

1minutestories round 2



Colorado Springs, Gauting, Athens

March 2006

Contributors:

Frances Burke

Horizon Gitano

Ioannis Kontodinas

Shannon Frances

Table of contents

Obligational Eating	1
Mormons in Hell	8
The Perfect Hosts	14
Inappropriate Introduction	18
Inappropriate Introduction	21
The Truth Comes Out	23
Bad Poetry	27
Bad Poetry	30
Molding Young Minds	32
Bad Hair Life	39
A Dog and His Boy	42
Heavenly Reward	44
The Boy Who Wanted to Be an Angel	46
Best Intentions	50
The Road to Heaven	53
The First Time I Meditated	55
The Happy Place in My Mind	58
Higly Concentrated	62
Conversation with a Prostitute	65
Conversations with a Prostitute	69
Bitter Aftertaste	73
Tiger Island	77
Bad Neighbors	81
The Terror Next Door	85
Identity Theft	89
Identity Theft	92
The Sweater of Success	96
Someone I Met on a Bus	101
Sid: Sage of the Bus	104
Destiny Bus	108
Things That Are Easier to Get into Than out of	112
Sinking Sensations	115
The Price of a Snowball	118
Post Office of the Damned	124
Post Office of the Damned	127
Post Office of the Damned	130
Post of the Damned	136
Exhausted Conversation	141
Exhausted Conversation	144
Missed Connection	147
Babylon	150
Patriotic Sacrifice	154
Long and Strange Trip	156
The Hero Returns	160
Dinner at Kent's	164

Homecoming	169
Notes for the second round of 1minutestories	172

Obligational Eating

When I saw the ad in the help wanted section of the local paper, I thought, why not? I needed a job for the summer. Having tried waiting tables last summer and working at Midia Play in the mall the summer before that, I thought a change might be nice. The sales clerk thing wasn't too bad, but I ended up spending most on my pay check before I even left the store. So I gave the Happy Happy Kiddy's World a call. The director told me I could apply any day from two to four. They were looking for a teacher's aid for the summer school-aged children's program. I wouldn't need much in the way of experience. When I asked where they were, she said they were only three blocks from my apartment.

Sweet!

I could walk to work! The exercise would help me fit into the jeans I couldn't get into since my last visit home and I like kids. I also hate taking the bus in the summer. They seem to suck up all the nasty exhaust fumes from the whole town and ferment it by trapping in that one scorching hot little box. That clenched it.

In high school, I worked as a life guard at the local pool. I figured that should cover whatever experience working with kids they might want. I had a friend type me up a letter of recommendation on the Parks Department stationery, put on clean jeans and hunted up a T-shirt that didn't have anything too objectionable printed on it. A lot of my T-shirts are souvenirs from rock concerts.

I walked on over.

The director, a lady named Irma, didn't seem too interested in anything but my letter from the Parks Department. She gave me the New Employee's Hand Book and told me to see Susan Mahoney the assistant director at eight Monday morning. Eight seemed a little early to be doing anything, much less showing up for work. I make it a strict rule never to take classes that start before nine. I'm a journalist major at State U.

I had to read the handbook and sign the back page saying I had read it all and would be responsible for knowing such things as not being able to wear short shorts or halter tops or most of my T-shirts. It included a blurb on the joys of Family-Style Dining. I would be expected to eat with the kids. I couldn't believe the sample menu, homemade cookies, chicken parmesan and something called "pancake squared."

With luck I could probably get through the entire summer with out having to cook once. How good is that! I am no great shakes as a cook. Mama was a firm believer in feeding anything that slowed down so I never had to learn. I do a pretty mean PBJ and have been known to open a can of Spaghetti-O's but only in the cooler months. My cracker box of an apartment faces south west and you can forget about air con. In the summer my chipped Formica dinette table top gets hot enough to fry eggs on. I would save a bundle of groceries, be physically fit from walking to work and spend my days playing with kids. Did I mention I like kids?

I walked through the door to the Happy Happy Kiddy's World on the dot of eight Monday morning. I asked the middle-aged woman at the front desk where I could find Susan.

The smile she gave me made me think she must have mistaken me for a long lost daughter of hers just returned from the Peace Corps or something. I looked to see who was standing behind me.

You must be Capricia Jones!" She said it the way most people say, "What an adorable puppy." Okay so maybe she is an old friend of my mother's. Though my mother doesn't know a lot of white, middle-aged women.

"Yes," I said waiting for some explanation of the big hello.

She took my hand, not like in a hand shake on anything, more as though she was going to ask me to marry her. I half expected her to plant a big wet one on me. "Welcome to our little Happy Happy family," she gushed. "Let me take you down and introduce you to Darlene." She lowered her voice relaxed her face into what I guess was supposed to pass for sincerity and said, "YOU will just love working with our Darlene. She is such a treasure." She took me by the arm about to steer me down the hall, when a woman came in wanting to change her kid's schedule. Susan pounced on the kid. "My! *Gosh!*" she bubbled over in transports of delight. "I see you have your blanky with you!" I had to look to see if maybe the blanky was a code word for the Hope diamond or at least tickets to a Paris for the whole school. "I just *love* that *color!* It looks so warm and soft." I guess ratty old blankets are just not my thing.

While they chatted, I got a look at the day's menu, Breakfast: burritos, applesauce, and cold milk. Lunch: mac and cheese, tossed garden salad, orange slices and cold milk. Snack: oatmeal cookies and grape juice. *Oh, yes, thank you, Jesus! This is the place for me.* I could do without the milk, it always leaves a slimy film in my mouth but any place open for business at eight in the morning had to have a coffee machine tucked away somewhere.

Susan finished with the mother and we had just gone a few steps when another mother with a little girl in tow hurried by. Susan startled me with a loud squeal, "Ashley! I see you have your cowboy boots on today!" Her voice came out in a good imitation of a Disney mouse. "OOOOH! I just love those boots, little buck-a-roo!"

The mom smiled and Susan stage whispered loud enough for the mother to hear. "We of the Happy Happy team just love our precious little ones."

Unhu! One of those, I thought.

When we got to the door at the end of the hall Susan gripped the handle, squared her shoulders and opened it. The blast of noise came close to ripping off my corn rows. The place was wall-to-wall kids. Susan practically dragged me over to a tall redhead who was a little older than me, "Darlene, this is your new aid Capricia."

A lego airplane sailed past her slightly dazed face in a lazy cart wheal. An African violet tumbled from a plant stand to the floor as a little girl let out a string of words you usually only hear from rappers. Susan hastily backed way from a little boy advancing on her with something I sincerely hoped was brown finger paint smeared all over his hands.

"Well, I'll leave you two to get acquainted," she called over her shoulder as she beat a retreat.

“Hi,” Darlene said, “Will you monitor the dress-up area before that little girl in the pink dress nails someone with the high heels, again.”

I turned to follow her gaze and saw the kid in a really trendy looking pink outfit take a swipe at one of the other girls with the business end of a shoe. We both made a bee line for the kids, and I grabbed the shoe before she could get off a good shot with it.

Darleen yelled, “Don’t touch her!” I jumped and the kid got the shoe away from me and whacked the back of my hand with the stiletto heel. “Hand over that shoe,” I said in my best “everybody out of the pool voice.”

“Sorry,” the redhead glanced at my hand, “but we have a strict policy about not touching the children.” She mouthed the words “law suits.”

“You can’t tell me what to do!” the kid in pink gave me a level look. “You are not my mother. Only my mother is the boss of me.”

Darleen got down on her knees and smiled sweetly at the little assassin. “Lauren, you know it really hurts your friends when you hit them with the shoes like that. Why don’t you give me the shoe and I’ll save it for later. It’s almost time to clean up for circle and stories now anyway.”

Lauren sneered, “She is *not* my friend,” but she handed over the shoe to Darlene. The kid flipped back her blond hair sending me a nasty look. “You,” she said loading the words with accusation, “are a *stranger* and my mother said I am not to talk to strangers.”

Darlene straightened up, “This is Miss Capricia; she has come to play with us. It’s all right for you to talk to her.”

Lauren produced a shocked expression as she turned to Darlene, “Are you telling me not to obey my mother?”

“No, of course not, Lauren. I am just saying that Miss Capricia isn’t really a stranger. She will be working with me in our room.”

“Mother will hear about this,” the kid said as she stalked off.

“She’s going through a rather nasty divorce right now. Acting out a little I’m afraid.”

I looked down at my hand. An ooze of blood had welled up in the crater where the shoe got me. Darlene glanced at it “You will find band aids in the white cabinet over the sink. Left-hand side.” She turned as said to the room of kids, “You have five minutes to circle. Time to finish up your work.” No one even seemed to hear her. I got the band aid.

If I had ever even said something rude to a teacher, my mother would have ripped me a new one. And here I am bleeding. I looked around for someone to come in and take the little menace to the principal’s office or something.

Nothing!

Five minutes later, Darleen sat in one of the midget-sized chairs and started reading a story. Five kids drifted over to see the book she held out before her. She looked over to where I stood and said, “Will you please encourage them to come to circle. If they don’t want to, we have to respect their choices.”

Yeah like the choice to whack me with a shoe, I thought. Those burritos better be really good.

Eventually a few more wandered over, and, by the end of the story, about half of the kids had decided to listen to a kind of funny story about a Siamese cat who thought he was a Chihuahua.

I had read the employee's hand book so I knew it said they were a child-centered school. But I didn't realize that meant they let the monkeys run the zoo. My mama would have had them in hand in a heartbeat, but the words "law suite" loomed large. Most of the kids were nice enough. Darleen told me we had thirty in our room. And most of the time all we could do was crowd control. We were not to touch the kids or raise our voice to them, but we had to prevent them from doing bodily damage to the other kids. There were only three who were really likely to do that, so it was my job to keep an eye on Lauren, Kyle and Justin. Another aid would come in to help at breakfast -- in another fifteen minutes.

I soon discovered Justin and Kyle were the best of friends when ever they weren't trying to murder each other, and Lauren, who's mother was a lawyer, thought she should rule the world. It seemed the mother was grooming her daughter for a seat on the supreme court. When not using the shoes, she exercise the ultimate threat, "You can't come to my birthday party!" at anyone who didn't recognize her right to have whatever she wanted.

When breakfast finally arrived we had to get everyone in the room to wash their hands before they went to the table. Not an easy thing when there were fifteen kids to a sink. My stomach growled and I really wanted to chow down but they seemed to all have eaten right before they got to school and were in no hurry to get to the food. Finally, twenty minutes after Mary had the food on the tables, we finally got most of them to sit down and start passing the plates. I wedged myself into one of the midget chairs and looked around for the goods. I had checked the menu, it clearly said breakfast burritos. What I saw were a pile of what looked like a cross between white cigars and slimy limp worms. "What's that?" I asked one of the kids at my table.

"Burritos," he said.

"Uhha, I know burritos when I see them, and that doesn't look like no burrito I ever saw."

There was a little cup of red stuff – ketchup -- next to the cigar things. And a bigger bowl of apple sauce, at least. I knew what that it was, but there was a lump of brown stuff in the middle of it. "What's the brown stuff?" I asked my informant.

He shrugged, "Not a clue."

A kid across the table said she thought it was supposed to be cinnamon, but she had cinnamon on her apple sauce at home and this didn't taste anything like that.

Mary came by with the milk pitcher to fill my glass. "I don't drink milk," I told her.

She shrugged, "Family-style dining. We are expected to model good eating habits for the children."

Then give me something to work with, I thought.

The kid with the cinnamon information -- Julia, I think -- told me, "They really aren't so bad once you get used to them." She took one and plopped it on her plate to show me how it was done.

"Right," I said. I had skipped my PBJ thinking I would eat at school, so I was pretty hungry. And just because they didn't look too good didn't mean they didn't taste good. A girl I went to school with came from some place -- China, I think -- that didn't have pizza. She said the first time she saw a pizza she thought it looked like barf.

I took one and tried a bite only to discover it really could taste a whole lot worse than they looked. Greasy isn't necessarily bad. I wolfed down greasy French fries all the time. Cold can be good. Give me a nice cold slice of watermelon any day. Slippery can have a good side. Jello goes down all right. Lumpy -- now, that's something else. There is a subtle distinction between lumpy and chunky. My aunt Bessy makes homemade chilly that has chunky beans in it and I can eat that stuff by the gallon. Lumpy is just not good. Put all that together in what is supposed to be a burrito and believe me you have a food disaster! My eyes watered as I looked longingly to the little kid's bathroom desperate for a place to spew the contents of my mouth. Lauren, the shoe maniac, smirked at me from one of the other tables and I swallowed. I even took a gulp of milk to wash the nastiness out of my mouth. I really hate milk, but sometimes you just gotta do what you got to do. Then I spotted the apple sauce. If I avoided the mysterious brown stuff, I could at least have some apple sauce. "Please pass me the apple sauce," I said. Persia, a really cute little sister in a blue and green jumper over a pink turtle neck, took it to pass and sneezed directly into the bowl. I had to take some, but I hid it under the remains of the cigar thing.

Darleen noticed I hadn't cleaned my plate. She smiled sympathetically. "Family-style dining is a big thing here. You really do have to encourage them to try everything by eating it yourself. The cook, Mister Gainer, has a... different take on burritos."

After breakfast we took the kids out to the play yard for what sounded like primal scream therapy. By now my stomach felt as though the remains of the cigar thing had reproduced down there, rats-in-a-sewer fashion, while still leaving me hungry enough to make me wonder what the chances might be of bumming recognizable something to eat from the kitchen.

I never found out. Instead of getting the fifteen minute break the employee's hand book promised, I had an orientation to go to. Susan drowned on about how to avoid power struggles with children. Her strategy boiled down to bribery, begging and ultimately just giving in to whatever the little terrorists wanted. The fifteen minutes took closer to forty-five and when I got back to the room every one had come in to center time. The hand book said this is where the real learning went on. I looked for anything that didn't look like mayhem without, success.

I did notice the little boy who had run to Miss Susan still had the brown paint on his hands. So much for the hand washing thing. I walked over to him still, keeping Kyle and Justin under surveillance. Maybe there was something to learning, after all. Kyle and Justin looked to be the kind of kids who would spend a lot of their lives under surveillance. I asked the kid with the brown goop if he had been painting.

Lauren intervened, radiating superiority, "Leon is a boy and boys don't paint."

I know I sounded petty, but I had had it with this kid. My hand throbbed enough to make me wonder if she might have broken one of my little bones. “Shows you what you know,” I scoffed, “Haven’t you ever heard of Michael Angelo?”

“Sure,” the boy grinned, “he’s a turtle.”

I chose to ignore that.

Lauren gave me a “told you so” look and flounced off.

Fearing the worst I asked him, “What’s that stuff on your hands?”

“Slime,” he indicated a plastic bucket of it on one of the tables. I went to check it out. From the consistence of the stuff I guessed it might be the raw material the cook used to make the burritos. It really felt kind of neat. A little like silly putty but looser. I had both hands in it when I from the former of my eye I caught Kyle jumping back from the unmistakable flicker of flames. “Holy shit!” I yelled into the silence that followed Kyle’s venture into pyrotechnics. Lauren pounced on my lapse of politically correct kid speak.

“She said the S word!” she squealed with delight. “We do not use language like that in our school. Mother will hear about this,” she said as I made a dash for the trash can Kyle had managed to set on fire. Darleen got to it before I did and poured the contents of the helping-hands watering can into the waste paper basket.

“I think Capricia really said ‘holy smokes,” Darleen corrected brat beast. Lauren obviously didn’t buy that but she let it pass.

I wondered if the kid kept some sort of notebook entitled “One hundred and one ways to get the new girl’s ass fired”.

Darleen, brushing a little smudge of soot from her cheek, came over for a little mid-course correction chat. You know, the kind of thing coaches do with a pitcher about to strike out in the World’s Series. “Capricia, I understand that this can be pretty overwhelming on your first day. But you really must try to monitor the three I gave you.”

I wanted to plead that hunger had made me light headed, but that would tip her off to the fact that I had not been a good team player and eaten the fowl glop that passed for breakfast. “Yes, Darlene I’ll keep an eye on them.”

By lunch time I could have eaten my brother Jamal’s mangy mutt. We were going to have macaroni and cheese. Even I could open a box and boil water. Burritos might take some creativity but good old mac and cheese -- that had to be goof proof. Darlene gave them the five minute warning, and Mary set the tables. I watched my three usual suspects the way local cops watch my cousins. For some reason I thought the kids had to be hungry enough to get washed up in under the mornings twenty minutes. Not happenin’. When I finally squeezed myself into the chair, I thought it went a little easier due to my not having had a thing to eat all day. I looked at the serving dish and my heart sunk. This was not mac and cheese: it was one glutinous lump of yellowish wallpaper paste. Maybe that’s just the top, I prayed as I stuck the serving spoon into the mass. Whatever it was, it went all the way through.

Mary passed with the milk. “Try to think of it as one big noodle she whispered.”

Lauren sat across from me watching in bliss at my discomfort.

I can do this, I told myself. I scooped out a tiny portion. It bounced slightly then settled down into a slowly spreading mound. Closing my eyes I put some of the disgusting stuff in my mouth. My mouth was having none of it. Try as I might I could not get my digestive system to accept the insult. Around the spoonful of what I felt sure was the brown slime in yet another form, I managed to tell Darleen I needed to use the toilet, right now, urgently. I beat feet down the hall, out the door and spit the mega noodle into the shrubbery.

My mama never raised me to be a quitter. But there are some things a proud woman will simply not allow her self to be subjected to and obligation eating had just made it to the top of my list.

1minutetopic: bro01
Contributor: Frances Burke
Completed: February 2006, Black Forest
Last revised: 26 March 2006

It's a bright day. The sky is almost black, it is so clear, and the sun shines down with a piercing ferocity turning the world into a stark black and white collage. The view is of the façade of a boring, modern, single-story brick office laboriously surrounded by a vast parking lot stretching off in all directions as far as the eye can see. It must be America. The lot is only about 12% full, as the "holiday mass-consumption season" hasn't yet arrived. As though in a mirage, a lone man appears in the distance. He weaves between the hulking boulders of steel and glass as though wandering through a vast desert, and finally enters the building. Soon he is followed by two beings in school uniforms: white short-sleeved, button-up shirts, black slacks. One has a backpack, and they both have name tags on their breast pockets. Their features can't be distinguished as their faces are saturated white.

Inside it becomes obvious that this is a bank. The first man is doing some transaction with the lone teller and laughing loudly. The two younger men wait side by side in the queue, quietly discussing the upcoming transaction: they are here to purchase traveler's checks. As the first man leaves the counter, his eye catches the two in the queue. He has an odd gait, as though he was made of mismatched parts. His eyes move quickly like those of a man calculating his relative land speed just before touching down on an alien planet without instruments. He passes the two and whispers, "Prostylization is a sin." The two men are clearly taken aback.

"No, it's not!" one of them insists. Before the first man exits he turns and adds, "Destroying indigenous ideas which form the basis of a regional culture and supplanting it with your own foreign dogma is... a bad idea, boys." And this is where our story begins.

Mormons in Hell

"What was that all about?" Joe asks Matthew.

"I think he was a hippy... Did you see how long his hair was? It almost covered his ears," Matt replies as they approach the counter.

"What can I do for you boys today?" says the smiling round-faced teller girl.

"We need to get some traveler's checks," Matt answers with an oratorical air.

"How much are you going to need?"

"Two thousand dollars," Joe says.

"Each," Matt adds, as though it was a lot of money.

"You boys aren't going to Vegas are ya?" she asks, head tilted, with a slight narrowing of her eyes. She had yet to take the Corporate Political Correctness training course, so she still conversed like a normal human being.

"Oh, no, ma'am! We're going on a mission," Joe replies, straightening up proudly.

"I thought boy scouts went on 'retreats'?" she says squinting to recall.

"Oh, were not boy scouts..." Matt says point to his LDS name tag.

“I’m sorry!” the teller says, bringing her hand up to her mouth, “It’s just with those, um, ‘Leave it to Beaver’ getups, and the small, too-tight backpack, well, I thought LDS was ‘Learning Disabled Student’. Anyway, what denomination?”

“Uh, we’re *Mormons*,” Joe answers unsurely, wondering if she was some how making fun of them.

“Yes, of course. So... what denominations would you *Mormons* like?” she asks again, trying to make it clear.

“Uh...” the boys look at each other.

“You know, like twenties, fifties or hundreds?” she asks leading them, still not quite over the whole LDS thing.

“Yes, yes, we know,” Joe replies. *What denomination? That’s not in our manual?*

“How ‘bout I just get you hundreds? That way there’s less to sign.”

The boys agree, and they soon have twenty fresh \$100 Thomas Cook monopoly money bills in their pockets. Each.

Back outside the rays of light are so strong it penetrates their skin, making it translucent. All of their underlying muscle structure and blood veins are clearly visible, making them look like purple-green aliens gone retro.

“Have you ever noticed how strange everyone else seems?” Joe asks Matt.

“Yeah, it’s like we were aliens or something,” he answers back, the circular muscles around his mouth moving like a large fish eating algae from an invisible cement retaining wall.

“I think we’re being oppressed,” Joe adds, blinking eyes which are clearly visible even when his lids are shut.

“Yeah, I guess we’ve always been oppressed,” Matt says as he straddles his bike. “It’s just not fair.”

After an inexplicable lapse in the narrative, the boys find themselves thousands of miles away in the darkest reaches of post-colonial Gondwanaland. Their formerly starched shirts now hang on them, sagging in the heat and humidity. Their name tags droop ‘till they announce the boys only to the ants scurrying across the red clay path just an instant before they are squashed under foot. Having taken the bus to the last stop, the furthest outpost of civilization from the hut which serves as the international airport, they have been walking for several hours and are nearing exhaustion. The natives, shocked by the glaring brightness of the Mormon’s skin, often jump back and run off shouting “Ga-Jinda! Ga-Jinda!” The boys haven’t come here seeking to understand the local ways, rather they are hoping to point out how deficient the local belief structure is and that they, Matt and Joe, have the superior superstition, called Mormonism. As such, they haven’t bothered to learn the local language and do not realize that “Ga-Jinda”, being a linguistic relic of the ancient time when Japanese ruled the world, actually means “alien”.

They stumble along, sun scorched and dehydrated. Just as they are about to question the existence of their own particular god, they come to a village clearing: clear proof that their god must exist. The headman speaks some English, and after discussing the day's events, they are shocked to learn that they are being called aliens. The headman, Mambugachi, explains "Ga-Jind means some one from far away, an alien."

Joe responds, "Oh, you mean a foreigner. But why do you call us aliens? They come from Mars."

"Yeah, that's just rude," Matt adds.

Mambo, as he is affectionately known, looks at them thoughtfully. "Well, you see in our language we have no distinction between alien and foreigner: there are no Martians here. And anyway, you two look about as close to space aliens as anyone of us could imagine! How would your government call us in your land?"

"Oh, you'd be illegal aliens there," Matt answers spontaneously. Hearing the words he quickly back-peddles, "Oh, not like *alien* aliens... it's like aliens, you know, like someone from another country."

Mambo considers the two pathetic, melanin-deficient creatures before him who have come to destroy his cultural heritage. He smiles. "You should take some water," he says motioning them to the water hole in the center of the clearing between thatched huts.

The tantalizing idea of crystal clear water happily dancing in the boy's heads is rudely ejected as soon as the boys look down into the shallow well. The red mud paste wasn't exactly squirming, but it did have more floaters than a trail-park dog's water bowl, more algae, water spiders and a lot more flies.

Matt looks at Joe and swallows dry, "I'd really like a coke." Joe shoots him an icy stare: For them, drinking caffeine is a mortal sin. "Do *you* want to drink that stuff?" Matt asks pointing at the malarial red slime hole just as noxious bubbles rise to the surface and burst, killing a fly with its vapors. "Hey!" Matt calls over to Mambo, "Can you get us some cokes?"

As the village headman, Mambugachi was highly respected. Despite his relatively youthful thirty years, he was the wisest, most learned and just man for miles around. Mambo was used to people bringing *him* food. "Coca Cola?" he asks laughing and shaking his head side to side. "You think we have money for Coca Cola here?"

"Oh, no!" Joe answers, pulling a wad of Thomas Cooks out of his pocket, "We have plenty of money. We want to *buy* some cokes and maybe some food."

It took the three of them hunched over an old scrap of news paper for about thirty minutes to figure out that \$100 was about five times the combined liquid assets of the entire village. Plus, no one there had ever seen a traveler's check before in their lives.

"Why did you not change money at the airport?" Mambo asked taking off his large, aged reading glasses.

"We thought we'd be cheated. We wanted to change with some one we knew... like you," Joe answers.

“You only met me now. How do you know me?” Mambo asks.

“Oh, well... We trust you.”

Mambo puts his hands together and bends his head down. “For us to trust someone, we must know them a long, long time.”

It was getting late. He took pity on the two strange trusting aliens. A large dinner was prepared for them, and they were given quarter for the night. The boys were so hungry and thirsty from the long day, they finally bit the bullet and ate the local fair, suffering no ill effects. Mambo asked them why they had come and they explained that some god had sent them on a mission to save the people of Gondwanaland.

“Save us? From what?” Mambo asks interested to discover what horrible danger they were unknowingly in the shadow of.

“Ignorance and heathenism,” Joe answers, stuffing his face with some white creamy stuff. It took him a while to get the point across, but eventually Mambo got the idea that the boys had a very jealous and insecure god who resented any others being worshiped. With such a weak god, surely these two were in need of help. “Very interesting. Now I will teach *you* something,” he says. “Tomorrow you will be going further into the forest, yes?”

“Yes!” they answer enthusiastically.

“The tribes there are barbaric, very dangerous.” The boys scoffed at such a notion. They were *Americans* after all. What could a bunch of backwards idol worshipers possibly do to them. And any way, just look how well god had provided dinner for them.

“I will teach you a few words to help you. AKO, that is *me*,” he says pointing to him self.

“Ako,” they answer. He nods contentedly and continues.

“MAKAN, that is *eat*.”

“Makan,” they respond.

“If you want to eat, you can say ‘Ako makan.’”

Seeing the utility of this, the boys repeat, “Ako makan.”

That night he taught them a few more words, but the only ones they really remembered were *makan* and *ako*.

Early the next day as the haze still clung to the ground and drops of dew dripped from long fern leaves, they thanked Mambo and set off down the path to the forest of ill repute. As they walked they saw fewer and fewer people, and the path dwindled to almost nothing. Bird calls echoed and insects hummed and buzzed about them. They passed the day discussing how heathenistic and completely un-Mormon like these natives were. Surely they were in need of saving.

As shadows drew long, the fullness of Mambo’s hospitality had long since departed their stomachs. At length they burst into a clearing where a group of natives were dressed up with feathers and scary face paints. The natives were shocked to see such hideous creatures suddenly appear, and they jumped back in surprise. Joe and Matt were equally horrified to witness what they took to be some sort of black-magic devil worshipping.

However the pragmatic reality of hunger and thirst temporarily won the battle with righteousness.

“Hello,” Joe tried. The native conversation had completely stopped upon their arrival, and this was not enough to get it going again. “Do you guys have any cokes?” he asked again, “Um, we have money.” He produced the wad of \$100 bills and waved it around. This captured the interest of the savages who watched with suspicion as he fanned the money through the air. Still, there was no verbal response.

“Anybody here speak English, I mean besides the two of us?” Matt asked looking around at the hideous faces. *Does God really want their souls?* he wondered.

The natives stood or crouched without moving except to blink and stare at the boys. In a flash of inspiration Matt raised up his arms and said “Makan ako.” This set the natives murmuring and exchanging glances excitedly. Matt slipped Joe a sly smile, but Joe’s face was less than exuberant. “Makan ako!” Matt said again, a bit louder. The natives started to move around and chatter more boisterously. They were gesturing towards the boys and appeared to be debating something important. “Sambal orang,” one shouted to Matt. The others seemed to hold him back. Matt took this to be a cue. He pat his stomach and repeated, “Sambal orang! Makan ako!”

This caused great excitement among the natives. The shout of “Sambal orang” was heard over and over again, and now they were all standing and smiling.

“Sambal orang!” Matt shouted taking a step towards them with raised arms. They started to dance around, and two of them cautiously approached Matt. They led him towards the rest of the group where several men picked Matt up on their shoulders like a triumphant football coach. They were all jovial, shouting, “Sambal orang! Makan Ja-ginda!” as they carried him off. Matt turned and smiled to Joe. “I’ll get them to whip up something good!” he said as he waived and disappeared into the jungle.

Joe wasn’t quite settled with the whole business of busting in on a pagan devil worshiping ceremony. Matt seemed to have gotten a little carried away. Sitting back against a giant tree, he realized he wasn’t alone. Two of the wild men didn’t share their compatriot’s enthusiasm for Joe’s friend and had remained behind in the clearing when the others left with Matt to make “Sambal orang.”

Joe was tired and hungry and sank his head into his hands. *What am I doing here?* he questioned. *NO!* he thought. *I’m on a mission from God! I can’t give up now! I must be strong, I must go on!* At length he looked up again. The two men were still there. They sat in silence, studying one another. Off in the distance they could hear festival shouts and noises. Joe’s attempts at communication all floundered, and eventually he gave up and sank back against the tree.

It was dark when he sat up with a start. He didn’t how long he had dozed off for, but it was starting to get cold. The two men were still there, staring at him. Soon the noises from the distant crowd got louder and louder, and at length the whole mass of natives came back into the clearing bearing a large steaming caldron. They dished it out in large gourds saying “Makan” and sat around sipping it and fishing out chunks with their fingers. Joe’s mouth started to water. The two men who had remained with him got up and collected their gourds, returning to sit near Joe. One of them brought a gourd full to Joe.

He took it with a nod and sniffed it. He was loath to eat the local food, but his stomach won the wrestling match with his mouth. The natives all stopped and watched Joe. He was sure their generosity was not to be refused. "Makan," they said motioning to him. Some even made exaggerated slurping movements to show him how. He held it up to his lips, and sipped it down. *Chicken soup?* he thought. Taking another swallow he thought *not bad* and polished off the gourd in record time, much to the delight of the natives.

He was offered another and another. Half way through his third bowl he began to wonder where Matt was, and why he hadn't returned with the soup he so valiantly got them to prepare. He looked at his two new friends and in his best sign language asked where his friend was. "Ga-jinda?" he asked? They nodded and smiled in recognition, and raising their gourds of soup said, "Sambal ga-jinda!"

AFTER WORD

The local tribe had been struggling with its own cannibalistic tendencies for several years now. When the strangers arrived just as they were discussing dinner plans and announced, "Eat me!" the debate was a short one. "Sambal orang" is the local word for "Man soup," which, with a foreigner in it, would be "Sambal ga-jinda".

1minutetopic: bro01
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
Completed: February 2006, Black Forest
Last revised: 26 March 2006

The Perfect Hosts

Frank L. Williams was a few minutes early, so he stood at the front door and waited, watching the seconds tick away on his wrist watch. Exactly at 8:00, he pushed the door bell and then began to unwrap the large, expensive bouquet of flowers he had brought with him. He had read that this was the custom when visiting Germans. It was important to be on time (to the second), to bring flowers and to unwrap them at the door. It was best if your host caught you in the act of unwrapping when they opened the door. As he was eager to impress his new boss, he was following the recommended behavior in every detail.

However, Frank had unwrapped the flowers and wadded up the paper, uncertain what to do with it, and the door was still silent and closed. He stood, with the flowers thrust toward the closed door and bowed slightly forward, wondering if he had made some mistake in the date or time. Finally, he heard a soft shuffling and the door swung open.

His boss, a short, roly polly man with a large pink cheeks, shouted "*Grüß Sie Gott!*" and opened his arms like he intended to hug Frank. If Herr Gotteslieb had a thick white beard, he could work as a very convincing Santa Claus. Awkwardly, Frank stuck the flowers toward him, but Herr Gotteslieb had stepped back and was gesturing to the narrow hallway for him to enter.

"Thank you for visiting us in our home!"

As Frank crushed into the hallway with the large man, Frau Gotteslieb, who was shorter and rounder than her husband and made a perfect Mrs. Claus, joined them, making it impossible to for Frank to move in any direction than backwards, out the door.

"When Helmut told me that a new American had started at the company, I told him we must have him for dinner. I love Americans!"

Both of the Gottesliebs were talking to Frank simultaneously and didn't seem to notice the flowers in his hand or that they were being crushed as he pressed himself into them so that Herr Gotteslieb could close the door behind him.

Frau Gotteslieb had bent over, brushing her hair along the front of Frank's trousers, and set a pair of what looked like grey woolen slippers in front of Frank's feet. As he looked down on the slippers, he noticed that his hosts were wearing similar house shoes and guessed that he should remove his boots.

While his hosts continued to hover over him, talking all the time, Frank bent down and began removing his boots. In order to have both hands to unlace the boots, he had to set the flowers and bunched paper down, which he was sure was a breach of etiquette. But he didn't have much choice in the matter. The boots were fairly complicated to remove and he was a bit dizzy from bending over such a long time by the time he had the house shoes on.

Standing up and swaying a bit, he was herded, still clutching the flowers to his stomach, into a small sitting room off of the hallway. His hosts crowded in after him.

Herr Gotteslieb was saying "Let me show you the rest of the house," when Frau Gotteslieb notice the flowers for the first time.

"Oh, how lovely. Let me bring them to some water," she said, beaming, taking the bouquet and wad from Frank. He was glad to be relieved of the flowers.

Leading Frank from room to room, Herr Gotteslieb described the recent renovations they had done to the house. Frank, not knowing what the house had looked like before, could only nod occasionally. He found that the cramped entrance had made him rather tense and was trying to relax.

Frau Gotteslieb joined them and suggested that they go into the dining room for a little pre-dinner aperitif. She led the way through the hall to the dinning room. Herr Gotteslieb sang "I hope you brought your appetite!"

Frank had been at Sawmanns for only a week, but he had the opportunity to have lunch with Herr Gotteslieb three times already, and knew that the man was a big eater. Washing his lunch down with at least a liter of *Weißeier*, he ate a volume of food at one sitting that would sustain Frank for two days. From their lunches together, Frank had also gathered that Herr Gotteslieb considered his wife's cooking superior to all others and was quite proud of this. To be sure that he could demonstrate a manly apatite, Frank had forgone lunch and his stomach grumbled at the delicious smells emanating from the kitchen.

The dining room was a warm, narrow, well lit room that nearly burst with the large table that was covered in a pristine white table cloth and set for three with a bewildering collection of glasses.

The men sat at the table as Frau Gotteslieb took a bottle and three shot glasses from a cabinet crammed in the corner of the room. Herr Gotteslieb was explaining he had saved a special *Obstler* for the occasion, as his wife poured the clear liquid into the glasses. All three lifted the glasses and Herr Gotteslieb shouted "*Zum Wollle*" and downed the schnapps in one gulp, as did his wife. Frank took a small test sip. The liquid seemed to be pure grain alcohol with a slight flavor of pears. Not knowing if it would be appropriate to continue sipping the drink, he decided to do as his host did and drink the rest all at once. He was going to say "That's very nice," but instead coughed as the alcohol burned down his throat to his stomach.

Herr Gotteslieb laughed, "Yes, it is strong stuff. Perhaps you need a beer to wash that down. Edeltraub, bring in the *Weißeier*. I poured it already, so it would be perfect for your arrival." Winking knowingly, he added "I know you do not prefer wine, so we will have beer with dinner." Frank was rather puzzled by how his boss had come to this conclusion, since he refused both beer and wine at lunch.

As his wife went to the kitchen and brought three large glasses of beer to the table, Herr Gotteslieb continued to talk of the renovations. Frank tried to listen intently. He had been told that Germans were fiercely proud of their houses -- the saying "a man's house is his castle" came from the German -- and he did not want to offend by not seeming disinterested.

Barely making a pause in his speech, Herr Gotteslieb lifted his glass as did Frank and Frau Gotteslieb. When they went to clink their glasses together, there was a moment of awkwardness as Frank tipped his glass to touch at the top and Herr Gotteslieb tipped his glass to touch at the bottom. But, they managed to clink the glasses together and Frank took a sip. Oddly, his two hosts tapped their beers on the table before taking a drink.

Frau Gotteslieb disappeared into the kitchen again as Herr Gotteslieb was discoursing about the history of beer making in Bavaria. She entered again with a huge pink pyramid of flesh, a leg bone still sticking out the top. Her husband stood to cut the meat as she went to retrieve more food from the kitchen.

Frank looked at the piece of meat in fascination. It looked like something that Fred Flintstone might wave around at lunch. It was barbarously large. Herr Gotteslieb had cut off a huge chunk and placed it on a plate, which he handed to his wife. She then proceeded to scoop large spoonfuls of the side dishes on the to plate before handing it to Frank.

He looked down at the plate in dismay. He was hungry, but there was no chance that he would be able to finish all of this. "My," he gushed, "this looks wonderful!" Looking for all the world like Mr. and Mrs. Claus, his hosts beamed with pleasure at his praise.

Herr Gotteslieb was making a toast to the cook, so Frank joined in lifting his glass. His head was spinning from drinking the liquor on an empty stomach and he forgot to tap his glass on the table as his hosts did.

With a shouted "*Gutten Apatit!*" they began the meal.

Frank ate diligently. In addition to the enormous chunk of meat, there was two large white balls of indeterminate taste, a salad that was swimming in yoghurt sauce that was so salty that the lettuce was already wilted and some mayonnaise-based corn salad. Mayonnaise was not well beloved by Frank, but, as it was explained that it was made especially for him from an original America recipe ("to make him feel at home"), he tried to look grateful and swallow with out gagging.

The meat, at any rate, was wonderful: flavorful and tender. But as he was removing the skin, which was literally running with rivulets of fat, his hosts explained that the crust was the best part. He sawed off a tiny square and stuck it in his mouth. As he chewed the grizzle, he could feel his arteries hardening.

The battle had begun. Just has he finished one of the white balls, another was spooned onto his plate. "Oh, really, I shouldn't!" he cried, "All this great German food is going to make me fat!"

"Non-sense! A *Knödel* never hurt anyone!"

Frank began to sweat.

Nothing seemed to deter his hosts from seeing that he didn't leave their house with an empty stomach. Every platitude, every excuse he could think of seemed to egg them on. It was clear that he was going to have to continue eating or run the risk of offending his hosts. They keep making small talk and putting food on his plate. Another enormous

scoop of mayonnaise. Another slab of meat. Another half liter of beer. Frank could feel the food backing up to his teeth.

Finally, he groaned “I think am going to explode!” This, unexpectedly, seemed to satisfy them. As Frank tried to ease his trousers over his swollen belly without anyone noticing, the Gottesliebs continued to chat. Frank’s brain was too dulled from the food and the stifling heat that had accumulated in the room to follow what they were saying. He just kept nodding and wiping sweat from his brow.

Just when he felt it was an appropriate time to thank his guests and waddle to his car, Frau Gotteslieb jumped up to clear the dishes.

“Perhaps you would like a coffee?”

Frank nodded helplessly. German coffee was strong enough to dissolve the enamel from his teeth, but he thought that it would probably help with the enormous task of digestion his stomach had that evening. He rocked from side to side, hoping that his meal would settle a bit more comfortably.

When she returned from the kitchen with a tray of coffee cups and baked goods, Frank whimpered out loud.

Herr Gottesliebs eyes twinkled, “Now, for the highlight of the evening!”

After she set the coffee on the table, she sat next to Frank. Explaining the origin of the different kinds of cakes, she shoveled a sizeable portion of each onto Frank’s plate.

“No, really! I simply couldn’t!” he started to panic.

“Oh, don’t be shy. Surely you will have a piece of *Nußkuchen*. It is my grandmother’s recipe. She was famous all over Bavaria for this cake.”

“Nut cake! Did you say nut cake? I am so sorry, but I am very allergic to nuts!” He was nearly hysterical.

“How can that be? Nuts are so healthy!” Mrs. Claus retorted. Dividing a large chunk from the nut cake, she held it in front of Frank’s mouth.

“Just a bite!” She leaned into him, her large grandmotherly breasts pinning him back into his seat.

He could feel his lips burn and itch as blisters began to form. As he opened his mouth to protest, she shoved the chunk in.

As his tongue and throat started to swell and red blotches were appearing on his face and neck, he managed to chew a few times, smile weakly and sputter “Absolutely delicious!” before he passed out.

1minutetopic: bro01
Contributor: Shannon Frances
Completed: December 2005, Gauting
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Inappropriate Introduction

Ben had only been gone three days and already things had gotten out of hand. The pile of unopened mail on her desk had begun colonizing the large pot of her drooping fichus as well as the book case next to it. He took care of the plants. She eyed its limp foliage. The last time she watered, it a large puddle had formed on the carpet exactly as though a rather large dog had lifted his leg on it. Ben had been Joyce Witherspoon's personal secretary – her very personal secretary – for three years. He knew where to find everything!

Joyce pored herself another scotch and sat down to make a start on the work she had been putting off. Pushing around her notes on work pending, she knew would have to start looking for his replacement soon. But once she started interviewing that would mean he really wouldn't be back, and she just couldn't face that prospect. With her elbows on the unopened envelopes, she sunk her head in her hands, ignoring the lit cigarette that littered ashes into her curly gray hair.

Success is a bitch, she thought. It had taken her years to have five books on the national top ten best seller list. That was a closely guarded secret known only to Ben and Mimi Chang her editor. Her lawyer Pat Michelson had seen to it that everyone signed nondisclosure contracts, so no worries there. Hiring another secretary would not be a problem, but, damn, Ben had been everything she wanted in a man. Marcus, the android in the last three books of her *Sex Droids of Slesh* series, had been modeled on him.

Somehow the glass in her hand had become empty again, and she could definitely smell her hair singeing. *I'll just have one more before I buckle down and do some work.*

The bottle only had a little over one more drink in it anyway. Joyce had an advanced degree in psychology; she knew better than most that drowning your sorrows didn't work.

The only books that appeared under her real name were the psychology self-help books and the *Little Chapel* series. The romance line was published under the name Lila Davenport, and the sci-fi came out under the name Sam Buckman. Her studies had given her an invaluable insight into the American psyche, and she believed in sticking to the basics – the three Rs: the righteous, the romantic and the raunchy. It was her own personal take on profiling.

The plan was simple: one plotline would slowly work its way through all three genres, with cosmetic changes and suitable time laps. A troubled teenager in the *Little Chapel* series graduated into a liberated, free-thinking woman in the romances, who in turn became the unrestrained hedonist in the not-so-soft porn of the sci-fi.

As an added benefit, the fans of the *Little Chapel* series abhorred the antics of the *Sex Droids of Slesh*, prompting their pastors to mount campaigns to get such trash off the shelves of family book sellers. Every time this happened there was a small but noticeable up tick in the *Slesh* sales, which further infuriated the *Little Chapel* folks. It had become something of a perpetual motion promotional program.

Stubbing out what remained of her cigarette and running her fingers through her hair to make sure nothing still smoldered, she called up recent work on her computer. The work in progress was a reworking of the Little Chapel story where kindly old pastor Kimble saves Lena the runaway from life as a pole dancer. She ticked in the lists of names, housing and occupations Ben had supplied her with to see what Lena would morph into in the new romance novel. She groaned. This never happened when he did the prep work. Now she had to deal with Bodacia who lived in a yurt on Night Shade Lane and worked as a mortician's assistant. That might have possibilities in an entire new genera, but she didn't want to try anything new right now.

Very funny, Ben. Damn your ass.

She tried again and a few clicks later she had Ima who lived in a gulag and worked as a septic system pumper.

Joyce couldn't believe the pettiness of the man, to trash a perfectly good program that *he* had created just because he was pissed – and over nothing, really. *It's not like I made him out to be weenie. How many men would complain about having their picture used on the cover of a paperback, especially when he was being portrayed as an intergalactic super stud. Maybe I should have asked him before I used his photo, but it was a goddamn joke! And what were the chances his ten year old niece would find a copy of Marcus Meets His Match and then be dumb enough to smuggle it into her Church's youth group sleepover.*

His mother and three sisters would probably never speak to him again. But how was she to know he even had a mother.

"This isn't working," she muttered. "I'll do the damn back-scratching crap."

The back-scratching crap was the blurbs she wrote saying intriguing and insightful things about the books of other writers, so they would do the same for hers. Privately she believed no one ever read them, but they were an expected part of success, like the reciprocal invitations to parties no one would ever really want to go to. She picked up the first request and groaned. The reverend Morton Mayberry, Founder of Americans for Moral Action, wanted something for his new book *Women, the Heart of the Home*. He and his movement were probably responsible for about five percent of the Slash sales, so she whipped off eight hundred words on the psychological health benefits of female servitude and the obviously God-intended male entitlement of the American home.

The next one made her smile. Blanch Black's hilarious historical romps were, if anything, even more bawdy than her own Slesh series. This she could sink her teeth into. She produced the usual eight hundred words extolling the fun of watching our founding father put new meaning to the book's title *Washington Slept Here*. She really had loved the book, so she had no problem referencing some of the juicier passages. Her personal favorite involved Betsey Ross with George's false teeth still clinging to part of her person, as she tried to pretend the large lump beneath the enormous flag she sewed was only her dog Richard. The next three were by authors her publisher handled who needed help moving rather tired formula-driven garbage. That she could do without really having to read more than a few pages here and there. Going over the letters requesting the blurbs she noticed that the deadline for some had already past. The others would have to be

electronic submissions, or they'd never make it. She entered the publisher's information and hit "Send". Her normally comfortable office was making her depressed. She would have to call the agency this afternoon for a replacement.

About three months later the reverend Morton Mayberry settled himself in his easy chair to look over his latest book just off the press. He loved the smell of brand new books – so sharp and clean. This was like a christening. He had established a little ritual to draw out the pleasure if it, first a sip of Lapsoung Suchung tea. Then he would just hold the handsome thing in his hand, feeling its weight and the texture of its binding. Then he would lovingly open it up. Miss Witherspoon always managed to grasp the vastness of his scope so well. Then he would have a shortbread cookie as he and read those glowing words. Afterwards he would allow Gladys his wife to bask a little in his glory by reading it to her. He got as far as the second sentence, "It is my extreme pleasure to introduce you, gentle readers, to a truly wickedly funny book. Discovering the sometimes pompous asses of our founding fathers literally caught with their pants down, hanging out in the company of naughty and highly imaginative women of fun..."

Gladys heard the chocking sound coming form her husband's study. She put her ear against the door and waited for the thrashing to subside. He hated to be disturbed while he was reading one of his own incredibly boring books. She would just wait for a while before seeing if he was all right. A couple of hours should do it. She silently snuck off to finish the latest romance by Lila Davenport.

1minutetopic: bro02
Contributor: Frances Burke
Completed: December 2005, Black Forest
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Inappropriate Introduction

“So, is this your lovely wife or that new girlfriend you’ve been talking about lately?” That’s the sort of thing Jimmy would always say when meeting his friends wives or girlfriends for the first time. Oh, there were variations on the theme, like “She doesn’t look Thai at all?” or “So *this* is your secretary!” said with a sideways glance at his buddy or with wide-eyed admiration. I suppose the worst one I personally heard was when he met Carlos’s fiancé: “I can’t believe she’s five months pregnant! It doesn’t show at all. Anyway welcome to America. Carlos is a great guy; I’m sure you’ll love it here.”

See, Carlos’s work took him to Mexico fairly often, some times for weeks at a time. Anita, his fiancé, was from Chicago like the rest of us. I suppose as a Latina she was a little more prone to jealousy than most women, but it took Carlos a good month to convince her that he in fact didn’t have a pregnant girlfriend in Mexico.

Usually the girls had heard of Jimmy’s tendency to goof around or sometimes they’d figure it out in real-time and roll with it: “I’m his wife,” I heard one of them say, “We drown the girlfriend in Lake Michigan last weekend.” Unfortunately Jimmy never learned when he could get away with it and when he’d better hold off. Eventually he managed to piss off nearly everyone he knew.

One day, just before a company party, the answer came to my wife Julia. It came to her in the form of an open dresser drawer striking her in the cheek as she bent down to pick up an errant sock. It left her with a pretty good black eye. She was seven months pregnant with our third child at the time, and we joked about how she looked abused. That’s when we hatched our plan.

Though we weren’t really close friends, I made sure that Jimmy had plenty to drink at the party and was feeling no pain. Of course we were joking around, and I had asked in a voice loud enough to catch his girlfriend’s attention if he had stopped beating his wife. “Only when she’s good, and that’s not very often!” he answered true to form.

When Julia finally arrived, she was decked out in her best trailer-park queen outfit and had our two children in tow. She rushed in frantically, disrupting conversations and upsetting more than just drinks, pleading, “Jimmy! Jimmy? Has any one seen my Jimmy?” Pretty much everyone was watching by the time she made it over to where we were.

“This the best you can do Jimmy?” she asked glaring at his soon to be ex-girlfriend.

He couldn’t quite figure out what was going on. “Uh... she is... This is my girlfriend,” he said straightening up.

“Oh, Jimmy! Not in front of the children!” Julia said holding one in her arm, and clapping the other’s ears shut with her free hand and hip. Jimmy’s girlfriend was looking back and fourth between Jimmy and Julia, eyes wide open, drink no longer at her lips.

Jimmy, rarely at a loss for words, was now feeling a little disoriented. “Uh... they’re not my kids,” he said for his girlfriends benefit.

“Jimmy!” Julia cried, “I’m not the one who screws around.” Looking his girlfriend up and down with an icy glare, “That’s your department.”

“I don’t even know you!” Jimmy tried in his defense, as he wiped nervous sweat from his brow. Julia winced at his raised arm as though she was used to receiving it full blast.

“Please!” she cried cowering, “You should know me by now. I don’t want to fight any more! It’s for the kids, Jimmy. They’re hungry... They need their father. Just come back and I promise I won’t make you beat me any more! *Please Jimmy!*”

The drink in Jimmy's girlfriend's glass had managed to find its way right into his face, and she stormed out saying, “You stay away from me, you *bastard!*”

Jimmy looked around at the icy stares confronting him on all sides. To avoid frost bite he ran out yelling something like, “Wait... I can explain!”

“Poor girl,” I said walking over to Julia. Though she had planned the whole thing, it was an emotionally draining performance. She sunk her head into my shoulder, and I tentatively embraced her.

ENDING #1

“Would you kids like some ice-cream?” I asked our bewildered children. They instantly lit up, and we made a hasty exit. Few knew what was going on, and to this day I still receive astonished glances when seen with Julia and the kids. “You’re so good with those children!” they’ll say with great admiration. Somehow, we just can’t bare to burst their bubbles.

ENDING #2

“Oh, sorry, every body. I’d like to introduce my wife, and our two kids.” After getting over the initial shock, we received a standing ovation. And no one ever looked at Jimmy the same way again.

1minutetopic: bro02
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
Completed: December, Black Forest
Last revised: 26 March 2006

The Truth Comes Out

Before heading to his office Will F. Thomas stopped by the departmental office to get a cup of coffee and collect his mail.

Betty, the department's only secretary, absently handed him a pile of mail. When Will pointed out that the mail that she had handed him was for Prof. Spiker, not for him, she took it back and apologized.

"Sorry Prof. Thomas, I guess I am a bit tired. My husband is out of town for a week and I have been hanging out in bars while he is gone. Last night I brought home two marines and we humped like rabbits all night long. I think the lack of sleep and the thirteen tequilas have gotten me a bit muddled today. Gosh, I can barely walk straight."

She handed him another pile of mail and, after he checked to see that it was his, he opened his mouth to thank her. However, what she had just said was starting to sink into his not-yet-wake consciousness. Watching her weave bowlegged to her desk, he instead suggested she take off the afternoon and go home early.

As soon as he left the office, he had put the unpleasant things she had said to him out of his mind. The halls were empty and quiet, as most people would not be into work for another hour or so. As Will walked through the laboratory to his own office, he muttered "Morning" to the two Asian postdocs who were standing at their desks, pipettes in hand, working away like mad men. Will wondered for the *N*th time if these two guys ever went home. They were already working when he came in and they continued working after he left to go home.

In his office, he tossed his mail on a pile of papers that was so high it threatened to teeter over and spill months of correspondence on the floor. He rounded the desk, set his coffee down, sat in his large chair and turned on his computer.

The day had officially begun.

Will started going through his email. Just as he finished his first cup of coffee and considering going back to the department to get another one, Xan Weng came into his office.

"Prof. Thomas, because you too cheap to order good enzyme, my experiment fail again. Now, I loose five week work because cheap enzyme failed. I must insist you purchase expensive enzyme. You not like that you buy expensive enzyme but you not like more that my work is five weeks delay. I have no choice but must insist."

Will was astonished. He had never heard Xan Weng say more than one sentence at a time, except when he was delivering an unintelligible journal club. Not only that, but he was always painfully polite and had never once expressed any thing approaching criticism or disagreement.

Trying to seem nonchalant, Will said, "Yes. Of coarse. Ask Dolores to order it for you."

"Thank you, Prof. Thomas. And please remember next time I request purchase expensive enzyme or other equipment."

Whew, thought the taken back professor as he watched Xan Wang's back leaving his office. What was that all about? Maybe Xan was suffering a breakdown brought on by overworking. Will would have to talk to him about this. But later, he decided, let the man calm down a bit, first. Will would wait until Xan was finished with the last set of experiments required by the reviewers for publication before confronting him.

Having provided for dealing with this minor employee issue, he went back to his emails. He usually had a good hour before the rest of his students and postdocs started showing up. If he was lucky, he could get through a month or two of backlogged emails before the interruptions started.

However, he had barely scrolled through the first ten, when Chris Moose walked into his office. Chris and Will's research projects dove-tailed nicely to the extent that they had decided to have joint lab meetings and "share" postdocs. When Chris had something to discuss about the science or the students, he usually took advantage of early morning quiet to come to Will. Today, he looked rather preoccupied and stood in the doorway to Will's office, staring at the edge of the desk in silence.

"Why don't you take a seat, Chris. What can I do for you?"

Chris sat across from Will, in a a chair dragged from behind the door.

"I am not sure where I should start." Chris was having trouble meeting Will's gaze. Oh, boy, this was going to be a doozy, thought Will, fearing that Chris had gotten his score from the NIH grant.

Chris remained contemplatively silent for a few moments before launching into his monologue.

"Actually, I wanted to be gardener. That's really all I wanted, to putter around in a garden. I could have gotten a job at a nursery. I would have really enjoyed that. Planting seeds and taking care of flowers. But, I just wasn't allowed to follow that dream. My whole town, a village really, was so proud that I had gotten accepted to the university. My parents were so proud. And without a word of resistance, I went on to finish my degree. But it wasn't over then. I did too well to avoid notice and was put on the graduate track before I know what hit me. I, fool that I am, I let everyone talk me into an illustrious career as a university professor. But it was all a mistake." Here he looked up at Will. "I see now that it was a mistake. The only thing I like about my job is the gadgets. I wasted my youth on my studies and now I am an old man before my time. I can't even be bothered to look after my students properly. I know I should be looking for jobs for them, push them to be more productive. But, instead, I spend my time wasting the tax payer's money on useless research and using my position to bully my employees into submission.

"If I had any self respect, I would give up my position and let someone with real ambition and drive have a chance."

The whole time Chris was speaking, Will watched in growing alarm. What was he supposed to do now, pat Chris on the back and tell him to get back into the saddle again?

But, before Will had much of a chance to say anything, Chris was standing up and turning to leave the office. He rested his hands on the back of the chair in which he had just sat.

“Thanks a lot, buddy. I really needed to get that off my chest.” Chris smiled with genuine relief.

“Is this about your grant? Did you get your score?” asked Will, still bewildered.

“My score?” Chris looked puzzled. “No. The scores won’t be out for another two weeks.”

Without saying another word, Chris left the room

Will sat back in his chair. What was going on? Was today national Go Hysterical Day?

He picked up his coffee cup and walked back into the laboratory, which had filled considerably with young people going about their research. Will announced that he was going to be working on his talk for the departmental seminar that afternoon and did not wish to be disturbed. Sneaking into the kitchen so that the secretary would not see him and have another opportunity to tell him embarrassing things, he poured himself another cup of coffee. Then he walked the long way around the hall, entering by the door just outside his office, so he would not have to go through the lab again.

His group was obedient and he spent the next few hours uninterrupted, arranging and rearranging his slides.

A few minutes before two o’clock, he grabbed his tray of slides and sauntered to the seminar room. He was gratified to see that the room was already quite full, his audience was murmuring quietly. The head had made the departmental seminar obligatory for all students and postdocs this semester, so attendance had risen.

He had barely gotten to the front of the room and sat down, when the Bill Slessinger stood up.

“Well I am sure our speaker today requires no introduction,” the head’s voice boomed into the quieting room. “You all know Prof. Will Thomas, who has been on the faculty for fourteen years now. As he is the only member of the department who publishes, we daren’t fire him. Although I would like to, as I can’t stand that he is getting away with an extramarital affair with his lab manager, embezzles grant money for beer-bash lab outings and makes an entire mess of his committee work. Will, I turn the podium over to you to bore us for an hour and a half with yet another rehash of your glory days as a promising young assistant professor.”

The department head took a step back, made a theatrical sweep towards the prepared screen at the front of the room with his outstretched arm and walked to his chair, sitting with a tired thud.

In a baffled haze, Will walked up to the podium and straightened his note cards. He looked out into the audience to judge how they had taken the department head’s words. As before every departmental seminar, they all looked bored, tired and frazzled. No one seemed shocked or outraged. Had they all known about the affair with Dolores already?

“Well,” he said, deciding to flow along with the stream of things. “Thank you, Bill for that extremely inappropriate introduction.”

Will nodded at Bill, who nodded back.

“Now I’d like to show you the latest results from my research project. Well, I use the words ‘my research project’ rather loosely, don’t I. I haven’t picked up a pipette myself in over ten years. What I am about to show you is the thankless work of underpaid, overworked and postdocs who, as is the standard in our academic environment, experience shaming and degrading exploitation just so I can add another journal article onto my publication list every year or so.”

Will scanned the room. Way in the back, crammed on top of a table with a bunch of other postdocs, Xan Weng was giving him the thumbs up gesture of approval.

“Right, let us proceed to the data. The first slide please.”

The screen brightened with the first muddy image and someone switched the room lights off.

Without missing a beat, Will began, as predicted, with a tired description of his greatest achievement to date.

1minutetopic: bro02
Contributor: Shannon Frances
Completed: December 2005, Gauting
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Bad Poetry

Miss Kendal, let me begin this critique by saying how glad I am to see that you no longer employ end rhymes.” Professor Vincent Grace treated her to a toothy grin. “But I fail to detect any, um, shall we say, *gravitas* in your work. Perhaps I did not make my self clear during our last little chat.”

He drew a breath to continue, but Ms. Clementine Kendal cut him off. “You made yourself perfectly clear, Professor. You said my work showed promise... if I wanted a career writing for Hallmark.”

He scanned her face for some trace of chagrin or at the very lest some sign of having grasped the subtlety of his barb. *Apparently not*. These older students annoyed him. For one thing, they seemed unaware of his celebrity status. Even worse, they might even be impervious to it. *I'll have to leave a copy of "Post Modern Soul Deconstructions" lying about in a more conspicuous location.*

“When I say *gravitas*, I mean you never delve deeply into the meat of reality. You skim lightly across the surface. The operative word here is lightly. Do you see?” He leaned back against his desk and folded his arms across his chest exhaling in a suitably world-weary way. *I hate to slam anyone with the L word, but she really doesn't seem to be getting the point.* He waited expectantly.

Still no reaction beyond a slightly quizzical look. Then she smiled up into his moody brown eyes.

“I think that is an excellent way of putting it,” she beamed at him. “Yes, I like that. ‘Skimming lightly across the surface’ like a damsel fly on a June morning.” She reached into the pocket of her long skirt and came up with a small red note book. Pursing her lips and scribbling as she mouthed the words, she paused then added aloud, “Leaving rings of bright light on the glass green surface.”

The renowned poet groaned. “No, no, no, my dear, delve! Don't be afraid to look into the gritty eye of reality. Just under the surface of that happy little pond there is a whole world of muck and decay, life and death. That's what we, as poets, are after. Go for the visceral, the piss and guts of existence.” He liked that “piss and guts” he would have to use that.

“But aren't we supposed to express our selves, how we perceive our take on reality?” she asked with a slightly raised eyebrow.

“Well, yes, of course. But you seem to be too, um, reluctant to face the darker aspects of that reality. I want what you really feel, deep down, those dark nights of the soul we all face.

Her laughter sounded like that of a much younger woman. “It might be possible to make something beautiful from that ‘piss and guts’ business but why dwell on it when there's a whole wonderful world full of beauty waiting to be experienced. ‘Truth is beauty, beauty truth etc....’”

His mouth dropped open as though someone had punched him in the gut. “That’s the trouble!” He struggled to get his voice back to conversational. “All that romantic crap, it totally ignores reality as it is.”

Her bright blue eyes narrowed dangerously. “I wouldn’t say ignores, so much, as chooses to focus on a more pleasant side of reality. Any first year medical student will tell you there is more the human animal than piss and guts. I would have to say that you take a rather reductionist view of things.”

He had expected her to tiptoe round his piss and guts. Instead she pushed right on. “The pursuit of beauty may have fallen out of favor, but it is still a much more rewarding endeavor than the examination of ugliness, brutality and decay.”

Shaking his head at such an outdated notion, he said, “I cannot help but feel you simply are afraid to look at your darker side.” He tried his famous understanding sage look. “Don’t be. We all have one. You must embrace it. Enter into the dance of death to know life.”

Now her smile took on a no nonsense firmness. “Isn’t that a bit like saying you have to watch someone vomiting to understand the beauty of a good meal.” She held up a small, old hand to forestall his next comment. “You know that old saying ‘you are what you eat?’ Well I believe ‘you are what you think’ is a lot closer to the truth.”

Clementine set her mouth in a thin line. “I know this world, probably a lot better than you do. After all, I have lived a lot longer than you have, through wars, raising kids, the death of loved ones, lingering illnesses of some of them. I know all about the dark night of the soul. I just find it...” she paused, thinking that over before saying, “boring.”

He could detect nothing but a rye sense of humor in her tone, and that rattled him slightly.

“A bit like eating Dickensian gruel every day. Give me fresh strawberries or a good steak.”

Scrambling to reorganize his thoughts, he tried again. “The age of truth and beauty is dead. You have to get with the times, or risk being irrelevant. No one is interested in things like that truth and beauty stuff now.”

“Perhaps not,” she sighed. “And that may be why we find ourselves saddled with public officials who find it so easy to peddle obviously insane and corrupt policies.”

“Are you familiar with Oakum’s razor?”

The professor had the feeling he had lost his footing in the discussion. *Damn it I’m supposed to be doing the critiquing here. I’m the one who directs these things.*

“It is usually applied to the existence of God, but it will work for the relevance of beauty just as well. If there are equally valid proofs on both sides of an argument, then you are free to choose whichever one improves your life. I do not for one minute believe the argument for the glorification of the repugnant is equally persuasive. But even it were, would I want to fill my life with piss and guts, with gritty eyes, and dark nights of the soul?” She tapped him forcefully on the chest with one bony finger. “No! I would not. When you get to be my age,” she did not say “Sonny”, but the word hung in the air

between them, “you may have learned to look beyond your own petty little personal tribulations.” Her blue eyes had taken on a disturbing blazing quality. “To delve deeper into life and feel the wonder and passion of things like fractal geometry, the marvels of the universe and the simple glory of a sunset.”

He had backed around his desk, feeling the need to put something solid between himself and this little, old lady turned fanatic. *Good God! She might have a bomb in that damn tote of hers!*

“Writing poetry helps me focus on the beauty I find in life. I may not be a very good poet but to paraphrase what my asshole of a husband said when he got back from Viet Nam, ‘Che sic cheche better than no cheche at all.’”

“Huh?” Not terribly erudite, but he couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Better to be a bad poet than no poet at all. Only in his version it was ‘better to have small tits than no tits at all!’” Laughing at his look of bewilderment, she turned and walked out.

1minutetopic: bro03
Contributor: Frances Burke
Completed: December 2005, Black Forest
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Bad Poetry

Just because someone is old and crazy doesn't mean that you can write off everything they have to say. It took me until my 30's to realize this about my grandpa. He always had plenty of stories, most of which seemed nothing more than the tall tales of an old man. Like the time he said he accidentally caused devastating floods out in Eastern Colorado when he burned up a bunch of silver iodide in a garbage incinerator. Or there was the one about how they found diamonds in the hills above Fort Collins. They were great to listen to, but nothing you'd want to bet your first born on.

It was only later, after my grandpa died, that I discovered that some of these tales were actually true, which makes me wonder about the rest of them. Especially the one about that old book he had...

He said it came to him out of the blue as he was walking down the sidewalk one day. Out of the blue sky, that is. Apparently it had been flung out of a window a couple of floors up by a tormented soul. Gramps loved to show off the scar where it struck him on the forehead. It was a heavy book, very old and bound in leather with brass trim on the corners. The curvy script gracing the cover, age-yellowed pages was allegedly written in old Italian. According to Grandpa the book was extremely rare and shrouded in legend. The only known work of Miguel Caprio De Said, it was poetry so exquisitely bad that it would drive any sensitive man insane. Of course, even at a young age, I scoffed at this. How could such a book ever get printed? "Mathematicians," he answered, "they are completely insensitive and, therefore, immune to its effects."

But what on earth could a book like this ever be used for? What purpose could a book of bad poetry possibly serve? "Inspiration. Much like a drug, it can induce extreme creativity, but too much exposure and it can be toxic." An overdose of bad poetry, so said grandpa, could be fatal.

The legend went that the book had been passed down for generations through the arts community in Europe, with varying effects. Leonardo da Vinci, it is claimed, painted the Mona Lisa in thirty minutes after reading just half a page. The Russian architect Postnik Yakovlev, responsible for designing St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow, read too much from this very book and immediately gouged out both his eyes in an attempt to stop the pain. The very man who flung the volume from the window interrupting my grandpa's constitutional had once read a few lines to Vincent van Gough, who upon hearing the profundity of the vial prose, hastily removed his own ear. Even Grandpa got into the act. When he was a young man he had shown it to Jackson Pollock. The man spent the rest of his miserable life trying to exorcize the words from his mind by burdening others with his own bad works.

Back in college I studied Latin and got it into my head to check out this notorious book. I snuck out to the shed where grandpa kept the book in an old tool box and picked the lock. I transcribed several passages of what sounded a lot like pop music lyrics, but suffered no ill effects, nor was I moved to any great artistic expression. With that I convinced myself that the whole thing was just the musings of a crazy old man and never gave it another thought. That is until I recently found my self back at school once again. I

had finally discovered my calling: I was studying advanced mathematical theory. One day it struck me, perhaps what he had told me so many years before wasn't just foolishness after all.

I have promised my self to find that book once again, and when I do I will laminate translations and mould them into table tops for coffee shops, just to see what happens.

1minutetopic: bro03
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
Completed: December 2005, Black Forest
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Molding Young Minds

“On Monday, we talked about the sonnet. Who can tell me what structure one uses to write a sonnet?”

David Bradshaw looked at the blank, vaguely puzzled faces of his students.

“What is a sonnet?” No response. “Anyone?”

Lily Chan raised her hand tentatively.

“Lily.”

“Isn’t a sonnet the sound an airplane makes when it goes too fast?”

“What?” David was not sure he had heard correctly.

“That loud crash. A sonnet boom.”

“What? You mean a sonic boom? No, no. SONNET. What is a sonnet?”

“Yeah, like Sonic Burgers by the interstate,” said Tommy Livingston enthusiastically

“Or Sonic Garbage. I love that band,” chimed Teresa Sanchez.

David turned to the board, “Not SONIC. SONNET.”

He wrote the word on the board in big, block letters.

“What is a SONNET?”

Again, no response.

“We talked about this two days ago. Doesn’t anyone remember?”

The students shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

“Does anyone know what day it is today?”

Five hands shot up, and the students whispered among themselves.

“Tuesday?” “Thursday?” “Anyway, something that starts with T.”

“OK, OK. Let’s start with something a little simpler. What about the limerick? What form does a limerick have?”

The murmuring stopped.

“Think about your homework. On Monday, you all handed in limericks that you yourselves wrote.” David waved a handful of papers as evidence. “Remember? Now, who can tell me what a limerick is?”

At this the students sat motionless, like so many deer paralyzed by on coming head lights.

This is not normal, thought David. This is a college prep class at a reputable high school. These children can not be so thick that they can’t remember their own homework.

He waited a moment, but the students just stared.

David was doing his student teaching internship and had been instructing this class for two months now. Nothing he said or did seemed to penetrate the thick skulls of his students. Realizing that they were not following his lectures, he had started taking a more interactive approach, requiring class discussion and lots of homework. But, obviously, this was not enough to reach this herd of slow witted children. Giving up his ideals of molding young minds, he was now shooting for basic reading comprehension. It was time, he decided, to try a little humiliation.

“OK. Let’s jog your memories a little bit,” he said casually as he started handing out the papers to the students. His own teachers had warned against shaming any student by forcing them into any situation where they could fail in front of the class. But he was at the end of his wits.

“Maybe it will help to read your poems out loud, in front of the class, hmmm?”

Returning to the front of the room, David expected that the students would react with fear and reluctance. But they all seemed cheered up by the idea. The entire front row was nodding and smiling in anticipation.

Not loosing heart, David asked “Who wants to read their poem first?” He smiled with malicious delight.

But to his astonishment, seven hands shot up.

“Tommy. You go first.”

Tommy held his paper in front of his nose and, in a quivering voice read:

I wish I were a bug
'Cause, if I was a bug
I could sit on the window
And make dirty little spots on the window
'Cause I'd be a dirty window spot bug.

An pleased mummer rose from the class.

“OK. That was almost right. You almost have the form down.” David had not had the guts to read the assignments was slightly surprised that the poem conformed as much as it did.

“What is the structure of the poem Tommy just read?”

“It was about a bug!” said Kiko Yoshizowa.

“Yes, that’s right. But what about the structure? Anyone? Tommy, you wrote the poem. What structure did you use?”

Tommy looked at his paper as though he was seeing it for the first time in his life.

“Alright. I’ll help you a little bit,” said David as he wrote on the board.

“A limerick has the form AABBA. That means that it has five lines. The first, second and fifth line must rhyme, as must the third and fourth.” As he spoke, he taped each letter on the board.

“AABBA. Looking at the poem from the perspective of the rhyming scheme, Tommy used ‘bug, bug, window, window, bug.’” Not to be deterred from his plan of humiliation, David took a deep breath and said, “This is not entirely correct. What is wrong with the rhyming scheme.”

Five hands shot up.

“Put your hands down if you don’t know the answer.”

Three hands remained waving in the air.

“Dmitri.”

“It should have been about an insect?”

“No.”

“He used too many words?”

“NO!” shouted David. He could feel his patience crumbling. A little more quietly, he continued, “Words that rhyme have the same sound. Like ‘cat’ and ‘mat’. You can not simply repeat a word to make a rhyme.” And for emphasis, he added, “‘Bug’ does not rhyme with ‘bug.’”

Understanding blooming on his pimply face, Tommy was nodding.

“What does rhyme with ‘bug’?”

“Insect?”

“No.”

“Beetle?”

“No.”

“Window?”

“NO, NO, NO!”

Sitting with one butt cheek on his desk, David considered for a moment. This was hopeless.

“Let’s proceed. Who else would like to read their poem.”

Almost every kid in the room was straining their arm in a salute to the ceiling.

“Billy.”

Billy cleared his voice and recited his poem from memory.

Oh, toilet bowl! Oh toilet bowl! Oh toilet bowl!
I wanted to write a poem to my toilet bowl
Because no one ever does.

“Billy, your poem has nothing to do with a limerick!” David’s exasperation was approaching infinity.

“Mr. Bradshaw, maybe you should let Karen read her poem. She always gets her homework right.”

Karen always sat in the back of the room, slouched in a nearly lying position. Her hair was dyed a different color every week and she wore so much eye make up that her face seemed to have two black holes drilled into it. However, she was one of the brightest students, and there was a chance she was capable of constructing a limerick.

“Good idea, Lily. Karen, would you like to read your poem for the class?”

Karen snarled, but picked up her page and in a macabre voice, intoned her poem.

There once was a penguin named Fred,
Who spent all his time in his bed.
It gave him a thrill
To lie very still
'Till the others were sure he was dead.

For a moment, David was too shocked to speak. Karen had let her page flutter to the floor and was picking her teeth while the other children look at her with open awe.

“Very good, Karen. Your poem has the correct structure: five lines with the AABBA rhyming scheme. That is ‘Fred, bed, thrill, still, dead.’ A touch morbid, but absolutely correct. Who else would like to read?”

This time, all hand were raised, even those of the kids who had already read. Most of the students were straining so much that they had risen out of their chairs.

“Larz.”

Twinkle, twinkle little wheelchair
I wonder who I am?
Flying up, up, up
And then flying down, down, down
Into a big puddle of dirty, spoogy, slippery, dirty mud.

Larz sat back, blinking, his cheeks burning pink with pride. A couple of the other boys slugged his shoulders.

“Excellent poem, man!”

“Good work, Larz!”

“No! For Christ’s sake, NO!” They were loosing ground. Humiliation was not working. David would have to use even more drastic measures.

As he was talking, Susie Dickens was gushing, “Wheel chairs! I love wheel chairs! Oh, Mr. Bradshaw. Could we all write poems about wheel chairs now?”

Every kid in the room, even Karen, sat up and looked hopefully at their teacher.

“Fine. We’ll have an in-class writing exercise. You have exactly five minutes to write a poem about a wheel chair.”

David need the time to calm down. As his students bent their heads and started scribbling furiously, he thought the situation through. It was impossible that these kids were really the imbeciles that they were pretending to be. They were trying to make a fool of him. They were making a fool of him, he realized with shame. They must have gotten together outside of school and conspired to drive him crazy. He was not going to let them get away with it. He was going to show them who had the upper hand.

“Time’s up! Put your pencils down!”

A protesting “Ohhhh” filled the room, as the students, reluctant but obedient, put their pencils down.

“OK. Since you have obviously failed to grasp the structure of a limerick, I will give you a poem which we will analyze together. He turned to the board, writing the rhyming works in all capital letters.

He turned back to the class, sadistic rays shining from his eyes, and shouted:

A crazy old whore from NANTUCKET
With a cunt the size of a BUCKET,
No matter how LARGE,
A yacht or a BARGE,
Give her a dime and she’ll FUCK IT!”

As he spoke, he underlined the last word of each line with such force that his stick of chalk shattered and crumbled away to a stub.

An appreciative sigh issued from the class. Someone whispered, “Cool!”

David began frothing at the mouth.

“NOW. WHO CAN TELL ME WHICH WORDS IN THIS POEM RHYM?”

“Nantucket and...”

“YES!”

“Nantucket and cunt?”

“NO! LOOK AT THE BOARD!”

“Nantucket and cock?”

“NO!”

“But they both end in T?” whined someone, “I don’t understand.”

Something in David’s head snapped.

“You children are, collectively and individually, an intellectual wasteland! Each and every one of you should be sold to Alpo to have your brains cut out and made into dog food! You are the most hopeless, depraved...”

Just then, in mid rant, the bell rang. The class was staring at David with startled, disappointed faces. He knew intuitively that they were sad the fifty minutes were up.

“Get out,” he growled. When no one moved, he screamed, his voice rising to an hysterical falsetto “Get out now, you morons! Get out this second!”

As the students gathered up their papers and books and filed past his desk to exit the room, David slumped down in his chair, elbows on the desk, head in hands. He listened to their comments as they left.

“Excellent poem, Billy!”

“I really like the part about the wheel chairs! It was so cool!”

“I think Mr. Bradshaw is an excellent teacher. He is probably a genius!” This was followed by an infatuated giggle.

He could not take it any more. He had gone over some limit, some point of no return. A nervous break down was too good for this lot. He realized that he was close to tears.

As the sound of the students died down, David realized with a start that Mr. Levi, the school principle, was standing in front of his desk. Now the shit was going to hit the fan. Although his stomach twisted and dropped to his knees, David was glad. The sooner, the better, he thought.

“Mr. Bradshaw,” the older man began in a deep, serious and troubled voice. “I have been observing your class for the last half hour. And I must say, I have never seen anything like this in the thirty-seven years that I have been working in the public school system.”

David, sat up straight and looked Mr. Levi in the eye. He was going to take this like a man.

“As you know, I am required to observe and evaluate all student teachers. I don’t like to be a disturbance, so I observe from the hall. I find that, by not making an appearance in the classroom, I get a better impression of the teacher’s style and methods. This technique has definitely paid off today.”

“Yes, sir. You are, after all, doing your job.”

“Indeed. I repeat, I have never before seen anything like your performance today. As far as I am concerned, your evaluation period is over. I will return to my desk immediately and write your report.”

“Of coarse. I understand.”

“I never... I am speechless! I can’t begin to describe...”

“Don’t bother, sir. I am sure you will find some concise way to summarized the situation.” David was resigned to see this through to the end with as much dignity as he could muster.

“Don’t be so modest, Bradshaw. You took a lifeless, useless and endlessly boring subject like poetry and got the students really excited about it. I have never seen young people so enthusiastic about any topic outside of the latest fad! I am going to give you the highest recommendation.”

“But...” David began to slobber. “I just taught them a dirty limerick about a prostitute and insulted their intelligence, indirectly and directly.”

“Creative! Innovative! Brilliant! One must be open to unconventional methods, I always say.”

Mr. Levi was veritabily rocking back and fourth with satisfaction.

“You know, Marge Flanners is retiring at the end of this school year. I do hope you seriously consider applying for her position. I can guarantee you the job, if you’ll have it.” He smiled broadly and bowed slightly. Before he turned and left the room, he actually winked at David.

A feeling of disgust came over David, and for a moment, he was sure he was going to throw up. Standing up and numbly feeling around for his briefcase, he looked at his wrist watch. It was 2:07 PM. He wondered if the Stumble Inn, a bar down the street from his apartment, was open at this time of day. No matter, if it was closed he would stop by the ABC package store and buy a big bottle of scotch. Even if he had to drink the whole thing in one sitting, he was going to wash this day out of his life.

1minutetopic: bro03
Contributor: Shannon Frances
Completed: December 2005, Gauting
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Bad Hair Life

This is the story of Duzie, a pretty girl who lived in a little fishing village. She had been called Duzie since babyhood because, quite simply, she was a duzie. All the neighbors said so. The baby had a perfect drift of bright golden curls, lovely sea green eyes and, if that weren't enough, she had the cutest dimples. "Yes, siree! That there girl is a real Duzie."

As she grew up, her mother, a poor woman of practical bent, realized that her daughter might be her ticket to better things. Not that the mother didn't love her daughter: she did. Who could not love such an appealing child. But the village had little to offer besides a great seaside location. Money was tight, and jobs consisted of fishing, cleaning fish, selling fish, trying to wash the stink of fish out of the clothing, and hauling fish to markets further inland. The aristocracy of such villages were the men who owned the boats.

So Duzie learned at her mother's knee that it is just as easy to love a captain as it is to love a stinking fish gutter -- and you get to do it on a much nicer bed. And having had occasion to get rather well acquainted with several fun-loving young fish gutters, she concluded that a nicer bed might have a lot to recommend it.

One balmy day in late spring after having received a nasty abrasion on her bum and back from a spot of dalliance with one of the fish gutters, Duzie decided to go for a swim to wash off the stink of fish guts with a dip in the ocean.

The shallow water lapped about her perfect -- except for the road rash -- thighs. Her glorious cloud of burnished gold hair fell loose over her round, firm and generous breasts as Duzie ruminated on how, at sixteen, she had better get cracking on her mother's sea captain project before her shelf life started to go out of date.

She heard a somewhat artificial cough behind her, and she turned to see a really handsome older man standing at the water's edge. For a guy with gray in his hair and beard, Duzie realized he had to be the hottest guy she had ever seen: strong, aristocratic-looking and exuding an air of authority that made her knees buckle.

She tried her damndest to work up an appropriately maidenly blush while placing a dainty hand artfully over as much of one breast as she could while smiling shyly.

"Oh, sir, you startled me!" she said lilting her voice sweetly.

"My dear, I didn't mean to frighten you. I thought you, um, might need some help lest you be swept out to sea." His voice matched his image of a powerful man of authority, deep and commanding.

This guy has to be at least the captain of one of those really big cargo boats. Maybe even the owner. My gosh, this is my big chance! she thought.

Being a reasonably bright girl, she worked her feet deep into the sandy bottom. Lowering her long lashes, she sighed, "You have come just in time. I fear I might be stuck in the soft sediment. I have such tiny feet," she added. It never heart to mention such an easily overlooked selling point. "Would you be so kind as to help me out before my extraordinarily fair skin begins to burn in this bright sun."

The very waves seemed to part before him as he strode to her and swooped her up into his strong arms. She snuggled against his manly chest and whispered. "My, but you are very strong!"

"My dear, I couldn't help but notice you have already started to turn a bit pink on your tender and shapely bottom. May I suggest that I carry you up to that building just there at the top of the bluff overlooking the sea," he breathed a warm breath into her shell-like ear.

"Oh, sir, I have no clothing on and that is a shrine. I don't think that would be seemly..."

But he had started tickling her in a most interesting way and she forgot what she had been about to say.

At close range, Duzie decided he must own a fishing fleet because the aroma of the sea clung to him. But on this man, it smelled good: strangely appealing with a fresh and salty zest to it.

When they entered the shrine, she could see that the sly rascal must have been planning on seducing her all along because a thick luxurious blanket covered the hard tile floor and a plate of fruit and a pitcher of wine waited on a nearby bench.

As he took her in his arms and kissed her soft lips, she murmured, "Mama had it right about the bed. Who would have thought?"

They spent the afternoon frolicking and drinking and making merry until the sun sank in the west in a burst of vivid pink and Duzie fell asleep in her lover's arms.

The light of morning poking at her closed eyes told her she had too much to drink. But she could feel his presence and, silly man, he seemed to be licking her cheek and shoulders. She smiled pretending to be asleep until a woman's angry voice yanked her bolt upright.

"You idiot slut! What do you think you were doing, defiling my house?" cried a really beautiful woman in her early thirties. She was hopping mad.

The slut comment seemed a bit harsh. Duzie found her clothing lying next to her and made a hasty grab for them saying, "I got stuck, and this nice man helped me out and..."

She looked around but could see no sign of her handsome lover. What she did see made her scream. A snake, no, several snakes were slithering around her bare shoulders. She reached up to brush them off but that only pissed them off. They hissed at her, and when she tried it again she realized that they seemed to be attached to her head.

The woman laughed a mighty ringing peal of laughter. "That's what you get for screwing around in my temple, slut. Thought your hair was so god damned heart-stopping! Will try this!" The woman lifted what should have been one of Duzie's golden tresses and it flicked out its forked tongue at her. The girl screamed in horror. Her hair had become a writhing mass of snakes!

The woman turned to make a fast grab at the cloak of a man hiding behind one of the massive pillars. "Not so fast, Neptune! You soggy, lecherous, trespassing bastard. Don't you want to say good morning to your cuddly little friend now?"

In the morning light, Medusa could see that he had a definite green tinge to his skin. Why had she not noticed the sea weed in his hair yesterday, she wondered.

“Awah, Minerva, have a heart. I didn’t mean anything. We were just fooling around a little.”

“What about my hair!” she wailed.

“Look at it this way, honey, you will be teaching woman everywhere not to mess with the gods. You will be famous! Generations to come will think of you as the queen of all bad hair days.”

A snake coiled companionably around the girl’s neck as one of his brother flicked his tongue in her ear as she uttered the words that would become the anthem of women everywhere, “Well, shit!”

1minutetopic: bro04
Contributor: Frances Burke
Completed: February 2006, Black Forest
Last revised: 26 March 2006

A Dog and His Boy

Time has a funny way of colorising the past to emphasize subtle details of life which, at the time, seemed almost lost in the background noise. It is only later that you realize these moments form the foundation of all that is meaningful in life. When I look back on my own life, I can clearly see that most of what parents and educators thought to be significant have simply faded with time, never having their desired effect, and the most important person in my life was my dog, Peludo.

I guess my folks got Peludo as the first step to “something bigger”, but I came along before they realized that the commitment of having a dog was really more than they were up for. I don't really blame my parents for being so lame, after all having a kid demands more from a person than most are willing to give. I guess that's why people are so screwed up, and dogs will one day rule the universe: people view giving love as an imposition on their selfish lives, but dogs give love spontaneously and unconditionally.

We were pretty much on our own, Peludo and me. As a single parent my mom had to work most of the time, and when she wasn't working she was usually going out with some new guy. I suppose it is the sort of thing that sends people into group therapy sessions later in life when they realize they didn't get the love the shrink tells them they deserved, but it was pretty much lost on me. I had my dog, and we did everything together.

We grew up together. We slept all curled up in a ball, and when I ate he got anything I didn't want, and half of what I did. Of course Peludo licked me clean at every opportunity, and even bathed with me. Having four legs, he walked long before I did, but as soon as I got mobile we were out the door, and down the road, playing in the fields and creeks at the edge of town. We were so close we even started to look like each other. Peludo had short dark brown hair which stood up in a stunted mane all down his neck and back, and had little swirly cowlicks on both sides. It was hot in the summers so I had my dark brown hair trimmed short. It seemed to all grow up toward the center of my head, giving me a permanent Peewee Herman head, with randomly swirling cowlicks on both sides, just like Peludo. Peewee was my nickname all the way through high school.

I learned a lot from Peludo. In many ways he was my big brother. He taught me to swim, doggy paddle of course, and when we'd crawl out of the creek, we'd twist and shake our selves dry, before running off to some other adventure. He showed me the joys of dumpster diving. He knew when the bakery had tossed out a load of bread which had reached its expiry date, and together we'd rummage around out back and load up on goodies for lunch. Fairly often we'd nap hidden in some bushes out by the turf farm.

I got my first lesson in sexuality when I was about three and a half. There was this cute little golden retriever that we ran into one day while out in the fields. Peludo thought she was just the thing, and he proceeded to hump her, well, like a bitch in heat. It was completely natural; there was no guilt or sense of violation even though they had never met, nor would they see each other again, and she was probably only two. It was just the way of life. I think this really helped prepare me for life better than any corny, forced “talk” from an elder. A few years later when I happened to walk in on my mom and some guy

banging away on the couch, I didn't find it shocking or traumatic at all. Actually it was rather comical, my mom sitting on this guy's lap, bouncing away like kids on a carnival ride. Peludo must have thought something similar, as he got into the act by humping the guy's leg.

We were always together, right up to the end. He made it to my 15th birthday. Of course I was sad when he died; he was much more than a pet, he was my family even more so than my own mom. Still I suppose it was all for the best. We had a good long run, and I never left him for school or a woman or anything like that. And the lessons I learned from him have stayed with me to this day.

When I went to college my permanent bed-head won me the nickname Napster. I took Peludo's basic premise that anything in the public domain was yours for the taking, or sharing, and I started up an internet file-sharing site where you could donate your programs, music or whatever, and everyone who wanted to could access it. The federal government couldn't grasp so basic a concept as communal property and tried to shut it down for copyright infringement. Well, I'm still swapping files, and now there are even more sites that do so. I guess you could call it human nature, but I learned it from a canine.

1minutetopic: bro04
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
Completed: February 2006, Black Forest
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Heavenly Reward

Dear God,

This is the last request I will ever make of you, I promise.

You know that, since I turned over my soul to Jesus' salvation five years ago, I have lived my life as a good Christian, always letting You guide me through prayer, always trying to do what Jesus would do. I have given up alcohol and all physical vices and treated my body like a temple to your greatness. I learn about you every day by reading the Bible and I have tried to spread your word and love to those around me with evangelical fervor. I try to be a model of righteousness to those around me and meet their spurn by turning the other cheek. I am ready to make any sacrifice for You.

But, Lord, there are many things I don't understand about Your ways. I struggle with feelings of envy and covetousness. I don't understand why my brothers in the faith react so critically and coldly to me when I am only preaching what You have taught me through Your love and works. I have spent long hours in prayerful meditation about these issues. I know you are no Santa Claus, granting wishes for Christmas, and I accept that your design is beyond human comprehension. But there is one thing, and one thing only, that I would like to ask of you. Please consider my Christian intensions and simply give me what I deserve.

My only desire is to serve you. Amen.

Jones was filled with eager anticipation after he made his last request to God. He was excited to see how God would respond and, in an effort to be open to any small, quite sign that God might send, tried to clear his mind of expectations. He couldn't help but fantasize about being recognized and respected in his church for his devotion and good works -- these thoughts were traps of the devil and he tried to avoid them as much as possible.

But weeks went by and he saw no change in the behavior of the people around him -- whether members of his church or the unbaptized. No one treated him with more warmth or called him by his first name. Everyone seemed to be looking for an excuse to get away from him whenever he came into a room.

He had to admit to himself that he had expected that God would make him more popular as his reward for the sacrifices he had made. But as soon as he recognized this, he saw the foolishness of seeking reward in the earthly realm and applied renewed effort in his Christianly activities, adding an additional hour of reading and prayer to each day and increasing his quota for establishing contact with non-Christians by 10%.

But, try as he might, the only change in his life that he noticed was that his hair had started to turn a darker color. He dismissed this as being too physical and base to be a sign from God. However, Jones had to wonder what was God's intention with his hair as it grew increasingly dark and alarmingly kinky. The new hair grew at such a rapid rate that, after he cut the straight blond ends off, it formed a helmet-like afro around his head.

Although it mortified Jones to think that people might think he had African American ancestors, he rejected any impulse to cut or change his hair in any way, just in case it was a sign from God.

The harder he tried to bend himself to the will of God and understand what this sign might mean, the faster and more irregularly the hair grew. It seemed to be growing the fastest at the top of his head, and virtually not at all at the back. After a few months, Jones's hair had formed a nearly impenetrable column towering above his head and two spheres engulfing his ears.

In his alarm, Jones gave up his job and moved back in with his mother to be able to intensify his devotional activities. He started rejecting the advice of the preacher and other members of his church, finally realizing that they were just trying to tempt him to turn away from the righteous path.

Despite the embarrassment it caused him, he decided to spend his afternoons preaching in front of the main train station. At first he was disgusted by the depravity he saw around him -- drugs, love of the things that money can buy and casual sex amongst young people -- he forced his heart to reach out to the wretched sinners around him.

Occasionally, his hair would twitch and start to itch when he was talking to some sinner, especially if the sinner was a pretty girl. But when he noticed his reflection in the windows of the train station and saw that his hair had taken on the appearance of an erect and throbbing penis, he quit going anywhere where he could come into contact with any female except his mother.

He stopped going out of the house entirely when he noticed that the hair above his forehead was growing in an irregular way as to form dread locks that crossed over themselves -- forming an upside down pentagon.

Why, oh why was God visiting such a plague upon him? Jones had done everything he could possibly do to please God, and God had responded by marking him with the sign of the beast.

Eventually, after a long struggle, Jones lost his religion. He rejected his church, the Bible and finally God. Feeling robbed of all meaning in life, he turned to philosophy and became a Buddhist. Taking the vows of a monk and shaving his head, he spent the rest of his life in a zen monastery in California. Oddly, once shaved, his hair ceased to grow. That is, it ceased to grow until he started having thoughts springing from his Christian background or demonstrating an attachment to the world. But as long as he concentrated on the void and the sound of one hand clapping, his head stayed as bald as an egg.

1minutetopic: bro04
Contributor: Shannon Frances
Completed: February 2006, Gauting
Last revised: 26 March 2006

The Boy Who Wanted to Be an Angel

Chala sat by the side of the path wondering what she could do. No longer a young woman, she had lost everything in the recent conflict. *Stupid*, she thought, *all this fighting is stupid. It doesn't get us the riches they say should be ours. It just kills out young men and boys, our little boys, before they even get to be men.* Wiping away tears with the heel of her grimy hand she stood up. Crying did no good. Her husband and son were dead but so were the sons, husbands and brothers of most of her village's women. Firewood still needed to be gathered, water still needed to be hauled from the river and food somehow still had to be found. Life went on, but Chala feared what that life would bring her alone and destitute.

She scooped water into her jar, hefted it to her shoulder and turned to make her way back to what remained of her house. When she saw a baby setting on the mud on the other side of the river, she muttered, "What kind of a foolish woman leaves her baby so close to the water?" Then she called, "Hi, hi! Your baby is too close to the water!"

Surprised, the child looked up and squealed with delight. Horrified, Chala watched the infant crawl towards her.

"No! Stop little one!" She frantically waved her hands but he continued into the swift current. Screaming for help, Chala dropped her jar and plunged into the river before the baby could be carried away. Water dragged at her clothing as she floundered, struggling to keep her head above the water. The adrenaline rush of fear gave strength to her lunge as she grabbed for a tiny arm.

Sputtering and wiping strands of wet hair from her face, she held the baby tight to her breast as she climbed onto the bank. Bewildered she looked around for some sign of his parents but could find no trace -- no foot prints on the mud, no sign of a camp fire or even a rag to wrap him in.

Chala sat out of breath waiting for his mother to return so she could scold her for leaving her baby like that. The boy seemed to be about a year old, with soft curly brown hair. At first he screamed with fright but, once cuddled in a mother's arms he soon quieted. An hour passed and no one came. Once again she wondered what to do. The long shadows of evening began to reach across the water. Being out alone in the night with wild animals, rebels and government soldiers patrolling was dangerous. She wrapped the baby in her damp shawl and hurried down stream to the foot bridge that would get her to the other side of the river. Murmuring softly to keep the baby from crying, she retrieved her jar and ran back to the village as fast as she could with her burdens.

Years went by. His hair darkened with time, and his unusual beauty blurred with hunger and hardship. But he remained a good and loving son to her. He would have been all a mother could have wished for, if it were not for his strange fascination with angels.

Almost as soon as he could talk, he told her about the bright men with wings of light. They must have had picture book his real mother had read to him, Chala thought. To confirm this she took him to a ruined church that still had fragments of murals on the walls. Once he saw them he laughed and clapped his hands.

"They are angels, she told him.

"I want to be an angel!" he said.

"You are my son, you are my own little angel," she told him.

"Will I grow wings, too?"

"You don't need them. You have two fine strong legs to carry you about," she chided her son.

"But I want them. I want to be an angel with wings!"

As he grew, the other villagers began to think him a bit off. His mother told him he must forget such childish dreams. "Angels are pure spirits, they do not have bodies as we do. God gave you a fine strong body, my son, be content with that. Or our neighbors will think you strange, and no man will give you his daughter to be your wife.

The boy grew to be a youth, still secretly dreaming of those bright beings, although he could no longer quite know his own memories from the stories he had been told about angels. The wars waxed and waned through the land. Chala lived in dread of the day her dearly beloved son would be snatched away for a soldier. It happened often enough. A boy or youth would go out to hunt or scavenge scrap metal to make tools and never be seen again. At first she refused to let him go out, but as time passed she became too old to forage alone and then too old to do it at all.

The clever lad knew how to vanish into the undergrowth and shadows. Often he watched the men with guns, men of both sides of the conflict, setting an ambush along a trail. They were both the enemy of his people, fighting for reasons he neither understood nor cared about. In moments of great daring or need, he would even steal food from their camps.

On the eve of his seventeenth birthday the boy crouched, sweating in the dark, waiting for the sentry to walk past so he could dart into the camp and make off with a box of supplies. Fear licked at him like cold flames, but someone had stolen the last of their chickens, and his mother needed good food. The smell of the guard's cigarette hung in the hot night air as he silently made his rounds. The time had come -- the boy bunched his muscles for the desperate dash.

A swirling cloud of unimaginably beautiful colors filled his mind. I'm dying, he thought, although he felt no pain, only a cool, slightly tingling feeling. The idea that he might indeed be dying didn't particularly worry him. He was far too excited by the prospects of finally getting to see the angels he had known waited for him all his life.

When he came to his senses he found himself sitting on a muddy river bank. A bright iridescent mist hung all about obscuring his view of everything but the immediate few feet. Odd, he thought, not at all what I had imagined it would be like.

Then two figures emerged from the swirling fog. One was a woman, though not like any he had ever seen, and the other was an angel. The boy cried out in his great joy.

"Greetings, my son," said the angel.

The boy could not find his voice to respond.

The angel smiled with a look of infinite peace and understanding.

"No, you are not dead. I have been sent to learn something of your world," the bright being said.

The boy wanted to say, "Then go to the great cities to where men of learning spend their time studying the grand things I know nothing about," but still he could not speak.

The angel shook his head, a shade of sorrow seemed to dim his eyes, as he said, "No, I want to know how you find the men of this place."

Almost against his will the boy found himself replying, "They are the same as men everywhere, I suppose. Some are very good. They will work hard or even risk their lives for their families or friends. Others are very bad. They will sell their children for a few hours or days of pleasure. Most just do the best they can -- making mistakes sometimes -- but trying," he shrugged. How could he explain to someone like this glorious creature a life haunted by fear, hunger and love. If this being was truly an angel, then why did he let things happen like the war that had been raging since before he was born and had turned the peaceful lives of his village into a hell of death, starvation and misery. "Are you really an angel?" he asked.

The figure before him just smiled. "You have some memory of us I see. Do you want to come with us?" he held out his hand to the youth. For the first time the boy looked at the woman. There seemed to be tears in her eyes yet her beautiful smile glowed with hope and promise.

"I want to..." he stopped suddenly feeling the warm mud soaking through his thin clothing. "If I go with you, can I come back?"

"No, my son, that is not permitted. Once you come with us you will be... different," the angel said.

"And what will happen to my mother?"

The woman's face clouded with a quiet sadness. "What happens to all those of your world eventually," she said in a gentle voice "She will die."

"Yes," said the boy. "She will, but I must take care of her."

The woman shook her head, "She is not really your mother. You know that, don't you?" The angel put his hand over the woman's out stretched arm.

"That is my job in this life: to care for her as she cared for me when I was a baby," he hung his head; tears traced a course down his dirty cheeks. "I cannot go," he whispered, as they vanished into the mist.

The woman watched her son sink to his knees weeping out his profound sense of loss.

The angel said simply, "He will do."

She clutched his hand, "But the life you offer him is filled with such hardships. So many of his kind are doomed by the very truth they speak. Throughout history, it is the enlightened ones that are eventually despised by those they wish to save. He is your son, too." She looked pleadingly into the angels serenely beautiful eyes.

“He has chosen.”

1minutetopic: io02
Contributor: Frances Burke
Completed: January 2006, Colorado Springs
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Best Intentions

Gabe couldn't remember exactly when the idea first came to him. Maybe it was inspired by his thick, long golden strands of hair that seemed to radiate angelic light. "What an angle!" people would say. As far as he knew he had always wanted to be an angel.

He had a pretty normal childhood: he played with the other kids and got in trouble just like the rest of them, but deep down in his heart lived a feeling of wanting to care for others; to watch over them and keep them from suffering. As he grew, so did his protective instincts. As a teenager going to punk concerts he hated the way some guys in the mosh pit would single out smaller members and slam them with the intent of doing bodily harm. Gabe became a self-appointed "vigilante" moshers and, though slight of build, body checked anyone clearly getting out of hand. He was so successful that he earned the title of "Gabe: Avenging Angle of the Mosh Pit," of which he was most proud.

Eventually it became time for all good white-bread children like Gabe to go to college. Not that nonwhite-bread children were deliberately prevented from going, but even a cursory look at statistics in the US shows that "Wonder bread" goes to college at a much greater rate than either "whole wheat" or "rye bread" kids do. It's almost cliché. Apart from his angelic leanings he had no clue what he wanted to be. Psychology was full of psychos, Communications was a bunch of freeloading potheads (destined to become tomorrow's peddlers of sugar water), Engineering was too geeky, so, like a lot of misguided youth, he wound up in Biology.

He was bright, if uninspired, and managed to graduate with his Bachelor's in only a single line of narration. At this point the only thing more numerous than unemployed biology grads was institutionalized psyche students, or perhaps Comm students in rehab. Lacking a suitable outlet for his celestial yearnings, Gabe took the default life-avoidance track of many unemployable grads and went to grad school.

He got a job at a lab working for the famous Dr. Vermicelli. He would be doing genetic experimentation and stem cell research using the unwanted offspring of the less privileged classes. Soon his destiny became apparent to him: to correct the wrongs of society he had to become an angle. With a little genetic manipulation and a few surreptitiously implanted stem cells, he was sure he could turn himself into a full-fledged angle. I mean, how hard could it be, right? He already had the hair thing going for him and his whole "avenging angle" attitude. Really all that was left was the wings.

He began to work frantically, staying late every night at the lab acquiring various samples of bird DNA and, of course, plenty of crack-baby stem cells. At length he managed to isolate what he believed to be the genetic code for the wings of a swan and spliced it into the stem cells. He injected it directly into his shoulder blades and immediately proceeded to convulse and pass out on the floor, more from the residual effects of the crack than the fact that the last student to use the sequencer forgot to clean it properly, so he had actually spliced in a sizable chunk wheat DNA, rather than swan wings.

Dr. Vermicelli was the first to arrive at the lab and found Gabe face down on the floor. Fearing that some of his work generating biological weapons for the Department of Defense had gotten out of hand, he immediately quarantined Gabe to keep word of the

leak from getting out. He strapped Gabe on a trolley and slipped an IV drip into his arm, just in case he needed to keep him sedated, and rushed him down into the steam tunnels below the lab. These ancient passageways were relics of the long forgotten day when people actually gave a shit about efficiency and used the waste heat from the local power plant to heat the university. Of course the tunnels had not been used since 1980 and, given the current political atmosphere, were unlikely to be used again for a very long time. It was the perfect place to hide an errant grad student.

Gabe was awoken a little later that morning by an eerie creaking sound coming from his head. Having read through Gabe's notes, Dr. Vermicelli came down to check on Gabe and get some explanation for his unauthorized experimentation. He was astonished to find Gabe's head buried under a thick mat of yellow fibers. They were so thick he had to cut them away with a knife. He asked Gabe what was going on, but all Gabe could get out was "I'm sorry, I just wanted to be an angulph..." before the quickly growing fibers sprouting out of his head again buried his face. Thinking quickly Dr. Vermicelli grabbed a bunch of the fibers and raced upstairs to analyze them.

Passing by the lounge he saw a bucket and, leaving the handful of thick yellow fibers on the counter, he decided to go collect more samples for the various toxicology tests he had to run. Having harvested several gallons of the flexible golden yellow fibers from Gabe's head, he hurried back upstairs. Passing the lounge once again he was stopped dead in his tracks. The fibers he had left on the counter were gone! He put the bucket down and slowly walked over to where they had been. "BING!" sounded the alarm on the microwave, causing him to jump in surprise. He rushed two of his Chinese grad students. They said good morning and went to the microwave to pull out a bowl full of... the missing fibers! With fluid like motions they began shoveling the stuff into their mouths before Dr. Vermicelli had time to react. He turned a rather nasty shade of green as they said, "Oh, these noodles very good!" slurping down the soft, steaming mass. Dr. Vermicelli stifled the urge to vomit and marched off before they had a chance to eat the contents of the bucket, too.

All morning he ran toxicology tests on them, checking for any pathology, poisons or danger of any kind. That afternoon he concluded that the fibers were in fact completely benign. He checked on his Chinese grad students who were working away as per normal. "Hey," they said, "You should bring them noodles more. They very good!" Returning to his office to contemplate the events of the morning, he was suddenly overtaken by pang of hunger, haven missed breakfast and lunch in all the excitement. Staring down at the noodle-like fibers his mind began to wander where any good scientists would naturally go, and he decided he simply must eat the latest results of his labs work. Putting the fibers in his mouth he marveled at their smoothness, excellent texture and taste, being a little like animal-fat-soaked spaghetti.

He raced back down to the steam tunnels and found the stuff growing at the same incredible rate. It had spilled all over the floor and was beginning to fill up the tunnel. In a flash of inspiration he grabbed a cable, tying one end around the fibers coming from Gabe's head, and passed the other up through a vent to the next floor up. With the help of his grad students, who he intentionally kept in the dark as to the origins of noodles, he quickly dragged up the fibrous noodles and set up an assembly line chopping the hair

into buckets. Passing a sample to the university catering service, he easily managed to get a sole-source contract for supplying them with “angel hair pasta” and made quite a nice profit.

And Gabe? Well, there he lies, chained to a trolley in the sub-basement of a university research lab with an IV drip in his arm, unable to sleep due to the horrific creaking noise made by the noodles growing out of his head. Just another example of “be careful what you wish for” with some “a little knowledge is a dangerous thing” for spice.

1minutetopic: io01
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
Completed: January 2006, Colorado Springs
Last revised: 26 March 2006

The Road to Heaven

Boy, oh, boy. He had really done it now. He was in deep trouble.

Sean Bradford knew from long experience, that, by the time he got home, the principle would have called and talked to both of his parents. They would most likely have spent the last hour discussing the situation.

Sean did not want to be a bad boy. He honestly wanted to be the kind of boy his parents could be proud of. But, as he dawdled on the way home, trying to put off the inevitable, he feared that he didn't have it in him to be good for more than a few minutes at a time.

Dragging a stick along Mrs. Johnston's freshly painted white picket fence, Sean thought about a book he had to read at school about a girl who was possessed with a daemon. The daemon caused her to do all kinds of shocking, disgusting things. Sean considered that maybe he was possessed by a daemon, too. He never planned to do bad things, but, before he knew it, he was pulling the girls' ponytails or blowing spit wads in class. If he remembered correctly, they burned the girl at the end of the book -- a thought that did nothing to cheer him up.

To add a few minutes to his walk, he turned down the foot path running along the Martinez's fields. Occasionally, he would bend down and pick up the painfully prickly burrs called "goat's head" and stuck them in a bag in his pocket for later use. Trying to imagine how his parents were going to react to the news of his behavior earlier in the day, he remembered his father's shy and hardened face, pale with fury, when Sean arrived home after filling Stacey Williams' desk with stagnant pond water, complete with tadpoles and slimy clumps of green algae. Why had he done that anyway? He pretty much liked Stacey, even though she was a girl.

Somehow, he knew he could handle his father. It was his mother that he worried about.

When he had been caught in the act of filling his second grade teacher's car locks with crazy glue, his mom had responded with a silence filled with pain, sadness and shame.

Arriving at Cooker's Lane, Sean stopped for a few minutes to reflect. After the car lock fiasco, he had cried like a baby and sworn that he would be good from then on. He would get a job to pay his parents back for the repair costs.

Realizing that he had shredded all the blossoms on old Mrs. Olsen's antique rose bush, he continued down the lane. He had really meant what he had promised his mother. But, not only had he not found a job, he hadn't even started looking. And as for being good, he had smashed that promise to pieces. What he had done this morning was worse than destroying Mrs. Carson's locks. It was even worse than lighting a fire in Jimmy Page's basement. He simply could not imagine how his mother would take the news.

To slow his progress even further, he took target practice on the basement windows of the houses he passed, kicking all the stones he could find on the way.

As he turned down his street, he began to fervently wish he could become an angel. He figured that, if children became angels when they died, God could make him an angel without his having to die first. He prayed to God with bitter pleas (making it up as he went

along, as all the prayers he had learned in Sunday school didn't seem appropriate and he had forgotten them anyway). He tried with force of will to sprout wings and grow a halo. If he arrived at home as an angel, he could promise his mother with confidence that he would be good for ever more.

He strained with all his might, standing still and closing his eyes tightly and making himself dizzy with the effort. Had give it his best shot. But when he opened his eyes, he could sense his wingless state. He didn't have to wave his hands over his head to know that there was no glowing ring hanging there. What he could sense, however, were his parents, watching him trough the front window with drawn and angry expressions.

Shrugging his shoulders and sighing with dark resignation, he gave the neighbor's lazy cat a swift kick and, head hanging and hands deep stuck in his jean pockets, walked towards the front door of their house.

1minutetopic: io01
Contributor: Shannon Frances
Completed: December 2005, Munich
Last revised: 26 March 2006

The First Time I Meditated

As I pushed the heavily carved oak door open, a surge of memories and emotion flooded through me. It had been years — I had to stop to think just how many, at least twenty — since I stepped across this threshold. The mingled fragrances of candles, incense and that ineffable muskiness of a building to which people brought their deepest emotions felt like I had walked into a timeless reality. The soft flickering glow and dark shadows triggered a feeling of comfort that I had been longing for.

Yes, I thought, *I had made the right decision. However unpleasant this ordeal might be, I had to go through with it.*

I slid into one of the back benches, letting my suitcase drop to the floor next to my knee, waiting for the last of the kerchiefed old ladies in their black shawls to mumble their prayers and shuffled off.

Before my courage deserted me I walked over to the confessional and stepped into the gloomy hush and knelt down. The intricately carved grill slid open and a tired voice said, *"In nomine patre et filie et spiritou sante. Amen."*

I took a deep breath and responded, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been about twenty years since my last confession."

He grunted, probably thinking this was going to get him home late again.

I sank back on my heels. "There's no point in beating around the bush. I think it would be best if I started at the beginning, Father, so please bare with me on this.

"I guess it all started with my father. He was an Irish cop right here in New York City. A big, handsome man who drank, held old fashioned ideas about the place of a father in the home and whom my mother adored unquestioningly.

"When it came time for me to find a husband I wanted something different for myself. Someone who didn't shout a lot or demand a beer as soon as he got into the house. Who didn't hang out with a bunch of loud fat guys in T-shirts. I married Stanley. He never yelled. He drank sparingly and discussed things with me before making decisions. I met him in my sophomore year at NYU. He was in law school. I dropped out of school and worked two jobs to put him through law school. The deal was that, once he got established, I would finish my degree in fine arts."

The telling of it made it all seem so logical. I shook my head determined to see this through to the end. I couldn't honestly say that I wanted forgiveness from a God I didn't really believe in any longer. Maybe, as Julia said, I just needed some kind of closure.

"It took longer than we figured for him to land a job with a good law firm. We kept postponing starting our family until the time was right. Stanley could always find some perfectly valid reason to wait just another year or two. On my thirty seventh birthday I decided if I didn't have a baby soon I would have to give up the idea all together. Reluctantly Stanley agreed. Although as a last ditch attempt to discourage the plan, he

pointed out that this meant that I would probably never go back to school to finish my degree, adding that a degree in fine arts would never generate what it cost.

"Connor our son will be three soon. This is, in a way, really all about him.

"When Stanley first suggested counseling I thought he was kidding. Sure things were not exactly smooth sailing in our relationship, but after thirteen years of marriage that's to be expected. He found a counselor and we started seeing him regularly once a week. It took me almost three months before I realized the whole point of this was not to build a more meaningful relationship but to pave the way for a divorce. When I finally worked up the nerve to confront him he admitted that he thought things had gone too far to save the marriage. We had nothing in common any more, and basically it was time to move out.

"That's when my friend Jill, a girl I had gone to school with, started to suggest that I needed to jump start my new life. She is into yoga, vegetarianism and self actualization. She was worried about me because I just couldn't seem to come to terms with the fact that my life as I had known it had somehow ended with out my even realizing it. Jill loaded me up with guided meditations to release my inner spirit power, to overcome fear and negativity and to awaken the sleeping woman I had been repressing. I just let them collect dust along with everything else once he moved out of our house in Connecticut.

"With in a week of his leaving, the lawyer he found for me informed me that technically Stanley owned nothing. It had all been put in some kind of company or trust or something like that and I would get just about enough to settle up what I owed my lawyer. I couldn't believe it. After all I did for him, all the crappy jobs I took to get him established, we were being cut loose with nothing but our personal possessions!

"The next day Stanley came by to talk things over. When he called he sounded so encouraging so comforting that I believed he had finally come to his senses and this had all be a horrible mistake, some mid-life crisis. I maxed out my credit card with a facial and a new hairdo.

"You have to understand that my husband could be incredibly persuasive. He sat there in the home he was taking away from me and explained in great detail how, if I loved Connor, I would want what was best for him. I must know the outcome for the children from single-mother homes of low social economic status was dismal at best. While he could give him the best of everything: a loving home the best schools, stability.

"Wait,' I said, 'what loving home?'

"He had the good grace to look a bit flustered like he hadn't meant to mention the fact that he would be marrying Belinda Blankenship as soon as the divorce was final.

"Binke Blankenship? The best body that money can buy?' I lost it. I started screaming that his intended was also known as Binke the Bimbo, that Connor called his pacifier Binke. That's when it hit me. His relationship with Miss Silicone Implant had been in the works for a very long time. I started throwing things. I bounced a really lovely cloisonné vase off his shiny balding head before he finally ran out of the house.

"Jill came over as soon as I was able to tell her what had happened. She brought a bottle of wine and stayed with me until I calmed down a little. Then she had to go home to her

own toddler. But she made me promise to do the meditation she slipped into my cassette player.

"It was the one about conquering our past to take control of our future. In my defense I can only say that I must have been in a very suggestible state. I lit the incense, sat on Connor's bean bag chair and listened to what Jill swore would calm me and enable me to see my way to rationally take control of my life. I spent all the rest of the day gobbling down the meditation tapes like a kid in a candy shop. They did not clam me, but they did put me in touch with some pretty deep realizations.

"I had entered into a contract with Stanley and he was backing out of it in a totally immoral way.

"If I didn't act immediately I would loose everything I had worked for.

"And my son would be raised by a man with the morel instincts of a rabid weasel and a woman whose bust greatly exceeded her IQ.

"I reviewed what I knew about Stanly that might be of some help in formulating the plan I knew I had to carryout immediately. And just as promised on 'Contacting your spirit guide', it came to me. Stanley had developed a heart palpitation when he was in his final year in law school. It only acted up under stress, but after this afternoon I figured he had to be under mega stress. It took only a few hours to make it into town and pick up what I needed. I started with a near-new store in the Village where I got a shiny wet-look, black leatherette, knee-length coat and a broad brimmed black hat, the kind with a vale, the forty's look. I have to admit I got the idea from the last video I watched with my husband, "Mister and Misses Smith". Next I went to a surplus store and picked up a tazer then, just for good measure, I stopped at a candy shop and got some water balloons and those red wax kissy lips. The balloons I filled with water and struck in my bra when I left my clothing in the car. I walked up to Stanley's very trendy new apartment. And when he answered the door wearing only his pajama bottoms, I knew my spirit guide was with me on this. I had to zap him three times be for he had a heart attack, but it took long enough for the heart to go into over drive enough to kill him. There was no trace at the autopsy of the tazing. Our divorce was not final, so I inherited everything, much more than I had ever imagined. I can only say that I am heartily sorry that I had to kill my husband and that I will never to anything like that again. As penance I am on my way to China tonight to adopt two special-needs little girls. One needs an operation to correct her vision and the other one was born with a club foot, which will also be corrected with surgery.

"Father, are you still there?"

1minutetopic: io02
Contributor: Frances Burke
Completed: December 2005, Black Forest
Last revised: 26 March 2006

The Happy Place in My Mind

Sitting now in the conference room, I marvel at how much my life has improved. The tension and anxiety previously brought on by meetings is but a distant memory, now. I actually enjoy the weekly sessions. The analyst is nice, if a bit daft, and it gives me the rare opportunity to converse with someone fairly literate for a change. What do I have to thank for all my good fortune? Well it all started with my first attempt at meditation...

I suppose I was always a little high strung; it's just my nature. My job certainly didn't help things either. I was one of the chief bean counters for a large disk drive company, a real cut-throat business. The burden of keeping track of hundreds of millions of dollars *accurately* was stress inducing enough on its own. But perhaps the biggest single factor in my anxiety level, however, was the complete morons I had the great misfortune to work with. Meetings were the worst. They dragged on *forever*. Of course they held the weekly status meetings on Friday afternoon right after lunch, and because every pinhead in the room had to have his pedantic say on every banal little issue, they often lasted until well past 5:00. The Executive Vice President was one of those "natural borne leaders" in his own mind who loved to tell people what to do, and he insisted in doing so in the meeting, so attendance was mandatory. Alas, those poor petty little people had no lives; they actually seemed to *enjoy* those tortuous meetings.

I, however, did not. I had things to do, beans to count, *anything* but sit through another endless meeting, dying by the minute in that cramped room packed with prima donnas and hypocrites. As the meeting stretched on, my tension level would rise. I would sit quietly calculating how long it would take to get through the rest of the agenda, figuring when I could get into my car and out on the road. Would I be stuck in traffic *again*? If I left by 4:30 I could just miss rush hour and make it back home in forty-five minutes. If I left at 5:00 it might take me two hours. Needless to say I hated traffic, and could feel the years slipping off my life as 4:30 approached, and we were still in that accursed room.

A friend of mine noticed that my stress level was dangerously high and suggested meditation. Naturally I appreciated the concern, I knew I had to do something, but meditation? "How about I just get a dwarf tree and hug it once and a while?" I asked sarcastically. "Oh, I know! I'll get one of those stupid little miniature sand boxes with rocks in it and a tiny rake. I can put it right by my computer and give it a good raking whenever my blood pressure starts to pass 200!" I really have to hand it to her, though. She put up with all my quips and then calmly explained the validity of meditation and the fundamental steps of how to do it. She even got me a CD of "Meditational Self Hypnosis". Though I can't really say I was a true believer at that point, I figured I'd give it a try. I had to do something: I was like a soda can in the rear window of an old car heating up in the summertime sun, just waiting to explode.

A trial by fire, that's what it would be. It was the end of a particularly bad quarter and we were in for one hell of a status meeting. The conference room was packed with sweaty program managers, sales guys, VP's, Executive VP's and their secretaries, and, of

course, me, my little CD player and nearly invisible earphone. As usual, I went first and gave the rundown of the quarterly numbers. I was concise, unbiased, and to the point. Ten minutes, that's what it took me. Then began the barrage of stupid questions. I knew they were coming, but like a frog in the head lights of a fast moving truck, there was no way I could avoid them. No matter how simple I made it, regardless of what level of detail I presented, there would always be the stupid questions. Was I sure of the figures? Why yes, they had all been checked and the variation of the last few days' worth of output wouldn't make a significant difference in the bottom line: we missed our numbers and badly. Had I properly amaturized the residuals from the one-time write off of some poorly placed acquisitions? Yes, of course, that was all done by the books, and would only amount to a drop in the bucket anyway. This went on for another half an hour.

Finally the Executive VP, Peter, asked "Is there *anything* you can do to make the numbers... uh, look better?" Let me translate this for you: what he was asking was. "Why don't you fudge the numbers so our stock doesn't take as big a hit, and do it without my direct knowledge so when the SEC gets wind of it I can have you sacrificed and deliver a moving speech about ethics in business, which will give us good press, and puff up my portfolio even more?" I naturally resented the implications. Pete was the main reason for all our troubles in the first place. As all eyes turned to me I had the sneaking suspicion that I would not be making it home any time soon. "As long as $2 + 2 = 4$ the only thing that can be done at this point..." I explained, the veins in my head throbbing, "is to make better business decisions for next time." With that I sat down, thrust the earphone in, and hit play.

I can't say exactly what effect my defiant words had on the meeting because everything faded into a serene dream-like state. Apparently I was particularly susceptible to the subliminal messages on the CD. At first the world went white and everything was silent. A tingling sensation started at my scalp and slowly flowed down over my entire body. A feeling of calmness permeated my being. I had no sensation of time, and felt like I was floating, coasting on a sea breeze above the beach in golden yellow light of a beautiful sunset.

"What do you think?" I must have hit a phone pole. "What do you think?" interrupted the voice again. Someone had pulled out my ear plug. It was like a nightmare — no, worse — like being in hell. I was suddenly transported back into the meeting room, and it was 4:45. Everyone was staring at me again. "What do I think of *WHAT!*?" I demanded.

"Well, Ben's proposal... to 'pull in' some of next month's production to pad this quarter's numbers, and maybe transfer some of this quarter's debt to another quarter?" Pete asked smiling at the prospect of being able to rewrite history to suit his needs.

"Are you crazy or just stupid, Pete?" I asked, still half stuck in some altered state. "What you are asking me to do is not only blatantly illegal, but it is typically short-sighted and indicative of your lack of competence as a VP. Next quarter we'd be so far down the shitter the only light at the end of the tunnel we could possibly see would be the water treatment plant." He stared blankly at me, not sure he had heard me correctly. "You want to improve the numbers?" I asked. Everyone perked up a little after the initial shock of what I had just said. "Ok, here's what you do. You know there are maybe about twenty or thirty good engineers in this whole company who are responsible for making the products

we all depend on for our livelihood?” There were nods of recognition. “Well fire everyone else. Those engineers make less than every blood sucking leach in this room. And you, Pete, make more than all of them combined.” It only took a few seconds for the shock to creep back in to their pasty faces. “Oh, no, wait! Here’s an idea: there are, what, thirty of us in this room for five hours a week? That represents, let’s see, not including the kind of bonuses VP’s give them selves, about two million dollars per year of productivity lost in the weekly status meeting alone! How about you keep the god damn meeting short and sweet, and when some idiot like Ben here opens his mouth to say something stupid, tell him to shut the hell up.” Pete was slowly catching up.

“Um... maybe you better calm down,” he said irritably.

“Calm down!” I shouted. “Well, you’d be the expert on that, wouldn’t you Pete! Considering all the three hour lunches, afternoon massages, and mid-week golfing trips you take on the company dime. In fact,” I said standing, “How many of you in this room actually *do* anything?” I began walking around the room placing my hand on the shoulders of people seated at the U shaped table as I walked behind them. “Alex here spends at least one hour in the bathroom reading the paper every morning, and the rest of the time he’s forwarding crude sexual jokes on email.”

“Stop it! You’re being very irresponsible!” protested one of the lesser VPs.

“Responsible? *Responsible*? Tell me, does your secretary’s husband know she’s carrying your child? No? You didn’t tell him? Then don’t fucking tell me about responsibility!” I yelled with an accusatory index finger.

Mrs. Witherspoon, the old lady from HR, was giving me a particularly horrified look, as though witnessing the disembowelment of Lassie, rather than the exposing of lies. “Oh, wipe that hypocritical look off your face, you kept corporate bitch! You’re the one who always short changes the Mexican employees on their expense accounts because, how did you put it, ‘They are satisfied eating rice and beans, so they don’t need that much’?”

I guess that first attempt at meditation just kind of burst the dam, releasing all that pent up frustration. The cops finally caught up with me after I had started a fire in Records, just as I was peeing on Pete’s desk. Now I have lots of time to meditate. The food in prison isn’t bad, and I get an hour of exercise each day. I spend most of my time in solitary, but I’ve found the people here are much more straight forward than out in the corporate world.

“And, see? I even enjoy our little weekly meetings. Yep, meditation has been a life changing experience for me,” I had to admit.

The state-appointed psychiatric analyst frowned as he scribbled notes on his yellow pad. His face had stress cracks running across it like a dried lake bed. I don’t think he was nearly as at ease with his life as I was with mine. Perhaps he should try meditation himself.

1minutetopic: io02
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
Completed: December 2006, Black Forest
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Higly Concentrated

OK. Here we go.

Oops. I gotta slip the cushion a bit further under my butt.

There we go. OK. Just think about breathing. In. Out.

How hard can that be? I mean, just “in” and “out” seems a bit too simple to produce something as big as enlightenment. Not that I have any aspirations of becoming enlightened.

OK. Just in. Just out.

But don't most buddhists foreswear enlightenment until *everybody* is enlightened? Where did I read that? I am pretty sure it was a reliable source. Geo or something. At least that is the way I remember it. But that hardly seems like a realistic goal. I mean, how many people obtain enlightenment? In all of recorded history, how many human beings have gone on record as being enlightened? Buddha. That's one. And there are those thousand Bodhi sattvas, or whatever they are. But I think they started off as deamons. And there are a whole hell of a lot of fuckers out there who don't care a fig for enlightenment. So it would be kind of an up hill battle.

Good thing is is simple, so those buddhists don't have to do anything complicated waiting for all those lazy asses to get interested in Nirvana.

In. Out. In.

This doesn't seem to be working. Maybe I should just take a quick glance at the teacher. Just sneak one eye open. Ah. There she is meditating away. Now, there is someone who looks like they are meditating properly. I hope her eyes are really closed so she didn't see me peeking.

Actually, it would be interesting to see if anyone else is deep in meditation. I'll just peek again -- teacher's eyes are closed so the coast is clear. Breath evenly so as not to disturb my neighbors. Yes. They all seem to be deep in meditation, too. So, it's just me then that can't get the hang of it.

I must concentrate.

Five.

Four.

Three.

Two.

Actually, my ankle is really starting to kill me. I must not be sitting right for my ankle to be getting stiff so fast. OK. Let's check the posture. Back straight. Chin down, top of the head pushed up. Seems better if I stick my chest out. But then my stomach muscles tighten up. Is that right?

Maybe it is time to take another quick peak.

Well. It seems I am sitting properly. Although my ankle is about ready to mutany. Maybe if I just shift....

Shit! I wonder if anyone heard that. Jesus. I almost farted, too. That would be dead embarrassing. Sitting around trying to obtain enlightenment and the bozo next to you farts at the critical moment so you have to wait another life time. That would suck.

I am not concentrating. I should try concentrating.

Breath in. Breath out. Breath...

Man! Isn't that typical. Just as soon as I get my ankle sorted out, my nose starts to itch. Nngggg! God, I never knew a little itch could be so horrible. Maybe if I... No. Wiggeling doesn't help. I am just going to have to itch. Now, careful. Quietly...

Ahhh!

I wonder if any one was looking? I should have opened my eyes.

Oh, yes. Meditation.

In. Out. Out. Oops. IN. OUT. IN.

You know who really needs some meditation? That Sabine girl at work. Whew. She is one mean critter! She could certainly do with some calming down. I still can't get over it.

She goes, "Who's crap is all over the copier"

And I go, "I am making copies, at the moment."

And she goes, "Well, I have to get this to Mr. Kontodinas right away."

What gall! I should have said, "Learn some office edicate, you stupid cow." No, actually, that would be sinking to her level. I should have said "Well, if you had been doing your work for the past week, you wouldn't be in such a panic right now, would you?"

My back is really starting to ache. I can not possibly be doing this right if it is causing so much pain. How long are we going to do this, any way? Seems like it's already been more two hours!

"Who's crap?" I can't beleive it. Like she has the right. Maybe she never noticed that she is the only one who wants to hear her opions.

Work would be so much better if she just left. Joanne will never have the balls to fire her. Maybe there could be some way to get her to quit. "Who's crap?" Sheeze. I mean, a person who acts like that obviously doesn't care that other people don't like being around her.

So there would have to be some other way.

The most effective way would be to have her killed. Yeah. No. I am sure that would come back to bite me in the butt. No, don't want to take any risks like that.

Let's see. It should be something that makes her decided to quit her job voluntarily. Yeah, she decides all by herself to get out of my hair. Something in her environment that would make her so uncomfortable that she starts looking for a new job. Well, the stupid cow isn't going to respond to peer pressure, that's for sure. She hasn't done a lick of work for three

weeks, and it doesn't seem to bother her at all. No. It would be better if it were something physical. Physical discomfort. Put something in her coffee that would make her really stinky? Hee hee. That would be funny to see. Oh, I need to get these papers to Sabine right away. Would you bringing them to her for me? I can't stand the stench!!

Naw. Something that other people could sense would be too easy to trace.

Hmm.

I know! I could dose her coffee with caffeine!

That's brilliant! Highly concentrated caffeine bombs! It wouldn't be traceable because coffee already contains caffeine. I could slowly increase the dosage so that she wouldn't notice from day to day. All she would realize, if she is, in fact, capable of any sort of self reflection at all, is that she always feels a bit tense and nervous at work. Then she would go on vacation, drink normal coffee and feel great. And her first day back to work, whamo! Back to being an irritable mega-bitch.

I could actually chemically train her to hate her job.

Hee hee.

That would be great.

She would leave. And I would be in peace.

And then, maybe I could concentrate a little better during meditation.

Concentrate. Inoutinout.

Damn. This isn't so easy. I am really going to try now.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

Shit. Time's up. And I only just got started.

1minutetopic: io02
Contributor: Shannon Frances
Completed: December 2005, Gauting
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Conversation with a Prostitute

Miles Miller

Creative writing assignment #11

It was raining. As I walked along Limit Street looking for a hooker to interview for this damn assignment...

no, make that

Rain pelted down making iridescent designs in the oil-slicked puddles of the deserted street. I hunched my shoulders against the filthy weather as I prowled the gang-infested jungle of Limit Street.

Yeah, that's more like it.

I was looking for a hooker...

Um... nah.

I needed to find me a woman. Not just any woman. Her name was Summer Night.

better yet

She went by the name of Summer Night. Probably even she couldn't remember her real name any more. Summer wasn't the kind of woman who saw a lot of day light, but what she didn't know about...

About crime? No, gangs? No.

...the dark side of life could be written on a...

a postage stamp?, a gum wrapper?

...the paper she rolled her joint in.

As I passed a doorway cast in rat-infested shadows, I heard a voice call out.

"Hey, Mac, you look like you could use a little warming up." A girl stepped out into the dim light of the street lamp. Her cherry red hair hung in sodden braids framing a narrow face. Her shadowed eyes looked tired. "Come on, baby, let me light your fire," she sang as she opened the grimy man's trench coat to reveal the body of a young girl: tight, flat belly and skinny thighs in a...

mini skirt, hot pants, thong,

...black lace teddy. She looked like she must be maybe sixteen. Even in the poor light I could see she was sprouting a bumper crop of goose flesh.

I wanted to say I was looking for hooker called Summer Night, but something about a kid standing there in a piss-scented doorway at one in the morning made me hesitate.

I've seen it all. I've walked on the wild side, but even I have compassion.

Na-- too sappy

I wandered if I could pump her for the information I needed, and I really wanted to get out of the damn rain. "What's your name kid?"

"Anything you want it to be, baby. What do you like? Anything special will cost you extra but I'll make it worth while." Shivering, she shut the coat and hopped from one foot to the other.

"I want some information. We can talk in that diner at the end of the block. I'll buy you a cup of hot coffee."

She looked at the inviting flash of red and blue neon and chewed her lip. "Okay, but it'll cost you just the same."

"How much?"

She eyed my...

expensive suit, black SWAT team jacket

...black leather jacket. "A hundred bucks," she ventured.

"I'll give you twenty."

"Right," she said, grabbing my arm to hurry me along to the beckoning warmth.

The place looked like it had never seen better days. The cracked linoleum, too dingy to be called any particular color, and split red vinyl seats were new when Kennedy was shot. The ghost of stale grease and burned coffee thickened the damp air. A sleepy-eyed counter man had a cigarette dangling from his gray lips. The "no smoking" sign behind him was held in place by a pile of ancient glass ashtrays. He nodded to the girl.

"Cup of coffee and a burger," she said eagerly, then added to me, "That all right?"

"Make it two," I said as we slid into a booth by the window.

In the harsh light of the fluorescent tubes, I could see she might be even younger than I figured. Not a pretty girl, her face was too narrow with a sharp nose and eyes too close together. She had the intense look of a kid who might have been the president of the debating team in a normal life. "How old are you anyway?" I asked.

Her laugh had a bitter edge. "About a million. Look, man, I'm expecting a regular. If he shows, I got to split. I can't afford to piss him off, you know?"

"Sure. You get many regulars?" The counter man came over and plunked down two thick white mugs that had been through the dish washer enough times to have battle scars. The kid grabbed hers and emptied about half a cup of sugar into it.

"No. That's why I got to keep him happy." She eyed me with her intense...

Damn what color were her eyes? Dark but not brown? Hazel maybe? Yeah I think they were hazel.

...hazel eyes as she sipped the scalding crap that passed for coffee at that hour of the night. "So, what's this information you're willing to pay for?"

"How did you get into this, um, business?"

“Shit, you want my life’s story? Is that it?” She thumped down the coffee when the burgers arrived and attacked it as though it might be snatched away any minute.

“If that’s what it takes.” I leaned back and rested my arm along the back of the seat to indicate that I had all night.

“Okay, here’s the abridged version,” she said around a mouth full of burger. “My mom worked as a bar tender in a little town you never heard of. When I was little, things were good. Then she started taking her work home with her, you know, she’d pick up a guy in the bar and they’d come home and drink and she’d get laid. He’d stick around for a while, then he’d take off. When there was no guy around, she’d drink for the both of them, you know. Well, when I was about twelve, this guy Earl showed up.” She held up her cup and waved it at the counter guy for a refill.

“Refills are free after midnight,” she whispered. “So don’t let him stick you it to you on the check.” The sugar was dumped in, and she gave it a brisk stirring. “Where was I?”

“Earl,” I prompted.

“Oh, yeah, Oily Earl. At first I really liked it when he talked to me. Then he started flirting with me, you know, just a little and told me how pretty I was and all that crap. You can pretty well guess what happened. About a year later mom sobered up before Earl thought she would and caught us humping on the couch in the living room. She threw us both out. I stayed with Earl for a while but he was afraid he’d get busted because I was a kid. So he split.” She shrugged and stuffed a few fries in her mouth.

“You ever consider going back to school?”

“What are you? Some kind of social services snitch?”

“No, I’m a writer.”

“A writer! No shit, that’s cool, man.” She glanced out the window. “Oh shit, there he is. I got to go.” She held out her hand. “Time to pay up, Mac. I told you what you wanted.”

I stood to get my wallet out of my jeans pocket.

“He is one sick bastard, you know. He pays good, though. It’s the same thing every time. We go to a motel room and I have to beg him to bang me while he says no he can’t, it wouldn’t be right. Then he has to spank me for being so bad. That really winds him up.” She grinned and folded the money into the pocket of her trench coat and wrapped the remainder of the fries in a couple of paper napkins. “After, he cries and says he’s real sorry and we can’t see each other again.” She buttoned up the coat and turned to leave. “He used to be sick, you know, he’d go into the can and throw up. I went through his wallet once. He’s got this real wooper of a wife and daughter about my age.” She turned and looked at me, tilting her head to one side. “Maybe I’m, like, saving her, you think?”

“Yeah, I think maybe you are.” The greasy burger seemed to have gained weight in my gut.

She smiled, kind of a pretty smile, and walked out into the cold rainy night.

1minutetopic: io03
Contributor: Frances Burke
Completed: February 2006, Black Forest
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Conversations with a Prostitute

A soft rain started falling in the growing purple of night, cooling the hot tar of the pock-marked streets. It had been a sweltering day rummaging around the noisy, crowded streets of hawkers and tourists, and the slight drizzle was a welcome relief, covering everything in a soft sheen of light.

I decided to quench my thirst with a cool beer in a sweat-drenched glass, dripping condensation on to a bamboo-slat table. I often have to search for miles to find a place that matches the image in my head, but this particular night it took only a few blocks. The menu was painted on the walls with coarse brush strokes. A decent local beer went for 35 cents: I was home for the night.

Half way through the second one, I was just starting to get that tingling feeling percolating through my brain when a well tanned young woman in low cut jeans and a tank top smiled as she walked over and sat at the table next to me.

“Hi,” I said, completely forgetting myself.

“Hi,” she said in that exaggerated tone with which a spider welcomes a fly. Her English was good -- too good. She turned and straddled the back of the chair, allowing her shirt ride up just enough to flash the sight of a metal ring in her naval. She was every inch the professional.

“I’m Jack,” I lied.

“I’m Bambi,” she lied back extending her hand of slim, feminine fingers. We shook. She had a tight grip that said that she was no stranger to men.

“So, Bambi... Care to join me?” I asked as though another option actually existed.

Joining me at the table she leaned forwards far enough to show the ruffed edges of her light purple bra.

She ordered a beer, and we swiftly passed the basic introductory prerequisites. It was clear that she had been down this same road many times before. She navigated the whole encounter so effortlessly that I couldn’t even fool my self into thinking that she actually had any genuine interest in me. But what did I care? In some ways it was the ideal setting really. Neither one of us cared enough about the other to tell the truth, so why bother lying? She asked me what I did for work, and I admitted that I mostly avoided it.

“What do *you* do, Bambi?”

“Oh, I do *lots* of things!” she admitted, shaking side to side exuberantly.

“Like what, for example?” I continued pretending not to understand.

“Well,” she rolled her exaggeratedly large eyes up “I go to clubs and dance... and then go back to your hotel!” More obvious it would be hard to be.

“Good! I’m all in favour of that!” I stated fully satisfied with her conviction to hard work.

“What do you mean?” she asked, tilting her head slightly.

“Well... you keep the other women honest.”

“Sorry?” she said, finally finding her self in unfamiliar territory.

“Well, women need a good... yard stick, some one like you, to keep them from going to pot.” Her head tilted a little more, and a few strands of hair swung in to partially cover her pretty face. I decided I had to make it crystal clear. “It’s like glamour magazines. Women need to keep comparing them selves to beauties like you as motivation to keep them selves competitive...”

She blinked her dark brown eyes at me.

“So they don’t get all fat and old-looking,” I added. She seemed to be getting it, albeit against her will. She took another swig of beer, and adjusted the straps of her thong.

“Like you,” I continued. “I mean you’re really hot.” At this she perked up substantially. “But if you don’t really work at it you’ll be so burnt out by the time your thirty that guys won’t want you anymore.” Her tide seemed to ebb a bit. “You know that old line about how women are like wine, and they get better with age? Well the story is really a lot more accurate with milk rather than wine. Let’s face it, time hits a woman like a baseball bat.” I think I actually saw her nostrils flair a bit at this one.

“And you think time is good to a man? You think women like old, bald men?” she asked in a scolding voice.

“Oh, no,” I said rocking back in my chair. “I think women like wealthy, successful men, and so it behoves men to invest in their own prosperity, you know, like going to school and working hard. That’s good for a man, right?”

“Yeah, but women don’t just go after men for the money!” she said, sinking back in her chair as well.

“Oh, so you go for the really poor guys, do you?” I asked, thoroughly entertained by her.

“No, but that’s not all there is!”

“Hey, I’m just being honest. I’m glad we have you. I mean you are what every man wants... You are what they are always wishing was in the bed beside them.” Her elbows were back up on the table exposing a beautiful valley of cleavage. I reached over and held her hand, opening it palm up and caressing it. “It is good to be able to see a woman’s body, to be able to check all her defects out before you decide on her.” Her hand snapped shut. “Don’t tell me you wouldn’t want to check out what’s under the hood before buying a car?” She pulled her arms back and folded them under her perfectly rounded breasts.

“You’re cruel,” she said with a pout.

“Would it be better to be dishonest, like you?” I asked taking another swig.

“Me? I don’t lie!” she said taping a painted fingernail on the table.

“Oh, no, you like broke guys and would never use false pretences to get... clients.” I said squeezing my breasts together, and pulling down on my tee shirt to show off my furry cleavage.

“No, I don’t! I never promise anything I don’t deliver.”

“Yeah, but can you claim you never use unfair persuasion?”

“I use whatever persuasion I like. But that isn’t anything like lying! You are such a pig! What are you gonna tell your girlfriend when you get home? Some lame story, and you call *me* a liar! Bastard!”

I was impressed with her tenacity, she must have been able to smell the fresh bills in my pocket. “Wife,” I said holding up a ringed finger, “and I’ll tell her what ever it takes to make her fell sexy.” I think she found this touching.

“Your wife is very sexy?” she asked actually sounding interested.

“No, far from it. But I have this theory that if I can make her fell sexy, somehow she might actually become more sexy.” She picked up her beer to wash the thought down. It lingered in her hand, rivulets of condensation running down her slim wrist as she swallowed gulps of frothy beer as only a girl of her kind knows how. Her eyes gradually cleared up and, sitting upright with an air of satisfaction, she said, “You are a pig.”

I held up my glass, clinked it against hers and said, “You got that right, sister!” We both smiled as though we had actually shared something meaningful. “I feel like I can just so talk to you.” I said in my best Britney Spears imitation. She smiled as she shook her head in agreement, hair playfully caressing the smooth skin of her collar bones. “It is a good thing you’re here,” I said ushering her over to sit in the chair beside me. “Men, if left to them selves, will always make the wrong choice. They choose what they want in the short run, not what they need in the long run.” She eased into my side, my arm enveloped her shoulders as though they were made for me. She looked up and smiled. She smelled good, like a fresh pizza, and I wasn’t sure if it scared me or just peaked my interest. “The difference between men and women is,” I said leaning towards her as if divulging a hidden secret “Men like to get what they want in the short run, and women like to get what they want in the long run. That’s why women are smarter than men.” I said in a whisper. She turned her lips upon my ears and whispered back “I know of a few more interesting differences between men and women.” It had the desired effect on my anatomy almost instantly.

The conversation flowed with the beer. Eventually I divulged that I wasn’t really married, it was just a high school ring, and that my mom had run off from my dad for having an affair while overseas. Bambi admitted that her mom had a brief fling with a foreign guy, and that’s where she came from. We were both, in a way, orphaned by mankind’s wayfaring tendencies. It seemed to have a uniting effect on us as we traded beer-flavoured kisses.

By the following morning the beer had worn off and we simply tasted like one another. Still rolling around in bed I was suddenly gripped with an icy feeling.

“What was your dad’s name?” I asked nonchalantly as I kissed her naval.

I didn’t have the heart to tell her. I snuck off later that day, broken-hearted. Though I suppose I should be grateful... If my father's name hadn’t also been Efriam, I would have surely made the mistake that men often do and kept her for life. Because, after all, she was hot!

1minutetopic: io03
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
Completed: February 2006, Black Forest
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Bitter Aftertaste

Even though Kyle had four hours before his train, he had enough of Zagreb and decided to avoid the downpour by waiting in the train station.

Upon a recommendation he had taken a day trip to Croatia to see the sights and fill out his visit of Eastern Europe. However, he had seen the few, uninteresting sites that Zagreb had to offer in less than two hours. Now he was eager to get out of this run-down, meritless city and back to Ljubljana, a much nicer town in his opinion, where he was currently staying for a few days before heading further north.

Soaked to the bone, cold, hungry and travel weary, he just wanted to sit some place warm where he didn't have to look at the grubby city. Arriving at the train station, he reconsidered his plan briefly. This was the most run down and desperate part of the most run down and desperate European city he had yet seen. But he was too tired to try to think up another plan, so he made his way around the drunks and druggies to the main platforms.

After he looked up the number of the platform from which his train was leaving, he sat for a few minutes on one of the benches standing at the side of the station. Even here, the wind was blowing hard enough to cut through his wet clothes and freeze him to the bone. To warm himself, he got up and walked back and forth a bit.

He noticed a sort of coffee shop in the station. A hot drink would be just the thing right now, Kyle thought to himself. It was marginally warmer in the cafe. Two seedy looking men were sitting on the only stools in the place, arguing in some guttural snarls that seemed pretty threatening. Kyle ordered a coffee, making the international sign for hot drink (two hands cupped around an invisible cup lifted to the lips). The dark and unshaven man behind the counter handed him a tiny plastic cup filled with an evil looking black liquid and typed the price onto a hand-held calculator which he showed to Kyle. He barely had enough Croatian money to pay for it. He would have liked to get something to eat, but he wasn't about to change any more money and, in addition, he didn't see any thing that looked edible in the cafe.

Glancing around the tiny cafe, he noticed a narrow, rickety metal stair case twisting up to the floor above. Jabbing a finger towards the ceiling, Kyle stared intensely at the counter man and mouthed the word "OK?" The man nodded with gloomy assent.

The stairs were almost too narrow for Kyle and his backpack to squeeze up them. He had to hold his tiny, amazingly hot drop of coffee very carefully not to spill it.

The upstairs room, smallish with about five tiny round tables and a bunch of mismatched chairs, was dingy but nicer than what he had seem downstairs. In fact, it seemed warm, quiet and clean enough not to be uncomfortable. Kyle set down the coffee and proceeded to remove his backpack, rain slicker, jacket, scarf and sweater and drape them on the chairs around his table. Then he unpacked a pair of dripping gloves and a map of Zagreb (poor investment that was) from a jacket pocket, unfolded them and draped them over another chair. Sitting so he could see the head of the stairs (he didn't

like the idea of being surprised by any of the seedy characters he had seen downstairs), he took a sip of the scalding coffee.

Bleeeeetch!

That was definitely the worst cup of coffee he had ever had in his whole life. It had a strange metallic taste, as though it had been filtered through toxic waste. He considered the chances that it was really poisonous and decided that he needed the warmth so much that he would take the risk.

While he was waiting for the noxious liquid to cool, he looked at pictures on the walls. They looked like someone had scrapped melted wax over a canvass to produce weird, fantastical shapes and colors. It was difficult to figure out what they were (satellites spiralling around a planet? rotting fruit? drug-induced hallucinations?), but they all seemed rather violent and menacing.

Suddenly, Kyle realized that someone else was in the room. A woman with thick, uncombed hair was sitting in a dark recess. He was startled to realize he was not alone. She was reading a folded newspaper -- the rustling is what had caught his attention -- that was marked in pen in several places with circles and Xs. Perhaps she was looking for an apartment?

As he was looking at her, she raised her head and looked back.

"Hey, you want girlfriend for one hour?" She had a thick accent and the question seemed more like a demand.

"No, uh, thank you." Oddly enough, Kyle could not look away. There was really very little he could do to avoid her gaze.

"You American?" she asked. She had the delicate, cat-like features of most of the women he had seen in Croatia and Slovenia as well as the low-budget prissy style of dress.

"Yes. How can you tell?"

"Your shoes. You been over here 'bout three weeks, huh?"

Now, really, how could she guess a thing like that? He stared at her in silence.

"What, you too good to talk to me? You don't pay for just talking."

"I have been in Europe three weeks and three days to be exact."

"What your work?"

"I'm a student."

"Nice. What you learn?"

"Mechanical engineering."

"You like?"

"It's OK." Then, so as not to seem impolite, he added, "Do you like your work?"

"It's OK. Good way to meet people," she shrugged. "Most people think whores like sex too much, so they work for sex. Not true. Most my girls is lesbian."

She lisped the last word oddly. Kyle considered this a moment. He had assumed that prostitutes were into sex and liked making money with their hobby.

“Then why...?”

“Most my girls come to me because drugs. Can’t get fired from fucking because you fucked up,” she answered his unspoken question with a pragmatic smile.

Kyle was not so sure he was interested in any further small talk with this woman.

“You sure you’re not little lonely, want little company.”

He regarded the woman. Even if he didn’t have to pay for it, she was not his type. Too petite and flat-chested.

“I am sure,” he replied, trying not to sound condescending.

“I got girls with big tits. I get you what you like. What you like?”

“Right now, nothing. I just want to drink my coffee.”

Her portable phone rang and she began to hiss unintelligibly into the phone. Kyle was glad for the interruption.

However, the conversation did not last long and as she set the phone down she asked, “What? You christian?”

“I don’t see what that has to do with anything.”

“Lotta christian man pay for sex.”

Kyle snorted at this.

“What. You never pay for sex? You will. When you old and fat and married.”

Feeling oddly provoked, Kyle retorted “I don’t have to pay for sex.”

“No, no. Not big American stud. You pay for movie and dinner. But that different, not paying for sex, no?”

Before he could reply that it was none of her business, she said “I bet you like big tit, blond American movie star, no?” Leaning forward lasciviously, she added, “But... I bet the hottest time you have is looking other boys jerk off.”

Kyle sputtered and blushed down to his buttocks. Just then another call came in. Bewildered, he watched her hiss and hicough her mother language into the tiny phone.

He was speechless with shame. Not wanting to consider the truth of what she said, he downed the rest of the foul coffee, stood and started to collect his things. He would rather brave the nasty weather than suffer this assault.

Setting down the phone, the woman watched him impassively. Just as he was slinging his pack on his back, she leaned back and said “Yes. Run away to your nice hotel room, big stud. Pay big American dollars to look American movie star tits and jerk off all alone. Real woman too much work for rich American.”

He glared at her indignantly before squeezing himself into the stairs.

She called after him, “Good. Now I work in peace. “

Once out side the cafe, he spat on the pavement, trying to rid himself of the awful taste in his mouth.

1minutetopic: io03
Contributor: Shannon Frances
Completed: December 2005, Gauting
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Tiger Island

Magda Zafarez sat on her balcony in the shade of swaying palms. Even at her age she wouldn't have her complexion damaged by the sun. Her white hair, wrapped in a turban, soaked up an ultra expensive hot oil treatment. The head scarf matched the deep purple of her embroidered caftan. Warm sea breeze caressed her face. A cold tea bag rested on each eye. Her hairdresser swore that tea soaks would work wonders on her crow's feet.

Some one had once told her that to be happy in old age one had to develop a very selective memory. Magda forgot who as she perfected the technique. She did, after all, have an unusually rich trove of experiences well worth drawing upon.

She fumbled for the glass of Champaign resting on the table next to her, took a sip and settled down to recall the summer she spent with Armando, one of the many charming lovers of her youth.

As the star of the Wounderhoff International Circus, she had been billed as "the ballerina of the high wire" and had her pick of the marvelously muscled acrobats, knife throwers with a phenomenal sense of timing, and trapeze artists of brilliant flexibility and stamina, to say nothing of some stunningly robust roustabouts possessed of a certain earthy enthusiasm. A smile curved her crinkled old lips, thinking of the young Count Petrakis. *Ah those were the days.*

Magda's one and only excursion into matrimony ended tragically. Her husband had died suddenly only two weeks after the wedding. Her father-in-law could find no way to annul the marriage and so she, Magda Yvonne Zafarez, daughter of an animal trainer and a ring master, had inherited poor Boris's entire fortune. Her miserable old father-in-law tried to close down the circus which he blamed for his son's unfortunate choice of wife.

Her blissful reverie collapsed as Tomaso came panting up the steps. His stubby legs had not been made for running up steps. Tomaso and his wife Lillianna had been clowns with the circus. Several of her old friends joined her rather large and colorful household when the circus folded.

Without opening eyes she asked the dwarf who had become her butler, "Darling, what has your knickers in such a twist now. Running up those stairs will give you a coronary."

The little man leaned against the stucco balustrade gasping for breath clutching a stitch in his heaving chest. "Peaches got out! You must have left the door open *again!* Damn it, Magda, you must be getting senile. Between you and that cat, you'll be the death of me."

The old woman lifted one tea bag to peek at her friend. "Don't be such a drama queen Tomaso, that's my line of work. Just leave some food out for him." She waved her heavily ringed fingers dismissively. "This is an island, remember. What kind of trouble can he get into here, the lazy old darling. He'll be back for dinner." Still she couldn't help a little flutter of anxiety. Few enough of her old friends were left now, and Peaches had been a gift from Demetrius.

Magda went back to day dreaming, this time Demetrius took center stage. So handsome in his black satin costume, cracking his whip. "Ah!"

Meanwhile just across the channel that separated Magda's island home and his, her nearest neighbor Morton Pishower, a retired toy manufacturer, had his binoculars to his eyes staring in fury at his prized strip of white sandy beach. "Those damn people are at it again," he fumed. Punching the intercom, he bellowed, "Stedman get down to the beach and scrape that scum off my property. Tell them this is a *private* island. I didn't pay eighteen million dollars to run a goddamn public amusement park!" He sat back to watch his flunky hurry down the winding path through the tropical forest to the beach. *This is the third time this month. If I wanted company I higher some agreeable young thing to come and amuse me.* He winced slightly at that idea. That's how he had accumulated five blood sucking former wives, and he forgot just how many of obnoxious, screaming brats, all wanting a share of what he had amassed by years of hard work and a certain ruthless cunning. Well, maybe just ruthless cunning.

The thought his freeloading ex-wives had him grinding his teeth. Stedman had come up with the idea of a private island. It would take even the pushiest lawyer a while to track him down out here. *Let all those slimy corporate lawyers I pay keep the damn vampires off my neck.* Morton picked up his single malt whisky and slurped, soothing his nerves. If the women were bad, their children were worse. They made his blood pressure skyrocket. The little leaches were always after something.

He chuckled, thinking how ironic that his wealth should have been generated by just such damp, disgusting, little creatures. Motrin Pishower, Inc., manufactured every cheep piece of crap toy fast-food chains gave away in their kid's munchy box meals. He had cornered the market when he discovered that by applying just the tiniest dot of super glue to the small parts that should have been declared as choke hazards, they could no longer be considered removable and, therefore, need not be mentioned on the packaging. True, they broke off at the first bump. But that had nothing to do with him. He could manufacture the little plastic child-enticing rubbish for less then next-to-nothing in third-world sweat shops using, he had to laugh at yet more irony, child labor.

He picked up the binoculars and watched his man run off the family. *I'll have to speak to Stedman this evening. Maybe we can electrify the beach in some way. This constant intrusion is just not to be tolerated. The little brat had probably been peeing in my shrubbery. Disgusting! What kind of private retreat had people stomping all over it and what if any of my ex-wives got wind of it and started storming the beach with their revolting offspring. No, Stedman will have to think of something and soon.*

That night while serving Morton's dinner, Stedman suggested one possible way to discourage the public. "Sir, if I might suggest, perhaps you could post the beach as contaminated by some noxious form of sea creature — stinging jelly fish or sharks. Maybe a well placed shark skull for verisimilitude?"

Morton thought about that. "You might be onto something. But I think some of that rabble are locals, they wouldn't fall for sharks. But let me work on it. I like the concept."

After dinner Morton watched "King Kong" on his big-screen plasma entertainment wall. He loved its larger-than-life aspect, considering himself a larger-than-life kind of guy.

Something about the movie resonated with Stedman's suggestion. Perhaps the tropical island setting started him thinking about posting the island as a wild game preserve.

A nice tasteful sigh stating that wild tigers roamed freely and that trespassers might be eaten would do the trick. The more he thought about it the better he liked the idea. In the morning he'd send Stedman to the mainland for the sign. Maybe he could get a tape of authentic tiger sounds to be played when ever a motion detector spotted intruders.

Going to bed that night, he had the satisfaction of knowing his property would soon be free of any unwanted guests, ex-wives, lawyers, whining children, picnickers or kids looking for a tropical paradise make-out location. He smiled as he drifted off to sleep.

Two weeks later his intruder deterrent was fully operative. True, seagulls triggered the tiger sounds, but he'd sent Stedman to the mainland for a shot gun. That would solve the problem and at the same time provide him with a little sport. Morton stood on his balcony watching a boat load of would-be trespassers make a hasty retreat as his PA system growled after them. He grunted as he considered Stedman. The man had not been as enthusiastic as he expected his flunkies to be with his shotgun plan. *How long has he been with me? Must be nearing his six month revue*, Morton sighed. *Time to fire his ass before he starts making the salary I promised. These people are just so gullible, I love it.*

The telephone rang. It took a moment to realize Stedman had not yet returned from the mainland. It would probably be someone he didn't want to talk to. He let it ring. Stedman could take the call when ever he got back if they called again.

He went in to his over-sized living room leaving the doors open wide to the warm evening breeze, poured himself another drink and settled down to watch "Godzilla". *Damn that man. He should have been back by now, I'm hungry. I could go fix myself a sandwich or something. It might teach him a thing or two if he has to clean up a mess in the kitchen.* Instead he downed his drink and poured another.

Morton dozed a bit as he watched his movie then decided to go grill a steak. The enticing aroma of sizzling T-bone filled the kitchen when he heard the recorded roaring. *Damn better than a door bell. That must be Stedman now. I can use this as an excuse to fire him. Here it is*, Morton checked his watch. *Past nine and I haven't had a bite since lunch.*

Down on the beach, Peaches shook himself off. The swim had been a long one but he didn't mind. He had been listening to that enticing female calling to him for days. The roaring had made him highly agitated. He sniffed the warm night air, but could detect no sent of a female tiger. The light at the top of the hill beckoned to him. Up the trail he bounded in long, loping, sinuous strides, his excitement building with each leap.

The nine hundred pound Bengal tiger walked through the door into Morton's living room, pausing as he sniffed for her sent, his ears twitched at the angry voice coming from a corridor to his left.

"Where the hell have you been? What am I paying you for if I have to make my own dinner? Mighty damn incompetent!" Morton emerged from the kitchen and screamed. Trying to back away he collapsed into the end of the hallway. The smell of grilling steak reminded Peaches that the sexy tigress had put him off his food ever since she had started inviting him over. He padded over to see if he could mooch a bite to eat. The

terrified man slammed the half full bottle of whisky into the tiger's face. Peaches had been promised hot sex, he wanted food and he was in no mood to be trifled with. He swatted back.

1minutetopic: mom01
Contributor: Frances Burke
Completed: December 2005, Black Forest
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Bad Neighbors

Each of us holds the illusion that we are the authors of our own destiny. However, looking back on the last year I can clearly see just how much of my life has been ruled by external circumstances.

It all began when our aged next door neighbor, Henry, died suddenly one autumn afternoon. He had lived there as long as any one could remember and was a cornerstone of the neighborhood. Though I'm not a religious man, I attended a ceremony in the cemetery and saw him covered with earth as the leaves were turning orange and the days grew colder. It seemed to signal the end of an era, or at least a chapter in life's book.

Soon Henry's grandchildren cleared out the house and placed it on the market. At dinner I discussed the possibility of new neighbors with my wife Faith and our young son Mark.

"Do you think they'll have kids my age?" Mark asked, shoveling a load of rice in his mouth.

"I don't know... maybe," I answered, wondering my self.

"It's a great place for a family. I'll bet a young family moves in," Faith responded. She was always the optimist that I could never be. Perhaps that was the strength of our relationship.

"I just hope it is not a bunch of rowdy teenagers blaring their music, revving their Harleys and peeing in the bushes," I added.

Faith shot me a look. "Honey, teenagers don't buy houses, and only bald CPAs ride Harleys these days." She was right, of course. I really had no call to be so pessimistic at this point.

A few months later, when we found out that a priest would be moving in, she couldn't have been happier. "See! A priest next door, what could be more peaceful?" she asked.

"Oh, how 'bout a deaf seamstress?" I retorted, not sharing her enthusiasm.

"Erni, really! You're just being contraire." She couldn't understand my feeling of foreboding. The fact that the man who was about to become our next door neighbor was a priest held no consolation for me. She had never been an alter boy, warding off unwanted advances of the priests.

"Even churches have to have lightening rods," I reminded her.

My trepidation was partially belied when Brian finally moved in. He was a slight man with graying sandy hair and a woman's hands. He seemed to keep to himself and always had a smile, albeit a rather cheesy one. It wasn't until later that spring that things started to fall apart. It began when I was taking our small, shaggy mutt, Cesar, for a walk around the block. Children were out playing in the front yards, and Brian was watering his immaculate lawn. I said hello as I walked by.

“Oh, hello, Ernesto. Say, could I have a word with you?” he said turning off the garden hose. That has always been one of those phrases that piss me off, like when someone asks, “Can I ask you a question?” rather than just coming out and asking it.

“What’s up?” I asked back.

“I noticed that you walk your dog past here every day...” *Very observant.* I thought, “and sometimes I see him out on his own.”

“Yes, the little rascal likes to escape, but we’ve never had any problems with him before,” I said as Cesar walked over and sniffed Brian’s bushes.

“Well, here. Look at this,” he said taking me over to one side of his lawn. “He does get out and he defecates on my lawn...” he added pointing to an enormous pile of dog poop, “and I’d appreciate it if you’d keep him inside or on a leash.”

“Brian, surely you’re not suggesting that *that*,” I said pointing to the world-record doggie dookie, “came out of this little dog?” It was physically impossible. Cesar chose this inopportune moment to pee on one of Brian’s evergreens. Brian clasped his hands on his chest and bowed his head slightly, closing his eyes and nodding as though witnessing a damning sin.

“Ernesto,” he finally said after a practiced melodramatic pause, “we just saw him urinate on my bushes. How much more proof do I need?” I made a mental note to kick the dog as soon as we were out of sight. What could I do? Dogs will be dogs.

“We’ll make sure he doesn’t poop on your lawn,” I said grudgingly.

“Well, I certainly hope so. I’d hate to have to take this up with a higher power,” he responded. *What? You’re gonna have god come down and kill my dog?* I thought.

“Vámanos, Cesar. Let’s go,” I called. Brian stood there watching us as we walked down the block. It was only later that I realized that he was probably threatening to call the dogcatcher and not bring down the “wrath of the heavens” upon my poor little mutt.

“That bastard!” I complained to Faith. “He thinks he can move in here and run the whole neighborhood?”

“Erni, don’t over react. I’m sure he’s not going to call the dogcatcher. We’ll just have to do a better job at keeping him in.”

“Yeah, and get him a tag with out phone number so they can call us to bail him out of doggy jail.”

With that I hopped it was all over. I had almost forgotten the incident when several weeks later I had to pull a Saturday shift at the factory to cover for a buddy who was out. I like my job, but not as much as I like my weekends at home. Around noon that same day Faith was called away to give a ride to a friend who had been in a fender-bender. Mark was playing out in the front, and didn’t want to stop everything and rush off with his mom. Brian was also out front tending his yard and overheard the exchange between Faith and Mark and volunteered to keep an eye on him. She was sure to be back soon, so she left Mark there under the watchful eye of the priest.

When she returned an hour and a half later, they were nowhere to be found. She knocked on his door, and finally went around back where Mark was playing in the water from the garden hose Brian was holding. Faith was a little surprised when she noticed that Mark was wearing only his underwear. Brian, seeing her concerned expression said, "Oh, he was going to get all wet, so I told him he'd better take off his cloths and keep them clean... Here, let me get him a towel." Mark seemed fine, and Faith soon had him dried off and took him back home.

That evening when I got home I noticed the strange towel. "You have to tell your boyfriend to do his own laundry," I teased.

"Oh, that's Brian's," she answered nonchalantly. I nearly choked on my beer. "Oh, I had to run off for a bit, and Brian volunteered to look after Mark." I held up the towel and gave her a dark look. How could she leave our only son with a stranger — worse — a priest? Sensing my growing ire she contended "He was just playing in the water... Brian gave him the towel to dry off," her voice had taken on a pleading tone.

"You left him with Brian?" I said incredulous.

"I had to give my friend Jan a ride, she was in an accident..."

"How long were they along together?" I asked.

"They weren't really alone, just playing in the yard."

"How long?" I demanded.

"Oh, just a little while," she lied. I knew full well that any trip across town and back would take at least an hour.

"I think the priest needs his towel back," I said glaring. The door didn't have a chance to hit me on the ass on the way out.

I pounded hard on Brian's door, towel in hand. He had a troubled look on his face when he saw my expression. I entered saying, "I believe this is yours," and thrusting the towel to him, "And I'd appreciate it if you'd stay away from my son."

"Your wife asked me to watch him while she was out. Should I have refused her?" Brian managed in his defense as the color started to drain from his face. I was not going to be put off by his logic.

"Stay away from my son. Do you understand me or not?" I said slowly and deliberately.

"I... If that is what you wish," he bowed his head and motioned me to the door. I stared at him and held my breath. Releasing it, I turned towards the door. On the way out something red on his floor caught my eye. I looked. *Superman underwear?* "What are you doing..." I said picking them up, "with my son's underwear in your house?" his arm was still trying to shepherd me to the door. I pushed his arm away.

"I... They're..." his voice was faltering.

I hit him in the face. It wasn't a good shot, but enough to knock him into the open doorway. I made up for it on my next several shots and left him bleeding and coughing his front porch. When I got back to the house Faith was livid with me. Almost as angry as I was at her for allowing this to happen in the first place. The police, having been called

by a neighbor who witnessed the incident, showed up fifteen minutes later. I was being held for assault. To my surprise I was released early the next morning. Apparently the pope or some other “holier than me” power in the church had decided to drop all charges against me and immediately transfer Brian to another parish, far, far away.

Eventually me and Faith forgave each other, and I was glad to finally have it all over with. Mark, however, still looked a little down.

“What’s up bud?” I asked him.

“Oh, I’m just bummed about what everybody is saying,” he answered.

“What are they saying?” I asked genuinely mystified.

“Well, you know — how you beat up that priest and made him move away?” he asked looking up at me.

“Uh, well, yeah,” I said, examining the texture of the floor. I wasn’t exactly proud of what I had done, but given the circumstances I’d do it again.

“Well now everybody calls us the ‘bad neighbors.’”

It was one of Mark's first lessons in social justice, but I’m not sure he fully appreciated it until years later.

1minutetopic: mom01
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
Completed: December 2005, Black Forest
Last revised: 26 March 2006

The Terror Next Door

Holding his breath and squashing his back against the wall to make himself as flat as possible, Victor Pelevin listened intently for a full minute. The faint swoosh of cars on the main road, the drip drip of melting snow and the screech of bicycle breaks were all he heard. As fast as an insect, he stuck his head around the corner and drew back behind the shielding wall. The yard was clear. His breathing, which had become more rapid, slowed a bit, and he sighed.

Head down, trying to look as if he were on a pressing mission, he walked briskly around the corner and entered the building, shutting the door behind him -- all in one quiet, fluid movement.

At the bottom of the stairs, he stood and listened intently again. Muffled television sounds reverberated in the narrow staircase and he could hear the voice of someone talking on the hall phone. But it seemed that the staircase was clear.

He proceeded to mount the stairs, carefully and silently. With weeks of practice, he had mapped out the squeaks and creaks in the stairs and stepped around these as though he were completing an obstacle course. Each step was a concentrated effort: he placed the sole of his left shoe on a safe spot, shifted his weight up and over the placed foot and then placed the sole of the right shoe on the next safe spot, thus gaining the steps as quickly and silently as possible.

When he arrived at the door, he took out the key. Previously, the key was on a key chain that rattled and clanked as he turned it in the door. Now, he kept the loose key in his pocket, unattached to anything, for quick and silent access.

Pushing the door open, it glided noiselessly on newly oiled hinges. Victor stepped into his flat and painstakingly shut and locked the door behind him. As he stood and listened to the sounds emanating from the stairwell, he realized that he had begun to sweat.

He removed his coat and hung it by the door. Stepping carefully, he went to the living room and stood listening again. He had planned to work on his computer a bit this evening. Rather than sliding the chair out from the computer desk, he lifted it up and set it down a few centimeters from the desk, so as not to make any noise. With his hands resting on the back of the chair, he listened again. He could barely hear the television in his neighbor's flat or the traffic outside. It was nearly silent.

What has become of me, he wondered. I am acting like a fugitive in my own home.

Rather than sitting in the chair and starting his computer, he walked to the sofa and sat down. The late afternoon sun was filling the room with a yellowish warmth. He liked this time of day but only rarely had the chance to enjoy it in his flat in the winter, as the days were so short. Today, being Friday, he was allowed to leave early and had caught the sun just before it set.

The leafless branches of the tree outside cast geometrical shadows on the wall. Victor looked around the nearly empty room, at the sofa he was sitting on, his computer desk, the bookshelf filled with CDs and DVDs. He was realizing that he actually liked his flat and was going to regret having to give it up.

He did not look forward to trying to find another flat. As a foreigner working on a green card who, at that time, barely spoke German, no one wanted to rent to him. The more he thought about it, the more he doubted that he would be able to find anything equivalent in terms of price and location. His company, a small concern where he developed software, was located in the most expensive part of the city. All the neighborhoods that were within a couple of subway stops from his work were either very expensive, newly renovated *altbau* or newer buildings that had all sorts of *Nebenkosten* for extras he would never use, such as a balcony or a parking place in a garage.

With a trace of nostalgia, Victor reminisced about the first four years in the flat. It was a quiet time and his life had flowed peacefully, uneventfully to his satisfaction. He felt completely comfortable and happy in his flat, and, he realized now, had taken that island of peace for granted. For those days were gone and he now lived in dread of his neighbors.

His discomfort had been growing gradually, nearly imperceptibly for years and now it was more than he could take.

A couple of years after Victor had moved in, the landlord retired. A widower, Herr Schmidt suffered from acutely loneliness once he stopped going to work. Although he had never loved his job, he was a government employee in an administrative office, he missed the social contact that he had enjoyed with his coworkers as well as the sense of purpose that work provided him. He had expected to spend his sunset years in blissful idleness, but had grown tired of this after a few weeks.

So, to keep himself busy, he started to convert the apartment building into a kind of retirement home. Herr Schmidt realized that there were a lot of older people in his situation -- retire people who were healthy enough to be board by retirement -- and proceeded to convert the building to a *Wohngemeinschaft* for the elderly. As tenants moved out, walls were torn out and flats on the ground floor were converted to communal rooms. The larger flats were divided into smaller suites and some were fitted for wheelchairs. The tiny, ancient lift was replaced with a larger, modern lift with doors that open and shut automatically.

Victor hadn't minded the renovations. If the construction got too loud or went on too late, he would just put on his head phones and listen to movies or music with the volume turned up to drown the noise out. And he hardly noticed the first few tenants for they, like the previous tenants before them, had kept to themselves.

But at some point, about two years ago, a critical mass had been reached. Suddenly, the place seemed to be crawling with old people. Not that Victor minded old people: he was, after all egalitarian enough and didn't judge people by their age, sex or religion. But he was a quiet and reserved man: it was their behavior that troubled him.

Many aspects of living amongst old people did not bother him or, if they bothered him at first, he found a "workaround" that helped him cope with it. Televisions and old fashioned *Schlager* tunes blaring into the wee hours of the morning were completely blotted out with ear plugs. He was indifferent to the waves of awkward and garish objects (results of arts and crafts workshops) that appeared hanging on the walls in the stairwell. At first he was a bit uncomfortable when his elderly female neighbors started to ring his bell at any

time of day or night to deliver baked goods of one kind or another. But a discreetly circulated rumor that he was both diabetic and lactose intolerant was effective in putting an end to the visits from the blue-haired *Kekse* brigade.

Victor, who rarely drank alcohol himself, was slightly scandalized by the marijuana smoke billowing out from the communal rooms in the evenings and the drunken, beer-garden-like *Weißwurst* breakfasts in the garden behind the building that started at six AM and went well into the afternoon. But after consideration, he decided that his neighbors were old enough to know what they were doing and that it was really none of his business what they were consuming. They were, after all, products of the 60's

There was a period in which he was irritated enough to consider complaining. At this time, there was a constant flow of family members through the building -- near and distant relatives coming to visit the grandparents, Victor assumed. The problem was the veritable army of screaming children that, bored with the elderly's life style would take to running up and down the halls and stairs making more noise than a war. The noise that they made was unbearable and penetrated even the most dense ear plugs. But, just as Victor had formulated a polite yet firm complaint, the noise stopped. Apparently, several other residents had complained and visiting hours for family members was restricted to the early afternoons, when Victor was at work.

With every new disturbance, Victor had learned to adapt. When, for example, one of the more aggressive gentlemen, a loud-voiced and opinionated man with a pink head that was shaped like a *Schweinebraten*, started a crusade to "make a cultivated European" out of Victor, which included visits to art museums and painting classes, he sputtered some curses in Russian and mumbled something about the cultural revolution. The subject was never brought up again. Whenever there was drive to enroll residents in the "Decorating with napkins" workshops or bus trips to Augsburg, all he had to do is regretfully decline on the grounds that he had to work. Without fail, the neighbor who had rung his bell would respond with "Oh, how unfortunate!" and leave him in peace.

In fact, elderly neighbors did have some advantages: things had never been so orderly before. It had been along time since Victor noticed anything amiss in the garden, garbage bins or stairwell.

But a recent escalation in the invasive behavior of his neighbors was well beyond his ability to adjust. The trouble had started shortly after Frau Bauer had moved in, and, since he found Germans to be rather disinterested in general, Victor attributed his suffering to her. She was a charismatic woman with bleach blond hair and unbelievably long red fingernails who was always dressed to the teeth, usually in ankle-length fur coats and reading glasses with fantastically complicated and colorful rims hanging from golden chains. Whenever Victor saw her she was talking. Talking to the landlord, to the other tenants, to panic-stricken delivery boys. Victor had never seen her when she was not engaged in a full throated monologue.

Suddenly, the inquiries into his love life increased exponentially. He found this inappropriate and uncomfortable to the point of quivering with embarrassment whenever anyone asked whether he had a girlfriend. Worse was the fact that no one seemed to believe him when he said he did, in fact, have a girlfriend. When he explained that she

traveled a lot for her job and that they only saw each other on the weekends, his statement was met with pitying, sceptical looks.

He had even made a point of dragging Mitya through the communal rooms with the pretext that he had forgotten a disk in his flat. (They both preferred to stay at her place.) Even a well placed and passionate kiss in full view of at least thirty residents waiting in front of the building for an excursion bus was not enough to shake off the interest in the state of his romatic life.

Not in the least discouraged, the neighbors started to invite him to Sunday brunch, mentioning with an undisguised leer that a certain cousin/grand-daughter/niece who was exceptionally pretty/intelligent/gifted was going to be present. Victor had tried subtile hints that he did not appreciate this match-making activity. When that did not work, he tried being more direct. He did not want to be rude and greatly feared offending anyone, so it was with increasing discomfort that he became more and more forceful when he declined these invitations. But it seemed that the more direct he was, the more effort his neighbors put into finding a new girlfriend for him.

The last tactic had been to strategically place lovely ladies in his age group near the door to the building or in the stairwell about the time that Victor usually came home. But the most recent devopment made those attempts look like child's play. Now, whenever he made his neighbors aware of his presence in the flat, by, for example, dragging his computer chair from under the desk or opening the oven door, which groaned like a donkey with a stomach ache, the doorbell would ring. Standing in front of the door would be either some pretty young woman asking him if he had signed some resident petition or an old woman asking him to help lift something in her flat. The heavy object was always placed near the shapely legs of a young, available, female visitor.

Victor could not take it any more. The constant interruption and the strain of trying to avoid his neighbors was too much for him. He thought twice about turning on the lights and had started to work erratic hours to avoid a predictable schedule. He was, he feared, slowly loosing his mind.

The living room was now dark and cooling rapidly, the sun having set long ago. Victor realized that he had been sitting silently contemplating on the sofa for over two hours. No longer interested in turning on the computer and not wishing to do anything that might announce his presence, he decided to go to bed early.

Removing his shoes, he silently padded into his bedroom. He undressed and slipped between the sheets. He lay on his side thinking for a few minutes about his flat and what he would miss about it. Growing drowsy, he rolled onto his back to release himself into sleep. His movement caused the bed springs to sigh. He tensed immediately, holding his breath, listening. Within seconds he heard steps in the stairwell, and the door bell began to sound. Again and again and again.

1minutetopic: mom01
Contributor: Shannon Frances
Completed: December 2005, Gauting
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Identity Theft

Stanley Malachi smiled as he watched the post man flip open the mail box of number eighteen Ridge Crest Place. That idiot Zhan had not been home for at least a month and a half, trusting his neighbor to pick up his mail. Stan had always been lucky. As a youth, hadn't he made it out of Bosnia unscathed while so many of his friends and family were being slaughtered? He lived by his wits, and the adrenaline rush of beating the system yet again made the backs of his hairy hands tingle.

This is the sweet one. This will set me up big time. No more shit-eating little scams. I'll get a place just like this, maybe even bigger, and a real class act woman to go with it. He wiped his mouth with a big snowy white handkerchief as he thought of how far he had come since the day he woke up in a stinking back alley in Sarajevo next to some dead guy.

That was his birthday. Not literally, he had no idea when he had actually entered this world. But that's when *his* life started: the minute he found the Irish passport and train tickets out of that hell hole in the dead man's pockets. He had become Martin Russer, not a very Irish name but perfect for someone with his darkly handsome good looks. In the years that followed, he had lost track of how many names he had used. A regular United Nations: Turkish, Spanish, French. Once he made it into Canada, he went Jewish. From there, dropping down into the US had been child's play.

The mail man hopped back into his little jeep and drove off down the tree-shaded road. Behind the tall, perfectly manicured hedges and stone walls with elegant wrought iron gates, Stan could just make out homes the size of small hotels that housed, at most, a man and his wife and maybe two kids. *These people are just begging to be ripped off. They got more money than good sense, and it's my mission in life to even up the balance.*

Stanley stepped out of his car, emptied the mailbox, dumped the contents on the passenger seat and drove away in less than ten seconds. Riding the high a successful score always gave him, he wanted to celebrate with a drink but knew better than to do anything stupid. *That's where so many really great scams fall apart. No, better to stick to the plan. I'll take all this stuff back to the motel and see what I got.* He shot the hefty bundle of envelopes a quick glance. *Oh, yes!* He could see a corner with a Master Card logo. *Better keep my mind on traffic.* He hummed a tune he picked up in a dive in Toronto during one of his French phases.

The Road Way Inn had a high turnover and the perfect location, right at the intersection of two main highways in a mostly industrial area. He looked just like all the other weary salesman who did business from the Inn's clean, cheep rooms before moving on to other equally dreary motels down the road. No one gave him a second look. *Mister invisible, that's me,* he thought as he slouched down the dim hall. He had even perfected the dispirited shuffle of the men that provided his camouflage. Once in his room, he turned on the TV because that's what all the other salesmen in all the other rooms did. Then he spread a towel on the bed and got down to business, sorting all the mail into "junk", "incidentals" and "the goods." Besides the Master Card, he had a bank statement, a

reminder of a dental appointment, an invitation to a seminar on agribusiness, and -- *Oh, God really does help those who helped them selves!* -- conformation of a stock transfer Stan made last week. With this, together with what he had gotten on last month's visit to the same box, he now had enough information to start siphoning off money into a dummy business account and begin making electronic transfers into an already existing account at a bank in the Cayman Islands. A little magic with his laptop on the motel's high speed Internet connection and a quick trip to Kinko's to print up his new business cards, ordered and paid for online, and presto changeo, Stanley the traveling salesman became Mister Laith A. Zhan, chemical contractor. The old Mister Malachi shredded all the material on the towel and flushed it, bit by bit, down the toilet, paid his bill at the front desk and disappeared from the face of the earth.

At the downtown Farmington terminal, the new Mister Zhan boarded a bus bound for Chicago and a new life.

During the next month, while he monitored the action on the Zhan accounts, he began to establish yet another identity. It did seem a bit odd that the bonehead hadn't tumbled to the fact that his bank account was shrinking like a deflating balloon, but he considered it just another manifestation his phenomenal luck. His Cayman Island account plumped up handsomely. He really liked the name Laith: it sounded lean and sharp -- much more appropriate than Stanley -- for his new image. When he changed his name for the last time, he would have liked to keep the Laith part. But such simple mistakes were the downfall of men who live by their wits. The former Stanley became Ralf Whitman. That sounded suitably Middle American.

With an almost sentimental reluctance, he dismantled and destroyed the laptop that had helped him build his fortune. Now no link existed between him and Zhan or any of his other victims. It was time to retire. Inventing new identities had become more work than fun. This time he would celebrate his new incarnation with style. He'd picked out a suitably upscale eatery and bought a really classy new suite. The classy woman would be easy enough to acquire once he got known in his fashionable, new neighborhood.

The new Ralf examined himself in the revolving door as he stepped onto the windy street. Good: understated, assured, every inch the image he wanted to project. A black Mercedes pulled from a parking space as he sauntered down the street. He glanced over at its tinted windows. Not a bad touch. I might have to get myself one of those. His attention strayed to a strikingly handsome woman hurrying towards him. Medium height, athletic, if the way she trotted along was any indication. Just the kind of woman he wanted. As she passed, she gave him a mighty body check that sent him careening into the open door of the car.

"Hey, what do you think your doing?" he shouted as the needle slid into his thigh.

When he woke, he found himself on a narrow cot in a cell. *Oh shit! I've been busted!* But once his head cleared enough to look around, he realized that couldn't be right. The cops don't jab you. They might slap you around if you looked like a bum. He definitely did not look like a bum. *A goddamn kidnapping for ransom?* The throbbing in his head didn't help as he struggled to make sense of what had happened to him. Then he heard a

sound that came close to stopping his heart: the call to prayer. He hadn't heard that since he left Bosnia. *What the hell is going on? Steady*, he told himself, *deny everything*.

Just then a man in a trim black suite entered his cell. "Ah, Mister Zahn. Or do you prefer to be called Shake Jamal Omar Husanni? I'm glad to see you're awake. Welcome to... well, since this facility doesn't officially exist, I'll just say 'Afghanistan'. My colleagues in the CIA have been tracking you for some time. Do you know they code named you 'the Ghost' because of your ability to vanish without a trace? Not one decent picture of you, no record of fingerprints, nothing." The man in black leaned casually against the door jam. His cordial smile had all the warmth of an ice berg. "When your trail went cold in Farmington, they thought you had done it again. Most exasperating! They had spent a year keeping your place on Ridge Crest under surveillance," he sighed. "But even the best of us gets sloppy. I have to hand it to you, though; you gave them quite an interesting chase." The man's narrow face broke into a truly scary grin. "Isn't it ironic, the peculiarities of political expediency? When I worked for the late Yusfe Rachides, I was considered a terrorist, a sadistic monster. Now I'm a worrier on the side of democratization and freedom." He shrugged. "Interesting man Rachides, very devout. He believed western decadence would eventually corrupt the entire world if valiant souls like himself didn't take a stand for decency and, ah, shall we say, family values." The man chuckled low in his throat, more like a snarl than a laugh. "He really hated having to employ my services." Shrugging again he added, "But eventually he had to accept that old saw about the ends justifying the means." He shook his head. "Ah well." Pushing way from the doorway, he got down to business. "You have been designated as an enemy combatant, blah, blah, blah. And life would be so much more pleasant for all of us if you decide to cooperate with our inquiries *now* before we're forced to do some very nasty things." The man's thin white face looked like he really wanted to do those nasty things.

1minutetopic: mom01
 Contributor: Frances Burke
 Completed: December 2005, Black Forest
 Last revised: 26 March 2006

Identity Theft

All I perceive is a blinding light. It seems so bright, like when awakening at the beach after a midday nap following a night of alcoholic debauchery. *Am I drunk?* I feel numb, heavy. Every thing is a blur. I can't move. I close my eyes and try to think, but nothing comes to me...

The light is brutal. I blink to clear my vision, but I'm left with an overexposed photograph. My mouth feels dry. I'm thirsty. I recall feeling like this after a surgery. *Am I injured?* My body does not hurt. I try to raise my head, but something is pushing against my face. My mouth is open. I feel the crust of dried saliva on my cheek. I try blinking again. The fierce brightness is calming down to a more humane grey. I can move my fingers, my lips, but I can't raise my head. *Have I been in an accident? Where am I?* I can remember nothing of the recent past...

Ah, a whirring! Yes, I definitely hear a low hissing sound, like a fan. My head moves, but only to the side. I must be on my stomach. Slowly I turn my head blinking frantically to clear my groggy vision. I have been sleeping face down in a grey room. Now I can feel my legs; they are cold. I can move my feet a little. I push them, and they hit something soft. The surface I'm lying on is soft, too. I'm suddenly gripped with the feeling that something very bad has happened.

I practice moving my fingers, flexing my arms and neck. My every muscle has the consistency of a punctured inner tube. Gathering all my force I push and roll over on my back. Facing up now I can make out the ceiling. I'm in a small grey room. There is a light fixture and an air vent in the ceiling. *Am I in prison?*

Slowly scanning around, I see a single door. It has a small window covered with wire mesh. My legs are against one wall. It is compliant and grey, same as the floor. I'm wearing a yellow cotton... dress? *Am I wearing a hospital gown?*

Everything is coming into sharper focus. I clumsily wipe my face. There is no IV in my arm. I seem fairly intact, but I'm definitely locked in a small room: clean, efficient, emotionless. *How long have I been here?*

A shadow passes by the window. It comes back. I can hear only vague, muffled sounds beyond my own breathing, the rasping of the cotton gown on the vinyl padding and the vent. I try to push my self to a sitting position, but my arms don't have the strength. By twisting my hips and shoulders I maneuver my self over to the corner. Breathing heavily and sweating, I finally manage to pry my self to a sitting position in the corner, facing the door. Recovering from the exertion I smooth my hair back and look at my hands.

A shadow appears at the window in the door again. It is a face, a professional looking young man. He moves out of view and I hear a metal clinking sound. The door opens and I can see two men in white lab coats. One man stands at the door as the professional one walks in slowly.

“Ah, Mr. Jones, how are you feeling?” he says looking at me.

“Feeling a little groggy? Here, let me check,” he says kneeling in front of me and pulling out a sort of pen. “May I?” he asks. I can only nod my assent.

He shines the light into my eyes as he stares into them. “Ah yes, you’ll be thirsty then, won’t you?” Again all I can do is nod. Turning to the man at the door, he says, “George, can you get Mr. Jones a cup of water?”

George steps out of the doorway momentarily and comes back with a paper cup containing water. He hands it to the doctor who hands it to me. I look down into the paper cup. *What am I doing here?*

My concentration is again interrupted by the voice of the doctor. “It’s OK. It’s just water. Go ahead, drink it!”

I lift the cup to my mouth. My mouth is so dry, it has a strange taste. The cool water seems to help clear my mind.

“Better?” he asks.

“Thanks,” I croak.

“Good. Now lets see if we can get you up, shall we?”

It took all three of us working together to get me standing. I could feel all the blood in my body draining towards my feet.

“Now how ‘bout we get you washed up?” They dragged me out to the hall where a wheel chair was waiting beside a small tray of instruments. George wheeled me down the glistening corridor between a row of identical doors and high, wire-mesh covered windows. We entered a bathroom where he donned large rubber gloves and pulled off my gown. I can’t remember when I was last bathed by someone else. It is a humbling experience, but the water was refreshing. I was given a fresh gown and wheeled back down the corridor to another room.

By this time I could walk with George’s assistance. I sat at a stainless steel table. The doctor came in with a woman. They sat across from me while George stood at the door.

“So, Mr. Jones, feeling better are you?” the doctor asked looking at me. I looked around stiffly, but there were just the four of us.

Gripping the table for support I asked, “Where am I?” in as steady a voice as I could muster.

“You are in a hospital,” he replied.

I shook my head no. Straightening and looking directly at the doctor I asked again, “Where *am* I?”

“Mr. Jones,” he spoke as though reluctant to get off track, “you are in the Aspenglade Mental Hospital. I’m Dr. Bushan, and this is Dr. Whitman. We are reviewing your case. We are...” he leaned forward slightly, “here to help you.”

I closed my eyes, and my head sunk down. *What's going on?*

"How long?" I asked.

"Excuse me?"

"How long have I been here?"

The doctors exchanged furtive glances; Dr. Whitman spoke up, "Mr. Jones, you were taken into custody... you were very distracted and delusional. We needed to calm you down to help you."

What is wrong with these people?

I banged my hands on the table, and George straightened up. "How long have you kept me here?" I spit each word out carefully.

"You've been here for three weeks," she finally admitted.

I felt nauseous. Sweat began to pour from my brow. I sank back into my chair and closed my eyes.

"Mr. Jones, you were very irritated and seemed prone to violence. You threatened to kill several people, and we had no choice but to sedate you," she said as apologetically as possible.

"Mr. Jones, we want to help you, but you are going to have to remain calm and work with us," added Dr. Bushan in a more authoritative voice. I opened my eyes. "Are you going to work with us on this?" he asked.

"Are you going to stop drugging me?" I retorted.

"That all depends on you." He opened a file folder and took out a pen. "Now if you're ready, we have a few questions. Are you ready?"

I nodded.

"OK," he began, "where do you currently reside?" he asked pen poised.

"I currently reside," I sat up and looked over at George. Only now did I recognize his stout build and beady eyes. Turning back to the doctors I glared and continued, "at the Aspenglade Hospital for the mentally suppressed."

George laughed, then immediately looked down to suppress further outbursts.

Dr. Bushan put his pen down and sighed with resignation. "You are not making this easy for any of us," he said staring at me, head lowered slightly.

"I am a prisoner," I said. Shifting my gaze to Dr. Whitman I added, "I want to go home." She looked down at her papers with a slight frown.

"And we'd love to help you get there, just as soon as you tell us where it is," Dr. Bushan contested, obviously practiced in the art of sarcasm.

I looked into his eyes, and exhaled deeply. "OK. OK," I said relaxing back into the seat again. I drew in a slow breath and began as calmly as possible. "My name is William Richter. I live at 1247 Calaveras Street in Ogden, Utah. I trade stocks and futures over

the Internet.” The doctors had stopped writing and were staring blankly at me. “My wife is Lydia Elise Richter. We have a black lab called Buck. My social security number is...”

“Enough,” said Dr. Bushan.

“568 29...” I continued.

“Enough, Mr. Jones, we’ve had *enough*,” he added placing his pen on the table.

“...6824. And what is it with the 'Mr. Jones' crap?” I demanded.

“Mr. Jones,” Dr. Whitman pleaded, “you are not William Richter. You have to give up these delusions or we’re never going to be able to help you.”

“That’s it!” I said banging my hands on the table again, “I’m outta here. Call my wife and get her to come bale me out or whatever.” I kept my hands on the table and stood, pushing the chair back with my legs. The doctors sat bolt upright and just stared back at me. “What? Just get her on the phone: (801) 715-8492.”

Dr. Whitman coughs. “Mr. Jones... We contacted Mrs. Richter. She has never met you before in her life...” she said slowly.

I’m stunned. *What the hell is going on?* “What? No...” is all I can say.

“And, Mr. Richter,” she continued, “she thinks you are a serious threat...” The rest of what she had to say faded off into oblivion. *What? She is denying me? Does she have another man? They are trying to steal everything? Are these doctors in on it?*

“That bitch!” I shouted, “I’ll kill her!” I grabbed the chair and swung it over striking Dr. Bushan. Dr. Whitman screamed, “George!” and ducked below the table. I turned toward the door, but George tackled me onto the table. I heard screaming and banging of overturning chairs as I elbowed George in the throat to get him off of me. Then there was a sharp prick in my leg and a warm sensation spread all over my body. The sounds became muted and everything faded to blackness.

1minutetopic:	mom02
Contributor:	Horizon Gitano
Completed:	December 2005, Black Forest
Last revised:	26 March 2006

The Sweater of Success

Tobias Himmelreich felt something akin to grief after the theft of his favorite sweater. It wasn't particularly expensive, and he was a bit confused why someone would steal a threadbare sweater. Several other items had been stolen on the same afternoon, all of which had considerable value: a wallet full of cash, a watch that someone had removed and forgotten on their desk, rings and other jewelry that a secretary had kept in her desk. But, it didn't matter why it had been stolen: the fact was that his favorite sweater was gone.

Without it, he felt naked. The sweater had made him feel comfortable and, somehow, more confident.

It was his favorite color: Grandpa's pajamas. He had discovered the name of the color when deciding on a pallet for a new product line. He liked the name as well. When he considered it objectively, he assumed that the old fashioned sweater made him look grandfatherly. But, when he had it on, particularly with a bow tie, he felt dashing and ten years younger. How he actually looked did not matter to him as much as his comfort.

With the pain of loss, he remembered the thick knitted form. It was a V cut, the first button resting just below his solar plexus. Tobi particularly liked the two pockets on the front, each with an orderly pattern on it, so much that he had quit putting anything in them, for fear that they might stretch out of shape.

Wearing the replacement sweater, he felt vulnerable. Why hadn't he taken the sweater home with him, he agonized. The afternoon of the theft, he had left early, leaving the sweater, as always, carefully folded on his chair.

The following weeks had been very stressful for him. He had difficulties concentrating on his work and often had the urge to look through his office cabinets one more time for the sweater. Each time, he dejectedly forced himself to return to his desk and focus on his work.

Two months after the theft, Douglas Michie walked into their weekly Product Manager's meeting wearing Tobi's sweater.

Tobi was dumbfounded and sat staring at his colleague incredulously. Wondering that no one said anything about the sweater, he looked around the room. The others were quietly discussing or looking through their papers. No one had seemed to notice.

Not knowing what to do, Tobi simply sat and stared at Douglas. It seemed that the others were too preoccupied to notice. But when Douglas stood up to deliver his monthly sales chart, Tobi could not take it any more.

Restraining his anger, Tobi forced his voice to remain impassive.

"Before you begin, Douglas, perhaps you would be so kind as to return my sweater."

Adrenaline surged through his veins, and he began to tremble slightly.

Douglas stared uncomprehendingly at Tobi.

“My sweater. If you would be so kind.”

“What are you talking about?” barked Stephan Richter, their boss. “What is he on about.”

“Mr. Richter, I think Tobias thinks Douglas is wearing his sweater.”

“What? Is this about a sweater? Nonsense. Michie, get on with your report. I have to leave for Barcelona at three and I need the numbers before I go.”

His mouth hanging open in disbelief, Tobi stared in turn at his boss, Shelly Morgenstern (the product manager who had spoken) and Douglas, the thief.

Without any further ado, Douglas began his report. As pie charts and tables full of numbers flickered on the wall, Tobi attempted to calm his reeling thoughts.

Had his coworkers all lost their minds? Anyone could see that Douglas was wearing Tobi’s sweater. They must recognize it -- he had worn every work day for the last five years.

Tobi had been very guarded about his feelings of loss for the stolen sweater. It was a bit embarrassing for a grown man to be so attached to an article of clothing. But certainly, the others could see that it was his sweater. Thinking it through logically, if Douglas had stolen his sweater, maybe he had stolen the other items as well. It could be that Douglas had stolen the other items as a distraction from stealing the sweater. Who would give a thought to a missing sweater when others had lost hundreds in valuables?

Tobi’s discomfort was unbearable. Before the meeting had come to an end, he excused himself and, shaking with fury, stumbled to his out of the conference room.

Before he returned to his office, he stopped by the secretarial pool.

“Good afternoon, Maxi,” he said looking through his mail.

“Good morning, Mr. Himmelreich.”

Seeming to study a piece of mail, Tobi asked, as if off hand, “You haven’t seen Douglas Michie today, have you, Maxi?”

“Yes, Mr. Himmelreich. He came by about an hour ago to pick up this months invoices.”

“You didn’t happen to notice what he was wearing, did you?” he glanced at Maxi to gauge her reaction.

“Oh, yes I did! He has a new sweater on. It is the most unusual color. I noticed it right away,” she seemed pleased to know the answer to his question.

“Uh. Did the sweater look familiar to you at all?” He was now watching to see if she found this line of questioning unusual.

“No. In fact, I complimented him on it because it was obviously new.”

“Yes. It is a fine sweater. In fact, it reminded me of a sweater that I used to have.”

“Oh, really. I never noticed that you wear sweaters. Oh, but I see you have one on now! And a fine sweater it is.”

Tobi would have suspected the woman of trying to butter him up if he had not known her for such a long time. Maxi was a bit simple, but had a good heart and was genuine.

His distress was so great, he left work early. Once home, he complained of a head ache and went to bed early.

As his wife snored gently next to him, he spent dark hours thinking through the situation. He was absolutely sure the sweater was his. He had carefully observed Douglas before he left the meeting and had noticed the loose bit of yarn hanging from the bottom right of the sweater. Tobi had meant to cut the thread away, but had forgotten about it by the time he had found his scissors. He had also looked carefully at the neck of the sweater. At the back, the tag showed through where Tobi had once hung the sweater on a coat tree that had inappropriately sharp pegs. One of these aspects could be chance, but not both.

Just as he was sure that the sweater was his, was he equally determined to get it back.

Thinking intensely, he decided he would first confront Douglas about it directly. If he returned the sweater without a fuss, Tobi would never mention it (or the other stolen goods) again. If, however, Douglas put up a fight, Tobi would go to their boss and demand justice. He was absolutely sure that Richter would support him on this issue. While Tobi had built up his business unit from the ground up, turning a profit in less than two years, Douglas had so badly mismanaged a previously profitable product group that the company was considering discontinuing the products and, very likely, reducing the work group. When it came to a fight, Richter would go with the money and support Tobi.

Being the kind of person who would prefer to avoid open conflict, he felt a bit uncomfortable about making such a big deal about a sweater. However, he could put up a good fight when required. He could claim that it was the principle of the matter that drove him. But, when he was honest with himself, he had to acknowledge that he felt lost without the sweater. Seeing it on the back of such a lazy, wannabe slimmer as Douglas bothered him immensely.

Once he made his decision, he fell into a deep and restful sleep.

The next morning he paid a visit to Douglas in his office. Careful to close the door so that no one would overhear, he confronted him about the sweater, which he was unashamedly wearing.

Douglas responded first with confusion and then with concern. When Tobi pointed out the hanging thread and demanded that Douglas look at the hole over the tag at the back, Douglas removed the sweater and, seeing the small tear, remarked that he had not noticed it before.

Now, with undeniable evidence of ownership presented, Tobi demanded the return of the sweater. Douglas, becoming alarmed, suggested Tobi sit down and called the secretary to bring some water. Tobi refused to sit and, furious, left immediately, nearly running down the secretary carrying a glass full of water in the hall.

As planned, Tobi went immediately to Richter's office. He did not want to give Douglas time to think up any lies.

To Tobi's astonishment and dismay, Richter made it clear he did not want to hear what Tobi had to say. Dismissing him summarily from the office, Richter said, "Look, Tobias. I am running a business here. I can't be concerned with your personal squabbles. And I am not please that you are taking up one of our most valuable employee's time with anything as trivial as a jacket. I am warning you, you should be spending your time and energy on a plan to get you business unit back on its feet or, to be frank, you are history."

At first, Tobi was too stunned. How could his boss defend someone who had lost three times as much of the companies revenue has he himself had generated? For the first time, Tobi began questioning himself. Even if he were experiencing paranoid delusions, the numbers would not lie.

Asking one of the interns to help him draw up some ROI tables, he went through the year-to-date data for both his business unit and Douglas's. Taking on the tone of a mentor, he asked the young man to give a short analysis of the health of the two units and to formulate recommendation for the next financial year.

"That's too easy, Mr. Himmelreich," the young man laughed confidently, "I would put my eggs into your basket any day. There is no way the Star-lite line is going to make it to the end of next year! I would cut my losses, move the more portable products into your product line and close the rest of Star-lite down."

"Very acute nose for business, young Henson. You will go far," responded Tobi, resisting the urge to pat him on the back.

With that, Tobi got back to business. He wasn't sure how Douglas had slimed his way onto Richter's good side, but he was confident he could win back his boss's favor without effort.

But, things did not go as Tobi planned. One after another, his strategic plans started to flop. At the end of the year, his product line had failed to turn a profit. By the end of the next quarter, it started to run in the red. Carefully examining every aspect of his business plan, Tobi had to admit that the decline was due to poor judgment calls on his part. To compensate, he worked longer and harder.

But, no matter what he undertook, it quickly resulted in failure. He had trouble concentrating and started to show up late for meetings. Deeply concerned, he realized that he had also started to avoid anyone in upper management, and when an encounter was inevitable, he could not help shamelessly stroking their egos and talking bad about the other product managers in an attempt to try to raise their estimation of him.

When he started missing work and lying to cover up his mistakes, he withdrew even further, often sitting for days behind his closed office door and playing computer games instead of working.

Eventually, he suffered the shame of being demoted. Meanwhile, he burned with envy as Douglas was first promoted to Director of European Business Units (the position that Tobi had secretly set his eye on) and then to Vice President of Business Management.

Tobi tried to accept that Douglas had earned it. His business unit had made a miraculous come back and, under his direction, the company had profitably expanded into Asia. But irrationally and uncontrollably, Tobi attributed Douglas's success to the stolen sweater.

After years of smoldering with hate whenever he saw Douglas, who was always to be seen in the seriously fraying green sweater, Tobi made a desperate attempt to steal it back. He was unsuccessful and was dismissed without severance pay as a result.

In rapid succession thereafter, his wife left him, his membership in the Better Business Association was revoked, his stock portfolio collapsed into dust and the IRS began investigating him for tax fraud. He was forced to cash in his pension to pay for debts that had seemingly sprung up over night. Penniless and broken, he left the city and began scraping by as well as he could as a migrant worker in the southern states where the weather was mild enough that he did not need a sweater to keep warm.

1minutetopic: mom02
Contributor: Shannon Frances
Completed: December 2005, Gauting
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Someone I Met on a Bus

Joan caught him checking her out once again. She smiled to herself. *Not bad for a woman my age*, she thought. He had been watching her ever since they got on the shuttle bus that would take them from the parking lot of the Grand Canyon Inn to the trail head. The man looked to be in his early fifties, tall slender, not really good looking but certainly interesting. The word aristocratic came to mind, though there was nothing remarkable about his clothing.

She glanced up and smiled at him in a friendly sort of way. He nodded, looking as though he would have moved to sit next to her if the bus had not been so crowded.

When they finally pulled to a bumpy stop in the shade of a scrubby juniper tree everyone got out, laughing and ready for a day of exploring the wonders of nature. She forgot all about him while sorting out her small back pack and the wide-brimmed hat she always wore hiking. Stooping to get her sun glasses she noticed a pair of brown boots in front of her. Scanning up the gray slacks she came to the slightly sharp features of the man from the bus.

She smiled, "Hi, do I know you?" That seemed as good an ice breaker as any.

He returned her greeting with a slightly wolfish grin. "No, but I do know some rather interesting things about you."

That seemed a little off-putting. "Oh, really, like what?" Better to get this over with when there were still so many people around, in case he turned out to be a nut case.

"Like the fact that you are lover of books," he nudged her pack. Two books were clearly visible crammed on top of her light all-weather jacket and two bottles of water.

"Not bad." She slipped the sun glasses in place. He had an accent: English softened by years in this country. Joan loved accents. "Any thing else?" she asked more to hear him talk than because she thought he would have anything significant to add.

"Well, yes, rather a lot, actually. You are in your early forties and most likely divorced. He pointed to her college ring, "It's on the third finger and not worn enough for the years since you graduated indicating that you most likely put in on to cover the impression when you took off your wedding ring."

Her look of surprise told him he had once again hit the mark. So he added, "That also tells me I can expect at least a modicum of intelligence. Not many women were graduating from universities in 1985." He now had her full attention.

"The fingernails are short, which leads me to believe you are a 'no nonsense' sort of woman. I watched you putting on your sun screen before we got off the bus, and you have a hat suitable for the desert, so you are well prepared. You wear your hair long but without a lot of hair spray, so you are either conscientious about protecting the environment from chloral floral hydrocarbons or you are confident of your natural good looks."

His remark about natural good looks pleased her. While she did care about the environment, her aversion to hair spray had a lot more to do with just not liking the feeling of wearing plastic hair. "You are very good at this."

"It is my profession," his smile warmed. "Let me introduce my self: I am a private investigator. My name is Shelton Homes."

Joan shook his hand noticing the long thin fingers. "Shelton Homes! You have to be kidding! I'm Joan Watson – a physician's assistant which is next best thing to a doctor."

He seemed mildly surprised by her reaction to his name. "Um, how nice to meet you."

She tried again. "Let me see how well I can do," she said with a hint of teasing in her voice. She took his hand and pretended to be examining it. "You play the violin, you smoke a pipe, and you keep your tobacco in a slipper on your mantel."

His eyes opened in amazement, "How ever did you deduce that? I assume you could detect the calluses on my fingers from the violin and perhaps nicotine stains on my teeth. But how in the world did you know I keep my tobacco in a slipper on my hearth?"

He seemed a bit old for such a playful come-on but Joan found it delightful. "Elementary my dear, Holms," she said, laughter creeping into her voice.

Before she had a chance to tell him he lived at number 12 B Baker Street, he placed a hand on her elbow and whispered, "Do you see that black man in the yellow T-shirt." He nodded over to one of the few people still remaining chatting to the bus driver. Most of their fellow passengers had unfolded their trail maps and gone off to explore the canyon rim. "His name is Moray R. Ratty -- a Botswana and an international arms dealer. I have been tracking him for months, ever since he left South Africa," he turned his back to the man in question. "While I have, of course, used many disguises," he smiled modestly, "I am something of an expert with disguises, I think he may have tumbled to my real identity." His intelligent eyes searched hers. "I know I have no right to ask you to get involved in this, but it is a matter of international importance. He is on the verge of making a deal to sell nuclear hand grenades to a terrorist group working out of Switzerland."

She pretended deep concern, "Ah, Swiss terrorists!" She narrowed her eyes in what she hoped was a significant way, "How awful! What can I do to help?"

"Just pretend you are my companion and we are out for a casual stroll." He gave her a hand with her back pack, "I suspect he is here to finalize the deal with someone he will meet on the trail."

"Oh, excellent! I have secretly always wanted to be an international spy." She had to hand it to him he positively flinched at her lightheartedness. "Oh, right, this is serious," she whispered.

Holding hands, they followed their path down the trails for far longer than Joan had intended. Shelton proved to be both in better shape than he looked and a virtual encyclopedia of interesting facts about the canyon, South Africa, the international arms trade, tobacco ash and good many other things as well. They stopped to admire the spectacular beauty of Travertine Canyon Falls, when Shelton spotted Ratty high on a ledge over the falls. A nattily dressed man waited at the far end.

“By Jove! That’s Herr Wexlhoff the notorious Swiss banker! I must stop them before he can make the exchange,” gasped her companion as he sprinted across the moss slick face of the rock. Joan shouted for him to stop. This had gone too far. But the torrent of water swallowed up her words in its rush over the precipices. In horror she watched the man in the yellow shirt turn and fire at Shelton just as he lunged at him sending them both tumbling over edge of the raging torrent. The Swiss terrorist spotted her and before she had time to duck, his shot struck the cliff wall sending shards of the stone into the side of her face. She went down as though dead.

“Oh my God! Oh my God! He’s dead!” she cried oblivious of her own injuries. When she looked up, the banker had disappeared.

Joan made it back to the trail head though she never quite knew how. Sobbing, she told the bus driver about Shelton’s going over the falls though she couldn’t bring herself to mention the black man or the banker. He said he’d radio the rangers, shaking his head at the foolishness of tourists. Looking her straight in the eye, he asked, “How well did you know this Mr. Holms?” Something in his tone made her uneasy. “I just met him on the bus. He seemed like a nice man.” She had a flashback of Ratty talking to the driver just before heading off on his hike. She looked at his well manicured fingernails, the expensive Italian shoes -- definitely not those of a Park Service bus driver. *He must be one of them!* she thought.

1minutetopic: mom03
Contributor: Frances Burke
Completed: January 2006, Black Forest
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Sid: Sage of the Bus

"I think you are not having enough fun." The heavy Indian accent came wafting over to me through the noise of wet urban traffic.

"What?" I asked, noticing for the first time the slight, dark skinned man at the back of the bus.

"It seems to me," he said raising a boney index finger, "that you are not fully appreciating the beauty of life all around you." I looked around to insure that I was indeed the intended recipient of his intuitive intrusion.

"Sorry?" I said, knowing full well what he said was true, but feeling that this kind of profound observation was better suited to more mature conversations.

"I think you know what I mean," he responded, bowing his head toward me slightly, "Don't you?"

The beauty of life had been rather elusive lately. Every time I turned around it seemed like some pedestrian detail of life was breaking down just for me: a frozen water pipe, the hard drive crash at work, and now my car won't even start. "Yeah." I said, finally surrendering.

"Don't worry!" he said popping up like a sprinkler head, "It happens to all of us some time. There are so many trees that the forest is hidden behind them." His head had a way of wagging like the tale of a happy dog.

"Can't see the forest through the trees..." I mumbled. *When was the last time I had even seen the trees?*

"That is what I am saying," his smile radiated warmth and understanding. There was no arrogance, only acceptance. Still I couldn't believe that I was being dragged into a conversation with some loony on the bus. I'm not the sort of person who will just pour out my whole life's intimate details to a stranger as though it was a meaningful exchange. And I *really* wasn't in the mood to chat. I looked him in the eyes. Though they were weather-faded brown they seemed to twinkle as though unable to hold back a great secret.

"You see, even money can not make for a happy man," he went on. "My father, he was very well off, but every day he can pick the spots out on the sun." I couldn't tell where he was going, but I was pretty sure he was lost.

"Your dad picked out spots in the sun?" I asked for clarification.

"We see the sun shine down on our heads all day, but when he looks at it, he only sees the dark spots on its face."

"Sun spots," I nodded. Ok, maybe it was I that had gotten lost in translation.

"That is what I say: he only sees the sun spots, not the beautiful light which we receive free of charge!" His arms were outstretched, palms up playing with the imagined sunlight splashing down on him like rain. "I see he has very much money, but no... No appreciation for life. He has time, but no passion to fill it. Very unfortunate."

I suppose he was expecting me to open up at this point, but it didn't happen. I did, however, rotate around in my seat so I could face him more directly without having to crane my neck. His motions were flowing and lively, like he was doing some sort of enchanted dance, and the loose clothing draped over his thin frame waved with his movements. "So... what did you do?" I asked.

"I packed my bags and did not let the door touch my back side!" he said skipping one hand off the other, and flinging it toward the furthest corner of the universe.

"You hit the road." I reiterated my vision blurring. That sounded like a good plan. It's not that you can run away from the grayness of life, but on the road all the colors shine so much brighter.

"I hit the road. I went to see what was on the other side of the other side."

"And what did you find?" I asked finally caught up in the conversation. He paused, head bent down in thought as though assembling the words to appropriately articulate the accumulated wisdom of several thousand years. Looking up again, hands open to pass off the valuable insight he answered, "Where ever you go... there you are!" This delighted him, as though it was the cure for cancer or it could some how prevent wars.

"Profound." I said with sleepy eyes. *Do crazy people inhabit buses everywhere in the world?* I wondered.

"Shallow minds mock what they cannot grasp." His hand had smoothly rotated in, then upward presenting an extended index finger to emphasize the point. "But you know what I say is true." I felt a little embarrassed by my own arrogance. "Everywhere you go the sun also shines, and the spots will follow you even into the darkest alleys of Detroit. You can see the forest or not, but tomorrow the sun will come up again to check to see if you are ready to enjoy it yet."

"Ok... So why are *you* here?" I asked trying to deflect the onslaught of introspection.

"I am here because I choose to be here!" he replied as though it was the most obvious thing in the whole world. "Why are you here?" he asked in return.

"I'm here because my battery is dead, and I have to get my ass to work or they'll fire me, and I'll get kicked out of my apartment for missing the rent." Ok, maybe I oversimplified it all a bit, but that *is* how I felt about it.

"You must have a beautiful apartment, yes?" he asked enthusiastically. It seemed like my destiny to rain on his parade.

"No, actually it's a real piece of crap," I admitted.

"So then you are wasting your time," he said hands flying up into the air as though signaling a touch down.

"I gotta have some place to live!"

"You are not living! You are seeing only sunspots, no trees! You are resenting to be working for a crap-apartment where you do not live: you miss out on life."

What the hell! I wanted to yell at the little guy. How can he think he knows me? But everything he said was exactly true. Was it that obvious?

Neither of us spoke for a while. The bus lurched and splashed through a pot hole, jarring me back to consciousness. I looked at him again. "What is your name?" I asked determined to exert more control over the conversation.

"It is not important," he said looking straight into my eyes, "But you may call me... Sid."

"Ok, Sid, so what do you suggest I do?"

"You do what you want," he said with a shrug of his shoulders. Somehow I had something more concrete in mind.

"Do what I want," I repeated with feigned understanding.

"Yes. You do what you want. You don't like your apartment? Don't go back to it. It doesn't make you happy any way. Then you can quit your job, and maybe find one you like." *Easier said than done*, I thought.

"So I should quit my job and move," I asked seeking confirmation.

"If that's what makes you happy, yes. But you will still be you." I raised my eyebrows and continued to stare blankly at him. *This guy is the source of all things obvious*.

"You and me, we are both riding the same bus, yes?" he asked, pointing to each of us in turn.

"Yep," I answered thinking *But I'm not sure were going the same direction*.

"I am happy, and you are not, yes?"

"Uh, well, apparently so," I had to admit.

"There is the problem! If you get on another bus, will you be happy?"

"I'd be happier driving my car," I hated riding the bus, too many crazies.

"You have been like this for quite a while, yes?" he continued to cross-examine.

"Yeah."

"Were you driving your car yesterday?" he asked again with the raised finger.

"Yes." *Doh! How does he do that? Yes, I drove yesterday and, yes, I was still pissed off at the world.*

"Like I say, anywhere you go, there you are. Even if you change jobs and move away you will still be you and will continue to be unhappy until you can see the sunshine and the forests. We look out the same window, and I see the beauty of life that you no longer see." I looked out the window. It had been raining and grey all morning. "You must find what you love in life and pursue it: become blind to the spots, not the trees."

Everything he said made sense. It was all so simple when he said it -- so obvious. But how?

"This is where I get off," as he raised his hand to pull the signal cord his wrist watch flopped half way down his arm. Though I had been grudgingly dragged into the conversation I didn't want him to leave. He got up to go as the bus pulled up to the curb.

"Sid... I..." What could I say?

“Don’t worry, my friend,” he said placing a firm hand on my shoulder as he passed. “From any three people you can learn something from at least one,” he smiled as he walked off the bus into a little park. A ray of sunlight illuminated a slight rainbow in the droplets of rain all around him. He waved and disappeared into the trees as we pulled away.

I had known I needed a change. I guess I was just waiting... Waiting for what? A pistol shot to go off announcing the start of a new chapter in life? A sign?

I looked around the bus. There were only three other passengers. The hippy with the long hair and beard nodded a knowing salutation. I had a lot to think about and a lot to do. Today was the first day of the rest of my life.

1minutetopic: mom03
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
Completed: January 2006, Colorado Springs
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Destiny Bus

OK. Someone I met in a bus... Whew. I don't know where to start. I meet so many people when I am out and about -- in trains, buses, etc. Weird things are always happening to me. Strange people just walk up to me and start talking.

OK. Let's see... Oh yeah! I met Monika in a bus. You remember Monika, don't you? She's the German woman who lives near Istanbul now. I spent Christmas with her a few years ago in Kilyos. Remember? I met her in a bus.

Yeah, really.

It was back in Hilden. I had just moved there. I guess I had been there a few months. I could barely put a sentence together in German. Anyway, I took the bus home (this is before I bought my bike). Back in those days, I would get home a few minutes after six and wonder what I was going to do with the next six hours of consciousness before I went to bed.

No. I mean, yes, I didn't know any one except my nasty coworkers. It was kind of hard to meet people when I couldn't speak the language. But the problem was more a matter of not knowing what to do with myself. I had worked around the clock when I was in Japan, and I had simply forgotten what to do with my free time.

Anyway, we arrived at my stop and I stood up to get out. However, there was a little black dog standing in the way, blocking my exit. She looked to be as old as dirt (the poor thing was OLD -- she could hardly see and didn't have any teeth left in her head). All ratty and gnarled, you know how little dogs get with age. And she was anxious about jumping the few centimeters to the street below.

Outside the bus a woman was pleading and scolding the dog. "Branka, get off the bus! Just jump down. Branka! I am not going to pick you up! You can do it. BRANKA!"

I waited patiently until the little dog jumped out of the bus. The woman was saying something to me that I could not understand, maybe she was apologizing or explaining that the dog was as old as god. Anyway, I responded with the only thing I could think to say in German. "Sweet. The dog."

Well, that was all it took to seal a life-long friendship.

Monika invited me for a cup of coffee. I guess you could say our friendship is firmly based on coffee. She talked away in German. I understood only a tiny fraction of what she said. You know, at the time I was learning things like "Where is the train station?" and "What time is it?" in my German class. I would ask simple questions and she would talk away. Somehow, we communicated.

She was, and is, always dressed to the teeth. Long blond hair (with proud strains of silver) swept up in a wave over her ears. Schick jacket. As we talked, I admired her earrings -- little clusters of golden grapes. Very pretty. I think of those earrings every time I think about how we met.

We exchanged phone numbers and the next day, I told my coworkers that I had made my first German friend. I knew immediately we were going to be the best of friends for the rest of our lives.

After that we met on Saturdays, becoming regular fixtures in the Hilden cafe culture....

Huh?

Oh, yes, you are right. I was IN the bus and she was OUTSIDE the bus when we met. I have to tell about someone that I met when we BOTH were in the bus?

OK. Let me think.

I can think of plenty of people I met in a train. But since I got my bike, I don't ride the bus very frequently. Hmmm.

OK. I remember something else that happened in Hilden.

I was waiting for a bus. It was in the evening, so I was probably going out with my nasty coworkers for dinner or something. A woman came up to me. God. I still have that image in my head. She had a huge awful head and folded, putty skin and a frightening medusa tangle of hair. Like some kind of dirty dwarf. I still can see her, her crumpled, diminutive body topped by a hideous, oversized head. And the hair. Wild and helmet-like. Like an exorbitant wig.

Oddly enough, her hair at least was always clean and nicely cut. Although uncombed and cruelly dishevelled. It tended to hang like mats.

I had seen this woman several times on Mittlestrasse. She was, incongruously, always well dressed -- always new, stylish (although casual) clothes. But always filthy and crumpled. She usually had a multitude of bags about her, filled with refuse and what one can only imagine with a shudder. She collects stuff out of the bins in the street.

I can still smell the beer coming off of her like a toxic, suffocating atmosphere enveloping all around her. Someone must be taking care of her. But, I imagine, she occasionally escapes and runs off to rummage through the garbage, taking breaks by hunching down in a doorway, rocking and muttering to her self. Like she was angrily battling some inner daemon that was threatening to break out of her and consume passers by.

On this day, she was fairly coherent, compared to other states of mind I had seen her in. Stinking like the floor of a bar after a big party, she started talking to me.

My German was much better by then. Although I could hardly understand what she slurred. I responded and tried to make polite conversation. You know the standard "Oh, you don't say?" and "My, that's interesting." But it disturbed me that she repeatedly stroked my jacket. If I remember correctly, she threw her arms around my neck at one point and hung on, her entire grotesque form hanging from me, dragging me down. I had the feeling she wanted to crawl into me, fuse into my skin.

Needless to say, I was becoming increasingly uncomfortable and was growing concerned by her piercing glances and hysterical tone. I waited for the bus, nodding and answering her questions about my age and name as calmly as possible, marking time until the bus, my refuge, arrived. To my extreme alarm, she climbed into the bus behind

me. Without thinking, like on automatic pilot, I squeezed through a crowd of passengers - old age pensioner types -- to sit two rows back from the mad woman.

She must be terribly nearsighted or was blind drunk at the time. She didn't see me. But she continued to look for me, calling "Where is my Shannette? Who took my lovely Shannette away."

I was mortified. I looked out the window trying to ignore her. Trying to be anonymous as though I could not possibly know who her Shannette was.

Everyone on the bus was doing the same. Looking out the window, trying with silent embarrassment to ignore the woman. She gave up and got off at the next stop.

But I was still squirming inwardly and my skin crawled under the jacket where she had stroked me. And I squirm every time I think of that incident.

And think "There but for the grace of god, go I." You know, I don't think it was the dirt or the ugliness of her body that got me so rattled. I think it is the fear that each of us have that the ugly, drunken bag lady we all have in us is could some day come out and take over. I wasn't afraid of her. I was afraid of me.

And I am ashamed. I am ashamed that I didn't treat her like a human being in need and instead reacted to my fear.

Oh, yes. I saw her every once in a while after that. She didn't recognize me and I never spoke with her again.

Huh.

No, no, that's right. We were outside the bus when we met. Doesn't it count that we were in the bus at the same time....

OK. I'll try to think up something else. Are you sure you don't want to hear about someone I met in a train? One time I was taking the train from Munich to...

OK. Bus. Got it.

Hmm.

All right. I have it. A few weeks before I left Hilden to move to Munich, I met a woman on the bus. I can't remember where I was going, but it was a rather long bus ride and we had a lot of time to talk. I seem to remember that we were the only people on the bus. How we ended up sitting next to each other is a mystery. Anyway, we were definitely on the same wavelength and talked up a storm. As we approached my stop (I was the first to get out), she suggested we go for coffee sometime. This is a German's way of saying "Let's be friends." Whether coffee is actually consumed or not, is irrelevant. The important thing is to exchange telephone numbers and expect future contact.

She was new in Hilden and was eager to get to know people in the area, as she explained. I was sad to tell her that it was useless to exchange phone numbers. I was leaving Hilden in the next few days. I barely keep up with my good friends that live in other towns, and it is unrealistic that we could have started a functional friendship at that point. And she really wanted to meet people in the area, not someone who was going to be 600 km away.

We were both pretty sad. But, I got out at my stop and never saw her again. A pity, isn't it?

So... that is a story about someone I met in a bus. Is that what you wanted? OK. Good.

You sure you don't want to hear about someone I met in a train. No? OK. Fine.

1minutetopic: mom03
Contributor: Shannon Frances
Completed: December 2005, Gauting
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Things That Are Easier to Get into Than out of

I really don't know why I do this to myself. Its not that I can't say no. I say no all the time. It would be nice to think that I can see the possibilities in every situation, but that won't wash. Every time I agree to do something like this it's far enough in the future that it really does seem like fun.

Gwen had called a month ago to ask me to have a few friends over to get their input for her run for city council. No biggie, she said, just a coffee for some of the neighbors to discuss the proposed rezoning to allow a Wal-Mart down where the old shoe factory used to be. "No problem," I said. "I have nice neighbors and we all drink coffee. Just tell me when."

We set up a time and I got on the phone. By the forth call I realized that the Wal-Mart would be about as welcome as a high-rise hog rendering factory. By the tenth, I learned that there was a neighborhood coalition that wanted to turn the sight into a senior center. And that Marge Harris's husband had big plans for a small development of luxury homes on that sight.

Okay, I thought, this might not be the happy gathering I had originally envisioned, but at least it would give Gwen a chance to hear the diverse concerns of the citizens she wanted to represent.

That was before Trudy Gulliver told me that her cousin Lucile told her that Gwen's campaign funds came straight from the corporate Waltons. And if Ben Harris's new homes were built, our property tax would go sky high.

Yikes! My cozy coffee klatch seemed to be morphing into a public blood letting. I chewed on this news for a while and decided that if I didn't take a stand on anything I'd be all right. I'd just let everyone say their part, drink their coffee and make up their own minds. After all, we were all reasonably mature intelligent people.

The day before the meeting, my husband called from work to say he wouldn't be able to make it. The neighborhood coalition that wanted the senior center had just become clients of his law firm, so he thought it best if he spent the evening with his sister and her family.

That call was immediately followed by Gwen's campaign manager wanting to know what I was going to wear.

I stared blankly at the phone for a minute. I hadn't been asked that question since Bunny Tucker and I were in sixth grade together. "I don't know," I said. "Probably my white slacks and a sea green off-the-shoulder top Rob gave me for my birthday. Why?"

Lisa Wilson, the campaign manager didn't say anything for a moment. "As you probably know, there is a serious misconception that Wal-Mart is, shall we say, not properly up-scale for some tastes. I hear that the Harries will be there." She managed to say it like I had invited Paris Hilton just to show up the non up-scaleness of Gwen's contributors. "I think it would be better if we went with something a little more classy."

I tried to say this was just a few friends over for coffee but the next words out of her mouth stopped me cold.

“What kind of wine were you planning on serving? I know a caterer who does absolutely divine things with shrimp. Why don’t I drop by so we can coordinate your wardrobe so that you and Gwen will accent each other properly? Shall we say four this afternoon?” I was still trying to get beyond “But I...” when she hung up.

All right, I thought, when she shows up I will just explain that I had agreed to a coffee for some neighbors -- nothing fancy -- and she could look at my slacks and top and let Gwen know so she didn’t show up in sequins and lace.

As soon she showed up on my doorstep promptly at four, I knew Lisa was not a local girl. She sported a navy blue power suit, had a haircut that probably cost more than my car payment and a smile that looked like she kept in it the fridge when not in use. “Hi,” she grasped my hand in a used car salesman handshake while appraising my home with a professional eye. “Um, yes, this might do. Though I think we’ll want to paint that wall something warmer -- maybe Mediterranean Parsnip. And that table will have to go.” She got on her cell and started barking orders featuring words like “oak table,” “wall swags” and “some decent paintings.”

Then she handed me a list of colors that she considered appropriate for me to wear along with the name of a woman. “Isobel will be dropping off your dress around six tomorrow. What size do you wear?”

“Eight,” I lied. I had been an eight until Rob, Junior, had been born, and I fully intended to be an eight again, someday.

She eyed me and I felt like she had been surgically implanted with calipers in her eyeballs. She shrugged, thanked me, and blew out the door as though on her way to oversee a session of “Total Celeb Makeover.”

I took a deep breath and tried to calm myself with a yoga meditation I had learned at one of the three classes I managed to attend last fall. Okay, I told myself, this will all be over by nine tomorrow night. At least I won’t have to do the painting and maybe a warmer color in the dining room would be nice for a change. I knew it would take a lot more than yoga breathing to get me through this.

The next afternoon a troop of men from a foreign country invaded my home. I retreated to my bedroom wondering what I would tell my husband when he finally came home. When I did come down to see the men out I had to admit my home had never looked so good. It would all be gone again by ten that evening, but in the meantime we looked like a layout for “Homes of the Rich and Famous.” I opened the fridge to see my mayo, green bean casserole leftovers and Rob’s beer had been replaced by a goodly stash of expensive wine. Why not, I said to myself, as I lifted out a bottle. I could use a little something to fortify me for the coming conflagration. I poured myself some in one of the glasses that had materialized with the table, chairs and paintings. It was really excellent, so I had another and began to feel much better about the whole thing. After all, this is the American way: free debate and all that. And I would get to wear a really great new dress. I was on my third sampling when the door bell rang. I smiled warmly at the severe little woman carrying a garment bag. She shot out a rapid stream of something that, if it was

in English it was so heavily accented that I couldn't make out anything, until she got to "Peek hit up hat ten." By now I knew the drill. I just smiled and nodded. The mighty flood of corporate dollars would take care of everything. I just had to float along on the tide.

I checked the new wall clock that had appeared on my new Mediterranean-colored wall. I had better get dressed. My downstairs had been transformed so brilliantly, I couldn't wait to see what the dress looked like. Gosh, I thought, this must be what Cinderella felt like with that bibbity bobbity boo stuff. I took a quick shower, being careful not to let too much water get into my wine. My short tousled-looking curly hair wouldn't need much work, so I decided to see how I looked in the dress. It seemed to be made of spun clouds: a simple sheath of moss green with a V in the back and strappy little sleeves. I stripped out of my baggy sweats and stepped into my silky confection. Right away I realized that I should have been a tad more forthcoming about my dress size. With a good deal of squirming I managed to get most of it over my hips and even got one arm into what I thought must be the proper set of straps. But when I looked in the mirror I realized that I hadn't gotten it quite right. I tried to ease the dress off only to discover that if I pulled my arm out of the straps too hard they would rip. I hopped over closer to the mirror to see if I turned around could I find a way to gather a little more of the ultra soft material over my boobs, thereby freeing up some room to get my arm out. But now my right arm was held prisoner inside the damn dress, leaving only my left out to try to extract itself from the straps that were beginning to bite into my shoulder. A brilliant idea occurred to me at this point. Maybe if I laid down on something hard, like the floor, I might be able to wiggle out of the dress. Kind of the reverse of when I was a kid and I tried to get in to my really tight jeans. I got as far as kneeling down only to discover that if I bent over to lie down, the seams would pop like rivets on an overheated boiler. I would have to hit the decks hard, as they say. Which I did. The side of my head conked into the edge of my dresser and I saw stars for a moment. Other than being flat on my face on the floor, I was in no better shape than I had been vertical. In fact one of the damn straps seemed to have gotten hooked on a drawer.

That is when I heard the first bing bong of the door bell. All right, I thought, there is no hope for it but to rip my way out and try to explain it all later. I had greatly underestimated the strength of the gauzy fabric. The stuff had the strength industrial nylon strapping. The bell rang again. I opened my mouth to call for help, then shut it. There was no way I was going to let anyone see me bulging like bratwurst out of this damn woman-eating concoction. Rob would be home sometime, and in the meantime I would just lie there listening to the door bell and the rising murmur of voices from my driveway. God, I hope Rob gets home before the circulation is so shut off from my left arm that I get gangrene. Being the philosophic sort that I am, I figured, if that did happen, at least I would have an excuse for missing my own friendly little get-together.

1minutetopic: mom04
Contributor: Frances Burke
Completed: February 2006, Black Forest
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Sinking Sensations

It is one of the great ironies of life that its lessons are often learned too late to apply them to the most appropriate situations.

I started one of those lessons shortly after I met my husband Walter; my ex-husband, I should say. At first it was all roses and wine. He was beginning a promising political career, and we made a good looking couple. I suppose I am at fault as much as anyone. I allowed myself to be led on by promises and my own imagination. As with many things in life, one thing leads to another, and soon I was pregnant.

It wasn't exactly planned, but I was convinced that it would all work out in the end. We were married before I started showing, and everything seemed to be going along fine. Walter spent most of his time at work, which was fine, because he had been becoming progressively more annoying when he was around. Apparently he felt that my pregnancy was part of a conspiracy to cheat him out of a life. With time things got worse. His career, while not brilliant, continued to occupy most of his time, and I was only required to put in brief appearances occasionally, smiling for the cameras, filling the role of the requisite adoring spouse.

Time together was terrible. He bickered constantly and forbade me to take up any occupation in the fear that it might somehow adversely affect his own career. I was like a prisoner in that house. My only outlet was Amanda, my daughter. At least I could still hope for a good life for her.

The real turning point was when Walter started drinking heavily. I guess things weren't going that well for him, and home life was obviously no consolation. He chose this unfortunate point to start spending more time at home. It was unbearable. He found fault with everything: whatever I did was never enough. He was always arguing, always drunk.

It was at dinner, after knocking over a pitcher of water, he said that my cooking was lousy anyway, and if it wasn't for me he wouldn't be stuck in such a slump. I told him that I could make it easy for him: I wanted a divorce.

"What?"

"A divorce. I want out," I replied.

He was incredulous. "*You* were the one that wanted to get married in the first place! I gave you respectability! A house! And now *you* want to get out?"

"*You* give me a headache and, yes, I want out."

"*You* ungrateful whore!" he said slapping me to the ground. My ears were ringing, and I threw up.

The next day I still had a headache and a black eye. He said he was sorry, but divorce was out of the question. He wasn't sorry, and the abuse continued. Actually it got worse. Eventually he stopped even pretending to be sorry. I had to do something. I could take Amanda and run, but I knew he'd hunt us down one way or another.

The breaking point came when he hit Amanda. She had been sick and crying a lot that morning. Walter was so drunk that he couldn't go to work, so he hung around at home making life hell for us. He was trying to make some sense out of the news paper in his hands when Amanda came over to play with it. He yanked it away, knocking her over, and she started crying again. He grabbed Amanda and shook her, telling her to shut up. His parenting skills left a lot to be desired even when he was sober. I came into the room just as he hit her across the face. I pushed him aside and grabbed her into my arms. He held his hand up as though to strike, and I starred him in the eyes. "This is the last time. It *will not* happen again." I sat rocking Amanda for an hour before she finally went to sleep. She would be OK, but only if I got her out of this situation. And it was looking more and more like there was only one way out.

Things started to get better the instant I decided to kill him. It was much easier to tolerate his outbursts knowing that I wouldn't have to put up with them for long. I hadn't really planned anything specific, but seek and you shall receive. Walter came home very late and very drunk one night. The car had a fresh dent and he managed to park on one of the bushes. He came staggering in looking for a fight. Amanda was in bed, and I just happened to be in the kitchen for a drink of water.

"Wherza food?" he slurred. I just smiled at him. "Wherza food?" he repeated, breathing out rancid fumes as he grabbed my arms. "Gimmiea... uh... something to eat," he said shaking me.

"I've got just the thing for you," I said as I pulled the iron skillet from the stove.

I'm not sure if he was falling backwards or winding up to hit me, but I prefer to believe the worst. I caught him in the temple with what I thought was a pretty good blow. He fell to the ground but kept moving and mumbling, "Whaddya doing?" I don't think he even felt it. I was hoping to make it look like an accident, but he was still moving. I panicked. I ran into the garage and grabbed a hammer. It was heavy enough, but too short to get a really good swing, so I dropped it in favor of the shovel. By the time I made it back to the kitchen, blood was starting to cover the floor, and Walter was crawling around, trying to stand. He got to his knees just as I brought the shovel down on his head. I hit him again. And again. I wanted to make sure he would not survive.

Finally I stopped, out of breath, heart pounding. The kitchen was a mess, and it didn't look much like an accident. I tried to clean up but his wounds kept bleeding; it must have been all that alcohol in his system. Finally I wrapped him in plastic wrap. Putting the shovel away I noticed a couple of bags of cement mix. That's when it all came together. There was no good place to drive the car into the bay, but we did have a small boat.

Dragging Walter out was a chore. There is a reason we use the term "dead weight", and, until you have had to load your ex-husband's body into a wheelbarrow, you never really appreciate its full gravity. I hung his feet over the end into two round basins. I figured the cement would cure in a day, and the following evening he'd join the fish at the bottom of the sea. I almost lost him a few times before he was in the boat. The worst part was tipping him off of the small peer into the boat, concrete shoes and all. In the end I had to get into the boat and pull him in. One of his legs went over the side, and it took me several minutes to get him all back into the boat.

Finally we were out on the bay, under a cloudy sky with intermittent moon light. It was romantic in a way. I unwrapped his head, and smiled at him one last time. What a wretched sight he was, all purple and gashed. With a shove I heaved his torso over the side. I was feeling such a sense of relief as I lifted the last concrete shoe out of the boat I hadn't noticed that it had snagged on my wet dress.

As Walter descended into the cold dark water, he dragged me down with him, tied to his accursed foot. Deeper and deeper we went. I could feel the pressure building, crushing my head. After what seemed like an eternity we stopped. I struggled to free my self in the murky blackness, but found it to be impossible. There we were: Walter's cold body hugging me in the icy darkness.

I was not going to go out this way! I tore at my dress with the fury of a woman not about to abandon her only child, and with a kick I launched my self to the surface. Panting and coughing, I searched for the boat. It had drifted a little way off, but the goddess of adrenaline was with me, and I managed to get back into it, cold and soaked to the bone, but alive, and newly single.

Rowing back in the inky night I made a solemn promise to me self *never* to put my self in that situation again. It hasn't been a hard promise to keep.

1minutetopic: mom04
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
Completed: February 2006, Black Forest
Last revised: 26 March 2006

The Price of a Snowball

“I cannot be dead,” thought Jerrith, “Death would not hurt so much.”

He squeezed open one eye but shut it immediately because of a burning bar of light that threatened to sear his retina. Rolling on to his back, he lifted his sandbag arms to feel his head. He was interested to determine whether the pain he was suffering had come from an injury. All he could determine was that his head was intact and his hair was damp (with sweat? blood?), so injury was not ruled out.

He felt an angry thirst and considered which was going to be more harmful in the long run, dehydration or aggravating his potential head injury. His mind returned to the burning streak of light. Something about its appearance was important. But what? What did it signify?

He rolled onto his other side, unleashing waves of nausea that coursed through his body. What did the bar of light mean?

“OH SHIT!” he suddenly realized, “I’M LATE FOR WORK!” The bar of light was the sun shining under his bed room door, indicating that it was past nine. He opened his eyes again and spent several minutes focusing on the digits of his bed-side clock. The image resolved to 9:37. At this very moment, he was already a half an hour late for work.

Moving as quickly as he could with out hurling, he showered and dressed, wondering how he could get across town as fast as possible. When he pulled on his jeans, he heard a jingling in the pocket: Tim’s car keys. The previous evening came back to him suddenly. He and his room mate Tim and some buddies had gone out to play pool and have a few beers. Tim had gone home with some punky-looking skinny girl and gave Jim his car keys to drive Jerrith home. Jim was sort of the default designated driver since he was Mormon and didn’t drink alcohol. Jerrith was in no state to drive the car himself and, upon thinking about it, wasn’t absolutely sure that Jim had driven him home. But he had apparently arrived in one piece -- with Tim’s car key’s in his pocket.

“Bonus!” thought Jerrith, “I can take Tim’s car to work.” That would save a good twenty minutes.

He was on his way when he remembered that Tim had told him specifically to leave the car parked on the street as he was planning to come by immediately after work and pick up the car to drive to the airport and pick up his little brother. Well, it was too late for regrets -- Jerrith was already halfway to work. He would think up some kind of excuse for leaving early and get the car back on the curb before Tim got home.

And while he was thinking of excuses, he would have to come up with one for being late. This would have to be good, as he would be over an hour late. It would have to be plausible. After discarding the first few ideas, Jerrith settled on some sort of medical emergency because that would generate some sympathy -- people like to believe that bad things happen to people like him. Hmm. It would have to be something serious but nothing that would leave any marks. He didn’t have any stitches or cast to back him up.

Eventually, he decided that he would claim anaphalactic shock. That would leave no marks, could be potentially life threatening and be probable enough for his actual

evening. He would say he was out playing pool with some buddies (true enough) and swelled up like a balloon with an allergic reaction. And he got lots of red spots all over his body and itched a lot. Jerrith had seen a reenactment of such an attack on “Rescue America” and could come up with lots of description. He had a few minutes to rehearse his story before parking the car and rushing into the office.

As always, he went directly to the coffee machine. Nancy, who was pouring herself a coffee, saw him and remarked, “Shit, Jerrith, you look bad.”

“Yeah, sorry,” he said, doing his best hang dog, “I didn’t have a chance to shave in the hospital.”

“Hospital?” Nancy’s look of derision turned to alarm. “What happened? Why were you in the hospital.”

Gratifyingly, Jerrith’s boss Mark walked in right at the moment of exposition. Jerrith acted like he didn’t notice Mark while he continued. “Oh, it’s nothing. Just a little anaphalactic shock. it was nothing, really. But they wanted to keep me overnight for observation.”

Jerrith felt he had gotten the right mixture of “after a traumatic event” fatigue and “I don’t want to worry you” nonchalance. While Nancy was gushing all sorts of “oh my gosh” dribble, Jerrith chose to notice Mark and said, “Oh hey, Mark! I was just on my way to see you. Terribly sorry about being late.”

“Jerrith was in the hospital with shock,” wailed Nancy. Good old Nancy, you can count on her to get hysterical.

Mark was saying, “Sorry to hear that,” with his mouth but his eyes were saying “this had better not be another lame excuse.” “D’ja have an accident?”

“Not an accident, just an allergic reaction. Nothing serious, really, but they wanted to keep me overnight for observation.”

Just then, Peter, Mark’s boss walked in. “This is my lucky day,” thought Jerrith, as he continued, “They pumped me full of antihistamine and adrenaline but because I couldn’t get my breathing under control, they didn’t want to let me go.”

Mark, who had not seen his boss enter the room was opening his mouth to say something when Peter walked up to the little group.

“Jerrith had a bad allergic reaction last night,” squealed Nancy.

“Yeah, I heard when I came in. That’s tough, Jerrith. How you feeling now.”

“Oh, pretty good. Maybe a little swollen here and there. But I can breath again,” he took a deep breath to demonstrate and beamed with gratitude.

“Allergies can be really dangerous. My cousin died of a bee sting,” Peter was shaking his head with concern. Jerrith’s boss had clamped his mouth into a thin line and was rapidly adjusting his expression to “if the boss believes it, so do I.” “You’re a lucky man, Jerrith. What was it anyway?”

“Huh?”

“What did you react to?”

“Oh,” Jerrith had neglected to consider this question and took a sip of coffee to stall. He said the first thing that came to mind: “Seafood. It was the shrimp cocktail that got me.”

To his relief, Peter’s look of concerned deepened, “You be careful with that. People die every year from that. If you need medical advice, let me know. I know a very good allergist.”

“Thanks, Peter!” His gratitude was genuine -- he was genuinely glad that Peter had bought it so that Mark had to buy it, too.

Nancy wanted more of the gory details, but Jerrith valiantly suggested that he was eager to get to work and make up the lost time. More or less satisfied with the situation, the little group dispersed and went to perform their respective tasks.

Jerrith took care to run down the hall in view of Mark and Paul’s office a couple of times with a handful of papers to demonstrate how he was working extra hard to make up for being late. But, in fact, he was still too hung over to concentrate much on work. Nancy had been very instrumental in spreading the rumor of his illness, and when he wasn’t rearranging his notebooks, he was describing the gruesome details of his medical adventure to various coworkers who stopped by to see if he was OK. He took a couple of breaks to come up with an excuse for leaving work early.

He figured he could get off work early and win some valuable employee points by asking to go home early to clean up before their dinner meeting with the bank guys. He didn’t want to represent the company unshaven and wearing yesterday’s clothes. He figured he would get this OKed by Peter and then, when telling Mark about it, make it sound like it was Peter’s idea. So, about three o’clock, he stuck his head into Peter’s office.

“Excuse me, Peter, I hope I am not disturbing.” Peter waved him in. “It’s just that I was thinking about the meeting with the bankers this evening...”

“Don’t worry about that, Jerrith. I was thinking about that, too. I know you must be exhausted.” Jerrith shrugged with a long-suffering, yet brave expression. “And I know you must be a bit nervous about being around sea food again so soon after your shock.”

When Jerrith had picked seafood as the source of his allergy, he had not thought about the fact that the meeting had been booked at the most expensive fish restaurant in the town. “Oh, no, not at all, sir. I was just...”

“Really, Jerrith, you need to consider these things now. There will be traces of sea food in everything in that restaurant -- salads, french fries, even the deserts, everything. You will need to make some adjustments to your lifestyle in light of your allergies.” Peter had taken a paternal expression and was looking hard at Jerrith, trying to be gentle but persuasive as possible.

“I am willing to take the risk for...”

“No, I won’t hear of it. I think it will be better if you skip the meeting this evening. I am sure I can ask Nancy to go instead. She will understand the gravity of the situation.”

“Oh, no,” wailed Jerrith in his mind, “Not Nancy! She can’t replace me!” But before he could formulate some brave company-devoted reason for going, Peter was insisting to drop Jerrith off at home on his way to the restaurant.

“It’s right on my way and I don’t expect you to take the bus or a taxi home after what you have been through.

This was not going well. To add some flare to his story, he had told several people how he had been rushed to the emergency room at Northside General by a compassionate taxi driver who had refused payment. And then bragged about walking the three blocks to work although the nurses had offered to take him in a wheel chair. There was no way he could retro-fit Tim’s car into the story and there was no way to refuse Peter’s offer. Jerrith needed to get Tim’s car back home by 4:30. If he got home at 3:45, he could take the bus back to work and get the car back around 5:00 and hope that Tim wasn’t able to get away as soon as he wanted to.

“Will you be ready by 4:30?” asked Peter, “And, trust me, I won’t consider letting you take the bus.”

“Thanks, Peter. That’s really great of you. I’ll be ready.” Jerrith’s heart sank into the sour swamp of his stomach. He spent the rest of the work day trying to think of a way out of the situation, but he knew that Peter was feeling like a caring employer, a people’s hero, right now and it could only hurt Jerrith to burst his bubble. Reluctantly, he piled a bunch of work papers into a folder, hoping to get a chance to mention that he was bringing work home for the weekend, and marched down to Peter’s office at 4:30.

On the way home, Jerrith thought furiously how he was going to explain things Tim. He was pretty sure Tim would accept the part about being late to work. But he didn’t want to admit to lying to his boss. Tim would find away to use against him, Jerrith was sure. So, as he pretend to listen to his boss, he plotted and schemed.

Because of traffic and the route that Peter chose, they arrived at Jerrith’s flat well after five. Jerrith made a point to come around to the driver’s side of the car after he got out and bend down to thank Peter warmly for the ride. He stood at the curb waving when Peter drove away. When the car had turned at the end of the street, Jerrith started up the path to the building with a painful limp.

He took the elevator and let himself in the apartment. As expected, Tim was there and he looked pissed.

“Tim,” said Jerrith, “You won’t believe what happened...”

“You are right, I won’t. Where is the car.”

“The car is fine. It’s at work. I drove it to work because I was running late.”

“I figured as much. I talked to Jim.”

“Well, anyway, the doctor said I shouldn’t drive the car home, so Peter gave me a ride. I am sorry, I know you have to pick your brother up...”

“What doctor?” Tim had a dangerously amused look on his face.

"I told you, you aren't going to believe this. When I got to work, I parked the car and went around to the front of the building. Just then, a lady up the hill started screaming. She had been pushing this kid in a wheelchair down the hill -- I guess they were coming from Northside -- and the chair got away. It was headed for Prospect Drive, you know, and the traffic was real heavy for that time of day. Well, without thinking, I ran for it. I got to it just as it was at the curb and I kind of ran in front of the chair to slow it down. The chair ran into me and stopped, but I tripped over the curb and twisted my ankle. The kid was alright, but I had to get the secretary to take me to Northside. The doctor said that it was sprained, not broken, but I should stay off it for a while and explicitly said not to drive a car. Since the swelling went down right away, I was going to drive anyway, but the secretary told Peter and he just insisted that he drive me home."

"Uh huh," was all that Tim said. He was staring manevolently at Jerrith.

"Look, man, I'm sorry. It can't be helped. But I will be glad to pay for the taxi to the airport to make up for it."

"Uh huh."

"Look, Tim, I didn't twist my ankle on purpose, OK. Let's just focus on getting out to the airport to pick up your little brother."

"Jim is already on his way."

Good old Jim, thought Jerrith. This wasn't the first time that Jim got his ass out of trouble -- and he doubted it was the last.

"Whew, that's a relief," Jerrith hobbled over to the sofa, sat down gingerly and started arranging dirty laundry under his outstretched leg to keep his sprained ankle elevated. "I was really freaking out about your brother."

"Tough break, man," said Tim, although his stare didn't soften and he really didn't look like he believed a word Jerrith said. "So the doc said it's sprained?"

"Yeah, at least sprained with a possible hairline fracture. Let me tell you, it hurt like a son of a bitch until they gave me some shots."

"That really sucks, man," Tim's expression hadn't changed, but he added, "So you can't drive at all with that ankle?"

"Nope. Doctor said I should stay off of it for a week -- no driving, biking, or walking over ten minutes. He wanted to give me a bunch of pain killers, but I didn't even want the shots they gave me."

"How are you going to get to work on Monday?"

"I don't know," said Jerrith unconcerned, "I'll get George or someone to pick me up." Maybe Tim was being a hardass because he thought Jerrith was going to expect him to do taxi service. "I am sure I can get any one of a number of people to pick me up."

"Good. That's very good." Tim did not look any more reassured. The two men stared at each other for a few moments before he continued. "Real shame about the weekend, dude."

Dooh! Jerrith had not once considered how his sprained ankle would effect the ski trip he had planned for the weekend.

“Yeah, man. That sucks. But, I figure it will still be fun to hang out in the lodge with everyone.”

“Yes. But it is a real shame to let your lift ticket and pre-paid ski rental go to waste isn’t it.” Suddenly, Jerrith understood the hard look in Tim’s eye now perfectly well.

“Yeah, well,” was all Jerrith could think to say.

“I tell you what,” said Tim, with a wicked grin, “I’ll help you out. How ’bout I take those tickets off your hands. You wouldn’t want them to go to waste, would you.” Both men thought involuntarily about Candis Kaufmann, a brainless blond with the reputation of being an easy piece of ass, who was also going on the ski trip. Jerrith had spent more than he could afford for the trip because he expected her to be one of the fringe benefits. “And it could be your way of apologizing for the car thing, right?”

“Sure, but what about your brother...?” Jerrith was grasping at straws.

“Yeah, what about him? You know, all he wants to do is sit around and watch TV. You could watch TV with him, since you can’t do anything else because of your bad ankle. You guys could keep each other company, right?” Tim’s pimply fourteen year old brother was a couch potato extraordinaire, and, when provided with enough diet Coke and popcorn, could spend months at a time in front of a television.

“Sure, but...”

“Unless you are exaggerating about the ankle. You wouldn’t exaggerate about something like that, would you. ’Cause if you did, that would be like a lie. And you know I hate a lie. I don’t think I could live with a liar. If I thought you were lying to me, I think I would have to ask you for the \$3000 you owe me and kick you out of the apartment. That’s how much I dislike liars.”

Jerrith gave up. “Dude, would I lie to you?” As visions of Tim bonking Candis doggy style filled his mind, he hobbled over to his room to get out his tickets and booking information for Tim.

1minutetopic: mom04
Contributor: Shannon Frances
Completed: February 2006, Gauting
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Post Office of the Damned

LA sweltered its way through yet another power shortage. The Post Office caught the sun in its floor-to ceiling plate glass windows, turning the normally air-conditioned interior into an oven.

Rubin Aguilera stood in an interminable line at the one window that remained open. His boss, a real bad ass, had given him a package to send registered mail, return-receipt requested. *The damn thing weighs a ton*, he thought shifting from one foot to the other. Sweat trickled down his nose to drip off the end. It itched along his spinal column. Every time he tried to scratch, the bulky package threatened to slip from his grasp.

The door swung open, and a skinny blond girl came in to check on her PO box. She shot him a slow smile and took a long slow sip from a can of Coke. Condensation twinkled in the bright light as it ran over her long green tipped fingers. Rubin licked his lips suddenly realizing how thirsty he had become. She mistook his thirst as a come on and, bending over to peek into her cubby, provided him with an excellent view of her tight, round bottom.

An entire new itch began. *A thong girl, no doubt about it. That skirt of hers doesn't have enough material in it to make a good dew rag.* He grinned at her.

"You live around here?" she asked. "Cause I just moved in, and I don't know nobody around here yet." She took another pull on the dripping can.

"No. I live over in East LA. I'm just in here to mail this package. I work down the street at the Home Improvement Center." Rubin wondered what the chances were that he could talk her into getting him a Coke. His polyester shirt had turned into a sauna, trapping the heat next to his skin. "Seems like that Murphy's Law thing. Whatever line I'm in is moving slower than the line I just left to get into it." He smiled encouragingly at her.

She sipped again, mulling that over. Nothing clicked for her. "Is that the one about the lawyer who works for the mob?" She asked, having at last settled on the one part of the sentence she had grasped.

"Um, no. But, hey, I have been standing here, sweating my ass off, for about a million years." He tried his most winning smile. "What's the chances I could get you to just go over to that shop across the street and pick me up a cold Coke. I swear, I'm about to die."

She grinned at him. "Well, I guess I wouldn't want that to happen. My name's Gloria."

He sat down the football shaped package to fish some money out of the pocket of his tight genes. The first bill he came up with was a five. Just as he tried to stuff it back, looking for a one, he noticed his package slowly rolling across the highly polished floor.

He handed her the five and made a grab for the package.

A kid on inline skates flew around the corner from the stamp and packaging vending machines right into it, sending both himself and Rubin's package crashing into the wall of postal boxes.

The kid gave him a nasty look. "You trying to kill someone or something!"

“Why don’t you look where you’re going? You could have knocked someone down.”

Rubin retrieved his package and looked around. The girl and his five were no where to be seen. He tried to wipe the sweat from his eyes with his sleeve, but the synthetic fabric only moved the moisture around a little.

At last another window opened as he slowly moves to the front of the line. *Only three more people to go and I can get out of here*, he thought, moving the heavy bundle to his other arm. His shoulders were beginning to ache. He felt a wet spot on the bottom of the package. *God, please let that be my sweat*. He looked down and realized the package must be leaking. “Oh, shit!” He stepped out of line.

They would never let me mail the damn thing this way this way, and I can’t take it back to Mister Whitney without getting my ass chewed off. Then he remembered the vending machines. Sure enough, one dispensed bubble pack, another packing tape and a third sheets of brown paper. With luck he could rewrap it and let everyone think it got broke in shipping. Better be fast so no one sees it’s already damaged. He fed bills into the machines, took his packaging to a little table in the corner and removed the paper. Sure enough, the bottom of the cardboard box had a dark damp stain. It only took a few minutes to rewrap it, get it addressed and get back in line. He glanced out the window the in time to see the skinny blond walking away, sipping the Coke she had brought for him.

A large black woman harrumphed loudly, saying to the older woman in front of her. “You see that? Young folks these days got no consideration at all. Girl goes out to get her friend a drink, and he don’t even have the good manners to wait around for her.” She stared at Rubin with frosty disdain.

He pretended to examine his package with great interest. There’s no point trying to explain. I’ll just mail the damn package and get of this Post Office of the Damned and that will be the end of it.

Just then a cold blast of air hit him. Power had been restored, and he had made it up to the window. He slid over the package, praying that it would stay dry at least till he got out of there.

“It needs to go first class, return receipt.”

The haggard postal worker never even looked at him, just weighed it and said, “That’ll be thirty-eight fifty.”

Rubin reached into his pocket with a sinking heart, knowing he would be exactly five dollars short. He glanced up to the clock at the end of the room. If he ran all the way, he might be able to get back to Home Improvement Center, bum the money from Hector and make it back before they closed for the day. *Or I could just send the piece of shit regular mail and start looking for a new job. Nicest thing about a minimum wage job, you can always pick up another one, no problemo*.

Rubin shrugged, slid the money over and said, “Send it regular mail.” *If I don’t get out of here now, I’ll go postal for sure*.

He turned and walked through the revolving door and headed to the end of a long line waiting in front of the only open window. The package under his arm weighed a ton...

1minutetopic: sf01
Contributor: Frances Burke
Completed: December 2005, Black Forest
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Post Office of the Damned

The year 2046 will be a very special year. Not only will it be “two to the eleventh year” but through an amazing convergence of calendars, Ramadan, Hanukkah, Deepavali, Christmas, Buddha Fest, the Winter Solstice and even Cheyenne Frontier Days will occur on exactly the same day, namely January twenty-third. This great day will be heralded with buoyant expectations the world over. Unfortunately for a group of belated gift senders, it is also the date on which a giant asteroid will strike the earth landing on a post office in Denver, Colorado, kicking up enough dust to engulf the earth in another ice age and destroying all of mankind except for a few throwbacks hiding out on a Greek mountain. We now zoom ahead to that fateful day.

“Two dollars and twenty-seven cents is your change. Thank you,” says a round faced, bald man in suspenders behind the counter.

“Mozzeltov.”

“NEXT!”

“I would like to send this to my loved ones in Fajulla.”

“What’s in the box?”

“Dates.”

“It’s ticking... Are you sure it’s not a bo...”

Just then the peaceful scene of mundane domesticity is interrupted by an alarm-clock shaped asteroid slamming in to the post office at a bazillion miles per hour. “Whump.” A fifteen block radius is instantly vaporized with the exception of one exceptionally well built Pitney-Bowes stamping meter which is hurled high into the air, landing unharmed in a hay stack in southern Argentina and temporarily becoming the object of great consternation for Guillermo Ramirez who, upon witnessing the miraculous appearance of the intact Pitney-Bowes meter, decided that the world is coming to an end and causes wide-spread panic throughout South America, which is only quelled by the end of the world a few weeks later. Meanwhile, back at the post office, the souls of all the formerly present have been dismantled like the image from a bad DVD, transported to a staging area, and remantled like a good DVD.

The dimly lit staging area is like a huge amphitheater, finished in marble and luxuriously adorned with sculptures of heroic figures. Slowly the lights come up to reveal a robed figure standing at center stage. He has long hair and a beard most terrorists would be jealous of. The Christians in the audience begin to slyly wink at one another, nodding their heads in righteous recognition and ever so slightly patting themselves on the back. Of course the Muslims accept the messenger as the bearer of good news and anxiously await the twenty-seven virgins their pious lifestyles have entitled them to. The cowboys (beginning with the “holy ascension” of George W. Bush to the throne of “almighty ruler of the humble” in the first part of the century, Cowboyism has become the official religion of the US Government) are all wondering why the “Great Cowboy in the Sky” has sent down a hippy-liberal to induct them into the “Divine Rodeo.” And, of course, as in life, the

atheists simply shake their heads in disbelief. All speculation is abruptly brought to a halt as the needle is dragged off the record with a resounding “Whrrriiiiiipp!”

“Welcome to Purgatory!” the robed figure belts out in a tuneful bass, arms outstretched, smiling broadly in grand theatrical style. Anxious glances are exchanged as an audible gasp arises from the audience. The MC looks around, still smiling.

“Yes, yes, I know. Quite a surprise isn’t it? Well, trust me; it’s not half the surprise I’ve got in store for you all! Haa, haa! HAAA HAAA! HAAA HAAAAAA!” The acoustics of the theater are superb and every laugh of the small central figure shakes the whole audience to their soles. Everyone looks devastated, and they all join the atheists in their disbelief.

“But...” pipes up one Christian, “Aren’t You Jesus?”

“Me, Jesus? Haaa HAAA!” thunders the MC upsetting the audience tremendously. “No! But, don’t worry, he’s down here too!” he added with a satisfied nod of his head. After a pause for dramatic effect, he begins again. “I guess you could call this hell, and every one of you is going to enjoy torment for the rest of eternity for worshiping false gods.” The audience is now thoroughly depressed. That sinking feeling in the pit of their stomachs ever since puberty has been confirmed: they were all worthless idol worshipers. Looking around, they realized they were not alone. In fact not a single person from the post office was missing. A cowboy slowly raised his hand.

“Yes, cowboy, you have a question?”

Taking off his hat reverently he begins, “Oh Holy One...”

“Cut the groveling, hick! You’re in hell, got it? It is not like a little last minute butt-kissing is going to make a difference at this point.”

“Uh... well I just noticed that every one of us from the post office is here...” By now everyone was trying to figure out who, via surreptitious deity selection, might have escaped their own lamentable fate. “Who... Who are the chosen ones?”

“Oh that, sorry. I forgot to introduce my self. Here.” And with that all went black. A cough is heard from someone in the audience. A single flute begins to sing and a spot light gradually illuminates a misty mountain-top scene. An off-stage voice narrates “Here, from the high mountains, overseer of all that is seen, knower of all that is known, that merciful, forgiving god among gods, it’s... ZEUS!” The lights come up full, and caned applause plays as Zeus walks down the stage-set mountain back to the main floor of the theater. Arriving, he extends his arms out and bows slightly in a curtsy and says, “Zeus loves all his children!” with a smile and tear in his eye.

A Jew asks, “So, Mr. Zeus, is there any chance we can escape the fate of hell?”

“Of course not! You are a bunch of deluded infidels, and you’ll just have to burn forever.”

“But...” asks a native American, “you’ve been out of fashion for quite some time. How can we be expected to keep up if you’re not even on the menu?”

“I know,” Zeus says hunching his shoulders dejectedly, “Kind of depressing isn’t it? But hey! That is the great thing about free will: you’re free to make mistakes, and I’m free to

burn you all! Haaaa! Haaaaa!” another round of teeth-shattering laughter vibrates through the crowd.

“Ahem, Zeus?” asks a fat Buddhist “Buddhism is not a religion, and does not exclude the possibility of other deities, such as Yourself.”

Zeus raises one eyebrow, arms crossed on his chest, chin resting on a thumb. “Hmmm... Let me call in an arbitrator on this one.” Looking up at the sky he calls out, “Thor!”

A rumbling and cracking of far-off lightening intermittently illuminates the churning black clouds revealing Thor’s presence. The Buddhist smiles with anticipation.

Reading directly off a queue-card, Zeus calls out “The question is: Does Buddhism encompass belief in me, therefore sparing this man the painful fate of an eternity in hell?” Sweeping his arm skyward he bellows, “Thor says...”

A head splitting crack of thunder is heard as a bolt of lightening hits the man directly, vaporizing him once again. “That, ladies and gentlemen, would be a NO! Good night and good luck!” The stage lights fade, and all is panic as people scream and try to run. Lightening crashes again and again until all is once again quiet in the staging area.

1minutetopic: sf01
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
Completed: December 2005, Black Forest
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Post Office of the Damned

The sign read “Post Office of the Damned.” It was a handwritten sign in a dark red color. Daniel knocked on the door as he was examining the sign. “This looks like it could be blood,” he said loud with a solemn look on his face. He heard whispering voices from the other side of the door and then silence. He waited for ten seconds and then he knocked again. He definitely heard a hissing sound this time, as if someone was hurriedly running to hide and then more murmurs and whispers. “Strange that nobody answers the door,” Daniel thought. “No visitors ever come here?”

Daniel was an angel of the highest order. These are angels that have never incarnated on Earth but have always stayed in Heaven and provided their services to the Lord. They are messenger angels. In the very distant future, God knows in how many thousands of years from our time, these angels will incarnate for a very special purpose, which still remains secret. For the time being, though, Daniel and his likes fulfill their duties in Heaven. Many times they serve as guardian angels to people on earth but their main task is to deliver messages throughout the corners of the Universe. In other words, Daniel is a postman of the Cosmos.

In order to understand how psychically evolved these angels are, it suffices to say that together with the Archangels, the Virgin Mary, Pharah (the Holy Spirit) and the Stars of the Lord – Socrates, Confucius, St. John the Baptist, St. George, Homer, Hippocrates and Moses – they are the only souls that are allowed to enter into the Palace of the Lord. Another unique characteristic of these beings is their amazing speed. They are the fastest souls in the Universe. They can traverse billions of light-years in a fraction of a second! No wonder they are often imagined with wings on their shoulders. Not that they actually have wings, as many people would think, but they are often depicted with wings to symbolize the speed of their soul.

So, what is Daniel doing in a place like this? People have called this place Tartara or Hades or Hell which, contrary to public opinion, is not situated in the bowels of the Earth but on a very remote star, so far away that the light of all the suns, even that of the biggest sun of all, the Azure Sun, never reaches that place. No life exists in that corner of the Universe. No life ... except for the damned! These are the souls who have signed a pact with the Evil One and give their services to the Reverse Logos. Because of their actions, of course, they are now facing the consequences of the Divine Law, and these souls are now imprisoned in that remote corner of the Cosmos that is Hell. No eternal fire burns there. On the contrary, everything is dark, cold and silent. Isolation and darkness: this is their eternal punishment... until, of course, they repent.

Are the damned then completely cut out of the rest of the world? Well, not exactly. You see, the Mercy of the Lord is so great, He has provided a contact point between these pitiful souls and the light of hope. He has established a Post Office for them! This may sound strange to you, but there are post offices in Heaven as there are messenger angels! Of course, they do not use carton boxes and paper envelopes. Instead, all correspondence is carried out with rays of light of different colors and intensities. You must know from your modern science that energy waves can carry information. This is how it works in Heaven, as well. However, the techniques used in Heaven are much

more advanced and complicated and only the messenger angels, like Daniel, know how to encrypt and decrypt the energy waves that traverse the ether.

So, the question can be formulated more precisely now, after this longwinded introduction. What is Daniel doing at the Post Office of the Damned? Well, it is for the first time that Daniel comes to this place, and he has a very important message to deliver. He carries a message for a very, very dark soul. This soul is the damned of the damned, next in magnitude only to Lucifer himself! We will not mention his name here as we are not allowed to do so by the Leaders of the Spiritual World. We'll just call him Mr. X. This Mr. X has been responsible for the most horrendous things that have happened on Earth. He has been incarnated many times in the past with the sole purpose of bringing chaos and destruction to the planet. He is ruthless and very powerful. He is responsible for the downfall of Atlantis and its subsequent sinking into the ocean. During this ancient time, the race of the mystics was defeated by dark forces who wanted to blow up the planet. But this is another story. In his last incarnation, Mr. X was in Nazi Germany and was the brain behind all Nazi operations. He was the one who brainwashed Hitler and telepathically communicated to him all atrocious actions. His name remained unknown in History because the Deity so decided.

Many angels have fallen because of Mr. X, and many have been converted to the Dark Side. This is why no angel ever wants to talk to Mr. X, not even the Archangels. But today Daniel must give him a message. After all the years that Mr. X has been quarantined and not even allowed to receive post, he has to come out of the darkness and talk with another soul. And this soul is Daniel, the bravest and the shrewdest messenger angel of the Lord.

Daniel knocked on the door for the third time. He mustered all his courage and spoke in a loud voice "Is anybody here? This is Daniel from the Order of the Messenger Angels." He heard steps nearing the door from the other side. The door opened slowly and a tall figure made its appearance at the doorstep. The figure was about one head taller than Daniel, with wide shoulders and an athletic posture. It was a masculine figure. He was dressed in a black robe, from top to bottom, with a purple rope around his waist for a belt. His head was covered completely by a cowl and Daniel could not even see his eyes. The doorman examined Daniel's face for what it seemed an eternity.

"Daniel! Is that really you?" whispered the doorman as he slowly uncovered his face.

"Ariel! My God, I never expected to see you here! I did not know you had been assigned to this post." Daniel was now staring into the eyes of a very old friend, an angel with whom he had spent much time in the PAAO (the Post Academy of the Angelic Order) and with whom he had gone on many missions to Earth and other planets.

Ariel's head was now completely uncovered and his blond, curly hair unraveled out of the hood and caressed his shoulders. The black robe opened up from below the neck and down to the chest and the magnificent white-blue uniform of the angelic order could be seen underneath it in the pale light of a single candle, the only light allowed in the room and, indeed, on the whole planet! Daniel noticed the emblem on Ariel's chest, a long winged dove with a sword. This meant that Ariel, like Daniel, belonged to an elite team of angels that had reached an unsurpassed level of training and merit. The dove in the

emblem represented the fact that they had decorated by Pharah himself, the third member of the Holy Trinity.

“I should have imagined,” Daniel said. “Only you could have undertaken such a task. Of course, of course ... Michael would have sent only the best! He personally trained you. I remember you were his best student ... My God! It’s been a long time Ariel ... such a relief to find you here, in this dark and unworldly place...”

“My friend, the pleasure is all mine” replied Ariel as he hurriedly motioned to the other angel to enter into the room. “You flatter me with your words, Daniel. I am nothing special, nothing more than what you or the rest of our order are. I was asked by the Lord to undertake this task, and I took it with great pleasure. And you know very well that one of us had to do it. Only we have the training to protect the rays of the Lord from the dark forces.”

Ariel referred of course to the superb training that this order of angels had to be both guardian angels and messenger angels at the same time. In addition to these qualities, though, Ariel and the rest of the team were trained by the Archangels to fight the dark forces. This is what the sword in the emblem on their uniform symbolized. This training was absolutely necessary for the angels to be able to protect the messages that traversed the ether in the form of light rays from interception and attack by evil spirits.

After closing the door, Ariel removed his black robe completely and lit another candle. “It is OK, they have left,” he said while looking at a small hatch door on the floor in the corner of the room. “You care for some tea? I am the only one allowed to drink this stuff here and is not much fun drinking it alone.”

“Who... who left, Ariel? I heard whispering voices as I was knocking on the door.”

“Those were my apprentices here at the post office,” Ariel replied as he proceeded to prepare the tea. “You scared them as you knocked at the door, and they hurried to leave the room as they are not allowed to see any visitors. They are damned souls who deliver the mail for me. They are the lighter cases here, I would say. They are the only ones who are allowed to talk to me, actually. They cannot see my face, though. In fact, no damned soul here can see anything because their third eye is disabled. They are in total darkness. This is the harshest punishment, believe me.

“So, these very few souls here that are in the verge of converting to our side are what I call 'light cases.' They help me with sorting the mail here. They are my only contact points to the other ones, the 'dark cases.' You wouldn’t believe it, Daniel. The souls that we have here ... it is sad ... sad.

“This is actually the hardest part of my job here. It is not the fight to keep an order in this place. No, the hardest part is to hear the agonizing screams of these souls and not be able to help them or comfort them. I tell you, I’d rather be the guardian angel of the most stubborn person on Earth rather than the Postman of Hell. Anyway, what brings you to this place, Daniel? It must be an important message. Otherwise they would not have sent one of us to deliver it in person. Please do tell.”

Daniel stood up and sighed. He looked very beautiful in the candlelight. His brown, wavy hair reached down to his shoulders and his green eyes reflected the beauty of his soul, compassion and love being the most abundant qualities.

"I am afraid this is not a good message I bring, my friend. I have come to see one of your dark cases, as you say," replied Daniel with a morbid look on his face.

"Who is it?" said Ariel.

Daniel looked around for a second, moved closer to his friend's ear and whispered "I have a message for Mr. X."

"Oh no, not him!" cried out Ariel, turning pale as the color of the candle. "Anyone else but him! Do you know what this means Daniel? Of course you do, my friend. You were there. You were there when the Lord informed us that this day would come when Mr. X would return to Earth. But I tell you, Daniel, he is not ready to return to Earth! Not by any means. He has not repented at all for his sins, not changed a bit despite all the punishment. God knows how hard I fight with him the whole time to keep him in place. He is just out of control! He will bring calamities, wars, chaos and destruction -- even more than before! And he will have the technology to do it this time!"

"He had an even more advanced technology at his disposal in the days of Atlantis, my friend," said Daniel. "The Deity intervened and sunk the whole continent. You and I know this, we were watching, remember? Do you think the Deity will let him destroy humanity this time? Not by any means! At least not until the Grand Plan of our Father is fulfilled on Earth."

"You are right, Daniel. I am just terrorized by the thought of the havoc he will bring this time."

"The decision has been taken by the Deity, my brother. It is all part of the plan for the evolution of humanity. You know that evolution can only happen when the two opposing forces -- good and evil -- are working together. Just like electricity, you need the positive and the negative pole. It is now time for evil to mature on Earth before the Winds of the Lord clear out the place so that a golden era of Peace and Love can reign on the planet."

"Can I see the message, Daniel?" asked Ariel in a calm voice.

"I can show you the seal only," replied Daniel. "I am afraid I have to deliver the contents of the message in person to Mr. X." Daniel proceeded to convey the light-ray to Ariel. In a mystic code that only the two of them understood and with a perceptive quality that only the angels of their order possessed, Ariel recognized the seal of the Highest Angelic Order that bore the private signature of the Lord himself. He knelt immediately and prayed in silence. Daniel made the sign of the cross in the air. A majestic light of the most beautiful colors and a sweet harmonious melody filled the room.

"Come, I will take you to him," said Ariel when they finished their prayers.

They left the main building of the Post Office and moved with dazzling speed to the darkest corner of Hell. They were invisible to the other souls they encountered in their way. When they reached their destination, Ariel first noticed Mr. X sitting in a corner in his cell, engulfed in total darkness. His anguish was torturing but, at the same time, his

powerful spirit and his strong ego had such a good grasp on his soul that he refused to repent for his actions and admit his sins. It was such a deplorable sight. Ariel made a special sound to call his attention.

“Who is there?” yelled Mr. X in a rasping voice.

“Two messenger angels of the Highest Rank,” replied Ariel.

“You don’t say!” snapped Mr. X. “I was an angel of the Highest Rank once. I left your order because you guys are pathetic! You are nothing! Only the Reverse Logos is powerful. Only him I serve!”

A moment of silence passed as Mr. X was trying to orient himself in the darkness like a wild animal.

“We don’t care about your pledge of allegiance,” said Daniel with a strong and, at the same time, compassionate voice. “I have a message for you, a message from the Deity.” Daniel approached Mr. X with tears in his eyes. He spoke in a steady voice, not reflecting his immense sorrow. Nor could Mr. X see the tears in Daniel’s eyes: tears that were shed for a fellow angel that had been trapped in the nets of Evil and had fallen to the dark side. Perhaps it was also the fact that thousands of years ago, Daniel and Mr. X were the closest of friends in the angelic orders and Mr. X had been a good mentor to Daniel.

Daniel decoded the message and spent some time explaining the contents of the message to Mr. X. When the plan of Mr. X’s next incarnation on Earth was revealed, the light ray dissolved into the ether, and Daniel turned around to leave. Mr. X was contemplating the contents of the message. His was already making plans for his life on Earth with a morbid grin on his face. He sensed the angel leaving and cried out.

“What is your name, angel?”

“You know who I am, my brother. It’s me, Daniel. God have mercy on your soul!” and Daniel disappeared as fast as he had appeared.

Back in the central building of the Post Office of the Damned, Ariel was embracing Daniel for the last time. Both angels had remained silent the whole way back to the building. Finally, Ariel broke the silence.

“So, it has been decided.”

“Yes,” replied Daniel. “God help us all!”

“Goodbye, my brother,” said Ariel as Daniel disappeared into the ether of the Universe. “God be with you.”

Daniel was flying towards the Palace of the Lord. He knew what was going to happen next, but he could not share this knowledge with anyone because it was classified information. You see, what Daniel could not tell Ariel on that day was that a great soul was going to incarnate on Earth in order to counterbalance the evil that Mr. X would bring to the planet. That soul was one of the Lord’s Stars: St. John the Baptist. And Daniel was going to be one of his guardian angels. A fierce battle was about to begin on Earth and in Heaven!

1minutetopic: sf01
Contributor: Ioannis Kontodinas
Completed: December 2005, Athens
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Post of the Damned

It was with some trepidation that I entered the post office.

I took my place at the end of the line and warily glanced around. The other people waiting in line looked cheerful -- happy as though they were all looking forward to picking up some big package from a good friend. Even the postal employees were bustling around with smiles on their faces, the picture of efficiency and professionalism.

I glanced around at the nice, neat rows of tape and packing paper. Satisfied looking envelopes and pens arranged in precise rows gleamed from the shelves. Everywhere, the cheerful yellow of the Deutsche Post was to be seen. It is a calming color -- festive even.

However, I was still a bit uncomfortable. I have been having a long streak of bad post luck, you see. The line was short, reassuringly, and moving relatively fast, but I still had a few moments to reflect on my recent post-related troubles.

It started when I ordered a beloved children's book that I had been looking for off and on over the years. I finally found the title and author of the book at a Web site specializing in finding old kid books and immediately ordered the book online. A few days later, a little green card arrived in my post box informing me that my book was waiting for me in the DHL service station. I had the opportunity to use the service station many times before. Even though it was after eight in the evening, I would be able to pick up my package, thus not having to wait an additional day. I happily hiked up the hill to the post office, warming with anticipation of soon being able to page again through one of my favorite books in the world.

At the station, I scanned in the bar code on the green card and signed my name on the touch pad. Literally holding my breath in anticipation, I listened as robotic sounds of rotating metal cylinders emanated from the pack station. A metal click could be heard as the lock on the sliding door was released and then... nothing. The door did not slide open, as it should have and has every other time that I used the service station.

I waited a few seconds, but still nothing happened.

I tried scanning the card again, but with exactly the same results. I realized with a sinking heart that I was not going to spend the evening on the sofa reading and rereading my new/old book. It was clear the door was jammed and I would have to come back tomorrow to pick up the book.

Of course, I tried again and again. Looking carefully at the screen, I noticed a button for a hot line. Eagerly, I pressed the button and was connected immediately and telephonically to a human being to whom I explained the situation, being careful to impart my urgency. The DHL service guy said that he could see in his computer that the book was still in the automat and agreed that the door must be jammed. He said he would send a technician and they would call me when the jam had been fixed.

I trudged back down the hill a bit deflated.

I spent the rest of the evening restlessly awaiting the phone call. Later, it occurred to me how foolish it was to expect that a technician would be sent so soon -- after working hours! -- to deal with a minor technical problem way out in the provinces.

As I had the next day off, I spent my time trying to liberate my book from the automat. I called the hot line several times only to be told every time that I had already picked up the book from automat. After I insisted they look a little closer, the story changed: yes, indeed, it had been recorded that the book was still in the automat, in fact, that the door is jammed and that a technician will be sent to deal with the problem. No, he was not already under way. No, they could not tell me when the technician would be sent. Yes, they would call me when the problem had been fixed.

I started to get the feeling that it might take months for a technician to be sent. So, I decided to see whether the employees at the post office could help me. Perhaps they have key to open up the back of the automat? When I told my sad story, the first woman I talked to insisted on taking my card outside to the automat, scanning it in, reading the screen and informing me that I had picked up the book on the previous evening. I stared at her in disbelief. Why would I be here, sweating with irritation, if I had gotten the package out?

When I told her that I had not, in fact, gotten the book out, that I had called the hot line who confirmed that the door was jammed, she did exactly the same. She pushed the hot line button, told the story again and listened to the hot line guy repeat the story, word for word, that I had told her just a few minutes ago.

When the hot line guy said it she believed it. She turned to me and repeated what he had told her within my hearing, without a trace of sarcasm in her voice, that a technician would be sent and DHL would call me when the problem was fixed.

Taking a deep breath, I said, yes that is clear. But no one knows when the technician will be here. Perhaps she could open the automat and fish my book out for me.

No, no one at the post office has a key to open the automat. Well, that took a good thirty minutes and a lot of frustration to find that out. Taking pity on me, she suggested that I come back at two o'clock. The DHL guy would be there and maybe he could help me.

I thanked her and trudged back down the hill.

At a few minutes before two o'clock, I trudged back up the hill.

Surprisingly, the DHL guy was not there. When I told the story to the second woman, she, like the first, took my card, scanned it in, told me the book was in the automat, called the hot line, and, finally told me to wait until DHL called me.

I admit I lost my cool.

Among other things, I told her that this was the sort of service that one expected in the third world, not in one of the richest areas of one of the richest countries in Europe. That I was sick to death of the very high level of acceptance of incompetence, mistakes and apathy that was to be seen at every level of German commerce, including, no *in particular*, at the post office. I stopped short of implying that sticking her head in the sand

was only going to contribute to the kind of atmosphere that had already lead to a certain dangerous developments in German history....

I trudged back down the hill.

At home, I searched the site where I bought the book for a service telephone number, thinking that the mighty Amazon could put a bit more pressure on DHL. I couldn't find a telephone number, so I send an email. (A few days later, I received an email stating that their records showed that I had picked up the book on the previous day.)

Not willing to give up (and not having anything else that demanded my attention so pressingly that day), I considered what else I could do to get my book out of that God-forsaken automat. It occurred to me that the DHL pick up time was 17:25. Some one would certainly need to get in and out of the automat. That some one would certainly be able to rescue my book!

So, a few minutes after five, I trudged up the hill.

And hung around the automat. He showed up, more or less on time. I told him the long, sad story, careful to mention that two postal employees and three hot line guys had confirmed that the book was still in the automat and that the door was jammed. Perhaps he could open the door manually and get my book out?

He, with no trace of irony, took my card, scanned it in, etc. He was sorry, but I had already picked up the book. Fearing I was going to loose my temper again, I took a deep breath and we continued. Oh, yes, the book was actually in the automat and the door was actually jammed. And, hope against hope, he might be able to get it out.

He inserted a card, tapped on the touch screen and stepped back. The metal cylinders began to rotate and, suddenly, the door sprang open! The DHL guy loaded a few packages, pushed more buttons and the cylinders rotated. A concerned look came over his face. Yes, he said, there is a jam in a certain sector. He might not be able to get the book out.

I hoped fervently that he would be able to deal with the problem for I was beginning to fear what I would be capable of if I was faced again with disappointment.

In silence and deadly earnest, we watched as the metal cylinders rotated one last time, slowly, slowly. And, then, it was there! I saw my book! Hurrah!

The friendly DHL guy handed to me as I sighed, suddenly awash with gratitude that I had been pushed to violence.

I shuffled uncomfortably at these memories, as I waited in the rapidly vanishing line. I remembered, too, the countless packages that have been returned undelivered, both to me and from me, as well as the recent spate of packages that have gone missing entirely. I remembered that, the previous month, I had sent a package with a lot of extra postage for tracking, only to learn that it, too had disappeared without a trace. (The postal employee who took my money failed to inform me that the package would be tracked only for the first leg of the journey.) I remembered the time I had to urgently transfer the money and the Post Bank server was down (so online banking was not possible), the money automat was being repaired (so I couldn't even get money out of

my own account by myself) and the Post would have charged 30% of the sum for the person at the counter to transfer the money, except that they didn't have the correct forms on that day.

I tried to think cheerful thoughts, looking again at the rows of bubble pack envelopes for support. But I could feel my blood pressure rising and my temper, in a Pavlovian response, growing thinner and thinner.

Nearly without warning, it was my turn. I placed my package on the counter and smiled at the young man across from me. I explained that I had a package to send (I find that stating the obvious both calms me and increases the chance that the postal employee will figure out what I need more quickly). As he was sliding the package around, tipping it to look at it from all sides, moving papers round on the desk, etc., I glanced over at the next employee behind the counter. It was the woman that I shouted at during the money transfer fiasco. She looked at me with recognition and smiled warmly. I tried to smile back, but a wave of panic washed over me. I felt ashamed at my behavior now. Try as I might, I could not still the irritation that was rising steadily in me. None of these people deserved the full force of my postal frustration and I had to struggle to not let it leak out.

The young man took my money for the post on the package and was just about to toss it on the pile of packages to be delivered.

"Ahem," I said, "Wouldn't you like to put some sort of sticker on that first?"

The man looked at me and then the package. "That's a good idea!" he said as he placed the package back on the counter and proceeded to put a green sticker on it. With a flourish he took out a pen. Then, leaning toward me with the conspiratorial half whisper of a concierge at an expensive hotel, he asked, "Perhaps you would like to describe, vaguely, what is in the package?"

"Potato chips," I responded. And he wrote "potato chips" on the sticker, like it was the most natural thing in the world to send a big box of potato chips from Germany to the United States.

He smiled and tossed the package on the pile. The his coworker nodded to me as I turned and started to walk out the post office.

I could barely believe it. This was the first time in many months that I had been in a post office without becoming nearly deranged with irritation. And I hadn't lost my control or yelled at anyone. It seemed that a weight was lifting from me, and I started humming a tune. I wadded up the plastic bag in which I had carried the package to stuff it in my pocket.

RIIIIIPPP!

I had pushed the wadded bag through the bottom of the pocket, bursting the seam and ruining my favorite coat. I examined the damage, hung my head, and with the resignation of the damned, shuffled out of the post office.

Post script: at the time of writing, weeks after the incident described, the package of potato chips still has not yet arrived at its destination in the States.

1minutetopic: sf01
Contributor: Shannon Frances
Completed: December 2005, Gauting
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Exhausted Conversation

“Are you asleep?”

“Yes.”

A long pause.

“No you're not. Com'on talk to me. We never seem to talk any more.”

“Becca it's,” he pried open one eye and peeked at the luminous numbers of the clock on the night stand, “Christ, Bec, it's one thirty. I have to be up at six, and I have a breakfast meeting. I need to get some sleep.”

Rebecca rolled over dragging most of the covers with her. Her back radiated annoyance. Vinny squeezed his eyes even tighter and tried to ignore his wife's exasperation. He rolled over and found there wasn't enough blanket on his side of the bed to cover his knees. He groaned silently.

“Okay, what is it you want to talk about.”

She rolled over onto her back. “I don't know. How was your day?”

He kept his back to her and pulled his share of the covers over his chilly legs. “It was long and hard and I'm tired. Can I go to sleep now?”

Rebecca sat up, turned on her little China shepherdess lamp, and folded her arms under her breasts.

Vinny knew the signs. His night was down the toilet until he found out what was bugging her.

He rolled onto his back and stared up at the ceiling praying it might just be another traffic ticket. “Becca, why can you never start this sort of thing between the hours of five thirty and ten when I still have a functioning brain cell left to my name.” He turned his head to study his wife pouty profile.

“We used to spend hours just talking. Now when you come home all you want to do is eat, watch TV and check your e-mail. What's so damned important on your e-mail that you have to check it right before we go to bed? I bet we haven't spent more than half an hour in real conversation in the last month.” A whiny note had crept into her voice, “You used to rush home so we could spend the evening together. You used to love to talk to me.”

“I also used to think it was really cool to stay up half the night shooting pool with Marko Upchurch. That was before I went to work for your father. Now I have a job and responsibilities. All of which demand that I can stay awake and do the work I'm getting paid to do.”

Rebecca's mouth hardened into an angry scowl as she glared down at him. “So now its my father's fault that you can't find time to have a decent conversation with your wife?”

“No,” he snapped, “I'm saying I put in a good day's work at a job I could be making better money at if I weren't working for one of the world's mega tightwads, while you have your

nails buffed and go to lunch with that airhead Marge and the girls, who, by the way, haven't been girls for about twenty years, while a Honduran woman raises our son and does all the things women used to do for their own family."

This, he thought, is why we don't have conversations any more – because they always end in a squabble.

He tried once more, "Look, I don't want to argue with you. I'm tired. Whatever this is all about, hold the thought and we can discuss it when I get home tomorrow. Now have a heart, Bec, and let me get some sleep."

"She won't be doing any more housework around here. I fired her," she said softly.

"You WHAT!" Vinny sat up as though his pillow had burst into flames.

His wife had a fist-full of her nightie clutched in her hand. "I fired Violetta," her lip had started to quiver.

"Why in God's name would you fire her?" he stared at Rebecca not believing he had heard her right. "She cooks, she keeps this place looking like a goddamn Better Homes layout and little Vinny loves her.

"Vincenzo kicked me!" she started to wail. "He fell and bumped his head on the coffee table," she tried out an angry look. "As you would have known if you made it home before he went to bed for a change!"

He swung his legs out of bed to stand glaring down at her. "VINNY! My son's name is Vinny, same as mine. And all two-year olds bump their heads. You can't fire Violetta because he tripped"

The attempt at temper fizzled. She started to cry in earnest, "He bled all over the place, and I had to take him to the emergency room, and he wouldn't let me hold him. He screamed if I even came near and he kicked me. *My baby only wanted Violetta!*" Fat tears spilled down her cheeks to soak the thin material in her fists.

"Well, what the hell can you expect? Damn it, she's the one who gets him up in the morning feeds him whatever that crap is he eats. She takes him to the park! How much time do you spend with the kid? And for this you fired her?"

He tore the blanket from her. "Get your ass off that bed, Rebecca. Go call her right now. Tell her you're sorry. That you didn't mean it, whatever it takes. Offer her more money, but get her back here." Vinny clenched his fists in a mighty effort to keep from doing something he would regret. "You can't just fire the person who has taken care of my son and he has loved from the day he was born. What do you think? It would be better to get someone in here who makes you look good?"

Rebecca started to sob loudly, "You think I'm a bad mother. I could take care of him." She looked up at her husband with wide, fearful eyes. "It's just that I'm not good with kids. I was an only child..."

"Cut the crap. This isn't about you."

She looked as though he had slapped her. "Look, if you want him to behave like your kid, you have to behave like his mother. You have to do the mother *job*. Take parenting

classes or watch what Violetta does, get counseling. I don't give a shit. But you are not going to mess up the kid by getting rid of the one person he loves. DO YOU HEAR ME!" Vinny began pacing around the spacious bedroom. Visions of his father played in his head. "Wait a goddamn minute, I do give a shit! I give one hell of a huge shit, as a matter of fact." The hand gestures of his Italian childhood that he had spent years trying to get rid of came surging back and they felt good.

"You are going to stop being one of the 'girls' and begin to behave like a woman and a mother. You are going to grow up or get the hell out of my house." He paused waiting for inspiration then grinned wickedly. "We are going to have my family over for dinner at least once a month."

Watching her mouth drop open in slack-jawed amazement. "Yes, all of them! And you are going to *beg* my sister for mama's lasagna recipe even if you have to get down on your knees to do it."

He leaned down and got in her face as he said it, "Get on the phone now!"

Rebecca got out of bed and, still sobbing, hurried to the phone.

Vinny climbed into bed and made sure he had more than his fare share of the covers. As his anger began to subside he realized he felt pretty good. A whole new appreciation for his father opened before him. *I should have done this a long time ago. Damn, but things are going to change around here!*

He smiled as he thought, *I'll wait until she asleep, then wake her up to tell her she's going to get her ass out of bed when I do from now on and make me a cup of coffee before I leave the house.*

1minutetopic: sf03
Contributor: Frances Burke
Completed: December 2005, Black Forest
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Exhausted Conversation

Jake stood impatiently on the platform. The backpack slung over one shoulder was a little heavier than he would have liked, but that's how it goes when packing for an adventure. It's all too easy to toss in another pair of socks or a sweater, not to mention the books, torch lights, toiletries, camera and dozens of other things which eventually wind up serving as a reminder of how material possessions are really boat anchors, limiting one's freedom rather than enhancing it. This was weighing heavier on Jake's mind than his arm. He had come to Europe seeking the freedom of the open road and the fresh perspective of other lands. He was looking for the *real* Europe. Waiting in the station he was painfully reminded of the fact that he was *not* hitching a ride in the back of a farmer's truck down some romantic Italian hillside just as the sun set. Instead he was in a very safe French *gare* with an expensive ticket, paid for by his well-to-do parents, overstuffed backpack on his shoulder.

He had spent several days in Paris getting over the jet lag and being shocked by how expensive everything was. *Is that what it is all about, money?* he thought. *You can get whatever you want, as long as you have the cash. Anything, that is, except a real life.*

He hoped the train would be his ticket to adventure and out of his funk. Life was out there waiting for him, and he wanted to get started.

Monique stood further down the platform, the collar of her black wool jacket turned up against the cold wind coming through the open end of the station. She, too, hoped the train would soon arrive to rescue her from the cold that was passing through her like a whisper in the dark. Jake had been eyeing her on and off for several minutes. Not that he had really singled her out; he found the sophisticated look of the European women exotic and couldn't keep himself from studying their features. Monique just happened to be the closest girl of interest.

When the train finally arrived they both boarded through different doors. Jake banged his bulky pack uncomfortable against seat backs looking for his seat. After stumbling through two cars at last he found it, and to his delight noticed that Monique was seated on the same bench seat. She looked up and smiled in a polite, noncommittal way as a bank teller might to a customer waiting in line. Any brooding thought about the dark side of materialism suddenly vanished from his mind.

Jake clumsily crammed his pack into the overhead rack and took out a few things including his euro-tour guide book. He really hated that book most of the time. It seemed to embody the domestication of the wild world. Every little town was reduced to a few lines of what to see or do. It belittled the uniqueness of the experience of travel, as if you could just as well buy a set of postcards and a CD of "The Best Photos of Europe" in the "Cultural" aisle at Wal-Mart. Finally he plopped down in the seat and tried to think up any excuse to chat up the girl next to him. Nothing good came to mind.

"Polly vu francais?" he eventually said, almost too soft to hear.

"I'm sorry, what?" Monique asked, half closing the magazine she had been reading.

“Polly vu French?” he said again, only realizing she spoke perfect English half way through.

“Yes, of course, do you speak French?” she asked in return.

“I, uh... no, not really. I’m American,” Jake said as though admitting that he killed babies.

“Yes, I know.” Her tone of voice was not exactly derogatory, more matter of fact, as though Jake had “BORN IN THE USA” tattooed on his face.

“Are you English?” he asked, unsure of her accent.

“No,” she said as if only an American could be fool enough to mistake her for a Britt.

“Oh, you’re French then, are you?” Jake asked again, trying not to sound like the ass that he felt like.

“Yes, I’m French.”

Now that he was right next to her, Jake could see that she was really stunningly attractive. He would have loved to chat and flirt with her for the rest of the five hour trip, but what could he offer her? He was an American, uncultured, ignorant of everything but the most basic European geography, and dependent on his accursed guidebook. She was beautiful, intelligent and sophisticated. He felt uncomfortable, like he was in the World Series with a Little League bat.

“So where are you going?” he asked just as she reopened the magazine to continue reading.

“Milano.”

“Oh, good. I’m going to Milan, too.” *At least I’ll have plenty of time to show her that I’m not just an ignorant American*, he thought. “Do you live there?” he continued, shifting around in his seat to face her more directly.

“No, my boyfriend does.”

Doh!

“And what does your boyfriend do?” he asked trying to hide his disappointment.

“He is a monetary annalist for the EU currency commission.”

Jake shook his head with the “Oh, yeah, every other kid on my block does that” nod.

“I’m just traveling around, you know, trying to find good places that aren’t... that aren’t too touristy.” he said as though she cared. Monique looked pointedly at his book and sighed with the resignation of one forced into conversation with an idiot.

“You wish to visit *unpopular* places?” she asked in the rhetorical tone of a teacher trying to lead the pupil away from the wrong answer.

“It’s just that everything here...” he paused. *This is going to sound bad*. “Everywhere in this book, it all seems so...” The idea in his mind was simply not lining itself up into neat little grammatically correct sentences.

“So what?” Monique asked, her voice slapping his wrists.

“So false... So materialistic...” he sputtered.

“France is materialistic and... *false*?” she asked, voice rising, magazine now clenched in fists like a weapon.

“No, no. It is just that I want to see the real Europe, not just the superficial, not just what everybody else comes to see, photograph and forget.” He battled to dig out of the hole he had dug for himself.

“Did you bring a camera?” she asked, rolling her eyes up towards his pack.

“Well, yes...” he admitted.

“When do you go back to America?” she continued the cross examination.

“My flight isn’t for three weeks,” Jake contended.

“What makes you think that you can experience an entire continent with only three weeks in anything but a superficial manner? How will you do this, by visiting unpopular places? Tell me, what parts of France are not real?” She was looking him in the eyes, glaring at the right eye, then the left eye and back again trying to find which pupil he was hiding behind. “Will you go there and tell the people who live there that they are not real, that their mundane lives do not live up to your American standards of genuinity because they are so materialistic that they must work for a living? You are looking for some unique experience different from what the rest of the million American tourists who come over here see, photograph, and leave behind? You come over here, waving your dollars around, ride our trains, eat in our restaurants, insult us, and you call us materialistic? Perhaps you should holiday in Texas or New York next year and see how well your lines work on an American girl.” Her angelic features had converted into sharp weapons, lacerating him with their sight.

Staring just long enough to burn away the last remnants of his self esteem, she muttered something decidedly nasty in French, whipped the magazine open again and continued to read. Jake tried to sink into invisibility in the seat. He hoped he could make himself as small as he felt. Not a word passed between them for the remaining four hours and fifty minutes.

Perhaps after all, Jake actually had found the elusive “real” Europe he was seeking.

1minutetopic: sf02
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
Completed: January 2006, Black Forest
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Missed Connection

Rick is sitting at their usual table in the back corner of the front room of the restaurant. He looks tired and has been staring at nothing in particular for quite a while. His left hand encircles half-empty beer glass on the table in front of him. Every few minutes, the door opens and when it does, he looks up to watch the new guest come in and select a table. Then he goes back to staring into space.

When George enters the restaurant, Rick nods in greeting. He watches as George squeezes between the tables and chairs to his table. Without ceremony, George plops on to the bench and scoots to sit at the end of Rick's table. He looks tired, too.

"Sorry I'm late." George is a bit out of breath. He sticks out his hand. "The first taxi took me to Marienplatz. I had to..."

"I am glad you could make it tonight," Rick says as the two men shake hands. "There is something I want to talk to you about."

"Have you ordered yet?" George asks as he scans the board over Rick's head for the specials of the day.

Rick looks at a flyer lying on the table. "I'm hungry. I didn't have lunch to day."

George looks over toward the bar and raises his hand. When he catches the waitress's eye, he calls "I'd like a Pills, please. And a menu." Turning to Rick, he asks "Do you want a beer?"

"You wouldn't believe how long it took to finish those tables. I could balance the books for a whole year in less time." Rick rubs the stubble on his jaw as though it were proof that he had worked long and hard.

The waitress comes over to the table. The two men look up simultaneously to stare at her breasts as she approaches. She hands George first a beer and then a menu, both of which he sets on the table in front of him.

"I'll have the lasagne." George looks at the waitress's face as he orders.

"I'll have a cheese burger. But no mayonnaise, please."

"Right. Lasagne and a burger. You want cheese with that?"

Rick looks a bit confused and responds "Burger. With cheese. No mayo."

"Got it," says the waitress as she picks up the menu and turns back to the kitchen. The two men stair at her behind as she walks away.

Rick drinks from his beer, which is now room temperature. "I really appreciate your coming all the way out here this evening. There is something I want to talk to you about."

George nods and then shakes his head. "Has that ever happened to you? This is the, I don't know, fourth or fifth time this has happened to me. I got in the taxi, said 'Stockdorf' and before I know it, I am getting out at Marienplatz. Sorry I am late."

George lifts his beer glass. Rick taps his glass to George's and, simultaneously, they say "Prost!"

George drinks deeply. As he slouches back on the bench he sighs. "Are you good to go for the weekend?" he asks as he watches a party of girls go into the back room.

Rubbing his stubble again, Rich mumbles, "Bah! Boy, am I tired. And hungry. You should have seen the state of the server room this morning."

Both men look hopefully in the direction of the kitchen. Nothing seems to be going on back there.

Rick takes off his glasses, sets them on the table and rubs his eyes. "It took me over an hour to get to work this morning. The traffic was backed up to Starnberg."

Taking some beer mats out of the napkin rack, George starts building a card house with them. "That's kind of weird, don't you think? I mean, four times, four different taxi drivers have misinterpreted what I said and took me somewhere I didn't want to go. Strange, isn't it?" Both men look at the double-decker structure George has just finished building for a few seconds before it collapses. They continue to look at the collapsed beer mats for a couple of minutes before George starts building again.

Putting his glasses back on, Rick looks in the direction of the kitchen. Someone has put on a new CD and soothing music begins to murmur in the background.

The men sip their beers.

Carrying two food-laden plates, the waitress weaves her way to their table. Both men stare at the plates, which she places in front of them. They start to eat immediately.

"*Einen Guten.*"

"*Guten Apatite. Prost!*" The eating pauses just long enough to tap the beer glasses together.

George stops eating for a moment as he looks over at Rick's plate to watch him cut his burger with a fork and knife. He then turns back to his own food. They eat fast and without talking.

As they start to fill up and slow down, George looks towards the bar. "How is your burger?"

Rich pushes his empty plate to the side and also looks toward the bar. When he sees the waitress, he raises his hand.

"Sorry, I'm really tired. Do you mind if we just get the bill?" Rick raises his hand again and wiggles his fingers.

George, just finishing, starts patting his pockets. "Where did I put my *handi*?" He stops patting abruptly, as the waitress is bringing the bill to the table. While she bends over the table to calculate, the two men stare at her cleavage.

They pay, drain their beers and stand.

"Take care."

"It's going to be a long day tomorrow."

They shake hands and walk in opposite directions, George exiting at the back door and Rick at the front. After a few minutes have passed, the waitress returns to the table to clear the empty plates and glasses.

1minutetopic: sf02
Contributor: Shannon Frances
Completed: December 2005, Gauting
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Babylon

A fitful wind blew brown dust in little spirals across the rock plain. Lupe watched the broken branch of a scrubby bush inscribe an ark in the dirt. Even in the shade the heat and dust were suffocating.

How ironic, she thought, that I should end up in a place so far removed from where I started, yet in many ways so very like it. She had been born into landscapes like this: the harsh contrasts of light and shadow, the jagged outline of broken rocks and the wind. Always the wind.

That thought triggered a long forgotten memory of her grandfather arguing with her father over his decision to take his children north. Her grandfather had loved the Sonoran Desert almost as much as her father hated it. "A hard land demands strong people, you got to respect that. You get too soft, this land, it would chew you up." The high desert held a simple grandeur, an almost mystic beauty for the old man.

"This is one stinking hell hole full of nothing but poverty and ants. I want more for my children. North of the border, a man can do better." Her father and grand father went round and round like a dog chasing his own tail never getting any closer to resolving their differences until, one day, her father threw everything they owned into a beat-up old truck and headed north to a new life.

One sweltering night two years later, her brother Alejandro walked down the wrong alley. The police said he got shot in a drug deal gone bad. A frequent enough thing in East LA to not require much in the way of investigation. Their take on it was he got pretty much what he deserved. Her father never believed Alex had been involved with the gangs, and he never recovered from the death of his only son. Lupe, just sixteen at the time, had no recollection of making a conscious decision to replace the son her father had lost. But as years passed, where he had been a backup pitcher in the high school baseball team, she came in third in the state in woman's track. He had started night classes at the local junior college. Lupe busted her butt to get into CU and, when a tuition hike put finishing her nursing degree out of reach, she signed up for ROTC.

"Look, Poppy, they will pay for my schooling. I'll get experience. And I'll have a job that will let me travel. I'll be an officer." She had finally won his attention and ultimately the approval she craved. Her father's pride in her accomplishments warmed her like that Sonoran sun when she heard him boasting to her grandfather about the college degree and that his daughter would be a *jefe* in the American army.

The old man could understand none of this. "She is a girl. She should come home, marry a nice boy, make a home, have babies." She didn't mind that he held such old-fashioned ideas; he was an old man. She did mind that she never even got to see him again to try and explain. He died five months into her second tour of duty.

As the burning disk of the sun crawled across the white sky, the incessant buzzing of flies began to gnaw on her nerves. Sweat ran down her back stinging and aggravating all the itches she couldn't reach. Lupe had taken to measuring the impossible slowness of time

by the movement of the shadows. Nelson had been gone for about four hours. She knew by the fact that Calhoun's guitar now lay half in shadow.

Nice kid, Calhoun. From somewhere in Georgia, a real red-necked hick with a goofy laugh like a jackass braying. But when he, sang she could forgive him most anything. Even his being a true believer in the cause. He and Boscowitz got into it all the time over whether Bush was something close to God's chosen instrument for deliverance for the suffering people Iraq or the Antichrist. Lupe had long gotten over politicks. She just wanted to do her job, go home and try to forget. This was her second tour in Iraq. They were just starting their first. How green they seemed to her, just boys.

They were driving her back to her unit, a field hospital a few miles north of Al Hillah, when Calhoun suggested the side trip to Babylon. Calhoun wanted to prove to Boscowitz that the Bible really was the word of God. He seemed to think that if the burly city slicker from Chicago saw that one of the places mentioned in the Bible really did exist. then the rest of it must be true as well. Boscowitz had come along just to escape the mind-numbing monotony of life in camp. Now what was left of him lay about five feet from Lupe on the far side of Calhoun.

She tried to remember Nelson's first name. Remembering such little things about each one of the three young men seemed oddly important to her now as she stared out at the vast empty expanse of shifting dust.

God what I wouldn't give to just get those damn flies to shut up for a few minutes! She licked her lips knowing that that would only make them dry out again faster.

"Concentrate on the edge of the shadow. Nelson will be back by the time it gets to the frets," she told herself as sand drifted up against one side of the guitar and began to strum the strings with a strange musical zinging sound. That would make Calhoun go nuts. He cared more about his damn guitar than the other guys did about their girlfriends.

She thought about throwing something at the infuriation swarm of bloated insects but just didn't have the energy. Besides as long as they were busy with Calhoun she hopped they would leave her alone. She had steeled herself to not turn and actually look at the young man's body. She knew what she would see. The gray flesh, gaping wound and dark stain on the hot sand. She had gotten used to seeing dead men during her first tour of duty. But they were the anonymous casualties of war, not people she had shared the intimacy of personal stories and laughed with.

She tried to shake away the thought. *It's not like I loved them or anything. Christ!* She lost the fight to hold back the tears. ***They were just boys on a road trip, laughing and trying to out-macho each other to impress her.***

Taking a deep breath, she tried to steady herself. *I'm just so tired. I have to hold it together 'til Nelson comes back.* There were so many young men, boys really, who would never know what it really meant to be men. To have families and worry about the kids teeth or mortgages or any of the little burdens that made up her father's life. She squeezed her eyes shut. She just couldn't think about her father now.

Sucking her dry lips, Loupe tried to remember her grandfather's *hacienda*. That had become her touch stone to all things comforting. That would get her mind off the growing stench of death and the pain and the growing sense that she would die here all alone without being able to saying good bye to her father or anyone she loved.

Concentrating deeply she dredged up her last memory of her grandfather. He seemed to have been made of twists, of tough brown ropes, with a thick thatch of iron gray hair and his prize possession, one gold tooth. The house had been started by the old man's father and added to, in bits and pieces, over the years. The thick adobe walls surrounded a small courtyard where little birds sang in a lemon tree. She could see the old man sitting in the shade arguing with her father. The sunlight shimmered on the little fountain surrounded by cobble stones incrustated with patches of dark green moss. The light of it hurt her eyes and she wished someone would close the curtain. The room, her old bedroom, was too hot.

Waking with a start she realized she must have dozed off. Her mouth felt like it had filled with hot sand that gritted in her teeth and caked on her sweat. The scorching expanse of desert before her wouldn't come into focus. *Time for a drink*. Fumbling for the water bottle she discovered it was almost too hot to hold. *How long had it been out in the sun?* She wondered. Still she gulped down the three swallows she allotted herself. *Only one more drink left in the bottle*. More water might be around somewhere but when they were hit by the road-side bomb -- or old ordnance left over from any one of the past wars -- the back half of the hummer had been blown away taking Boscowitz and Calhoun with it. Nelson had managed to drag her into what remained of the cab before he went in search of help. Lupe looked at what was left of her legs. No way could she go out searching for the water bottles. Her training had impressed upon her the importance of fast action in massive traumatic injuries. Only immediate action could prevent... No she would not think about that. They had been hit around nine in the morning. It had to be close to four now. There was nothing for her to do but wait for him to come back.

Nelson looked like he might be eighteen at the most, blond curly hair and skinny as a rail. He took their kidding with a grin and reminded them, "Baby-Faced Nelson was one tough bad guy in his day." His last words to her were, "Geese, Lupe, don't die on me."

When she could focus her eyes again she saw that the relentless wind had already started the job of reclaiming the both of the boys. A drift of sand infiltrated Boscowitz's buzz cut, and Calhoun legs had become small dunes. A few inches from those fingers that so effortlessly plucked music from his guitar lay his Bible, the pages fluttering in the wind.

Lupe saw that the guitar now lay half buried in harsh sunlit sand. She had to blink several times before she could scan the horizon for any sign of movement. She strained her ears for some sound of help on the way. Nothing but the steady low hiss of blowing sand could be heard.

Poor skinny Nelson, he had walked out into that life sucking inferno armed only with a kid's sense of invincibility and a desire to get her help. If she had any tears left in her, she would have shed them for him. He had thrust the one remaining bottle of water into her hand. "Geese, Lupe, don't die on me."

She reached for the last remaining sip of water.

She had known for some time that Nelson wasn't coming back. Lupe didn't want to die out here. None of them believed they would. They were the young, the strong. They were supposed to be the good guys. Now she was going to pay the ultimate price for the sin of foolishness, both hers and others. She closed her eyes against the futility of it all, but the knowledge only grew inside her. This is where her life would end -- dirty and alone, a stranger in a strange land. She looked out at the jagged rocks littering the empty plain. Her focus faltered and she didn't even try to clear her vision. The only sight that remained to her was of the old man standing in the doorway of the *hacienda* beckoning her; a smile creased his leathery brown face. She could see the small fountain in the court yard through the open door, so clean and cool and green, the home of her childhood. This time her hand closed on Boscowitz's rifle instead of the water bottle. Lupe wondered vaguely, if there was no one to hear the sound of a shot in the desert, did it really make any noise? Did it even matter in a world gone insane? She squeezed the trigger.

Slowly sand stilled the pages of Calhoun's, Bible leaving the words as though inscribed in the shifting dust.

Psalm 137

1 By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
2 There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
3 for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
4 How can we sing the songs of the LORD
while in a foreign land?

1minutetopic: sf03
Contributor: Frances Burke
Completed: ebruary 2006, Black Forest
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Patriotic Sacrifice

“The great patriot.” That’s what they call me now. It’s funny, I never really considered myself to be especially patriotic. We didn’t think about it in those terms, we were just doing whatever was necessary. My dad always taught me about the importance of fulfilling ones duties. He did, and it cost him his life in the First Gulf War.

I was old enough to understand, but too young to fight back then. Time remedied that situation when the Second Gulf War came around. Of course my mother, knowing how I felt about it, begged me to stay out of it, but she was about ten years too late: I was going and there wasn’t a thing she could do about it.

I suppose there were a lot of reasons for going: revenge, good versus evil, their weapons of mass destruction (and willingness to use them) and all. But it basically came down to the fact that it just felt like the right thing to do. So I told my mom to fly the flag proudly for me, and not to worry, I was going to be well taken care of. Several of the kids from the neighborhood were going and I was fortunate to be stationed with one of them. You’d think it would be reassuring to have an old school mate with you, so far from home, but he was really nervous and scared all the time.

The ever-present danger, while it was a concern, was not going to drive me into hiding. I knew I was right, and God was on my side, and if death was in store for me, then so be it. I think it was my calmness under fire that first turned the commanders on to me. I was pulled aside and interviewed for a special assignment. When they learned that my father had given his life in the First Gulf War and I was not afraid to follow, they knew they had the right man for the job. I joined an elite group operating in enemy-controlled territory. It was very risky stuff, and high casualties were just part of the scenery.

I kept at it, unfazed by the danger, driven on by the conviction that we would eventually be successful and I was making the world a better place for these people all around me. Progress sometimes requires sacrifice. “If you are not willing to risk great sacrifice, you will never achieve great things,” one of the commanders told me. He had been watching me for weeks. I had consistently beaten the odds and kept coming back for more. “Son, you’re destined for greatness,” he said. I was being asked to go on a special mission, and this time I would be on my own.

A lot of things passed through my head as I drove the truck through the narrow dusty roads at dawn. I looked out at the faces of the people as I passed; so desperate for peace. I remembered my mom and dad and the hard times we had to endure. I thought about the friends I had lost in the war. As I neared the compound I saw a poster commemorating the opening of some civil infrastructure project recently brought online. But how could the people be expected to celebrate when their land was still in the hands of foreign intruders?

I gunned the old engine and smashed the truck into the barracks igniting over a ton of explosives. “Suicide bomber kills 17” their papers would say the next day. “A Heroic Patriotic Sacrifice” read ours. What do I think? I was just doing my duty.

1minutetopic: sf03
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
Completed: February 2006, Black Forest
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Long and Strange Trip

Our pod landed with a soft thud. So eager were we to get out that we scrambled over each other to the sandy surface beyond the hatch. We crawled, on all fours, through the sand, letting it run through our fingers in stunned joy and disbelief. The sun, dazzling in its brightness, nearly blinded us and we sat weeping with emotion in its warm rays.

It occurred to Dobi to take out his landing pack and the rest of us followed suit. As instructed, we chewed the salted peanuts slowly and washed it down with the distilled water. Three of us vomited it back up within minutes.

Space travel is, obviously, not for the faint of heart or weak of stomach.

We sat for a long time, allowing our eyes to adjust to the bright light and taking in the fresh breeze. The sky above was pure blue. We had landed on a sandy bank between a rather large river and a stand of tall trees which looked to me like poplars. All around us were sandy hills dotted sparsely with low bushes.

We all seemed to be thinking the same thought and trying to come to grips with it: We were finally home.

"I wonder where we are," said Lazuli, looking around with a puzzled expression. He spoke Kapksz-lj-luish, the language of our captors, which was the only language we had in common.

"Or when." This came from Nebucha.

Hmm. I hadn't considered this issue before. But it was a fairly obvious question. The aliens had abducted us from different locations as well as from different times. I had tried to determine origin of the other members of the band by drawing maps, first of countries and then of geographical features and land masses. But it rapidly became clear that our world views were vastly different, and that my geography was seriously lacking in detail. The others didn't seem to have a sense that our mother planet was round.

I guessed that Garzt was from some medieval European country, as he spoke what sounded to me like a kind of Proto-Germanic language. I thought I recognized a few words of his language. But he was completely illiterate and uninterested in exploring this with me, so I dropped it.

Lazuli and Dobi were dark skinned and I guessed that they came from North Africa or the Middel East or maybe India. They both recognized the numbers I wrote and had the concept of zero. But they did not have a language in common and culturally seemed to be like night and day: Lazuli being rather cultivated, while Dobi was rather coarse and, er, a bit earthy at times.

Nebucha was the most princely of all. I had no clue from where or when he had come. Although he had once described a fruit that sounded like an olive to me, he calculated with a base 60 system and recognized neither the letters or numbers I wrote.

In fact, the only thing that we seem to have in common is our musical ability. Four of us play some sort of stringed instrument, while Lazuli plays a kind of double flute that reminds me of something I once saw on a Greek urn.

In fact, I had been abducted waiting for a train after performing in a concert in the Gasteig in Munich, Germany. It was the tenth of December, 2005.

The purpose for our abduction was entertainment. Naturally, I expected that the aliens would perform some sort of gruesome medical experiments on me, like they do in movies. But they had obviously already learned enough of human anatomy and behavior before abducting us to keep us healthy and moderately comfortable. Perhaps they had completed their medical research on previous abductees? Other than requiring us to perform every five days or so, we were treated well.

For example, the aliens, large creatures that resemble cuttelfish, do not seem to sleep. They demonstrate periods of relative activity and inactivity with a cycle of about five hours. But, in approximately six years of enslavement, I never saw one sleeping. However, they provided us with sleeping quarters and allowed us eight hours of sleep every twenty-five hours.

It was not easy living among the aliens. Our performance had to be top quality or we would be punished in one unpleasant way or another. The music we had to play was often difficult, the worst being the eery pieces composed by the aliens that were so technically difficult that they were nearly impossible to master. My theory was that the aliens had scanned human history and chosen the best muscians of all time for abduction. I am not really bragging about my own ability. Not many people in the whole history of the Earth had ever played the type of harp that I play. But the others were undoubtedly the most gifted muscians I had ever met.

Our life consisted of practicing, performing and trying to keep ourselves entertained. And then, suddenly, the aliens developed other interests and we were prepared for our return to Earth.

And here we were.

After milling around for an hour or so, Dobi reminded us that we had better unpack the pod before it disolved. We spent the rest of the afternoon unpacking, setting up the tents, organizing the supplies. Concerned for our instruments, we hung them in the trees. Since they had become our livelihood and only assurance for survival, we had each developed an unnatural attachment to them and took inordinate care that they didn't touch the sand or water.

In the evening, we disussed our options. We had enough food for four or five days of rigourous activity. Water was not a concern since we had water filtruation units and were close enough to a source of water. We decided that it would be safer to stick together until we found a town or at least got oriented. It was agreed that we would head downstream until we came to an ocean and follow the coast until we discovered civilization.

Out of habbit, and having nothing else to do, we played music together for a couple of hours before going to sleep.

Early the next day, we packed and started walking. Progress was slow. Although our packs were light, as all the materials we were carrying except the food and water were of alien design and extreemly light, we had not had so much continuous physical activity in

captivity. Not to say that we were unfit -- we were made to perform regular exercise. But none of us had any endurance.

The terrain was hilly and largely desert. Other than the trees growing by the river, there was hardly any vegetation. Garzt proved himself to be an excellent hunter and provided the band with fresh meat on a daily basis, usually birds, once or twice some rat-like mammal. Nebucha recognized some of the plants and, two days after he had consumed some root or berry and survived (proving that it was not toxic), the rest of us would commence gathering it too. We traveled in harmony and with determination.

Occasionally, we would see loops of another large river way off to the east. As we headed south, the eastern river seemed to be getting closer. On the eighth day, we came to a place where the land began to descend more rapidly. Off in the distance, we saw an interruption in the landscape that spanned the river. Could it be a town? Or was it just a rock formation.

As we approached, we became nearly feverish with anticipation. The closer we got, the more convinced we became that our journey was coming to an end. Secretly, the question of when we were began to bother me more intensely. All the time that I was captive, I longed to see my friends and family again. What if they were all dead? Or had never been born? I kept these concerns to myself as I did not want to dampen the growing hope in the others.

When we were a half a day's walk from the apparition, we had to stop for the night. We were all so agitated that we could not play our instruments and none of us slept well. The next day, we nearly ran towards the brown blocks in the distance. It was becoming increasingly apparent that it was a town. Late in the morning we saw several people mounted on camels exit the town and ride off to the west. When we got close enough to distinguish the wall, which had an large gate to the left of a small dock, and individual buildings, Nebucha began jumping up and down screaming "Babilu! Babilu!" It took a few minutes for him to calm down enough to add "Look, there is the Gate of Isther!"

He was nearly delirious with excitement and it was contagious. In an all out dash, we arrived at the gate. There were people milling around, looking as though they were awaiting a delivery. When Nebucha was within shouting distance, he began yelling in his mother tongue. To our amazement and relief, the people responded, shouting in amused welcome.

"It is! It is Babilu!" he cried, so overwhelmed that he fell to his knees, completely out of breath. The rest of us were too excited to ask questions, and Nebucha was too excited to answer coherently, even if we had.

After taking a few minutes to recover, we entered the city gate unhindered. The buildings were all low and of mud construction, and sewage ran down the street. It wasn't Paris or even my native Los Angeles. But it was civilization.

That was about ten years ago. As far as I can determine, we are in Babylon, which is currently the capital of Mesopotamia. The available technology indicates that it is some

centuries before the birth of Christ. I have often regretted bitterly that I never learned more history and that I will never know for certain where and when I am living.

But I am living, and living well.

Nabucha had grown up in the south on what, if I am not mistaken, will be called the Persian Gulf. His uncle, an aristocrat of the Babylonian society, whom Nabucha visited during the winters of his childhood, recognized him immediately and gave him a house which he shared with us. Nabucha's generous and noble nature drove him to find us all jobs, provide us with servants and teach us the language.

Because of his uncle's connections, I am allowed once a season to visit the Hanging Gardens, a sort of terraced arboritum that is irrigated with river water. They are very nice -- lots of large, graceful trees -- although I fail to see how they got to be one of the seven wonders of the world. Slowly I adjusted to the hot climate, the bacteria, the goat-centered diet and the complicated, multilayered culture.

At the age of forty-five (roughly estimated), I am considered an old man. I married (twice), had children and invested well in trade, which provides me with a comfortable income. I sometimes miss the conveniences of modern life: in-door plumbing and telephones, for example, or pizza and movies. But I rarely think of my old life -- or rather, I should say lives: the one before the abduction and the one amongst the aliens. My two wives, four children and the business keep me too busy for such nostalgic thoughts.

I meet with the other members of the band, but not as often as I used to do. This afternoon, I am visiting Lazuli for the first time in months for what amounts to a barbeque on the roof of their house. As the children are playing in the courtyard and our wives have retired to the sleeping quarters to coo over some new imported fabrics, we took the few quiet moments to reminisce about the old times with the aliens and the bizarre twists in our destinies. We wondered at length if the aliens set us down in Nabucha's time because they knew we would be taken care of here. After a reflective pause in conversation, he turned to me and sighed, "What a long strange trip it's been."

The familiarness of this statement puzzled me and I had to dredge my memory for a while before I placed it. With a start, I realize that he had just quoted the Grateful Dead, a band that will not be born for thousands of years.

"Yes," I chuckel, looking out over the dirt-brown roofs of Babylon, catching a pungent whiff of fish guts and goat dung. "It has indeed been a long and strange trip."

1minutetopic: sf03
Contributor: Shannon Frances
Completed: December 2005, Munich
Last revised: 26 March 2006

The Hero Returns

I sat on the bus thinking so I had missed my stop and Jerry Jo Tepid had to remind me twice to get off before he drove me all the way to Dothan.

I had gone into Mobile to get new drapes for the living room. Pecan Springs doesn't have a Wal-Mart, yet.

I had run into Tammy Ray Wycliffe at a downtown coffee shop. Her brother Jack and I dated back in high school. That might be considered a bit euphemistic, we mostly just drove out to the reservoir and screwed like bunnies. He was the captain of the football team and, if you know anything about small Alabama, towns you know that makes him something like a combination rock star and super hero. He led the Pecan Springs Bulldogs to the state championship for the first time in twenty-three years. That elevated him to Greek god status. Jack Wycliffe even looked the part, curly black hair, green eyes and a build suitable for sculpting. I was a cheerleader and, simple-minded as I was back then, it just seemed natural that he would go off to greater glory at Alabama U and then come back and marry me so we could live happily ever after.

When he left he unfortunately shook the dust of small town life off at the city limits. I graduated and got a job at Grumbacher's furniture store while I waited for his letters and phone calls which came less and less often. When Martin Grumbacher, junior, asked me out, I figured why not. Jack had not called or answered my letters in over six months. Martin is not what you would call an exciting guy. His father gave him a good job and some day he would take over the business. So while he might not have been the catch of the day, he did have a lot going for him.

I got pregnant on our third date, and we were married two days before my twentieth birthday. Life settled down to something like rock bottom. The highlight of our year was the furniture convention in Milwaukee. Martin joined the Lion's club, and I went to PTA meetings and read romance novels. I always imagined myself as the incredibly strong-willed and gorgeous ward/governess of the grumpy old uncle/squire of the mansion and Jack as the dashing and reckless young nobleman/sea captain. My fantasy life was every bit as rich as my reality was humdrum, until that fateful meeting.

Tammy Ray had married one of Jack's college friends and moved to Atlanta. I hadn't seen her in ten years. As we sipped our coffee, she told me that Jack planned to move back to Pecan Springs some time in the fall. Their mother had a heart attack, and Jack wanted to come home to settle his father's business. That seemed a bit of a stretch. Bubba, Jack's father, had run the Bulldog Run, a high school hang out back when we were in school. When he died, Wanda took it over and the clientele of the Bulldog Run gradually changed from sweaty teenagers talking football and sex to older women talking the neighbors and shiftless husbands.

I could hardly believe it when she told me he had just gotten divorced again. I spent the entire way home thinking about him being single and home again. I had six months to get my self back in shape.

At first I thought I just didn't want to seem dumpy to my high school sweetheart. Gradually I realized that I had never stopped loving him. Every time I looked at Martin, I noticed how out of shape he had become, not that he had ever really been in shape. A nice predictable guy, a good father to our two kids and a good provider -- but exciting he was not. I was still a young woman, relatively speaking. Did I want to spend the rest of my life with a man who wouldn't notice if I suddenly grew a third eye in the middle of my forehead? Was it fair to either one of us to slowly molder away, bogged down in the status quo when we could both be free to make a new start?

I lost twenty pounds, put a sunny honey gold-rinse in my hair and, a week before Jack would be home, I suggested a trial separation. Martin moved out, but he didn't seem to really grasp the situation.

I floated through that week on a dreamy cloud of expectation. Pecan Springs being the size of your average Wall-Mart parking lot, I didn't have to worry about finding ways to run into him. I was standing in line at the bank when I heard his voice calling my name. I turned expecting to see my hero, but something had gone horrible wrong. He had become his father! Bubba had been a beefy man in a perpetually wrinkled white shirt that strained to make it over his beer gut. Jack's hairline had receded as his belly advanced. What I remembered as clear green eyes now had a slightly watery blue look, and his once fine firm, kissable lips had become fat, puffy hot dogs. Love withered and died like a geranium blasted by an early fall frost. I could almost hear the poor frozen little petals clinking on the icy ground.

"Well, hi there, stranger," I tried to keep my voice light. "I hear you're moving back to town. What are you going to do with yourself?"

He grinned a bit sheepishly. "Take over the family business. Can't let a grand old tradition like the Bulldog Run die."

I wondered what had happened to all the talk I had heard about Jack's taking over some big-ass insurance company in Georgia. "Great," I said, "Got to feed all those high school kids there burgers." I silently thanked God that my turn at the counter had come.

As I hurried out, he yelled, "Hope to see you around, Bootsie! you're looking good!"

I cringed. "Bootsie", that's what he used to call me in the back seat of his daddy's Dodge. It was short for Pussy in Boots.

My head felt like it would explode with conflicting stresses and pressures. I had spent ten years longing for the day Jack would come home and sweep me off my feet. Now he looked like a cartoon of a flabby, old ex high school jock. *Oh shit! And I had dumped my husband for this dreamboat turned nightmare garbage scowl.* Oh God, what a mess. What was I going to do? The same thing I always did when things got out of hand: call my sister.

I ducked into the post office and used the pay phone, praying that Cora would be at home. She picked it up on the fifth ring. Damn her, she always lets it ring at least five times so it wouldn't look like she has nothing better to do than hang out waiting to gossip. "Cora," I gasped, "I've got to talk to you right away. This is important!" I had a hard time not jumping up and down.

She must have heard the desperation in my voice because she said, "I'll be right over."

"No, no not at my house." I checked my watch. "The kids are home now. Meet me in the park by the statue of the Confederate soldier." I hung up before she could ask me anything I didn't want to talk about in public.

She showed up as I paced round and round the monument. "All right what is so dang important I had to cancel a consultation."

"Jack Wycliffe is back in town!"

Her eyes narrowed, "So that's it? You have been panting after him all this time, haven't you? That's why you dumped Martin. So are you happy now?" Cora's attitude did not radiate sisterly support, to say the least.

"No, I am not! He has become his father. You remember: fat and kind of squishy looking." I shook my hands like I was trying to shake off something slimy.

Comprehension dawned. And she had the gall to laugh! "So what do you want me to do?"

"Well, duh! What am I going to do?" I cried.

Cora sat down on the garden bench that encircled the base of the statue. "For God's sake, will you sit down? What is it you want? Think for once in your life. You aren't a cheerleader any more. You got two kids and the job skills of a migrant fruit picker. Do you really want to go through with that stupid divorce?"

I sank down next to her. The crack about the cheerleader stung. She had always been jealous of me ever since I made the squad. But she was right, damn it. Martin might not be high school hero, but he really wasn't so bad. Now that I had seen Jack, he actually looked pretty good.

"No," I said. "But how am I going to..." I waved my hand in a vague gesture of help-me-here "...you know," I sputtered.

"Get him back, you mean, without it looking like you have just shot yourself in the head."

Her grin held only a tinge of sympathy and I kicked her in the ankle but not too hard. I really needed her help. "Yeah. If I go to him and say it was all a stupid mistake he'll probably go for it, but he'll always wonder what had happened. And everybody in town knows about me and Jack in high school. Sooner or later, he'll put two and two together and things might get sticky."

Her grin faded and for the first time she looked suitably concerned. "I wouldn't be too sure about him taking you back so easy. Anita Mancheck had been sniffing around him ever since he moved into the her apartment building."

"Need-a-man? That whore wannabe who works at the Rusty Bucket lounge?" The thought of the closest thing our town had to a hooker and my husband in the same sentence upped my blood pressure a good ten points.

"Well, hell! You're the one who asked him to leave. That makes him fair game, especially when you consider he would be the most eligible bachelor in town now that his daddy

passed and he owns the furniture store. Mancheck'll only be the first in line. If he hasn't figured that out yet, he had a much slower learning curve than I gave him credit for."

"Oh, shit! How could I have been so stupid? I should have at least waited until I saw Jack. But I figured, if I wasn't married... Shit!

She appeared to be gazing over my head while rubbing one earlobe. A gesture I knew well. She was hatching a plot. "You know, this might work for you," she muttered.

"What! I'm dying here. Out with it!" I wailed.

"You have to convince him that you thought *he* was fooling around," she said with a gleam in her eye.

"You have finally lost it," I said in exasperation. "Martin is not the type to fool around. He doesn't have the imagination for it."

"That is completely beside the point. You go at it like you thought any, no every, yeah, every woman would be after such a hotty. Say you overheard a conversation about him screwing," she had to think for a moment, then brightened with a big smile, "Mancheck!"

Now she warmed to her intrigue. "Tell him you thought if he had some time to think it over he might start to miss you and want you back." She got up and started to pace back and forth as her plan bloomed. "You have to cry a little here. Tell him you realized how much the kids need their daddy. Tell him you have missed him terribly and please can't you work things out." She sat down next to me and patted my hand. "Play to his vanity. It's much easier for a man believe his wife would think women find him irresistible than it is for him to believe she doesn't love him any more.

"How do you do it?" I asked in amazement. "How do you come up with such devious, twisted things?"

She grinned, "Work."

"Work? You sell Avon, for crying out loud."

"Honey, you wouldn't believe what women will tell their beauty consultants. Trust me on this, it *will* work!"

1minutetopic: sf03
Contributor: Frances Burke
Completed: February 2006, Black Forest

Last revised:26 March 2006

Dinner at Kent's

The door to the stereotypical suburban American household bursts open suddenly knocking the jet black cat, Kryp, across the room into the far wall where he lands with a feline "thud". A beefy looking middle-aged man with immaculate hair enters, satisfied with the exaggerated door swing, and, with an anticipatory smile, he hold his head high and calls out in a clear voice, "Honey, I'm home!"

The call echoes through the surprisingly spacious and well lighted house leaving no corner untouched. The ringing annunciation fades to be replaced by a background hiss. Before the man's smile completely fades, he gives it another try, as though the first time wasn't quite loud enough to reach the eagerly waiting ears of his unseen spouse. Drawing in his breath again, he calls out, "Honey, I'm home!" Again the acoustic reflections of his grand proclamation bounce off the walls and disappear into the background noise, raising the ambient temperature 0.0005°C, but leaving the house otherwise unchanged. Exhaling with an exaggerated sigh, he finally closes the door, shoulders hunched, puts down his characterless movie-prop brief case, and takes off his non-prescription glasses.

Looking around the room his gaze is caught by a dark shadow lurking behind the couch. His eyebrows perk up with intense concentration, muscles tighten, and then suddenly... he springs, shouting, "Take that!" He lunges behind the couch, knocking furniture asunder, and in the ensuing tussle punctuated by exclamatory dialog balloons, an occasional animal-like screech is heard. When it is all over, and the dust settles, a forlorn yowl sneaks out from beneath the overturned couch. The man lifts the couch up, and Kryp comes hobbling slowly out, dragging several non-functional appendages as he goes.

Mr. Kent gets up, dusts himself off and frowns. "Oh, sorry kitty, I though you were a ..." The cat stops and looks up at him with undisguised scorn. "I thought you were a bad guy," he continues, shrugging his shoulders. Kryp stares at him bitterly long enough for Mr. Kent to feel uneasy and begin inspecting the back of his hand for anything previously unseen. Kryp coughs and slowly drags himself off to convalesce.

Mr. Kent slouches till his sculpted chin nearly hits his chest. He puts the couch back on its feet and flops down into it. Still frowning he looks down and sees the remote control at his feet. Pointing it at the TV, his conscience is taken hostage by *The Simpsons*. The minute hand on the wall clock starts to spin with the speed of the second hand, and the second hand becomes a mere blur.

(From TV)

A door opens, knocking a cat across the room "Thump! Wrrrraaarrww!"

Voice of Homer Simpson: "Honey, I'm home! Hey, wait a minute, this isn't my house at all. Doh! I'm stuck in the wrong show!"

Canned laughter erupts as a cat jumps out from behind the couch tearing Homer to shreds. "Down kitty! Nice kitty! Wrrrraaarrwww! Hiss! Oh, for the love of God, change the channel!"

The sounds of the TV are drowned out by Mr. Kent's own boisterous laughter. All is suddenly silenced by a sudden "bang" as the door bursts open. In walks Mrs. Kent carrying a bag of groceries and a small mulatto girl. Mrs. Kent is an attractive woman whose wardrobe and hairdo are suffering from a serious case of "1940's envy".

Mr. Kent accidentally calls attention to himself by fumbling for the remote to turn off the TV and accidentally turns the volume up before he finally gets it shut off. "Oh, hi, Clark. Do you think you could maybe put that thing down and give me a hand for a second?" Clark stands up proudly and says in a loud, clear voice "Honey, I'm home."

Mrs. Kent stops and looks at him with slightly bloodshot eyes. "Yes, dear, I can see that, thank you. Now can you get the little Hulkster, he's still in the car seat?"

"Hi, papa!" the little girl waves.

"Uh, yeah, sure. Hi Tanisha."

Mrs. Kent stumbles into the kitchen and unsteadily begins heating up several TV dinners in the microwave, creating a small fireworks show of sparks much to the delight of Tanisha and her rather green baby brother, the Hulkster.

"Here, let me help you with that." Clark says triumphantly tearing the door off of the microwave and loading the foil wrapped TV dinners into the toaster oven.

"Oh, thanks, honey. I guess we tossed back a few too many."

"You weren't out with..." he asks seriously concerned.

"Yep, you know, 'girls night out'." She answers making light of her burgeoning alcoholism.

Clark wrinkles up his forehead and scratches his head. "I thought that was last night?"

"Part II," she admits.

"I think she is a bad influence on you."

"Get outta town! She's... well, she's Wonder Woman!"

"It's just that..." he strained hard trying to think up a good reason why she shouldn't go out with "Wonder Slut" as she was commonly known. The protracted silence was broken by a shrill "BING!" from the toaster oven, causing Clark to jump in fright.

"Geeze! That thing gives me the creeps!"

"The toaster oven?" asks Tanisha.

"Well, yeah. I mean, it's just not natural, domestic appliances that ring at you like that."

"Like the phone?" she asks.

"Oh..." Clark mumbles feebly.

"Oh, or the door bell?" his wife kicks in.

"Yeah..."

"How about an egg timer?" Tanisha offers.

"Er..."

"Or the dryer?"

"Alarm clock?"

"Margin warning on the typewriter?"

"Um... how about we just eat?" Clark beckons, placing the dinners on the table.

"Chime on the clock?" Tanisha continues.

"I'm eating!" he says trying to ignore them.

Eventually they all sit down to some really rancid burned and/or frozen TV dinners.

"Doesn't anyone want to know how daddy's day went?" he asks looking from face to face, stopping finally at the Hulkster. They all keep eating away like hungry dogs at an overturned hotdog stand. After a painfully long silence punctuated only by the occasional slurping or chomping noises, he continues undaunted by the abject lack of interest, "Well, I saved the world today!"

"That's nice, dear. Can you pass the Koolaid?" his wife asks.

"That's right!" he says passing a pitcher of what looks like blue toilet water. "I stopped a mad man that was going to make a bomb and blow up the whole world!" he says raising a finger emphatically. "But I stopped him."

"Why would anyone want to blow up the whole world? Wouldn't they die in the explosion?" Tanisha asks.

"Um, well... I guess. I guess that's because he was mad... the evil Doctor..." Again his face contorts into the painful looking "thinking" expression reminiscent of bad constipation.

"Dr. Evil?" asks Tanisha.

"Dr. Evil? No, no... Wasn't he Sean Connery's evil twin?" he asks back.

"No, that's Sandra Day O'Conner," his wife adds.

"It was Dr. Al..."

"Al Franken?" asks Tanisha.

"Al Jezera?" asks his wife.

"Al Quiada?" Tanisha shoots back.

"Al Bundy?"

"Al Ligation?"

"Al Imony?" his wife finally asks. He shoots her a stern look. "It was Dr. Alfred... Enistone..." he says, 28% sure of himself.

"You mean Dr. Albert Einstein, the famous physicist?" Tanisha asks wide-eyed.

"Yes! That's it. The evil Doctor Alfred Einstein was planning to make a huge bomb that could blow up the world... but I stopped him!" he said triumphantly flexing his muscles.

The moment was underscored by the cat, painfully dragging his damaged body across the floor, prompting Tanisha to ask, "What's up with Kryp tonight?"

"Aaaagh! Kryptonite!" Clark screams, upending the table on the poor cat and diving for cover behind his wife. Tanisha throws her hands up in the air, "Dude! The cat, Kryp! I'm just asking what's up with the cat!"

"MeyaooooooIIIIIIII," comes from under the overturned table.

"Oh, yes, of course," Clark says straightening up and righting the table. "I, uh, I accidentally stepped on him?" he says tentatively as everyone eyes first the cat, then him. "Accidentally," he adds picking up the flat cat. He breathes into the cat, reanimating him like a balloon. Clark looks at him with satisfaction for a moment, until the air leaks out with a "Wheeeeeeeee" and the cat goes flat again.

Eventually all is cleaned up and put away. Mrs. Kent is getting ready for bed and Clark is flexing unconvincingly in front of the mirror. He tries the wrestler curled-arms-hunch flex and asks his wife, "Does this make my 'S' look big?"

"It'd look a lot better if you wore your underwear on the *inside*," she replied. She was always getting on him about that. "Now come to bed, my man of steel!" she calls in her raunchiest slut voice. He again slumps his shoulders and turns out the bathroom light.

Mrs. Kent giggles and makes playful sounds. There is a little rustling and finally Clark says, "I'm sorry honey..."

"What's wrong?" she asks.

"I dunno... maybe it's work. I'm just not feeling very super lately."

"Saving the world never slowed you down before. Come on, let's play! Where's my Clark Bent? Hee, hee!"

Again some rustling and feminine kissing noises.

"I'm sorry... Honey, I just can't. I..."

"You just what?"

"I'm just..."

"You're just Clark Can't, I guess," she says scoldingly. There is a long pause as she breaths out her frustration.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"It's OK, Clark, just go to sleep."

There is a long pause.

"Honey?" he asks.

"Yes, Clark?"

"I was just thinking..."

"What is it?"

"Well, you know how the Hulkster is all green and everything. I mean he's not... You never... Are you sure he's mine?"

"Of course not!" she answers without hesitation.

"Uh... Of course not what?" he asks.

"Clark?"

"Yes?"

"Go to sleep."

"Oh, OK. Good night."

"Good night, Clark."

1minutetopic: sf04
Contributor: Horizon Gitano
Completed: February 2006, Black Forest
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Homecoming

It disgrunteled her slightly to realize that she was nervous. Just a little. But undeniably nervous.

Well, she considered as she rubbed more cream around her eyes and watched her tired-looking face in the mirror. It had been over nine years since she had slept with a man. Never mind that she had slept with this particular man before and that indeed he was her husband. Nine years was a very long time.

That is, she intended to sleep with him if he ever came to her rooms. He had been home for three days already and hadn't yet made it up the stairs. The first night he slept in the yard, claiming he couldn't get used to sleeping in a house again just yet. And yesterday he passed out at the table while recounting his journey to the gathered masses.

She was scandalized. If her husband knew how some of his guests had behaved while he was gone, he might not have been so hospitable.

Just then, she heard his step at the door. She turned slowly, smiling at him. He smiled back with warmth. Either he was as eager to go to bed as she was or he was tipsy from the wine, she decided.

Resting an arm on the back of the chair so that the folds of silk fell to expose a bit of breast, she murmured, "Shall I welcome you home, now?"

"Oh, yes, my love. Welcome me home!"

As they undressed each other, she had to accept that he was perhaps a bit more than tipsy. But that had never stopped them before from enjoying one another's company.

They fell in to the bed, kissing and murmuring how much they had missed each other. She thrust her hands in his thick, dark mass of curls as he ran one fingernail along the side of her breast down to the top of her hip.

Suddenly he was on top of her, pumping away. It was a rather abrupt change in the mood, but, with her current sense of urgency, she didn't mind dispensing with the romance. However, just as she was entering that realm where boundaries seem to be melting and every cell in her body is crying for union, he let out a shout, gasped and flopped down with his full weight onto her. With a heavy sigh, he rolled off and lay motionless on his side.

"Odysseus." She shook his shoulder. There was no response, so she shouted his name again to try to rouse him. With a snort, he rolled over on his back and proceeded to snore.

He was just sleeping, she thought with relief.

She had forgotten about the snoring. It seemed the nine years of separation had not improved the volume.

Rolling over to watch his snoring profile, she wondered how much they both had changed over the long years of separation. Most likely, they, like most people, were becoming more themselves. Like his snoring. It was always there, but now it was louder.

Turing away from him in irritation, she hoped that this evening was not a sign of things to come (or, as it were, to not come). It would be kinder, more realistic, to attribute the brevity of their encounter to the urgency brought on by long years of privation. As well as long hours of drinking wine, she added with a sigh.

No, to be realistic, she could expect her husband to be as he was before: irregularly attentive. Now that it occurred to her, all of her female servants could also expect his sporadic attentions. Soon, he would be spraying his sperm around like a cat, inseminating every pretty servant girl in the place.

It wasn't the infidelity that bothered her. She knew what sort of man she had chosen before they married. It was the fact that the household was running smoothly and there was bound to be disruptions as the girls left their stations to bear children or to protect their one and only commodity: their virtue.

Unwillingly, she followed this train of thought to other logical conclusions. Once settled back into the routine of things, he would certainly want to manage the everything as he had done before. This troubled her, as she felt a fierce pride in what she had built over the years. Yes, she had made some mistakes in the beginning, but she had earned back everything that she had lost. Their estates had never had so much livestock, the crops had never been so plentiful. There had never before been such profound peace and regularity in the working of everyday business.

And now, what would become of all she had built? Strangely, she had never considered this aspect of his homecoming. She had contingency plans for what she would do if he *didn't* return: what she would do when their son reached majority and when he subsequently produced heirs. She had, of course, dreamed of her husband's return, of the tears they would cry and the joy with which she would show him the vineyards and stables. She longed to show him the care she had taken to improve every aspect of their properties.

But, in all fairness, he would most likely take up where he left off. He would certainly never consider letting her continue to manage their affairs when he was present. She would be forced to step back into the roll of keeping his house as she had done before. Remembering how she had struggled to cope when she realized he was not going to be back in time for the harvest, she thought of all that she had to learn, so many details and people she had to manage. And now she was to be contented by drawing up menus and choosing fabric for draperies?

Penelope's forebodings were trifles in comparison to the brutal ways in which her husband reasserted himself. Although she waited and hoped for a chance to speak with him about how she had spent the time of their separation and perhaps to discuss the future, she never found an appropriate moment when Odysseus had the time or peace of mind for such things. His need to take charge had taken on manic proportions, and he was always traveling to organize business and reestablish connections.

She withdrew in shock and horror after he massacred several guests, claiming afterwards that they had all conspired to kill him and steal his lands.

Sitting on the stairs above the great hall, she would spend her evenings listening to her husband recount his activities of the past nine years. With her, he never spoke much about the past, moodily evading her gentle questions. He preferred to relive his pain with his male companions, and soon she understood why. Initially, she had hoped to learn what privations and suffering had caused him to become a tyrant in the hope that he might be cured. But it became rapidly apparent that pain and suffering were only an aside in his accounts. Encounters with exotic kings who lavished Odysseus with praise and presents figured prominently in the stories. And the charms of a certain goddess named Calypso were described in long, explicit detail.

Shame and disgust replaced her fear and disappointment. In turn, these were replaced by anger and resentment. Over the years, Penelope withdrew further and further from her husband and public events. She tried to turn her interest in her son and, eventually, his family. But she saw too clearly that the son was a product of the father and disengaged herself from her son's family. Slowly, slowly, without anyone seeming to notice, she became more and more insubstantial. Finally, transparent and massless as a whisp of smoke, she vanished completely, leaving no trace behind.

1minutetopic: sf04
Contributor: Shannon Frances
Completed: December 2005, Gauting
Last revised: 26 March 2006

Notes for the second round of 1minutestories

Round 2 took place between December 2005 and March 2006.

Contributors to round 2:

- Frances Burke, Colorado Springs
- Horizon Gitano, Colorado Springs
- Ioannis Kontodinas, Athens
- Shannon Frances, Gaunting

History of the 1minutestory: SF's perspective

The 1minuteconcept was conceived as a way to entertain my brother and myself during a long train trip to Prague.

I had recently read *One Minute Stories* by the Hungarian author István Örkény (1912-1979). These absurd, satirical, immensely enjoyable stories were written, as the author describes, so that they can be read “while the soft-boiled egg is boiling or the number you are dialing answers.”

I had been very impressed by the stories and very much inspired the idea of writing extremely short stories – sort of short stories for both writers and readers with short attention spans. (I personally fall into the former, but not the latter category.)

During the discussion about Örkény's work, I was reminded of a writing exercise I participated in at my former job. The other technical writers with whom I was working were concerned about their creativity and were interested to have regular creative writing tasks to help them develop their writing skills. Although I found this rather bizarre, as technical writing is essentially anti-creativity, I was eager to participate because it sounded fun.

It was.

At our weekly group meetings, we would take out a topic (submitted anonymously and secretly) from the topic envelop. Our boss would read the topic – usually a phrase or a few sentences, sometimes with an accompanying graphic – and we would have 15 to 20 minutes to write some few paragraphs about the topic. The resulting texts tended to be very short, as we were writing with pens and our hands, so used to typing, started to cramp after the third sentence or so. When everyone had finished or the time was up, we each read our texts out loud. I doubt very much that any of us became more creative as a result of the exercise, but we had a hell of a good time listening to the stories that were produced.

My brother also found the idea of writing short short stories appealing, and, during the train trip to and from Prague, we took turns thinking up topics. We would consider a topic intensely for a few minutes and then first one of us would start to scribble furiously and then the other. When both of us were finished, after 20 or 30 minutes, we would read the stories out loud to each other, often causing discomfort and fear in the passengers sharing our car.

Despite the fact that each story we produced was rather short (although the tendency was toward longer stories), we produced a rather large body of writing. Some of which has some mild literary merit. And it was a lot of fun.

Philosophy of the 1minutestory: perspective of HZ

I began writing “one minute stories” with my sister during an extended visit with her in Germany in the winter of 2004. We had a lot of time on a trip to the Czech Republic and wound up using it to great effect. All told, I wrote over fifty stories in about a month.

We would take turns proposing a topic, often as simple as two or three words, e.g., “The Service Industry.” Only once the topic was announced would we begin thinking about a fitting story on the particular subject. Often we would think for several minutes, then, frantically, likes clowns on fire, we began writing. Usually it took ten minutes to perhaps as much as an hour to get the first draft of the story out. Of course we were eager to tell our stories, and as well as hear the other's take on the same subject.

It was of particular interest to see what similarities and differences there would be in our takes on the common topic. Sometimes I'd think that there was a single, obvious story line to be derived from a given topic only to be surprised at how different her take on it was. She is an excellent writer, and it was a delightful exercise. In the end, I wound up with twenty or thirty stories of my own that I liked enough to inflict on others.

Occasionally I'll use a pre-existing idea floating around in my head and apply it to a likely topic, but more often when writing the stories, I begin with a completely clean slate. I consider the topic and think about the simplest, literal interpretation. This alone may suggest a suitable story, but often I look for an alternate point of view on the topic. It is not that I intentionally try to “twist” it, but, as the song goes:

Like a bad play where the hero is right
And nobody thinks or expects too much
Hollywood's calling for the movie rights
Saying, “Hey babe, lets keep in touch.”

Well, that is the whole problem with Hollywood: too much money and attention to unimportant details and special effects, and not enough story. Hollywood produces some of the most expensive, monotonous crap you can imagine. If they have a “picturesque Italian villa” scene scripted in, they go and paint an entire set to look like some suburb dwellers impression of a “picturesque Italian villa,” rather than, oh say, actually going to a “picturesque Italian villa” and filming. In scenes featuring old buildings, if they even use real-live old buildings, they repaint them according to the whims of some CSA set designer, shoot the footage, then repaint them back to the previous color as mandated by the National Historic Registry.

Any way, apart from bagging on the American Megafilm Industry, my point is that the obvious take is often too boring for anything but Hollywood, and unbecoming printed media. What is interesting is when you read something that makes you think “What? No! I can't take it any more! Make it stop!” set your hair on fire and go running out into the street. Unfortunately the next door neighbor you always hated was, at that precise

moment, washing the oil off of his leaky Harley with gasoline, the fumes from which cause you to burst into a furball of flames, much worse than any cover of a Led Zeppelin album, and you wind up torching about ten or twelve cars and as many old oak trees as you trash about your beloved red-brick tenement lined urban street, only to be put out in a horrific impact with a Deep Rock water truck. As the cute HAZMAT response technician (played by Penelope Cruz) is flirting Harley guy (who eventually fathers two illegitimate children with her, destroying her chances of breaking out of the cycle of poverty which has afflicted her family for the past 3.5 generations) you lie immobile on the stretcher all wrapped up like a mummy, staring at the pigeons on the singed branch of an oak tree and you think, "I would give every thing just to keep that pigeon from crapping on my face," of course to no avail.

When was the last time a movie did *that* to you?

Notes to the individual stories

Topic mom01: trouble with neighbors

Topic mom02: identity theft

SF: Clothes make the man.

Topic mom03: someone I met on a bus

SF: Every word is true.

Topic mom04: things that are easier to get into than out of (in the style of Fran)

SF: I didn't feel I could match the tone of one of mom's stories, but I figured I could take one of her characters. Jarreth is the main character in "Theif of Dreams".

Topic bro01: obligational eating

SF: This story is heavily based on my experiences of *Gastfreundshaft* (hospitality) in Bavaria. The belief that it is impossible to be allergic to things that are good for you is actually prevalent amongst older people.

Topic bro02: inappropriate introduction

SF: Sadly, this story is based on many small truths about working in academia.

Topic bro03: bad poetry

SF: I wrote this story immediately after reading Horizon's story to "Post Office of the Damned" and is heavily influenced by the style of that story. I enjoyed writing this story so much, that I wrote a follow up about the same teaching doing parent-teacher conference.

Topic bro04: bad hair life (in the style of Horizon)

SF: Before I read this story out loud, I explained I tried to tell a story that I thought my brother would tell. I could barely get out the first few lines ("Dear God, ...") before he started howling with laughter. Somehow, this reaction gave me the impression that perhaps I had missed the mark.

Topic io01: the boy who wanted to be an angel

Topic io02: my first attempt in meditation

SF: This story is a pretty good simulation of what happens in my head when I try to meditate. The bit about the coffee was inspired by the Arch Evil Tech Writer at my last job.

Topic io03: discussions with a prostitute

SF: The environment of the story is based on a day trip I took to Zagreb when a friend and I were staying in Ljubljana. As in the story, we fled to a train station cafe to escape the rain and unpleasant city. To my great alarm, my friend spent the entire time that we were in the cafe speculating what the only other customer was doing. Looking for a flat? Working as a prostitute?

When I told him that I was going to write a story to this topic, he suggested “Why don’t you write about Vladya, the one-eyed prostitute?” And the story was born.

Topic sf01: post office of the damned

SF: This topic is based on real-life events. In fact, the only descriptions that are not literally true in the story are those of my reactions (i.e., I never implied anyone was a Nazi).

Topic sf02: exhausted conversation

SF: This story is based on an evening that I spent with a couple of tired coworkers at Schabi, our *Stamlokal*. I actually suggested this topic because I had already sketched it out as a short film. As a result, the text is unfortunately too visual to read well as a short story.

I added the incident with the taxi, so that the story could be include in *Predition Taxi*, a novel about a taxi company that drive their customers to where they should be.

Topic sf03: By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept/There on the poplars we hung our harps

SF: I read a book (or short story), the title of which was the first line of the topic. Although the book was unremarkable, the title stayed with me and I and wanted to write something for it for at least five years. The topic itself is a paraphrase of the first two lines of Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion
There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs

However, when I wanted to write the story, I could not get the meaning of the original Psalm out of my head. Everything I thought up had something to do with Zionists being tortured by their captors.

After awhile, I became desperate and had to resort to alien abduction to be able to write anything at all on the subject that was not a literal interpretation. My struggle to write the

story lead to an excessive amount of exposition. You can see that I never did get away from the themes of enslavement and music.

Topic sf04: the hero returns (in the style of Shannon)

SF: I had written this before we had decided to do a bonus round, intending to use it for round 3. In a way, I was glad I had, because I think I might have tried to second guess myself trying to write a story in my own style. I didn't really believe that I have a style -- that is, until I hear my brother's story for this topic. It gave me the creeps to hear him read aloud something that mimicked my style.