded childlike, giddy as shit and out of breath.

"Here's one! Here's one!" his eyes were red and shiny and he looked demented. "What's done is done when the fat lady shings!" Colonel Grok just stared at him, puzzled.

What Grik had said sounded correct, but then again, it didn't. The Colonel was too drunk now to figure it out. So he practiced more of his rug beating and laughing.

This revelry was interrupted by the chucka-chucka-chanka-chanka sound from a device similar to our fax machine. They looked toward the machine and saw a piece of paper, dark purple in color, slide out. On its surface glowed glisteny, iridescent yellow lettering. Colonel Grok's new orders had just arrived.

As he held his stomach, Captain Grik stumbled to a standing position and went over to the machine. As he took the first glowing sheet out, two more followed in rapid succession.

Without even a glance down at them, a sign of respect for his superior, he brought them over to the Colonel and handed them to him. Colonel Grok, still on the floor, gave the glowing letters a quick scan. Shit, he thought, I could do this part of the job drunk or sober. He read with whoozy eyes for a bit, the glowing type swimming before him somewhat and looked up at the Captain.

"Shimple . . . uh . . . simple ashine . . . uh . . . assignment," said the Colonel. "Shouldn't take us more than a century!" He blinked and looked fuzzily at the Captain. The Captain looked back at him. They both would have loved to laugh some more, but their stomachs hurt too much.

The Colonel said, "Shet the coordinates in motion, Captain, and then I'll tell you a little bedtime shtory." He stumbled to his feet and added, "One with a very happy ending." He winked at the Major.

Grik, without a word, stumbled over to his console and plopped into the chair in front of it. He quickly programmed in the numbers needed, the coordinates, to get them going in the direction of the new location.

Shit, he thought, I could do this job drunk or sober! He finished in less than ten seconds, turned and saw that Colonel Grok had poured two more celebratory drinks and was now back in his chair at the con. He now held one of the cups out toward Grik.

Grik went over, took the offered cup, and sat in the second-in-command's chair. Not as lush, mind you, but not too shabby, either.

They had been ordered to move to a new position, a safer one, to await the arrival of new Earth body-type transmutations, which were to arrive in two or three days. There was no mention, as Grok had expected, of the two men, the officers responsible for the mistake. The mistake of letting the first kidnapped Earth creature escape.

Colonel Grok was glad of this. He had purposely left Gron and Grin's names out of his report. To put them in would have meant a death warrant for the pair and the new Colonel hated that part of his job. Killing two good officers for a small mistake, to his way of thinking, was foolish and ill thought out. Only Nazis did that sort of crap. Or fascist or

communist dictatorships. Facts he had gleaned from his perusal of Earth history.

The report that now swam before him did mention, of course, his promotion, but it also contained, as he suspected it would, for he knew how the High Command operated, the happy ending to his bedtime story

"Now, my dear Grik," He took a sip before he added, "Are you ready for your bedtime shtory? One guaranteed to give you shweet dreams?" Grik nodded groggily with half comprehension.

"Once upon a time," the Colonel began softly, "the Commander of a Groinkian Warrior Fleet was promoted to Colonel." He paused. *Sip!* "And with his shpotless record, a record with only one shpot on it," *Sip!* "Our fearlesh Colonel was rewarded with a deshk job!" He made another quick pause. *sip!* "And he was given a year's supply of coarshe shope powder for his dirty underwear!" The colonel laughed. He knew the High Command had taken resentment to his blackmail ruse, after all.

All Captain Grik could say was, "I'm show . . . so shorry . . . sorry shir!" Christ, how he hated it that at this very moment he couldn't speak without slurring his words. He reached out a hand and touched his superior's arm. His face showed concern.

"If you shay there, there, there, to me, Grik," the Colonel said curtly. "I'll shmack you shilly!" Captain Grik pulled his hand back. "Grik! Shhhh! Lishten . . . uh . . . liss . . . ten, Grik! The bedtime shtory isn't over yet, so shtop interrupting!" *Sip!* "It doesh have a happy ending, *Major Grik!*" The Colonel winked conspiratorially at the new Major. The new Major didn't grasp it at first. Then he did.

"You mean Shir . . . ?" Words failed him. He was drunk and felt both sad and wonderful at the same time, as if he had just won a lottery, and at the same time, his dick had fallen off. He looked bleary eyed at his superior for some kind of cue.

"Right, old friend," said the Colonel. "Now it won't take effect until after I depart the ship and turn control of her over to you. But if I were you, Major, I'd get my hands on shome new uniform catalogues! Congratulations, *Major Grik!*" He saluted the soon-to-be-Major and then shook the man's hand. Funny how life turns out, he thought, very funny.

Grik said, "And Colonel? I'll get shome of those catalogues for you too, Shir."

They both felt the ship's engines put out more thrust as the third level, the "we're-going-to-a-new-place" level, of programmed coordinates kicked in. *Shwoosh . . .*

"Just the facts, Ma'am!"

DETECTIVE Clu Sniffer stood in the small foyer-lobby of 745 Columbus Street, a pastel brown building from the architect's palette. He scanned the mailboxes and reached out to press the one labeled 3G. He had arrived unannounced.

He preferred it that way. No call-ahead courtesy calls for this detective, no sir. He'd rather find no one at home than give him or her forewarning and time to pick up a big load of bullshit to throw his way. He knew the jarring effect a visit from the police had on most civilians, innocent or guilty, and he used this effect fully and to his advantage.

He made no distinction between witness and perp. Get their adrenalin going was his motto. If they were an innocent witness, fine. They'd know it, and a good jogging just might help them remember something they otherwise might forget.

And perps knew they were perps. So, jogging those bastards couldn't lose a thing, now could it? And some innocent-looking witnesses just might turn out to be perps after all and guiltier than Satan at a sock hop in Hell. No matter what, it worked for him.

Sniffer now heard a female voice speak to him through an intercom on the mailbox. He listened carefully, trying to read the voice.

"Hellooo . . . who's there?" said the pleasant voice. He liked the sound so much he remained quiet just to get her to repeat herself. She did. He smiled. Lovely voice. Okay, **'nough** suspense, he thought, don't go and scare the lady.

"Detective Clu Sniffer, Ma'am, from Police One." A pause. No buzz-them-right-in for *this* lady.

She finally asked, still pleasantly, but with a tinge of wariness in her voice, "What's this all about, Detective?"

"Just want to talk to you, Ms. Prissyfoot," he said. "About the kidnapping you witnessed." He paused to give her time to absorb what he had just said. "I only have a few small questions and I promise it won't take too much of your time, Ma'am." He waited for her response. It came in the form of a weak-sounding buzz, buzz. "Thank you, Ma'am!" he said as he pushed on the inner door.

He stepped through and gave the staircase ahead of him a look-see. Third floor, he thought, and no friggin' elevator. I'm getting too old for this crap. Hey! --He reminded himself, that's what a getting-older-than-shit detective would say.

He strode to the first step briskly, took a deep breath, then took the stairs three at a time. On the second floor landing (he had taken a mere six three-step hops) he had to pause and gasp for breath. If he could only get his hands *gasp!* right now, on the bastard he was sure had choked *gasp!* the life out of him *gasp!* he'd kill him, for sure. *Gasp, gasp!*

He just stood there and felt stupid for a full minute. He was bent at the waist and now stared down at his shoes. *Gasp, gasp, gasp!*

Gotta quit smokin' Clu, you dumb shit, he said to himself, gotta quit. gotta quit. gotta quit. Somewhat refreshed, but not totally, he walked the short hallway to the remaining flight up. This flight he took a bit slower. As he approached the door to 3G he wasn't exactly panting, but he still felt as if someone had let most of the air out of him.

Ms. Prissyfoot's door was ajar and he could see a security chain that spanned the narrow gap. These security chains are a laugh, he thought, they wouldn't keep wet cereal out if it had its mind set. Sure didn't keep Freddy "Bruiser" Fitzpatrick out. No sir! Kicked that door in in less time than it takes a flea to pee, then killed his wife and three children before turning the gun on himself. Security chains? Ask Mrs. Fitzpatrick her opinion on the matter. It's a wonder, he also thought, the amount of false-sense-of-security goin' 'round.

In anticipation of her next move, he had his ID and badge ready. At a few feet from

her door, he held it up for her to see and read. She gave his open wallet a quick scan, and then closed the door. He could hear her inside as she fiddled with the I'm-flimsy-as-shit-can-be chain. A few seconds later she opened the door wide and greeted him. He liked what he saw.

She had a nice, feminine shape. She wore a housedress that flattered her smallish frame. It fit well, too. Although it emphasized her bosom and hips, it did so in a sweet way that made him just want to hug her.

Her whole aura exuded a kind of feminine warmth that reminded him of home, and family. He liked it that she also reminded him of his mother. There was no one like Mom. He realized he had stared at her, so he changed that posture with a direct look into her face. He then said, in a very Scotland Yiddish and Britishy Inspector like voice:

"Good evening, Ms. Prissyfoot. Detective Clu Sniffer here from Police One Headquarters, Ma'am," He bowed almost to the floor, then, as he held this ridiculous posture, he added, "At your service, Ma'am. And now if you'll just show me to the goldfish's body, I'd be most appreciative, I would."

"Hee hee," she giggled. "Hello Detective. Come in, please." She stepped to the side and held the door for him to enter. He made a great show of straightening up and said, "Thank you, Ma'am." He looked at her eyes. "And, Ma'am, you say you don't believe Goldy committed suicide because she had everything to live for. That about it, Ma'am?" He cocked his head and squinted one eye at her. She giggled again. "Hee hee, hee hee. Come in, you fool." Geez, he thought, she even giggles like Mom.

As his large bulk passed her, he could smell her perfume. Light. Delicate. Not overdone. It reminded him of the smell one gets from those fancy bathroom soaps that no one is ever supposed to use. A clean, delicate, and lovely odor. He liked that, too.

"I don't know why Detective Sniffer," she said from behind him, "but somehow--hee hee--I know you've never done that Chief Inspector routine before--hee hee--and I feel somehow honored." Then she added. "If it's an old routine of yours . . . it needs serious work!"

He chuckled. "It's brand new, Ma'am." He smiled back at her over his shoulder. "You're the first to see it . . . and the last . . . 'cause it's rough on the old back." He put a hand to his back in a sham show of pain.

He heard her close the door behind him as she chained it up again. Talk about cautious, he thought, here she's got a cop with a gun standing right in her living room and--

She spoke and short-wired his thoughts. "Make your self comfortable, *Chief Inspector Sniffer*." He laughed as she came into the living room and stood beside him.

Facing him she said, "You like? Decorated myself." She swept a hand around.

He scanned the living room he now stood in and made a quick assessment. Like her perfume, it was decorated in a light, delicate, and not overdone fashion. He liked the room.

"I like it, Ma'am." he said honestly. "You should be a decorator. Very nice, indeed." He looked around a bit more.

It was the type of room a man, any man--well--most men, anyhow, would love to come home to. It was homey and comfortable looking. And it sure beat the I-trained-myself-to-be-a-slob place he hung his hat in. A fleeting thought entered his mind along the lines of hiring her to redecorate his bachelor-in-a-mess place, but it quickly passed. Although, somewhere in the background of his brain, it decided to linger for future reference.

"Please have a seat, Detective. Would you like a drink of some sort?" He took a single, very comfortable living room-type chair, leaving the entire couch for her.

"Uh . . . no thanks Ma'am," he said. "I'm on duty." As he watched her cross the room toward the couch, she said:

"Well, coffee or a coke is permissible, isn't it?" She now sat and crossed her legs primly, properly, just the way he thought a real nice lady should. He liked the way she did that. She was certainly no raving beauty, but she was no mutt, either. A nice face. A pleasant face. And like her perfume, delicate, and not overdone. His kind of face.

She wore glasses, but not the type some people imagine school teachers always wear. Although he didn't know shit-one about designer eyewear, he knew this pair headed in that general direction. Further, unlike the hair-in-a-bun some people also associate with her profession, her hair was shoulder length, a glossy brown, stylishly cut and looked squeaky-clean.

Her hair, for some reason, reminded him again of fancy soap. Yessiree Bob, he liked the cut of this schoolteacher's jib! The faint and long-lost stirrings he now felt in his crotch area told him *that* much. He crossed his legs and felt a blush hit his neck area.

"I don't drink noth . . . uh . . . anything on duty Ma'am." he said and regretted the double negative he had started to make in front of her, especially her being a school teacher and all. Shit, he thought, I'm as nervous as a schoolboy trying to put on his first condom!

Slow down, Clu, he reminded himself. Get control boy! You're here on official police business, you knucklehead! But damn, he thought, why does she have to be so attractive to me? And intimidating? Take control Clu, he told himself. Think like a cop! And not a dick cop, either.

He took control. "You see, Ms. Prissyfoot," he began. "I have a philosophy about drinking on duty, even if it's only a coke or what have you." She seemed interested, so he went on.

"To me, it's an infraction of police rules. A minor infraction to be sure, Ma'am, but an infraction, nonetheless." He checked her face again. She was still interested. In fact, she almost looked fascinated. "And a small infraction can lead to larger infractions. Commit enough small infractions Ma'am," Shit, he thought, if I use the word infraction one more time . . . "And before you know it, Ma'am, you're stuffing a drug dealer's pay-off money under your mattress!"

God! He thought, I sounded like a fucking, lecturing gasbag! With an infraction for a brain! He was sorry now that someone had been thoughtful enough to put the air back into the him just long enough for him to lecture her on his boring, silly-ass philosophy.

The schoolteacher now spoke to the newly deflated bag of wind.

"It's nice to know, Detective," she said. "That there are still some men who hold strong beliefs" She paused and smiled. " And now, Detective Sniffer," she sounded very serious, "how do you take your martini? One olive or two? Stirred or shaken?"

This caught him way off guard. He just stared at her with a look of slight disbelief on his mug, his mouth agape. Then bozo got it! "Oh! . . . Ha! Ha! Ha!" he laughed. "You she-devil, you! Whew! You had me going there! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

She laughed too. A nice, light and delicate laugh, that he liked the sound of, as if he had just heard the tinkle of temple bells for the first time. He relaxed a little. Their ice, as they say, had just been broken.

"Now, Ms. Prissy . . ." he started, but she interrupted with, "You can call me Pooty, Detective Sniffer. I don't stand on formality." He ran her name through his mind: Pooty! Pooty! He thought it sounded light and delicate, unlike most people who might, just might, mind you, picture the yellowish lumps found in a baby's diapers. "Me go make pooty now, Mommy!" Sniffer, you love sick puppy, you.

"And you can call me Clu, Pooty." he said. And now that he had said the name out loud for his first time, he was still not reminded of yellow baby shit. *I now pronounce you 'marm and gasbag! You may kiss the bride, but please don't let the your wind knock her light and delicate head plumb off her shoulders, gumshoe!* And while we're at it, why do you want her to call you Clupooty, anyway?

The Gasbag Clupooty asked the Poopy Pooty the usual basic and very preliminary questions--to establish the background firmly in his mind. The When? Where? What? Who? And Why? Stuff that any TV detective knows leads to the solving of the crime in the last five minutes of the script.

As he wrote her answers down, he checked them against the police report, just to keep the game honest. After all, he was a man who held strong beliefs. Why, Miss Pooty had even told him so!

When? Last Wednesday around 9:00 pm. Murder She Wrote was just coming on. The episode where Jessica gets mixed up with Russian spies and Russian dancers.

Where? Right in front of 745 Columbus Street, the pastel brown building in between the pink one and the pale green one. Here, Pooty told him about the architect, Widdle Smerth, and his palette philosophy. Sniffer was just thrilled, if you get the drift.

What? Bertram Balliwick, 20's--question mark. 5'5' to 5'7'--question mark. Brown hair--question mark. At this point, he was reminded of the Fernando Kite Caper. Grabbed by two men and put into car trunk. Car type--question mark. Color of car--Darkish--question mark. Officer zapped with a very bright light from a TV remote--question mark. He fell down. Here, Sniffer told her that there had been no report of a cop being shot. And, Fuggit, the cop on that beat, was just fine and dandy. She simply told him she saw what she saw.

Who? Two men in pig masks--question mark. One tall, one short--very, very short. Too dark for a better description. They hadn't said anything, but Bertie yelled from the trunk that he was going to sue them. Did Balliwick know the men?

Why? Because I flunked him in kindergarten! (I couldn't resist, dear reader! Just checking to see if you're paying full attention!) Our Clu put a question mark next to this one.

As he asked the questions, wrote them down and compared his notes with his copy of the police report, he had the distinct feeling, an impression, a sensation, call it what you will, that she was sizing him up, taking stock of him, assessing him, as a man, as a woman does when she's interested in the man, and he liked her doing so. It made him feel young somehow.

He knew she liked him, took to him. And for sure as Cheez Doodles are yellow, he was puppy-love-smitten by her. They had the back-and-forth, the give-and-take, the I-like-you-and-you-like-me rapport that only light and delicate first-time friends that may one day be lovers can share and know.

And they found each other easy to talk to and it got easier during every passing minute. Was it love? Not yet, but they were sure as doody up to their necks in deep *like*.

I said *like*, not lust, you perverts. Lust has no place in this newly formed friendship. Not when Clu and Pooty both hold strong beliefs. True, he was just dying to kiss her and see if his tongue still enjoyed the taste of tonsils, and the feeling was mutual, but that kiss would occur, when and if it did occur, as a kiss of love and not one executed by a "Sooeey!" yelling, hog-rutting sex fiend. So there.

He knew he was near the end of the interview and he hated for that to happen. He wanted to interview his Pooty forever, if truth were known. Longer, if given the chance.

He now thought of getting ready to stand up, thank her like a gentleman, hide his slight erection with the police report and take his leave. He also thought he would stand up, cross the short distance between them and lift her face to his, then kiss her light and delicate lips until one, or both of them, passed out or died.

The two thoughts wiggle-waggled in his mind. They shifted back and forth rapidly, first one then the other, then a piece of this one, a piece of that one, as if he was a child who could not decide whether to eat the cake first or the ice cream. Pooty interrupted this delicious dichotomy in his mind.

"Clu!" she burst out. "*I've just thought of something!*" Goody, I get to stay longer! And she's going to tell me that the *something* she's just thought of is: "*Kiss me, ya big lug, and while you're at it, rip my bodice off!*" Later Clu, later. If you're that lucky.

She answered his Yes? nod, "I'm such a chowder head at times! (*You could never be a chowder head to me, sweet Pooty!*) Why I didn't remember this before, (*The excitement, Darling!*) I don't know. The excitement, maybe. (*Told ya, Hon!*) Anyway, I should have told them, the police that is, that Balliwick wore a dark colored tee shirt with Semper Fi on the front. And I . . ." Clu jumped in, his semi-woody knocked back into Slumber land.

He said excitedly, "Semper Fi? You sure?" Clu the smitten was now again Clu the cop, new and improved and stirrings-free.

"Oh, yes! I'm sure. Ms. Higgam . . . huggem . . ."

"Ms. Higgambotham-Smythington?" He said the name glibly, so smoothly in fact, one

could get the impression he had practiced it hundreds of times. Pooty looked at her Clupooty with true admiration.

"Yes, her." She agreed. Then said, "Ms. Higga . . . Henrietta . . . told me that the peeping-tom that ogled her through her bathroom window was wearing a red tee shirt with those same two words. "She paused to check his reaction. He looked very serious. "She also told me, by the way, that the police had her *convinced* that what she had seen was a real live pig and not a man. Imagine that!" She laughed. Yeah, he thought, imagine that. Silly cops.

Sniffer looked like a man in deep thought. And he was. Could it have been a *man* Ms. aitch hyphen ess had seen? And *not* Blossomfarten's big old hog? Could this Balliwick character be the peeping tom? Could all of this have something to do with Balliwick's kidnapping? Revenge of some kind? A jealous husband? Would Pooty take that blouse off if I asked politely?

Things fit and yet they didn't fit. He had too many questions and not enough concrete answers. He came out of his reverie and half heard her say something.

"Huh?" he said. Now she didn't hear him.

". . . and so I just told her, Poppycock!" she said. "Poppycock! Poppycock! There are no five foot tall pigs, I told her, going around looking in bathroom windows and squeezing their fat behinds into red tee shirts. Poppycock! Poppycock! Poppycock! I told her!" He nodded his head in agreement each time she said poppycock. He looked like a nodding-head doll stoned on the poppycock.

She asked his last nod, "Clu, you agree with me, don't you, that Ms. Higga . . . Henrietta was mistaken?"

He sure, almost, maybe, could be, possibly, did. "Yes, Pooty," he said gently. "It's looking that way." he scratched his chin. "Damned funny . . . " She shot him a reproachful look at his use of the mild expletive.

He recovered. "Dang funny stuff all this, to be sure. Could be Balliwick's her peeper. Could be. Funny stuff going on, that's for sure." She gave him a normal look and he felt greatly relieved. He tacked on, "Very funny stuff." She agreed. "Yes, Clu, it is funny."

And now, before he said something else in the stupid-too-stupid vein, and before he blew all his chances with his light and delicate Pooty, he decided to say his goodnight.

"Pooty, I've got lots to check out," he fairly cooed. "If this Balliwick character is our peep, he could be dangerous, *very dangerous!*" He studied her face. "Ms. Higgambotham-Smythington could be in great danger! If Balliwick thinks she can identify him, you know?" Her face showed visible dread. He couldn't help that, so he plunged ahead just to make sure her false sense of security bubble was fully popped.

"And Pooty?" he looked at her lovingly. " *I want you to be careful, too* . I don't believe in coincidences. Balliwick was right in front of *your* building, *remember?*" She nodded.

"And who knows?" He took her hands in his. "This Balliwick just might have a few screws loose and do things for no other reason than to do them." He squeezed her hands. "Now, it's true you haven't had any contact with him in many years, so there's no reason whatsoever for him to have a grudge against you, so I . . . " She interrupted.

"Oh, my God!" she said. "I flunked Bertram Balliwick in kindergarten! And other grades, too. Oh, my God!" Her face had turned the color of ash. She looked as if she was going to swoon, to faint dead away. He stepped toward her.

He took her into his strong arms to give her comfort and reassurance. Her slender body fit into his big bulky one in a very light and delicate way. He told her not to worry, but to be careful. He was only a phone call away, after all.

And he told her he'd have Corporal Fuggit keep an extra sharp eye on her place. No peeping tom was going to hurt her, you betcha. Not his Pooty. Not after he had waited a lifetime for her, a lifetime looking for her and had finally found her. No sirree Bob! He'd protect her with his life if it came down to that.

You just try hurting my Pooty, he thought, you fucking perv and I'll rip your window-peeking fucking head off and shove it down your fucking neck. And wrap it all up in your Semper Fi tee, you fucker! Thus he comforted her. He reassured her. He held her. As a protector, a cop, a man, a man who was now falling in love with the soft and wonderful woman in his arms. Even as he tried to will his mind-of-its-own penis to shut the fuck up, already.

And all the while, in the back recesses of his thoughts, was something his Chief had said: "We've got pigs coming out of the woodwork!" Chief, he thought, there's more than one type of pig.

Resisting an urge to kiss her, an urge that was overpowering and overwhelming, he merely said his goodbye. He would call her, he told her, if anything new developed. He knew that call would be made even if zilch developed. That, my friend, is a given!

As he walked down the stairs that led to the street below, on legs that were now capable of walking on air, he had no idea of just how nearby that window-peeking perv fucker was . . .

"On the street where I live?"

BALLIWICK hated the way he had run out on Henrietta ("Call me Henny, Bertie, Darlin'!") in the way he had. But he had no choice. Not really. He hadn't wanted to confront her in the morning, with the usual lovey-dovey wasn't-last-night-great-Honey? type chitchat. No--he certainly wasn't up for that stuff. Didn't want to face her in the morning, even. Too much guilt built in, dontcha know?

Oh, he had enjoyed it, you betcha! Especially that mind-blowing (pun intended), magical-like thing she had done to him with her mouth, in the all-blue bathroom. Unbelievable, absolutely, un-fucking-believable! Thank you, Henny Darlin,' he thought, for *that!*

That other stuff, the screwing, was great, too. Not un-fucking-believable great, mind you, but great nevertheless. He had been so prolific! Where he had learned all those positions, all four of them, he didn't know, but one thing was for sure: He felt like a drive-the-ladies-wild-and-make-them-beg-for-more stud-muffin! In spades, with a fat Bing cherry on top.

That Henny had loved it, too, was a given in his mind. No one, he thought, ever heard a woman scream like *that!* No one. Including the Devil himself! Although, *he* just might, because the noises she had made sounded straight out of the bowels of Hell!

He had yelled "Sooey!" at the top of his voice in an effort to drown her out, but no go. Satan himself had possessed her, so it seemed. And his "Sooey!" yells hadn't drowned out her screaming to the ceiling, to the bed head, to the walls, as positions dictated, at least a dozen times, maybe more: "Fuck me, Welly!"

Well, he thought, I fucked you as welly as I could, Henny Darlin!"

And he'd had that dream again, too. A really bad one. So real. As if it was actually happening to him at that very moment. Those pig men were not only chasing him, they had him cornered! Right next to a barbeque pit, no less. With families nearby making burgers--for crissakes! -- And what have you, on their barbeque grill, paying absolutely no mind to his plight. Like they couldn't see him or something. Or even hear him.

They had surrounded him (and the pit), this pig-faced gang, and were grinning from piggy ear to piggy ear, right at him. All leering as only true pigs can do. Perverted pigs, that is.

He had tried to reason with them, but they couldn't or wouldn't understand. And he sure as shit, didn't comprehend what they were saying, no sirree. *No speaka da pig Latin, Caesar!* And what the fuck does gricka gru mean, anyhow? Sounded like grunting, that's all. Did to *his* ears, anyway.

He had read their grunts as a hunger cry, for they sounded just like hogs do when lined up at the slop trough. So he tried yelling: "Sooey! Sooey!" a few times. It had seemed to work for they had stopped their leering and had just stared at him, blinking their eyes repeatedly and exchanging quizzical glances with their nearby pig-faced neighbors.

He had looked around for food, anything edible, something, anything, to quell their appetite. If fed, he was sure, they'd leave him alone. And mind their damn piggy business, you betcha!

All he found, right there on the ground next to the pit, was a fat bag of long, orangey carrots, maybe twenty or so. But damn! He couldn't get the fucking bag open! It was sealed--oh, was it ever! --so tightly. As if King Kong himself had plopped his big fat, hairy ass on the damn thing!

His shaky fingers couldn't even find a starting point in the tightly sealed plastic edge. He had, in total fear and desperation, ripped at it with his teeth, just a-gnawing and a-gnashing at it, but it wouldn't yield, not a mite. Then, amazingly, one of the nearby pig-faced guys just stepped over to him and zapped it with a TV remote! Open sesame!

The strange pig being had just smiled at him, grunted, and then--as nice as you please, Ma'am! --went back to his prior position in the gang. What a dream! What a fucking, scare-one-to-death dream.

The dream was fuzzy after that. He remembered only snippets. Weird, crazy shit. Him throwing carrots at them! Them catching them and some of them throwing them back!

And one piggo, having caught three carrots, was juggling away! Pretty good juggler, too, if he remembered right.

And he had been right--they were hungry! But not for any old fucking carrots.

"THEY WANT TO EAT *ME!*" he had yelled to his Momma, the one up in Heaven. He also remembered something fuzzy about them tying him to the barbeque rack, all a-grinning at him and chanting over and over: "Grunk greenk grokka gru gank gu gu gritta," all the while mixing a special chef's blend barbeque sauce that was more green than red.

It was here, before they could get the charcoal a-going--you know how *that* goes--that Balliwick had awakened, covered in sweat, trembly all over, with his eyes bugged out of his head and him screaming "Momma!" at the top of his voice. Right next to an old lady who, fortunately for Balliwick, couldn't hear him in her dead-to-the-world, AFO state.

Balliwick was now sitting on a wrought-iron chair. He chewed on a hotdog. Right there on the street in front of the *Funny Flamingo Outdoor Cafe & Bowling Alley*, the one with the large, pinkish-red flamingo logo printed on the front door awning.

You know, the logo showing a pinkish flamingo, dressed as a waitress, one wing carrying a tray depicting a burger, fries, and a coke on it, while with other wing held a bowling ball. The name of the place is emblazoned right there on her chest, and she's wearing large, clumpy bowling shoes. You know the one, I'm sure.

To Balliwick, it looked like a large, I'm-gonna-eat-you pink vagina, with the cafe's name, in white letters on a black field, providing the teeth. He shuddered just thinking about it. With an effort, he now altered his thoughts back to the previous night.

That the bedroom antics were wonderful was a definite. It was the afterwards, the after-sex twilight zone, the smoke-us-a-ciggy-while-we-cuddle-in-Mellow-Land zone, that after-glow zone known only to the Best-sex-I-ever-had lovers, that bothered him.

Some of it was guilt, for he truly felt as if he had just jumped his old Momma's bones or worse, much worse, his dear old Granny's bones. And there was that other thing. The smell. That indescribable and very cloying, old-lady smell. Just like Granny after her stroke.

It had hit his nostrils right after that Holy-shit-whose-been-fucking-in-here smell--which he hadn't minded a bit, to tell the truth ---had faded. He had experienced this old woman odor before, he felt sure, but he couldn't remember when or where or with whom. All he knew, at the time, was he had to get out of there, pronto. And the thought of finding out just who the Hell he really was, played a part, too

Naked, as he had been, he had gone into the all-blue bathroom to contribute his fair share to the porcelain potty fund. As he stood there, looking down at his limp wee-weeing petunia, he pictured her face: Just a-bobbing and a-sucking! As one might see in a well-made porno flick. In color, too.

The thought of it made the petunia want to grow, but when he remembered the old lady smell, he resisted the urge to replant the petunia in Ms. Higgambotham-Smythington's hothouse pussy-bed.

Instead he had given himself a spit bath before he went to retrieve his clean-as-a-

whistle clothes from her dryer. Semper Fi was fully legible again. And ready to travel.

As Semper Fi headed for the door, Balliwick had a realization: He hadn't coin-one in his possession. Now, he sure as shit didn't want to wake granny, so he scoured the house and found her purse. In it, she had over two hundred dollars, but being a gentleman like his Momma taught him, he took only fifty. One very wrinkled twenty and three brand new tens.

No choice, he had thought, no choice at all. And if she didn't discover it missing? Goody, goody. And if, as they say, the jig were up, she'd either forgive him or call the cops and hate him forever. But after last night? Shit, he could have taken it all! Of this he had not even doubt one.

Now, as he nursed a Coke, Balliwick reviewed the day thus far: He had wasted the whole morning in his who-am-I? quest. It had started with an ad he had spotted on the side of a bus. An ad for the *Red Fish "Disco-Is-Back" Saloon*.

The words Red Fish had rung a memory bell. A loud one. Balliwick, being too dim to realize that the ad was on every bus in town, had thought: Now that's very familiar! Seen it before ---hundreds of times! Maybe I live in that part of town!

Thus it was, with a pen borrowed from the waitress, he had written down the address, boarded one of those very buses, and rode it to the wrong part of town in his quest to find Bertram Burlappe Balliwick home address.

Then, after he had asked every stranger he met: "Do you know who I am?" and receiving responses that ranged from: "Get the fuck away from me, you maniac!" to "You want I should call a cop?" to a few actual hard smacks with an umbrella, a newspaper, and an attaché case--to mention but a few--Balliwick threw in the towel.

God, he now thought, why can't I remember? Then, like magic you might say, he remembered something that thinking about last night's dream had stirred up: The campgrounds!

Hell, he now knew where they were located and could picture the place, too. Why, hadn't his own dear Momma, who he could also fully picture now--just don't ask him her name--taken him there for picnics? Damn right she had! Sure of it now! The grass. The trees. The barbeque pits. The families with kids. The different, delicious smells. Hell, it was as fresh as yesterday!

Of course, the dream also reminded him of being lashed to a grilling-grate by pig-faced beings, but he thought to himself: Only a dream, Bertie, only a dream. Scary for sure, but only a dream. And dreams never hurt anyone.

His campground venture was a bust. At this early hour there were no families, no kids, no smells--no nothing really. And nothing he looked at helped his memory. Except he did get a twinge of fear as he looked at the largest barbeque pit. And for whatever reason, his memory-vision of being turned into a pig had returned vividly, and in full-color this time.

On that note, he left the place and started to walk toward the center of town. No goal in mind, mind you, just strolling along, goofy-like as if he was just another guy on his way to work or something.

As he ambled along, confused as shit and twice as dopey, he started to take in the street signs:

Maypole Street, Wiggins Avenue, then a bunch of flowers: Rose Drive, Chrysanthemum Place, Violet Way, Daisy Lane then a weird one: Bjilvusklavsky Farms then the alphabet and numbers came up: A Street, B Street, C Street, First Avenue, Second Avenue, Fourth Avenue (What the fuck, he thought, happened to Third Avenue!) then the military piped aboard: Sergeant Street, Major Place, Corporal Grove. It was a veritable Smorgasbord!

Who in Hell, he thought, thinks this shit up?

The street signs started to dance in his head. Which he didn't mind, as they seemed to be familiar to him, somehow. Reassuring, you might say. Then Bingo! He remembered a street sign from his recent past: Columbus Street! Yeah.

Aloud, but softly, he muttered the name a few times: "Columbus. Columbus. Columbus Street." Just to test the tricks a mind can play on a fella.

It seemed solid. But he muttered it again, just to see. "Co . . . lum . . . bus." Yep. He was sure he remembered that one.

In great glee and happiness, he yelled out at the top of his lungs: "Sooeey! Sooeey! Sooeey! I'll bet I live on Columbus Street!" The woman with the big dog said: "Stay away from me, you crazy bastard, or my dog here will rip your nuts off!"

Bertie stayed well away, you betcha and with a new place to go to, walked more briskly than he had in ages.

With his Semper Fi now as legible as a neon sign, he headed directly toward the North end of Columbus Street. What number on Columbus Street he didn't know, but he felt sure that he'd know the building once he laid his eyes on it. Memory being what it is.

Columbus Street. Where *Earl's Donut Dunker's Shoppe* makes the world's best donuts this side of Bjilvusklavsky Farms, the one that's the next street over from Daisy Lane. Heading North, that is from . . .

"Just let me see you again, you pig!"

CORPORAL FUGGIT, eyes peeled, as they were, saw the man. The man had entered Columbus Street from the North end and was walking briskly toward Fuggit's position.

Something about the man seemed familiar to Fuggit. The man was too far away for a clear look-see, but the man's build and the manner of his gait, reminded Fuggit of someone he felt he would recognize if he just got close enough.

When the man was within the two hundred foot range, Fuggit could make out the man's red shirt. Something was written on it in white, but at this distance, it was unclear what the words spelled out. But it made Fuggit pay extra attention.

The sensations of the *deja vu*, coupled with his police officer's curiosity, made Fuggit feel that this did, indeed, call for a closer inspection. No harm, he thought, in looking, now is there?

So with alacrity, he popped the last of the chocolate donut into his mouth, wiped his

chocolately hands on one of those cute little wet-wipes thingies--that his wife, Cantella, insisted he always carry--polished off the last half inch of tepid coffee and opened the patrol car's door. Has he stepped onto the sidewalk, he felt alert. Ready for anything. He patted his gun as if making sure he had it with him and hadn't left it in the men's room. Again . . .

"Pick a house, any house!"

BERT BALLIWICK, as he headed south on Columbus Street, scanned every building in hope of a sign of recognition. Shit, he thought, they all look alike, 'cept for the colors.

They should. The entire street had been designed by one architectural firm, to save money, and to give the street a homey, villagey-like appearance. The only concession the architect had made to individuality was to paint each building a different pastel color. The street looked like a delicate palette. Light and delicate, just like the Pooty who lived on the palette.

Balliwick saw the police car parked at the South end of the street. Hell, he thought, maybe I should just forget this building shit and go talk to that cop. He can run my fingerprints or something and find out for sure where I live.

The idea tempted him until he realized that he just might be wanted or something. Maybe he was an escaped murderer! A wife killer! Or, even if he was just wanted for being a pickpocket, they might lock him up for a long time. With a cellmate who thought he had a real cute ass and a right purdy mouth.

No--he wasn't up to a talk with any cops. Not now anyway. He scanned more pastel buildings as he walked. He was less than twenty feet from 745 Columbus Street, residence of one Ms. Pooty Prissyfoot . . .

"I wanna go wee!"

A MINUTE LATER, give or take, Detective Clu Sniffer, with a light and delicate odor still clinging to his suit, had just stepped out of the front door of 745 Columbus Street.

The wonderful visions of his Pooty that ran around in his head were suddenly kicked to the back burner. Put there by two words now directly in front of his vision: Semper Fi. And on a red tee, too. His cop brain kicked in so he said: "Hold it there, fella! I'd like a word with you!"

Simultaneously, Fuggit, who had read the Semper Fi when he was thirty feet from Balliwick also approached. He had ambled up--sauntered if you will--so as not to arouse the guy in the red tee's suspicions.

His last encounter with this guy had ended with him taking a nice, long nap, and memory being what it is; he wanted to take no chances this time around. He also saw Sniffer. Heard Sniffer's hold-it-there-fella statement and now lunged toward Balliwick--to get there first.

In his mind he thought: No dumb-ass Detective is going to usurp my collar! Also a-swirl in that mind of his was how much this bust would help kill his new nickname back at the station.

Fuggit's right hand now had a good grip on Balliwick's left upper arm. "He's my collar, Sniff. I'm taking him in." He had said it politely as if that should end the matter right then and there.

Sniffer took a few quick steps toward Balliwick. "Take your mitts off him, Fuggit!" he snarled. "I've gotta talk to this boy." Fuggit moved closer to Balliwick, as if to grab him even harder. Sniffer also got closer to the boy.

Fuggit yelled, "Screw you, Sniffdick! He's comin' with me!" He yanked Balliwick's left arm out to a forty-five degree angle.

Balliwick felt surrounded. He threw his free right arm into the air and yelled, "You got me, coppers! I surrender! Don't shoot!" Anyone hearing him would swear the cops had just captured another Dillinger. Or, at the very least, some criminal mastermind who had gotten away with a big diamond robbery or bank heist and now knew his time had come.

"Let go of him, Fuggy!" Sniffer now had hold of Balliwick's raised right arm. He tightened his grip.

"You deaf, Sniffass? I said he's comin' with me!" Fuggit snarled back. His right hand shifted downwards and he took a firm hold of Balliwick's left wrist. Fuggit's attitude was whoever grabs him first gets to keep him.

Sniffer was having none of it. He forced Balliwick's raised right arm down. He put a good tight Sniffer grip on it and pinned the arm to Balliwick's side.

"Bullshit! Fugnuts!" said Sniffer, his dander up. "I'm taking this perp in for questioning!" He tightened his grip on Balliwick's left wrist. "So, let 'im go, Fuggo!"

"Ouch!" said Balliwick. "That hurts!" The two men paid him no mind. Fuggit reached behind himself with his free left hand and drew forth a pair of handcuffs. Sniffer saw this maneuver. Not in the mood to be outraced, as it were, Sniffer also took out cuffs.

Almost in unison they snapped the cuffs on Balliwick's two wrists. *Click! Click!* Balliwick look petrified, both eyes wide. He looked helplessly from one man to the other. "Hey! There's only one of me!" he yelled. "You guys crazy or somethin'?" They ignored him.

Fuggit said menacingly, "He's going with me, Sniffnose!" Then, with his left hand he snapped the cuffs onto his own right wrist. *Click!* His right arm was now chain-linked to Balliwick's left arm. "He's my perp Sniffo, go find one of your own!"

Another *click!* Sniffer now had Balliwick's right arm tethered to his own right wrist.

"No! He's mine Fughead!" He gave Balliwick's arm a strong tug and the kid lost some footing. Balliwick did a little hip-hop step in an effort to stay upright. "Hey!" he yelled.

"In a pig's eye, Sniffshit!" said Fuggit. He started to pull Balliwick in the direction of his black and white, which was parked in front of *Earl's Donut Dunker's Shoppe*, to the South. Balliwick now stumbled toward Fuggit, his feet flailed and made slap-slap clown-shoe like noises on the pavement.

"I said he's coming with me!" growled Sniffer as he pulled Balliwick North, in the

direction of his unmarked vehicle. Balliwick yelled, "*Lemme go, you rat bastards, or I'll sue your rotten asses off!*"

"No, he ain't, Sniffballs!" said Fuggit. He now pulled harder and Balliwick said, "Hey! Hey! Hey!"

Balliwick was stretched out fully now, as if two horses were about to split him in two. And he hurt. His natural reflexes kicked in, so he yanked back with both arms. His forceful yank caught both cops off guard. And off balance. They both started to stumble and fight gravity, on legs that danced all over the concrete.

Fuggit flew to his left, both legs a-whirl. Sniffer followed suit by stumbling to his own left. It was all he could to keep his feet on the ground. When the two horses found some balance, they again tried to yank on Balliwick. But Balliwick yanked back first, which caused both cops to lose their complete sense of direction.

Now Sniffer and Fuggit yanked in their respective wrong directions. Sniffer went south. Fuggit headed north. And neither one aware of the change.

To counter their spin-like yanks, Balliwick yanked again. They yanked. He yanked. Both cops now stumbled clockwise around Balliwick. And more yanks from all parties concerned made the carousel go faster. Feet flew. They whirled and danced. Danced and whirled.

Fuggit yelled, "He's mine!" Sniffer yelled. "No! He's mine!" Balliwick yelled, "Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!" *Yank! Yank! Twirl! Twirl!* The crazy ride got even faster. Their yells and pavement stomps matched the pace.

There they were, Balliwick stretched out as he twirled and yanked. As two cops whirled and yanked clockwise around him. They spun 'round and 'round. All three now yelled at the tops of their lungs like kids on a roller coaster ride having a ball.

Balliwick was dizzy. The cops were dizzy. The ride went on as if the happy customers didn't want it to stop. Arms flailed. Legs flailed and stomped the ground.

A black and white pulled alongside this brand-new ride for maniac children. Chief Melrose peered from the back window, which was half open. He was reminded of the Whip-A-Whirl ride that's always set up at the county fair--with Balliwick as the Whip. He was also having trouble understanding them as they twirled their little hearts out. He heard:

"He's mine, Fughead!" "Let go!" "Screw you, Fuggo" "Ouch!" "He's mine!" "I saw him first!" "Stop it!" "Sez you, Sniffass!" "Ow!" "Let 'im go, Sniffshit!" "Ouch!" "Ow!" "He's mine!" "No, he's mine!" "Mine!" "Let go!" "Up yours, Fugface!" "Ow!" "He's Mine!"

The Chief rolled down the back window and hollered out to the two slaphappy ride customers, "Sniffer! Fuggit! Stop that shit before you churn that poor kid into butter!"

With hip-hop stumbles, more yells and pavement stomps, the two cops somehow managed to shut the ride down. The Chief, as he looked at the three out-of-breath and disheveled-looking creatures, had the privilege of seeing the almost-churned-to-butter kid upchuck all over Corporal Fuggit's brand new fifty two dollar police regulation black shoes--a gift from his wife, Cantella who . . .

"That's not me! But if it is me, I didn't do it!"

FBI AGENT, Tom Bookem addressed Officer Moldon and said, "I'd keep your distance from him!" He pointed a thumb at the hulking figure in the red tee shirt that had occupied them the better part of the morning. The kid had played mum. Wouldn't talk, no how. "Try to make me, coppers!" had been his complete attitude.

At one point in the interrogation, he had actually yelled, *"Lemme go home, you rat bastards, or I'll sue your rotten asses off! You hearing me?"*

When he saw Bookem's thumb, Balliwick shifted around on the wooden bench they had handcuffed him to. Now he was faced away from them as he stared at a wanted poster on the wall that said to be on the lookout for one James Oliver Pickle, a pickpocket. His AKAs: Jimmy the Hand, Dilly, and The JOPman, a use of his initials. The flyer said The JOPman loved working the crowds, ballgames, and such. Balliwick felt a kinship of sorts. He also liked crowds.

This damn tee shirt, thought Balliwick, It's got me in trouble. I should have stayed with that old lady . . . but my God, the stink. Her old lady smell! And if that was perfume . . . she shouldn't have done it for my benefit! I can't get that stinko outta my nose. He wrinkled his nose up just at the thought. Then, he heard someone talk about him, so he turned his head even more toward the wall, the better to study the criminal underworld's latest who's who news.

Officer Casey entered the room and went over to get a drink from the water fountain that was a few feet from where Balliwick sat. He looked at the wall-reading Balliwick.

He spoke playfully to Balliwick, "Hey peeper, looks like your goose is cooked. Found your sperm all over those Rhododendron bushes. DNA matches perfectly." Balliwick looked up at him, a surprised look on his face. "I didn't . . ." he started to say.

"You're in deep, peep! That rhodo was underage!" Casey laughed, filled with himself.

Moldon ignored Casey's impromptu wit and said, "I've seen him around." He didn't like to preempt the Chief while this smartass FBI man was around, but he thought he had to because Melrose hadn't defended their actions--so far anyway, in this most nefarious affair.

The Chief just stood there, right inside the door to his office, and listened to this exchange, a bored look on his face as if it was nothin' new to him. He'd seen it all before.

"Oh, have you?" the Agent shot back, obviously annoyed to be upstaged. "And where was that, may I ask?" They seemed to be in a performance for the Chief.

"Just in the neighborhood," replied Moldon. "Where that Higga . . . Hogga . . . that woman had an episode with a peeping tom." He looked at the agent and then at the Chief, as if some form of support might come from outside himself. None came. The Chief looked like he'd really welcome a nice nap right about now. And perhaps some nice hot cocoa. With marshmallows.

"He was the peeping tom, officer," the Agent said. "We scanned the back tapes from the spy cam and that is unmistakably the guy." He paused and pointed at a photograph on the Chief's desk some ten feet away. "Go look at the photo of the tee shirt, for crying

out loud." The Agent had a look on his face that said any rookie could, or should, understand that kind of evidence. Moldon said to the Chief, "Can I, Chief?" The Chief nodded and invited both men into his office. The Chief seated himself behind the desk.

The Chief looked down at his desktop, brought up his right hand and rubbed the fingertips back and forth across his brow. He looked disgusted. Officer Moldon looked constipated. The agent looked smug.

Moldon picked up the spy cam photo and studied it. "That could be anyone, even me!" Bookem ignored his remark.

Bookem pointed a fresh thumb at Balliwick and said, "He's not saying anything . . . he won't talk, Chief. I think you should turn him over to me. After all, from a technical aspect, we *saw* him first!" He now glared at the Chief. "The spy cam . . . remember?"

"*You saw him first ?*" said the Chief as he looked up and bristled. "Just one cotton-picking minute here, young man!" His face was red now. "*We took him into custody!*" His hackles were *really* up as he went on.

"This is *our* capture." the Chief said. "The boys brought him in, with you just sitting there minding your own damn business!" He paused and wrinkled up his nose. "Why don't we just keep it that way, OK?"

"I think not, Chief." the Agent shot back. "He's involved in this invasion stuff, too. I just know it. *So his mangy ass belongs to me!*" Bookem sounded as if it was already decided.

"First," the Chief said as if he now talked to an idiot. "There ain't no invasion!" He looked at Moldon. "You see any Martians around here, Moldy?" Moldon shook his head, obvious enjoyment written on his face.

The Chief added, "See?" He looked back at Bookem. "No invasion! So please shut your yap about any invasion crap. OK?" He paused to see if Bookem thought it was OK. He didn't look like it was OK, not with him, anyway.

The Chief continued. "Because that bullshit only scares people in these parts. And I don't like that!" He now stood behind his desk, his hands planted firmly on top of it.

He went on. "Second. Those so-called spy cam photos of yours. Yeah, there's a guy in a Semper Fi tee, but I agree with Moldy, with that pig mask on who's to say it's Balliwick?" The Chief held a hand up, as if to silence any possible refutation from Bookem.

"Now, maybe your photos taken from the Moon's ass will show it *is* him, eventually, in which case he'll go before a magistrate on this peeping-tom business." He walked around to the front of his desk. "After that, you can have him. But I think our local judge will hold him over for a trial." The Chief looked satisfied with himself as if what he had just said was irrefutable.

"With *what* evidence Chief?" the Agent spat out. "You don't think I'm going to turn over our spy cam photos, *do you?* Fat chance of that!" he banged a fist on the Chief's desk. "So you've got no case and no jurisdiction. *He's coming with me!*"

To bang on the Chief's desk, as he did, could easily have ended with him asleep on the rug. Put there by a clean left hook from Melrose. For it sure as shit ran through the

Chief's mind. But--

The fight over Balliwick was bitter, but very short. The FBI Agent held all of the national security cards. And he played every one of them as trumps. One Balliwick bid, doubled, redoubled, and made. The rubber was over.

Thus some hours later, Balliwick was in the backseat of an unmarked black sedan that was headed to a safe house an hour away from London. Two large men sat on either side of him. They made him look like the smallest sardine in the tin.

At the same time, the Chief received an answer on the phone to an inquiry he had made earlier. His face look perplexed after he hung up.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he growled. "Can you imagine that?" When no one asked what the *"that"* was, *the Chief supplied it on his own accord.* "The Bureau's never heard of this Bookem guy!" The Chief had a look on his face as if he had just checkmated Bobby Fisher.

But deep down, he felt dread about his pension, and had a sliver of worry for one Bertram Burlappe Balliwick. Whose whereabouts the Chief no longer knew . . .

"You little scampi, you!"

DETECTIVE Clu Sniffer looked down at his clutter-junky desk. He pushed the piles of papers around. You're in there somewhere, you dumb turd, he thought, so show yourself!

He searched for the police report, the one with Ms. Prissyfoot's address and phone number on it. You dumbo, he thought, there you are!

He looked at it to make sure it was what it was supposed to be and reached for the phone. It rang and startled him.

"Grand Theft Auto Division, Detective Clu Sniffer here. How may I help you?" He had said it in a real snappy tone, as if nothing would make him happier than to take that phone and bang it on the desk for scaring him.

He heard a light and delicate voice say: "Hi Hitler! Having a rough day, are we?" Then before he could apologize for his bruskeness and tell her he loved her and wanted to have her babies, she continued. "Clu, you sweet over-worked and underpaid Detective you, any word on Bertram?"

And, once more, before he could say a word, she threw in: "And Clu? Please use that Hitler charm I've grown to love!" All she heard was his deep male voice: "Ha ha ha!" She giggled and sounded girlish: "Hee hee hee." Like two love-struck mooncalves laughing their fool heads off.

Finally, he said: "Hi, Poot! How are you? . . . There! Does that sound better?" The way the word Poot had rolled so smoothly from his lips, one might get the idea he had tossed the name around in his mind more than once, just to see if he liked it better than Pooty, for if he did, it would be used by him for ever. Until death do us part. One might say that, one might.

"Much better!" she said. "I'm fine! And how do you do too Clu?" The do-you-do-too-

Clu rhyming tempo made her giggle again. "Hee hee hee." He too laughed at the do-you-do-too-Clu tempo. "Ha ha ha." Mooncalves, ain't no two ways about it.

But even mooncalves have to come down to earth sometime. He wanted to say Poot, my Darling, Darling Poot. I love you, I love you, I love you. It came out: "I'm great. And guess what? Balliwick's been taken into custody!" He paused giving her a chance to hear it. "And probably a good thing too, because I grabbed him right in front of your building!" Oops! He regretted saying that! Might scare her unnecessarily.

He heard an intake of her breath, so he said, "Now, don't you worry none, Poot. He won't be bothering no . . . uh . . . anyone for a long time." He hoped that would reassure her. It had.

She said calmly, "So he was the peeping tom then?" His pause that followed concerned her.

"Well Poot," he said. "Not exactly . . . though he's an odds-on favorite. What I mean is we're pretty sure he's the one, there's even evidence of a sort . . . photos, though we haven't officially charged him just yet. But he's . . ."

"If you end up *not* charging him," she sounded apprehensive, "does that mean you have to let him go?" Now she sounded scared at the very idea.

"Oh, no no no Poot! He's not going anywhere. He may not be in our custody any more . . . at the moment, but . . ."

"You just said *he's not going anywhere!* Have you lost him, Clu? Has he escaped? Please Clu, don't sugarcoat it for me. I'm a big girl Clu!" She sounded the opposite to him.

"Poot, my dear Poot," he cooed. He didn't want to turn into one of those man-woman-misunderstanding type deals. "If you'll stop interrupting me and shut that beautiful yap of yours a sec, and let me finish what I started to tell you, you'd see that he's no threat. OK, Darlin'?"

With that last long sentence said so sweetly--so cooingly--so filled with new love and with a Darlin' no less, as a tail, it's a mystery why men and women have trouble communicating! And he'd said it much sweeter than Humphrey Bogart ever could.

That he had just told her how to behave, how to act, and to keep her yap shut, shouldn't matter in the scheme of male-female relationships as long as it's cooed properly. By a master cooer, for sure. Don't want any misunderstandings--now do we? Anyway our--uh--his Poot went with the flow and took it in the manner it was intended, possibly with a little help from that Darlin' tail.

"OK, Clu," she said, in a voice that would make anyone who heard it know she did not feel as if he had just ordered her around. "Go ahead. I'll keep mum, Sweetheart." *Omnia vincit amor!* Another male-female misunderstanding nipped in the bud!

He paused and contemplated how to proceed so it wouldn't sound as if he was now going to follow up his cooed remonstrance with a gasbag lecture. He wanted to keep it short, sweet and to the point--but light and delicate at the same time.

For fun, the reader can now choose which one they would use from the four starting-conversational-prongs Sniffer had mulled over in his mind:

1. "What I was trying to tell you, Darlin' before you interrupted me was . . . "
2. "Now that I have your full attention, Darlin' . . . "
3. "As I said Darlin,' Bert's not going anywhere . . . "
4. "Darlin!' . . . Balliwick's being held by the FBI! . . . "

Isn't male-female communications loadsa fun? If you thought the first three sound a little I'm-the-teacher-your-the-pupil-like, even with the Darlin's, you agree with Detective Clu Sniffer.

"Darlin!' . . . Balliwick's being held by the FBI!" he said. It was short, sweet, and to the point, but a little less light and delicate than what he had in mind. "Where, I don't know, but those boys don't fool around."

He then explained in full, in a normal tone and without interruption, how he had spotted Balliwick outside her building and brought him in for questioning. He left out the Whip-A-Whirl scenario. *Wee!* He told her how Balliwick refused to talk without a lawyer present, but before they could get him one from the pro bono pool, the FBI had glommed onto him.

He told her about the spy cam photos that showed a man who looked very much like Balliwick. The man was shown as he peered over Henrietta's bushes. He wore a Semper Fi shirt. He also told her that a positive ID was a tad rough because the man had some kind of pig mask on. But he told her, even though it looks very much as if Balliwick's ripe for being the perp peeper, *that* may end up as small potatoes compared with what the FBI wanted with him.

She had listened to him without interrupting, save for an occasional, and soft "uh huh" here and there to let him know she was still on the other end of the line and hadn't hung up. He had talked gently and in a very unteacherly-like, unpreacherly-like tone. When he was through, she hopped right in.

"Clu Darlin' I've got a million questions," he was sure she did, "and if you're free this evening, how about we have dinner together?" Free? Free? Hell, he'd cancel a meeting with the President of the United States even if it concerned the world's total destruction and he was the only man who could stop it. "Goodbye world."

"Great!" he said. "I know a great Italian place over on Wayne. It's got great . . ." She interrupted before he used up the word "great" and left none for anyone else.

"No, Clu. I love Italian and all, but I have a better idea!" He was all ears. "Why don't you come 'round here and I'll make us a meal. You like shrimp?" She had assumed her better idea was accepted.

He hated and detested shrimp *Yuck!* and he told her so in no uncertain terms: "Love it! What time would you like me to be there?" Hell, if his Pooty made it, he'd eat a skunk's diarrhea on a Ritz cracker! And ask for seconds, please . . . 'cause I'm famished!

"Sevenish sound good?"

"Great!" he said, still determined to use the word up before anyone else got to it.

With the word "great" sounding to her as if she'd heard it recently, she said,

"Wonderful! It'll give us time for drinks before dinner. Just Cokes . . . if you prefer."

"I'll be off duty, Hon. And I don't mind a sociable drink or two with dinner. Got any Scotch? Or should I pick some up?" He thought about which liquor store to hit.

"Guess you didn't notice," she said. "But I have a full wet bar. I once even, for fun, took a course in mixology. You just name a drink and I know how to fix it. Everything from an Old Fashioned to a Zombie Special to a Long Island Iced Tea."

"Great! See you around seven! Ok?" he said.

"Ok!"

"Great!" he said.

"See you then. 'Bye for now . . . Sweetheart."

"Bye, Hon." he said. She had hung up first, which allowed him to hear a small sigh from her. Was it a sigh of relief that he had left at least one last "great" unchewed? We'll never know, will we?

The detective now looked down at his clutter-junky desk. It's going great, he thought, just great. But Clu, old chum, take it slow. We've had one great get-together and a phone call for Crissakes, and we're at the Darlin' this and Sweetheart that stage with a Hon here and there. Slow down or it could burn itself out before it gets really great.

He reminded himself of an unpleasant affair concerning another nice, lovely woman named . . . what was her name? All he could remember about her was Darlin.' Or . . .

"She's got a real buzz on!"

HENRIETTA HIGGAMBOTHAM-SMYTHINGTON sat at her lovely kitchen table and just picked at her usual breakfast. She'd made the breakfast perfectly. The egg omelet just so. The bacon extra-crispy, the way she preferred and, for once, the toaster hadn't over-browned the bread.

It looked simply scrumptious on her blue Wedgwood plate. Too bad, she thought, I haven't had an appetite since Bertie flew the coop.

She smiled inside at the Bertie-coop connection she'd just coined. It pleased her so much, she said it aloud in a singsong fashion: "Bertie flew the coop! My little Bertie flew the coop!"

She picked at the egg. No dice. No use. No appetite. The trip from the plate to her mouth took way too much effort. She plunked the fork onto the plate and stood up.

She turned, sidled her legs to her left to get out from the space between table and chair and turned around. She stepped behind the chair and placed both hands on its top wooden rung.

She pulled the rung toward herself, which forced the chair's front legs to leave the floor. She looked down at the chair seat, then at the table. She suddenly felt old and weary. As if it took all the effort in the world to just stand there and tilt a chair

Thoughts crept in. As she eyed her picked-at bacon and omelet remains, she thought, God, I wonder. I wonder just how many breakfasts I've fixed in my lifetime?

Then she thought: And how many dishes I've washed? Thousands, I'll bet.

She tried to multiply three hundred and sixty five days by . . . how many years now? . . . Let's see. I started fixing breakfasts at ten, after Momma taught me how . . . so that would be . . . uh . . . fifty-six. Now that's three hundred sixty five times fifty-six . . . so six times five is thirty, carry the three . . . and six times six is thirty-six and add the three. That's thirty-nine and . . . Oh, damn it, I give up!

She couldn't do it. She couldn't fix the numbers permanently in her mind. She'd get a new number and it would blot out the last one. It frustrated her.

She could do it at one time. Way back a thousand years ago it seemed like to her. She felt even older than a thousand. When she was first married, old Welly would marvel at her ability to do numbers in her head, as he called it. He relied on a calculator.

For some reason, it was now important to her to get the exact figure. She just had to know, even if she didn't know why she had to know. Just had to. Welly was in her mind now, too.

She went to the kitchen drawer in which she kept her calculator. She held the AT&T hand-held and went to punch in the numbers. Damn thing wouldn't light up. Wouldn't you know it, she thought, batteries dead just when I need 'em most! Figures! Oops! That's the problem, it won't figure. She laughed at her wittiness.

She made a mental note that she feared she'd soon forget, and tossed the useless piece of junk back into the drawer. She slammed it shut.

Determined to get those damn numbers even if it killed her, she grabbed a piece of paper and a pencil from off her yellow and white phone caddy, the caddy she'd bought for five dollars at the street fair they held each year. She scribbled down the numbers, did the math, and looked at the result: 20,440.

Can't be, she thought, so she did the math again. Same total. Oh, my Lord, she thought, over twenty thousand breakfasts and washer-uppers! She now felt even older.

Like a person held in a dungeon whose lost all track of time and is suddenly told he's been there sixty years, and all the while he thought it was only forty or so, and twenty years just came crashing down on his head making him feel older than Methuselah, who, as everyone knows, lived to be nine hundred and sixty-nine years, give or take a year or two, thank you.

Funny, she thought, I can remember Methuselah's age and even that it was in Genesis, verse twenty-seven, but I can no longer do simple mathematics in my head. Now, ain't that a hoot? A real hoot, Welly!

She cleared the single dish, the almost-full cup of coffee, the utensils, and did the washer-upping on autopilot. She thought she should add this here one to the twenty thousand something number. She would if she could only remember what the actual number was, without being foolish and going over to the phone caddy.

I don't care, she thought, one more don't make much difference any way you look at it. Or count it, either. Twenty thousand or thirty thousand. Even a hundred thousand. Gets you no rewards in Heaven, that's for sure. Maybe it does in Hell.

As she washed up she thought of Bertie. It had been three days and not a word. She

would have called the police to report him missing, but she didn't want to add to Bertie's burdens. She didn't know how doing that would add to his burdens, but she didn't want to take the chance. Besides, she had thought, better to keep your nose out of other people's affairs. Less trouble that way all around. You betcha.

That she was deeply affected by the goings on, she had no doubts. She missed him. She liked him. She worried for him. And if truth were known, she wouldn't have minded a tad more experience with that wonderful object that swung so mightily between his young legs. *Twinge! Twinge!*

She wasn't fooling herself, she knew. She knew the age difference. Her being almost three times his age and one of them with one foot in the grave. She knew they had--really now! --no great future together.

She also knew there would never be a great love between them. She knew it was foolish and stupid to fret and worry and wonder and let it kill her appetite, make her lose sleep, which she had, and, in general, give her an overall feeling of loneliness and despair.

She knew it, but it was so hard to fight, to stop it occurring. Please call me, Bertie, she thought, and I'll do again that thing you thought was so unbelievable. *Twinge, twinge!*

The twinges overlapped now and she became overwhelmed. The pictures in her mind now overpowered her. *Twinge! Twinge!* So, she went to do what she hadn't done in many, many months.

Five minutes later found her on her back, naked, with legs spread, on her big queen-sized bed, a vibrator in hand ready to start its magic. With Raggedy Ann as witness. *Twinge, twinge!*

The nice, new vibrator she'd bought from that catalogue, the one in which they had only played up the soothing massage action, and had made no mention to other uses for the dang thing. *Twinge, twinge, twinge!*

She punched the start button. "Shit," she said to Raggedy. " *I just gotta remember to buy batteries, girl!*"

"In a pig's ear!"

LEST THE READER come to the conclusion that the Groinks, by invading Earth, hadn't done their homework, rest assured they had. Unfortunately, that homework had proved somewhat erroneous.

It began with their transmutations into Earth pig, which had proved disastrous. Yet among the first arrival forces (there were eighteen in all), one transmutation proved to be a rousing success, at least initially. That transmutated Groinkian, a Lieutenant Grank, had managed to get safely into the North Carolina countryside. Of course, he had yet to learn about the word barbeque.

Grank's transmitter had been destroyed in what can only be considered a less than three-point landing. The ship was also out for the count, just like the other seventeen Groinkian vessels. Seems they had a minor misunderstanding involving gravity--as a

force, that is. One could say, rightfully so, that it hasn't been a good week for our daring Groinkian invaders.

It was while he was later in the company of numerous Earth pigs that Lt. Grank learned that they're not quite the pinnacles of intelligence as was thought. Now, it should also be noted that the four humans he had also made contact with hadn't seemed much smarter, but he still surmised, correctly, that the humans were pretty much in charge. Most of the time.

A little later he discovered the meaning of the word barbeque. Not as a main course participant, for now at least, but as the winner in a local Pig-In-A-Poke contest.

It seems that the President--yes, that one--was going to have a good old-fashioned barbeque up in Washington, D.C., to show off to his fellow countrymen. So, a nation-wide search had gone out for a really good sized hog to be the centerpiece-- ergo-- Grank, who was definitely above average in size and color in comparison to your standard, run-of-the-mill Earth hog.

Thus, to D.C. he was taken, his eyes and ears attuned to every factor during the six hour drive. Amazingly, he wasn't afraid, though that was probably because he had no idea of what a barbeque really meant. That would come later, much later. Then the fear would set in, but remember, Grank is a man--a pig-- a man-pig of action.

He spent six days on the White House grounds and in that time he learned a whole lot, but not exactly what a barbeque meant.

It's too bad he didn't have his communicator. Especially on his last night (the barbeque being held the next day), when a special meeting was being held in the oval office.

Grank, in true spy mode, had positioned himself in the Rose Garden, right under an open window. Serious sounding voices carried out to him. What the voices said filled him with way more dread than any old barbeque word could.

Hearing this didn't matter in the final analysis. Because the next day the only reference to him was said by a senator from Kansas: "Best damn pig I ever tasted!"

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"The ship of foolishness!"

CORPORAL FUGGIT didn't like it one bit. Not one bit at all. It was rightfully his collar, his bust. But the Chief had given it to Sniffass just because rank has its privileges, and Sniffshit had way more privileges than a Corporal, or a beat cop for that matter.

All Fuggit ended up with for his troubles was a burn on his right wrist from the cuffs and a bellyful of upchuck on his brand-spanking new shoes--a gift from the wife.

One of these day, Sniffdick, he thought, I'm gonna give that sniffer of yours a Fuggit knuckle sandwich, with all the trimmings. He felt that--in a fair fight--he could take old Sniffhead--that older-than-shit-sorry-excuse-for-a-cop any day of the week--and twice on Sunday, given half the chance.

For now, however, he just sat there, in the chair with the metal step where you place your feet while the guy shines 'em up. He was off duty, would go on duty in an hour or so, and had his eyes on his personal car, a dilapidated eight-year old Ford, which was parked outside.

He didn't keep an eye on it for fear of it being stolen--who'd want it? --but more to make sure some kids didn't go and poke around where they didn't belong. What with the twelve-gauge shotgun he kept under the front seat. And what with the lock on the right back door about as broken as broken can get. Broken? Shit, it was beyond repair and he wasn't about to invest even one thin dime on the old clunker.

He thought about the new-used car he and Cantella were saving up for. One less than three years old, he thought, with a radio and an air conditioner that worked all the time. They were almost there. Only needed a few hundred more to get themselves something nice, something decent.

Thank God for Cantella, he thought. A good woman. Patience of a saint. And she sure as shit hadn't married him for his money! No sir! Cantella was in it for the long haul, come what may, rain or shine, in sickness, and in health, with vows respected, and it was amazing that she loved him, really loved him. And would, he truly believed, until death they do part.

As he thought about her now, he felt a flush of guilt creep up his neck. Gotta start treating her better, he thought, and stop that foolishness she hates so much.

That foolishness had started four years ago when Cary Nuthin, Cantella's old beau from high school, had come back to town for a just-passing-through visit. First thing that S.O.B. had done, of course, was to call her on the phone and--what gall! --what balls! --he ups and asks her to have dinner with him, that very night, to catch him up on old times. That fucker.

Cary never knew just how close he had come to dying. Cantella spared him that fate. For she, being solely in love with her Grinny, and only her Grinny, had told Fuggit about the whole sordid thing the moment he had hit the door, home from work. He remembered it now:

"Grinny," she had said. "Guess who called here today?" And then, before he could get out word-one, she told him all about it, every detail, not leaving anything out.

"Wasn't he the guy," he said sheepishly. "That . . . uh, you know . . . deflowered you?" He was sorry he said that, and it showed on his face as a wince.

That she had told him all about her 'one-time doing it' with Cary at all, should come as no surprise. Cantella was, and is, the kind of woman who believes that the foundation of a good marriage, and one of the biggest bricks, in fact, is honesty.

"Yes, Hon! Same one," she said. "But I told him to go blow smoke where sunshine never visits!" She had laughed when she said it, proud of herself for how she had handled the situation.

Now, the matter ended there, mostly. However, Fuggit took the extra time it takes to grow a little jealousy bee up his ass, by a constant reminder to himself that some other man had been between his sweet Cantella's legs, ass a-pumping, cock a-wiggling in and

out, a-moaning and a-groaning, as men do, and a-pounding her ass into the back seat of a Ford Fairlane--a brand new one, at that.

The fact that Cary Nuthin was handsome, six foot two, built like a brick shit-house and was rumored to possess a horse's cock, big around as a man's wrist--might have had something to do with the constant pictures in Fuggit's mind.

Mind you, he never let Cantella see this side of him--not really--well, except for that foolishness he pulled on her every so often. Which he knew got her goat, but he just couldn't help himself, the pictures in his mind being what they were.

You see, whenever he and Cantella would meet someone new--Christ, even a stranger in a supermarket check-out line--out would come that Fuggit foolishness.

"Funny story," he would start out with, or something like it. "But my wife Cantella here once had a beau in high school name of Cary Nuthin. And if she'd a-married him instead of me, her name would now be Cantella Nuthin! And I sure as Hell can't!"

He'd laugh and carry on as if it was the funniest joke ever invented--in spite of the looks most folks gave him, including Cantella. Oh, he'd get her goat real good, he would. She'd stay mad at him for days. Then, marriage being what it is sometimes, they'd kiss and make up.

He'd promise, on his Mother's soul, to never do it again, and he'd keep that promise right up until the next stranger. Which was more frequent than Cantella preferred it to be.

Cantella, he now thought, I swear on my Mother's grave, no more of my damn foolishness!

He now looked down at the top of Bobby Willicker's bald-on-top head, just a-swaying to and fro, as Bobby whipped the shine-towel back and forth. The first shoe was just about finished. One to go.

It had been a bitch, Fuggit remembered, getting that asshole kid's vomit off the shoes, especially the shit between the cracks. Took him over an hour just to fix it right. But the washing had left the shoes' surfaces duller than the brain of the kid who caused it.

He had told Bobby the story, expecting some small commiseration; especially from a guy who's living is shoes, for Pete's sake. But all he got was a shit-eating-grin laugh out of the guy. Some way to do business, Fuggit had thought, laughing at a customer.

Bobby, called Gee Willickers by some due to his middle name being Gerard, didn't give two shits about customers' feelings--no sir--because he was the only bootblack in town.

His store, *Bobby's Boots & Bootblack Shop & Bagel Emporium*, had been opened now going on thirty-five years, with Bobby as the sole proprietor, and Lord willing and the creek don't rise, it would do another thirty-five years paying customers no never-you-mind.

Bobby tapped on Fuggit's calf signaling all done, so Fuggit paid him, his usual tip of a buck included, and went out to start up the old clunker and go to work. With a promise to Cantella firmly in his mind. On shoes an old beat cop could be truly proud of.

An hour later found him parked at his usual spot, with an Earl's chocolate donut in

hand. Now, when it came to donuts, Fuggit didn't just love them, he was head over heels. He not only had them at work he had them at home. The minute his shift ended, he'd march right into Earl's and pick up a box. He was Earl's best customer, to be sure.

"Earl," Fuggit once told him. If there ain't no donuts in Heaven, I'm taking the down elevator, if you get my drift!"

Fuggit and the donut maker's relationship went way, way back, so Earl always got his drift and . . .

"How ugly can it get? Pretty ugly!"

FACED THE WAY HE WAS, as he walked, Grin didn't see the cop who sat in the darkened patrol car, less than twenty feet away, and watched him now with his very alert eyes.

There was a time Grin wouldn't have been so careless, but time had caught up with him. At aged ten thousand and twelve, he had very few useful full years ahead of him. He could have retired when he reached his ten thousandth year, the usual retirement age for a Groinkian, but Grin loved his work and wouldn't know what to do with himself if he had to wake each morning without some place to go to. But there was no doubt about it; he was past his prime, to use a phrase.

Corporal Grinnan Fuggit eyed the man suspiciously as he wiped a little chocolate off his fingers with a moist Wet Wipe. It was his cop's nature to suspect anyone who didn't wear a badge. His wife and family the only exceptions, if you don't count that no-good shiftless cousin of hers, Ziggy. The same Ziggy who had snatched a woman's purse and was given three months in county lockup.

He continued his surveillance of the man, the suspicious man he was now keeping tabs on. The man walked diagonally to the patrol car's bow, from left to right, and faced away from Fuggit. He was less than fifteen feet away. Unless the man suddenly changed direction, he would be within two yards when he crossed the patrol car's left headlight.

Fuggit took note that the man had something draped over his left arm, the arm away from his view. It looked like clothing. Then the man took a little hip-hop step. Odd the way he walks, thought Fuggit. It was true. The man looked as if it hurt him to stand up and walk at the same time. The gap closed some more.

Ugly fuck, too, thought Fuggit, a face like one of Blossomfarten's hogs. Won't win no beauty contest, that's for sure.

He also took note of the man's size, or bulk would be more like it, for if he weighed less than three hundred pounds, Fuggit would eat a whole pound of penny nails, without butter. If he's married, thought Fuggit, his wife must look like a fucking pancake, only a bit flatter.

The man now did another hip-hop-like motion, then straightened up as if still fighting pain. Now Fuggit had a better idea of the man's height. Add tall to the ugly, thought Fuggit. He guessed the man to be about six-foot five. He didn't know it, but he was right

on the mark.

He also saw a large brownish-red stain on the man's coat that reminded him of blood splatter. It was barbeque sauce, but Fuggit had no way to know that. The man next pulled something shiny and metallic looking from his right coat pocket. He clutched it in his right hand as he walked. Cell phone? Thought Fuggit.

As the man approached within eight feet of the left headlight, he did another of those odd hip-hop straighten-up-and-stand-on-his-heels maneuvers.

Fuggit clearly heard the man say, "Gris!" as if it was a pain complaint. Then, as if willed by Fuggit, the man stopped dead in his tracks and brought the metallic object up to his face. Fuggit silently rolled down the car's window. He saw the device light up and glow.

The mysterious man stood there, less than eight feet from Fuggit, and spoke into the device:

"Graponna gru gra gi gan. GROGGA GROGGA!" Then he paused. He turned his head just slightly in Fuggit's direction and Fuggit got, as they say, a good look at him.

A pig man for sure, thought Fuggit, as ugly as any hog I've ever seen, bar none! The man spoke again: "Gruss giss grilla ga. goolo gool getta grissa. GROGGA GROGGA!" As he talked, he had no idea a donut-worshipping cop listened to it all.

Then, the man hung up and stuffed the device into his pocket. He walked again and kept to the same direction as before.

Christ! Thought Fuggit, what the Hell was *that*? He watched the man go around the corner and disappear. The man had entered the short street that goes to the back of Earl's store. The alley also led to the back of 745 Columbus Street.

Fuggit decided to follow the suspicious man. His cop's nose smelled something rotten in Denmark. Rottener, he thought, than Brady Bunch reruns.

Fuggit entered the alley and immediately spotted the large man. He stood at the bottom of a fire escape's ladder, ready to climb up. Fuggit sized up this second-story-man, cat burglar situation. As he drew his gun, he yelled: "Freeze!" He had his gun aimed squarely at the big man's chest, ready to fire if need be.

Then, the flash. Blinding! Fuggit tried to squeeze the trigger, but his fingers failed to cooperate. He had hardly felt the one-sixteenth inch laser beam hit him, but he knew he was hit. And blind. Every fear he had ever known now swept over him.

God, I'm peeing strangely, he thought, it's comin' outta my ass! His bowels had dropped.

Inside his chest, strange things also took place. It felt as if someone had turned on a fire hydrant to let the water out, the way they do for children on a hot day. He felt his legs weaken and his knees hit the pavement, real hard and unforgiving. He felt his mind go fudgy and saw a fuzzy color picture of his sweet Cantella in a brand new car, smiling up a storm and looking twenty years younger. She sat right alongside Cary Nuthin. They were both naked.

He then fell backwards and his head smacked hard against the pavement. He tried to bring a hand--any hand would do--up to his chest, but both hands simply weighed too

much.

He lifted his head just slightly, tried to open his eyes, but failed. Then he mustered every drop of strength within him and yelled out: "Oh, sweet Jesus, Cantella! He's gone and killed your Grinny!"

Grin just stood there. He watched and wondered if he should fire again. No need, he thought. He'd seen this many times before. He now heard only one more thing:

"I love . . ." Corporal Fuggit's words then died with him. Grin, as he moved closer to him, said, "You!"

Grin moved more quickly now. This will never do, he thought. He couldn't just leave him lying there, right there in the back of 475 Columbus Street, right below their base of operation.

Grin stood over the body and worked his fingers at the Grun-gun. The lighting was poor so he had to set the controls by feel. When he felt the little lever click on Evaporate Six, he shifted his attention to the front nozzle, the width controller. He turned it as far right as it could go. It was now set on its widest setting, a two-foot spray. At this setting it couldn't knock a hole in casehardened steel, but it would surely handle the purpose he had in mind.

He looked down, took careful aim and pressed the trigger-button. The zap of laser light, as blinding as the Sun, did its intended job and the top third of the man just up and disappeared.

This left a slightly scorchy look on the ground in his place.

In spite of the immensely bright light the weapon emitted, a sharp-eared cat wouldn't hear the sound it made ten feet away. Grin stood there and watched the man just disappear.

He aimed and fired twice more. Now there wasn't enough of Corporal Grinnan Fuggit to make even the simplest of DNA tests.

Grin looked down and, satisfied, walked over to the fire escape ladder. He grabbed the ladder with both hands and stepped up and put one foot on the third rung. He stopped, with the other leg in space, and looked back over his shoulder. He grunted approval before he made his ascent.

As he climbed, he felt regret come over him. He hated killing. Like most Groinkians he had a pacifist's nature. But he knew it was necessary too. *If* one wanted to survive. He had been brainwashed many moons ago that what he had just done was beyond necessary.

And if he hadn't killed the man, the man would have created trouble. And that trouble would have led to Grin's own demise, just as sure as if the man had put a nine-millimeter bullet into Grin's head. For it also would have been reported as a great failure, and he knew what that meant. Every Groinkians did.

And he knew it so well, that he had made up his mind to keep the man's death to himself. Just in case.

In the alley down below him there was a six-foot long scorchy spot. It marked the last known location of a man, a cop. A cop that an alien pig-faced Groinkian had made

damned sure no one would ever find.

A man, a cop, who would never again pull any of his foolishness on his wife. A man, a cop, who would never pin a dumb-ass detective's ears back. Even on Sunday.

A man, a cop, who would sooner go to Hell than to stay in a Heaven that lacked chocolate donuts. A man, a cop, who was so weak as he died he needed an alien creature to finish his last sentence. A man, a cop, a Corporal Grinnan 'Grinny' Fuggit whose highly polished, police black regulation shoes would never again feel the slip-slap magic of Gee Willicker's shoeshine cloth.

"You're back Grin!" said Lt. Gron. "Good." He took the clothing Grin held out to him. "Any trouble, Grin?" he asked with eyes that pierced directly into Grin's. "Any problems?"

"I'm worried about your worrying!"

DETECTIVE Clu Sniffer heard the phone ring on the desk fifteen feet or so behind him, but he didn't even look up. He had stayed late to finish up some last minute paperwork on the Fernando Kite Caper. It was case closed--finito. Wrap it up. Stick a fork in it, it's done.

Old man Fernando had closed the case himself. He had called in and said, "Close the case, detective. It was my sister's kid that done it." He had then droned on about how the kid was just a bit wild, and the family would handle it by grounding the kid until he was fifty, etcetera.

Ring, ring! Sniffer turned and saw that the Homicide Division desk was unattended. The entire Homicide squad, Sniffer thought, must be in the pisser taking dictation from nature.

Ring, ring! Where are you Moldy, he thought, your dick get caught in the condom machine, again? *Ring, ring!* "Shit!" He said out loud as he rose and headed for the other desk.

"Homicide Division, Detective Clu Sniffer here. How may I help you?" He noticed that a pad on the desk had the words: Billy Tuttle case - close it! Tuttle found in Charlie's backroom sleeping it off. The initials MM were at the bottom. Sniffer smiled. Sherlock Moldy had done it again!

He recognized her voice immediately. "Clu! Is that you?" she said, spitting it out. "Grinny's not home yet! I'm worried somethin' awful! Where can he be, Clu? He shoulda been home two hours ago! It ain't like . . ." He couldn't let her go on this way.

He said forcefully, "Whoa! Cantie! Take a breath!" Then gently, "You know Grinny, probably out buying you something special for that anniversary you two have coming up next week." Now *he* was worried.

He went on. "You'll see his lovable old face walking in the door any minute now, I'm sure of it." He wasn't. Lovable old face was as responsible as a German car or a Swiss watch. And she was right--it wasn't like him to *not* call home. Unless...

She sounded less anxious, but still ready to jump off a building as she said, "I hope

you're right, Clu. I do. I'm going crazy with worry! I don't know what to do next. I've called every store Grinny and I go to. Called everyone we know, too. I tried callin' Earl's place, but he closes early, given his health and all. Help me, Clu! Please help . . ." He had to cut her off again.

With his voice raised a notch, he said, "Cantie, you just sit tight now. OK?" Then he lowered it. "I'll go check it out. Earl's place, too. See if he isn't just having a donut nightcap with old Earl himself and forgot that time was invented. Now, don't you go worrying none, Cantie, I'm sure everything is just fine." He wasn't, but he went on.

"And why don't you see if that nice Missus Robley can cross the street and keep you company. OK?" Grinny, he thought, you better not have let something happen to yourself. You hear?

"She's here with me now, Clu." She sounded calmer. "Came right over when I called. Telling me not to worry, too. I'll try not to, but please Clu, find him for me, will you?" He now wished he had someone telling *him* not to worry.

"Good girl! Now, you just hang in there and I'll get back to you just as soon as I can. OK?"

"OK, Clu. Thanks. Thanks a whole lot. I'll be here waiting with Jeanette." He was getting ready to say goodbye and get to on it, when she said, "Clu! Hold a sec, will you? Someone at the door."

He held, hoping she'd come back and say it was Fuggit. Lost his keys or something. No, he thought, German cars *never* lose their keys. Then she was back.

"Sorry, Clu. Just old man Fender returning Grinny's drill." She sounded as if she wanted to cry. "Clu? . . . I'll say goodbye now and let you get on with it. OK?"

He said, "Cantella, I'll call y . . ." She'd hung up. He looked up. Officer Moldon stood there and dried his hands on a paper towel. The officer sensed the atmosphere.

"Trouble, Clu?" he asked as he shit-canned the towel. Sniffer stood and looked at him.

"Grinny's gone AWOL. Two hours now," Moldon's eyes widened. He knew German-car-Grinny, too. "I'm gonna go check it out, Moldy. Could you call the carpool and see if Grinny's turned in his black and white?" Moldy nodded. Concern showed on his face, but he didn't want to interrupt. "Oh, it's probably nothing, Mold . . . Grinny's probably just boring the shit out of old Earl." Let's hope, he thought.

"OK, Clu, but the carpool's closed at this hour. You know, we just park them in the back of the place at night, " Sniffer didn't know. He hadn't sat in a black and white in ages. "So, Sniff, maybe you can swing by there too, huh?" Sniffer nodded. "Yeah, sure."

Sniffer left Police One without a return to his desk. That could wait. As he approached his car, he thought: If you ain't dead, Fuggy, I'm gonna kill you myself for worrying poor Cantella like that--If she don't kill you first!

He started the plain, unmarked police car with a heavy heart. And not a thought of Poot . . .

"They made me kill them! I didn't wanna do it!"

THE WAY Lieutenant Gron had asked, "Any trouble Grin?" coupled with the look on his face, made Grin reassess his idea to put the lie to his superior. They'd worked together hundreds of years now and he sensed Gron knew something.

So, to give himself time to gather his thoughts he said, "Whoops, Lieutenant, gotta use the potty." He rushed toward the bathroom door and yelled over a shoulder, "Can't get used to this Earth food!" He slammed the door behind him.

He sat on the porcelain throne, fully dressed and thought. Gron knows something, for sure. But there were actually two somethings he could know about. The officer in the alley and the three other killings at that store. That mess. How did he know they lived above the closed store? What choice had he? None!

He had broken into the store silently. He had collected up some of the clothing the Lieutenant had ordered him to get. Earth clothes. He had agreed with Gron that they couldn't just go and saunter around town dressed as military officers from the planet Groink. No. They'd stand out way too much when what they needed was to blend in.

They needed an Earth disguise. Thus they found, in a left-behind Yellow Pages, *Timeless Thrifts*, a consignment store. Hours: 9 - 7, closed Sundays. Just two blocks away.

Of course they didn't know, couldn't know for that matter, that in this small town, smack dab in middle America, just a-brimming with a let's-imitate-the-big-city-folks attitude, they could have dressed as chickens, punk rockers with purple-orange hair, Elvis, or even Jesus and not raised even one eyebrow. They would have created more of a local sensation dressed as accountants.

Once inside the store, it took him over an hour just to pick out something for his large frame. He had finally settled on an old and shabby, ill-fitting overcoat, a large flowery shirt, massive denim overalls, and a pair of shoes that hurt the minute he put them on. At six-five and three hundred and twelve pounds he wasn't easy to shop for.

Getting Gron suited up was an easier task. At just a tad over six feet and slender, he posed no problem. Grin had just gathered a nice looking brown raincoat, a pink shirt, gabardine trousers, and a pair of blue suede shoes he knew Gron would have no trouble getting into, when the lights went on. And there they were. All three of them.

An old man, an old woman, and a teenage girl. They had looked right at him with their eyes popped out. The old woman had merely gasped loudly. The girl screamed. The old man only got as far as, "What the Hell you . . ." before the Grun-gun's laser silenced him forever.

It had been set on Evaporate One, its lowest setting. And it's deadliest, too. For the one-sixteenth inch wide laser beam it emitted could cut through casehardened steel four inches thick.

Grin had merely to press the trigger-button two more times, in two different directions and the store fell silent once more. He then mopped up as he had with Fuggit, but he failed to complete the entire task.

Oh, he'd taken care of the old couple fine enough, but when he heard a police car's siren, he decided it was too risky to walk all the way to the back of the store where the young girl lay. So he ran. And left her whole, with the thought of this mistake fully in his mind.

Grin now stood up. He didn't even bother flushing in furtherance of his ruse. He had decided that his best course of action was to do what he had always done. It hadn't failed him so far.

So, with a much lighter mind than when he entered the room, he went out to tell Lieutenant Gron, his immediate superior, the truth, the whole truth and with nothing left out--and that included the cop in the alley.

He thus put his fate in the hands of fate and . . .

"Where the Hell are you?"

EARL'S SHOPPE was closed, all right. Closed tighter than a Falwell-like mind. But there was something that was open. Fuggit's black and white. There it was, bigger looking than life, right in front of the donut shoppe, its driver side door flung wide. As if it was still waiting for Fuggit.

Sniffer pulled alongside the car and peered in, with a half-hope he'd find the missing officer asleep on the back seat, drunk as a skunk on some weird, and unheard of, donut overdose. No such luck. Sniffer shuddered. Not good, he thought, nosiree.

From this position he could also see right into Earl's place. The dark interior told him there was no Fuggit bothering an old Earl. No Earl, either, for that matter. Upstairs asleep, most likely.

Sniffer left his car and took a walk-around, which included the alley that led to the back of Earl's. No sign of Fuggit. And though he felt as stupid as can be, he called out the officer's name a few times, as if Fuggit was, like the family cat, only temporarily missing and just a-licking and a-cleaning his balls somewhere. Although he didn't say, "Here, Fuggy, Fuggy!" he felt as if he did.

Sniffer's efforts yielded nothing. There was nothing to yield. So, he called it in and told Moldy to forget about the carpool. He also told Moldy he'd have a good long look-see around the area before he would come back in. Moldy said he'd send someone by to get the police cruiser.

It was going to be one of those long, long, sleepless-type nights that cops go through without complaining and no one ever thanks them for. And part of this particular cop's long night would include something he dreaded having to do--the call he just had to make to Cantie. What he had to tell her, he knew, was both good news--and bad. No Fuggit body, but no Fuggit, either . . .

"I saw what I saw when I saw it! See?"

THE NEXT MORNING found Sniffer, red-eyed, unshaven and sleepy, at his desk. He wanted to figure out how this damn thing called a pencil-sharpener worked, anyhow. Bleary eyed, he had tried, wholeheartedly, to sharpen the eraser. And succeeded, in a fashion. When it wouldn't write, he cursed at it for being out of ink. Being a pencil, it had no idea what he was on about.

There was still no sign of Fuggit. And Cantella, he thought, must just be dying inside. In spite of his late-night call to reassure her. Damn, he thought, who's gonna reassure me?

Sniffer's date with Pooty was scheduled for this evening. Yesterday, he'd had an inspirational thought--a rare event for him--to stop at *Francie's Fine Flowers* before going off to his night in Pooty Paradise. Now, unless Fuggit just up and walked through the front door, Paradise would probably be put out to pasture. For the mystery at hand had changed everything.

Fuggit had been AWOL for less than a day, but even if it had been for less than one hour, the same treatment would have been applied. For an officer doesn't just up and disappear, leaving no trace, without at least calling in--and *then* calling his loved ones. Unless...

Ingrained in the Brothers in Blue is one code they all live by: Your life depends on being able to count on your fellow officers and they must be able to count on you. It's a life or death situation with no if, ands, or buts attached. One for all, and all for one.

Not calling in would never occur to any one of them. Not for one nanosecond. Even that Officer Kyle, the one who decided, willy-nilly, and out of the blue, that he'd rather be an artist--the same Officer Kyle who had missed morning roll call--called in. From Tahiti, to be sure, but he called all the same. He knew his now ex-brothers would fret over his whereabouts.

The boys in blue have another written-in-blood truism: When a call comes in "Officer Down!" all personal bullshit is pushed aside. Any animosity two officers might have for each other, on any level, from deep, unabiding hatred to the minor set-to between Sniffer and Fuggit, is, without a thought --simply gone. Again, with no ifs, and, or buts. It works hand in hand with calling in and for the same reason.

The call that Corporal Fuggit was "down" hadn't come in yet--at this point he was simply missing--but that didn't lessen the furor that arose. Police One became a madhouse. A task force was appointed by the Chief, with Sniffer at the helm and six officers assigned to him. Each officer, regardless of rank, now answered directly to him. He answered to the Chief.

Chief Melrose had also placed every other officer, those on duty, and off, on the case of Fuggit's disappearance. No stone, no location was to be left unturned or not looked into.

Every place, nook, or cranny that Corporal Fuggit had ever even so much as put a foot into, was to be visited--and more than once, if need be. And if need be, as many

visits as it took.

Every file that pertained to Fuggit was to be looked at, even the ones choking on basement dust. Who knows what perp, past or present, just might have it in for old Fuggy?

And every living perp who ever came into even the slightest contact with the officer was to be called in and questioned. And if it came to it, they were prepared to dig up the dead ones, as well.

Unfortunately, this beehive of action led absolutely nowhere. Until...

His name, so he said, was Dusty Miller.

Now, being a vagrant and all, he, personally, wouldn't be familiar to most people. But to a gardener, his name would ring a bell. The Dusty Miller is a well-known annual plant, about a foot high, with gray-white, soft and velvety foliage. Some folks use it as a background foil for other plants in the garden. To make their colors appear more vibrant.

However, there was nothing visibly soft and velvety about this specimen. And he, sure as shine, didn't smell like a garden. A winery would be more on the point.

He had just popped into Police One with one very strange tale to tell. Seems he had been an eyewitness to the evaporation of a cop. And it had scared the living life out of him.

So, naturally, he was turned over to the one man, the man of many hats, who knew how to deal with this particular cheap-wine- soaked annual. Or, in Dusty's case-- perennial.

Just a glance at Dusty and Sniffer knew that the rank odor of the man would easily match the horseshit fertilizer that could pop out of him when he was uncorked.

With this firmly in mind, Sniffer listened to Dusty's weird tale of a pig-faced guy in an alley who had pointed a TV remote at an officer and how there been a bright, blinding flash of light and how, after his vision was restored later, the officer was gone. Just gone!

"One minute he was there and the next, just gone. Just like that, he was just gone! Gone! Not a trace. I never saw anything like that in my whole life, no sirree! Just gone! Scared the shit out of me, it did, I can tell you! Just gone!"

As Sniffer listened, he pictured the fertilizer rising up to his neck.

"OK, Dusty, I get your drift. He was gone. Just gone. OK?" Sniffer said. And then to knock down some of the bullshit, "Where did the pig-faced guy go? Huh? Tell me Dust, where did *he* go?"

Sniffer knew winos had trouble remembering the beginnings to most things, so if old Dusty ran true to form, he was about to be repotted onto the sidewalk outside Police One. Right in front of a sign with one blinking light whose message would now make more sense to anyone driving by, from either direction, east or west.

Without hesitation, and with his waterpoolish, soft blue eyes right on Sniffer, he said, "He was gone, too! Just gone! Just like the cop. Just gone!" Sniffer had had enough. Dusty was about to be gone, just gone.

In his most friendliest-to-drunks voice, Sniffer said, "OK, Dusty, I've heard your story. Now, why don't you come back tomorrow and tell it to me all over again. OK? 'Cause I

just love to hear a good story more than once. OK?" Sniffer had a nice, firm grip on Dusty's right arm. Then Dusty reached into a pocket of his shabby overcoat and drew forth a shiny object. He handed it to the detective.

It was Corporal Grinnan "Grinny" Fuggit's badge! With the numbers 6807, Fuggit's assigned number, as plain as daylight.

Because Dusty Miller was the only other person nearby at the moment, he was again a witness. To the world's first detective who managed to turn ashy-white, gasp out loud and holler "Damn!" all at the same time.

The Chief heard Sniffer's "Damn!" and came over to where they were. One look at what Sniffer held in his hand had the Chief agree: "Damn, is right, Sniff." He rubbed a forefinger over the badge's face as if to make sure it wasn't an illusion then looked right at Sniffer and said, "Guess I'd better call that FBI chap!" The Chief had momentarily forgotten that "nobody" had ever heard of Agent Tom Bookem.

Now, none of these officers knew it, couldn't know it, but there was another officer somewhere whose life could be affected by all of this. For the badge had been an oversight by him. And an oversight meant a mistake. And a mistake meant failure. And failures, where he came from, anyway, were untolerated . . .

"Welcome to my world!"

"WHERE AM I" the voice asked.

He heard the voice. It was *his* voice. But somehow it did not come from him, but out of thin air. As if his voice, his very own voice, was somehow disembodied and well outside himself. He knew he had spoken and yet, at the same time, he knew he hadn't. This fact scared him.

He made an effort to say the words again, for some form of reassurance that he truly did exist, but found he couldn't. This also scared him.

This illusion of being nothingness and somethingness simultaneously passed quickly when, in response to these fears, he brought a hand down on each side and touched himself in an attempt to know if he still had sides. He did.

Relief washed over him as he realized that he was still solid and that the sensation of feeling not so must have been an illusion, a trick of the mind. Renewed, he tried to speak again, but still couldn't.

Wherever he was, the lighting was very dim. He looked straight ahead and he could only see a dark gray swirl that mixed itself with whirls of black. It was all very strange. He had the distinct sensation that he had stood up but was still on his back at the same time. His usual reference points failed him. There was just no up, nor any down.

It reminded him of that time, long ago at aged ten. when he had dove off the fairly shallow end of an indoor swimming pool and rapped his head on the pool's bottom. It had made him semi-unconscious and totally disoriented.

With his eyes wide open he had tried to kick off of the pool's bottom to push himself

to the surface for air. In reality, he had pushed off of the pool's sides. So, instead of finding air, all he found was more water. Sheer panic had set in as he tried to figure out which way was up.

Minus the sheer panic, he felt that way now. Where was up? What had happened to down? And on top of that he felt very woozy. What the Hell, he thought, is going on?

Then, a new sensation came to him. Cold. At his fingertips somehow. He turned his head to the right, arced it downward in the direction of the new sensation, and even in the dim light, saw shiny metal. A table. He was on a metal table of some kind. A cold metal table. And the cold felt very good to him. Wonderful to him, in fact. For it meant that he could feel. He existed.

"Welcome, Corporal Fuggit." a new voice said gently. It sounded strange and mechanical like.

Fuggit looked around him. There was no one there. No one. This voice was truly disembodied. That fact both scared him and didn't scare him at the same time. He now remembered something, too. Events crept in. They reminded him of . . .

Fuggit snapped at the voice, "Who the Hell is that?" His anger had come to the fore.

It was one thing to be killed dead by a flash from a TV remote, but it was another to be kidnapped, damn it! To be murdered and kidnapped in the same day was just too much. And it was against the law! And he was a cop, for crissakes. He heard a whirring sound.

The voice spoke again. It said gently, "You are very lucky to have arrived here, Corporal. Most fail." Fuggit heard a click.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" snapped Fuggit. He was all action now. He hopped off the table and searched for his nine millimeter. It was there all right, right where it should be. In its holster on his right hip. He wanted to draw it out, but somehow he couldn't. It was as if an invisible hand was at work, keeping his hand away from the leather. And his hop up, or was it down? had made him woozy again. Dizzy. No sides or bottom to the pool. He leaned against the table for support.

"You've drugged me, you rat bastard!" he croaked. "That's what you've done." Add drugging to murder and kidnapping. Serious charges. He heard another whirr.

"You are very lucky to have arrived here, Corporal." the disembodied voice repeated, leaving off the "most fail" and ignoring Fuggit's anger. Fuggit didn't know it, had no way of knowing it, but he now listened to a computerized welcoming program. Click.

Fuggit decided to just listen. He felt too weird to do anything else. Whirr. The voice now continued.

"I'm sure you have many questions." the voice said soothingly, "and that is understandable." Click. The voice paused for a time as if anticipating a response. When none came out of Fuggit, the soothing voice whirred and went on.

"The strange feelings you are experiencing, Corporal Fuggit, are the result of your unfortunate encounter with a Grun-gun set on Evaporate Six." Click. The voice waited again. Fuggit just blinked a few times. All argument had gone out of him. Whirr.

"Consider, if you will, that most people arrive here as just pure ether. And as nothing

more. In fact, that is more typical, really. More natural, too." The voice seemed to have assumed there would be no more protests from the man. "But all of this will be fully explained--explained ---explained . . . *Click!* . . . to you later. For now, kindly step through the glass door to your right . . . right . . . right . . . right. *Click!*" Fuggit looked to his right. Whirr.

"They are waiting to process you." the voice said. Then, Fuggit heard a whirring sound followed by an audible *Click, click*. Then, --silence.

Process me? Thought Fuggit, Now, that don't sound right. Not a bit. I'm still on duty.

Then, as if he was a sleepwalker, he obediently headed for the glass doors. His mind held no thoughts. Not for donuts and not even one for his Cantella . . .

"My boss can beat up your boss!"

THE SUPREME COMMANDER, his speech completed, quickly left the podium, his glixizza swaying furiously.

Most of his audience realized that he had not made his customary speech-ending head movement, a short down, then up, nod. Some wondered if the nature of his speech had anything to do with it. Most didn't even think about it.

He had informed them, after giving them a preliminary, in-depth analysis of the situation to date, that the invasion, the conquering of the planet Earth, was to be cancelled. Forthwith. He had then ended the speech quickly and said that, in a word, they had lost and that was that.

Take it or leave it. Like it or lump it. That was that.

He offered no further explanation and any questions the speech had created, were not going to be answered. Not here. Not now. And certainly, not by him. As simple as shit. And just as unfeeling.

The Supreme Commander knew, even if his audience didn't, that he had just lied to them.

The invasion *was* still going to happen, *was* still moving forward, but in a different phase. The platoons of new changelings were *still* on standby, still waiting for their orders. Orders that were yet to be given, but they *would* be given. At the right time.

The Supreme Commander hadn't liked giving this proclamation of gloom and doom, but he had no choice. For, unbeknownst to anyone on Groink--and if known, they wouldn't have believed it--even a Supreme Commanders can have a higher-up. And the Supreme Commander was on his way to meet his. And he was late.

And that made him as nervous as being a can of gasoline in Hell . . .

"He's in a London fog!"

BALLIWICK looked around the room. Nothing in it except a desk and four chairs. One chair was behind the desk, two were placed at its sides and the fourth was in front. The desk was surrounded--with no way out. That's how Balliwick felt as he looked over the

arrangement.

Tired from his car ride between the two no-necked goons, he took the chair he felt they meant for him. "Interrogatee present and accounted for, Sir!" he said to the empty chair behind the desk. He saluted and ended it with a crisp hand-away. Then he waited.

He had hated being between those two big gorillas. Just hated it something awful. They gave him no personal space, what with their big, fat arms pressed solidly into his.

He had suffered the forty-five minute plus trip all scrunched together. Which was bad enough, but the large jaboney on his right kept farting. Not the noisy kind, but those others, the worse ones, the SBD's, the Silent, But Deadlies.

And the smell! God! Balliwick figured something real ugly musta died in the man's ass and its rotted remains were now out to gas him. To make him pay for all his sins, past and present.

Geezie peezie, Balliwick had thought, am I the only one noticing this shit? No one else, the guy on his left, or the two men in the front seat, had mentioned it. If they were aware of it, they kept it to themselves.

Now, as he sat here he knew he might be in trouble, but what kind exactly, he wasn't sure. As long as they didn't fart-gas him anymore, he didn't care, either. Of course, they just might use the rubber hoses on him to try to get him to confess to more than just some minor stuff. Like serial murder!

Cops just loved having a fall guy take the rap so they can clear up dozens and dozens of cases in one fell swoop. Hell, he'd seen that much on TV! He stood up and said out loud:

"You coppers try to pin a serial killer tag on me, you rat bastards, and I'll sue your asses off!" He felt better, but added, for good measure, *"You hear me, ya flatfoots?"*

Well, he mused to himself, take your best shot, coppers. I don't care. Hell, *I don't know who I am*, so I won't be telling you too much now, will I? Shit, the only thing fresh in my mind is getting a blowjob in a blue bathroom and fucking the old lady silly. And that ain't against the law yet, is it? 'Cause if it is, you better hurry up and build a whole lotta new jails.

He chuckled as he pictured millions of guys cooling their heels in stir, and protesting their innocence to the guards.

He could hear one of the cons say, in Jimmy Cagney's voice, "I'm innocent, I tell ya, see? . . . Yeah . . . I put it in there . . . yeah . . . but, I didn't cum . . . see? So, go get me my mouthpiece, ya screw . . . see!" Balliwick said out loud, "Yeah . . . See?" He chuckled.

Then his spirits dampened a bit when he thought: What if the old lady says I forced her? For some sick, old lady reason? Man, it'd be my word against hers.

And who they gonna believe? Me or a sweet little old lady, for Pete's sake? Oh, man, if that happens, my ass is grass and this Bookem guy's the lawnmower! Please, Momma, if you can hear your lovin' Bertie, save his amnesia ass!

Balliwick looked around him again. No windows. Bastards, he thought, don't want no witnesses! He was about to stand up and get loudly litigious again, when the door

opened. He turned to see who it was.

Agent Bookem came in with another guy. Not one of the car's apes, but just as big. Bookem greeted Balliwick jovially.

"Well, well, well . . . Mr. Balliwick. I sincerely hope we haven't inconvenienced you too much by keeping you waiting." Balliwick shrugged.

"Good." Bookem said. "Then we can proceed *poste haste*. I know your time is valuable to you." Yeah, right, thought Balliwick, and you're just losing your sleep over it. Bookem walked around the desk and sat down. The unnamed ape sat on Balliwick's right. Balliwick shot him a side-glance as Bookem said, "This is Karl, Mr. Balliwick." Karl just nodded. He looked like he'd really enjoy killing someone. Anyone.

Balliwick then got smart-assy. "Geez, fellas, looks like we need a fourth for bridge again!" The two men exchanged glances that easily could have said; we know how to handle smart asses, young fellow.

"You play bridge, Mr. Balliwick?" Bookem said, knowing he didn't. In fact, Agent Bookem knew more about Balliwick than Balliwick's dear old, long-dead Momma knew.

"No, Sir." Balliwick said. He had decided to can the wiseacre routine for the "catch more flies with honey" one his Momma had taught him.

Bookem looked at him seriously. "Wouldn't matter if you did play that wonderful game, Mr. Balliwick, for I hold all the trumps and your hand is *chicane*." He stared at Balliwick.

"Sha . . . what?" Balliwick asked. He was nervous now. New words could scare him witless sometimes.

"*Chicane*, Mr. Balliwick. It means a hand void in trumps." Balliwick nodded. He got it. Bookem had all the trumps. He had zippo. Then Bookem really caught him off guard.

"You know a woman named Henrietta Higgambotham-Smythington?" It was said matter-of-fact like, but the effect on Balliwick was tremendous. He shuddered and his eyes popped out simultaneously. Bookem knew he had hit the mother lode. But Balliwick parried nicely.

"I gotta think on that one. I got amnesia or somethin' and my memory's kinda fudgy. Give me a sec, OK?" Bookem nodded, a small grin on his face. Cat and mouse was okay with him.

Oh, my God, Balliwick thought, she's gone and turned me in! The old bitch. Balliwick stood up and leaned on the desk with both hands. He looked Bookem straight in the eyes and yelled:

"I ain't no rapist! If Henny's sayin' I am, I'll sue the bitch's ass off, you hearing me?" He sat back down, his point fully made. Bookem, who had sat back quickly in surprise, now sat forward and leaned his arms on the desk.

He spoke very gently. "I'll take that as a yes then, Mr. Balliwick. But to put your mind at ease . . . no, she hasn't called you a rapist. In fact, to give you the unvarnished truth, we've never even spoken to the lady." Balliwick looked relieved as Bookem went on.

"Oh, we *do know* all about your last encounter with her, Mr. Balliwick. Or would you prefer I call you Mr. Sooeey?" He smiled. Since Balliwick had his mouth wide open and

looked as if he was about to go into his sue your rotten asses off routine again, Bookem cut him off. His patience had run out.

"Now, Balliwick!" he said harshly. "You'd better keep your calm, or as you yanks say, your cool . . . or I'll put your sorry arse in prison for so long, you'll wonder what that yellow thing in the sky is the day you get out! You hearing me, Balliwick?" Balliwick looked down and meekly nodded.

"Good!" Bookem said forcefully. "And now, I'm going to tell you how it's all to play out and you're not to interrupt me, or say even one small word. Got that?" Balliwick did another weak nod.

"Good! . . . But Balliwick, do be a good little boy and nod or shake your head where appropriate. OK?" Bookem's eyes locked on Balliwick's. Balliwick nodded for practice. He also took note that Bookem had dropped the sweet Mister before his name. This fact cowed him somewhat, too. Nice Bookem was now bad Bookem.

"We've had our eye on you for some time now, Balliwick, quite some time. From that first evening when we saw you lurking behind that lady's bushes and peeking in her windows." Balliwick vividly shook his head from side to side and opened his mouth, but Bookem's glare put an end to any further nonsense.

Balliwick looked completely confused and puzzled. He had no memory of hiding behind any bushes. His Momma hadn't raised him to do *that* kind of thing! No sirree, buddy, he thought, you got the wrong guy. Bring her in here, whoever she is, and let her tell me to my face I was peeping at her. You'll see.

"In your red tee shirt with the Semper Fi on it. Same one you have on now. It came out real clear in our photographs, too. But your pig mask! Quite realistic, eh? Now that's what really got our attention and made our juices flow, I can tell you."

Pig mask! Thought Balliwick, what the fuck you talkin' about, you rat ass English muffin? He most definitely felt the urge to protest, but a Bookem glare ended that idea.

"That's when it was decided that you were worth following up on. However, before we could put a tail-team on you, we . . . I readily admit it . . . lost you. And your whereabouts eluded us until . . . there you were! . . . right back at the very house where our little love affair had started . . . and yours was about to begin!" He gave Balliwick another glare to keep him silent.

"You were a pretty naughty boy with the lady, Balliwick, but we were naughty, too. We placed an operative outside her bathroom window. And all I can say is, you two were very photogenic!" Another Bookem glare. "When the two of you later moved to her bedroom, our man had to climb her rose trellis . . . he can still tell you a thing or two about thorns, to be sure . . . and made a most professional X-rated movie," another Bookem glare, "if you consider the low-light ambience he had to work with, that is. When we viewed the results later, Balliwick, we were quite impressed with, shall we say?. . .Your film presence! Quite a performance, I say, old bean." He winked at Balliwick. "Actually made one of our female operatives swoon just watching your animalistic technique." Balliwick grinned. Hey, he thought, this isn't so bad, after all.

"But now, Mr. Balliwick," Bookem said. Balliwick noticed that the Mister had

reappeared. "We come to the core of the matter, if you will." He paused. "We want you to help us." Balliwick's jaw dropped. "Huh?" he said. Then when he realized he had interrupted Bookem, he said sheepishly, "Sorry."

Bookem said gently, "That's all right, Mr. Balliwick. You have questions and that's understandable. But believe me, they will all be answered later. For now, however, I'm going to tell you how we go from point A through point Zed.

"Firstly, you *will* help us. For, if you don't, peeping tom charges will be the least of your worries. Secondly, you will be sworn to secrecy and if you violate that secrecy we will, quite promptly I assure you, eliminate you with extreme prejudice.

"Thirdly, if you help us and somehow manage to live, you will not only have a completely clean and clear police record, but we will show you our heartfelt appreciation and undying gratitude by giving you a cashier's check in the amount of one hundred thousand American dollars." Bookem stopped, waiting for Balliwick's response.

Balliwick didn't take long. In less than a minute, he said, "A hundred thou . . . what is it you want me to do?" Bookem smiled at him and said, "Ah, good."

Bookem pointed at the man who had sat mute through all of this and said, "Karl here will take you to a woman who will swear you to the oath. Then he will escort you to a group of people who will, shall we say, prepare you for your most important mission." Bookem stood up, reached across the table and offered his hand to shake.

As Balliwick took it, Bookem said, "Welcome to MI-5, Mr. Bond . . . heh heh . . . I mean, Mr. Balliwick!" As they shook on it, Balliwick beamed. Then in the best James Bond voice he could come up with, he said, "Thank you, Mr. Bookem. And remember, I like my martinis shaken, not stirred!" Bookem laughed. Even the ape in the other chair laughed.

Then Karl the ape gently escorted Britain's newest schmuck-ass spy to the door. As Balliwick reached the door, he turned back to Bookem. "Mr. Bookem, Sir, I was surprised you didn't use the bright lights in the eyes treatment on me, or those rubber hoses."

"Oh, no, Mr. Balliwick, we reserve those for the really hard cases."

"Oh, I see. Sure. Makes sense." Balliwick made his departure and Karl walked right beside him, his right hand on Balliwick's left shoulder. Like two old chums.

Bookem took a cell phone from his jacket. He dialed a number and waited. A moment later he said, "Sir? As expected, Balliwick is aboard. We should have him fixed up and operational with a fortnight, if all goes smoothly . . . and I foresee no reason it shouldn't." He listened. "Yes, Sir." He listened. "No, Sir."

He listened. "Well, Sir, we knew he was more ignorant than a cribbage board going in, but unless we want to open up Pandora's box with ill-timed raids on the known cells . . . which would leave who knows how many others still in business . . . and we would still be in the dark about their future plans . . . we're stuck with him, Sir." He listened.

"Believe me, Sir, I fully appreciate the seriousness of our situation. And if there's a cockup, I know just where the axe will fall. And as such, Sir, I will personally supervise the operation. Balliwick, one might say, will be completely in my bailiwick and I will try to keep him alive as long as humanly possible. You can count on that, Sir." He listened for

a time. "Yes, Sir. And cheerio to you too, Sir." He snapped the cell phone shut.

He glanced around the room, and then put both hands on the edge of the desk. To the room void of people, he said out loud, "Balliwick, you sorry shit . . . *long live Balliwick!*"

While you, Mr. Balliwick, he thought, may be expendable, I most certainly am not.

As he stood up to leave he realized that the sorriest version of James Bond to ever come along, had no bloody idea just what lay ahead of him . . .

"All I need is a den somewhere!"

CHIEF Busby Havelock Waterford "Badges" Melrose sat on the soft, buttery-leather chair in his den.

At least that's what he was calling the room at the moment. Yesterday, he called it his study. The day before, it was his library. He also referred to the room, from time to time, as the hobby room, the game room and the trophy room, as the situation and his use for the room, dictated.

It was called the den when all he wanted to do was relax, clear his cluttered mind and have his usual nightcap, before retiring for the night to lie next to his beloved Melanie, his wife for too many years to count.

The Chief called the room his study when he wanted to pore over a case, recent or otherwise. He called it his library when all he wanted to do in it was read a book, a newspaper or a magazine.

It became the hobby room when he was in it puttering around with one of his many pastime interests. The game room when he had friends over for poker playing or watching the big game on TV. And as the trophy room, it housed the many mementoes, souvenirs, or what have you, the Chief had garnered over a lifetime of crime fighting.

From the cowboy belt, with the huge buckle depicting a longhorn steer that young Billy Bitts had used to strangle his dear, old Mother, to the nine-millimeter bullet slug that old Doc Kimmie had removed from the Chief's buttocks. That was a fun time.

As a young Lieutenant, he had answered a frantic mother's call for help. Seems her lovable little boy, Flummer, aged ten, had somehow gotten his chubby little hands on a full box of daddy's forty five ammo and was now threatening to throw the bullets, every one of them, into the crackling fireplace if they didn't get him a two-wheel bicycle for his upcoming birthday. A major part of his extortion demands was that the damn bike better be red, his favorite color--or they'd be sorry a bunch, you betcha.

The young Lieutenant had arrived on the scene just in time to see the first bullet--and thankfully, the last--make its arc toward the roaring flames. Like everyone else in the room, and this included the lovable Flummer, the Chief had turned and ducked his head to moon the fireplace. He'd heard the bang just as his ass exploded.

Later, old Doc Kimmie who, at sixty five, still carried his childhood nickname (his real first name was Kimball), gave him the good news: "Here's the good news, Badges," Doc

Kimmie said, looking as if he was having way too much fun with it. "Couple inches to the left and your asshole would have looked uglier than any asshole has the legal right to get!"

No charges were filed against lovable Flummer, his age and all, but the family dished out its own version of jungle justice by grounding him until he came of legal voting age. If, lord willing, the kid ever lived that long. Without a red bike. For a while, at least.

Well, anyway, the Chief was now in his den. And his wife, Melon (his loving nickname for her) knew exactly what he was up to, even from the living room as she watched the TV and couldn't lay a direct eye on him. If anyone asked her, right now, where the hubby was, she'd know how to answer accurately: "He's in the den having his usual nightcap." One might think they'd done this many times before.

Melon would also know, quite accurately, what he was up to in the room if he had said: "Mellie, if anyone wants me, I'll be in the study." Or: "Melon, old gal, I'll be in the library." It was their form of marriage shorthand to save using extraneous words. How this had come about, neither of them could tell you, but they used it, they liked it and it made both of them feel somehow closer and more married to each other.

The Chief now took a sip from his usual nightcap, *Poole's Cream Sherry*. Of course--oh, no here we go again! --It was just *this week's* usual! Last week's usual was Johnny Walker, splash of soda, with a slice of lemon lovingly cut by his old gal, Melon. The week before it was...well...you get the drift.

The Chief enjoyed this and he came up with a new 'usual' week to week. It made the usual unusual. And it gave him and the wife a little extra, and enjoyable, conversational game to play.

Melon would say: "What's this week's usual, dear?" To which he might reply: "Oh, I don't know, Melon my pet, it might just be that twenty-five year old cognac you got me." They would then have a playful and lengthy discourse, on the pros and cons of this week's *usual*, with, now and then--more now, than then--a small visit to the *Dictionary of Libations and Potables* or the *A Mixologist's Guide to Entertaining*, just to clear up a fine point. And at the same time, learn something new.

Now while all this might seem a minor matter to most folks, it was their way to keep the marriage ball rolling so it wouldn't gather any moss, because, as any fool knows, mossy marriage balls can make the world seem more cruddier or more boring, than it usually tries to be.

The Chief now took a second sip of the usual, his buttock reminding him of the lovable Flummie and tried to relax. Which he was having a Hell of a time doing since Fuggit's mysterious disappearance two days ago. Where are you, Fuggy, he thought, where the fuck are you?

All roads had led to nowhere. And there were no new roads in sight. Fuggit, it seemed to all concerned, had just up and disappeared into thin air. Like some sick magic act of sorts. Hell, the Chief thought, even a magic act has a happy ending.

After the magician, or his scantily clad, big-titted assistant, disappeared, he or she would pop up at the back of the audience, all smiles, a relief to all the really old folk--or

anyone under six-- in the audience, who believed the disappearee was a goner, for sure. C'mon, Fuggie, the Chief now thought, stop playing the goner, for crissakes. Reveal yourself so we can all applaud. And go home and be normal again.

The Chief liked Corporal Fuggit. They went back a long way--over twenty years sharing the blues and badge. True, Fuggit had the brain wattage of a Christmas tree light and was stuck in Corporal for fifteen years now, but the Chief had genuine affection for the man.

He might be dumber than wallpaper paste, the Chief once thought, but they don't come any more loyal or dependable. Like a Swiss watch, thought the Chief. Or one of those German autos.

Fuggit hadn't missed a day of work since he first pinned on that badge, number 6807, and you never had to hunt him down at morning roll call, either. Fuggy, you dumb shit, the Chief thought, why'd you go and miss your first roll in all these years?

Yeah, the Chief liked old Fuggy. And he also had an avuncular affection toward Fuggit's wife, Cantella. They were both invited often to the Melrose house for barbeques and such. And his Melon took to Cantella as any woman might who can't bear her own children.

Of course, if the Chief heard just one more time the cant-tella-nothin' foolishness that Fuggy kept telling, each time unmindful he'd said it all before, the Chief would not only demote him to Private, he'd nail Fuggit's balls to the squad room's full-color town map, right where those two streets crossed Police One's location. Just for the embarrassment the Chief hated seeing on Cantie's sweet and adorable face.

Dusty Miller's finding of Fuggit's badge had also proved to be worthless. Old Dusty, it seems, as stewed as a prune, had simply swiped it from the front seat of Fuggit's police cruiser. The badge's pin gave them that first clue--it was bent and incapable of doing its job properly. So, the badge probably just fell off Fuggit's uniform and found itself a comfy spot on the front seat to luxuriate in.

Sniffer's questioning of Dusty about where he'd found it, sorta, kinda, led to this conclusion. Dusty had either drunkenly forgotten how it had come into his possession, or he was afraid he'd be kept away from his precious wine, for a time, by doing lock-up detention for Grand Theft, Badge.

Or, as Sniffer surmised, probably an equal mixture of both. Sniffer was just glad that old Dusty hadn't happened upon the twelve-gauge shotgun Fuggit kept under the front seat. No telling what trouble this perennial flower of the streets might stagger into. No telling at all.

Unable to relax, the Chief took a new sip and thought of Sniffer. You didn't just look like shit, Sniff, the Chief thought; you looked like shit on a bad hair day. That was sure true. The last time the Chief had laid eyes on the man, that very afternoon, he had looked ragged, haggard and dopier than his norm. As if he hadn't slept much in two days, which he hadn't.

Other officers, for sure, had also burned their candles at both ends, but Sniff's candle had managed to make both ends meet. This thought now distracted him in a new

direction. He got up and went over to the den's door and shouted:

"Hey, sweet Melon, how's that Plath poem go . . . you know . . . the one about burning her candles at both ends?" He knew the poet's name, but not the exact words. He also knew he could count on Melon to supply them. "Melon," he once told her. "Your memory is getting better than mine, day by day." He now heard her yell out, over the TV's background noise:

"Buzzie! Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote it! OK?" He hollered back, "OK!" Well, he knew the poet was a woman! She shouted out the words to him:

"My candle burns at both the ends,
It will not last the night.
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends,
It gives a lovely light."

"Thanks, Mellie," he shouted to her. "You're welcome, Buzz." she shouted back.

He'd have written it down to save remembering it in the future, but why should he? -- He had Melon's memory as a backup. He now turned his mind back to Sniffer.

He had told Sniffer to take the next two days off. No use hanging around here. We'll call you if something new pops up. So, get your raggedy-ass outta here, before I nail your balls to the squad room map and let you pick the location. Sniffer got the message and reluctantly went home, with both his balls un-nailed, thank you.

Now, Dear Lord, the Chief thought as he looked at the ceiling, why don't you make us all very happy by giving us something solid to go on. Or, even better, have Fuggit call in. 'Cause, Lord, where all worried as shit, pardon my French, about his present whereabouts.

He polished off the sherry, killed the desk lamp and went to join his Melon. At the doorway to the living room, he saw two small cats cross the TV screen. Then unlike the housecats he first thought they were, they surprised him. They both, simultaneously, stood up on their hind legs, held the position and looked this way and that. "What are *those* things, Mellie?" he asked. He sounded childlike and astonished.

She poked her head around the chair's high back and said sweetly, "They're called meerkats, Hon, and they stand up that way to keep a vigilant eye out for predators."

"Oh." was all he said as he entered the room, his eyes glued to the screen.

The two cats were joined by two more, who also did the stand-up-and-keep-your-eyes-peeled trick. The four of them reminded the Chief of a feline barbershop quartet. And it wouldn't have surprised him a whit, if they all of a sudden broke out in a meowingish rendition of *Sweet Adeline*.

"*Sweet Ad. . . e . . . line*," the Chief croaked out as he took his place in the chair that was alongside hers, so they could watch the fascinating cats together.

"Wrong, Buzzie," she said dryly. "The program calls for *My Wild Irish Rose* to be up next." He reached over and squeezed her knee, for no reason other than he wanted to. And maybe, just maybe, because he knew that if anyone could tell you what meerkats

were supposed to sing next, his Melon could.

He felt the warmth from the sherry and the warmth of her just being there with him. His Melon and the meerkats. New singin' group, he thought. And his Melon knew what he meant just from two words sung in his croaky voice. He was happy, contented and comfortable. And a whole lot guilty.

For he knew exactly what Cantella Fuggit felt right now. And it sure as shit, he knew, wasn't fascination for stand-up kitty cats on the *qui vive?* for wild dogs.

"You speak to Cantie, today?" He was sure she had . . .

"Who's the boss here, anyway, boss?"

THE SUPREME COMMANDER just stood there, nervously with a capital N, as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. A characteristic trait that was becoming his norm. He disliked the idea immensely, but if he had a choice, he hadn't found it yet.

"I have done your bidding once more, Sir!" the Supreme Commander said as he bowed his head. As usual, he was surrounded by nothing but darkness. In three distinct shades of black. "And I don't like it one . . ."

A loud voice boomed out: "Don't look so glum, chum!" The voice lacked all warmth; while at the same time it emitted a strange, surreal dimension of hot, white-hot heat. It was as if, by some sorcerer's magic, fire had finally learned to speak. And the fire spoke Groinkian fluidly. As if it had practiced at it for a long, long time.

Some of the darkness parted with a swirl and a tall figure emerged. The fire speaker.

The fire speaker was tall, much taller than any Groinkian, and he now towered over the Supreme Commander. He wore a huge dark purple robe, with a hood that totally hid his head from the Supreme Commander's view. The hood's black space, where the face should have been, showed only two large, red eyes that glowed brightly. No mouth or nose was discernable. The right eye now gave the Supreme Commander a red-glowing wink.

As the Supreme Commander looked up at the hood's black space, he said quietly, "Quite frankly, Sir, I'm sick and tired of all your shenanigans." He cleared his throat and added quickly. "Is this just another one of your so-called Cosmic jokes?" He crossed his arms in defiance and waited for an answer.

"Ah, yes! . . . Shenanigans. Nice word," the mouth less voice said in a more normal tone. "Let me check my copy of Webster's. Have to do it myself because my secretary is busy giving blowjobs to all the male members . . . hee hee . . . of General Hospital."

The Supreme Commander knew full well that the voice had no dictionary on hand to check. And at the same time, he knew full well that the voice had access to *all* dictionaries. All thesauruses, too, should a need arise. The voice also had no secretary--on her knees or otherwise--to speak of.

"Here we are!" the voice boomed and more heat arose. "From the old Irish, possibly, chum." The voice chuckled then went on. "I've got many friends among the Irish!" The voice laughed heartily then continued:

"Comes from an old, old word . . . sionnachuighim . . . which means . . . smarty pants! . . . *to play the fox!*" The voice laughed, so loud it forced the Supreme Commander to cover both his ears with his hands and put his head downward. His chin now touched his chest. The voice's heat had also increased.

The voice now spoke in a more conversational tone and the heat abated. "Fox? . . . Is *that me*, or is *that . . . me?* . . . it's . . . *me!*" The voice chuckled again. It sounded very pleased with itself.

"Wait! There's more!" This was said louder, as if to threaten it would get even louder and *hotter*, if the Supreme Commander didn't look up immediately. He looked up. He felt perspiration form on his upper lip. He wiped it away with his fingers then rubbed the fingers together to evaporate the wetness. He looked ill. His glixizza drooped pitifully.

"The rest of the description for this wonderful word also fits . . . *me* . . . to a tee. Tee hee!" the voice said, then paused for effect. "Playful. . . That's *me!*" Another pause. "Mischievous and treacherous. . . That's *me*, too!" Another pause. "Nonsense and trickery . . . *me* to a tee, tee hee hee . . . that's *me* to a tee . . . *Me!* . . . *Me! Me! Me!*" Then, the voice switched gears.

"But poor little *you*. I've stepped on your tender toesies . . . haven't I?" The voice sounded as if it had genuine concern, which worried the Supreme Commander.

He shuddered. "You have, Sir!" the Supreme Commander told the voice. "And it's not fair! Not fair one bit."

"*FAIR!*" Boomed the voice, so loud it caused the Supreme Commander to jump back. He tripped over his own feet and landed on his butt. He scrambled around, but only managed to get to his knees. He crawled toward the voice.

The heat was intense now. His glixizza looked wilted, its color faded. He feared it was about to catch fire and burn his head right off his shoulders. Sweat glistened all over his face.

The voice went on, not as loud, but still filled with anger. "*I can't play fair!* And you . . . being thousands of times smarter, Mister smarty pants . . . than those other Groinkian clowns, should know *that!*" A hot blast of air hit the Supreme Commander, which caused him to duck, as if a punch had been thrown straight at his head. The voice chuckled.

The heat had to be quelled. "Sorry, Sir! I'm truly sorry. I didn't . . ." He was still on all fours. He had his head tilted upwards toward the robed voice, eyes at the top of their sockets.

The voice commanded quickly, "Shut up! Don't be so pitiful." It was still angry. Then it said, but in a much calmer, almost soothing tone:

"You're a Supreme Commander, for shenanigan's sake. It annoys me to see you grovel like that . . . *Especially in front of the children!*" The Supreme Commander was now back up on his feet. He looked just awful as the voice added, "And you know what happens when a playful fox, such as I, gets a hair up his ass."

"I didn't grovel, Sir! You just caught me off guard and I just tripp . . . "

The voice cut him off. "Be that as it may," it seemed mollified, "let's sit on the sidelines on this one, as we always do, and see what happens." A small pause, then the

voice said sarcastically, "Shall we? Good. Let's shake on it, old chummy!"

A large hand shot out of the oversized robe and offered itself to the Supreme Commander. The hand's skin color was a glowing fire engine red. The Supreme Commander shook the hand. Then, feeling braver, he offered the voice his last verbal salvo:

"You're going to fuck this up for both of us, do you know that, Lucifer?"

"HA HA HA HA HA HA!" Boomed the voice of the fallen Angel. The heat was at its most intense. "Ask me if I care? HA HA HA HA HA HA. . ." He waved a robed arm in dismissal. Then he laughed some more. And the laughter could be heard even as he disappeared into the black swirls. "HA HA HA HA HA HA! . . ."

As the Supreme Commander took his leave, he could hear the Devil's laughter follow him. And, as before, the voice got louder even though his distance from it had increased. All the while he wondered if the intense heat had singed and ruined his glizzza.

Amazingly, it hadn't. Not like last time . . .

"You look especially poetic tonight!"

AS SNIFFER LEFT POLICE ONE HEADQUARTERS, to start the first of his two days off, he not only looked like warmed-over shit with the edges burnt, he felt like it, too. How he managed to drive the six short blocks to his apartment, he couldn't tell you. He wasn't there.

How he managed not to hit the kid on the motorcycle, who had cut him off, coming out of Sniffer's blind-spot they way he had, he couldn't tell you, either. Nor would he remember the finger the kid had flashed at him as he roared past, with the Angel of all bikers as a backseat passenger.

He also wouldn't remember how he had come through the front door and forgot to lock it behind him. Nor his trip to the fridge to chug-a-lug OJ. Or the two long swigs he took from a bottle of Jack Daniels. Or when he fell, face first, with all his clothes on, onto his unmade bed and passed out. He wasn't there.

Some hours later, when he woke up and tried to figure out just who it was had put a full bale of cotton into his mouth; he stumbled out of bed to dump his afternoon rain. One look in the medicine chest's cracked mirror, gave him a preview of just how cute he'd look on the day they embalmed him.

Holy shit, he thought as he looked at his mirror-double and giggled, you're having a bad hair day! The guy in the mirror agreed with a vigorous and idiotic nod.

He brushed his teeth and they felt to him as if they were covered with dried Vaseline. He showered, a long one, and marveled at his new discovery--a thing he decided to call water--in an honor to rain. As he toweled off, he felt almost human. Or in that general direction, at least.

After he dressed and had a bowl of Cheerios, milk, and a sloppily sliced banana, he

felt ready for anything. As long as he didn't have to see, speak or think. A nice, hot cup of his favorite make-it-in-the-pot coffee, *Chock Full 'O Nuts*, brought those three partially on board. After the first hot sip, he said to the fake Ficus plant that stood just outside the kitchen, "I can see! I can speak! And I can think . . . therefore . . . I am?" The fake plant just acted like a fake plant.

As he sipped, he looked out the window and saw a small, light and delicate dark gray bird pick at something in the grass. Pooty! He thought, our date! He glanced around the room to make sure the phone hadn't run off with the spoon. Nope. Present and accounted for, Sir! Good phone.

As he punched in her number, he noticed a coincidence. The last four digits were 6807. Fuggit's badge number!

Weirder than shit, thought the man who, like his Chief, didn't believe in coincidence. Just weirder than shit! He suddenly felt spooked, as if Fuggit's ghost was trying to communicate with him and tell him:

"I may be dead, you shit-for-brains Sniffnuts, but I can still kick your getting-older-than-shit ass! Pass me another donut, would you please, Saint Pete?" Weirder than shit, for sure.

Six rings. What's taking her so long? He wondered. Seven rings. He knew she lived in a one-room studio apartment, as he did, with the phone near enough to bump her ass every time she turned around, so he now thought she was probably out somewhere.

He looked at his watch and found the reason. She was still at work, teaching little kids how to say their A, B, C's and tell time. You dum-dum! He thought.

But Hey! He thought, you get lemons, make lemonade! He had just remembered his prior plan to visit *Francie's Fine Flowers* before going to Pooty's. Because Poot wouldn't be home for another two hours, he now had the time to pick and choose something real nice. Something light and delicate, just like his Poot. He had to remind himself that she wasn't *really* quite yet his Poot, but it sure felt that way. And who wants to argue with that?

Of course, he also thought about the fact that he had assumed a lot. She just might have plans, prior or otherwise, for the evening. He was, after all, about to spring it on her. He hadn't spoken to her in the last two days, either. The Fuggit stuff and all.

Perhaps she just might play that silly-ass game of saying she was busy when she wasn't--just to yank his chain a bit. And to let him know that she wasn't just sitting and staring at her phone hoping the great Sniffer would call. Oh, well, he thought, if nothing pans out, flowers look charming with a TV dinner.

As he put his suit jacket on, he looked in the hall mirror. He'd looked better, he admitted to himself, but--hey! --You still have a long way to go to get to chopped liver, Cluey, old chump.

Yeah, he thought, that phone of hers is probably real antsy from being stared at day and night. It's got a real good case of the paranoias.

He wolf-whistled at his image and, as he admired himself, he thought: Here comes the Sniffman, Honey, with the cure for what ails ya! And I'll cure your phone for free.!

Buoyancy had set in. He felt like his dumb old, optimistic self. So with legs that once again could walk on air, he went outside.

When he got to Francie's place, Francie herself waited on him. She was a big gal who wouldn't get ill if she suddenly lost forty pounds, with large breasts that reminded Sniffer he hadn't watched basketball in weeks.

And she knew her flowers! Such as the correct ones to go with a first-date shrimp dinner. He, who didn't know a pansy from a petunia, placed himself in Francie's chubby and capable hands. His first impulse had been long-stemmed roses. Light and delicate roses. Pink ones, maybe. In those long, long boxes with the clear plastic lids. And without thorns, if they came that way.

"Dumbkopf!" Francie said. "You vant her to sink you're a Mister Smarty-Pants-Slick-Guy? Just vanting to impress her so you can zen haf your vay vit her?" The way she'd put, with her German--who knows? --accent and all, he sure as shit didn't want *that!* He shook his head from side to side vigorously. No smarty pants here, Francie.

He was now mesmerized by her. She could have picked him up and planted him in the flower freezer and he'd have just stood there and, like a snow crocus, hung on her every accented word.

Francie looked him straight in the eyes. "Ve save der roses for ven you luf her," she winked at him, "und she knows you do . . . Zen . . . it is der vunderbar!" She smacked him in the chest with a clubby backhand as she said, "Dumbkopf!"

The dumbkopf flinched and winced, then nodded vigorously and wondered if he had the time, before the date, to have his ribs checked out for compound fractures.

Francie ignored him. The thought of playing flower Cupid to a new young couple now fueled her. "Now, vat you vant," she began, "is somzing that tells her you *like* her . . . just like her . . . and you vant to get to know her better." She stopped, so he crossed both arms against his chest. Just in case another of her dumbkopfs popped out with a hard rap attached. She spared him.

She pulled out a full-color flyer, with her store's name on the top and pointed to a nice, light and delicate arrangement of flowers. It was called Friends First - Lovers Later. What a coincidence.

And was said to cost *ONLY!* \$79.95 (Tax Incl.) Order # 745 FF-LL. The order number somehow looked familiar to him. Then he remembered. He took the police report from his inside coat pocket and scanned it. There it was. Ms. Pooty Prissyfoot 745 Columbus St. Apt. 3G.

"I'll take it, Francie!" said the detective who didn't believe in coincidence, but still believed in superstition.

The flyer hadn't mentioned what flowers made up the arrangement, but it did say each arrangement was lovingly created by Francie herself. Good enough for him. He fished out his credit card and the bargain was sealed with one swipe.

Francie went to work. He watched her chubby fingers do their magic. First, she deftly cut a piece of Styrofoam to fit into a white, shallow casserole dish. Then she gathered the flowers. White daisies with yellow centers. White and yellow yarrow. Sea holly and

globe thistle. Yellow St. John's wort, "White Cloud" butterfly bush and green eucalyptus leaves. With golden marguerites and pale blue African lilies bringing up the rear.

He watched her take this mass of flowers, cut their stems to various lengths and position them into the foam. He had the impression that Francie had done this many times before.

Her chubby fingers fairly flew through the work. She would tilt her head, close one eye and squint the other constantly as the arrangement unfolded magically before his astonished eyes.

When the flowers just about made the dish invisible, she grabbed a handful of African lilies. She looked at them, and then at him. "You zee? Mamma Nature makes zem too big for our little garden . . . zo . . . ve improvise . . . ya?" She then zestfully, but carefully, pulled the individual florets from the larger flower head. She pushed a fine-gauge wire up the length of each floret stem. "Voila! . . . zay fit us now!" He nodded and seemed hypnotized.

She carefully placed these light blue lily florets on the right side of her artistry. They looked in perfect harmony and balance with the yellow daisies on the left. The arrangement now looked light and airy. And very delicate.

It fascinated and amazed him. He hoped it would do the same for Pooty. How could it not? He thanked Francie profusely, kissed her on the cheek and adroitly side stepped her backhand that came at the same time as, "You zilly boy, you!" Then to his back as he left the shop, she hollered, "Und, Mister smarty pants, try to sink vit der head, not vit der pecker!" He heard her raucous laugh behind him.

Twenty minutes later or so, Sniffer could be seen as he drove along, with a colorful bouquet of flowers wrapped in clear cellophane beside him in the shotgun seat. Anyone driving by would have had the pleasure of seeing one very happy guy who smiled up a storm, and sat next to a small, potted, light and delicate garden.

And never guess just how truly worried he really was--about making a first-date impression and about finding a missing cop. And about a frantic Cantie.

But things went swimmingly from here on. Pooty was not only free, she sounded thrilled by it all. They agreed on sevenish. She told him the only thing he had to bring was an appetite, which, because the main course was shrimp, he knew he'd have to work on.

Just before he hung up, he told her he'd read a great little joke in yesterday's paper. Had she read yesterday's? No. Great! I think you'll like it. She said she probably would. Great! Bye-bye. Ta ta. See ya. Great!

Their little chitchat was brief, but it somehow made him feel good about the flowers. He felt they would be a surprise. Of the Friends First - Lovers Later kind. Thank you, Francie.

Sniffer arrived five minutes early and rang her buzzer. None of this fashionably late crap for him! She buzzed him in and this time he showed more respect for the staircase than he had before. He arrived at her door with only slight puffs. A thirty-second pause, with one hand on the doorjamb, his head bowed, cleared that trouble up.

She opened the door and they did their hellos. Then he pulled that old magical flowers-from-behind-the-back trick. She oohed and aahed as if she'd never seen this particular version before and bade him enter. "They're absolutely lovely, Clu. So light and delicate. They'll make a beautiful centerpiece." Thank you, Francie.

The way she said it put a beam on his puss that would have lit up all of Rockefeller Center. With light to spare, just in case a bridge or two went dark. Thank you, Francie, thank you, thank you. I owe you one.

However, his beam soon lost a little wattage when, as he watched her put the flower assortment on the table in between two tall candles, he realized she now held a small tag that read: Friends First - Lovers Later \$79.95 (tax incl).

The blush on his face coincided with a thought: Just how long will I get if I murder that dumbkopf owner of *Francie's Fine Flowers*?

But things went swimmingly from here on.

She offered to make him a nice Scotch. He said yes with a, "Sweetie, make that a *double*, one ice. Would you?" No argument from her. She just up and made it for him, and remembered that he wasn't the *only* one who had blushed earlier. For herself, she put together a nice white wine spritzer.

After "Cheers!" by her and "To new friendships!" by him, and a clink of their glasses, they small talked, with her doing an occasional zip-in and zip-out of the kitchen.

He had nothing positive to tell her about the disappearances of two people, Fuggit and Balliwick, though Balliwick was a lot more on the plus side of the equation. The FBI, he told her, had Balliwick stashed away somewhere and were probably, this very minute, using his kindergarten rap sheet as pressure to get him to confess to treason, espionage, and sabotage. With littering as a backup offense, just in case.

And he told her about Dusty Miller.

As she put together his second double scotch on a single rock, he said, "Funny thing happened the other day, a wine-soaked perennial name of Dusty Miller told us a story very similar to the one you told us." She looked over at him from the wet bar, the white-wine bottle in her hand.

Her face showed interest. "Really? What did he have to say?" She grew Dusty Millers each year on her small patio. As a background foil for her potted petunias and impatiens.

"Well, once I got past his natural odiferously fragrant self, what he said got interesting. Seems he also saw a bright light come out of a TV remote-like thing that blinded him." She handed him his drink and he thanked her. "And I thought about Fuggit when Dusty said that he, just before the flash of light, had seen an officer on the ground who just up and disappeared, his way of putting it, by the time his vision came back."

Pooty responded to this. "The officer I saw get hit with the bright light was also gone by the time I got back to the window after calling nine-one-one." She looked puzzled.

"I know," he said. "But there's more. It gets weirder. You said the two men wore some kind of pig masks, right?" She nodded. "Well, old Dusty told us he saw another guy who, not more than ten feet or so from the cop on the ground, had a face that looked just like a pig!"

She drew a short sharp inward breath and sat bolt upright. "What's it all mean, Clu?" "Don't know yet. Oh . . . Dusty also said the pig faced guy was also gone when he could see again." He took a sip. "The two stories are eerily similar and they somehow seem to revolve around Fuggit. Although Fuggy was still alive and kicking after your report of Balliwick's kidnap, he disappeared after Dusty's little tale. And both events took place on Columbus Street, Fuggit's home beat." She just sat there, taking it all in.

He took another small sip, then said, "Bright lights, TV remotes, and disappearing people. And all three are tied into pigs. Sure as shit . . . shitake mushrooms . . . something funny's going on." She nodded and her mind complimented him on his adroit recovery. Shitake mushrooms, indeed!

She mixed another round for the two of them. This time, however, his got watered down a notch. She didn't apprise him of the fact. As a basic rule, she didn't like it too much when a man had one too many drinks on an empty stomach. Just might get abusive. But somehow, she felt safe from that nonsense with Sniffer.

It wasn't that she thought he could handle his liquor--he probably could--there was just something about him that made her feel he wasn't the nasty drunk type. And if he wanted a few to unwind that was just fine with her. Besides, she really liked him, so why not find out early in the game where he was really at.

She made another zip to the kitchen. As he heard her call out, "Won't be too long, now." he switched from the sofa to one of the dining room chairs. On the way, he did a small stumble, nothing much, but it prompted him to remind himself to go easy on the booze, old chump.

As he sat down at the dining table, he called out: "Poot? I just might have another of these and, if I do, could you please make the next one a mite weaker?" She smiled to herself. She had no problems with that request. They were of one mind on the subject.

She came in and joined him at the table. They small-talked for a time and then he said:

"I read a good joke in the paper yesterday. Want to hear it?" It was a funny one to him and he was so eager to lay it on her, he had momentarily forgotten they had discussed this already.

"Love to, Clu," she said. "Just let me check on the rice. OK?" He nodded and said, "OK." As she walked toward the kitchen, he couldn't help but admire her rear end. Nice. Real nice. Goes well with the Lovers Later part.

A minute or so later she joined him and sat down. On her nice Lovers Later rear end.

"Ten minutes more or so," she said. She smiled at him. He smiled back and said, "Good. You ready for the joke?" She nodded and said, "Yes. I love jokes!"

"OK," he began. "There's this old, old guy, see?" She nodded. "Well . . . he kisses his wife goodbye and heads off to work," Pooty looked as if she had a question but he forestalled her with a hand held up, palm toward her. He went on.

"A while later, his wife hears on the radio that some driver is going the wrong way on the highway. OK?" She nodded. "So she gets him on his car phone and says, 'Honey, be careful! There's a guy going the wrong way on the highway.' To which he says, 'One guy

Honey? . . . there are dozens of 'em!' Clu chuckled and waited for her to follow suit.

With a puzzled look she said, "I don't get it, Clu, why are dozens of them driving the wrong way?"

"They're not . . . *he is!*" he said. She gave this some thought for a few seconds and said, "Why?"

"If you remem . . . because he's an old, old man and . . ." She cut in. Oh, God, he thought.

"Well, if he's so old," she said matter-of-factly, "why is he *still* working?"

"What?" he asked. He felt nervous and stupid and in a sudden race with the rice. He also sounded a tad, a large tad, a very large tad, exasperated. He looked right at her. There was no menace in his face--he just looked stupid.

She looked back sweetly and said, "You said he was an old, old man. Shouldn't he be retired or something?" Oh, God, he thought, the rice is gonna win. This is gonna be all uphill!

He reached across the table and held each of her hands in his. "Honey," he began, oozing honey. "Honey . . . Honey . . ." His eyes moved from side to side, looking into each of hers in turn. "Forget about his working *or* not working. OK?" He hesitated, his eyes now locked on her left eye, while he tried to figure out how best to explain it without the honey turning to vinegar.

He threw some more honey at her by saying sweetly, "Just think of him as an old, old man. *And* what the wife heard on the radio was about *him* . . . *he's* the guy going the *wrong way!* But he don't know he is, because of his age. That's why he told her . . ."

She cut him short. Her face beamed as she said, "I get it! Silly me! Hee hee hee. The wife thinks it's anoth . . . And the old man, thinks . . . hee hee hee . . . And because he's so old . . . hee hee hee . . . he is . . . Oh, Cluey, that's a good one!"

Oh, God, he thought, trouble in our funny department. If I've got to explain 'em all, I'll die. Or pistol-whip her to death. Maybe, I better stop telling 'em. She still tee-hee'd.

He tilted his head slightly forward, cocked it to one side, and with his eyes tilted up toward her asked her suspiciously, "You *sure* you got it?" He wasn't.

"Yes, Darlin, ' " she said. Then she gently pulled her hands from his and added, "Ooh . . . the rice."

He sat there and felt pleased with himself. It looked like she *really* did get it and--he had beaten the rice! Just under the wire, but a win is a win, dontcha know? Pistol whipping was no longer in his thoughts.

But Clu, he thought, you gotta take it easy. He knew he had almost lost his patience with her and the idea of standing up and shouting: "Why can't you get it? You're a fucking school teacher, for crissake!" had slightly crossed his mind.

Shit, Clu, he thought, you saving that noise for *after* we're married? He made a solid mental note to self-analyze it all later. He sure as Hell didn't want his years of bullshit and issues baggage to get in their way. He'd have to work on that a bit.

He remembered what his father had said just last year, from a hospital bed and just two short days away from his last breath. He had asked "Pop" how he Mom had made

their marriage last for over fifty years. "Cee You Tee!" had been his answer.

His father then explained that Cee You Tee stood for Compassion, Understanding, and Tolerance. He then explained what each word meant to him, ending with:

"Son, if both people love each other and they practice these three abstractions every day, they'd have the type of marriage me and your Momma share." Cee You Tee. Simple to remember--all one had to do was make the C. U. T.

From the kitchen he heard her call out, "Din-din in five, Sweetie. And forgive me for being a little slow on the joke uptake, okey-doke? I got a lot on my mind tonight."

She poked her head through the door and looked at him. "That Bertie stuff, you know? And Darlin'?" She paused and threw him a wink. "I'm a little nervous about dinner. I haven't made my special shrimp scampi for a detective . . . in days, now!" She ducked back into the kitchen and left him to ponder.

And he thought she was deficient in the humor department! Hah! From the kitchen, she heard:

"Ha ha ha ha ha!" Real loud and genuine sounding. From where he sat, he heard, from the kitchen. "Hee hee hee hee hee!" Real loud and genuine sounding. Two mooncalves, you betcha, who had narrowly missed their first real loud and genuine disagreement.

After dinner--the scampi hadn't killed him. In fact he genuinely enjoyed it and wouldn't mind having it again--she said, "You want funny," she put her right hand to her mouth, put the thumb and forefinger together, wiggled the other fingers above them, smoked an invisible cigar and rolled her eyes (Groucho looked down, real proud), "I'll give you funny!" He laughed and it made his chest go up and down. He took a sip from the sherry she had fixed for both of them. Then she gave him her funny.

"There once was a man from Nantucket . . ." His eyes bugged out. She hee-hee,d and said, "Just kiddin' . . . here's the real one." He smiled at her and liked her a notch more.

She sounded very much the schoolteacher when she said, "The Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, thought the hen a most elegant creature . . ." "The hen pleased with that, laid an egg in his hat. And thus did the hen reward Beecher." She smiled and waited for his reaction. He gave her a big grin and said:

"That's good. I like the play on words. The Henry Ward Beecher stuff." He'd gotten it.

She had dated many men who hadn't, which amazed her. It was as if they didn't hear the words somehow. Or make the connection between the first line and the last. Maybe it was a male thing. A friend of hers had gotten the same reaction from some men. Her answer was, "Men are so busy staring at our tits, their minds are fudge. Maybe if we had them read it with their dicks . . . !"

If that was it, and Pooty wasn't so sure it wasn't, she liked the fact that Clu was a face man. Or--she giggled inside at the thought--maybe he's just a good poker player!

Now, it isn't as if Pooty used this poem as any type of acid test. Even if a man failed to get it, so to speak, she had no qualms about a follow up date with him, if he wished, provided they sort of hit it off to begin with. The hitting it off farther than that part was

where Pooty had some strong feelings.

She, and the man she might want to fall in love with, had to have what Pooty called the Magic. Now, our Miss Pooty was no fanciful flight taker. Far from it. Where most people couldn't tell you exactly what they meant when they said, "That couple has the right chemistry." or "They were made for each other," she could. Kinda.

Where many people were of the idea that souls just wandered the Earth and sought out their soul mates, Pooty believed it was more logical than that. But still very magical at the same time. Logical magic. Magical logic.

She knew, and she knew most folks knew, that people were the end result of many things. Genetics. Nurturing. Environment. Experience. Brain chemistry. Food intake. Health condition. And many more.

But people were always, until death, an end result in the making. People changed over time. And kept changing. Even those 'set in their ways' changed. Sometimes. She saw that the ones who refused to change were miserable and unhappy most days. With closed minds that couldn't see beyond today. To Pooty, these people were the epitome of the "He's dead, but he just don't know it yet!" saying.

Or, as Pooty liked to put it, "He's alive, but he just don't know it yet!"

Those that "knew it," in either case, had no choice but to change. Outside happenings and inside happenings saw to that. And as someone changed, his or her personality changed, too. Or, as Pooty believed, their *personalities*.

She knew, and she knew most people knew, people had more than one person hiding inside. They were pluralized. With dozens of personalities. Maybe hundreds. All being individually altered and changed by inner and outer events. No one ever felt the same way at forty as they did at fifteen. No one. Not without a mental condition of some kind. Or stubbornness born from spite.

Thus she felt that when one person, with *his or her* myriad personalities, met another person, with *his or her* mixed bag, the chances of things going swimmingly after that was rather slim. It made happily ever after the rarity it is.

Two such mish-mashes that clashed head on would lead to a cluttered, disarrayed mish-mish, and disharmony could, or would, ensue. They most certainly would not be 'made for each other.' And forget about chemistry. The only chemistry they had would only create trinitrotoluene--T. N. T. Pooty had seen that before, more than once.

However, magic *could occur* when, and if, the two people had more of their uncountable personalities blend than clash. She rough-estimated that it took an eighty percent blending to make two people very happy.

At a ninety percent blending, they were deliriously happy. A one hundred percent blending? --Cloud Nine and above. Cloud Nine was what she referred to when she said 'that couple has the right chemistry.' The magical logic. The logical magic. Pooty style.

She also estimated Cloud Nine occurred only once in every thousand couples and maybe even less. Whether others agreed with her on this, she didn't care. It was her belief, and she was sticking to it. Besides, being Pooty, she never proselytized her idea to anyone.

In fact, up to this particular time in her life, she had not mentioned it to another soul. For no other reason than to *not* get into a clash of personalities, for she knew that just about everyone had *their own* ideas on the subject and it would be a useless and argumentative discussion all around. With no general agreement in sight.

Now, so far at least, she had never found the magical logic-logical magic. Certainly not with old Earl. But she still believed in it.

At times, however, she wondered if she should. She wondered if maybe she was in pursuit of the impossible dream, the non-existent Prince Charming. Like someone after the fountain of youth. Or perpetual motion. Or even a four-leaf clover. The upshot a wasted and lonely life that only spinsters could comprehend. A nonmagical life.

Perhaps it would be better to settle, like the majority usually did, on a blending of only fifty to seventy percent of their individual personalities.

The Magic of Cloud Nine wouldn't be there, but she would be somewhat happy and she could work on making it better and better. While also having someone in her life, which could ease the loneliness she felt deeply from time to time.

The problem with that, so far at least, is she had yet to meet a man who combined with her to even forty percent, her guestimate. And that was too damn much work to work at, in her opinion.

Now, she was no date-freak, that's for sure, but she had her fair share. It was just that the men she kept running into were just too wrong for her. On so many levels. Chemistry, included.

If they weren't overly vain, they were overly conceited. Or overly both. If they weren't totally bookish and lacking all sense of humor, like some teachers she had dated, they were dull, boring, and class-clownish.

Many were overly macho, or outrageously competitive and followed the typical male path of sex, sports and self. To her, these were the three Esses that her Cloud Nine frowned upon and would certainly not grant entrance to. Good looks considered, too.

No, she wouldn't change. Not even if it meant joining the sisterhood of spinsterhood. If she never met the logical, magical man with the magical, logical blend who would share Cloud Nine with her--then so be it. She'd be damned now, at this time in her life, if she was going to settle for anything less. She'd done that already with Earl. And that blend was so low on the Pooty charts it wasn't funny.

As she now looked at Detective Clu Sniffer, who sat across from her, she felt small twinges of magic. Of the logical kind.

"Clu? You play poker?" she asked matter-of-factly.

Her new tack threw him for a moment. "Not really," he said. "Don't like the game much. I don't like losing money, and strange as it seems, I don't care too much for taking a man's hard-earned money, either. I guess I'm just not competitive enough."

Although that answer satisfied her in two areas, whether he had a poker player's deceptiveness and whether he was too-too macho, he absolutely thrilled her when he said:

"Don't go in for sports too much, either. They downright bore me. I'd rather go head to

head with a crossword puzzle. Where I'm *in* the game and not just watching from the bleachers."

"Great." was all she said, but she smiled a really big one.

She looked around the room. It still looked the same as it always did, but it seemed that Magic had snuck in when she wasn't looking. She could almost see it. It sat there, right now, right on her couch--and it held Cloud Nine in its lap. She smiled, and Magic smiled back at her. Sniffer had just said something, but she only half heard it.

"Yes," she said with a smile, her eyes still transfixed on the couch, "I'd love that."

Then, dreamy-like, she looked back at Sniffer and found that Magic had tossed Cloud Nine right into his chair. But her reverie was brought back to earth when the cloud in the chair spoke.

"Great. Now, here's the poem," he said, "I learned in High School and somehow I've forgotten to forget it." She waited, enrapt, for Cloud Nine to go on.

He took a sip of the sherry, then stood up as if to make a classroom speech. He thought for a time. She didn't know it, but he had to picture himself back in the classroom in order to remember all the words. And there were lots of words to remember. Especially for a getting-older-than-shit Detective.

"The Twins, by Henry S. Leigh." He executed a little bow from the waste. As he held the pose for longer than she thought he should, she giggled. He straightened up and looked at her.

He shammed a huffy intake of breath through his nostrils as if it was a poem-reading-Sniffer rule to ignore all audience gigglers. Even the pretty school marm types.

He began. "There once was a man from Kent, whose . . ." She giggled louder and thought, damn, he's cute. He chuckled, shammed a glare at her and went on.

"The Twins, by Henry S. Leigh." He bowed once more and, as before, he held it longer than most folks would.

She fought back the urge to giggle again, but her body shook. He straightened up and winked at her. She couldn't help herself. She giggled again. "Tee hee hee." He sham-shushed her with a forefinger to his mouth. Then with his third bow from the waist, but speedier this time, he began anew.

"In form and feature, face and limb,
I grew so like my brother.
That folks got taking him for me,
And each for one another." She looked impressed and very interested as her Cloud Nine continued:

"It puzzled all our kith and kin,
It reached an awful pitch.
For one of us was born a twin,
But . . . uh . . . Yet not a soul knew which." She now hung on his every word, sipped her sherry absent-mindedly and waited for him to go on. The cloud obliged:

"One day to make the matter worse,
Before our names were fixed.
As we were being washing by nurse,
We got completely mixed." She smiled.

"And thus you see, by Fate's decree,
Or rather nurse's whim.
My brother John got christened me,
And I got christened *him*." She still smiled and followed closely along. I'm gonna kiss you tonight, Cloud Ni. . . Detective Sniffer, she thought.

"This fatal likeness even dogged,
My footsteps when at school.
And I was always getting flogged,
For John turned out a fool." She let out a small tee hee. He gave her a playful admonishment-type look before he turned back into Cloud Nine and went on:

"I put this question hopelessly,
To everyone I knew.
What *would* you do, if you were me,
To prove that you were *you*?" She laughed out loud. Then picked up the sherry glass. He reached down, picked up his glass and toasted her. The teacher sipped. The cloud sipped, too. Then the Clu-cloud continued:

"Our close resemblance turned the tide,
Of my domestic life.
For somehow my intended bride,
Became my brother's wife." She giggled.

"In short, year after year the same
Absurd mistake went on ---
"And when I died . . . the neighbors came, He paused for effect.

And buried brother John! " He bowed and said, "Thank you, thank you." She applauded. She laughed. She did both.

"Oh, Cluey, that was *wonderful*!" She stood up, went to him, threw both arms around his neck, pulled his face to hers and planted both lips fully on his mouth.

As he enjoyed the softest lips he had ever felt, and the sweetest mouth he had ever tasted, a thought popped into his mind. He decided to save it for when the kiss ended. And he felt that could be eternity, or forever, whichever came first.

It didn't matter to him that it ended sooner than either, for as he gazed into her eyes

he knew, and he knew she knew, that there would be time for many more kisses. And he knew, and he knew she knew, that they had found something beyond special, something realer than real and truly wonderful. Then he remembered his thought.

He looked into her eyes and said, "I didn't get that kind of audience reaction when I read it in High School, *teach!*" She giggled. He laughed. And they did the kiss again. This time even longer, as if trying out for eternity, at least. With forever waiting in the wings.

And yes, dear reader, they did the whoopee, and the naughty, too. Not on a Who's-ya-Daddy level, but much higher. And just like Ms. Henrietta Higgambotham-Smythington, Pooty had never done the naughty-girl-in-a-blue-bathroom thing before, but she did it on her Cluey. She did it without any doubts, fears or worries over what he would think of her now, or later.

After all, her Magic was in the room. And as it watched two people on a bed of clouds, it protected her. As she always knew it would.

And although he had never done it before, he reciprocated. And later, as he held her in his arms, he thought about just who would share the rest of his life with him--and he knew--and if there's any certainty in this crazy old world of ours--he knew she knew, too.

Sniffer laughed, so she asked, "What's so funny, Hon?" as she nuzzled closer.

"I was just thinking . . . HA HA . . . about the tag . . . HA HA . . . on the flowers!" He paused long enough to draw her closer with a squeeze. She giggled as she remembered it. He added: "We sure as blazes breezed right through that Friends First - Lovers Later part, didn't we?"

She laughed before saying, "Yeah, and it just shows you what you can get for \$79.95!"

He roared, and then said, tears in his eyes, "With tax included!" They giggled and laughed up a storm and the release felt so good, so reassuring, they did the whoppee again. But slower this time, as if they had all the time in the world. Eternity being what it is and all.

He sounded sheepish when he later asked gently, "Sweetheart? What does . . . "Poppycock me Darlin' mean? "

"I'll tell you in the mornin' . . . Hon."

They slept, spoon-style, her ass fitted into his stomach and her left hand behind her back. It encircled his . . .

"I heard that!"

LIEUTENANT Junior Grade Grin just stood there on the third floor of the fire escape, right outside the open window of the vacant apartment. He listened, with deep suspicion in his mind.

Less than fifteen minutes earlier, he had been in that very room. He had confessed to Lieutenant Gron about the officer in the alley and the three killings at the consignment store. Gron had listened intently. With patience. He seemed all ears.

Gron had agreed with him that it had been absolutely necessary. What choice was there? He would have done the same. Don't worry about it, Grin, it will be our little secret. I won't report it. OK?

On the surface everything had seemed OK. But there were undercurrents that bothered Grin. He and Gron had been together for ages and they could read each other. Read each other's minds sometimes. Or, so it would seem to an outsider. They sometimes even knew each other's thoughts *before* they were thought.

And Gron hadn't been Gron. Not really. Oh, he seemed genuinely concerned, right enough, and he seemed to care for his old friend's future, but he wasn't Gron. Not really. He seemed to hide his thoughts. They were blocked from Grin. Also, there was something about his face. Something also hidden. Even his smile looked forced, contrived. As if it was an act of some kind.

All this had aroused Grin's suspicions. He couldn't tell you even one significant point why, but he felt it hung in the air as if it was real. And palpable. And very, very deadly.

But maybe what had happened at the end of their chat was the straw that broke the camel's back. It came in the form of an errand Gron wanted him to make. An errand that seemed to come out of the blue, as if Gron had just thought of it and had made it up as he went along.

While he knew Gron could be forgetful at times--he always forgot to place a chair against the door to keep it from being opened by just anybody--he knew Gron would not simply forget what he now called an important errand--to find new license plates for the stolen car they had used to grab Balliwick.

Gron had made it seem super important, when Grin knew the need was almost non-existent. The car would *never* be reported stolen. For the simple fact the owner was now thin air. Plus the fact the man had airline tickets in his possession, and four suitcases, which suggested a long absence.

And besides, the plates had been swapped no less than three days ago. Gron wouldn't forget that. Or would he? Grin didn't think so, but either way, he felt he could take no chances. Not when his life could be in the balance.

That's why he had noisily clumped down two flights and had snuck back up and now listened. Listened as Gron contacted the warrior ship. Listened to the usual preliminary contact bullshit. Then listened to his old, old friend sell him down the river. Rat him out. Squeal on him. Turn him in. Essentially ending Grin's life for he knew the punishment for failure and mistakes.

He heard Gron inform them of the killings. All the killings. And how he, Gron, thought it had been handled sloppily, stupidly, and incompetently by Grin. And Gron left no detail unmentioned. He even embellished the details.

And then Grin heard the voice on the opposite end of Gron's communication: "You must eliminate Lieutenant Junior Grade Grin, *poste haste* and, if you don't, for whatever sentimental reason, we will send people to deal with the both of you. Understood?"

And he heard Gron did understand by a simple, "Yes, Sir! Consider it done, Sir!" Grin understood, too.

As he listened he could feel his eyes get misty. For he knew that if the situation was reversed, the shoe on the other foot, he could never, but absolutely never, put it to Gron the way Gron was now doing it to him. Never.

Then as he listened to Gron go over the coordinates for the clone landings in their area, he thought it out. It was simple. Fact: Gron will kill me first chance he gets. Fact: Unless I kill him first.

Two as-simple-as-it-gets facts. But it was more complicated than that. To kill Gron was *not* the problem--he would have the element of surprise--but, at the same time, it *was* the problem.

To eliminate Gron would not make the men on the warship disappear. He might be alive after Gron's demise but for how long? They would, most assuredly, come to look for him. And he knew, they would track him down in a heartbeat. Through the locator chips embedded in all Groinkians at birth. Unless...

Unless, after he had dispatched Gron, he could convince the higher ups that Gron was a traitor. And it was really Gron who had killed the officer and the other three. That Gron had just made up a story to cover his ass and put the blame on him--as a smoke screen for his treachery.

The idea greatly appealed to Grin, as it would appeal to any desperate men in the same situation. True, it needed more work, more planning. But it was doable. All he needed was a little time and he would give them a tale that even the world's biggest cynic would swallow.

But first things first. He now heard Gron sign off. The desperate man's time had come. The moment of decision. Now or never.

He stepped quietly through the open window, his Grun-gun drawn and set on Evaporate Setting Three, a one-quarter inch width that would melt casehardened steel. Gron hadn't yet heard him. His back still faced him. The element of surprise was there.

Grin just stood there. And waited. He noticed the door had not been chaired. He smiled and waited some more. He wanted to see Gron's face at the moment of decision. He didn't have too long to wait. Gron stood up, his back to him.

Gron turned around, his Grun-gun evident. In mid-turn, Grin heard Gron say, "You heard? Too bad."

When Gron was fully turned in Grin's direction, he saw Grin's Grun-gun was pointed directly at his chest. Gron smiled.

Grin's brain worked lightning quick. No time to reply to Gron. With his Grun-gun pre-aimed as it was, he pressed the trigger-button. The flash lit up the small room as the one-quarter inch beam buried itself into Gron's chest. Acrid smoke erupted and momentarily concealed Gron's face.

"Goodbye, Gron, old friend." Grin said dryly. "I'll miss you."

Then the impossible occurred. As the smoke that hid Gron's face disbursed, Grin saw Gron grin at him. Then heard him say with a smile, "Not up on the KV-6, are we?"

Another flash. Grin's wide-open mouth didn't even have time to close as the six-inch beam tore a half-foot-wide hole in his chest. Blood, organs, and ash, with the acrid smell

of burnt flesh in the air, powder-puffed all around him. He flew backwards. His legs danced across the carpet as if he had become a broken string-puppet.

He crashed into the wall and made a flesh-hitting-a-solid sound. Then he totally collapsed onto himself, his head coming to rest on his chest. From his outstretched right hand, the Grun-gun fell to the floor. It hardly made a sound as it bounced on the carpet.

"Remember this, Grin, old friend. The part number," he smiled at the corpse, "for the laser-proof vest, is KV-6." He paused, and then added. "Don't get the Beta version!" He laughed out loud.

Then Gron picked up the communicator. He pressed a button. And waited. He had something new to report . . .

"Murder she saw?"

OFFICER MOLDON entered the room. He took one look at Sniffer and said, "What the fuck hit you, Sniff? You still wearing beehives as hats?" He laughed a real good one.

Sniffer just looked at him. His mouth made one of those yeah-sure smiles. You know, where the mouth is closed, the lips spread out wide, and the cheeks puff out a tad. The yeah-sure smile. Usually it is accompanied by a slight up and down nod of the head.

Moldon's attempt at humor reminded Sniffer of what had happened on his drive in.

There he was in his convertible, at a stoplight waiting for the damned thing to get tired of chewing on red, when he hears someone say, "Hey, Buddy?"

Turning his papered head to his right he saw two punk-like kids in a car idling right alongside his.

"How's your job as a dartboard going? The pimply-faced kid with a ring in his left nostril had asked just before answering the question himself. "Not well, I see!" He and his friend then busted up laughing.

Sniffer, simultaneously glancing up at the stoplight to see if it was now tasting green, had put his hand in his suit jacket to get out his glock, which he rested on the steering wheel just before turning his attention back to the punky kids.

He'd gotten the expected 'don't want no trouble, mister' from the two bug-eyed kids a mere second before the light greened. The kid then floored it, leaving the paper-covered dartboard in the dust.

Sniffer had just sat there laughing. Not only because of the way the kid had jack-rabbitted, but also because he had thought the kid's line was damn funny.

Glancing in the rear-view mirror, he had thought, Dartboard! You're right kid . . . a friggin' dartboard, all right. And the pay sucks, too. His chuckling from looking at his own image soon turned to full laughing. Dartboard. Good one kid. Just like I woulda done when I was your age.

"Ha Ha, very cute, Moldy," he said. "But you missed funny. You shoulda asked me how my job as a dartboard was going." Sniffer laughed. "Now, *that's* funny!"

Moldon laughed and agreed. "You're right, Sniff. That *is* funnier!" He paused. "But a beehive hat does have a nice ring to it, too, you know." He chuckled, more to himself

than at Sniffer.

Sniffer knew that Moldy would plagiarize the dartboard stuff all over the stationhouse, with various embellishments. "Hey! Whaddya you think Sniffer's doing in his off time for extra dough?" "He's gotta job as a dartboard! Go see for yourself, if you don't believe me!" Sniffer prepared himself for the many heads he knew would be popping through his doorway all damn day long.

"Whatcha want, Moldy?" Sniffer said. "Besides breaking my chops, that is."

Moldon got serious. "Well, Sniff, I've been going over the nine-one-one calls that came in during Fuggy's watch. Three seem interesting." He placed a piece of paper on Sniffer's desk. Three names had been circled in red.

While Sniffer took them in, Moldon said. "Now, old Earl swears he saw Fuggit alive and eating at ten o'clock. Brought him a freebie himself, he says." Sniffer glanced up at him with his papered puss. "So?" he said.

"Well, those three call-ins all happened after ten, and one of them's a doozy!"

"How so?" Sniffer asked as Moldon took the seat across from him.

"Well, two of them probably won't go anywhere since they occurred blocks away and outside Fuggy's bailiwick. Just in case, though, I've sent officers to interview 'em, since old Fug might have done a walkaround and strayed his area." He paused, gathering his thoughts.

"But the third one, that" he looked down at a small pad he held, "Ms. Fiona Fandlecandle there, is kinda strange. And she lives right there on Columbus Street, not more than fifty feet from Earl's place." He had Sniffers full attention minus a quick thought about the woman's odd name.

"Since the nine-one-one only says she saw a bright light come in her window and something about a guy lying on the ground, I called her." Sniffer nodded once. Moldon consulted the pad again and read aloud from it.

"It was around ten thirty . . . she's not certain on that . . . but, she was getting ready for bed. She says a very bright light shone into her bedroom and scared the shit out of her . . . my way of putting it, not hers . . . It reminded her, so she says, of those alien invasion movies where a bright light comes just before the aliens go into the heroine's bedroom and snatch her." He took a breath. Then went on.

"Too much scary TV for her I guess . . . well, anyway . . . She investigated, so to speak, by going to the window and looking out. Says she plainly saw a man lying on the ground. He looked dead like since he wasn't moving. To her anyway." Another breath. "She sounded old, so maybe she's got eye problems or something.

"I asked her what had happened to the bright light and she said it was gone. It had been just a flash, she said, like a flashbulb makes. Then it was just gone . . . well, anyway, she went and called us, but when she later went back to look at the man again." Moldon turned a page.

"She says he was, quote, gone. Just gone. Just like that, there one minute and gone the next, unquote . . . kinda weird, Sniff, dontcha think?" Sniffer had a thought running through his mind, but he didn't mention it.

Instead he asked, "What did the black and white find out?" He knew they wouldn't send a Detective.

"Nothing." Moldon said. "No guy on the ground . . . No body and no used flashbulbs, either. Just an empty alley. With not even a sign of an argument"

"They bother to interview the lady?" Probably not, he thought.

"No." Moldon said. "Didn't see a need, I guess. They reported their findings and that was that." Sniffer, in deep thought about the coincidence between her story and Dusty's, didn't pay full attention to Moldon as the man turned another page and said:

"Oh, another odd thing. Though she's not sure about it . . . what with being a little blinded from the flash and all . . . but she thinks she saw a big man, in the shadows, at the fire escape ladder, wearing a Halloween mask. Says her memory impression of it was that it was some kind of hog . . . or pig. But she's not too sure."

Sniffer asked Moldy to run that by him again. Moldon did. Then Sniffer filled him in on the coincidences of her story and Dusty's bright light, his gone-just-gone tale and the bit about the pig-faced guy who was also gone, just gone. Moldon listened, fascinated by it all. He also told him what the Chief had said about being up to their asses in pigs.

With Sniffer was done, Moldon asked, "Whaddya think's going down, Sniff?"

"I don't know what it is yet, Moldy," he took a quick breath, "but unless bright lights, vanishing people, and pig masks, have become the town's welcoming act, something in all this just might have caused Fuggit's disappearance." Coincidences, he thought.

"Moldy," Sniffer said. "Since you've already spoken to Ms. Findle . . . Fondle . . . ah, fuck!" He glanced down at the nine-one-one sheet. "Ms. Fiona Fandlecandle," what the fuck ever happened to normal names, he thought, "why don't you go and interview her. I don't think we'll learn any more than what we know now, but you never know." He paused then added:

"And if the sweet old thing just happens to have Fugface's Glock sittin' in her undies drawer . . . you rush it right back here and shoot me with the fuckin' thing!" Then he also added. "That is, Moldy, if you can find me under all this wallpaper." He pointed to his face. Moldon chuckled.

"You got it, Mr. Dartboard." he quipped. "I'm on my way." Moldon stood up, turned and left.

You're right, Chief, Sniffer thought, we're up to our ass in pigs.

A few three minutes later, Officer Casey poked his head in the door and said:

"Quit that friggin' moon-job, Sniffer, 'cause they ain't paying you enough to look like that!" He laughed as he disappeared from Sniffer's view.

Moldy, as young and alert as he is, hadn't wasted any time. Who's next? Sniffer wondered, 'cause my Glock's got a full belly . . . And even I won't miss from here . . .

"Don't swear at me, young man!"

BALLIWICK had just finished his swearing-in phase and now sat on a wooden bench

outside Ms. Withers' office. He waited. Karl said he had to wrap up some paper work with Ms. Withers. Yeah, Balliwick thought, I'll be he's got those papers spread out real good.

Ms. Withers had administered the oath, which Balliwick now wished he had paid a bit more attention to, especially to the part that went, 'on pain of death' or something. Well, shit, he thought, us spies eat death for breakfast!

He hadn't heard too much of the oath because it was Ms. Withers' fault. Those fantastic legs of hers, that mini-skirt that showed them off so well, and that pink triangle had distracted him.

She had given him the oath sitting down. Right across from him without so much as a desk to block his view. How could he help but look? Even with her legs crossed, he could see that little pink triangle of panties. With those brownish blonde hairs sprouting out all around. And the five times (he counted) she uncrossed and recrossed her legs--well! --What's a red-blooded boy to do? Except be a gentleman and not drool too much while he stared. And get a ten and a quarter inch woody.

He was able to hide it from her easy enough. Since it ran down his right leg, he just kept that one crossed over the other. No prob. Unless he had to suddenly stand up, that is. If I have to stand, he thought mirthfully, she'll think, hee hee, I boosted one of the cafeteria's salamis.

She hadn't asked him to stand. Instead, she tossed a stack of papers in front of him, held together by what Balliwick thought was the world's biggest staple. He was, she told him, to read each page carefully and initial here, here, and there and sign here, here, and there. With a few more of each she'd tell him about later.

He welcomed the distraction. It would give him the time needed to make that salami of his wither a bit. So he could finally stand up and take his leave.

He tried his best to read the damn thing, as she had said 'carefully,' but there were too many wherefores and whereases to wade through. And enough party of this and party of that to keep him in parties for every weekend in a year.

So he pretended to read it 'carefully' with a well-chosen "Hmmm" and "Aha" thrown in here and there where he felt it was appropriate. With each one, Ms. Withers gave him a real funny look. No one, but no one, had ever said "Hmmm" and "Aha" before. And she'd been in the job twenty years.

Of course, the long, long stare he took at her nice round ass as she bent over once to reach a lower filing cabinet drawer hadn't helped. Since this had the effect of prolonging his "goodbye woody, see ya later" plan, he had to resort to his sure-fire weapon to kill a stiffer.

On page umpteen, he closed his eyes and imagined a can of Campbell's soup. The same can painted so long ago by one Andy Warhol. In less than thirty seconds it worked its usual magic and Old Mr. Softy switched places with Mr. Hard-As-Oak Salami.

He then left her office and felt great. He was now a full, on-duty spy, in the British secret service that most folks affectionately call MI-5. He hoped they assigned him the number 007 since, obviously, Bond wasn't using it. So, why shouldn't he? Only fair. Why

let it go to waste?

Karl popped out and told him they might as well go to lunch, being the hour and all. Balliwick said sure. When they got to the elevator and had to wait, Balliwick puzzled Karl a bit when he said, "Did you know that us spies eat death for lunch, too?"

"Huh" was all Karl said as the elevator doors opened. Balliwick just smiled at him, but kept quiet. He'd said too much already and until he knew for sure Karl wasn't some sort of double agent, a mole, his newfound attitude was going to be: Mums the word, chum. Couldn't take any chances now, could he? Not for the stakes he was playing for . . .

"Just how checkered is your past?"

AS MS. POOTY PRISSYFOOT walked across her living room to change the FF-LL assortment's water, she discovered she had learned how to walk on air, Cloud Nine being what it is and all.

In the short journey, she also learned that everything was brand new, too. Even the colors of the flowers seemed brighter and clearer looking. As if God had decided they needed a new paint job. , And not trusting it to just anyone, mind you, had done the work himself, using Mother Nature's palette and Michelangelo's brushes dipped in Day-Glo paints.

Sniffer had gone home but he had left behind some of his Sniffer magic. And she was awash in it. He might not be there but his spirit sure was.

The chair he had actually sat his wonderful butt on (she had sat on it just to feel his presence). The glass that had actually touched his magical lips (she had kissed its rim and made a toast to the world, and to Magic, and to Cloud Nines everywhere). The plate he had eaten off of (No, she didn't lick it, but she did stare at it a tad longish).

She felt real girlish and pixilated when she went in and hugged the bed. Thankfully, she drew the line at kissing the toilet seat! But when she sat on it just who do you think she thought of as she dumped her mornin' rain? Togetherness-- it comes in many flavors, dontcha know?

Sniffer had stayed over for the remainder of his two days off. His office knew how to contact him in case there was a break in the Fuggit mystery. They didn't contact him during the whole time and he didn't call them. Not out of any disinterest but because there wasn't much he could say, anyway. So he pushed it back in his mind and paid his full attention to his Pooty.

During their time together, they hadn't done much except make love, talk and talk, eat, and use the bathroom. And fall farther in love with each other.

Oh, they did work the Sunday *New York Times* crossword puzzle together--in bed, no less. They had their Sunday breakfast there, too. Sniffer made the omelets, filled with strawberry jam and cooked apple slices. He called them Jamlettes. She called them wonderful.

She got the other stuff together, the OJ, coffee, and what have you. And they made frequent excursions into her Webster's to check out a word. Fun and learning at the

same time--can't beat that, now can you?

How many times they made love? I can't tell you, as Cloud Nine knows how to keep secrets. And Magic never reveals how the trick works.

Pooty now remembered her Snifferman's face and how it looked when he had kissed her goodbye at her door. Cute as a button! Except for the fact its lower half was almost hidden by tiny pieces of toilet paper with red circles in their centers. Hee hee, Clu, she now thought, you looked like you had a run-in with a swarm of bees. Hee hee.

He had used her leg-shaving razor, which--she warned him--might, just might, nick him a wee bit seeing how it always nicked her legs something awful. And because it was also on its ten millionth use, give or take a few, --she warned him--it might, just might, be a wee bit dull.

She offered to go and buy him a new one, but Sniffer did not want to part from his Poot for even a short time. And being the male schmuck he was, poo-pooed the idea and soldiered on.

No razor, however old, cruddy, and dull, was ever going to get the better part of him. Nosiree Bob. Thus when he went home to change his clothes he looked like someone's bright idea of a Christmas tree for the loony bin.

"Sure beats the one we had last year, Napoleon, don't it?"

"Oui, oui! But it eez not a tree. It is one of my most macho fusiliers with dozens of zee battle scars. I gotta go get my shoebox fulla medals, Stalin!"

Another little magic left behind by Sniffer was the white blobs of the baby-making kind that now nestled, comfortable, and warm-like, in her womb. She hadn't used her diaphragm and he hadn't brought any condoms.

Their thoughts for each other had fully blocked out the idea. It wasn't just passion getting in the way of logical thought, it was the way everything had simply flowed. As if Ma Nature was in command and they were merely following orders.

Pooty idly thought about that now but it didn't worry her one bit. If their lovemaking resulted in a baby shower, fine, there was room on their Cloud Nine for a third. And as everyone know, clouds and showers always go hand in hand.

She and Sniff were adults, of the logical-thinking kind and it would all work out, wonderfully and joyfully. Ma Nature would see to that--as she always did. Worse case scenario, they'd marry, raise Sniff junior, and live happily ever after. The Bookworm, the Badge, and the Baby. That's how Pooty thought of it. When listening to her third--or was it her fifteenth? --personality who had a thing for alliteration.

Marriage! To Cluey! She would become Ms. Pooty Sniffer! It reminded her of the unkind names the other children had teased her with. "Hi, Pooty Pooper!" "Look out--don't step in the Pooty!" "Mommy! I got Pooty in my di-dee!" She wondered if Sniffer had made the connection. Hah! From his chair on Cloud Nine? Poppycock! And fuggetaboutit.

Her marriage to Earl Doody, which made her Pooty Doody, had taken place when she was just twenty three. She had just started to teach kindergarten. Earl junior was about ten at the time--and was a handful.

She found this out when she taught the higher grades in summer school, for extra money, and saw him on her roll call list. He was a regular class clown. He interrupted the class often, cut up frequently and, in general, was one royal pain in her ass.

If it had been legal, she probably would have whacked him upside the head with a ruler, or a metal folding chair if it was closer, but as it wasn't legit, she settled for almost getting him to behave himself. Then one day the class clown got real ill.

He complained to her of stomach pains and followed his complaint by doubling over and falling to his knees. At first, she thought this one of his shenanigans, but he proved that wrong by upchucking. She stopped the class and gently escorted him to the nurse's station. Turned out later to be nothing more than a stomach bug, so the clown lived.

His father had been called in and that's how they met on a personal level. Previously, their conversations were only of the donut kind, whenever she was a customer of his.

From the git-go, Earl senior had enchanted her. Though exactly twice her age, he cut a dashing, man-about-town, man-of-the-world figure. Money didn't matter to Pooty but Earl had tons of the green stuff. And he lived all by himself, if you subtract the butler and maid, in a big house on a hill.

His ex-wife, Cluce, had her own house, fully paid by him, on a smaller hill. She lived with little Earl, who bounced back and forth between the two hills.

They had a head spinning, whirl-win courtship, which culminated three months later when Earl proposed as he stuck a glazed donut on her ring finger and asked for her hand. Why she said yes, she couldn't now tell you.

Perhaps it was his resemblance to her father. Or how much of a gentleman he was. Why, he hadn't even so much as tried to cop a feel here and there from the virginal kindergarten teacher. Whatever. Maybe her prince hadn't come along but he was an Earl. And she was enchanted with him.

They married that very afternoon in the offices of the Justice of the Peace. Old Earl even had the ring ready, as if he knew she'd say yes. In spite of the long, long kiss the JP said they were now entitled to, it went downhill from here. But not right away.

Earl promptly took her back to his mansion. His man would see to her clothes and such, later. This was their Honeymoon, dontcha know? He gave the maid and the butler the night off. After a quick celebratory small drink of cognac to toast the nuptials and four or five hearty swigs by Earl straight from an Old Granddad bottle, he fairly rushed her into the master bedroom.

He seemed like a thirsty man who had discovered water was now at hand and he was to have his fill. It scared her somewhat but she also felt wifely. Now if she could only chase away how she felt like the lamb led to slaughter.

In the bedroom, Thirsty man became Lecherman. He stood her at the front of the bed and said, with both hands on her shoulders, "Now, Missus Doody, I'm gonna show you what you've been missin' all your life!" He eyed her body up and down, licked his lips, and looked demented and lascivious at the same time. It frightened her somewhat. But she still felt wifely.

"Now Darlin,' I'm gonna peel these here clothes offa you and see if I can't get your

sweet honey-motor started." She stood there unable to speak.

He took her clothing off, piece by piece, and very slowly, as if he was unwrapping a present and wanted to delay the surprise, for his better overall pleasure.

She trembled. His hands trembled while he worked. Then he kissed her with each now article he took off and tossed carelessly to the floor. He kisses were sloppy wet, hot, tongue-probing, and delivered nervously. Spittle ran down his chin. He smelled of booze. It mixed with the smell of his heated muskiness.

For some strange reason, she didn't protest, argue or get angry. Perhaps she thought this was only a man's way to get through the Honeymoon jitters. Whatever the reason, she just stood there. And tried, unbelievably, to respond mentally positive to what was taking place.

When she was finally nude, he stepped back for a better overall look-see. She stood there before him, nipples rigid from the cool air. Her eyes looked slightly down. Her hands were placed primly in front of her groin area. Waiting. For whatever he decided to do next.

And as weird as she felt, as she stood naked before him, she also felt stirrings within her. As lecherous as he looked, she also felt greatly desired by him. He was her husband now. She his wife. For better or for worse, isn't that what the JP had said? Absolutely. No argument about it.

And she knew, and she thought, that in mere moments from now, she would be getting fucked. Wifely fucked. Her first fuck. And the thought of being fucked by the man, now her husband who drooled and salivated just by looking at her, somehow hit her twinkle buttons. Her honey-motor.

She now *wanted* him to fuck her. To take her and ravish her, just like in the gothic novels. In any manner and fashion he chose. She was now a wifely slave to her new drooling, twice-her-age master. Who reminded her of Daddy.

"Honey, you have," he said, "the most loveliest titties I ever laid my eyes on!" He reached out with his hands and tweaked both of her nipples at once. This sent a shiver through her body. "They make my ex, Cluce, look like a cow by comparison!"

He pinched the nipples again then squeezed both of her breasts, his hands a-tremble noticeably. Then he pushed the pair of ample bosoms together. He kissed and sucked on each nipple in turn. Then he buried his head into her cleavage and kissed and licked. "Mmm, mmm, lushus." he said. She felt more stirrings take center stage inside her. Goose pimples broke out all over her body. She felt warm.

He covered her breasts and stomach with wet, sloppy, lip-tongue kisses, while his hands explored her all over. Her legs. Her back. Her buttocks. Her chest and belly were wet from this, and she could sense a wetness start to form in her vagina.

She moaned, and this encouraged him. He kissed her hotly as both hands massaged and kneaded her buttocks. He moaned throughout the kiss. He brought a hand around to her front and rubbed her vagina area.

Then she shuddered violently when he, on his knees now, ran his tongue down her stomach and plunged it straightaway into the top of her vagina. And proceeded to lick up

and down and around. The shock of it, the newness of it, for no man had ever done that, sent ripples of something unnamable and indescribable through her. Her knees almost buckled out from under her as a small orgasm overtook her. She moaned, louder now.

He stood up and ordered her to lie on the bed. She obeyed. When she was thus placed, on her back, her legs held coyly together, she felt surreal. It was all happening to her but somehow it wasn't. She watched him as he undressed. He fairly tore his clothes off as he watched her and eyed her body up and down. He looked insane. Spittle flew off his chin. Sweat glistened on his forehead, his shoulders, and his hairless chest.

She felt herself blush when his erection was revealed. It swayed with his movements. Its size both startled and frightened her. It was long, and extremely fat, with a huge purplish-pink head. But it was odder looking, too. It was bent, acutely, to the side, his left side. The bend was so severe it almost made a half-circle. It frightened her. And amazed her. He wiggled it in her direction and smiled at her.

In her younger years, she had never seen anything like it. And amazingly perhaps, she had seen many. In high school, she had given eight boys handjobs, when the hormones that led to petting seemed ready to go out of control and threatened to lead to more. She was saving the 'more' for marriage. The boys didn't complain. They had today.

In truth, she greatly enjoyed being the cocktease, it pleased her, but she knew it could be a dangerous game to play. So, to this end, and in pretense to spare the boys from getting, what they called, blue balls, she offered her hand in masturbation. It never went beyond that, and sometimes letting them kiss and fondle her firm, young girlish breasts.

After the first time, when the boy had spurted all over her brand new jeans, she started carrying extra Kleenex for the after clean up. She would make the boy, with the threat of not doing it, promise to tell her when his moment had arrived. She would then wrap the head of his spurting joint in the Kleenex, wad it up, and put it in her pocket or purse for later disposal. She didn't want to litter.

Now and then, and she felt weird doing this, she would open up the wadded tissue and inspect its contents. Out of curiosity--and who knows? --to see if the color was white, as it should be, or had she run into a strange boy who spasmed green? Or blue. Or purple?

All eight of the boys shot white, as is to be expected, and returned for many rematches. The moment a boy had her alone somewhere, zip, out would come his favorite plaything.

It all happened so frequently, and so mechanically, she felt as if she was a demented nurse who had developed an unusual method for collecting sperm samples. At one time, she had no less than six such samples in her pocket and purse combined. All carefully preserved in Kleenex, for which purpose, as you savvy readers already know, Kleenex was invented in the first place.

And she had marveled at the differences in the boy's penises. A large one, a skinny one, a fat one, a short one, a short, fat one, one curved up, one curved down, a little

head, big head, medium head. It amazed her no end. God hated sameness.

Four of the boys had tried to get her to perform oral on them, two by pushing her head in the general direction, but she was having none of that icky stuff. Poppycock! Take what I offer or get nothing. None of them pushed the matter any farther.

When she went off to college, in another town, and shared a dorm room with a roommate, she went wild in her tease-'em-then-please-'em game. Dozens and dozens. And dozens more.

She quickly grew a reputation and any guy who was tired of using his own five-fingered Mary, knew just where to go and just who to see: The big-titted virgin who was saving up her anything "more" for her prince charming. "You can't fuck 'er, Harry, but get 'er to put Vaseline on it and you might not know the difference."

Her roomie, Wendy Turkle, informed Pooty one day that they were starting to refer to Poot's actions as "Getting Kleenexed," and comments such as "See Poot, she'll Kleenex out your pipes for you!" were becoming commonplace.

Pooty didn't care. Who knew her in this town, anyway? And they don't ask for ID when buying Kleenex. At least not yet.

Besides, who was the roommate to talk! She was well known as Windjob Turkle, for her oral skills, which, she eagerly told Pooty, were getting better with every guy.

"You should try it, Poot. It's really rad!" Someday, Poot told her, when the Prince came a-knocking. With his "more" hangin' out, I guess.

At times, the girl-talk they shared would give Doctor Ruth a heart attack. But they had fun with the whole thing. Windjob would tell Kleenex what sperm tasted like to her, salty with a long-staying aftertaste and give her all the juicy, you-shoulda-seen-me-in-action details of the event, including, usually, whether the guy smelled musky, sweaty or like shit in a diaper.

Kleenex would match her in the details arena, like the time the guy spurted, with Pooty being too slow on the Kleenex, and it hit the ceiling! Right there in a dark booth in the back of Howard Johnsons.

Sometimes Pooty would unfold the Kleenex tissue for a joint-committee inspection, analysis, and college-like discussion. Ah, those were the days! The salad days of yore. The halcyon days. When college really meant something to a kid.

Some of Windjobs stories were so unbelievable, so preposterous, that Pooty felt compelled to tell her as much. "Wendy, you're full of poppycock! Just full of it."

Don't worry, Poot. We haven't forgotten you're lying naked as a jay on a bed in a mansion, watching the last of your husband's attire hit the floor and . . .

"What is this thing called, Love?"

AS POOTY LOOKED at Earl's swaying cock, she knew she had never, in all her travels, seen anything even close to it. It scared and fascinated her. It looked nearly a foot long. Maybe more. Its severe bend reminded her of a coiled cobra ready to strike. If it hissed right now and lashed out and bit her on one of her big toes, it wouldn't have surprised

her a bit.

Earl, with his black half-socks still on, walked over to the side of the bed and stood there. His crooked, humongous lady-thriller snake wobbled and swayed from side to side as if it sought out the best place to strike. He took it in his right hand and shook the huge, bent salami up and down at her.

"Ain't it a beaut, Darlin,' he said. "Cluce couldn't get enough of this little fella, dontcha know? He waved it around in a circle and, as he did, a pre-cum blob flew off the tip and landed on her left nipple. It both startled and titillated her.

"Like it?" he asked. Not knowing what else to say or do, she nodded, her eyes a-bug. "Soon now, Honeybunch, . . . *you're gonna love it!*"

Just before he got onto the bed to place his body alongside hers, he gave a wink to the wall space that was behind and above her head.

Earl's favorite picture of our Lord, the one with the eyes that follow you all around the room, now looked directly at him. It also watched him as he placed his left knee on the bed but it did not hear, one must assume, the bed groan from the now added extra weight.

He kissed her lips, sloppily and wetly. He smothered her body in slick tongue kisses, all the way down to her toes. He groped and he felt her. He trembled. He sweated. He wiggled around on top of her and beside her, as he groped, kissed and devoured her.

His left knee went between her thighs and opened them slightly. He pressed his knee into her vagina. He moaned and she moaned. A kiss. A grope. A feel. A squeeze. As he tried to get her honey motor started.

As he worked on her body, her arms merely rested, in turn, on his back, his shoulders, his sides. Then he plunged a middle finger into her vagina. He wiggled it and probed. Farther in now. A push upwards. Then it was joined by a neighbor. The two now probed and pushed in a frenzy to find the elusive starter gizmo.

She moaned louder now. Her arms now found more of him. Her hands squeezed, pressed and explored. Her fingers wandered and stumbled on Cluce's favorite thing.

She could hardly get her small hand around it. It throbbed and pulsated as she explored its circular length. He moaned. They writhed, entangled, and kissed and groped some more. His fingering of her increased and her passions rose. They both sweated, slippery together. Her hand went farther and found his balls. Hairy. Combined, they were as large around as an orange. She squeezed and massaged the orange sack tenderly and felt the two large egg-sized lumps just beneath the surface.

She massaged his scrotum knowingly. As if she had done it dozens and dozens of times before. He moaned. She moaned. The bed shook. Sweat flowed. Heat rose. "Oh, baby," he breathed hotly in her ear, "You are one hot Momma! . . . And your Daddy's gonna fuck you silly." She shuddered. Her mind was jumbled.

She was ready. Ready to be fucked silly. By a man twice her age who reminded her of her father. He knew she was ready, too. The moment for man and wife coupling had arrived. The foreplay was over. Earl's fun part was here.

He parted her legs with his lower body and got between the two alabaster-hued

gams. He reached down with his left hand found his penis's large plum-like head and started rubbing it up and down furiously on her moistened slit. She moaned and marveled at the strangeness of it all. And his size. As a drop of spittle fell from his chin and alit on her shoulder, he whispered, "Won't be long now, Shugga!"

He pushed his member into her to the depth of its head. She felt her vagina spread out wide by the intrusion. He gave her more, slowly, teasingly, a small half an inch at a time. Then he was in four or five inches. Fear arose in her. Fear of what was to come.

Earl knew his new bride was a virgin. And he had only one philosophy on that matter. As a young man, he had broken in many a fine filly and knew just how to go about it. None of this, "Sorry. Am I hurting you, Honey?" stuff for him. No sirree. Just plunge the old yoitza right in all the way, quick as a rabbit, break the maidenhead and get the stupid shit done and over with--so a man can get to the fun part.

Thus without any warning to her, he plunged the entire eleven and seven-eighths length in. (For you sticklers of accuracy, and you purists, it should be noted that the method used for the measurement was taken from the prestigious, and very well respected, New Oxford College Penile Measurement Guide, volume six, edition two.) His pubic hairs now bumped and shook hands with hers.

"Oooooooooooooow! Oh! Owwww! Ohoow!" she shrieked, her eyes shut tightly and filled with tears. She felt split in two. Torn apart. Ripped asunder. As if someone had drove a pregnant baseball bat deep into her. One that curved acutely to her right. She felt the pressure of its enormity. The picture on wall watched her plight.

He took hold of her shoulders, from behind her, with both hands, held her fast and kept her in place. He pulled out some and plunged it to the hilt again. She screamed. She dimly felt the orange sack smack against her buttocks. He plunged again. And again. And again.

Earl's latest fine filly screamed throughout as he rode her. To break her in properly, his way. But her screams of pains were less loud each time as the pain was somewhat duller. Throughout her screams and groans, he plunged the bat with a vengeance.

In and out. Without mercy. He was a wild man now. A wild man who now tried to fuck his new wife silly. Even sillier than silly. His ass pumped up and down like a piston. Her legs were splayed way out on both sides of him. They wiggled and flailed in the air. He tried to drive the bat deeper with each plunge. Their bodies made slap-slap noises. Sweat flew in all direction.

The bed bounced and creaked. They sweated some more. They moaned and groaned. She screamed and yelled. He kept at it. In her jumbled mind, she wished he would spurt and stop the pain. And at the same time, something in her wanted more. He, with a control only learned by practice, could fuck all night if asked politely. He regarded her moans and screams as polite enough.

Then she felt the release. Her release. It exploded within her. It sent shock waves throughout her body. It overwhelmed her. It flooded her brain. Exploded within her brain. She saw stars through her closed eyelids. In full color. Then more explosions. Then even more. She rode the huge baseball bat straight to Heaven on a wave of explosions

and starbursts. New waves of emotion flowed over her then lifted her higher. And higher. Then higher still.

And higher yet. Then something flowed back down. And flowed out of her. She felt as if she had flowed out through her vagina, flowed out all over the bed, onto the floor. And then, miraculously, it all flowed back into her. Then out again. She thought she would faint. She hoped so. Then she didn't want it to end. She wanted it over with but never-ending.

She and Earl surfed the flow, the wave. She was sure they were somehow on the floor then on the bed. Another wave. Stronger even. Had she gone insane? From somewhere around her, she heard a wild, crazy woman yell, "Poppycock me, Earl . . . Poppycock me! . . . Poppycock me, poppycock me, *poppycock meeeeeeee!* . . . Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God! . . . Poppycock me silly, Earl, *poppycock me silleeeeeeee!*" And amazingly, old Earl only heard what he wanted to hear.

From a place somewhere way, way high above her, she heard, "Yes, Baby, yes! But you gotta tell your old Earl you love it! Say the words! . . . Say it! . . . I love it, Earl! . . . Say it! . . . Now!" She couldn't speak. And then--she could.

"Oh, God, yes! I love it, Earl. . . I love it! . . . *I love it, love it, love it!*" As she said it, she wrapped her legs around his back, crossed her ankles and squeezed him. "Oh, yes! I love *you*, Poppycock! . . . uh . . . Earl! . . . I love you Earl, love you, love you! . . . Oh, God, oh, God! . . . *Oh, sweet poppeeeeeeeecock!*"

She showered his ears, his neck, and his face, with wet kisses. Sweat rolled off both of them. They kissed. Their wet, sloppy tongues crashed. Spittle flew. More sweat flowed. Two people entwined in a rutting frenzy. No animals had ever matched their actions. They were driven. Out of their minds. Insane.

He told her he loved her, too. Once. Then he fucked her very hard and violently for a minute or so more. Then yelled, at the top of his lungs, "Here I comes, Darlin! Here comes your Earl! Hold still, Baby, hold still . . . now! . . . ooooooooooooooooooooooh" With one final plunge of the entire bat, he spasmed. And flooded her.

She felt it. Every spasm. Every spurt, deep inside her, spurt after spurt. And it felt hot. As if, somehow, each spurt was hotter than her own body temperature. She felt sure an elephant had just unloaded in her vagina. But he only had the weight of an Earl.

As she felt him flood hot and very deep inside her, a thought bounced in. She said, "Oh, God, Earl, you really have poppycocked me silly!" He chuckled in her ear. "Told ya I would," he said matter-of-factly. "Told ya."

Then he asked as his full weight collapsed upon her, "What does poppycock mean, Baby?"

"I'll tell you in the mornin' . . . Hon."

Whew! Hold on, gentle reader, I'll be back in a mo.....

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.....That's better! I gotta remember to buy more Kleenex.

Now back to our sexually explicit tale . . .

Then a new pain crept into her. Unlike the first one, this one was intensely gripping. As if her insides were in a vise. And more insistent. Deep in her vagina, on her right side. She had the urge to double over to escape it. But he was still on top of her. He had to get off. Now.

"Please get up, Earl. I gotta go pee." she lied. Somehow she managed not to double over before she got to the bathroom. Once inside, she folded in two and upchucked into the toilet bowl. Earl, spent and exhausted, laid back on the bed. He had not heard a thing.

Her first marriage went downhill from there on. But not right away.

Each time they had sex she would get the pain. Not at the end of their lovemaking, as the first time, but now at the beginning. The moment he plunged in all the way.

It was unbearable. And she knew what caused it. That strange bend to the left in Earl's penis. And his size. The huge head was bumping into something inside of her and it hit a spot that got more gun-shy each and every time.

Earl got sore, too. Sorely disgusted with her. She had tried to open a conversation to address the problem, but Earl didn't want to discuss it. His attitude was it was *her* problem, not his, and she'd damn well better do something about it because it had become *their* problem. And he didn't like that one bit. Nosirree Bob. Not one bit.

She even went to a gynecologist. Actually, six gynecologists. The first one told her she might have interstitial cystitis, which is a chronic inflammation of the bladder. She didn't think that was it, so she went to another for a second opinion.

This one said it could be endometriosis, a chronic disease that can cause excruciating pain during sex. She didn't think she had that chronic disease, either.

The third gynecologist checked her for vulvar vestibulitis. A condition where glands become inflamed. He found that not to be the case.

The fourth looked for a connective tissue disorder frequently characterized by painful sex. Zippo. She soldiered on.

Number five had just started practicing, but he figured she had vulvodynia. He wasn't sure what it meant fully exactly, or how to treat it yet, but he said he'd call as soon as he figured it all out.

The last was a lecherous looking old man with a large wart on his lower lip. He had the idea that it might stem from somewhere in her breasts so he had her strip completely. After five or ten minutes of playing with both her breasts he said, "Aha! I know what it is!" She was all ears.

He told her to lie on the table. She complied and he put her into the stirrups. "What you have," he began, "is a medical condition called dyspareunia. This can be caused by many conditions, both physical and emotional." She seemed impressed. He went on.

"One of the possible physical causes of dyspareunia is a spasm of the pelvic floor muscle. I can help you learn to relax and contract the muscle in an appropriate manner. Shall I show you?" What did she have to lose?

He then put the two first fingers of his left hand into her vagina and started to work them in every direction known to man. And to woman. He poked. He plunged. He kept saying, "Aha!" Perhaps he was on to something.

"Now, my dear," he said. "Close your eyes and try to totally relax. Don't open them again until I tell you to. OK?" She agreed and closed her eyes. He went to work. He would ply her vagina for a bit and then squeeze each breast in turn. "Just checking for tissue reaction." he told her. A few more "Aha's" followed.

After a few minutes she heard him breath heavily. And then moan. This sounded a bit odd so she slit one eye for a peek. There he was, a dreamy look on his face, with his pecker in his right hand. As she opened both eyes he spurted into a paper plate that was positioned alongside her.

She bolted upright, took the paper plate and smacked him square in the face with it, and hurriedly dressed while calling him every poppycock she could get her hands on. As he wiped his face he begged her not to sue him or call the police. She threw another poppycock at him and left. Her only consolation being she hadn't paid him.

Since there was nothing she felt could do about it now, their sex life dwindled to zero. Even less if you counted weekends. And Earl's comment didn't help. "There's somethin' real wrong with a wife can't take her husband's prick. Ain't natural. Why don't you go and see Cluce. She may have been a lyin' cheatin' whore, but she never failed her wifely duty!"

In his desperation, Earl once tried doggie-style on her. All that did was create two pains, one on each side. Sex with him was now something she dreaded completely. And avoided. Completely.

He had suggested she perform oral sex on him as a sort of substitute, as he put it, but aside from the problem she foresaw of getting her mouth around the huge head, Earl's treatment of, and attitude about, the whole thing, made her deny him. And she told him, even before he thought to bring it up, you can just forget anal, while you're at it.

Her Earl, the first man to fuck her silly, was now certainly no prince charming, and 'more' took on new meaning for her each time he got frisky. Which he did more times now than she could count, almost as if he did it out of spite. Which he probably did.

The marriage was on its last legs, but she hung in there just in case a miracle occurred. None did. The Angels were busy elsewhere. They were both very unhappy with the whole shebang. Neither one unhappier than the other, maybe, but both as miserable as Hell can get.

Divorce loomed on the horizon. They both knew it. Why she hadn't started the action by now, she couldn't tell you. Perhaps she waited for a good enough reason to pop up.

Earl provided it. Pooty discovered Earl had taught the maid, Wilma, a plumpish, large-breasted Austrian woman in her early fifties, that the correct way to clean a baseball bat was to use a liberal amount of hot saliva. Wilma was a quick study. With a

large mouth provided by genetics that could easily devour baseball bat-sized crooked snakes.

The expected argument was soon followed by a well-earned divorce. Pooty settled for exactly what she had brought to the marriage, her personal possessions.

Earl must have really liked the way his pole shined, so clean and all, for he up and married the maid. The three of them then, with Earl junior a-coming and a-going, lived in the big house on the hill. The arrangement reminded Pooty of a Donut, a Dust rag, and a Dope, but she kept that alliterative thought to herself, being Pooty and all.

Last year, when Earl Junior OD'd and died on something weird, she had called Earl to offer her condolences. She got no early 'thank you, appreciate that, how you doing?' from him.

Instead, he launched into a vehement tirade on his ex-wife, Cluce. None of this would have happened, he told her, if Cluce had given the boy as much attention as she gave to every guy in town who came over to tinker with her plumbing, if Pooty got his drift, that is. She did.

But he hammered it home farther by telling her, to his way of thinking, his ex had seen more butt-cracks than any woman in the history of plumbing.

As he prattled on, she thought how lucky she had been that Earl had been incapable of fathering a baby when she had been in his life. Brrrrrrrr, she thought.

He went on a full ten minutes more about his ex's shortcomings before he got to the thank-you part. He screwed that up some when he asked her if maybe, just maybe, mind you, she'd like to get together with him just to see if she'd become more wifely. She politely declined. She later wished she had read him her version of the riot act, but she wasn't to get the chance, for they never spoke to each other after this day.

These days she avoided the donut shoppe, which wasn't too easy seeing how it was at the South end of her street. And he did make the best donuts this side of someplace. But there was always the supermarket. She could live with that. And she did.

And now she had her Cluey. True, he hadn't given her any baseball bat type orgasms, or even fucked her silly, but people aren't the same at thirty five as they are at twenty three, now are they? Changes being what they are, and all.

She now rubbed her tummy, daydreaming. What if . . . ?

So, with silly-ass romantic ideas in her head of marriage and babies, she toyed with a thought. What would it hurt, anyhow, if she went and took a look at the vacant apartment next door?

Baby, or no baby, they couldn't very well live together, whether wed or not, in either of their small studio apartments. And the place next door had two bedrooms, now didn't it? Sure did.

She said aloud, "Never know, do you Poot," she patted her tummy, "when a second bedroom just might come in handy." She went to get her coat...

"I'm gonna miss my gona!"

COLONEL Grok looked down at the printout of Captain Grik's latest contact with Earth. It had every word that was spoken between the Captain and Lieutenant Gron. The higher ups had seen to that. They listened in on every form of communications. It wouldn't surprise the Colonel if they even had his ship bugged. Always paranoid, those bastards, he thought. They see spies everywhere. So they put spies everywhere.

He now knew Gron had eliminated Grin. On Captain Grik's order. Technically. For he knew the real order had originated with High Central Command. Listening in, they would have told the Captain, through his ever-present earpiece, what had to be done, right then and there--and by whom. He also knew his Captain, if allowed to, would have found a more saner and sensible solution. That he was sure of.

He had liked Grin. A good Groinkian soldier. Loyal and faithful and dependable. What more could you want in a man? Some schmuck in the HCC should go to his books and look up what the term "real waste" means. But even if he did, that wouldn't help Grin now, would it? Nosirree.

He was glad it wasn't he that would have to make the house call to Grin's gona, Gridda. He had only met her a few times, but he liked her. And she and Grin had one of those loves that he suspected would be gonotta-renewed many, many times. He would have trouble facing her with the bad news.

He thought about her cooking. Gridda's Slave-Surprise Stew was something to *die* for! He chuckled when he realized the pun he had just made. Some slave *did* have to die for that stew. Oh, well, he thought, one man's meat is another man's stew! He chuckled again, his heartlessness hidden from him by over a century of Groinkian training.

His large warship was now in the static-filled position. The paradoxical situation this created wasn't lost on the Colonel. True, it made detection by Earthlings near impossible, but it also made communications between his ship, the infiltrators on the planet, and the home base, near impossible, too.

Even though he had ordered the ship's power output tripled. Even Groinkians, he thought, sometimes lose to the limitations of physics.

To push the output even higher would use up vast amounts of energy, which, should they suddenly have the need for, for whatever reason, including an attack, they just might find themselves caught short. Invincible Groinkian warships had their limits, too.

Now as he sat in his private stateroom, he wondered what events, those over with and those yet to come, were leading up to. Victory? The conquering of a planet? New slaves and foodstuffs? Or defeat--with all the trimmings? And one of those trimmings, he knew only too well, would give him his first taste of a Grun-gun's savage raw power.

He shuddered and his shoulders shook.

Oh, well, he thought, I've been trained to accept death. Bitch is they don't train you how to accept never seeing your Grinda again. The thought of her made his eyes mist up. He tried to picture her face more clearly, but it had been too long. Two years now. Of course, he had her on tape on his portable televiewer.

Did she, he wondered, ever miss him the way he now missed her? Probably not. At least not often. For he knew Grinda had dozens of slave gossixi to take her mind off things. And fill more than just her time. And quell her loneliness. Especially that one gossix, Gundle, who she once said had driven her to Heaven with his three-headed penis. He had never met Gundle. Grinda had acquired him only recently.

Of course, he thought, when the transmutations arrive I'll have my fun, if I feel like it. The were sending along enough gammixi to keep the entire ship happy for a long time.

He reached for his portable televiewer and pressed buttons. He looked down at the square four-inch screen. Gundle appeared. Naked. "Greetings Major Grok. I hope when you receive this you are well. I am Gundle, your gona's gossix. She has asked me to participate in this endeavor in the hope it gives you some form of pleasure."

The image cut to Grinda's face. It was obvious she held the camera. "Hello my love. I miss you terribly. And I thought you would like some lurid entertainment. OK?" As if he had a choice.

The camera then cut and panned Gundle's body. In a close-up shot he saw Gundle's large penis come to life as Grinda manipulated it with her free hand. It was truly an amazing sight to behold. It was a normal penis that, at the four or five inch spot from the groin, split into three separate shafts, each with its own fully formed head. The three heads formed a perfect triangle, with an inch or so space between each pair. It looked awesome.

Then Grinda must have rested the camera on something stationary, for there she was, on her knees, sans camera, performing oral on Gundle. She went from head to head as if she was playing some type of musical instrument. The Colonel was surprised he couldn't hear a melody. She did this for a time and then the two of them kissed a few times before getting into the bed.

He had seen this before and wanted to get to where Grinda goes to Heaven. The Colonel punched in the fast forward number, frame 323. Click. 323 had arrived. He watched his gona scream, writhe and go crazy as Gundle worked his heavenly magic with his three-headed Hydra. When the action died down, he hit the off button.

What followed, he knew, were six more performances by Gundle along the same lines. Gundle sure had stamina. He was also very adept, but he lacked variety and imagination. He hoped this made a difference to Grinda. How could it, he wondered.

The Colonel now remembered what he had said to Grinda in his once every six months home communications allowance. Knowing it would be read by the spies, he worded it cryptically. Aside from the I love you and miss you part, he added: "Remember, my Grinda, three heads are not *always* better than one--*I hope!* Hee hee!"

And to Gundle he wrote: "Thank you from my wellspring for keeping my Grinda happy."

He forced his mind to shift this sentimental gear into neutral. He reached out and pressed the intercom button. When he heard his Captain-Soon-To-Be-Major say, "Yes, Colonel, Sir?" he felt once more like an important part of the invincible Groinkian invasion forces.

"Captain?" he said as he heard static. "The transformutations will be coming in soon. Prepare their gear." Silence.

Damn! He was speaking into a dead line. He hoped this wasn't some prophetic Cosmic sign. He stood up to go and tell the Captain in person.

Simultaneously, a now unattached gona named Gridda was peering into her freezer. "Let's see . . ."

"What rhymes with booty?"

IS SNIFFER REALLY SMITTEN with his Poot? Judge for yourself.

There he was at his usual work desk. He had written a poem for her. He wanted to show his creative and sensitive side. There, on his trusty yellow legal pad, he had written:

You make me feel like skipping,
All along the street.
With a heart that's gaily tripping,

He needed a fourth line. He pondered and pondered. And pondered some more.

"Thank God it's not my feet!" said Moldon with a chuckle as he looked over Sniffer's left shoulder.

Sniffer turned his head toward the man. "As usual, Moldy, you're tryin' to be a wise-ass, but you know what? I'm gonna use it!" He penciled the line in. "Without your permission . . . I think it gives it a cute twist and takes some of the mushy shit out." He sat back in his chair. "Yeah. I like the flavor. It shows I care, but doesn't overdo it. Thank you, Mold."

Moldon said, "OK. But if you ever make a buck on it, I want twenty-five percent. Fair?"

"Yeah, sure. I can just see the Hallmark suits lined up outside my door . . . waving fists full of money at me." He paused. "Because that fourth line just knocked their socks off." He chuckled.

Moldon chuckled and then said, "I just got back from my interview with the Fandlecandle gal. Nothing new except now she's positive it wasn't a mask the guy had on." He stopped long enough to pull a chair up to Sniffer's desk and plop into it. Sniffer just watched him. "She now says the guy had the face of a pig . . . no mask. His real face. She knows this is a fact," he paused and chuckled, 'cause she had a scary dream about him!" Sniffer said, "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. In this dream of hers he's naked and chasing her all over the place." Moldon laughed. "Yelling "Oink, oink, oink, you're gonna get a boink!" Moldon laughed.

Sniffer laughed and banged his desk. "No shit? You're gonna get a boink! Her words?"

"Yep. And the old gal looked real sheepish when she told me."

"I'll bet she *did!*" Sniffer said and laughed.

Then Sniffer asked, "Did he catch her?" He laughed again.

Moldon laughed. He held his right hand out, palm facing him and looked down at invisible notes. "Witness refused to talk. Took the Fifth, but told the officer, quote, "It's none of your beeswax, Sonny." They both laughed. Sniffer asked, "She actually say that?"

"Yep. And she was as red as a monkey's ass when she did!" Sniffer roared and bent over, head down, to hold onto the desk's edge with both hands. He had tears in both eyes.

"He looked up at Moldon. "Did you tell her that fornicating with animals is against the law in this state?" He continued to laugh.

"I woulda," said Moldon with a laugh, "but she threw me out!" Sniffer laughed, then composed himself a tad.

"Well, Mold," he said. "You've made my day. I needed a good laugh . . . and thanks for finishing my poetry." Moldon nodded, got up and walked away. He shouted over a shoulder, "Don't forget, Sniff. Twenty-five percent!"

Sniffer chuckled and turned to his computer console. After opening AOL, he clicked the cursor on Write. He next clicked on Address Book and then clicked on Pooty. He'd gotten her e-mail address from the police report. Prissyfoot9@AOL.Com appeared in the Send To: box. In the Subject: box he typed: *Skipping & Tripping*. A poem for his teach by little Clu Sniffer, aged 44.

In the message area he typed:

You make me feel like skipping,
All along the street.
With a heart that's gaily tripping,
Thank God it's not my feet!

Then little Sniffer, aged 44, says "Thank you,
Ma'am." and bows from the waist.

He looked it over one time and clicked on the Send Now box. He hoped she liked it and took it the right way. He thought: If you like it, Poot, I wrote it. If you don't, I'll blame Moldy.

"The King is dead! Long live the King!"

THE SUPREME COMMANDER had a fantastic idea. A truly clever idea. One might say it was devilishly inspired. And there was a lot of truth in that.

He reached for the intercom on his Supreme Commander desk. "Grilla! Get me Lieutenant Grool!" he barked. He loved to bark at Grilla. Kept her on her toes.

"He's here now, SC," she told him. "You sent for him just twenty minutes ago, remember?" Grilla was the only Groinkian who could get away with this. Not only had

she called him SC, she had also reminded him of his forgetfulness, an absolute show of disrespect to a Supreme Commander. It was lucky for her he depended on her so much. Otherwise, she would have been the Groat-Sturnacker's next quick meal. And, if she pushed it just once too often, she still might. She walked a fine line, indeed.

He barked to her, "Of course I remember, Grilla. That's what I meant when I said to get him for me. I knew he was here," he didn't, "so send him right in. OK?" All he heard was silence. Grilla had either not heard him or had chosen to ignore him. He winced.

Then Grool came through the door. He looked nervous. As if he had been sent to the Dean's office for something, but he didn't know what it was.

"Ah, my dear Lieutenant, have a seat, please." He pointed to a chair opposite him at the desk. "Yes, Sir." Grool said as he sat. He had his eyes cast downwards. Oh, shit, what have I done now, he thought. He heard the Supreme Commander's glixizza swish and swoosh as the man left his desk and positioned himself somewhere behind him.

"Tell me Grool," the Supreme Commander began in a conversational tone, "have the transmutations left on their journey to Earth yet?" Grool felt he was on shaky ground. He could hear the Supreme Commander's glixizza swish and swish as the man paced back and forth behind him.

He responded carefully, "No Sir. You told me to . . . uh . . . they're in standby, Sir. They await your further orders, Sir." Oops. Almost a boo-boo there. He now regretted he had heard Grilla remind the man of his memory slips. Maybe it was catching. Sweat now formed on his brow. And on the bridge of his nose. And in his armpits.

The Supreme Commander chose to overlook the inference. Or he simply missed it. Either way, he said, "Good, Grool, good. Now . . . I am going to run an idea by you and I want your honest opinion. And, to that end, my dear Grool, I hereby permit you to look upon me even if you are *not* talking to me. I don't want your opinion fettered by military protocol. Do you understand me?" Grool, in semi-shock, simply said, "Yes, Sir!"

The Supreme Commander walked behind the desk and punched a button on the wall. The televiewer appeared. He punched more buttons and an image came on. It showed a man in a white, sequined outfit. A female who had a microphone up to his face was interviewing him.

The female spoke. "Tell me, Mr. Presley, do you know that everyone is now calling you *The King*?" The man called Presley said, "Yes'm I do. And I feel right honored, too."

"And, King Elvis," she said playfully, "What would you like to say to your subjects?" The man thought a moment. Then he said jovially, "Well, if they'll be loyal, I'll be royal! And I'll do my best to keep them happy and entertain them to the best of my royal abilities!" The woman giggled. The man laughed. The Supreme Commander hit the off button.

"Well, Grool. What do you think?"

Grool didn't know what to think, or to make of it, or what was expected of him, so he improvised. "Well, Sir, he seems to have a very charismatic personality." I hope.

"Exactly, Grool! You've hit the nail on the head! This transmission was captured no less than an hour ago, which means this man is *now* the King of all of America! Do you

know what that means my dear Grool?" Grool didn't. "No, Sir, I can't say I do, Sir." Instinctively, he lowered his eyes. If the Supreme Commander spoke, he was prepared to look up.

"It means Grool, all of our current transmutations are all wrong. Well, not wrong, really, but less effective than they could be for complete and easy infiltration. "Grool was totally lost, so he just kept his mouth shut.

"There's more farther along on the tape, from four different interceptions, that I won't bother running for you now, but it shows that there are no less than twenty-five hundred King impersonators throughout America at this time.

"In fact, they are as common as bus drivers!" He paused to sweep his glixizza away from his face. "Which means, Grool, this King Elvis Presley is worshipped by all of the Earthlings. Every one. Even their damn grannies think this guy is their second coming!" He stopped and looked at Grool as if expecting a response. Grool felt sick, but he soldiered on.

"Are you implying, Sir, that you would like *all* the transmutations to look like this King Elvis?" He had finished, but he kept his eyes on the Supreme Commander. I better remember, he thought, that this is just for today. Don't get too comfy with it.

"Lieutenant Grool, you are now, henceforth, *Major* Grool! No! Not befitting enough. *Captain!* Yes. See Grilla on your way out later and tell her I told you so. OK, *Captain Grool?*" Before Grool could say a word, the man added, "It's your type of quick think-on-your-feet attitude that the Groinkian Military could use more of. Once again you've hit the old nail square on the barrelhead." He just loved using these quaint Earth sayings. God, Grool thought, if I knew what I was doing, he would have made me a General!

As Grool sat there astonished, a dazed look on his face, and his mouth agape, he heard, "So, *Captain*, here are your orders. Make all of the current transmutations look exactly like King Elvis."

"All eleven thousand, Sir? Are you sure you wouldn't like to keep a few . . . "

"Now that you're a Captain, Grool, don't think you can argue with my orders. When I said *all* I meant *all*. Got it?" Grool wouldn't argue with that truism. "Yes, Sir! Consider it done, Sir! I will see to it that each and every transmutation meets or exceeds your wishes. They will be ready for your inspection in less than twenty four hours, Sir!" When can I leave?

"Excellent, Grool. Oh, one thing. Before you fully dismantle and retransmutate the battalion called aspiring young actresses, have these three sent to my private accommodations. Grilla will give you the address. OK?" Grool said, "Yes, Sir! Consider it done, Sir!"

He handed Grool a slip of paper on which was written the names of three female Privates in the Groinkian military. Two of the names were unfamiliar to Grool, but he recognized the third name as belonging to the "aspiring young actress" that the Supreme Commander had used, during his review of the battalions, as a test for fresh, large breasted melons.

The new Captain saluted and turned to find the door. Behind him sat a very self-

satisfied Supreme Commander.

Who had a small spittle of drool in the left corner of his mouth . . .

"You want to put what, where?"

MR. BERTRAM BURLAPPE BALLIWICK was now officially a spy for the British government.

The ID card Karl had just handed him said so. It had his goofy picture on it and was actually laminated. Across the top, above his smiling face and on two centered lines, it read: OFFICIAL SPECIAL AGENT WITH HER MAJESTY'S SECRET SERVICE MI-5. To the right of his face was his full name on three lines, all flush left.

Below his name, in type so small any spy would love it, it read: Spy. Flush left, of course. There it was-- for the entire world to see and know. Just in case you didn't take him at his word.

Balliwick was thrilled. And even beyond thrilled when he saw something he had missed at first glance. In the lower left hand corner, in type as small as "Spy," it read: Agent 007.

"Wow, Karl," Balliwick said, "But are you guys sure Bond doesn't need it anymore?" Karl was sure and told him so. He then escorted Bond's new replacement to a room and told him to just sit and someone would be by in a short while. True to his word, less than five minutes later three people entered the room.

"Mr. Balliwick, I presume." said the elderly man with white hair. He wore a lab coat with an ID badge pinned to it that simply said: Razor.

"This is Doctor Phillip Josephs and Doctor Mira Kenty." He pointed to them with an open hand. "They will assist me in your preparations. You may call me Doc Razor."

"Hi Docs. Hi Doc." said Balliwick cheerfully. He sat on the only couch present. The other three stood. They were fanned out in the middle of the room. Doctor Josephs was on Balliwick's left with Doc Razor in the middle. The other two also wore white lab coats with ID badges attached. They didn't return his greeting. They just stood there, fixed in their positions and stared at him. As if they wondered what species it was he belonged to exactly.

Josephs looked too young to be a doctor, much less one in the spy business and Kenty looked like she ate nails for breakfast. Her large breasts were telltale she was a female, but it ended there.

To Balliwick, she looked as if someone had taken Ernest Borgnine's face, smooshed it up with Abe Vigoda's, threw in a smidgen of Phyllis Diller just for the feminine aspect, and left it out in the sun to bake for a week. Forty miles of bad road, he thought.

As Kenty stood there with her arms crossed and just stared and glared at him, Balliwick had the urge to run. Or at least assume the fetal position with his hands over his head. She scared him. One reason was she never blinked, like humans are now and then known to do.

Doc Razor broke the spell. "Well now, Mr. Balliwick . . . uh . . . may I call you Bert?"

Balliwick nodded. "OK. Bert it is then. Well, Bert, we three here don't know what hush-hush plans they have in mind for you, but," a partial lie. He knew, the others didn't, "it's our job to get you ready for it. And these two little devices here," he reached into his lab coat pocket and took out a small plastic circular container no wider than an inch across, "will play a big part in that preparation." He stretched out his arm and put the box in front of Balliwick's nose.

Balliwick peered through the clear box top and saw two very tiny chip-like pieces with thin wires curled out of each. "What are they?" he asked. He sounded apprehensive.

Doc Razor said gently, "The blue one, Bert, will alter your voice and change whatever you say into another specified language . . ."

Balliwick cut in. "You mean I'll be able to speak French?" Wouldn't that be nice?

"Something like that," Razor told him. "Now, this orange one here will translate what you hear in that other specified language into English so you can understand it. See?" Balliwick didn't see that, but he saw something else.

"That mean you're gonna plant those two things inside me somehow?" Balliwick looked worried. His eyes were opened wide.

Doc Razor nodded once. "But, now, now, Bert, nothing to get upset about. The procedure is a piece of cake. You won't feel a thing . . . we'll make sure of that . . .and we haven't lost a patient in . . . in days now, have we Doctors?" He looked at the other two. Josephs laughed. Kenty laughed. Balliwick didn't. He had his eyes as wide open as they could get.

"Sorry. Just a little doctor-patient humor, Bert. Now, we've done this little procedure thousands of times without even the slightest snag." That was a bald-faced lie. This was their first attempt. Balliwick was to be a guinea pig. "As I said, Bert, it's a piece of cake." Cake my ass, thought Balliwick. Doc Razor continued.

"Now then . . . Doctors Josephs and Kenty will get you ready, Bert. And I'll be in to see you in a few minutes. OK?" Balliwick, the new spy who ate death for breakfast *and* lunch, could only nod weakly. Oh, well, he thought, a hundred thou is a hundred thou.

Doc Razor turned and left the room. Doctor Young-Face took Balliwick's left arm in hand and Doctor Rock-Face grabbed the other. They marched him on his wobbly legs to the operation prep room, gave him a shot of something, shaved his neck and waited the arrival of Doc Razor.

Balliwick, just before he went to twilight land, fired a fine spy-like shot, " *You fuck this up, you rat bastards, and I'll sue your . . rot . . . ten . . ass es off! You . . . hearin . . .*"

"The lady vanishes!"

"WHERE ARE YOU?" Sniffer thought as he hung up the phone when her answering machine said: "I can't come to the phone right now. Please leave your name and number at the beep and I will call you back. Thank you." He wanted to talk to *her*, not her fool machine. Oh, he knew she'd know who it was had hung up. Her caller ID would pick it up

as a call from Police One 555-1111. Who else could it be but him?

He had tried to reach her four times during the day. Three calls to her house, one to the school. The house calls all ended with him hanging up on her answering machine. The call to school, which he had made just five minutes before the last call to her house, really had him worried. She hadn't shown up for work. A first time for her, the woman at the school had told him. Pooty was as reliable as they come. Now, she was worried, too.

It had also worried him earlier in the day that he hadn't gotten a call *from her*, especially after last night. He had definitely expected her to call. In fact, for that very reason, he had waited until noon before calling her. To let her blink first, so to speak.

He knew it meant he needed reassurance, and he disliked that, but he couldn't help himself. He needed reassurance. Like some dumb-ass teenager who'd just gotten the town's beauty to wear his going steady ring and couldn't believe his luck.

Was she having second thoughts? Was she trying to tell him things were happening too fast for her? And a little absence just might get him to think and slow it down a notch? He didn't really think any of these played a part. She wasn't like that. He felt positive that if she had something on her mind, she'd come right out with it. No mind games for this lady, no sirree. And he loved her for it.

Moldon came out of the Chief's office and headed Sniffer's way. "Hey, Mold, I gotta go and check something out. Why don't you come along? It'll give that beautiful hairdo of yours some needed air. OK?" Moldon said, "Sure, Sniff, what's up?" Sniffer told him he'd tell him all about it in the car.

Moldon took the shotgun seat. As Sniffer started the engine he looked at Moldon and said, "Pooty's taken a powder. She went truant from her teacher's job today . . . first time ever. I want to run by her house for a look-see. OK?" Moldon could see the worry on Sniffer's face. "OK by me. When's the last time you spoke to her?"

"Last night. We had a dinner date." He looked at Moldon again. "And, no, before you ask, I didn't screw it up and now she's just hiding out from the big, bad Sniffer."

Moldon shrugged. "Sniff. You screwing a date up was the farthest thing from my mind . . . You? The epitome of date diplomacy and tact? Never!" Then he quickly added, "By the way, how's that book you're penning coming along? You know, *Dating for Dummies by the Sniffman?*"

Sniffer knew Moldon was just throwing out some cop levity to lighten it up a bit. He appreciated it. So he threw some back, "I'm up to chapter six: The correct way to apologize the day after you've pissed in her fish tank." Moldon chuckled.

"That reminds me," Moldon said, "of something I saw on Benny Hill the other day. Benny and the wife are in a marriage counselor's office. Right?" Sniffer nodded. "And Benny says, 'I don't care what the old bat says, I've got the Lord on my side. If I get up in the middle of the night and have to use the John, the Lord turns on the light for me the minute I open the bathroom door!' The wife says, 'Oh, no. He's pissing in the fridge again!'" Sniffer laughed. Moldon followed suit.

Sniffer said, "Good one, Mold. I gotta remember that one." Then he added, "I'll make it chapter six's ass." Moldon laughed.

As Sniffer parked the unmarked police car in front of 745 Columbus Street, he felt an apprehension that the levity hadn't quite erased. The street was absolutely quiet. Not a sound. Not even a bird noise. It felt as if the whole block was at a funeral. And if he spoke even one word, someone would pop out and shush at him for his disrespect. It was eerie. He hoped it wasn't also an omen.

If something had happened to her, he didn't know what he would do. As cold as it sounded, he knew he'd survive without Fuggit in his life, but as sure as grannies wear long underwear in the winter, he knew he'd die if he lost his Poot. Done in by grief or his own hand. Take your pick. He knew it was foolish thinking, but she had crawled under his skin so deeply he couldn't picture a life without her little hee hee's in it.

They put their two bulky shapes into the outer foyer of the building and Sniffer punched the 3G button. Nothing. No light and delicate voice asking whom it was. He punched it three more times. Same thing. She was either not home or . . . He didn't want to think about the "or."

Moldon said, "Sniff. There's a sign outside says the super lives behind that black door we saw to the left of this place. Why don't we try him?" Sniffer agreed.

They went back outside and walked right the ten feet or so to the black door. A small sign above the buzzer said: Mr. Ebbett S. Rinsdale, Maintenance Engineer. Moldon laughed and said, "Looks like superintendent is now politically incorrect." Sniffer chuckled as he pressed the buzzer button.

"Yeah," he said. "From now on, Mold, you can call me a Deductive Reasoning and Evidence Accrual Manipulator." Moldon laughed and said, "Hey! That spells dream!" Sniffer said, "Yeah, you're right! It does. How's about that?" The door opened halfway.

The Maintenance Engineer forgot to dress up for work. He had on baggy, oil-stained trousers and a holey tee shirt with a cartoon of a blue Smurf on the front. The Smurf was a sloppy eater. It had what looked like a spaghetti sauce stain all over its face.

The guy's shoes were no prize, either. Someone had dribbled paint on each one in every color imaginable. If they could be framed you'd have a passable Jackson Pollack.

"Whaddya guys want?" asked Mr. Ebbett S. Rinsdale the Maintenance Engineer in a voice that sounded as if it got very little practice lately at verbal gymnastics. Sniffer flashed his badge. The man didn't seem too impressed. "So?"

Sniffer gave him something interesting to chew on. "Well, Mr. Rinsdale . . . and I want you to keep this just between us," he lowered his voice, "we've had a report of some funny business going on in this building. Could even be foreign spies or the like." Now he had Rinsdale's interest. Sniffer looked up and down the street as if he was afraid someone might hear him. Then he whispered, "May we come in, sir?" Rinsdale opened the door for them to enter. He said, "Spies? Really? Zowwee . . . No shit?"

The apartment surprised both the detectives. It was very clean. And neat. Much cleaner and neater than the man himself. The furnishings left a lot to be desired, but not if you enjoyed the hotel room look. Rinsdale told them to make themselves comfortable. When all three were seated, Sniffer opened the conversation up.

"Mr. Rinsdale, we . . ." Rinsdale cut him off. "You know, Detectives, I almost called

you a while back, I did. About some funny business that happened with apartment three eff." Now he had *their* full attention. Sniffer said, "Yeah, you don't say?" That apartment was right alongside three gee.

"Yeah," Rinsdale said. "Now, apartment three eff was a vacant apartment . . . still is, actually . . . and no one was supposed to be living in it. You know?" Sniffer and Moldon both nodded. "Well, one day I thought I heard voices coming from the apartment. I tried the door, but it was locked. Which it wasn't supposed to be, if you get the picture." They did and nodded in unison. "Well, I went and got the passkey, but when I came back, the door was unlocked. Pretty weird, huh?" Both men nodded once more.

Moldon asked, "Mr. Rinsdale, when did all this take place?"

Rindale thought a moment and said, "Well, I've been pretty busy lately, what with getting four gee repainted and all, but I think it was around a week or so ago. What day I can't say for certain. Sorry." Moldon said, "That's OK. What happened then?"

"Well, I thought maybe I hadn't turned the knob the right way before. But anyway, I went inside and . . . nothing. No one. No nothing. Just an empty pizza box on the dining room table. I checked all the rooms and all the closets. Nothing and no one. As if the voices I heard were only in my head or something. Well, I did a thorough check all through the place, even checked under the beds and all the closets. And I checked the fridge for clues, like I saw them do on Quincy, ME one time, but the fridge was completely empty. So was the freezer.

"Now, I almost called the cops, I did, but since the place didn't look like anyone had ever been in it, aside from the pizza box, I mean, what would I have told 'em, eh?" He put both hands out in front of him, shrugged, then said, "Besides, you fellas got more important things to do than to check out some possible squatters now, dontcha?" He looked at Sniffer, then at Moldon and said, "Of course, if it's spies in there, well . . . I guess they'd be real clever and maybe not leave any trace of themselves. I guess . . ." He let his words trail off.

Sniffer nodded in agreement and said, "Mr. Rinsdale, we'd like to take a look in three eff. And while we're at it, we'd like to knock on the adjacent apartment, three gee, and if there's no one home, we'd like to look in there real quick, too. Just to be thorough. Okay with you?" It was.

Rinsdale went and got the passkey ring. Sniffer took the keys from him and instructed him to stay put, for his own safety. They would go and check it out and get back to him to fill him in. Rinsdale started to protest, but Sniffer told him how, if it is spies, there most likely would be a shootout. This convinced Rinsdale to stay put.

Moldon took the two flights of stairs three steps at a time. Sniffer started to, but gave it up on the fourth three-stepper. Gotta quit, he thought. Moldon waited on the third floor level, his gun drawn, with his eyes trained simultaneously on apartments three eff and three gee. The only sound he heard was Sniffer as he puffed up the stairs.

Moldon smiled as Sniffer joined him, and was about to make the expected "old man" remark, but the look on Sniffer's face changed his mind. Sniffer also had his gun out, in his right hand, the passkey in his left.

Without discussion, they both knew three eff was the first to be looked into. Moldon took a place to the right of the door, for safety, and to give Sniffer room to get at the doorknob, which was on the door's left side. If the door was locked, they always had the passkey.

Sniffer positioned himself to the left of the door. He didn't want to switch his gun to his left hand, so he had to turn the knob with an awkward upside-down hand maneuver. He hoped the deadbolt would behave and not make too much noise. He turned the knob and pushed on the door gently. It gave. It was unlocked. And the deadbolt had behaved nicely. Not a peep out of it.

Although they hadn't heard any sound come from the apartment, that didn't mean it was unoccupied. And a shotgun blast through the door has a way of wrecking your weekend plans.

Holding the knob, Sniffer pushed the door in a quarter inch or so. Then he threw it wide open and covered the now exposed right view of the living room with his gun while Moldon kept an eye, and his gun, on the left zone. Nothing. No one. So far, at least.

Moldon looked through the doorjamb's thin crack space to see if anybody was hidden behind the door. No one there. They entered carefully. Moldon checked out the kitchen, which was on the right less than two feet from the front door. Nothing. He opened a small closet that was between the kitchen and the door. Nothing and no one. Just clothing and boxes and such.

The two bedrooms on the left also yielded nothing. No one was home is seemed. Sniffer checked out the only bathroom in the place, in the main bedroom. Nothing, but his heart jumped a bit when he had to throw back the shower curtain.

The apartment was empty of people. Unless they were hidden under the bed. Or in a closet. While Sniffer covered him, Moldon checked under each bed in the two bedrooms. Nothing but dust mites. Then, they both heard the closet in the second bedroom say something.

It had moaned.

Sniffer looked at Moldon who shot a look back at Sniffer. Sniffer, with Moldon at the ready, quickly crossed the room and yanked the closet door open. His gun was pointed at the closet's middle space, ready for anything, even a switch to an up or down direction. His gun was also aimed approximately three feet above the woman's head. She lay there, bound hand and foot, in the fetal position. She opened her eyes, looked hazily up at him, and said, "Poppycock!" Then she passed out . . .

"Ga giga gru grint Jell-O!"

DOC RAZOR was right. It was a piece of cake and Balliwick didn't feel a thing.

The blue device was implanted in his throat. A thin, hair-like wire ran from it and went through his face to a chip in his left ear lobe. He could now talk in Gronkian merely by pulling gently on the lobe. Simple.

The orange device was implanted in his right ear canal with a short hair-like wire

connected to a chip in his right ear lobe. A gentle tug would allow him to hear and understand Groinkian. Simple.

Balliwick was about to put the finish on a large cup of green Jell-O, his new favorite color, when Doc Razor walked into the recovery room. He seemed rather chipper. Even his white lab coat seemed crispier than usual.

He said cheerfully, "Ah, how's my favorite patient doing? Well, I hope." Balliwick grunted, "Yeah, just great, Doc." He worked the spoon around the cup's bottom to get the last green glob. Razor said, "No pain then?" Balliwick shook his head. "Nope."

"Now, Bertie, it's time." Doc Razor said. "You're all healed up and I'm eager to tell you how the two devices operate. OK?" He smiled at Balliwick. In his right hand he held a clipboard.

Balliwick said, "OK, Doc. Let's get this show on the road." He killed the green Jell-O and sucked audibly on the white plastic spoon. The Doc smiled at him again.

"First . . . Mister Impatient . . . Let us start," the Doc cleared his throat, " with the VOX Voice Synthesizer which we implanted in your throat . . . shall we? Which by now shouldn't bother you at all. Does it?" Balliwick said, "Nah. Not at all, Doc." He tossed the plastic spoon onto the tray cart and licked his lips.

"Wonderful. Now, Bert, this device couldn't be easier to use. Oh, bye the bye, it is the latest model, you know." Balliwick yawned. Doc razor ignored this. "Well, anyway . . . to *speak* in Groinkian, simply pull on your left ear lobe. OK?" Balliwick nodded sleepily. Left ear lobe to talk, he thought, no problemo. He yawned again and scratched his stomach with his left hand.

"Let's test it once, shall we Bert? Tug gently on your left ear lobe and say something, please." Balliwick did a small tug and said, "Ga giga gru grint Jell-O"

Doc Razor asked, "What about the Jell-O?" Balliwick repeated it and again it came out in Groinkian. He looked confused. Where was English?

"Bert, to get back to English you have to tug on the ear lobe again. OK?" Bert tugged. He then said, "I said I wanted more green Jell-O Doc!" He had learned something. Tug the left ear lobe once you get Groinkian. Tug it again, English. Simple.

"Second. We have the Wang Linguistical Translator," Christ, thought Balliwick, who names this shit? "We embedded *that* little chip in your right ear canal. It doesn't bother you too much, does it?" Balliwick shook his head. "Good. Now . . . to *hear* . . . and *understand* . . . *the* spoken Groinkian, simply pull on your right ear lobe. To hear again in English, pull it again. Got it?"

Balliwick nodded and seem bored out of his gourd. "Yeah, yeah. Simple, Doc. To talk Groinkian, pull my left ear lobe. To hear Groinkian, pull the right one. And since talk has an "L" in it, as does *Left* ear lobe, and hear has an "R" in it, as does *Right* ear lobe . . . it's talk left, hear right. Right, Doc?" He'd learned that little trick from a book on improving one's memory in seven days, or one week, whichever came first.

"Yes, right! You impress me! Well, done, Bert. Well, done, indeed . . . However . . . it gets a wee bit more complicated than that." Balliwick had a look that said, yeah? Bring it on, Doc. "You see, sometimes the Groinkians like to talk in English. Balliwick nodded

even though he didn't know why he did. It just seemed like the expected thing to do.

"Practice, I guess, for better infiltration into society . . . and they'll expect you to do so, too. Now, if you were *hearing* in Groinkian at the time, as an example, you wouldn't know what they were saying, now *would you?* And that could prove fatal, *couldn't it?*" Balliwick shook his head then nodded vigorously in agreement on those two points. There was more.

"Or, conversely, if you were hearing them okey dokey in English, but *Groinkian* came out of your mouth . . . well . . . they'd get a tad suspicious because you *hadn't responded* in English, now *wouldn't they?*" Balliwick nodded. His face showed a little bit of concern. But there was even more.

"That's why, to cover this contingency, in fact, to cover *all possible contingencies* . . . and to keep you *alive*, you might say . . . the manufacturers of these two marvelous devices have joined their corporate forces and created this little easy to follow instruction sheet." He tapped the clipboard. "If you study it, I'm sure you'll see it's quite well thought out and very logical." He handed the clipboard to Balliwick.

Balliwick turned the clipboard around and looked down at the stark white top sheet. It read:

E-Z

Instructions for using the VOX Voice Acoustical Synthesizer (Model VAS-8) & the WANG Linguistical Translator (Model WLT-21). (Alone, or in combination)

He read it and then he read it again. Who writes this shit? He thought. He flipped the top sheet up and looked at:

E-Z Instructions for using the VOX Voice Acoustical Synthesizer (Model VAS-8) & the WANG Linguistical Translator, (Model WLT-21). (Alone, or in combination):

1. To talk right in Groinkian pull left ear lobe once. This will activate the VOX Voice Acoustical Synthesizer. *Warning: Pull gently on the left ear lobe so as not to damage the delicate wiring.*

A photograph on the right of this typography showed a smiling, pretty model tugging on her left ear lobe. She looked directly into the camera. Underneath the photo was a line of type that told the reader to take note that the right ear in the

photograph is actually the model's left ear. They were taking no chances with mirror imaging.

1a. To talk right in English again pull left ear lobe once more. This will de-activate the VOX Voice Acoustical Synthesizer. *Warning: Pull gently on the left ear lobe so as not to damage the delicate wiring.*

A photo showed the same pretty model tugging on her left ear lobe again. This time she looked off into space to her right. Same "take note" line.

2. To hear right in Groinkian pull right ear lobe once. This will activate the WANG Linguistical Translator. *Warning: Pull gently on the right ear lobe so as not to damage the delicate wiring.*

You guessed it. She now tugged the right ear lobe. And tugged it again in the next step. Both steps used the same photograph. And the same take note line.

2a. To hear right in English again pull right ear lobe once more. This will de-activate the WANG Linguistical Translator. *Warning: Pull gently on the right ear lobe so as not to damage the delicate wiring.*

3. If talking right *and* hearing right in Groinkian, and you wish to speak right in Groinkian, but hear right in English, pull right ear lobe once. This will de-activate the WANG Linguistical Translator. *Warning: Pull gently on the right ear lobe so as not to damage the delicate wiring.*

There she was again. A-tug at the right ear lobe again. Her smile had faded a tad. Of course, the same take note line was present.

4. If talking right *and* hearing right in English, and you wish to speak right in English, but hear right in Groinkian, pull left ear lobe once. This will de-activate the VOX Voice Acoustical Synthesizer. *Warning: Pull gently on the left ear lobe so as not to damage the delicate wiring.*

Yep. But, full smile again, at her left ear lobe and back to that stare of hers into space. She looked slightly cross-eyed. And yes, the same take note line was there.

5. If talking right in Groinkian *and* hearing right in English, and you wish to speak right in English and hear right in Groinkian, pull both ear lobes once. This will simultaneously de-activate the VOX Voice Acoustical Synthesizer and activate the WANG Linguistical Translator. *Warning: Pull gently on the left and right ear lobes*

so as not to damage the delicate wiring.

Her again! This time she smiled head-on as she held onto both ear lobes. She looked like the Hear No Evil monkey. The take note line had disappeared.

6. If talking right in English *and* hearing right in Groinkian, and you wish to speak right in Groinkian and hear right in English, pull both ear lobes once. This will simultaneously activate the VOX Voice Acoustical Synthesizer and de-activate the WANG Linguistical Translator. *Warning: Pull gently on the left and right ear lobes so as not to damage the delicate wiring.*

The Hear No Evil monkey again. Same photo. To save a few bucks? No “take note” line.

7. If talking right in Groinkian *and* hearing right in English, and you wish to speak right and hear right in Groinkian, pull left ear lobe once. This will keep the VOX Voice Acoustical Synthesizer activated and the WANG Linguistical Translator will now be activated. *Warning: Pull gently on the left ear lobe so as not to damage the delicate wiring.*

They saved more bucks by using one of her previous shots. Here and in the next. But, the take note line had reappeared.

8. If talking right in English *and* hearing right in Groinkian, and you wish to speak right and hear right in English, pull right ear lobe once. This will keep the VOX Voice Acoustical Synthesizer inactivated and the WANG Linguistical Translator will now be activated. *Warning: Pull gently on the right ear lobe so as not to damage the delicate wiring.*

If you didn't get the warning to be gentle by now, you never were.

1 Year Warranty on Parts Only. See warranty for mailing instructions. © 2015

Prepared by the Royal Institute for Linguistical Clarification and Nonsemantical Edification (RI for LC and NE) Version No. 22398a Correction 238.

Yeah, simple! Talk has an "L" in it and hear has an "R!"
By point 4, Balliwick looked like the green Jell-O. At point 8, the Jell-O was yellow.
(As this was being written, dear reader, I cracked up. It reminded me of the many "E-Z" instruction sheets I've encountered on life's fun-filled journey--I'm sure you have, too--especially the ones translated from Japanese.

Follow along if you will. (Fold A Two over Cee Two but not cross on Bee One with Dee Four and E One on right. Now you see Cee Two and see Bee One lined up from A Two and Dee Four. Put batteries in push down hold up and press. If no work press pull more time to draw current up and finished use screw to held well in good place. Now to take Gee One and . . .) HA HA HA! Gotta love it, you betcha. I'll bet the Japanese have the same problem when English is changed into their language. Oh, well . . . back to our story of poor Balliwick . . .

"Is this a fucking joke, Doc, or what?" Balliwick looked up from the clipboard. Doc Razor was no longer there. It seems Doc Razor is a very smart and educated man.

Balliwick looked back down at the clipboard. I'm a fucking dead man, he thought. Then, just for shits and giggles, he tugged on his left ear lobe and said out loud, "Gif gissa goil grusso ga giddlegor --- *gis goggu!*" Us spies eat death for breakfast --- *and* lunch!

He tugged the earlobe again . . .

"You believe me, dontcha, Darlin'?"

THE YOUNG DOCTOR came out of the room and walked over to Sniffer and Moldon.

"She's going to be just fine. No broken bones, cuts, or bruising. A few very minor rope burns on her wrists and ankles, but other than that . . . and with a little time to get the strong sedative she was given out of her system . . . she's in perfect health."

He looked at Sniffer. "You should be so lucky, Sniffer. Quit 'em, already, will you? Before your first myocardial infarction sets in. OK?" He didn't wait for an answer. Just turned and rushed off. Sniffer hollered at the doctor's back. "Yeah, Sidney, you'd just love that, wouldn't you?" Doc Sidney waved a hand bye-bye over his head without turning around. Then a nurse came out of the same room.

She said, "Hi Sniff, hi Morty. How's it going with you two?" They both mumbled something, and then Sniffer asked, "Can we see her, Marge?" Marge nodded. "Sure guys, she's awake now. But be gentle with her, will you, and don't be your usual crude and ugly selves. OK?" They both chuckled. Marge stuffed a bottle of pills into a pocket and walked briskly away. She also waved a ta ta with a hand in the air.

A moment later, Sniffer and Moldon were on both sides of Pooty's hospital bed. She looked up at Sniffer and said, "Have I got a story to tell you, Detective Sniffer!" She looked half drugged and not quite out of it.

Sniffer said, "I'll bet you do, Hon, but before you do, I'd like you to meet officer Morton Moldon. Say hello to the lady, Moldy." As Pooty turned her head toward Moldon she caught his wince at Sniffer's use of Moldy.

"Hello, Ma'am," Moldon said. Pooty blinked at him a few times and said, "Now officer Moldon, I want you to call me Pooty, OK? And I'm sure you don't want me to call you by Sniffhead's nickname for you, do you?" Moldon chuckled at her use of Sniffhead. But he

didn't know whether to nod or shake his head.

So he did neither. "No Ma'am . . . I mean no, Pooty, I sure don't. And someday, after I shoot old Sniffhead, he'll know I mean it. But in the meantime, you can call me Morty. Although, in all honesty, it doesn't beat Moldy out by much now, does it?" She laughed. "Morty it is, then," She turned back to Sniffer. "Isn't that right Sniffsocks, Darlin,' hee hee?" He'd had enough.

He said, "All right, all right. Let's get off the Sniff this and Sniff that long enough for you to tell us your fascinating story. OK, Sweetie?" She smiled at him and said cheerfully, "Okey doke." God, Sniffer thought, I love this girl. She reads me real well.

Pooty propped the pillows up behind herself and scooted up to a sitting position. She then looked from Sniffer to Moldon and back to Sniffer again. She looked serious.

"What I'm about to tell you is going to sound absolutely crazy, but I feel you'll both believe me. Especially you, Clu." She paused as if for effect, then looked right at Sniffer and said, "There is an alien being living in apartment three eff," she stopped and examined both their faces, "and he grabbed me and then he tied me up . . ." Right here, Sniffer had a sick-humor thought. He half expected her to add: ". . . then he put me on the railroad tracks!"

Instead, she said, "He gave me a shot of some kind and put me in the bedroom closet.

Where I assume you found me." They both nodded as she looked from one to the other.

Moldon got the first question out. "Where did he grab you, Pooty? . . . I mean was it in the hallway, your apartment, or somewhere else?" Great style, Morty, he thought, you sounded like a friggin' lecher with your "where did he grab you" crap. He felt his neck redden.

"Well," she said. "I'll have to explain that. It's a little silly. I went over to three eff, thinking it was unoccupied, to see what a two bedroom apartment looked like." She visibly blushed. Sniffer caught it and also knew why she all of a sudden had an interest in bigger spaces. Moldon missed it. He was too preoccupied with his earlier lechery. She continued.

"When I got there the door was unlocked, so I just went in. As I expected, there was no one in the living room or the kitchen so I went to look at the bedrooms. The small bedroom on the left was also empty.

"Then I heard someone speak in the other bedroom." She paused to take a sip from a water glass that sat on her roll-around tray. "Well, I was going to scoot right out of there, but when I got to the bedroom door, there he was! The alien." Both men just looked at her, interested. Neither wore an expression of disbelief.

She looked at Sniffer. "You're going to love this, Clu. He looked just like . . . a pig!" She waited for a reaction. She didn't wait long.

"A pig?" Sniffer asked. "Was he on all fours or did he stand up like we do?" He realized the question had a tinge of sarcastic disbelief attached to it, but that he couldn't help. It was a legitimate question. But he made his face more serious so she would know he wasn't just humoring her.

However, if truth were told, he did have a small chuckle hiding under the surface of his thoughts as he imagined her now saying: "He was on all fours and wearing a pink tutu."

Whether it was the aftereffects of the sedative or not, she seemed not to catch the cutesy in the question. "He stood up," she said, "just the way we do. Aside from the pig face, he looked like most any man. Perhaps a little taller than the average. And he wore what appeared to be a military uniform, with medals and all."

Moldon asked, "Did he say anything to you?" No lechery in that question.

"Yes, he did. At first it sounded like he was just grunting . . . and squealing. In a strange animalistic-like language. Sort of like, grunga gitta gru gogga. As if every word began with a gee. Anyway, after he had grabbed me and put a hand over my mouth, he spoke in English. Oh . . . it was a funny looking hand. It had a big bump on the back of it, like a large knuckle of some kind. Well, anyhow, he told me he would kill me if I fought him. Then he threw me face down onto the bed and I felt a pinch in my right arm. I started to get groggy almost immediately." She paused for another sip of water.

"He then tied me up and carried me to the closet. I'm a little fuzzy on what he said after that, but on the way it seemed he was telling me something about how I'd be going out on the next slave trip. And I think he said something about how I'd make a nice sex toy for his Colonel." She shuddered. "And how he would test me himself when he got back from a meeting of some kind." She shuddered again and added, "It was awful, really awful." She looked frail and frightened.

Sniffer took her left hand into both of his. "I know it was, Hon. But he can't hurt you now. Not with me and old Mol . . . uh . . . old Morty here to protect you." She looked at Moldon and tee hee'd. "See Morty, he's trainable after all!" Moldon laughed and said, "Yeah, but for how long?" She tee hee'd again. Even Sniffer let out a chuckle.

Then Sniffer got serious. "Folks, we've got a big problem here. And we can't handle it ourselves. We'll have to notify . . ." Moldon jumped in.

"Sniff, I just remembered something. You know that FBI guy Bookem? Well, last week he showed the Chief and me some NASA photos. Said aliens were invading us and they were right here, in our bailiwick is how he put it. All I saw was a big white blob in the shots, same as the Chief. But, I guess now Bookem was on to something." He paused, and then said, "Unfortunately, we can't contact Bookem. Seems no one at the FBI ever heard of the guy."

Sniffer asked, "Isn't he the FBI guy who took Balliwick?"

"Yeah, but I wonder why. What could Balliwick have to do with all of this?" Moldon didn't know about Balliwick's kidnapping.

Sniffer filled him in. "Well, Moldy," he said. "Things are coming full circle now. Two men kidnapped Balliwick. Pooty witnessed the whole thing." Moldon looked at Pooty. She nodded. "And Pooty says the two men looked like they had pig masks on. We know now that that was possibly in error. They were most likely two aliens. But somehow Balliwick managed to escape from them. Maybe Bookem knows this and wants to question Balliwick about it." Moldon nodded. Sniffer continued.

"Pooty also saw the pig men zap an officer. That could have been Fuggit. But since he was alive after that . . . why hadn't they killed him right then and there? Unless . . . their TV remote gun was set on stun or something and Fuggit was just lucky. That time, at least.

"Then, as you know, Dusty Miller says he saw a pig-faced guy in that alley behind Earl's place. Where he also says the cop was on the ground. A cop who then disappeared." He was headed somewhere definite.

Moldon was with him. "Don't look too good for Fuggit, Sniffer, does it? What with that Fiona woman also seeing a man lying on the ground in the same alley." Sniffer frowned. Moldon added, "And the guy she saw also had a pig mask on. If it was a mask."

Sniffer said, "Fiona probably saw the same thing Dusty saw. Which means it was Fuggit who evaporated right before his wino eyes. Poor Cantella." He paused, thinking of her. Pooty and Moldon looked saddened by the remark. Then he went on.

"Let me sum it up for us. OK? Aliens come here. Fine. Why? Who knows? An invasion? Who knows? But, for some odd reason they go and kidnap Balliwick. On Fuggit's beat and Pooty sees it. Fuggit, probably, gets zapped but not killed. Balliwick escapes from them somehow. Bookem, who may not be Bookem, comes by and takes Balliwick. Fuggit, who may have wised to the aliens, is probably dead. He's probably the guy in the alley on Columbus Street that was seen by both Fiona and Dusty. OK. An alien grabs Pooty in apartment three eff, also on Columbus Street. They probably used that vacant apartment as a base of some kind. But we get lucky and find Poot before the alien returns." He looked at Pooty. "Thank God for lucky."

Pooty had been quiet throughout this give and take, but she now had something to ask. "Fellas, tell me, is it safe for me to go back to my apartment?" Simple question.

The men looked at each other, undecided who would field that one. Sniffer took the plunge. "Poot, by now he's probably been back there and spotted the two cops in the black and white I put outside your building. So, I doubt if he'll consider the place safe from here on out. Thus, he's probably taken a powder. But . . . to be on the safe side . . . you can stay at my place if you like." He smiled at her. Officer Moldon, bless his married heart, was the only one to blush. She said, "I'd like, Clu."

"Good," Sniffer said. "Then it's settled. Now, if you'll make a list of whatever it is you need, Moldy and I will go and rustle it up for you." He handed her his small pad and one of his trusty number two yellow-jacketed pencils, freshly sharpened--naturally. Then he motioned with a thumb for Moldon to join him outside the room. Moldon got the drift and left first.

Sniffer bent down and tilted her face up to his. He gave her one of those short, lovable kisses that say we may not have the time now, but when we do, girl, . . .

"Two heads are better than none!"

FRANÇOIS "FRENCHIE" de GAULLE looked at the mess they had given him to work with: Balliwick's head.

I'm an artiste, he thought, not a miracle worker. But he knew it had to be done and done quickly. There was no time for artistic temperament. He reached out with his right hand and turned Balliwick's head to the right. "Hmmm." he said. Then he turned it to the left. "Hmmm." he said again. Then to the center. "Hmmm."

As he turned Balliwick's head back and forth, Balliwick's eyes followed François' face. He felt as if he was in a barber's chair getting an estimate.

François squinted at the challenge before him: to get this man's face to match the face of the pig-like alien shown in the realistic-looking holograph that now hovered in mid-air to the right of Balliwick's head. The face had a large, square-shaped mole on its left cheek. "Hmmm." François said again.

On a wider-than-the-others turn of the challenging head, Balliwick saw the alien's head floating near his face. "Hey! I know him!" he said. François stopped and looked at Balliwick, astonishment on his face. "*You do?*"

"Yeah. That's Lieutenant Gron. His Lieutenant Junior Grade, a tall, fat guy named Grin, served me dinner one time. Great dinner, too! It had roast chicken, mashed potatoes, smooth gra . . ."

François had his back to him and was headed toward the door. "Hold zat thought, Balliwick, I'll be back in a sec." he threw back to Balliwick.

Balliwick just sat there thinking about the rest of the roast chicken dinner. Pearl onions, carrots and a nice slice of apple pie. He didn't eat that well too often, he could tell you. It hadn't dawned on him that part of his memory had just returned.

François called Bookem and told him the story. Bookem, while extremely interested, had a very important meeting in a few minutes that he couldn't afford to duck out on.

He told François this and added, "Put him through the mold process, François, and call me," he knew that would take hours, "when it's finished. I'll pop over then and talk to him. And, François? *Don't let him go wandering off somewhere!* If you need Karl to see that he doesn't, call him. OK?" It was oui, oui with François.

Bookem took out his trusty cell phone. A moment later, he said, "Sir? I've got some very interesting news to tell you . . ."

"Take a left at the next hanger!"

AFTER LEAVING Pooty's hospital room, Sniffer and Moldon sought out Sidney, the young doctor.

He told them he'd like to have Ms. Prissyfoot stay a day or so for observations and a few more tests. Just to be on the safe side. He told Sniffer he could come and get her the next day at around six p.m. This was just fine with Sniffer. He had some things to do, anyway.

One thing he had to do was get home and straighten up the place. Although he had had the cleaning lady in just last week, his place was now bachelor messy. Now, Sniffer wasn't really very sloppy--you wouldn't find socks and underwear on the floor--but he had a habit of not putting anything away. In spite of Momma Sniffer's "There's a place for

everything and everything in its place!" training.

Shirts hung on doorknobs and over the backs of chairs. Along with the occasional pair of trousers. Three pairs of shoes and three pairs of slippers lined up like soldiers alongside his bed, which was unmade, you betcha.

Ties were anywhere they felt like resting. A week's worth of newspapers were scattered around, mixed in with magazines, letters, bills, and what have you. Who knows how many bills he forgot to pay because they were tossed out when they hid inside the *New York Times*.

And forget about the kitchen sink. It's amazing how many pots, dishes, cups, and utensils one man can use in a week. Without even trying hard. Sniffer had a dishwasher, but that fine machine was used for storage, much like a china cabinet.

Now, when he first moved in, he would wash the single plate, the utensils for one person, and a pot or two, right after eating. That regimen worked well for about seven days, or a week, take your pick. Then he pulled an all-nighter and the plan went south. From then on, he took the path of least resistance.

Another thing he had to do was fill Pooty's list. It surprised him that it wasn't too long. But it was quite detailed. And seemingly quite accurate: Small closet near front door, third hanger from the left, blue blouse with flowers on the shoulders. Amazing, he thought, I can't remember what fucking drawer my socks are in.

He usually had to open every drawer just to find a pair of shorts. He made a mental note that he was probably wasting who knows how many months of his life just hunting for stuff. And getting exasperated. No wonder women outlived men. They knew where everything was! Just like his mother, who, so far, had outlived her husband by ten years. Maybe science should start looking deeply into that everything in its place idea.

Moldon agreed to give him a hand before heading home to his wife Mandy. Both as a favor and as backup, just in case the alien returneth. You never know, do you now?

As Sniffer and Moldon climbed the last flight of stairs to the third floor level, Sniffer said, "Moldy? You think the Chief is going to buy this alien stuff of ours?"

"I doubt it, Sniff. He thought Bookem was bananas with his invasions photos. In truth, so did I at the time. But who knows? If you use that famous Sniffer allure on him, and for once, just once, mind you, you learn how to bat those gorgeous eyelids of yours, maybe he'll bite. Wouldn't work on me, but the Chief's a pushover."

Sniffer chuckled and said, "Here, wise-ass, your half of her list. I'll do the unmentionables and such." Moldon responded with, "Be careful, Sniff, I don't need an aroused cop in the same room with me. OK?"

"Don't worry, Moldy, I'll be going *into* closets, not coming outta them." They both laughed. They had reached her door. Sniffer keyed it and they entered, guns drawn--just in case. But it was for practice, the place was unpeopled.

Moldon opened the closet near the door while Sniffer headed for the small bedroom alcove. She had turned it into a bedroom by the use of a three-paneled screen. Each panel showed various birds doing what birds do best--fly. It was colorful, but delicately rendered. Audubon would have been proud. Moldon heard Sniffer call to him. "Hey,

Moldy, you haven't told me what you think of Pooty yet."

Moldon called back, "Great gal. Pretty, educated, and a great sense of humor. I'm glad you found her Sniff, she's just what you need." Sniffer was surprised Moldon hadn't wise-assed it up a bit, but he was glad he hadn't. He's right, he thought, she is good for me.

Moldon had no trouble whatsoever picking out the blouses, skirts, and dresses Pooty had listed. Third hanger from left, fourth from right. He was astonished at her memory. He couldn't tell you what color socks he had on. Or what his tie looked like. With this in mind, he gave a glance down at his chest. Frigging tie was blue. He'd have bet hard cash it was red.

Well, if the tie was blue, he probably had blue socks on. He looked. I'm getting senile, he thought. The socks were pink! A lavender pink, no less. Disheartened, he went back to the task at hand. Going through a woman's closet. He'd done this before a few times, but it was nice that this time, the woman was still alive and kicking.

Everything was right where she said they would be. The black, low-heeled shoes. The running shoes. The jeans. And of the three sweatshirts on hangers, there it was, the middle one, just as she said, the one with Kindergarten Teacher printed on it. He turned it over. Nothing on the back. None of those cutesy "I'm with Stupid" --> type sweats for her. If nothing else, Sniffer's little Pooty was sensible and down to earth.

In the meanwhile, Sniffer was having an easy time of it, too. Her toiletries and whatnots, all duplicates for traveling, were in a small overnight suitcase stored in an under-the-bed pull out drawer. Right where she said it would be. The drawer's contents looked extremely neat. Folded blankets, pillowcases, and such, all in plastic casings. He stared at in with envy. And with hope. Perhaps, when we get married . . .

He stopped daydreaming and went back to work. The alcove was quite filled by a double bed and one three-drawer dresser. He glanced at the bed. It was a wonder, he thought, that one of us hadn't fallen out of it last night. His alcove bed was a full-sized one. While it really crowded the space, he knew it would sleep two nicely. He'd bought it with that purpose in mind even though he hadn't any particular woman in mind at the time. Doesn't hurt to plan ahead. One never knows. Does one?

He took a small empty suitcase from the bed's other side slide-out drawer. He tossed in two pairs of pajamas that he got from the dresser's top drawer. They were flannel and not in the least sexy looking. He liked that she wasn't the Baby Doll PJs type. She'd feel real cozy in his arms. Especially during the winter months. He liked that idea. It warmed him some.

He opened the middle drawer and found the list was still accurate. It was crammed full of panties, pantyhose, and the like. All neatly folded. Of course, they would be, he thought, but at least they're not labeled with the days of the week. He picked up a pair of sold black panties with a lacy fringe. He held them up and looked at them, as if seeing panties in a new light. He had the sudden urge to bury his face in them. They were hers, after all. He managed to resist the idea, but felt a tad guilty for thinking it.

"Get your nose outta those, you perv!" Moldon said. Sniffer dropped the panties as if

he'd been hit with a sledgehammer. He turned and saw Moldon's head peeking around the screen.

Sniffer managed, "I was . . . I wasn't . . ."

"Yeah, I know. Some habits are hard to break!" Moldon chuckled. "Listen. I'm finished with my end. How you coming?"

"Almost done. All I need are some bras." He looked dopey.

"Gee, Sniffles, you don't look that hard to fit. Why don't you try clunky sizes in second floor ladies?" Moldon laughed and slapped the screen's edge with an open palm.

Sniffer turned back to the dresser and opened the bottom drawer. He yanked out a white bra and put it up to his chest. "How's this, Mold? I think it's me." he said as he turned toward the screen. But Moldon was no longer there. Joke wasted, son. He finished up and they left the apartment. On the way out they ran into Mr. Rinsdale.

He said, "Hey, you guys never got back to me. You find any spies? If so, I got a right to know. It's my responsibility to keep the tenant's safe, you know." He looked antsy. Restless.

Sniffer appeased the man by deputizing him. "No spies. If they were there, they've cleared out. But, you'd be helping the police and the FBI immensely if you would keep an eye on both apartments, three eff and three gee, as our inside agent, so to speak. You see anything suspicious, know what I mean?" Rinsdale nodded. "You call me pronto. OK?" Rinsdale nodded again as Sniffer handed him one of his business cards.

Then he added, "And Mr. Rinsdale, don't you go being the hero now. Spies play for keeps, if you get the drift." Rinsdale nodded vigorously. Sniffer whispered "And we'd rather have a live agent than a dead one. Understand?" Agent Rinsdale not only understood, he assured them he'd play it safe by calling the minute something looked amiss. No spies were going to get by him, you betcha.

Sniffer dropped Moldon off at his personal car, which was parked behind Police One. He thanked Moldon for his help and drove off to keep a date with a messy joint. He knew he should have gone in and told the Chief about Pooty's alien story, but he was tired and didn't want to get into it with the man. He also felt he had just about enough strength in him to make the place pretty for Pooty. And he hadn't eaten yet.

And besides, he thought, what's the rush . . .

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"And then what happened?"

BALLIWICK only wanted to, as he put it, stretch his legs with a little walk around, but Karl wouldn't let him.

As Karl put it, "I've got my orders, Mr. Balliwick. To keep England's best super spy in this place until Mr. Bookem gets here. So sit back down before I have to get serious about it. OK?" He sure didn't want Karl to get "serious," about anything, so he went back to his seat and watched François work.

François was busy mixing some gloppy-looking stuff. He had called Bookem no less than five minutes ago and was surprised when he heard Bookem make an entrance.

"I'm here François, how's our face coming?" He glanced at Balliwick. "Hello Double Oh Seven." He smiled and winked at Balliwick who said, "Hi Mr. Bookem."

Bookem took François to the side and whispered to him, "It's very important, François, that Balliwick not only resemble that guy . . . I want him to be his spitting image. Got it?"

François got it. He whispered back, "Oui. I will run zee hologram through zee computair-genairated duplicatair process. Zee Cee Gee Dee Pee will ensure zat he will look just like him, right down to zee mole."

Bookem patted François' shoulder and said, "Good. And, François? Don't forget the hands. The right hand center knuckle has a double split to it." As François oui-oui-ed, Bookem turned his attention to Balliwick.

"Now Mr. Balliwick, while François performs his magic, why don't you and I have a nice little chat in his private office. Shall we?" He motioned for Balliwick to come along.

François' office certainly did not reflect his artistic bent, not even one jot. The whole room had been decorated in Colonial. From the over-sized oak wooden desk to the quilt-patterned fabric on the small-sized, office couch.

There were no slick, artsy-fartsy chrome-framed pictures on the wall. Just four prints that depicted the various stages of farming. On the couch stood two needlepoint pillows, François' own petit point handiwork, that showed a realistic-looking chicken on one and an evil-eyed, angry-looking rooster on the other. It was the kind of room anyone's grandmother would have no problems with.

Bookem motioned for Balliwick to sit between the two birds while he took a comfortable looking wide-armed dark-oak chair for himself. "Cozy, isn't it?" he asked, glancing around.

"Yeah," said Balliwick as he also looked around. "Kinda relaxing. Reminds me of Henny's place. I gotta call that old gal when I get back her way."

Bookem cut in. "François told me you know the face in the hologram, Lieutenant Gron. I want you to tell me just how it was you came to make his acquaintance. And, please, Mr. Balliwick, it's important you leave no detail out. OK?"

Balliwick nodded. "OK, but I have a touch of amnesia and my memory's kinda fuzzy." He tapped his right temple with his right forefinger. Bookem said gently, "That's okay . . . you just do the best you can now."

"Well, lemme see. Where do I start? . . . I guess it began with the pig mask party. Yeah, definitely. The pig mask party." Bookem's eyebrows went up a bit, but he didn't interrupt. Pig mask party? He thought.

"It's very fudgy, the amnesia you know, but these two guys, see? . . . wanted to take me to a pig mask party, but I wouldn't go with 'em 'cause they refused to sing along with me. Even though I asked them real polite . . . like my Momma taught me. "Bookem thought, what the bloody Hell is this fool prattling on about? But he let Balliwick continue.

"Then they got real pissy like and threw me in the trunk of their car." Oh, thought

Bookem who had read the kidnap report. "Well, next thing I knew, I wake up in a dark room with a dead pig. Cute little fella, he had real nice soft ears." Bookem was out to sea again. Had one of the aliens died? But he again held his tongue.

"I did the proper thing and read him his last rites, just like on TV, so he could get into hog heaven." Bookem just nodded, as if that's what he would have done if it had been him. Balliwick continued.

"Well, I couldn't think of no good proper prayer to say, so I used the only one I could think of . . . This little piggy went to market. This little piggy stayed home." Bookem looked like he was in agony but he held his tongue. "This little piggy had roast beef. And this little piggy, bless him God, had none."

Don't rush him; Bookem reminded himself as he said, "That's a good one. I never would have thought of that one myself, I could honestly say." Then he prodded just a bit. "Tell me about Gron. When did you first meet him?"

Balliwick smiled. He had remembered something. "Wait, Mr. Bookem. I blessed the dead pig into hog heaven *after* I met Gron . . . and Grin. That's right, after . . . Hey! It's comin' back a bit!" He looked excited. Bookem looked interested.

Balliwick went on. "Yeah. They had come into the room, the room with me and the dead pig, and right away I spotted they were aliens. Oh, yeah . . . and their wonderful uniforms with all them fancy medals didn't fool me, either. No sirree." He leaned his head in closer to Bookem and said in almost a whisper. "I was on 'em right from the get-go, I can tell ya." He sat back. Bookem merely nodded and said, "And . . .?" He thought: Will I live long enough?

"Well, they gave me a real hard question 'n' answer test . . . which I passed with flying colors, I might add, and fed me a fantastic dinner. Roast chicken, mashed potatoes," here Bookem took his eyes off Balliwick and looked at the chicken pillow. You're lucky you can't hear this shit, he thought as Balliwick droned on, "smooth gravy, pearl onions, carrots and a nice slice of apple pie. It beat Healthy Choice by a mile, it did." Bookem nodded. They don't pay me enough, he thought.

"They offered me seconds, but I told 'em I didn't want to make a pig of myself, just the way my Momma taught me." Bookem asked, "You told them *that?* In *that* way?"

"Not in so many words, but they got the message OK." Bookem nodded and said, "Then what happened?" Balliwick thought a moment.

"Well, as they was leavin' I heard the high-pitched one say somethin' like, 'Gotta get 'im good and guttier for Grok' which I first thought was just their grunt-like talk, but later I figured it out. They wanted to fatten me up for their Grok thing to eat. Just like farmers fatten up a turkey for the holidays. You know?" Bookem knew. He nodded twice to show it.

Balliwick cocked his head to one side and winked conspiratorially at Bookem. "That's when I planned my great escape!" Bookem merely said, "Really?" I gotta hear this!

"Yeah! I hollowed out the dead pig so I could hide from the aliens in it! Clever, huh?" Bookem wasn't too sure. He asked, "With your bare hands?" He pictured it. Ugh.

"Nah! I sharpened my belt buckle on the cement floor." He had said it as if any idiot

should know that. "Then I carved out the pig and climbed inside. And, man, let me tell ya, it was hotter than Hell in there!" Bookem imagined it would be. Double ugh. Sometimes, he thought, death is the better choice. But now he was curious. "What did you do with all the mess you took out?" Triple ugh.

"Well, I threw the big parts under the cot to hide 'em and covered the bloody floor over with straw." Straw? Thought Bookem, where the frig did he get enough straw from? He didn't really want to know. But he just had to ask, "Where did you get all the straw from?"

"The whole floor was piled up with the stuff. Real deep, too." He said it as if he had seen many a straw-covered floor in his day. Bookem looked over at the rooster. Tell me, crower, he thought, why would the aliens go to the trouble of covering a floor with straw? The rooster didn't know, either so Bookem said, "Go on, Mr. Balliwick."

"Well, now . . . I remember hearin' 'em comin' into the room but the only next thing I remember is being at a family barbeque campgrounds. I woke up still in the dead pig. And then ran my ass off I can tell ya." Bookem had no idea what had happened to Balliwick, but he was sure of one thing. Balliwick had somehow managed to fool the aliens and escape. By hiding in a hollowed-out dead pig's cadaver. Quadruple ugh.

Balliwick then added, "That's when I realized I had the amnesia thing." Bookem listened. This schmuck, he thought, just might be stupid enough to stay alive . . . and save my bacon in the doing.

He leaned toward Balliwick and said, "Mr. Balliwick, I have to tell you. James Bond couldn't have done it any better. Your escape was more than just brilliant, it was . . . inspired!" He beamed at Balliwick.

Balliwick beamed back. "I got the idea from MacGiver reruns! You know, where MacGiver only needs a screwdriver, some Scotch tape and a thumbtack to blast his way out of a tight spot?" Bookem knew, but he just couldn't imagine an episode in which MacGiver would ever hide inside a hollowed-out dead pig. To get Balliwick back on track, he asked, "What happened after the campgrounds?"

"Well, I guess with the amnesia and all, I imagined I lived on Magnolia Lane, you know, Ms. Higga . . . Hogga . . . uh . . . Henny's house, so I headed over there. Since I was a real mess I thought I'd go home and clean myself up a bit." Bookem was now up to speed. He knew that was where Balliwick had made his second spy cam appearance. And had made an old woman happier than she had the legal right to be.

"Thank you, Mr. Balliwick, for filling me in. You've told me a most fascinating story and I appreciate it greatly. But now I'm going to leave you in François' capable hands." He stood up and looked down at Balliwick. "After François has you all dolled up, we'll have a nice little chat and I'll fill you in . . . on your secret mission. OK?" He winked at Balliwick.

Balliwick winked back. "Sure, Mr. Bookem. I'm lookin' forward to it, I am." Bookem went through the door and Balliwick could hear him say, "He's all yours, François. Treat him gently." After a "oui, oui, but of course," from François, Bookem added, "And call me when he turns into Lieutenant Gron. OK?" Balliwick couldn't hear François nod.

Balliwick sat back, tugged on his left ear lobe, picked up the chicken pillow and held it out at arms length.

He said to the bird, "Groon grooga, grib gabboes, giss grel, gruff gogs, gallys gi gamo gak." Roast chicken, mashed potatoes . . . "

"The man who cried alien!"

Chief Melrose was at his desk trying to figure out something extremely important. And he knew just whom he could get to help him.

"Hey, Moldon," he yelled to the officer who was at his desk just outside the Chief's office. "What was the name of that Hungarian woman who warned people not to go to the castle?" Moldon yelled back, "You mean in the old black and white films?" The Chief hollered back, "Yes."

Moldon yelled back, "You mean the old woman who would come out of the woods and say to the young couple in the horse drawn carriage, 'Don't go to the castle or you will die!'" The Chief yelled back, "Yes, her, what was her name?"

Moldon yelled, "And the horses would rear up and whinny? Her?" The Chief yelled back, "Yeah, her, damn it, what was her name? It's driving me crazy."

"Sharon Stone!" Moldon yelled. The Chief grimaced. Always the clown that Moldon. "Moldon," he hollered, "how'd you like traffic duty down by the docks for a few nice weekends?"

"Maria Ouspenskaya, Chief, but I don't know if she was Hungarian or not." The Chief didn't care; all he wanted was the name that was driving him nuts. "Thanks, Mold, I knew I could count on you." The Chief penciled in O-U-S-P-E-N-S in seven across of the crossword puzzle in front of him. He called to Moldon, "Is it ess kay _ why _?" He heard Moldon holler a yes so he filled the four remaining spaces in.

Almost done. All he needed was a three-letter word that meant needlefish. It began with a gee and ended with an ar. G--R. He pondered. Gar, Ger, Gir, Gor, Gur, and Gyr. Shit, it could be any one of them. What name would he give to a needlefish if he had too? "Moldon! Needlefish, three letters beginning with a gee." He heard back immediately, "Gar, Chief." Shit, the Chief thought, the key to having a good memory is to surround yourself with people who do. Like Moldy and his Melon. Another puzzle knocked off. He felt pleased with himself.

Moldon got up from his desk and went over to where Sniffer sat. "Sniff, I've softened old Poopy Pants up. Why don't we go see if he's in a mood to accept pig-faced aliens?"

"Well, what do you two want? You look like two kids at the teacher's desk." the Chief said to the two sheepish looking detectives who now stood at his doorway. "Just a word, Chief." Said Sniffer. The Chief nodded so they approached his desk. Both men stood there looking dopey. Moldon put his hands in and out of his pockets. Sniffer twirled a pencil. "Well?" the Chief said. "And, make it snappy, can't you see how busy I am?" He had covered the puzzle with a police report folder. Moldon wasn't fooled.

"Well, Chief," Sniffer began. "I . . . we . . . we've got something to report to you on

those aliens Bookem mentioned to you and . . . " The Chief held a hand up.

There were two words the Chief was in no mood to hear: Aliens and Bookem. He scowled at both men and said, "That crap again! What's it this time, Sniffer, you go and get your ass abducted and you're now pregnant with an alien's baby?" The Chief grinned. He liked how he had put it.

"Does it show, Chief?" Sniffer asked as he rubbed his stomach. "'Cause I need some fatherly advice. Should we marry or just live together?" Moldon chuckled but cut it short when he saw the Chief's face. He did not look like a happy camper. Or a softened-up Chief, either, you betcha.

"Sorry, Chief," said Sniffer. "Humor runs in my family. It's genetic or something. Well, anyway, let me cut to the chase and stop wasting your valuable time. OK?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Ms. Prissyfoot, the schoolteacher who witnessed Balliwick's kidnap? Well, she was sightseeing the vacant apartment next to hers when she was grabbed, drugged, and tied up by a pig-faced alien . . . in full military dress. The alien that is, Sir, not her." Moldon chuckled. He remembered the old Groucho Marx line: "Last night I shot a bear in my pajamas. What he was doing in my pajamas, I don't know."

The Chief said dryly, "And he killed her for eating his porridge. Right?" The Chief had a look on his face that could have said: I gotta tighten up the rules about drinking on duty. He frowned and waited for Sniffer to answer.

"No, Chief, she escaped and called me." He left out his and Moldon's involvement. He also made a mental note to clue Pooty in, just in case. He hated lying to the Chief, but he didn't want to have to explain how it was he and Moldon took the time to go on a lark of hunches for a slightly missing Pooty. The Chief started to speak. "Sniffer, I am tired of . . ." Sniffer cut him off.

"Chief, forgive me, but I *gotta* fill you in. This could also be connected to Fuggit's disappearance." The Chief's face showed a glimmer of interest. Sniffer went on. "First, the teacher sees Balliwick being taken by two pig-faced men. She also said a cop was zapped by a bright light and he fell to the ground. Now, Fuggit wasn't missing so I figure they probably used a laser-type gun set only on stun or something." Even Sniffer knew he was starting to sound spacey and Star Trekky. But he went forward in spite of it.

"Anyway, next, both Dusty Miller and that Fiona Candlestick, or whatever, sees a bright light, pig-faced people, and a body on the ground. And they both say it took place in the alley behind the vacant apartment's building." Sniffer thought it was sounding more plausible so he pushed it.

"Chief, I think the aliens were using that vacant apartment as a base or something. Fuggit, who's beat covers that building, might have wised to them and got zapped for his trouble. I hate to say it, but he's probably dead. Especially since it looks as if he was the guy on the ground that Dusty Miller saw as a cop and Candlestick saw as a body. And the teach goes in to look the apartment over and gets grabbed."

Moldon, wanted to be helpful so he chimed in. "And, Chief, don't forget . . . Balliwick managed, somehow, to escape from the two pig-faced men. Then Bookem shows up and has a burning desire to get his hands on Balliwick. Why? Because the FBI now has

a peeping Tom division? No, Chief, I believe Bookem somehow learned of Balliwick's kidnapping by the pig-faced men and he wanted to question him about that. Remember his NASA photos? And his invasion talk? And his spy cam of a Balliwick look alike?" The look on the Chief's face told him perhaps he'd pushed too much. He handed the Chief a piece of paper. "Look this over, Chief. See what you make of it all."

The Chief looked at:

1. Prissyfoot witnesses Balliwick kidnapping. By two pig-faced men. Cop zapped by bright flash. In front of 745 Columbus Street.
2. Fuggit disappears. His beat covers Columbus Street.
3. Dusty Miller sees a bright flash and sees cop on ground (Fuggit?) in alley behind 745 Columbus Street who later disappears. Pig-faced man also disappears. (Did he go up the fire escape to get to the apartment (3F)? The same apartment where the teacher was taken.)
4. Fiona Fandlecandle sees bright light coming in her window. Sees a man on the ground that she says looks dead (Fuggit?). Also sees a pig-faced man in the shadows of the same alley behind 745 Columbus Street.
5. Balliwick escapes the two pig-faced men. Gets arrested in front of 745 Columbus Street.
6. Bookem wants Balliwick. Has photos of Balliwick in a pig mask. Alien invasion stuff.
7. Prissyfoot gets grabbed, drugged, and tied up. By a pig-faced man. In a vacant apartment (3F) at 745 Columbus Street that is above the same said alley.
8. So, unless the town's new welcoming act is pig-faced men, bright laser lights, and disappearing people, we just might have an alien invasion-taking place.

Sniffer had contributed point 8.

The Chief read it. Then he read it again. And once more. He looked up at the two men. His face looked serious.

"All right," he said, "You've got something crazy plausible here. I'll give you that. But we have a problem. No evidence. Of any kind. We have an old woman who probably has eye problems and a drunken wino who definitely has eye problems. And we can't question Balliwick for more details because Bookem has him and we don't even know where he has him." He paused and scratched his chin. "So, that leaves Prissyfoot. And you, Sniffer, Remember? Thought she had one too many after-class libations." Who knew, Sniffer thought, that it would come back to bite my ass? The Chief went on.

"But there are enough truths in this," he rattled Moldon's paper in the air, "to make me

think that maybe, just maybe, this has something to do with Fuggit's disappearance. And to that end, I'll chase a few wild geese. Mind you, I still don't think aliens are involved in all of this. But it could be a cult of some kind, you know, who use pig-masks to hide their faces. Maybe they make pig sacrifices. Or even human ones. Whatever. Cults can be very deadly, as we all know. So, we'll look into it." He looked at Moldon and said:

"Moldy, send forensics to that apartment. See what they can learn. Also have them give that alley a good going over. Who knows, eh?" He turned to Sniffer. "Sniff, have the teacher come in. I'd like to talk to her myself. Get a first-hand read on her, you know, to check her veracity." Sniffer merely said, "Sure, Chief." He looked ill.

The Chief then said, "By the way, here's something else to chew on. The FBI never heard of Bookem. If that's his name. But I just thought of something. His prints are all over those NASA photos he left with me. Run 'em, Moldy," he grinned, "and let's find out just who this character really is. OK?" Moldon grinned back and said, "You got it, Chief." The Chief grinned back at him again as if they shared an inside joke. Sniffer still looked ill. The Chief motioned with a hand that said go and get on it.

"And guys?" the Chief asked. "Before I can take this to the higher-ups, I'll need much more than some hi-falutin' tale that anyone in their right mind would have to be crazy to swallow. And, please, no fanciful stories of pigs that can fly. So, bring me facts, gentlemen, concrete facts."

Aliens, my ass, the Chief thought. But deep down he had an inkling . . .

"The man who wasn't there when he was there!"

THE PHONE RANG and Sniffer picked it up. "Homici . . . Robber . . . Grand Sex Auto Division. Detective Sniffer here. How may I help you?"

"Grand Sex Auto? You doin' it in your car again, Clu?"

"Oh. Hi Cantie. Sorry, I don't know what division I'm supposed to be . . . did I really say grand sex auto?"

"Yep. Sure did," she paused. "Grinny's dead, Clu." she said it flatly and with no emotion.

"Now, Cantie, if that's true, I'da heard it before you and I ain't heard a thing. If it . . ."

"He told me so himself, Clu." Oh, God, thought Sniffer as he asked, "He did? When?"

"Last night. He shook me awake," oh, he thought, "and there he was just sitting on the edge of the bed. He looked terrific, Clu. Brand new uniform and all." Dear Cantie, he thought as she went on.

"He told me he was in a great place and very happy and I shouldn't worry about him . . . but just go and get on with my life." All Sniffer could say was, "Uh huh." He thought, Sweet Cantie.

"He said he would watch over me and protect me from any harm." Dear, sweet Cantie.

"Tell me, Cantie," he said gently, "If he spoke to you, he probably told you how he died. Did he?" He shouldn't push her, but he felt he had to. Before she came apart at the

seams. She was either delusional or in denial and possibly both. She had sounded calm up to this point, but he felt the undercurrents of her pain.

"Oh, yes, Clu," she said simply. "And he told me to tell you, too. That's one of the reasons for my call." Sniffer was tempted to throw something in, but he knew she'd go on so he just let her.

"He told me he was killed in the alley, right behind Earl's, by a big man with a pig's face and . . ."

"You *sure* he said pig's face, Cantie?" Good God, he thought, I sound like I believe she *really* talked to Fuggy!

"Yeah, Clu. And he said the guy killed him with a bright light that shot out of his hand. He said to be sure I told you, Clu. He said you'd know what to make of it." Jumpin' Jesus, thought Sniffer, I'm getting leads from a dead man! If he *is* dead. This is weirder than weird should get.

"Cantie? I'm glad you told me. But I want you to keep a level head about this. OK? Because until we know for sure, one way or the other, I don't want you to go and get all worked up. It coulda been a dream, Cantie . . . you know?"

"It was *no* dream, Clu. Grinny told me something he'd never told me before. That he had bonds he had inherited, before we married, and they were being held for him by a lawyer named Griner." She took a breath. "He was saving those as a surprise for when he retired so we would have it easier. He said they were worth over fifty thousand dollars, Clu."

"Really?" he sounded surprised. And he was.

"Yes. Grinny gave me the phone number and I called Griner. He sent them over by messenger. I've got them right here in front of me. They're real, Clu. Just like Grinny was real last night." Well, I'll be, he thought.

"Geez, Cantie, this is stranger than strange, you know?" She knew.

He then said, "Listen, Cant, the Chief is signaling me. I gotta go, but I appreciate your telling me this. I can't talk now, but what you've told me fits in with some other things going on. I'll try to get over there and fill you in on it. But for now, Cantie dear, you take care of yourself. OK?"

"OK, Clu. I'll see you then. And you can see the bonds for yourself." He said goodbye and just stared at the phone in his hand. He stared so hard he didn't hear the Chief when he yelled, "Sniffer, get your dumb ass in here!"

He just stared at the phone some more . . .

"Don't get your snout bent all out of shape!"

"ABSOLUTELY AMAZING, FRANÇOIS," Bookem said as he looked at Balliwick's new face. "Gron's own mother would be fooled by him."

François smiled. "Oui, oui. I have outdone myself on zis one, if I may say so. He was, how you say? zee tough nut to crack." He pushed in a little piece of the mask to finish it

off. "His misshapen head does not lend itself so easily to the final product, but as you can see, my artistry knows no bounds." He stepped back to admire his artistry.

"So true, so true, François," Bookem said, "But now I must steal him from you so he and I can have a little chat. Are you finished with him for now, François? As I told you, the hands can wait for a later time." François nodded.

Bookem said, "Good. Now Mr. Balliwick, or should I say Lieutenant Gron? --If you'll come with me I'll fill you in as I promised you I would. OK?" Balliwick said, "Sure, Mr. Bookem, anything you say." He stood and followed Bookem to the door. Bookem looked over his shoulder at Balliwick and muttered to himself, "Amazing, absolutely amazing."

He took Balliwick to a private conference room to which Bookem had the only keycard. He sat Balliwick at one side of a very long table. He looked down at him and said, almost in a whisper, "Amazing, absolutely amazing." Then he took the chair to Balliwick's left. On the table were numerous folders and a pile of photographs.

There was also a remote control that operated a VCR. It sat on top of a TV whose screen was embedded into the wall to the right of them. Bookem picked up the remote and pressed a button. The TV screen immediately came to life. Lieutenant Gron and seven other Groinkians appeared. He was the only one in an officer's uniform.

Gron prodded them, or so it seemed, to work harder and faster as the seven noncoms unloaded boxes and crates from the back of a large truck. On the side of the truck were the initials: G.O.D. Gron did not appear very happy in the least.

"There's your twin, Mr. Balliwick," Bookem said. "Study him. Notice how he rotates his snout clockwise? That shows his pique."

Balliwick had a confused look on his face. "Peek?" he asked. "What's he peeking at?" Bookem chuckled.

"Pique, Mr. Balliwick, shows he's chagrined . . . no, wrong word . . . pique means he takes umbrage . . . uh . . . wrong again . . . he's pissed." Balliwick said, "Oh."

Then Balliwick asked, "What's it mean if he rotates it the other way?"

Bookem shocked him. "Kiss me, Mr. Balliwick." he said flatly.

"What? Hey, I don't go that route fella. Now, I don't put you homogenized guys down . . . live and let live, I say, but it just ain't *my* bag. Comprendo?"

Bookem laughed. "No, No, Mr. Balliwick, Ha Ha . . . that's not what I meant. What I meant was if a Groinkian turns his snout counterclockwise, or as you put it, the other way, it means he wants a kiss. And, also that he's not pissed. Get it?" Balliwick put out another "Oh." Bookem laughed again. Balliwick also laughed. "Sorry, Mr. Bookem."

"That's OK. No offense taken. And I'm glad you have such a liberal attitude toward homogenized folk." He laughed again. So did Balliwick, but he didn't know why.

Bookem's face turned serious. "Now, Mr. Balliwick, let's get to the good stuff, shall we?" Balliwick nodded as Bookem turned off the TV and continued. "Arrangements have already been made to have Gron picked up and taken to a place of confinement." Bookem had contacted the FBI and they had agreed to the plan. "There, we will confiscate his ID papers and his uniform, which we will have tailored to fit you." Bookem paused to let it sink in.

"Now, since Gron is about ten pounds heavier than you, we'll use a little padding. The problem comes in, however, with the differences in your height. Gron is about four and one-quarter inches taller than you. It took us a while, I can tell you, but we finally solved that little chestnut.

"Now, listen carefully," he paused to make sure he had Balliwick's full attention and that his mind hadn't wandered as it usually did, "we're going to fix you up with bell-bottomed trousers, such as they wore in the seventies." Balliwick nodded. He liked the idea.

"This will allow us to give your shoes four inch lifts that will be effectively concealed by the bellbottoms. Now . . . here's an extremely important part." He looked right into Balliwick's eyes. "Don't wait for anyone to ask you *about* the bellbottoms. Beat them to the punch by establishing very early on that you saw this style on TV and you took to it. Do you understand the importance of that?" Balliwick nodded.

Bookem said, "I'd like to hear you say it out loud, please, so I know you comprehend. This could kill the plan from the start . . . and you along with it."

"Yes, Mr. Bookem. I got it. By beatin' 'em to the punch it arouses less suspicion on their part." Bookem was stunned. And surprised. "Good, Mr. Balliwick, very good, indeed." Will wonders never cease, he thought.

Bookem continued. "Now, another minor ticklish point. Your voice, in Groinkian, is slightly lower than Gron's. So, Doc Razor will have to go back in and make some very minor adjustments to the device. It will be quick and painless, I guarantee."

Balliwick surprised him again. "Sure. Why not? If its gotta be done, its gotta be done."

"Now, Mr. Balliwick," Bookem said. "Once we get you placed into Gron's cell, we expect you will find many things of interest that you can get to us. Later, someone will go over exactly what it is we would care about. Such as their future plans, codebooks, landing sights, and so forth. When François gets you set up with Groinkian hands, we will put a small camera into the hoof pouch," Balliwick had nodded throughout, "and we'll teach you how to operate it. Quite easy, really."

Bookem went on. "Someone else will fill you in on all of Gron's little nuances, his body movements, how he puts a hoofhand to his forehead, and the like. But I can now give you a small preview, if you will, of a couple of important points to remember. First. Gron has seven cell members, all non-officers, Corporals and Privates, directly under him. They carry out all his orders and Gron rarely sees the rest of the cell members. Now, Gron is a veritable taskmaster. He rules them with an iron fist. He'll strut angrily around a room as if he wants to bite someone's head off. Learn to imitate *that* about him and you should have no problems with the underlings. They have been trained to follow orders without ever questioning them." Balliwick nodded and said, "Just like the Nazis." Bookem nodded, pleased with Balliwick, and continued.

"Second. Gron *never*, but *never* allows himself to get chummy with any of them. He doesn't socialize with them. Doesn't drink with them, eat with them, or even share a funny story or joke with them. In other words, he keeps himself totally insulated and apart from them. Got that?" Balliwick nodded. Then said, "That'll be hard. I'll have to work on curbin' my naturally outgoin' personality." Bookem simply said, "Good idea."

Then said, "Now, Mr. Balliwick, I'd like to fill you in somewhat on his seven henchman. If you would kindly look at the seven photographs here," he tapped a pile of pictures, "I'll go over them with you." Bookem took the photographs and slapped them, one by one, onto the table. He also looked at his watch.

"This is Corporal Griv. *Slap!* This one is Corporal Grof. *Slap!* And this is Corporal Gril. *Slap!* The rest are Privates. There's Grab. *Slap!* There's Grit. *Slap!* Here's Grox. *Slap!* And last, we have Private Grod." *Slap!*

"Great grief," said Balliwick, "The seven Groinks!" He smiled at Bookem.

Bookem said, "Yeah, but Gron's no Snow White!" Balliwick chuckled. Then asked, "How am I going to learn all these same-sounding names, Mr. Bookem?" He looked very concerned. "I mean with my amnesia and all."

"You won't have to. They wear name tags at all times. I guess Gron can't remember them, either!" He then added, "This is a four-letter name type cell. They also have five, six, and seven-name cells, and so forth. Why they do it this way we can only guess. It might have something to do with making their record keeping easier. Who knows?"

Bookem went on. "The longest name cell, that we know of, is eighteen letters. It's run by a Lieutenant," he looked at his notes, "Grugga . . . goose . . . ga . . . groon. Gruggagoose . . . ga . . . groon! Whew! . . . Oh, he goes by the nickname of Goon." Balliwick said, "I'm happy I ain't in that one!" Bookem laughed and said, "Me, too!"

"Well, Mr. Balliwick, I'm basically finished with you for now. If you have any questions just ask Karl to get in touch with me. OK?" Balliwick nodded. "And once you're in the cell, you can always get in touch with us by taking a walk down the long path you'll find behind the house. There will always be someone there at the end of this path. No one will question you if you tell them you want to stretch your legs and think. Just yell it at them. OK?" Balliwick grinned. He would enjoy that part.

"Now, my dear Balliwick, I will take my leave of you. Someone will be right in to play more tapes and to help you in your imitation of Lieutenant Gron. OK?" Balliwick nodded and said, "Sure, Mr. Bookem, I like watching TV." Oy vey, thought Bookem.

After Bookem left the room, Balliwick heard him say from the corridor, "Ha ha, homogenized! Ha ha ha!" Balliwick thought that it wasn't right for Mr. Bookem to laugh at those people.

Balliwick picked up the remote and hit the play button. Gron and the seven Groinks came back on. Then there was a close up of Gron's face, magnifying the square mole he now shared with Balliwick. Balliwick stood and raised a fist toward the screen.

He shook the fist and said, "*You seven creeps don't follow my orders, I'll sue your rat bastard asses off. You hearing me?*" They didn't now, but they soon enough would . . .

"It's only Spam, Ma'am!"

WHEN POOTY SAID, "This place could sure use a woman's touch, Darlin'," Sniffer couldn't resist. "Know any women I could touch?"

He smiled at her with a lecherous look on his face. She ignored him. She was too

busy eyeing the place over. Picturing the possibilities. A picture here. A doodad there. He could almost see her mind working at it. And he loved it.

Later, after she had unpacked and settled in, Sniffer made them dinner. With a grease-stained recipe card in front of him, he made homemade meatballs. She played sou chef by boiling water for the spaghetti, preparing a small, simple salad, and setting the table. "Needs a nice centerpiece of flowers." she said.

He said dryly, "Of course it does, Hon, that table's been needing a floral centerpiece for years now." Then he added playfully, "Know any woman whose centerpiece I can touch?" He laughed while rolling another meatball. He made them golf ball size, just as he'd made them at this Momma's request when he helped her in the kitchen.

From behind his back he heard, "Hee hee. You silly goose. Stop thinking of touching other women and keep your mind on those balls of yours. And stop playing with them."

He laughed and said, "I'm not playing with my balls, Sweetheart, I'm shaping 'em." He knew she hadn't realized what she'd said.

She said, "Oh! I see! Hee hee. I meant . . ." His loud laugh cut her off. He came out of the kitchen, walked right up to her and planted a quick, hard kiss on her lips. One of those kind of kisses, without the tongue, that says, God, I think you're cute and I love you somethin' fierce right now. Then he said, an evil look on his face, "Wanna come in the kitchen little girl and check 'em out?" He winked at her.

"Oh, sure," she said coyly. "I can't wait to see them hit the hot frying pan." He shammed a wince and a look of pain. "Ouch!" he said. She giggled. "Hee hee."

After dinner, she asked if she could use his computer to check her e-mail. He said OK and she went and got her e-mail retrieval program from her overnighter suitcase. She had the program on both a floppy and a CD-Rom disk, as she never knew what a hotel had in the way of program installations. Many hotels PC's still lacked a CD Rom drive.

Sniffer's PC did have a CD Rom drive, but modernization ended there. She noted he had only 32 MB's of ram on a hard drive with a mere 40 MB's of storage. And his Internet service provider was using up most of the storage. It left him with 6 MB's to do whatever he wanted with. A dinosaur, she thought, just like him. Hee hee.

Sniffer saw the smirk on her face and asked, "What's so funny, Honey?"

She looked at him and grinned. "I'm not saying this machine is ancient, Clu, but I think they used it to program the design of the first wheel. Hee hee." Then she added, "Or maybe how to start a fire." She laughed and added, "Clu, when this machine was built, mankind hadn't yet learned how to walk erect. Hee hee." She was enjoying herself. He was too. He had a dopey look on his face and looked like a man in love.

"Think that's funny?" he said. "Wait'll you see my e-mail!" She put her CD Rom disk into the drive and installed the retrieval program. She hoped he had enough ram to spare to let the program run. He did. By a whisker probably. But would it let AOL run. It needed about 9 Megs of ram just to get to its home page. She lucked out. AOL's screen came up. His You've Got Mail was lit up. She clicked it. Holy cow!

The screen was filled with incoming. She clicked for the next screen and then about

twenty or so more screens after that. All filled. She clicked a few more. Filled. She clicked some more. Filled. It seemed to go on forever. Five more clicks and five more filled screens convinced her to give up. It had no end. Thousands, probably.

She asked him quizzically, "Clu, do you ever check your e-mail?"

"I did in the beginning. Around the time of the wheel and fire. But, all I ever got was advertisements. Lots of 'em. And since no one ever sends me e-mail, I just never got around to deleting them all. Work reaches me by pager, so what did I need it for?" He'd said it matter-of-factly as if it made perfect sense. Which it did to him.

He added, "And, if I want to send e-mail, which I do infrequently, I use the computer at work." He was thinking of the poem he'd sent her. Which she had yet to see.

"And," he said. "I hate those chat rooms. Tried a few, in the beginning, and it seemed as if they were all kids, children. Fifty year olds saying, 'Ain't that groovy!' And 'That's real rad, dude!' Not my idea of a chat, know what I mean?" Pooty did. She'd been there, too. Everyone tried to talk at the same time, too. So, you never knew what the subject was without a scorecard. She'd found better chats in the gardening clubs. But, she knew Sniffer wasn't of that ilk.

She said, "Makes sense." Tomorrow, she thought, while he's at work, I'm going to go in and delete all this junk. Shouldn't take more than a month. She double-clicked her retrieval program and selected her e-mail location. A moment later her e-mail popped up. Her first screen was filled, too. She scrolled down. Only a few more. Like normal folk.

With Sniffer looking over her shoulder, she scanned the list. Lots of Spam. Plus three from the school, one from her mother. And one from a Sniffer. "Ooh," she said. "You sent me a letter!" She opened it. It was from, CSniffer@Police1.gov. She read:

You make me feel like skipping,
All along the street.
With a heart that's gaily tripping,
Thank God it's not my feet!

Then little Sniffer, aged 44, says, "Thank you, Ma'am." and bows from the waist.

"Hee hee," she said as she turned and kissed him on the cheek. "I love it, Clu." Good, he thought. "I wrote it in a moment of wild inspiration." Screw Moldy.

She checked the school's messages to get them out of the way. Nothing important. Scheduling stuff she already knew about. She deleted them. Her Mom's message was a recipe for her famous Golden Chiffon Upside Down with Downside Up 3 layer cake. It was yummy. She couldn't wait to make it for Clu. Her man. She saved it. Then there was the Spam. Lots of it. Twenty or more.

Sniffer said, "Maybe I'll get that one for your birthday." He pointed to a line that read: Universal Turbo Vibrator with 22 speeds. He said, "Open it for kicks." She did.

For only \$99.95 one could purchase the new Model 6, which had twenty two speeds.

From "Just tickle me!" to "Is it legal to marry a mechanical device?" They laughed. She deleted it and said, "I should have saved it. Never know when you're going to run out of steam."

He said, "Me? Nah! I invented steam. Right on this PC a thousand years ago."

She said, "Here's one for you, Hon." It read: New Generic Viagra Eyewash. She opened it. The eyewash promised to get a new rise out of your man." For only \$69.95 for a full month's supply. He said, "Save it! I've always wanted harder eyes!" She giggled as she hit delete.

"Well, smarty," Sniffer said. "Here's another one for you." He pointed to it. It read: New! Magical Menopausal Mind Tricks! She hit delete. "My mother didn't get the change until she was forty five. That gives me ten more years . . . if I'm anything like her. By then I'm sure the book will have been upgraded. And reduced in price." She giggled. He kissed the top of her head. She felt as if the kiss meant: Menopause, schmenopause, I'll love you no matter what. She liked that feeling.

The rest of the Spam wasn't as interesting. Except, perhaps, the three from porn sites. He didn't comment on them, nor did he ask her to open them up. Smart cop.

He said he was going to take a shower. He didn't ask her to join him. Later for that. She said she'd play with the computer for a bit and take her shower after his. He kissed the top of her head again and left.

She went back to his e-mail fiasco and started to delete screen after screen. She'd scan the screen to see if there was anything that looked important, then delete. On the fifth screen she saw one from Moldon. She didn't think he'd mind, so she opened it.

It read: hey sniffo - here's the print report on bookem - seems he's one peter marchand, london, eng. i tried to run him thru the data base - u need a passwd to see his crap. he could be mi5, old beano. i left a copy of the full report on your desk so you'll see it manana. see ya. mm

She saved it to his filing cabinet and continued deleting . . .

"In one ear and out the other!"

LIEUTENANT GRON had been in charge of his new cell for less than a week when the FBI grabbed him.

It was easy. Gron's overconfidence played a big part. Behind the cell's house was a long walk path. Gron would walk it everyday and whether it was to stretch his legs or just think didn't matter much. What mattered was he took the stroll without any guards. On his last walk, so to speak, he was quickly and silently grabbed.

Bookem gave Balliwick a small pep talk and reminded him how to act. And just what to try to collect in the way of useful data and stuff. Then Balliwick was off. He pulled on both ear lobes and made the walk back. He could now hear and speak in Groinkian. As Bookem watched him go, he crossed himself. Just like they do on TV.

Halfway through the walk, Balliwick put his hands behind his back as he had noticed Gron had done. And he practiced scowling. He wished he could rotate his snout, but he

had no way of doing so. In a way, he was also glad. Because he couldn't remember now which direction the snout should go to show pique. With my luck, he thought, I'd probably ask one of the Corporals for a smooch. He laughed to himself.

He also practiced a few barked orders at a few unsuspecting trees. He told them in Groinkian, to stand at attention. The trees looked as if they had obeyed. He also told them to shape up or ship out. Stand up and be counted. And damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead. He was about to tell a small bush to drop and give him fifty pushups when he noticed the house wasn't too far off. He'd have to save that one for later.

Just before he entered the house, he thought: Left lobe to talk, right lobe to hear. Simple. Pull again to switch. Simple. That was about all he remembered from the E-Z instruction sheet. Except for a vivid recollection of the model's firm breasts.

Once inside the house he became a veritable Simon Legree, a relentless taskmaster. He had the seven Groinks line up in a row at full attention. He made them do pushups. He made them play leapfrog. When it seemed they were enjoying this too much, he ordered them to march double time around the living room. In a circle.

In Groinkian he told them they were getting flabby and unfit as warrior soldiers. He cursed them. He insulted them. And he loved every minute of it.

But enough is enough he thought. Down to business. He ordered Corporal Grof to bring him, as Bookem had suggested, the latest codebooks, all copies. He said he wanted to make sure they were up to snuff. Grof obediently complied. Less than ten minutes later, Balliwick was alone in Gron's office with the precious books.

From his hoof he took out the small camera. As he had been instructed, he spread the book wide open and photographed each double spread. There were only sixteen such spreads so they fit on one roll of film. Satisfied, he pocketed the camera and went out to the living room. He told them he was going for a walk to mull over the codebooks in his mind. To make sure there were no problems with them. No one challenged him.

At the end of the walk path, he was surprised to see Bookem himself sitting in a black sedan. Did Bookem never take time off? "Hi, Mr. Bookem," he said. Bookem's puzzled face made him realize it had come out in Groinkian so he tugged on his left lobe and repeated it. Bookem said hello back.

Then Bookem asked, "Do you have something for me, Mr. Balliwick?" Balliwick nodded and produced the camera. "It's the code book you wanted, Mr. Bookem."

"Really? So soon. I'm amazed, I am. Truly amazed. Good work, Bert." Balliwick beamed. He had called him Bert.

"Now, Bert, I'm going to have this stuff developed. You go back before they get wise to something and keep up the good work." Then he added, "Agent Balliwick." Balliwick beamed. "Thank you, Sir. I'll do my best." They shook hands. Then Balliwick watched Bookem drive off.

He started back up the path with lightness to his step. Bert, he thought, Mr. Bookem called me Bert. He felt terrific. First day on the job and he had made the boss happy.

Then he reminded himself not to be too happy. He still had to go back to the cell house and play the role of Mr. Hardass. To aliens who would kill him in a second.

When he was less than six feet from the house's back door, he remembered something he'd forgotten to do in the excitement and pleasure of his big moment. Something that, if forgotten, could have spelled trouble with a capital T.

He straightened his uniform, tugged on his left ear lobe, and entered . . .

"I wish all you people would just go away!"

WITH WINTER right around the corner, people started to up and disappear.

Two hikers in the mountains of Colorado vanished. Their disappearance only made the local newspaper. Then four seniors playing bridge went AWOL. This also appeared only in the local rag. Other minor disappearances followed. No one took notice.

The major media didn't get involved until a busload of boy scouts went south, twenty four in all. All they found was an empty yellow bus. On the heels of this came the mysterious disappearance of two hundred and ten people on board a ferry. The ferry had left its home dock for a two hour trip up river. They found the ferry adrift and void of people, its motor on idle. Many more such events took place.

The President called in the FBI, the CIA, the NSA, and various scientists and analysts. The President informed those who did not know that the Groinkians were behind it. He backed it up by showing a film clip of Lieutenant Gron in FBI custody.

It showed Gron being interrogated by an Agent. To no avail. Gron would give no more than his name, rank, and serial number. Even when threatened with death by one frustrated Agent, all Gron would do was grin.

When told he could have a lawyer present to represent his interests, he declined. Where he came from there was never a need for lawyers. They didn't exist. And he had heard that lawyers were the lowest form of life on Earth. Why on Groink would he ever want to be defended by *that*?

The only positive note from Gron came through his Grun-gun. FBI personnel had reverse engineered it. They could, if they so wished, now make the device. In quantity if needed.

Of course, many Groinkians were arrested in raids on the known cells. Bookem had supplied the FBI, and other groups, with detailed information as to location, in-charge personnel, rosters of members, and so on. The arrests now totaled in the thousands. But there were still many unknown cells and the work seemed never-ending.

The captured Groinkians were housed on Alcatraz. To keep them in line, they were told that Alcatraz was Spanish for pelican. Which was taken from Isla de Alcatrazes, Island of Pelicans. And only the pelican could get off the island safely. All attempts by prisoners in the past had ended with their rapid demise in the rushing currents of the San Francisco Bay.

It had been the President's idea to have the Groinkians guard themselves. "Why waste the manpower?" he had said. His plan was a simple one. First, show them a few Clint Eastwood movies in which he played 'Dirty' Harry Callahan. Establish firmly in the

Groinkian's minds that this is one tough mother who is surely a lot tougher than they are.

Thus the Groinkian's had the pleasure, you might say, of seeing *Dirty Harry*, *The Enforcer*, *Sudden Impact*, and *The Dead Pool*. All dubbed in Groinkian. All showing Eastwood clobbering bad guys, and in general, beating hopeless odds.

Second, pull the rug out from under them. With a fifth movie, *Escape from Alcatraz* which was based on the true story of Frank Morris (Eastwood) who may have been the only prisoner to escape the notorious Federal Prison. However . . .

The Groinkians didn't get to see their new hero quite this way. The Hollywood folks had tossed their hat into the ring. They dubbed in Harry Callahan's name over Frank Morris' and, with Eastwood's cooperation, the ending was changed to show his dead body washed up on the beach. The effect upon the Groinkians was startling. If 'Dirty' Harry couldn't make it, who could? Thus they guarded themselves. At a huge savings to the taxpayers. Good idea, Prez!

Thousands of Elvis sightings also occurred. Hundreds of people saw the exact image of Elvis. But as it was on a national level, spread far and wide, no one person put two and two together. News reports were sparse as most people were afraid to say they saw him, since it marked them as slightly kooky. If not outright nuts.

Elvis was seen at bowling alleys, supermarkets, convenience stores, and in most every Denny's and IHOPs. He had also been seen standing in line at banks, car washes, and advance ticket sales lines for Streisand's final farewell performance. Her twelfth.

Before total chaos set in, the President knew something had to be done . . .

"I didn't say that I said that. I said I didn't say that I said that! Is that clear?"

BALLIWICK was about to have a bad day. A really bad day.

A Major Grink had come to town to meet with Gron to review the landing sites for more of the Elvis transmutations. He went directly to Lieutenant Gron's cell. Gron was expecting him. Balliwick wasn't.

At the cell, and face to face with Balliwick, the Major said, in Groinkian, "Ah, Gron, you old dog. It's been a while. How are you?" Balliwick adroitly answered, "Gis Goti. Gol Grus?" Just fine, and you? He'd done well. So far.

Luckily for Balliwick, at this point anyway, the Major didn't have the time to reminisce their old times. He was in a hurry and all business. In Groinkian, he outlined his plans for six landing sites and pointed out the benefits of each.

Balliwick tried to listen, but the Major spoke too quickly. Balliwick was receiving the information so fast it was garbled. But he suspected it must be a good idea at least. After all, the man was a Major. So . . .

Balliwick wanted to compliment the Major by saying, in Groinkian: "I think you have a great idea there. Really great." But the Major had flustered him. He tugged an ear lobe. Now he was hearing in English and speaking in Groinkian. He tried to switch to hearing in Groinkian, but he pulled the wrong lobe. The Major had said something else in

Groinkian. Balliwick pulled another lobe. Then he tried the other. He couldn't seem to get the correct combination.

Balliwick started to talk, "I think . . ." Oops. He pulled another lobe. Now he couldn't understand the Major again. He pulled one lobe after the other. Pull, tug, tug, pull. Finally, and nervously, he spoke as he simultaneously pulled and tugged away, hoping he'd miraculously hit on the correct ear lobe setup.

It came out, "I think gri goffa a great grino there. Golla great."

The Major then said, in plain English, "Huh?" Balliwick tried to repeat himself in Groinkian only. He tugged here and pulled there and it came out, "I think you have a gissa grino there. Golla gissa." Oops.

Balliwick sweated profusely under the mask. He couldn't remember a thing from the E-Z instruction sheet. Except the model's smile and nicely shaped tits. He couldn't even remember that talk has an "L" in it and hear has an "R." He pulled and tugged some more.

He looked as if he was trying to send Morse Code by using his ears. Now he heard the Major say, "Gill gotta go gloxa gonni grimma Gron?" He couldn't understand it. Oh, shit, thought Balliwick, my ass is grass!" And it was.

Because Balliwick's outer mask layer didn't itself sweat, the Major had the unusual sight of seeing a fellow Groinkian sweat through his eyes. And, because Groinkians neither sweat nor cry, this struck him as most odd. He reached out squeezed Balliwick's cheek. Then he gave it a tug. It came away from Balliwick's face a few inches.

In Groinkian he said, "You're not Lieutenant Gron! Who the Hell are you?" The Major gave the mask cheek a really hard yank. The entire mask, from the neck up, snapped right off of Balliwick's head. Balliwick smiled and, in perfect English, said, "Hi there."

A nanosecond later Balliwick found himself staring into the short one-quarter inch muzzle of a Grun-Gun. He didn't know it, but it was set on Evaporate Six. He didn't care either, as he was somewhat preoccupied with filling a Groinkian military uniform with pee and crap. Simultaneously.

The Major called in Corporal Griv and Private Grab. He ordered them to strip Balliwick nude and then tie him to the outdoor BBQ spit. They'd roast him as one would a whole pig. He also told Corporal Griv to get some oil and butter. He'd make the BBQ sauce himself. From his dear, old Mother's recipe for Spicy-Mild with Dijon mustard and herbs. The Major smacked his lips just thinking about it. He'd heard the legends about how great humans tasted. If cooked properly and with the right sauce.

As Balliwick rotated on the spit and watched them stack kindling beneath him, he realized that his penis, which hung down a full, and swinging, seven inches on each turn, even though flaccid, would be the first to feel the heat. This idea did not exactly thrill him. He closed his eyes in an attempt to block out the image of roast Pecker à la Balliwick. Which he believed he could smell even right now.

The Major came out, a bowl of sauce in one hand and a basting brush in the other. Balliwick made a last ditch effort to save his life. In English he said, as he rotated, "You're makin' a mistake, Major Grink. I'm worth more to you than just a meal. I'm a spy

for England and I have lotsa valuable information. We can work out a deal, Major." Now, if the Major would only listen.

Unfortunately for Balliwick the Major knew only one word in English: "Huh?" And he had used that one up. The only other word he had understood Balliwick say was: Grink. As did the other Groinkians present who also couldn't understand English. Balliwick realized this and would have loved to be able to switch to Groinkian, but his ear lobes weren't long enough for him to reach them from behind his back. In sheer desperation, he stuck his tongue out and tried to go across his left cheek. Nice try.

So, instead, he threw at them, *"You eat me, you rat bastards, and I'll sue your rotten pig-faced asses off!"* Without comprehending him, they all laughed. So he added, *"You hearing me?"* They continued laughing while they watched him spin.

Perhaps if the Major wasn't in such a rush he might have given it more thought. At least he might have questioned Balliwick. Possibly the Major was thrown by Balliwick's previous Groinkian-English gobbledygook and thought it would be a total waste of his precious time. Or, could the Major simply be famished from his long trip?

Corporal Griv came forward. As Balliwick rotated, Griv poured olive oil all over him, from head to toe. Even on the dangling pecker. Then Private Grab got into the act. He took a quarter-pound stick of Land O' Lakes butter and smeared it all over Balliwick. He did the same with a second and a third stick.

Then Private Grab stopped the spit when Balliwick was facing the sky. Grab grabbed Balliwick's limp penis and, using his buttery hands, he lubed it up real well. So well it got a rise out of Balliwick. Grab looked at the Major and said, "Gromma go gitt gi gazem, Golfa?" Shall we save you the sausage, Major? The Major replied, "Go, gu gogi grammu!" Yes, it looks yummy! Grab nodded and started the spit's rotation again.

Corporal Griv stepped forward again. In his hand he had a box of wooden kitchen matches. He lit one and was just about to toss it onto the kindling when they all heard the shotgun. They froze and turned in the direction of the loud noise. Balliwick did, too.

There stood Bookem, less than fifteen feet away. He had a backup of twenty or so heavily armed Marshals. All their automatic rifles pointed directly at the Groinkians.

Bookem held the shotgun. It was pointed toward the sky. He fired it again for effect. All the Groinkians hit the dirt except one Private. He tried to go for his Grun-gun, but was hit by dozens of rounds before his hand even touched it. He was quite dead before he hit the ground. The others merely stayed on the ground and cowered in fear. Bookem snapped orders and all were handcuffed and taken into custody.

Bookem approached the spit and said, "Balliwick, Balliwick, Balliwick, aren't you the sight! All buttered up and ready to be cooked. Ha ha. And, for your eagerness to sell England down the river, I don't think we should waste this barbequing opportunity. Now, where did he drop those matches? Ah, yes. There they are!" He lit one and held it up for Balliwick to see.

Balliwick closed his eyes. He wasn't sure what they did with spies in England who were so ready to spill their guts to the enemy, but he had seen what had happened to some spies on TV for being guilty of lesser offenses.

"You wouldn't, Mr. Bookem . . . you couldn't . . . could you?" He peed on the kindling. Bookem saw it and laughed. "No, Balliwick, I couldn't. But, it is very tempting, I'll tell you." He stopped the spit and untied Balliwick. Bookem told him to take a shower and get dressed. But Balliwick had a question.

"Tell me, Mr. Bookem, how'd you know I was in trouble?" Bookem smiled.

All Bookem said was, "A little Bertie told me! Now, go get cleaned up! That's an order!" Balliwick headed for the showers, his buttery ass glowing in the moonlight.

Balliwick didn't know it, couldn't know it, and Bookem wasn't about to tell him, but they had planted a small chip in his left ear lobe. It allowed Bookem to hear everything heard by Balliwick. It had been Doc Razor's idea. As a precaution to keep his handiwork alive. And to get back the two expensive devices by invasive removal. Budgets being what they are and all.

As Balliwick cleaned up, Bookem made a phone call. He informed his superior that the rescue was successful and forty four Groinkians of this cell were in his custody. Others had gotten away and would surely spread the word about Balliwick's imitation of Gron. And from here on in the Groinkians would test all their members for masks. Thus Balliwick's cover was not only blown, all future such infiltrations would be too unlikely to succeed and far too dangerous to attempt.

"Sir," Bookem said. "Although Balliwick's usefulness is over, he did, after all, Sir, get us that code book. This undoubtedly has saved thousands of lives. Therefore, Sir, do I have your permission to go ahead and give him the cashier's check? I heartily recommend it, Sir." Bookem then listened.

"You don't say, Sir?" Bookem said. "That's wonderful, Sir. He'll be most surprised . . . and very thrilled, I'm sure. Thank you, Sir. I'll give it to him when . . ."

"That's a devil of a plan!"

SNIFFER AND POOTY had finished dinner and was enjoying coffee when his bathtub rang. *Ring, ring!*

At this first ring, they both looked to Sniffer's left where the phone sat, but on the second ring they looked toward the bathroom. *Ring, ring!* The sound had come from that direction. Sniffer looked at Pooty. She looked at him. Both had very puzzled looks on their faces.

Sniffer stood, took a few paces, and grabbed his gun from its holster, which was lying on the telephone stand. He headed for the bathroom with Pooty right behind. She had a tight grip, with both hands, on his left bicep. They crossed the living room carpet diagonally, as a unit, to get to the bathroom door.

At the door, Sniffer stopped. He popped his head around the doorjamb and peeked in. Pooty couldn't see in, so she whispered, "What is it, Clu?" He whispered back, "There's nothing in there, I mean no one is there." He took a step into the bathroom.

Now he could partially see into the tub. He saw the top of an old fashioned French

telephone. One of those gold-gilded types. *Ring, ring!* They both jumped. They were expecting the ring, yet they weren't. Pooty said, out loud, "I've had enough of this nonsense!"

She left Sniffer and rushed to the phone. Someone had filled the tub with six inches or so of water. The phone sat on one of those floating trays one finds at a swimming pool. She reached into the tub and picked up the receiver.

"Whaddya want?" she barked. She listened. Then, she handed the phone to Sniffer and said, "It's for you." Sniffer said, "Huh?" He had a look on his face that said he wasn't used to receiving tub calls. Especially right after dinner. He took the offered phone.

"Hello?" he asked. "Who is this?" He noticed a cord coming out of the phone that ended in a connection to thin air. What the . . . he thought.

"Hey, Sniff, it's me!" a voice said lightly and playfully.

"Who's me, pal?"

"The man who's going to help you defeat the Groinkians."

"What the Hell is a Groinkian?" Sniffer was not amused. It didn't even bother him when Pooty had winced at his use of the aitch _ double hockey sticks word.

The voice said, "I'll give you a clue, Clu. Pig-faced alien bastards. You know now?" The voice chuckled.

"Yeah, I got the drift. Now . . . who are you and why would you want to help me defeat the aliens, what you call Groinkians?" Sniffer felt he was being joshed. Any moment now, a dozen cops were going to pop out of the woodwork all yelling, "Surprise!" and "Gotcha!" But he really didn't think that was going to be the case. Not with a French phone connected to air. In his bathroom yet.

"Who am I?" the voice said. "Who *am* I? Who am *I*? Let me see, now. I go by many names, Snifferino. Take your pick, Sniffie. There's Satan. And Lucifer. And Old Scratch. And Beelzebub, And Skeeexix. And even el Diablo in Spanish. I've hundreds more, in every language you could name, but we don't have time for that nonsense." Then he added, "And don't forget fa . . . fa . . . fallen Angel." The voiced chuckled, amused with itself.

"Ha ha ha," Laughed Sniffer as he looked at Pooty. "I'm talking to the Devil, Poot. He's now telemarketing . . . for souls, I guess. How about that?" Pooty looked scared.

Sniffer said, "Listen, Jack, I don't know your game yet, but if you really *are* the Devil, why go through all this rigmarole? Why not just appear and have our little chat about it over and done with? Or are you having trouble materializing these days?" That should fix the phoney.

"Rigmarole!" the voice said casually. "Interesting word. I must look it up in my Webster's one of these days. But to answer you, Sniffer Quiffer, I can never just appear before an honest man, such as yourself, unless he says the word Slobs three times. It stands for five of my favorite names, Satan. Lucifer. Old Scratch. Beelzebub, and . . ." the voice paused for effect, then added, "Skeeeeeezix. So, Sniffy Whiffy, just say Slobs three times and you'll see me in the flesh, hee hee, to put it very loosely."

Sniffer thought, I've got a madman here. Humor him and find out if he's dangerous.

"So, all I gotta do is say Slobs three times, you appear, and we chat. That about it?"

"I see why you're a Detective, Cluey! Nothing gets by the Sniff-em-out man, does it now?" It was said somewhat sarcastically. "Hee hee."

Sniffer decided to play along. He said, "Slobs, Slobs, Slobs. OK? Now where are you?" Nothing happened. The Devil did not appear. Just as Sniffer suspected. He looked at Pooty. She looked more scared. She trembled now. Sniffer tried to ease it for her.

"See, Poot? No Devil. Or do you see him and I don't?" She said, "I don . . . I don . . . don't see him." Her teeth chattered when she said it. As if she was very cold. Sniffer was in mid-laugh, to lighten the strange situation, when they heard a voice come from the dining area.

"Delicious coffee, Pooty. Come on you two, I've made a fresh pot." Pooty almost fainted. Sniffer took hold of her and propped her up. He showed her his gun. "Easy, Hon," he said. He didn't think a gun would do it somehow. It was for her benefit.

He helped her to the doorway. And there he was, at the dining table. Pooty took a sharp inward gasp of breath and wobbled again. Sniffer gasped, too. He helped her stand with one hand while his other hand pointed the gun right at the apparition. And it was truly an apparition.

Although seated, the Devil was as tall as Sniffer, maybe taller. He wore a dark green robe with gold trimmings. On the left breast was appliquéd SLOBS. An attached hood showed only two red and glowing large eyes against a field of dark smoke. Black smoky wisps popped out into the air all along the hood's rim. No mouth or nose could be discerned. Pooty sighed and slumped against Sniffer. They stared at the Devil.

One of his bony, blood red hands held a coffee cup. His other bony red hand motioned them to come over. "Have a seat, chums, let's get to know each other better, shall we?" Then he added, "I promise I won't bite. Hee hee."

When the Devil saw them hesitate he said, "And put that gun down, Sniffles, before you hurt yourself. Or your lovely Pooty. Besides, I'm way beyond killing. As a Detective, that should be plain and evident to you. Hee hee."

Sniffer just stood there and held Pooty up. Then she surprised him. She broke loose and went to the table and sat down. Right across from the apparition. She looked as tiny as tiny can get compared to the Devil.

She turned her head toward Sniffer and said, "Come on Clu, he said he wouldn't bite." Then she turned back and looked up at the creature. "You *are* a Devil who keeps his word, aren't you?" Sniffer's mouth was opened wide enough to catch butterflies. He stood there and looked his dumbest yet. "You hurt her, you fu . . . fudgin' rat, and I'll empty this gun into you. You got that?" He felt stupid saying it, but it made him feel better. He hoped it made Pooty feel better, too.

"Got it, Sniff, and I'm real scared now. Hee hee. So, why don't you put that toy down and join us. Before I show you another of my really nasty funny tricks. OK?" Sniffer was beaten. He nodded and took a seat to the Devil's left. He laid the gun on the table. Nearer himself than the Devil. Just in case, dontcha know?

The Devil said playfully, "Is it hot in here, or is it me? . . . It's . . . me! Hee hee!" Sniffer

and Pooty felt the heat in the room rise considerably. Sniffer quipped, "Neat. We can sure use you come winter." The red eyes glowed and looked at him. "*If your winter comes*, I'll be only too happy to oblige."

"I know," the Devil said, "that I've got a face only a mother could love, and a demented mother at that, but I like to let my hair down, so to speak, when I'm doing business." That said, he threw back the hood. Pooty gasped. Sniffer's eyes widened.

The entire head area consisted of loosely packed dark swirling smoke. It seemed to shimmer and change shape continually. The two large red eyes floated, unfixed, in the black mist. They wobbled to and fro. Black smoke wisps curled up toward the ceiling. His head was a black shifting cloud with vision.

"Ah, that's better!" Then he added, "Let me play Mother. Hee hee." He picked up the coffee pot, which both Sniffer and Pooty knew had been empty before, and poured each of them a fresh cup. He's full of tricks, Sniffer thought. Then the Devil really scared him.

"You're right, you know, Sniff, I *am* full of tricks!" He had read Sniffer's mind. "Like that fun stuff I pulled with the word Slobs. Hee hee. Gotcha, Sniffman. I just thought I'd try that. Got it from watching Beetlejuice, you know. Nice little film. But totally unrealistic."

"Well," Sniffer said. "Let's get down to it. OK? You say you can help me defeat the aliens. I'll buy that, for now. Now, what do you want in return? My soul? Our souls? Spit it out, we're listening." He looked angry.

"Souls? Nah! I have no use for them. You humans got it all wrong on that one. Souls are nothing but pure energy. And as such they're a boring lot, those damned goody-two-shoes. Totally incorruptible, too, I might add." He took a sip of coffee into the black space where a mouth should have been. "Just telling them a joke uses all my powers. And they won't listen if it's even the slightest bit risqué. Souls! I let the Big Man struggle with those clowns. He speaks their language." He winked at Pooty conspiratorially. Then he continued.

"My job, which I love so much, I'll tell you, is creating mischief and mayhem. Next time you lock your keys in the car . . . think of me! Little 'ol me . . . Me . . . me . . . me, hee hee."

He looked from Pooty to Sniffer. Then his eyes spread apart and he looked at both of them at once. It looked eerie. He went on.

"I also enjoy getting humans to do bad and evil things. Like Hitler. One of my best projects. But just one of so many, as you both well know . . . anyway, that's what I do. It helps fill my time since I will be around forever. And beyond that, too, I dare say." He looked down at their cups. "You haven't touched your coffee. And I spent so much time on it, too. Hee hee."

Sniffer crossed his arms over his chest and said, "Ok, we get it. Now, what's your plan and why me?" He looked defiant. Pooty took a sip of coffee and said, "Yummy! You must tell me how you make it." God, thought Sniffer, Poot's socializing! What next? Swapping anecdotes about failed loves? Who does his hair? Sniffer was amazed.

The Devil waved a bony red hand. There on the wall behind him, as if done with a wood-burning tool, appeared the words, in letters an inch high: Always use fresh-ground

beans! Smoke wafted and curled off of each letter. Sniffer said, "Well, Poot, you don't have to write *that one* down! And please, Hon, don't ask for his recipe for Hungarian Goulash!" Pooty smiled. That made Sniffer feel a bit better. They just might live through this after all.

The Devil spoke. "Why you, Sniffadoodles? Good question and easy to answer. Because you, Snifferino, are an honest man. And you know about the pig-faces. That Bookem chap knows about them, too, but he cheats on his expense account. Small amounts, to be sure, but it disqualifies him, you see." They almost saw. He went on.

"And, although you didn't ask it, I'll tell you *why* I want to defeat the Groinkians. They intend to make frozen meals out of you humans and those they don't fresh-freeze, they plan to use as slaves. Now, I ask you, how can any Devil, such as me, hope to corrupt dead meat and enslaved beings? You see?" They saw this time. Made sense. They both nodded simultaneously. They looked like idiots. He went on.

"Oh, I could play at creating problems for the slaves, but what fun is there in that? I'd never match the problems set for them by the Groinkians. No . . . slaves are a decidedly listless group, and as such, they'd never aspire to doing evil deeds, either, now would they? So, the Groinks must be defeated if I am to retain all my toys." He laughed. The heat rose. Smoke billowed off his head toward the ceiling, charring it.

Then the heat abated as he said, conversationally, "Now to my plan. It's a beaut, chums! There is a planet in the Groinkian galaxy called Vonn, that's vee oh en en. At one time, the Groinkians tried to attack and enslave the Vonnians. The Groinks lost against them, even though the Vonnians were certainly outgunned, one could rightly say.

"You see, the Vonnians had developed a device that transmitted a very broad-beamed signal. This signal destroys a chemical in the Groinkian's snouts that controls their ability to rotate it. They rotate this snout to show anger or love, clockwise or counterclockwise, as the case may be. But the chemical does much more than just enable them to express themselves emotionally.

"Even if the Groinkians somehow managed to alter this snout chemical it wouldn't help them . . . because this chemical also controls cognitive reasoning. If the chemical were altered, or eliminated, they would become, instantly, blathering idiots. So, the Groinkians have left the Vonnians to themselves.

"I want to give you, Sniffer, the plans to build this remarkable device. I guarantee it will work and both our problems will be solved in on swell foop. Hee hee. So, do we deal?"

He offered his bony red hand to Sniffer. Sniffer thought. What do we have to lose? If it doesn't work, we're no worse off. If it does work, well! He looked at Pooty. Might as well start sharing some decision-making right now. "Poot, Darlin,' what do you think?"

The Devil chuckled and said, "How sweet, Sniffo. Very caring and sensitive of you, old Sniff." He looked at Pooty.

She had been thinking, too. "Well, Hon, what do we have to lose? I know it sounds crazy, but I think we have an honest Devil here who needs us as much as we need him." Sniffer thought, you just gotta love this lady. Honest Devil, indeed! The Devil smiled,

reading him.

Sniffer took the bony hand offering. "Deal, Devil. And I hope it's not just one of your shenanigans." The Devil laughed. He then told them all about the word shenanigans. As he'd done his thing with the Supreme Commander. Pooty look enraptured. Even Sniffer looked interested.

When his shenanigans story was over, he waved a bony hand again. He then pointed. There, on the wall behind Sniffer's small sofa, were the schematics for a strange looking device. It reminded them again of a wood-burning kit. Sniffer stood up. Pooty, too. They went over to the wall and studied the plans. As the smoke cleared it looked as if someone had taken a printing press and miraculously printed the plan right on the wall. All the lines and type was razor sharp. Even the smallest type. They both stood in awe.

Sniffer said, his eyes still on the wall, "So, Devil, old chum, say we do this device . . . you going to show us how to operate it?" No response. They both turned toward the dining table. The Devil was gone. Only a blackened spot on the ceiling marked his former presence. Also gone was the way to make perfect coffee. Sniffer turned to Pooty.

He looked deep into her eyes and said, "Darlin', I know I haven't said this yet, but I want you to know . . . I love you . . . very much." His eyes were misty.

Her eyes misted up, too. "I love you, too, my Darlin'. With all my heart."

They hugged each other. Then kissed. A warm, affectionate kiss. A kiss that said . . .

"Just put tab A into slot B and fold over point C!"

OFFICER MOLDON stared at the Vonnian schematic on Sniffer's wall.

"Amazing," he said. "It looks as if it will be no bigger than your average toaster. Are you sure it will be powerful enough to do as advertised?" Moldon looked at Pooty and Sniffer with a look of doubt on his face.

Sniffer and Pooty had filled him in on the bathtub phone call and how Satan had burned the schematic into the wall. And all about this device's alleged ability to clobber pig snout chemicals. He believed them right from the start. He'd known Sniffer a long time and knew the man wasn't given to making up strange tales, no matter how tempting that might be sometimes. No, Sniffer wasn't playing some type of sick and silly game. It wasn't his style.

Pooty was another story. He didn't know her all that well. However, she didn't strike him as a flighty female given to hysterical fancies. No, she was too believable not to be believed. If these two said the Devil served them coffee, take it to the bank. And it seemed no odder to Moldon than pig-faced aliens invading Earth for human filets. Or walls printed with clear-cut schematics by a wood-burning bony finger.

Pooty answered his question. "Well, Morty, it's a little bit bigger than a toaster. According to the schematic, it will end up being slightly larger than eighteen inches wide by twelve inches deep." She pointed to two measurements that were printed in very small type. "As to whether it will be powerful enough, see these two round things?" She pointed to two circular objects, one on each side of the basic rectangular shape. Each

was at a forty-five degree angle.

"Well, the lines radiating out suggests that a beam comes from each that somehow magnifies itself as it projects forward." She put one knee onto the sofa to get closer to the wall. She continued. "By using something called the Firnal Quantum Effect, whatever that is.

"I may be wrong, but it looks as if the beam keeps replicating itself, impelling what has already been created forward, which also replicates itself and pushes what it has created forward. With that now replicating itself, and so on. It's all very complicated and would take someone with a physics background to fully understand it." She had someone in mind, but she kept it to herself for the moment.

"See, here?" Pooty said as she pointed to an edge of one of the circular objects. "The beam comes out here, and, in phase one, it's about six inches wide. By phase three, according to this, about two thousand feet wide. Almost a mile!" She pointed to delicately drawn outwardly radiating lines.

"By phase six, which it supposedly reaches in ten seconds or so, each beam is one hundred miles wide and they overlap. That's one fast and very broad beam. And, it shows here that it has a maximum distance of . . . one hundred thousand miles!" She looked from Moldon to Sniffer. "If this is true, we'd only need to build one to cover the entire country."

Moldon chipped in. "And a lot of outer space, too." He looked from Pooty to Sniffer. They nodded in unison. It would certainly bring down any mother ship floating around up there. Sniffer said, "Hmmm, no wonder the Groinks stopped invading Vonn."

Pooty said, standing up again, "Well, what do we do now, fellas?" The fellas looked at each other. Both shrugged and threw their hands into the air.

Moldon asked jovially, "We get Toys-R-Us to build it?"

Sniffer said, sounding serious, "Yeah, 'cause no one else is going to believe us." They both looked dejected. It's hard saving the world if they think you're crazy.

Pooty said cheerfully, "Hey, guys, as Satan himself said, don't look so glum chums. I think . . ."

Sniffer interrupted. "Hold it a sec, Hon. I just have to tell Moldon." He looked at Moldon. "My sweet Pooty here, after tasting the Devil's coffee, goes and says to him, 'Yummy! You must tell me how you make it.' I thought the next thing she'll be asking him is who does your hair!" Moldon laughed and looked at Pooty. "You didn't?"

Pooty looked somewhat sheepish and said, "Yeah, hee hee, I did. Just trying to be sociable, that's all." She laughed. They laughed. It all seemed so ridiculous to them.

Moldon said, "Find out if he plays bridge, will you?" He laughed again. Pooty said, sounding very serious, "I'll bet he does. We could have a regular weekly foursome. I think he'd like that. He's probably starving for company. What do you think, Clu?" She looked at him. He had a look of astonishment on his face.

He was about to say something when Pooty beat him to the punch. "Gotcha!" He grinned. "Yeah, you did. I thought you'd gone round the bend." She smiled.

Now, fellas," Pooty said, "getting back to our problem. You're right, Hon," she looked

at Sniffer, "no one is going to believe us. They should, but they won't. But I know an old professor of mine from my college days. He's now a psychiatrist, but in those days he taught physics. If anyone can understand how to build this thing, he can. And he has an open mind when it comes to strange things happening. He should, seeing as how he swears he was abducted by aliens himself!" She noticed the strange looks on their faces.

"No! He's not a kook. He has a solid "in" with the President. He has advised him on many national and international events. And once, he even helped Richard Nixon figure out how to erase audiotapes. And how to set the clock on his VCR. He's written many articles for *Psychology Right Now* and is a pioneer in the treatment of schizophrenia, paranoia, and partial amnesia." She went to her pocketbook and took out her address book.

"If we agree," she said, thumbing through the little book, "I'll call him right now." Sniffer went to Pooty and took the address book from her. He studied the name and said, "Why not? What can we lose?" Moldon said, "Right. And, actually, I've read a few of his articles. He seems like a pretty savvy guy."

Sniffer looked at Dr. F ükenfaster, PhD's address and phone number and said to Pooty, "Just how *do* you pronounce his name, Hon?" He looked amused. He waited for her to speak, a grin on his face. Moldon came up beside him and looked down at the book. He grinned, too.

Pooty thought for a bit, then said, "Professor Poppycocken . . . faster." Sniffer laughed. He now knew what "Poppycock me, Darlin'!" meant.

Moldon chuckled and said, "I believe it's pronounced Fy__ . . . ken . . . faster because of the dieresis, or umlaut, that alters the vowel." Lordy, thought Moldon, is that me? I sound so damn pedantic. I gotta cut that crap out. It'll ruin my fun.

Pooty dialed the number and got lucky after the second ring. "Hello Professor," Pooty said. Sniffer noted that she had omitted saying his last name. "This is a voice from the past, Professor. Pooty Prissyfoot. How are you today, sir?" He said he was fine.

He remembered her. But before he could take the conversation down memory lane, she filled him in, without mentioning Satan, and she made it a point to mention the aliens.

He seemed extremely interested. He told her life was a tad boring at the moment and he would welcome the challenge. And the chance to get even with aliens of any type. Pig-faced or otherwise. He'd come right over. Pooty gave him Sniffer's name and address. And phone number in case he got lost, which she didn't really think he would. They said their goodbyes. Pooty then told Sniffer and Moldon she was going to fix some coffee and something to nosh on for their little upcoming meeting.

Sniffer said, "Remember what our newfound friend said, Darlin,' use fresh-ground beans." He laughed. Pooty said, "Oh, you! This place of yours hasn't seen a fresh coffee bean in its entire life." She left the boys to themselves.

Sniffer told Moldon all about the wood-burning trick for perfect coffee. Moldon chuckled and agreed. "He's right, you know. Makes all the difference. He sounds like a

well-rounded little devil. Introduce me sometime, OK?" He laughed. Sniffer laughed.

"Sure," Sniffer said. "We can all get nice and chummy. And real warm. When he speaks you can actually feel the heat in the room go up a bunch of notches. And if he raises his voice? Look out! It'll singe your hair." Moldon instinctively reached up and ran a hand across his head. He said, "Wow! This guy's a trip. You haven't told me what he looked like."

Sniffer described the Devil, right down to his bony red fingers and dark smoky head. Moldon listened in awe. He looked up at the ceiling area over the dining table and saw the charred reminder.

Sniffer had just finished his description when his doorbell rang. He walked over to the intercom and pressed the talk button. "Who's there?" he said nicely. A voice said, "Hello, it's Dr. Fügenfaster here, I believe you were expecting me." Sniffer buzzed him in. He went to his door and opened it. A few minutes later he saw the elevator doors open and a tiny man, dressed for the eighteen hundreds, emerged. He was carrying a brief case and an umbrella. He smiled at Sniffer. Sniffer returned the smile.

As he approached Sniffer he said, "Ah, Detective Sniffer, I presume." He offered his hand to shake and the two men shook. Sniffer said, "Come in Professor. Mi casa, su casa." He stepped aside. The Professor entered and stood his umbrella just inside the door. The umbrella was dry. It should be, it wasn't raining.

Pooty was just coming out of the kitchen carrying a tray. "Professor!" she said.

"Well, well," the Professor said, "you haven't changed a bit. As lovely as ever I see. But I'm eager to get to this device of yours. We can reminisce later. OK?" Pooty nodded. The Professor hadn't changed, either. Still all work and no play. She set the tray down on the coffee table that was in front of the sofa. They'll eat when they're ready, she thought.

Sniffer introduced Fügenfaster to Moldon. Then he filled the Professor in on the Vonns and the Groinks. Then Sniffer introduced the Professor to the wall. The great little man stared at it for what seemed a long time. Finally, and still staring at the wall, he said, "Yes, it will work. Most ingenious, to be sure. It appears to violate Newton's first law of thermodynamics. That you cannot get something from nothing. But this, instead of losing energy, its particles seem to create more of it through some form of replication."

He turned to face the three onlookers and seeing their quizzical faces, said, "It's as if you took a car battery and drained it. But instead of it now being useless, it was totally recharged and ready to be drained all over again. Over and over. As many times as you cared to do it." He paused and looked puzzled. He scratched his chin. "How it does this is not shown here," he pointed to the wall, "but, who knows? Perhaps when we build it . . . " His voiced trailed off. He was in deep thought. The three others just stood there, letting him think.

He finally said, "Einstein showed that mass and energy are the same with his $E=mc^2$ equation, thus some form of outside energy is needed to begin with, but on the other hand . . . with matter's positive energy balanced by gravity's negative energy potential . . . well, who knows? The zero energy situation from this could allow for that fact that no

outside energy is needed for the replication. This would mean it doesn't violate the first law after all. Understand?" They all nodded, since it seemed called for, but not one of them understood it at all. The Professor might as well have been talking in Groinkian.

Professor Fūkenfaster chuckled. "I'll bet you do! But no matter. What is important is we *can* build it. And it looks as if it will work. But I'll have to get the President's approval first, although I foresee no obstacle in that. Where's your phone, Detective?"

The Professor was amazing. In less than ten minutes he had the President's OK to build and test the new device. No "Tell me all about it." came forth. The President just took the Professor at his word. Sniffer, Pooty, and Moldon were truly impressed.

Sniffer said, "OK, Prof, what do we do next?" Again the Professor impressed them. He opened his attaché case and took out a small camera. "We can't very well work off of your wall, Detective, now can we? So I'll take a picture that we can use to put this newfangled thing together. This camera may look incapable, but I assure you it takes razor sharp photographs. I'll develop them myself so we can keep this just between ourselves. No point in getting more people than is necessary involved, now is there?" They all agreed to that fact. The Professor went to work.

The ending to the Groinkian invasion was as anticlimactic as any ending could be. The machine was built. And it worked, just as Satan predicted it would.

Every Groinkian on the planet Earth was turned into an idiot in less than ten seconds after its first and, so far, only transmission. Thousands of cell members and eleven thousand Elvis impersonators all now babbled incoherently. As did Lieutenant Gron. The FBI Agents who witnessed this had no idea of the cause and it baffled them.

The fleet of Groinkian warships, including Colonel Grok's Fleet Command ship, was so far spared as the beam was angled sideways and not upwards.

Eighty miles above the Earth, a hand reached out to press keys on a console . . .

"Don't let the door hit you in the ass, Jack"

"IT'S OVER, CAPTAIN," Colonel Grok said. "We've been clobbered." He pressed the pause button on the televiewer. On the screen was the face of George W. Bush.

"I know, Sir," Captain Grik said. "I've just read the casualty reports, the ones I could understand, that is. Lot's of gibberish, most of them, Sir. Now, I didn't serve in the Vonnian campaign, but I read about it. Is this that all over again, Sir?"

Grok nodded. "Yep, somehow the humans have built the same device the Vonnians used against us. How they got the plans for it I don't know. Not from the Vonnians, that's for sure. They don't have space flight yet. And, even if they did, I doubt they would be smart enough to figure out time warps to reduce the travel time. Shit, without it, it would take them thirty thousand years to get to Earth." He looked unhappy.

"Sir," Captain Grik said. "Maybe we can't invade Earth, but what's to stop us from blowing the fucking place to Hell and back on our parting voyage?" He looked angry.

"I'll won't tell you why, old friend, I'll show you." He punched the pause button again.

President Bush started to speak. The Colonel said, "Listen to this." Grik took a seat alongside Grok. They stared at the screen together.

"My fellow Americans, greetings. As you have read in the press, despite all of the reporters' speculations, innuendos, and rumors, we really have been invaded by an alien life form. But . . . I have great news! Their invasion is over! They have been repelled and sent packing . . ." the applause was deafening, "and now I want to direct what I say next to their remaining warships hovering above us in outer space." He took his eyes off the crowd of people and looked directly into the camera. He spoke vehemently.

"To you aliens. This is the President of the United States, George W. Bush. I know you can hear me this very minute, you rat bastard Groinks, because we are beaming this transmission directly at you. So, listen up and listen up real good." He paused for effect. Then he spoke absolutely conversationally and softly. And most threateningly. As if he was a Godfather in the mob talking to a man who would soon be dead meat.

"You bomb even one of our cities, just one, and we'll turn the Vonnian Death Ray fully in your direction . . . Now . . . if you want to see what damage it can do to you all in a mere twelve seconds, stick around. So, you pig-faced asses, you've got twenty minutes to get out of Dodge." The crowd went wild. Applause, whistles, yells, and shouts.

Colonel Grok spoke as he hit the off button. "This transmission was six minutes ago. I've programmed the computer to get us out of here four minutes from now. No sense in pushing them on the time element. Their watch may be fast!" He laughed. Grik laughed nervously.

"Sir?" the Captain asked. "Do I have to notify the rest of the fleet or have you seen to that" The Colonel replied, "Taken care of, old friend. I've even notified High Central Command, if it got through, that is. Transmission troubles again." He looked beaten.

Captain Grik said, "Well, Sir, at least we can get the consolation prize, that planet we can invade on the trip home." Grik didn't sound too convincing.

"Yes, we do have that, don't we?. Should be a piece of cake, too. No match for us mighty Groinks." He said it sarcastically, which wasn't lost on the Major. The Major then tried a little side step to get the Colonel's mind off of things.

"Tell me, Sir, why do they call the American President Dubya?" The Colonel smiled.

"His middle initial. Texans say dubya instead of double y__." He chuckled and added, "We've been beaten by a friggin' double y__ing Texan, Major. A New Yorker I could understand, but a friggin' Texan? A double y__ing one at that." He laughed. Grik laughed more heartily this time. Defeat was a bitter pill to swallow, but it beat dying. Or turning into a mindless vegetable.

They felt the ship's engines rev up. Whoooooooooosh . . .

"I do, do you do, too?"

TEN COPS showed up for the Sniffer-Prissyfoot wedding. Twelve if you count Chief Melrose and Sniffer.

Wives and girlfriends were also in attendance. It was held at the charming chapel behind *Our Lady of Perpetual Dreams* church. Father Olympus Farquar Kaminski performed the ceremony.

The only problem to occur, if one thinks it's a problem, was when Father Kaminski asked, "And do you, Pissy Pootyfoot take . . ." Sniffer himself interrupted and corrected the good man. Just in case a slip like that made the marriage somehow null and void. Why take the chance, eh?

Pooty looked absolutely lovely. She'd made her own wedding dress. From a pattern she got by mail order from one of those women's magazines. It was a dead-ringer for the wedding dress worn by Elizabeth Taylor at her sixth, or was it seventh? betrothal. To . . . what's his face?

The dress was a pastel lilac, and it looked absolutely light and delicate on dear, sweet Pooty as she stood next to the Cloud Nine she was soon going to wed. And only Pooty saw Magic perform the ceremony. Everyone else saw dull-as-dish-water Kaminski.

Prior to the nuptials, Chief Melrose gave an order to the entire stationhouse personnel. He had caught the entire gang of cops going over a flyer from a local store that had many items on sale, including toasters. Knowing his cops as well as he did, he could see it coming. The Sniffers would be the recipients of eleven fucking toasters.

"Listen you bozos," he barked at them, "these two have all the appliances they need right now. So here's a chance to use your collective imaginations and show some creativity . . . *give 'em cash.*" He scowled at them. "*You hearing me?*" They heard.

The Sniffers honeymooned at a small, charming place in the mountains. Pooty picked the place out, possibly because of its name: *Sal & Sally's Love in the Clouds Bed, Breakfast, and Beyond*. The *Beyond* was a late night snack of milk and cookies. Which Sniffer loved, especially as he could also watch his Pooty in her warm flannel pajamas.

By the time they returned, Mr. Rinsdale had three eff all painted and cleaned up for them. He loved the idea of having a cop living on the premises so much he gave them a thirty percent discount on their rent. Turned out the maintenance engineer not only ran the building, he owned it, too.

And the Sniffers needed a bigger place. Not just for convenience of extra space, but for the proverbial bun that Pooty had in the proverbial oven. They peeked. It would be a boy. A love child made on a bed of clouds.

They plan to call him Richard after Pooty's great-grandfather, Dewey Richard Renfrew Prissyfoot. The child would be Richard Sniffer. Or Dick Sniffer. Or Dickie Sniffer. Oh, yes, we can hear it now. "Hey, wanna give my dickie a sniffy, Dickie Sniffer?" Poor kid. Will parents ever learn? Or never learn?

It reminds me of the inimitable real-life Hogg sisters, Ima and Ura. They'd get a kick out of meeting new people. Ima would say, "Ima Hogg and Ura Hogg." She'd then point to her sister. Great fun, what? And, of course, there's Jack Frost. And the real-life dentist, I. Pullem. Not to mention Lana Evoli, whose name means nothing much unless it's read backwards. Then it's a hoot.

The Three Stooges had fun with names, too. Such as their law firm: Dewey, Cheatham, & Howe. I love that one.

But, yes, it was the same Dewey Prissyfoot who founded *Prissyfoot's Haven for Wayward Girls*. And yes, there was *that* scandal. Where ninety six girls said he had threatened to throw them out on the street, in the middle of winter, if they didn't, as he called it, "Ride my little pink pony to Heaven." All ninety six had taken the pony to Heaven numerous times, to hear them tell it.

He'd gotten away with it for over ten years, and probably would have gone on for who knows how long if one of the girls didn't up and get jealous because he spent more time with what's her name than with her. She turned him in. And there was a trial. But all the girls, including the whistle blower, recanted their statements at the last minute. Just funning, they said. Dewey Prissyfoot was forthwith released and all charges were summarily dismissed.

The townsfolk saw it differently, however. As one local yokel put it, "I guess old Dewey's little pink pony really *did* take them to Heaven, dontcha know."

All the girls, including the whistle blower, wanted to go back to Dewey's haven, for more riding lessons it was presumed, but the town council took his license away, just to be on the safe side it was rumored. So Prissyfoot was forced to close up shop. But he outfoxed them in the end. He turned the haven into a party dress manufacturing plant. And hired all the girls! Whether they could sew or not. As long as they could ride.

He could often be seen riding around in his horse and carriage with one or more of the girls accompanying him. With heavenly smiles on their young faces, you betcha.

But that was then and this is now . . .

"All's well that ends OK!"

BALLIWICK was at London's Heathrow airport, but anyone who knew him before would never pick him out now.

He looked fantastic. Bookem had Karl take him for a hair styling and a manicure. And a new suit, shirt, and tie. With new shoes to boot. And, believe it, a new watch, too.

So here he was, looking squeaky clean. In a pearl gray suit with a pale yellow shirt and a dark blue tie with tiny yellow dots sprinkled throughout. With styled hair and shiny nails. He looked like a fashion plate. A far cry from the Balliwick of old.

His plane was due to take off in twenty minutes. Bookem had said he'd meet him and present him with his check. Balliwick checked his watch. Where's Bookem, he thought. Oh, well, he's probably conned me and there'll be no check. But at least I'm still . . .

Balliwick looked through the window out at the tarmac. A Rolls-Royce limousine had pulled up. It had a British flag flapping in the wind on each front fender. On the driver's side door was a crest of some kind. Bookem stepped out. He saw Balliwick through the glass and waved to him. Balliwick smiled and waved back.

A moment later they were face to face. "Sorry," Bookem said. "We hit some traffic. But I'm here now. How are you, Bert?" Balliwick smiled and said he was OK. Which he

sure was now. Bookem said, "Karl did all right by you, Bert, didn't he now?" Balliwick nodded.

Without further ado, Bookem handed Balliwick the cashier's check as promised. Balliwick thanked him profusely and pocketed the check real quick like. Before Bookem could change his mind.

Then Bookem reached into his inside coat pocket and brought forth a small, purple velvet box. He opened it to reveal a medal sitting on an interior of gold lining.

Balliwick leaned forward slightly and peered into the box. He saw a cross, enameled white and edged in gold. It hung from a one and one-eighth inch wide red ribbon edged in blue, with gold bars, top and bottom, ornamented with laurel. In the center of the cross, within a wreath of green enameled laurel, sat the Imperial Crown, in gold upon a red enameled background. Balliwick gasped.

Bookem said, "Mr. Bertram Balliwick. On behalf of Great Britain, I take immense pleasure in awarding to you the Distinguished Service Order. This is awarded in recognition of special services you have performed for Her Majesty's government." As he offered the box to Balliwick he added, "You have Great Britain's undying thanks and everlasting gratitude."

Balliwick hesitated. He looked as if he was either in shock or afraid of the box. "I . . . I . . . don't know what to say, Mr. Bookem. It's . . . it's beautiful!" Bookem said, "Here, take it Bert, you've earned it. It's yours now." Bookem smiled.

Balliwick took it and his hands shook. Bookem saluted him. He saluted back. Both ended their salutes with snappy hand-aways. Bookem offered his hand to shake. They shook. Bookem said, "Congratulations Mr. Bertram Burlappe Balliwick." Balliwick said, "Thank you, Sir."

He then told Balliwick that when he got to where he was going and was settled in; he was to call a certain phone number. He handed him a card, which merely read, on two lines: Major M. Wolfert 703-555-1236.

He told him Major Wolfert was a de-briefing officer who would help him adjust to civilian life. Balliwick told him he didn't think he needed that kind of stuff, but Bookem told him, "Whether you need it or not, Bert, it's the law." Balliwick stuffed the card into his new suit's inside pocket. No point in ruining his squeaky-clean police record now, was there? He promised Bookem he'd call immediately upon settling down somewhere.

"Now, Bert," Bookem said. "When you get to your destination airport a chauffeured car will be there to meet you. The chauffeur's name is Vincent. I think you'll like him." He also told him that he had the use of Vincent and the limo for one full month. A gift of the UK and MI-5.

Balliwick's flight was uneventful except for his pestering of all the flight attendants with stories of how he saved the world from aliens. And had the medal to prove it. As he wasn't drunk, boisterous, or acting crazy, they politely listened to his story once or twice. One attendant heard it four times. By the end of the flight she had a dizzy look on her face and mumbled her goodbye to each passenger.

And Bookem was right. Balliwick liked Vincent immediately. He kept calling Balliwick

sir. "May I make you something to drink, Sir? It's a good thirty miles to Magnolia Lane, Sir. A nice martini, perhaps, Sir?" That hit the right note with the new and improved Balliwick.

"Yes, Vincent, a martini will do rather nicely." The he switched to his best Sean Connery: "Please see that it's shaken, not stirred!" Vincent laughed and said, "Yes, Sir! Comin' right up, Sir!" Balliwick enjoyed this immensely.

When he got to 1411 Magnolia Lane he could see that Henrietta's house was dark. Well, he thought, it is after nine o'clock and she's probably asleep, but she did tell me to come 'round no matter what time it was. Vincent told him he'd wait, just in case.

Just as Balliwick neared the front door and was about to press the bell, the door opened. A middle-aged man stepped out. He looked at Balliwick and said, "May I help you?" Balliwick thought Henrietta had probably hired a butler.

"Yes, my good man," said Balliwick, "tell Ms. Higga . . . uh . . . Henrietta that Mr. Bertram Balliwick has arrived. She's expectin' me. So could ya tell her I'm here, please?" Balliwick smiled. He liked living up to his new look.

"Ah," the man said. "I'm Mr. Griner, Henrietta's lawyer." He offered his hand to shake. Balliwick shook it. Then Griner said, "And you're just the man I've been looking for. Come in, Mr. Balliwick, please." He stepped aside to allow Balliwick to enter.

He asked Balliwick to make himself comfortable in the living room while he opened his attaché case and took out some papers. He spread them out on the desk and came right to the point.

"Mr. Balliwick, I have the sad duty to inform you that Ms. Higgambotham-Smythington has passed away. Two days ago. In her sleep." Balliwick gasped. He looked sick.

"Now, now, Mr. Balliwick, she was, as you know, very sick for the last few years. It was to be expected."

"I . . . I didn't . . . I knew . . ." Griner cut in. "But I guess even if you know it's coming, it's still a shock." Balliwick was in shock all right. Real shock. But more shock was to come.

Griner said, "Henrietta's will has already been read, Mr. Balliwick, but as you were not there I can fill you in on the basic details now. Henrietta has left all her money, save what she has bequeathed to you, to *The Chalmer's Association for the Rapid Neutering of All Felines*, or CARNAL, as they're better well known. To you, Mr. Balliwick she has left the sum of \$500,000 and this very house." He swept a hand around.

"Mr. Griner," Balliwick said. "I had no idea she had that kind of money. She didn't seem to . . . you know . . ."

"I know, Mr. Balliwick, she didn't live as if she had money. Rather frugal woman, to be sure. But, nonetheless, she had it. Left to her by her husband Wellington who was quite adept with real estate and the stock market." Griner looked toward the hall closet.

"Oh, yes," he said, "I almost forgot. She left you something else." He went to the closet, opened it, and brought out four shoeboxes tied together with heavy green gardener's twine.

"Balliwick asked, "What is that, Mr. Griner?"

"I don't know. She never told me. Only that I was to give them to you for your own use. Rather mysterious, eh?" Then he added, "She said she hoped it brought you as much happiness as it had her." Griner looked at his watch.

"Well, Mr. Balliwick, I have to run. Now, you won't get the money until the will is probated. Should take nine to twelve months. But in the meantime, you'll find the name of a bank president and a letter of introduction in this." He brought forth a long, white envelope from his case. "All you have to do is contact him and he can arrange a loan, if you need it. Just tell him to call me if he gives you any problems."

Griner then wrapped it up. He had Balliwick sign some papers. Then he gave him the keys to the house and wished him luck. He said goodnight, handed Balliwick his business card, and took his leave.

Balliwick just stood there. In *his* living room. He felt very, very weird. And very funny inside.

He said out loud to the room, "Henny, why'd you go and do this? We hardly knew each other. And just being here without you makes me feel funny. I feel like a thief who's broken in and has the place all to himself. Why couldn't you have some living relatives, for crissakes?" Then he noticed an envelope on the desk Griner had used. It was addressed to him. He went to the desk and opened the envelope. He took out a letter. His hands trembled as he opened it. It began:

My dearest Bertie,

If you're reading this it's because I've gone to grow prize-winning flowers for the Angels. I know you didn't know, but I've been ill for quite some time now. And the way this old body of mine is feeling lately I think my time is getting nearer. In spite of what that old coot doctor of mine says.

We haven't known each other very well, but you gave me the greatest night of my life. Whew! The greatest! For a whole week afterwards I didn't notice my pains at all! Not at all. You've got some wonderful medicine there, Bertie. You should bottle it! You'd make a fortune, I can tell you. And if you need a testimonial--well--what can I say?

You're still young, my sweet Bertie, with a whole life ahead of you. So you go and give your "medicine" to some nice sweet girl who will appreciate it. What girl wouldn't? Ha ha.

The money I've left you should make your future easier. And this house, too. Please, Bertie, live in it and make it your own. Nothing would please me more. It's a friendly house, Bertie, and it takes to people real quick like. In no time you'll feel right at home. You just wait and see. Promise me, Bertie. Promise me right now! You hearing me?

Balliwick stopped reading and said out loud, "I hear you Henny, real loud. OK. I'll do as you say and live here if that's what you want. I promise. *You hearing me, woman?* He

looked up at the ceiling and he was sure she did. He read the last paragraph.

And Bertie? Don't open the shoeboxes until my birthday on December 6th. Promise me!

Love, your Henny.
Who now loves the taste of
salty onions!

Balliwick looked up at the ceiling again. "I promise you, Henny. December 6th. Not one day sooner . . . "

"Heeeeeeeere's . . . !"

THE SUPREME COMMANDER was due to make another speech. In a few minutes from now.

He looked into the mirror in his dressing room. He liked what he saw. The Devil had shown him a clip from an Earth transmission that featured punk rockers. Knowing how adored punk rockers were on Earth, the Supreme Commander went ahead and had his Glixizza dyed a bright orange. The star points he had dyed blood red. His face was made up to look like a cadaver, overall white with black sunken eyes and black lips. He thought he looked magnificent. Especially with the purple star on his left cheek.

He couldn't wait to make his speech. The Devil's plan was right on schedule. They had suffered a massive defeat, as the Devil had arranged, at the hands of the Earthlings. Now, he would predict a fantastic turn-around victory. All with Satan's help. How delicious it was going to be. He would go down in Groinkian history, for sure.

And his *pièce de résistance* was to be his keynote speaker, Satan himself! Could it get any better than this? Satan said he would outline his plan for defeating the unbeatable and undefeated Earthlings. A sure-fire plan. Led by the Supreme Commander himself.

A slave gossix came in and told him it was time. He gave the mirror a final glimpse and proceeded to the door. Showtime, he thought. Oh happy days. His glixizza swished noisily as he walked.

And there he was. Satan. Just as he said he'd be. Standing in the wings alongside some of the most famous Groinkians imaginable. And Satan looked unbelievably magnificent. He wore a black hooded robe covered with yellow quarter moons. He reminded the Supreme Commander of the wizard he had seen in one of the first Earth transmissions. Floating over the Devil's head was a halo of fire with the flames going round and around. His blood red hands sported white nails at least six inches long.

The Supreme Commander took his place at the lectern. A hush fell over the crowd. He told of the defeat and how gallantly his warriors had fought against overwhelming odds. He told them of the foodstuffs and slaves now on their way back to Groink. Not as much as they would have preferred, but it was still a win. He told them of the plan to have his warriors take another planet on their trip home. For more foodstuffs and slaves.

And, with victory all but assured.

Then he told them of a new plan. A plan to retake the Earth. To turn the defeat into a rousing victory. Without so much as a shot being fired. A plan to win the Earth from a distance. Then, when Earth was to its knees, all they had to do was go in and pick up the booty. A plan so foolproof, so staggering, they had to hear it from the originator of the plan himself. Just to believe it. He looked over at Satan. Satan winked at him. He winked back. How sweet it is, he thought.

He then said, "And now, Ladies and Gentlemen, without further ado, and as promised, . . . Heeeeeeeeeere's Satan!" He did his best impression of Carson's sidekick, Ed McMahon.

He watched Satan leave the wings and take his place beside him, with robes flowing.

"Thank you, Supreme Commander, for this opportunity. Hee hee." The Devil then took the lectern and faced the audience. The Supreme Commander stepped back and just beamed up a storm. Delicious! But why hadn't the audience greeted Satan?

"Shenanigans! . . . Shenanigans! Shenanigans! Hee hee." He repeated the word over and over as if stuck in a groove. "Shenanigans! Shenanigans! Shenanigans! Hee hee." Over and over. And over. The Supreme Commander couldn't figure out what the Hell was going on.

"What are you up too, Satan?" Satan looked at him and said, "Shenanigans! Shenanigans! Shenanigans! Hee hee." The Supreme Commander was now boiling. This was no time for his devilish fun and games. This was a serious time, damn it.

"Listen, Satan, we have a deal. We shook on it, too. So, get on with it, will you?" The Devil looked puzzled. He said dryly, "Shenanigans! Shenanigans! Shenanigans! Hee hee." That tore it. The Supreme Commander was truly pissed. Especially since the crowd was now murmuring in the background.

The Supreme Commander yelled at the Devil, "If you don't fulfill your end of our bargain, I'll never serve you again. You hearing me?" He had grabbed the Devil's robe front with both hands. The Devil suddenly lifted off the ground a few feet, taking the Supreme Commander along with him. While they hovered in mid-air, the Devil said, "Shenanigans! Shenanigans! Shenanigans! Hee hee." He lifted him a few more feet.

Then suddenly, the Devil let him drop. He landed on the stage with a thud and crumpled to his knees. Then he fell head first onto the floor. From above him he heard, "Shenanigans! Shenanigans! Shenanigans! Hee hee." And he knew he had been had. He started to cry. And then to babble. All gone. Gone. Just like that. Gone.

As he lay there he could hear some of the front row conversations. "Who's he talking to, there's no one there!" And, "He's gone round the bend!" And, "Crazy as a bedbug!"

Members of the podium rushed over to him. As did people from the wings. Two Gossix ushers leaped onto the stage from the front row area. Someone called for a doctor. The audience was made to leave, forced to keep their eyes off of the fallen man. On pain of death they were told.

A few moments later a team of medics and a doctor arrived. They took him away. He would go to a recovery place until it could be decided what was to be done with him.

That decision came a week later. He would be relieved of his command and given a well-paid retirement. He would also be put into mainstream society. To protect him, they plucked out his glizizza, one springy bristle at a time. Who knows how many Groinkians had it in for him for putting a relative out of his or her misery.

But don't feel too sorry for him. His old friend, Giffo, gave him a part-time job as a bouncer at his gammix cathouse. Part of his job, which he just loves, is to break in all the new talent. Just to see if they're up to snuff, you betcha. And Giffo can keep a secret.

Thus, the Supreme Commander, one-time leader of all of Groink, will probably live the rest of his few thousand years as happy as a pig in slop. Glizizza or no glizizza.

One can easily imagine him saying, "Now, Honey, show me what you can do . . ."

"It was the winter of my content!"

DECEMBER 6th finally rolled around, as it does every so often, especially in winter.

We find Balliwick in his own house. In front of a roaring fireplace. He looks very much the fashion plate in his red smoking jacket, with the black trim, from the latest Hugh Hefner Playboy Wannabe collection. Three B's are appliquéd on the left breast. He's drinking old Sherry. Just living large. With an hour to kill before his date is due to arrive.

He looked over at the desk. There it was, Henrietta's shoebox collection. He looked up at the ceiling. "Henny, my dear, it's the sixth. So, if it pleases you, I'll get right to it. OK?" It seemed OK to her, as he didn't hear any argument out of her.

He walked over to the desk and opened the top drawer. He took out the scissor and cut the green twine. He opened the first box, the topmost one. Seemed logical to do so.

It was filled with notes, letters, and 3x5 cards. And, on top of it all, an envelope with his name on it. He opened it up. One sheet of paper, signed by Henrietta.

Dear Bertie:

In these boxes are all my notes for growing prize-winning plants. Some of them go back 100 years or more--my mother's, my grandmother's, and even my great grandmother's stuff, you know.

In one of the boxes you will find my manuscript for a book I was writing about growing flowers. I knew I'd never finish it, but it gave me something to live for, day to day, if you know what I mean.

Balliwick did. He really did. His eyes misted over. He had to force himself to read some more.

The manuscript, Bertie, is on a CD-RW disk. A copy of it is also on my computer. I forced myself to learn to use the dang thing and I can tell you I ended up loving it. So much easier than writing it in pen or pencil or typing it on a regular typewriter. Now, I don't supposed you are too familiar with computers, Bertie, but if you want you can put

some tapes you'll find on my bookshelf into the VCR and it will teach you all about it. If you want.

I know I'm asking a lot, Bertie, but I'd love it if you could finish the book for me. It only needs two more chapters. And I've got those all fleshed out. All they need is a paragraph here and there. Then you can take it to Mr. Griner. He told me he has a friend that would be sure to publish it. And Mr. Griner, in case you don't know, doesn't just talk through his hat.

Balliwick had that impression of the man.

Well, you think about it, Bertie. No hard feelings if you don't want to get involved. I understand. It was my passion, not yours. But, it would be so nice, if you did.

Love, from among the Angels,
Your Henny

The doorbell sounded. His date was at the door. Book writing could wait for later. He went to the door. There she was. The new love of his life.

Cantella Fuggit. As radiant as she could ever look. "Hello, Hon." she said. Then kissed him hello. A hello kiss with a little x-rating on the side, if you get the drift.

He invited her in, took her coat, and offered her some Sherry. They toasted themselves and the world in general. They both looked happier than they had in a long, long time.

They had met at *Earl's Donut Dunker's Shoppe* when Balliwick had a craving for the best donuts this side of Bjilvusklavsky Farms.

She had come to Earl's at the insistence of Fuggit. He had appeared one afternoon and he didn't like the way she was looking. No sirree. Not at all.

"Cantella," he had told her. "You gotta get on with your life. You keep moping and pining away for me and you'll end up an old lady with no happiness or joy in her life at all. You think that's what I want for you? Why, that would make my dying add up to zippo. Now, woman, you listen to your old Ginny. Go out and have some fun. Meet someone." Then, just before he disappeared for the day, he said, "Get a life, while you still have one left to get . . ." *Pooooof!* He was gone.

She took his advice. Sorta. She went to Earl's for a box of donuts. Whoopee! She sure knows how to live it up.

She liked Balliwick immediately. She thought he was witty and charming. He told her the word donut was tunod spelled backwards. "But it tastes the same if you dunk it!" Cantella thought this was the oddest and funniest thing she had ever heard.

Yes, she liked the way Balliwick was. His look. His odd humor. His down-to-earthiness. And his gentlemanly manner. All of this was probably due to Bookem.

For, unbeknownst to Balliwick, the de-briefing officer was, in reality, a psychiatrist. Bookem thought Balliwick was in need of one. One could say he sure was. And it had worked. Balliwick was transformed from a pig-faced peeping Tom into a man-about-town. A new Beau Brummell and a regular bon vivant.

And Balliwick had taken to Cantella, too. To him, she was the most beautiful creature he had ever laid his eyes on, through an open window or not.

After their Sherry, he showed Cantella Henrietta's stuff. She was more than impressed. "Hon," she said. "Do it! We can work on it together. I can show you all about computers and while you're learning I can do some of the inputting for you. It'll be fun. And it will our first project together." Of course, he agreed. He'd buy any bridge she had for sale and wouldn't even ask for a receipt. Or the price.

Well, now . . . he not only got involved, he excelled at it. With just a few hours of watching Henrietta's computer learning tapes, and with Cantella's patient guidance, Balliwick actually knew what he was doing. In less than two weeks, they had turned the complete manuscript, on CD-RW, over to Griner. Griner was thrilled and glad to help. He had known Henrietta for many years and he knew of her wish to have her gardening secrets published. To share it with the world, as she had put it.

Griner's publisher friend not only liked the book, he loved it. It was, he said, the greatest book on gardening he'd ever seen. And he knew what he was talking about, having published over twenty books on the subject.

Today, you can pick up a copy of the book at any bookstore worth its salt. It's called *Henrietta Higgambotham-Smythington's Secrets for Growing Prize-Winning Plants*. A dull title to be sure, but it sold like hotcakes to avid gardeners worldwide. In fact, it was translated into ninety four languages and is in its seventh printing even as we speak.

The book also made Balliwick a respected gardening expert, with many appearances on TV. With the money he had, and earned, he eventually opened *Bertie's Ye Olde Green Thumb & Halloween Masks Shoppe*. A success right from opening day.

And his lovely Cantella worked there right alongside him. In her own world of happiness, surrounded by colorful flowers and colorful masks. The only mask not available for sale is, you guessed it, the pig faced one.

Fuggit seems to be coming around less and less lately. He is a gentleman after all, and respects other people's privacy. His latest words to Cantella, just before he pulled one of his disappearing acts, were, "Marry him, Cantie, he makes you deliriously happy . . ." *Pooooof!* Gone.

"Bye, bye, Bertie, for the last time!"

Meanwhile, in Merrie Olde England, at MI-5 headquarters, a young man listens to a conversation through headphones. He looks bored. He's heard juicier chats than, "Pass me that floral twine, would you, Hon?" Oh, well, tonight would be better. That's a given, given this guy's sex hunger.

Bookem popped his head in the door and said, "If anyone needs me, I'll be in the cafeteria doing my latest expense account." You listening, Satan?

The young man looked up at him and said, " Sir, what should I do about the incoming from Agent Balliwick's chip?"

"De-activate it. Immediately! . . . I don't want anyone listening to that animal's

rutting!" Bookem then ducked away and headed for the cafeteria.

The young man pressed a key on his computer keyboard and a color photograph of a satellite appeared on the top half of the screen. He hit another button and a small blinking, one-quarter inch red circular shape appeared a few inches below the satellite.

He hit two more buttons and a yellow line went from the satellite toward the red blinking light. In a flash, the red light disappeared. Gone. Just like that. Here one minute, gone the next.

Bertram Burlappe Balliwick has finally been set free from MI-5.

In more ways than one . . .

Epilogue:

WHEN DETECTIVE CLU SNIFFER married Pooty he became a better man. And cop. He passed his Lieutenant's test. He's now Lieutenant Sniffer. He doesn't know it yet, can't know it, but in a few years from now he'll be elected Police Chief--by a landslide--when Melrose retires.

Bertram Burlappe Balliwick and Cantella marry and will live happily ever after. And, for some reason, Cantella will be seen walking around with a smile on her face that never seems to fade. When people inquire about her sudden cheerful disposition all she'll say, in a joking manner, is: "My husband beats me every evening with his big nightstick!"

One of their favorite keep-the-marriage-exciting games is for Balliwick to tog up in one of Fuggit's policeman's uniforms and pretend he's arrested her and now has to frisk her and strip-search her for contraband. Ooh, wee, do they have fun!

"Sooeey!" Cantella always yells when he takes out his ten and a quarter inch nightstick and slaps her around with it. Police brutality at its hottest.

Bookem, out of curiosity, dropped by *Balliwick's Ye Olde Green Thumb & Halloween Masks Shoppe*. He was amazed at the transformation in Balliwick.

He tells him, "You've come a long way from the days of hollowed-out pig carcasses, haven't you, old bean?"

Balliwick, the ex-James Bond, just beamed. "I sure have. And I owe it all to you and Henrietta. And I guess I owe a small bit of thanks to the Groinkians." For fun he tugged rapidly on both ears. Bookem laughed. They never saw each other again. But they do exchange cards for the holidays.

Officer Morty "Moldy" Moldon made Detective last week. His first big assignment was to find out who was going around town removing Wet Paint signs.

Chief Melrose, with three fresh green paint stripes on the seat of his new suit trousers, and four on the jacket's back, personally assigned him the case. Moldon cracked it in less than twenty four hours by staking out four park benches due for a repainting.

The culprit, one Dusty Miller, said he did it because of revenge. He was pissed at the

police because an officer, one Grinnan Fuggit, had confiscated his fresh bottle of Thunderbird Wine.

Dusty also confessed to another unsolved crime. He told Moldon exactly where he could find a nearly empty can of Krylon Blue #4 spray paint. Thus Moldon cracked two cases at once. And Chief Melrose was ecstatic.

Speaking of the Chief, he doesn't know it, can't know it, but he retires in a few years. He and his adorable Melon will enjoy themselves immensely. They will learn French, Spanish, German, and Russian together.

They will also go to South Africa and take a safari that specializes in locating meerkats. Melon will take a color photograph of two meerkats on the watch that will be used by *National Geographic* magazine for an article titled: Meerkats are no mere cats!

The photograph will also be chosen by the *Meerkat Lovers Society of North America, Canada, and Mexico* for their November newsletter's cover. Thus inspired, the Chief and Melon will take photography courses and open their own studio "specializing in animal pictures, feral and tame."

Melon will also videotape the birth of the Sniffer's first baby. That too wins an award. The videotape, not the baby. But don't tell that to Clu and Pooty. Their little Dickie Sniffer is better than any old award could ever be. And they've got the pictures to prove it.

And the aliens? Who gives a shit! "*The rat pig-faced bastards! We'll sue 'em!*"

But somewhere, far, far above the planet Earth, a voice does seek help and asks for it very respectfully . . .

"Pass me one of the chocolate ones, would you please, St. Pete?"

The End

Glossary:

Gammix: A female-male Groinkian slave-hybrid. 5' 5" height, on average. **Gammixi** (Plural) are used for light duty work, such as cooking, cleaning, sewing, and rearing children.

Gixisor: A data bank containing vast amounts of information. The word also refers to the machine used to transfer the data. **Gixisor** machines come in two flavors:

1. A desktop model slightly smaller than your average computer tower. It comes with viewing screens varying in diagonal widths from three inches to ninety-five feet. The larger screens are usually used for outdoor viewing. Used anywhere large amounts of data are desired.

2. A portable, wearable (usually worn on the head) metallic-looking device, circular shaped (three inch diameter), sporting a four-inch antenna. It was conceived in 1970AD by a team of techno-geeks working for the now defunct **Gicrosoft Company** (bought out by **GOL, Groinks On Line**, in 2005AD).

Glixizza: The white, stiff, bristle-like hairs that fan out, fountain-like, from the head of a Supreme Commander. Picture a dandelion with the bottom half missing. Length at birth: Approx. 6." Length at adulthood: Approx. 2' to 3.'

At the end of each bristle is a silver, star-shaped formation. Only two or three Groinkians are born, every thousand years or so, with the **glixizza**. This is in direct contrast with most Groinkians who are born bald, and remain that way throughout their lifetime.

Supreme Commanders are thus chosen from Groinkians (at aged one hundred) displaying the **glixizza** at birth. The main reason for this is the fact that those so blessed are known to be, and history has proven it out, five thousand times smarter than the average Groinkian. Groinkians *not* chosen are automatically made **High Commanders** in the lowest ranking **Power Level**.

i.e. The present Groinkian Supreme Commander invented, at aged two, the **Golix-Girgin**. This unusual device can turn any food into any other food in seconds, providing the amount of molecules in each do not exceed a five percent differential. Don't like meatloaf? Poof! Filet Mignon.

Golix-Girgin: A device that can turn any food into any other food in seconds, providing the amount of molecules in each do not exceed a five percent difference. The **Golix-Girgin** was invented, approximately five thousand years ago, by the current (2018AD Earth time) **Supreme Commander** of Groink, at aged two years.

Gona: A female Groinkian pair-mate. See **Gono** and **Gronotta**.

Goni: Combined form of **Gona** (she) and **Gono** (he). As in: The **goni** enter into a contract for twenty years.

Gono: A male Groinkian pair-mate. See **Gono** and **Gonotta**.

Gonotta: A pair-mate arrangement contract between **Goni** and the **High Command** Military of Groink. Each arrangement is for twenty years, at the end of which it is renewable for an additional twenty years, if the signatories so desire.

Gossix: A male-female Groinkian slave-hybrid. Over 6' in height, on average. Gossixi (Plural) are used for general heavy-duty labor, as guards to slaves, and as assassins.

Grippa-grippa: A large, bushy plant grown in the **Glinna Valley** (not the inferior and smaller plant, the Grippa-grilla, found in abundance throughout the Groinkian countryside). The large, wide leaves of the plant (they can measure three feet across) are used for slave bedding, and when boiled for approximately ten minutes, cooled, dried, and minced finely, they make an effective laxative, and poultice.

Groal-Sturnacker: A man-sized machine capable of reducing anything to ashes. On the high setting. Set on low, it can heat thirty TV dinners in four seconds. Or twelve full-sized turkeys in eight. The closest translation to English is: Black (or burnt) toast. It has been in use by the Groinkians since 7AD our time.

Who invented it is no longer known. The inventor, having screwed a high Groinkian official's wife, was caught *flagrante delecto*, as it were, and was used, *poste haste*, as the first test of the Groal-Sturnacker efficacy. His name was, also *poste haste*, expunged from all future records.

Groink: A planet in the **Farnsworth-Hayden** galaxy, 12 light-years from **Earth**. Twice as large as Earth, the planet Groink has 4 Suns and 2 moons. Thus, on Groink, there is no night, and the average daily temperature is 198 degrees. 34 planets orbit the 4 Suns in various arrangements. Of these planet, eleven (so far) are known to be inhabited, mostly by primitive creatures of varying description. Six of these planets are used as slave repositories by the Groinkians.

Groinkian: An inhabitant of the planet **Groink**. They have pig-like features, are bipedal, completely hairless, and have smooth skin. The average life span is twelve thousand years due to their drinking (on a daily basis) a sweet, green, viscous tea-like liquid made synthetically called **Grudu**.

Groka: A small, shrub-like plant found only on the banks of the **Gi River**. The roots are boiled, fermented, and made into a sweet, green, viscous tea-like beverage. It has the property to extend one's life. How long is not known as testing is impossible. A rough yardstick is obtained by reviewing Groinkian birth records. Before Grudu, Groinkians expected to reach aged two hundred on average. After Grudu, aged twelve thousand years has been attained.

Grudu: An alcohol made from the roots of the **Grudu** plant that is found on the banks of the **Gi**

River. The method of distillation is a secret known only to the appointed gourmet chefs of the High Command. However, it is widely available to all Groinkians except slave-hybrids. Slave-hybrids caught using the Grudu are executed. To date that has never happened.

Grun-gun: A portable, hand-held, laser-like weapon with various settings: Stun (from 10 seconds to eternity), Evaporate (Settings 1 through 6), and Memory Loss (from 10 seconds to eternity). It is the only Groinkian small arms. It is also put to use (frequently) by Groinkian guards. Relatively new, it was invented in 1905AD Earth time, by Colonel Grun, HC.

It has totally replaced the **Grax-gun** due to the fact that, unlike the Grax, the Grun-gun never needs reloading. A description of how it works would be nice to have, but that information is top secret. Even Colonel Grun no longer knows how it functions since he was immediately silenced, permanently, after its first testing proved it worked.

Suffice it to say, it emits a bright light that is accurate up to one thousand yards. The width of the light can be set from one sixteenth of an inch to two feet in diameter. Its Evaporate Settings (1 through 5) leave varying amounts of ash-like residue, with Setting One leaving the most. The Evaporate, Setting 6, leaves no trace.

High Commander: A military rank. Chosen from Groinkians born with the **Glixizza**.

Power Levels: A military rank consisting of **High Commanders** (see Glixizza). All levels may vary in numbers except **Power Level One**, which is held to six members. The chain of command would thus be:

Supreme Commander (One)
High Commanders Power Level One (Six members)
High Commanders Power Levels Two through to last level
(Varying # of Members)
Generals (4 ranks), Colonels (2 ranks), Captains (1 rank),
Majors (1 rank), Lieutenants (2 ranks)

Slave-Hybrid: See **Gammix** and **Gossix**.

Supreme Commander: A singular military rank.

Author's End Note:

A WORD about the characters. The police in this story have been, for the most part, portrayed, and stereotyped, as small-town bumblers (Except for Clu Sniffer who is a notch up the food chain). This has been done on purpose to make the story more interesting. After all, who wants to read about smart, savvy cops? (Don't write us).

In real life, however, the cops are not only smart and savvy; they're as dedicated as Hell. In a real-life game of life and death. Day in and day out (24-7). On a pay scale that is outrageously low. Plumbers make more and what the blazes have they ever saved

anyone from? A wet ass?

So, to all the folks out there of the blues and the badges, we apologize, from the heart. And we hope you take it all good heartedly and in fun. And in the same way you've reacted to all the other indignities piled upon you - by not shooting us sorry sacks of shit right between the eyes.

Of course, nothing we can say will ever cure the police of their serious brain fault: It's pure insanity to work at a job where the next crazy, hopped-up bastard can come along and put you six feet under. And we, the chicken-shit masses, who pay their hard-earned salaries, should pray every day that they're never cured. And while we're praying, let's salute them, one and all.

Similar statements could be made about teachers, like our Ms. Pooty Prissyfoot. Except she's based more on reality. I've personally known two teachers very much like her. Sorry, Poot. But, actually, we weren't too hard on you.

Ms. Henrietta Higgambotham-Smythington could exist and probably has, so we make no apologies to horny sixty-six year old widowed ladies.

Bertram Burlappe Balliwick, on the other hand, is certainly out there. In far too many numbers for our true comfort. To him we say, getta life! And we say the same to the wino Dusty Miller.

And finally, we offer absolutely *no* apologies to the aliens. For they have been accurately portrayed without embellishment by us. And if they don't like it, they can just lump it. As Bertram Balliwick might say, *"Mess with us, you rotten alien bastards, and we'll sue your pig-faced asses off! You hearing us?"*

Arthur Kilcup, June 2002