



# Clearings

Stories and a Poem

Biff Mitchell

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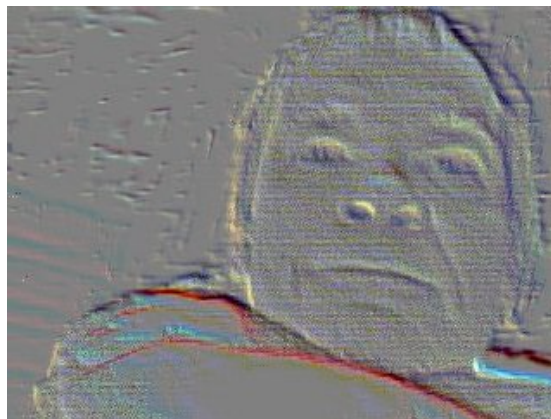
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## About the Author

Biff Mitchell lives on the outskirts of civilization with his muse, a large red paper mache fish named Betts, and Pico, a diabolical cat that tries nightly to kill him by stuffing wads of paper into his ears while he sleeps. Somehow, surviving this each night makes him stronger.



## Other Works by Biff Mitchell

### The War Bug ([www.double-dragon-ebooks.com](http://www.double-dragon-ebooks.com))

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### Team Player ([www.biffmitchell.com](http://www.biffmitchell.com))

“Hilarious, and ringing with wry truth, TEAM PLAYER is a novel best enjoyed by those who can appreciate the absurdity of modern life. Mitchell’s characterization is deep, yet the book itself is easily read. Off-beat, darkly humorous and all-too-realistic, TEAM PLAYER is a truly great read.”

Ann Leveille, The Best Reviews

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# The Nickel

Shards of sunlight flickered off the car's bumper as it disappeared over a rise in the road. Josh stared at the bright bursts of light and breathed deeply, winded from his run through the woods behind the shack where he lived. As though it had been hiding until the car left, the silence crept back from the woods, oozed from the wild grass and shrubbery pushing through cracks in the pavement where the two highways intersected.

Josh wondered who would be driving out this far from town so early in the morning. With the exception of a few hunters in the fall, burly old Ned Wilkins, the grocer from town, was the only person who ever drove out to the mill road when he dropped by twice a month. Gruff-spoken as he was, he was company-something Josh had little of since his father's death--and Ned always brought a box of supplies: things like soap, cornmeal, salt, and Josh's favorite, comic books. Josh could not read, but he enjoyed looking at the pictures of brightly costumed heroes and villains. The villains, he knew, were the ones who were zapped in the end because good always won out over evil. On Ned's visits, Josh and Ned played checkers. Sometimes Ned let him win. But Ned had not dropped by in three weeks and Josh was running low on matches.

He walked across the weed-patched pavement of the station drive-in and stopped at the concrete stand where the gas pumps used to be. He glanced at the box and looked down the road. The dust had settled now, but a faint odor of exhaust fumes still lingered in the air. It was a rare smell these days, far from the days when Josh was young, when the mill was open and the mill workers streamed through the junction, stopping for gas from his father's pumps. They were happy days, when his father, a big man with a round, red face, brought his sleepy-eyed customers in with a big smile and a good word and sent them off with a full tank and a friendly glow. Josh cleaned window shields while his father pumped gas. And no one ever made fun of Josh for not being too bright, mostly because everyone loved his father, Calvin Wright. They loved the boom of his laugh and the smile that never left his lips.

Then the mill closed. The woods had been stripped by budworms and fire. The stream of cars and trucks dwindled to a tickle and stopped altogether. But Calvin never lost his smile, even when he had to close down the pumps and travel to town for construction work or whatever else he could find. "Things will get better," he used to say. "Things can only get better."

One day, about two years after the mill closed, Josh's father coughed up some blood. A month later, he was dead.

Ned had driven Josh to see his father in the hospital in town a few days before he died. Josh was scared at the sight of his father, withered and stark like a dead tree in a big hospital bed that had seemed as though it would swallow him up. Ned and Calvin exchanged a few words, almost whispering, and then Calvin asked if he could speak to Josh alone. His voice cracked, his breath coming in gasps. "You'll be looking after yourself from now on, son, but Ned's agreed to drop in from time to time. I wished it was different. You're young yet, but strong."

"You're gonna be alright, Dad," Josh said, but he knew from the hazy film over his father's eyes that the life before him was nearly spent and ready to sink forever into the big hospital bed.

"Yes, I'll be alright now, Josh, but I won't be around to take care of you. I figure you can take care of yourself. You're not smart the same way others are, but your heart is good. An' what they got in schooling, you got in living your days in the woods, learning about living." He broke into a violent fit of coughing and Josh's blood froze. It didn't seem that his father's shriveled body could withstand the rack of the cough. Panicking, Josh cried: "I'll get the doctor, Dad."

"No, stay here. It's gone now." He wheezed a few times, his face gaunt but determined. Grabbing Josh's

arm with fleshless fingers, he said: "You might think my life is finished, but nothing's ever finished, Josh, nothing."

Even though his father's hand was shrunken, Josh felt it tightening powerfully on his arm. "You got to start things with a mind to do 'em, but you can never finish. Like keeping with the box. It goes on. You try to finish up, but you never will. Never."

Something deep and incomprehensible thrashed about in his father's eyes. "Never." The word was barely audible, the last thing Josh had heard his father say as he drifted into a deep sleep, his lips curling into a soft smile as though he had known something all along and found out he was right.

Fifteen years had passed since then and Josh had grown into a bulking and contented thirty-three-year-old man. Ned had offered to take him in and let him work in the store, but Josh had refused to leave the junction. The small shack, the woods and the quiet were his home. Fishing the streams, snaring rabbits and watching the clouds were his life.

And the box. The box tied it all together.

Gray and weather-beaten, the box perched on a post by the road. A tattered cardboard sign hung from the front like a piece of shredded skin with a few faded gray letters: D NAT ONS. It had been there since Josh could remember. He was never sure what it was for exactly, but he was vaguely aware that it had something to do with helping people, and that gave it an air of respectability in Josh's eyes. He used to watch his father snap open the huge padlock with a skeleton key and remove coins and paper money, which he kept in a cotton bag under his bed. Once a week, a long black car pulled up at the station with silent, unsmiling men who took the money from the bag and drove away.

After the pumps closed, Josh's father stopped going to the box each evening because there was never anything in it, and the black car had long since stopped coming. One day Calvin saw Josh eyeing the key on its hook by the door.

"Got eyes for that skel'ton key, Josh?" the trace of a smile lined his lips. Josh became flustered. He didn't know what to say. It wasn't the key that was important or all that interesting; it was the box. The key was part of the mysterious act of opening the box and helping others.

"Take the key, Josh, it's yours." Josh stared at his father. "And the box, too. They're both yours."

Ever since then, Josh had worn the key around his neck, tied to a ratty old shoelace. Each evening, like his father had done, he marched dutifully to the box, opened it ceremoniously, looked in and, finding nothing, locked the emptiness back inside.

Now, something moved inside Josh like the smell of gasoline fumes reaching deep into his memory. His hand moved to the key around his neck. His breathing slowed. He walked toward the box and began to hum. It was a low hum, a sound that rose, trailed off and rose again, and the pattern of the hum was the pattern of his life, and he seemed to flow more than walk to the box. Standing before it, he removed the key from his neck and placed it into the padlock, turning it slowly until the lock snapped open with a clunk. He removed the lock, lifted the lid and looked inside. Lying solemnly on the bottom was a shiny new nickel.

He stopped humming.

His first inclination was to drop the lid and leave the coin lying there like a riddle with no answer. He was not used to anything new touching his life. But the coin was there, real and demanding to be acknowledged. He picked it up gingerly and rolled it between his thumb and fingers, studying the relief picture of a beaver hunched on a log on one side and a picture of an expressionless woman on the other. He ignored the letters and numbers. The coin had a nice heft at the end of his fingertips. There

was something enjoyable in the weight that seemed so big for an object so small. He was fascinated by the precise edges of the coin, the circularity that came back on itself so smoothly. The roundness pleased him. He closed the lid and locked the box.

Later, sitting on his stool by the wood stove, still gazing raptly at the nickel turning on his fingertips, Josh wondered what to do with it. The men in the black car had not been out to the junction in years, but Josh's father had never kept any of the money in the box. Josh remembered a time when money was short and he suggested they use money from the box.

"Stealing's not right," Calvin said, his eyes icy. "Specially from folks that are needier than ourselves."

"But it's s'posed to help folks an' we need help, Dad." The reasoning seemed apparent to him.

"Then we'll get our help elsewhere, son." The ice in his eyes softened. "The money from the box belongs to others."

Josh knew what he had to do. If the coin was not his to keep, and the box was his responsibility, then he must take the coin to the right people. But he had no idea who they were or where to find them.

An idea crossed his mind. Ned would know how to find them. All Josh had to do was go to town and find Ned. He hadn't been to Ned's store since his father's funeral, but it hadn't seemed like a long drive in Ned's truck, and there were lots of streams and trees along the way. And maybe he could get some matches. And some comics.

It was still morning and he reasoned that if he started right away, he would be in town before dark. Humming again, he draped his jacket over one shoulder, left the shack unlocked, and started down the road toward town with big, purposeful steps.

\*\*\*

The noon sun spilled invisible fire onto the weather-beaten pavement. Josh had been on the road for hours and his stride was beginning to totter. Walking to town no longer seemed like a good idea, especially without a jar of water. The streams and brooks he had seen as a child had dried up, leaving sun-scorched beds of rock and pebbles. His feet were sore and his head ached from the heat. Horseflies, attracted by the pungent odor of sweat, buzzed around him, zipping in to land stubbornly on his neck, his face and his clothing. He brushed them away, arms flopping back to his sides. And they came again. He no longer hummed, his throat too dry to sustain a note. Hot sweat drenched his clothing and stung his eyes, seeping acridly between his lips and into his mouth. He fantasized plunging into the wavering mirage on the road ahead until the mirage dissolved. Then he fantasized on the next one, and plodded on. The sky was cloudless; the air, windless. Nothing moved but the flies and Josh. He dared not look at the woods lining the road fifty feet from each shoulder. Though sparse and tinder-dry, they might tempt him with shelter from the sun and he would sink into a bed of crinkly leaves and stay there forever, shrouded in budworm webbing.

Josh's thoughts traveled back to his childhood, back to a blustery winter night when the wind had pounded against the walls of the shack, making it tremble and creak. Inside, it was warm with heat from the wood stove reaching into every corner of the room, and Josh was comfortable and sleepy in his bed as he listened to his father and Ned talking quietly and playing checkers. He stared through the slots of the grill at the flames, and the smell of burning wood was sweetened as it mingled with the smoke from his father's pipe.

Ned talked around his chewing tobacco: "Nope, Cal, I surely did not want to go over there and shoot up the Kaiser's army. T'tell ya the truth, I was scared so that I pissed my pants the first time I heard shells boomin' miles away, an' we was headin' for all that noise."

"No shame in that, Ned," his father said as he jumped two of Ned's pieces and removed them from the board. "Fear's a natural feeling. Keeps a man alive."

"Right you are, Cal. But that's not what bothered me so much at the time as wonderin' what the hell I was doin' headin' for all that noise an' not wantin' any part of it. But we was all tired, worn down from a long march with full kit, an' I kept walkin' towards that boomin', liftin' one foot in front of th' other an' wonderin' why."

A gust of wind battered the far wall and the entire shack groaned.

"There was wounded men bein' brung back all shot t' hell," he said with a distant look. "An' I wondered if they had any idea why they was wounded, why they'd gone into that boomin' to get themselves all shot up. An' I thought about patr'ism an' protectin' folks back home, an' lots of things, an' before I knew it, we was smack in the middle of the boomin', lookin' over the tops of trenches at land that looked like it'd bin ripped an' torn by some giant plow gone haywire." Rolling the tobacco wad to the other side of his mouth, he added with finality. "Still don't know what the hell I was doin' there."

Josh was beginning to wonder the same thing.

Now, he took the coin from his pants pocket and studied it closely. Turning it slowly between his thumb and two fingers, fascinated by the clean edges and the pleasurable heft. He flipped it a few inches into the air and caught it. He flipped it again, this time a few inches higher. Before long, he was flipping it several feet into the air and the heat and the flies were forgotten. He was humming again, his eyes transfixed by the flipping coin. He watched it tumbling through the air, throwing off sparkles of sunlight as it came spinning down into his palm. Soon, it was as though his mind were spinning with the coin, his being merged with the being of the coin, shooting up and tumbling down. Everything but the coin washed out of his vision, and then the coin disappeared in a flash of brilliant white. Nausea churned tightly in his stomach as he felt his body dropping, his mind still spinning and his ears filled with humming.

He was uncertain how long he'd been unconscious but, judging from the position of the sun, it was not long. He felt rubbery as he raised himself to his feet. He shook the dizziness from his head and stooped to pick up his jacket. As he did so, he saw the coin on the pavement a few feet away. Surprised and elated at the same time, he snatched it up, inspected it closely, apologetically, and put it back in his pocket.

Every exposed part of his body was bright red. He was getting hot and cold flashes, and his body tingled with the imminent danger of not finding water soon. He could not understand how he could have misjudged the distance to town by so much. Nothing was as he remembered it.

He draped his jacket over his head and continued walking.

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The sun moved slowly across the sky and Josh was no longer walking a straight line. Several times his wobbly legs carried him onto the shoulder of the road and twice he had tripped and fallen down only to struggle back to his feet and continue walking. The road seemed endless; the town, unreachable. All that was real was the heat, his thirst and the steady shuffle of his boots across the burning pavement. Horseflies bit into unresponsive flesh. The temptation to drift in the scorched woods gnawed at his will, tied itself to his legs.

Then, on the road ahead, he saw the faint outline of a bridge. He quickened his pace and soon the faded green girders were distinct and promising against the blue sky.

He mustered his energy into a slow easy run and, even before he reached the bridge, he could smell the water, hear it crinkling through the woods. He arrived at the bridge breathless and stood by the steel

railing, gazing jubilantly at the lively stream, silvery under the early evening sun. A path led from the edge of the railing down through bushes to the stream. He picked his way carefully down the steepest part of the path and then ran with a joyful bellow and belly-flopped fully dressed into the water. He splashed about wildly until his energy left him and then he just sank, neck deep, and savored the cool, life-restoring massage of water.

Half an hour later, propped on an elbow on a patch of grass, Josh finished his sixth raw frog leg. He licked his lips contentedly as a fly darted by collecting air. It was a pleasant spot with healthy trees and alder bushes. Uneven grass, dotted by large rocks left by years of spring high water, sloped gently down to a narrow, pebbly shoreline, and the air was sweet with the smell of water and plants. A crow cawed from the distance upstream. Josh cawed back to it.

A few beer cans littered the area, but these were heartening to Josh, a sign that he was close to town. That would come tomorrow though. Tonight, he would rest by the stream and tomorrow he would finish the trip into town to see Ned about the coin. Remembering the coin, he reached his hand into his pocket and clenched it around nothing.

Something thick and ugly curled inside his stomach.

His hands snapped to his other pockets, rummaging and throwing their small contents onto the ground. No coin. He scanned the ground around him. Nothing. The small shore area grew expansive with merciless glints and glitters from rocks and broken glass. The water sparkled mockingly under the lowering sun.

It would soon be dark.

The last time he could remember having the coin was on the road by the railing when he brushed his hand on his pocket and felt it there before he descended the path to the stream. He retraced his steps to the road and from the road back to the stream. Nothing.

He glanced at the sun. About twenty minutes of useful light. He put his boots back on and waded into the stream. Water ran swiftly around his pant legs, and Josh began to fear that the fast flow would wash the coin down to where the stream deepened. He crouched down close to the water, his gaze trying to penetrate glistening wavelets as his hands slid nimbly over rocks and pebbles. Long shadows of trees crept over the water towards him. Mosquitoes attacked him hungrily. He moved faster, lost his footing on a slippery rock and toppled into the water with a shallow splash. Cold shudders racked his body, but he ignored them as he propped himself onto his knees and stared at the endless flow of water rushing into the imperfect distance.

It was dark when he fumbled, cold and drenched, back to the shoreline. Water squished in his boots, weighing down his steps. He slumped on a patch of grass and tugged his boots off, poured the water from them, and thumped them on the grass a few times. His frustration mounted and he pounded his boots onto the ground, and pounded them again.

"Darn!" he cried.

And then he saw it, outlined faintly by the dim glow of moon and starlight. The coin. Rolling out of his right boot.

He dropped both boots and reached forward slowly, cautiously. His right hand closed around it. Blood throbbed in his forehead as he raised his hand, opened it, and saw the coin lying in his palm, the small heft so familiar. He closed his fist around it and felt a cool spread of elation throughout his body.

After a few minutes, he checked his pocket again. There was a small hole near the bottom where the coin had fallen through, and then had fallen down his leg and into his boot.

"I'll sew you when I get back home," he said. He walked wearily back to the tree where his coat was hanging, draped the coat around his neck and, after making sure the coin was still tucked safely in his left pocket, he sat with his back to the tree and fell into exhausted sleep.

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The morning sun was still laced with night chill when Josh, muscles and joints aching, lumbered back to the road. His face was red and grizzled and his damp clothes sent chills through his body as he moved. But Josh was humming. The nickel was secure in his pocket and he was twirling the key on its shoelace in slow circles. The movement pleased him, the roundness of it. From the bridge, he looked down at the stream, sparkling in the morning sunlight. It occurred to him that he should retrieve a few empty beer cans and fill them with water for the remainder of the trip. But looking down the road, he could make out the scattered buildings of town about two miles away. He bellowed happily, almost dancing on the pavement and, twirling the key, he was soon passing the first small bungalows, their graveled driveways spilling onto the road where metal mailboxes leaned at odd angles.

The road turned just ahead of him, and Ned's store, with its two big windows and white, balustrade porch, sat on the outside of the turn. Josh ran awkwardly to the gravel parking lot that fronted the big white building. He bounded up the three sagging steps and opened the screen door.

Behind a long, wooden counter laden with jars and display cases, he saw a weasel-faced man with a balding head stocking wall shelves with tin cans. The man turned his head inquiringly towards Josh as he approached the counter. Josh asked for Ned.

"What d'you want with Ned?" the man asked, looking up at Josh suspiciously.

"I--uh--" Josh had no idea how to explain. The box, the coin, the stream, the road all crowded his mind at once. He thrust out his fist. The weasel-faced man jerked back. Josh opened his sun-reddened hand slowly and the nickel gleamed coolly on his palm. "From the box--" he said with a deep, dull voice. "--the men from the charity."

The man behind the counter relaxed slightly, but still looked uneasy. Leaning forward to look at the coin, he asked: "Charity? What chari--" He leaned farther, looking at Josh thoughtfully. "Aren't you Calvin Wright's boy? The one livin' by himself out to the old junction?"

Josh nodded, feeling easier at the mention of his father's name.

"Well, I'll be," said the man, pulling at his chin with a thumb and forefinger. "You look like hell. You all right?"

Josh nodded again and said that he was thirsty. The weasel-faced man smiled and took a bottle of orange pop from the cooler at the end of the counter. With a single movement, he opened it and handed it to Josh. "On the house," he said, and watched silently as Josh downed the pop with a long, noisy guzzle. Josh handed the empty bottle back, burped, and thanked him.

"I guess you were thirsty," said the man, staring at the bottle. "Now, what 's this 'bout a charity?"

"The box to the junction. I brung a donation. Is Ned here?"

The man puckered his lips and parted them with a muted pop. "No. I'm afraid not. Ned passed away last week. Heart attack, while he was unpackin ' a box of pickles, an' was dead the next day. I'm his nephew, Ernie."

Josh's mouth opened slowly as he realized why Ned had not been out to see him.

"An' if you mean the old donation box to the junction," Ernie went on, "well, that charity ain't around no more, not since the mill closed down. Hell, that money was for laid-up workers from the mill. Ain't no laid-up mill workers without no mill. Why don't you just pocket that nickel."

Josh looked dumbly at the coin, now a strange enigmatic thing without purpose, lying in his hand.

"Say, now, just hold on a second," said Ernie, pulling hard at his chin. "Seems to me there was somethin' here for you. Out back. A box. Just a second now." He rushed off to a door at the end of the counter and reappeared a few seconds later carrying a large cardboard box, which he placed on the counter in front of Josh. He tore off a strip of paper that was taped to the top and read it: "Josh Wright. I believe this is for you."

It was the same size as the boxes that Ned had brought on his visits. Josh lifted one of the flaps and saw the glossy cover of a comic book. Inside, there were four more comics, a box of book matches, a bag of flour, cornmeal--all the things that Ned used to bring for him--placed tightly, carefully, in the box.

"I was gonna drive this out to you this week," said Ernie. "Had no chance so far, with just takin' over the store, gettin' settled into things. Hope you didn't need any of that stuff too urgent." He thought a moment, and added: "Ned an' your daddy were pretty close friends."

"They was," said Josh, shifting his eyes down the counter. "What's that?" he asked, pointing at a clear plastic container with coins and a few bills in it. A small, black and white picture attached to the top showed two children who looked as though they were in pain.

"Oh, that's a donation box for muscular dystrophy victims."

"Donation?"

"Sure, like the one out to the junction, sort of."

Josh looked at the coin still tucked in his left hand. He picked it up with his right hand and dropped it into the slot of the plastic box. The nickel landed with a clink and settled in its place among the other coins.

"Say, Josh," said Ernie, "things are usually pretty slow 'round here this time of day, an' I wouldn't mind a break from the store. How 'bout if I drive you home. It's a long walk to the junction an' it looks to be another scorcher today."

Josh accepted the offer, and Ernie, untying his smock, said: "Fine. Let's head out there right now." He hung the smock on a nail and took two bottles of orange pop from the cooler. "These'll take some of the bite out of the heat on our way there. You want to grab onto your box of goodies?"

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As they pulled away from the store in Ernie's green van, Josh fingered the key that hung from his neck. He was grateful for the ride home as he listened to Ernie talking about the store. He wondered if Ernie played checkers. But most of all, he was glad that he would be home soon to open the weathered old box by the road and gaze into its splendid emptiness.

## Downstream

Hot sun and high water, perfect for a day trip down the Nashwaak.

The four of us had a serious itch to relax and commune with beaver and alders, eagles and backwaters, and whatever Indian gods still cast their spell on river-goers and danced naked with moose and field mice. Not that we were planning to take our clothes off. Hell no! More like hats off to crows cawing from the banks and rocks jutting up from the riverbed, trying to trip us.

I was in a plastic Coleman with my girlfriend, Debbie, later to be my wife, then ex-wife, and finally, good friend and mother of my children. Dylan and Maura were in a wooden Chestnut. Dylan was a friend of mine before I met Debbie. Maura was a friend of Debbie's before she met me. Dylan and Maura weren't aware of this connection until a full month after they started dating. Small world, eh?

A light but pushy breeze shoved aside waves of heat pouring down like crystal gravy from the electric blue sky. Sunlight etched silver castles on the pinnacles and precipices of cumulous mountains. They were the kind of castles that fill your imagination with jumping off misty towers into sticky white pools of marshmallow icing.

Back on earth, cool wavelets flirted brazenly with our gunwales and mingled with the splish of paddles dipping lazily into the water.

Half an hour downstream, we encountered a series of alder-ringed islands, spliced by three channels. Debbie and I took the channel to the right. Dylan and Maura took the channel to the left. The river laughed: "HA!" and went straight down the center.

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There's a kind of reality game I play when I'm in a canoe. I stare at the water and blank out the passage of trees, canyons and abandoned cars until time turns into molasses. Beer helps a lot with this illusion. I reached into the cooler and asked Debbie if she would like another.

"Um?" Her voice was slow and dreamy, faraway somewhere, no doubt, bobbing in the molasses of her own reality game. I used my paddle to pass her a can of beer. Tears of condensation trickled over its frosty label.

She snapped the cap on her can with a foamy crackle, a sound that was almost thirst-quenching itself, you know, by association. She asked: "How much longer to the end of this branch?"

"Oh, a ways," I said.

Twenty minutes later, she introduced a new mood into the flow of river and beer. "Are you sure Dylan and Maura are okay? We haven't seen them in ages." This was a mood peopled with what I called the Worry Marchers--stark little men that appeared as columns of tiny dark shadows deep in Debbie's eyes, where they marched and marched until the tromp of their little boots became louder and louder and channeled their sound through her brain and down to her mouth where it manifested itself as: "Carman?"

"They're fine," I replied. "The river flows downstream. It's the only place they can go. We'll meet them at the end of the channel."

Minutes passed.

"I'm getting worried." Debbie brushed a bang of blond hair out of her eyes. The bang said: "No way!" and immediately fell back, almost covering her eyes. But for the few seconds that her eyes were completely uncovered, I caught a glimpse of Worry Marchers tromping and stomping in a panicky melee deep behind the irises. "Maybe we should go back to the branch they took and see if we can find them. They've never been on this river before."

I looked back in the direction we'd just come and figured, oh, maybe three long bends in the channel, a couple of miles paddling against the current.

"No. They're fine. We'll meet them at the end of the channel."

"But what if their branch goes into a dead end. What if--"

"They're fine."

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More minutes passed with the lap-lap of water lap-lapping and the occasional ba-bump of the metal keel bumping against the plastic hull. Wind tickled the hairs on my forearms. I lifted a cold brew, wet-fresh from the ice, and soaked my throat with a rush of bubbles.

Debbie looked back quickly, the stomp of the Marchers cracking the corners of her eyes with lines and shadows. Tension swelled her shoulders, pushed her arms into the unnatural act of paddling forcefully in an already quick current. Waste of energy. Better to just drink some beer and use the paddles as rudders, to steer only.

"But this is only your second time on this river. Have you ever been down the branch they took?"

"No. But it can only flow one way." So obvious, it seemed to me.

"Unless it comes to a dead end. What if it comes to a dead end? What if it flows away from the river and takes them--"

Why couldn't she grasp a concept that was so much like life itself? "It all flows downstream. We'll meet them at the end of the channel."

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Splash.

The Worry Marchers had changed tactics, trading stomping and tromping for slow, perfectly synchronized jumps telegraphed through Debbie's tensed shoulders, funneled through her arms and hands and into her paddle and--

splash.

Her head had become granite--

splash.

with opal eyes--

splash.

and pumice ears--

splash.

She opened her soapstone mouth: "I'm getting really worried, Carman. We should have seen them by now. Can you at least call out their names?"

"And scare the wildlife?"

"We haven't seen any wildlife. We haven't seen anything."

"Hm, yeah, wonder where all the beavers are today."

"Just call!"

"Okay." I cupped my hands around my mouth. "HEY, ASSHOLE!"

"Carman!"

"Just joking. DYLAN! MAURA! You guys still alive?"

Alders and sky gobbled my voice. Not even an echo burped back, a blank response from river, land and sky, almost like Dylan and Maura had been absorbed into the tangle of roots, rock and water that was nature, dissolved into its ineffable void.

I was becoming a tad concerned. Like Debbie had said, it was only my second trip on this river, and the first one had been with a drunken armada of ten canoes full of beer and madmen. To tell the truth, I couldn't even remember the river forking into three branches. I didn't say this, but thinking it was enough, all that Debbie needed to pick up on it.

"DYLAN! MAURA!" she yelled.

Nothing.

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Mother Nature, always empathetic to the moods of river-goers, nudged the biggest of the creamy white clouds right across the path of the sunlight. Shadows winked from under the crests of wavelets and smiled eerily from stands of evergreens. A cool breeze raised goose bumps on my forearms. And worst of all, my beer had gone flat.

I lengthened and quickened my paddle stroke, a useless exercise since almost no power is generated once the paddle is parallel to the body. I was working against the natural flow of the current, forcing my intent to be downstream before the river's time.

"Dylan! Maura!" Debbie's voice cracked the air with lesions of panic. "Carman! Where are they?"

"There's only one place they can end up, Debbie." I pointed ahead. "Downstream." But my tottering certainty was no match for the genuineness of Debbie's paranoia.

"Isn't there anything we can do?"

"Just go forward, to where the channels merge back into the main body of the river."

Debbie dug her paddle into the water.

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Splash.

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We raised a high white wake as we paddled vigorously, her muscles and my muscles throbbing blood to the same heavy rhythm. It seemed that we gulped the same deep breaths, filling our lungs with the same energy-packed air, and then expelling it through our arms and into the paddles and into the water and into our intent to be downstream. And the rhythm droned with a

splash

Splash

Splash

until the inevitable call of the Great God of Paddling clamored in my throat.

"Time for a brew," I said. Debbie, panting, agreed, and I passed her a beer on my river-drenched paddle. We lay down our paddles and snapped open our beers. The smell of pine drifted into my nostrils as we rested and floated, sipped and thought.

"It's beautiful out here," said Debbie. The big cloud had passed and the sun was back, the shadows gone, and mercy be, a beaver slipped into the water to our right with a splash of its tail.

"Wildlife," I said, pointing with my paddle.

"Was that a beaver?"

"Yeah. Big one." We looked for a couple of minutes to see if we could spot it swimming, but it was long gone. Debbie looked back at me and smiled. "Is that why you come on these trips?" she asked.

"Part of it," I said.

I was about to say more, but Debbie, satisfied with my answer, turned her eyes back to the shore, the blue spruce, the sun glistening on late afternoon wavelets, the melody of an endless procession of water molecules sliding over each other in a single direction beyond the march of any beat. The rest of it.

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"Debbie!"

A woman's voice. It was Maura, waving madly from the river bend ahead of us, where the channels merged. "Debbie! Carman! Where have you two been? We've been worried sick!"

## A Shiny New Pan For Jerry

Jerry in the kitchen, commands the action on the home front. The first sortie begins, a direct frontal attack on the surface layer of loose ground beef and noodles. Splash, circle, rinse. Heavy casualties in the rinse sink! Small globs of Hamburger Helper swirl in brown water and wash down the drain with a crackly sucking sound. Jerry moves the washcloth, coated in brown sludge, over to the wash sink and splashes into the grease-scudded water, bits of food flotsam bob in the lukewarm liquid. Jerry squeezes the cloth, releases. Bits of slime dislodge. Squeeze and release. The cloth brightens, the water darkens. The cloth is ready. Three more sorties and the surface layer is gone, exposing the blackened mounds of burned-in, stubbornly resisting food from God knows when.

This isn't supposed to happen, thinks Jerry. He reaches for a tattered plastic scrub pad. Nothing sticks to a T-Fal pan. One or two wipes with the cloth and the pan gleams metallic gray and clean. And so it does, along the rim where the protective coating is still intact. But below that, the coating has long since been scrubbed and burned away, its stick-proofness striated and peeled, forming a powerful magnetic for food. Jerry attacks harder with the scrub pad, softens the entrenched black mounds, bits of them falling into the water to join bobbing wads of meat and pasta. Into the rinse. Down the drain. Assess the damage. Why can't they make glue this strong?

Incoming from the rear. A piece of cookie flies by Jerry's head, sticks with saliva wetness to the window above the sink.

"Da," from the baby, sitting in her highchair in the middle of the kitchen floor.

"Nice try, Little Red," says Jerry, looking at her reflection in the window. The baby's tuft of bright red hair reminds him of his younger brother. Jeez, even the shape of her head. He feels a chill, watching his little girl sitting out there in the cold dark of her reflected image. He turns quickly: "Ho, ho! There's my little food-chucking girl." He reads impatience in the wide blue eyes above the pug nose.

"DA!"

"I know. Don't leave me stranded here in the middle of the kitchen, Dad. I got to be free. Got to scamper around the floor and figure out this big thing called Life. But Daddy's got to get the supper gook--like that stuff on the floor all around your chair--off this very uncooperative pan, into the drain, into the sewer, and into the ground where it grows into Hamburger Helper trees so we can start all over again." He studies the pan as he twirls it by the handle. "And maybe without burning it, next time."

Back to the scouring with wide circular strokes and hard short scrubs on the tougher spots--a war of nerves and small gains. A few spots resist repeated scrubblings. Options, thinks Jerry. Leave them and risk ptomaine poisoning or whatever E Coli madness from rotted Hamburger Helper. Or--increase the scour power. Things are bad enough between wife-person and self now. If I poison the kids, she'll withhold vital recreational assets indefinitely.

He scrubs harder.

Mission completed. He rinses the pan, looks at his reflection in the window, right beside Little Red, both of them lively in color against the dark outside. He notes the similarity in pug noses and high cheekbones, and the serious absence of hair on both of them. Getting on and getting nowhere, he thinks.

With a tight squeeze, he rings the water from the dishcloth and uses it to dry the pan and hangs it on the hook on the wall beside the window. He pulls the plug in the wash sink. Bubbles gurgle up and break

through the floating layer of slime. This isn't the kind of water he likes for washing pots and pans. Ideally, one sink of hot soapy water for the dishes; one sink for pots and pans. But he and Laurel have worked out The New Household Budget. One sink of water for everything. To conserve soap.

"And now, folks, step up for the main attraction--the liberation of Little Red from the Tower of Flying Food."

"DA!"

"Subtitle: Cut the theatrics and get me the hell out of here! Watch the language, kid." The baby holds fast as Jerry lifts the splattered tray and unsnaps the straps. She reaches her arms up and he lifts her directly into the line of an on-coming kiss to the mouth, which she deflects by turning her head and takes the kiss on her cheek. "No kisses Daddy?" She opens her mouth wide, facing him, her way of kissing. He plants one on her lower lip. "Thank you kisses Daddy." Then he whispers in her ear: "We'll leave the floor for Mommy-person. Wanna go see Mommy?"

"Ya!" Two lower teeth gleaming fresh white, and a tiny food-wrinkled finger points at the entrance to the dining room, which leads into the living room. From that direction, the happy music of Super Mario bounces into the kitchen. Jerry walks into the dining room, baby in one arm, tray in the other. Baby spots Mommy and brother, Jerry Junior, through the opening into the living room

"YA!" Arms waving. Jerry puts the tray on the dining room table, below the chandelier with six candle-shaped light bulbs, just two lit. To conserve electricity.

Two lines of socks, underwear and diapers stretch across the dining room in front of a large picture window, a grim reminder of the War of the Warranties. Break it before you lose it; things always last longer after the first repair. Clothes dryers are not supposed to break down two days after the warranty expires, thinks Jerry. They should wait at least three days. He feels something squishy under his left sock, balances Little Red and bends down to peel off a small piece of macaroni, which he flicks into the far corner. Food for the vacuum, he tells himself. He walks into the living room. Laurel sits in a rocking chair covered in a gray burlap-looking material. Jerry Junior stands. Mother and son are held in a video-optic trance by a tiny black and white screen, control panels grasped tightly, as Jerry Junior guides Mario through an underwater nightmare of Mario-eating marine life as ancient as black and white TV and the version of Mario on the screen.

"Ohhh!" from the video enthralled twosome. Big Mario has just bitten the bubble from a jellyfish, turns into little mario, who swims directly into the jaws of a silly-looking, but deadly, round fish. Laurel leans forward, her turn with Luigi, working his way through a cavern.

*How can they play that game night after night on a black and white TV?* thinks Jerry. The color TV, another casualty of the War of the Warranties, is used as a stand for the black and white, a ten-dollar yard sale bargain. ("Yep, of course it still works.")

"Hun, we definitely need to get a new T-Fal pan. Washing the old one's turning into a battle scenario every night."

Laurel motions to Jerry Junior, who puts Luigi on hold, turns to Jerry. Her blond hair is in a ponytail, and she looks young in spite of the lines around her eyes. "Okay."

Uh oh, thinks Jerry.

"And while you're at it, could you drop the color TV off. And the car needs a tune-up. We really should have the stereo repaired. Maybe we could listen to some music. Maybe we should put it all on the VISA. Oh, silly me. The VISA's maxed out, isn't it? Well, let's see." She scratches the side of her chin, thoughtfully. "The Master Card. We'll use--no--come to think of it--maxed out as well, isn't it? Maybe you

could check out the money tree and see if it's started to bloom?" And now the quick twist of lips into a smile, a dangerous smile, a smile of readiness to wage argument. "I think the pan can wait--hun." She gestures to Jerry Junior and Luigi continues through the Cavern of Bottomless Pits.

"And don't forget the fourteen dollars allowances you owe me before you buy the pan, Dad." Jerry Junior, another pug-nosed product of Jerry's nose-strong gene pool, hasn't received his allowance in seven weeks. Jerry Senior has given him IOUs written on yellow memo paper, which Jerry Junior has carefully folded and placed in his wallet as though they're real money.

"Well," says Jerry, "a new pan is top priority as soon as we get our finances together." Top Priority. Finances Together. Catchwords he uses often, along with When Things Get Better and This Can't Last Forever, to keep his optimism intact, his bitterness in check. "Make the future your frame of reference when the present looks bad," he told Laurel who, being present-oriented, according to Jerry, sees only a shrinking future eaten away by an increasingly dismal present. When the kids are in bed, she spends hours playing Super Mario in black and white.

"By the way," says Jerry, "we're out of bottle liners for Little Red." *And now, thinks Jerry, for the wife-person response when husband-person mentions something whose need can't be avoided.* Shoulders hunch up slightly, indicating tension in all areas below the shoulders. Distraction soon to follow--soon to follow--soon. Luigi plunges into a bottomless pit. Distraction completed.

"Couldn't you have waited until I finished my turn?" she complains.

*Tiffed, thinks Jerry. She's tiffed. Super Mario night after night and she's tiffed.* "My apologies. We'll have to appoint a commission to look into the matter of unwarranted interruptions of the Luigi-killing type."

Laurel glares at him darkly, then snaps her eyes back to the screen.

Little Red has begun to struggle and Jerry puts her down in front of a large plastic bear with wheels, a Christmas gift to provide her many happy hours of riding enjoyment. Little Red immediately begins to bang the bear with her hands, the influence of Jerry Junior who, when he's not playing Super Mario, spends hours banging rubber wrestlers together. Jerry wonders what she'll do when she gets her first Barbie and Ken dolls, after the influence of Big Brother, Mommy and Daddy. Ken says we need a new frying pan. Barbie says fry your ass. Ken and Barbie bang together, plastic arms and legs flying everywhere.

"Dad, are you gonna tape Ultimate Wrestling for me tonight?" Jerry Junior asks while guiding a small Mario through water, yanking the control panel this way and that.

"Sure, if you don't mind me taping over one of your other movies. No blank tapes, son, and no money for a new one."

"Can you use one of the pieces of paper in my wallet?"

Jerry sighs. "C'mon now, let's not get into that again. We'll just have to wait until we can afford it. Besides, you never watch anything I tape for you anyway."

"I'll watch it!" Plaintive. Jerry Junior has refined plaintive to an art form in its effect on Laurel, but not this time.

"You heard your father," she says, toneless, non-supportive, just stating the situation.

No acknowledgment from Jerry Junior, whose mind, body and spirit focus on Mario, close to the end of the tunnel that will take him out of the water and into a bridge world under constant bombardment by aerial critters. Jerry wonders what his son will look like in his teens, after years of video stress. No

picture comes to mind.

"In fact," says Jerry, "I may as well take the grocery list and get the shopping out of the way now. Then, we'll have all day Saturday to do nothing."

"Like the rest of the week?" says Laurel.

"I mean, nothing to do like work stuff--shopping, chores. We can take the kids down to the park for some sledding if it's not too cold."

Laurel considers this a moment. "That would be nice." Almost a cheery lilt in her voice. Jerry scores a direct hit in the Saying The Right Thing For A Change Department. Laurel stands up, tall and lean, a striking woman, with a long, graceful nose. But, according to Jerry, a woman obviously endowed with a weak nose-gene pool. She tells Jerry Junior to keep an eye on the baby. Jerry Junior remains oblivious to everything but the game.

In the kitchen, Laurel removes the grocery list from the refrigerator door, places the bright orange ladybug magnet back on the door, cluttered with a swarm of colorful insects pinning down unpaid bills, lists and original Jerry Junior artwork. She hands the list to Jerry.

"Are you sure this is all we need?" he asks.

"I'm sure it's all we can afford." She goes to her purse on top of the deep freeze, rummages while Jerry leers at her rump and sings in his thoughts. *Saturday night. Saturday night. Kids to bed early on a Saturday night.* Laurel turns abruptly, bills in hand, catches Jerry's leer before he can avert his eyes to the list. She ignores it. "There's fifty dollars here." She breathes deeply, sighs. "I figured it all out. It's just enough, if you stick to the list. And don't forget the bottle liners for Little Red." She hands him the money. He feels strange taking it from her. This is money his wife has earned at her job. "Jer, no extras, no treats, no frills. Just--the list."

Jerry feels a flush of anger. *She doesn't trust me.*

"And don't take all night."

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Jerry in the K-Car, popular holdover from The Days Of Affordable Cars, hanging together, now, mostly by faith and two thousand dollars a year at inspection time. Not the Jeep Laredo Jerry has always wanted, but, hell, that will come When Things Get Better. *She doesn't trust me. Fuck her.* He puts the car in reverse, presses the gas pedal, the engine revs, ready to go, but: What's this? The car doesn't move. *Oh God, don't let the transmission go. Not the transmission!* He nudges the shift and the car backs out of the driveway, over a hump of hard-packed snow, and onto the road. *Thank you, God.* He shifts to drive and turns to wave to the family standing in the window to wave him off. No one is there. He puts his foot to the floor, but the car accelerates with a sluggish crawl and no squeal of tires. It's not supposed to be like this.

He pushes his tongue against a large cavity in his left eyetooth. *Yes, I may soon have an unsightly hole in my smile.* Options. Sell the kids to pay the dentist. Or--stop smiling. *She doesn't trust me.* Jerry is certain that he loves Laurel. It's one of the few certainties in his life, even more certain than This Can't Last Forever. But lately, he has begun to compare their relationship as family breadwinners to a game of Super Mario. Jerry, the high-paid, self-employed Communications Consultant, loses another lucrative government contract in the Ware Of Fiscal Restraint, jumps the pit and falls in. Laurel, the full-time, permanently employed Social Worker, jumps the pit effortlessly and scores twice the take-home pay that Jerry makes.

Jerry now has two modest contracts. And a problem.

Jerry spends.

"Spending is not inherently bad," Jerry has explained to Laurel. "Under the right conditions, it's good. It keeps the economy healthy, provides jobs for factory workers, store clerks, service people, farmers, fishermen and Communications Consultants.

"Spending allows the acquisition of Necessities. Like food, clothing, shelter, furniture, indoor plumbing, lights and all the other strings and twigs essential to building a comfy nest for Jerry Juniors and Little Reds.

"And then, there's spending for the things that make putting in a hard day's work worthwhile. The Gotta Haves. Gotta have a VCR, gotta have a color TV with on-screen programming, gotta have a camcorder, gotta have a CD player and a Pentium computer. Gotta have it because I work hard and it proves I'm getting somewhere. Well, last year I didn't have a camcorder. This year, I do. Must be getting somewhere. Tired, hun?"

Jerry driving along in the K-Car, thinking: *She doesn't trust me. I don't need to be pushed into the pit. I can make it there quite well myself, thank you. So I spend too much.* The thought of spending brings it back, that familiar feeling, expansive feeling, of spending sprees, of forays into malls with no purpose but to Walk Where Things Are Sold, to peruse, approve and purchase. The feeling is optimistic, alive with the tang of juicy restaurant steaks, the swipe of credit cards, the smooth slide of bills passed across the counter, the rows of big white signs proclaiming in bold red letters The Best Deal Anywhere, the pungent ozone of stacks of appliances ready to serve. So painfully familiar.

Ah, Consumer Man, deprived of cards and credit, losing the War Of The Warranties, his realm a shambles of high-tech poverty, his pennies, nickels and dimes long since rolled and spent. Empty jars in the kitchen. We were saving those for our first night out together in almost a year. *What did I spend them on?*

The K-Car glides smoothly on the expressway, heading toward the mall.

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Jerry in the mall, unzipping his jacket, shaking off the cold and feeling very much at home. Comfortable. Familiar. *Yes, Virginia, city streets have roofs and they make the doors too small to get cars in. The ones you sometimes see on display were put there by magic.* This is Jerry's favorite mall, simply laid out, with a food store at one end, a department store at the other, and in between, a long hall with more than a hundred stores, fast-food outlets, specialty booths, banks, bars, arcades, skylights, fountains and real trees. Everything but rain and snow.

The mall reminds Jerry of a street he and his brother had walked down in Italy when they were kids. There had been buildings four stories high on either side; food shops, clothing shops and antique shops fronting the cobbled street on left and right. Halfway down the street, they had come to a wide opening to their right and had looked out the opening onto a river flowing underneath them. The busy, building-lined street had really been a bridge.

Jerry feels that same sense of astonishment as he stands in the mall. He takes the list from his jacket pocket, talks to himself: "Now, let's see. Hot dog buns. Three bags of milk. Ketchup. Dish soap, clothing soap, hand soap. Gotta stay clean. We may starve, but we'll die clean, with glistening dishes and fresh-smelling shrouds." A woman carrying a large package walks by Jerry, eyeing him suspiciously. Jerry glances at her and then back to the list. "It's all right, lady, I'm just a casualty in the War of Warranties. I talk instead of tic. French fries and potatoes. What? No scallop potato mix? No potato chips? No frozen baked potatoes with chives? You write a pretty bland grocery list, wife-person. Bottle liners for Little

Red's boppies." Jerry looks down the hall to his left. "K-Mart for boppie liners. All aboard for the K-Mart express."

Jerry walks down the hall toward K-Mart, mildly disturbed by the sparse crowd of shoppers. Where's that festive look tonight? He passes by the darkened front of a bankrupt shop. Pillow shop. That was a pillow shop--not a good idea to over-specialize in times like these. He passes another closed shop. *Christ, they could at least put some travel posters in the windows so they don't look like black holes in space, slowly drawing in the stores around them.* He passes a group of teenagers in flamboyantly colored jackets and blue jeans who have established their stomping grounds around a marble and wood bench. A tall, pretty girl with a cold sore on her lower lip looks Jerry straight in the eye, steps back just enough to place herself in Jerry's way. Jerry swerves around her. *Wrong target, hard belly. This chicken shit worries about laws and wife-person anger.* Or would it be wife-person disappointment? Or just a wife-person shrug of the shoulders and gimme half and the kids? Half of what? A tiny black and white television set?

Jerry spots a man with a mustache and glasses in a camera shop, purchasing what looks like a camera lens. Immediately, he becomes jealous, resentful, even though he has an expensive camera at home and a large tote bag filled with expensive lenses and accessories. He also has twelve rolls of film to develop When Things Get Better. *Nope. I won't stand for this. I won't be intimidated by a man with glasses and a mustache.* Jerry strolls into the camera shop and begins to browse, not focusing on anything in particular, not even the books and accessories he touches and examines. He lingers a few minutes after the glasses-and-mustache leaves, and then remembers: boppie liners.

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Jerry in the K-Mart, thinking, *Yes, Virginia, the Temple of Outstanding Values, where Santa comes to shop.* Attention, K-Mart shoppers. Yes, YOU. You are about to purchase boppie liners at K-Mart. YOU are a K-Mart shopper. Shoulders back and chest out, stomach in, chin up, preeezent credit card. Jerry walks past the checkout counters. Not too busy for a Thursday evening. Three young girls are at one of the checkouts, paying for records with a credit card. Jerry will be paying for the bottle liners with cash. *Kids have credit cards. I have creditors. Shut up, Jer. Don't start getting jealous of kids.*

And then Jerry sees the signs, the beautiful, reassuring signs. LOWEST PRICES! YOU CAN'T DO BETTER! AFFORDABLE! The baby care center is at the opposite end of the store. Jerry plots his course, a diagonal through men's wear and kitchenware. He feels better now, surrounded by racks of shirts boasting 70% OFF! He feels buoyed by the OUTSTANDING BUYS in men's pants, the SUPER SPECIALS on men's underwear. He stops for a moment to look at some winter jackets that are EASY ON YOUR BUDGET! The lining in Jerry's jacket has begun to rip and both pockets have holes in them. He pushes the jackets around the metal rung until he comes to the medium-size jackets, pleased that the gray and blue jacket he likes is available in his size. He fights the urge to take it off the rack and try it on. *Boppie liners. I'm here for boppie liners.*

He breaks out of the men's wear section into an aisle with tables packed with GREAT DEALS and BEST BUYS! He spots a stack of Pampers on sale for 40% OFF! Little Red uses cloth diapers. Too bad. Could've saved a bundle. And then Jerry sees pans, T-Fal pans, on a bargain table in front of the kitchenware section. YOU CAN AFFORD THIS LOW PRICE! Jerry heads straight for the table to check out this low price that he CAN afford. He picks up one of the pans by the handle, as though he were lifting it off a burner. He imagines eggs sliding effortlessly across the perfect, gray, non-stick coating, grease from sausages disappearing with one pass of the dishcloth. YOU CAN AFFORD THIS LOW PRICE! He looks at the red sticker marked SALE in black letters across the top. And, below that, the price--\$7.99. Seven ninety-nine. Seven ninety-nine for a brand new T-Fal pan. Sweat forms on Jerry's hands as the excitement builds. YOU CAN AFFORD THIS LOW PRICE! Sold! One T-Fal frying pan.

He unfolds the grocery list. Got to be some duplication here. Time to be creative. Put the mind in gear, assess with critical eye. Hot dog rolls. Scratch the rolls. Cut the wieners and put 'em right in with the beans. Beans and wieners. Save on relish and mustard, and fewer utensils to wash. French fries. Bye-

bye frozen fries. Hello big chips, home-cut from fresh taters. Looking like a new pan. Looking like a new pan. Cheerios. Nothing wrong with puffed wheat, called them fluffs when I was a kid. Must be good roughage, and cheaper. Yes, you can afford this pan. Ketchup. No Heinz this time, baby, go for the generic. Beans. Nope, need them for the wieners. Fall back, regroup. Dish soap, clothing soap, hand soap. Soap's soap. The clothes will never suspect they're being washed with dish soap. Come on list. Gotta have this pan. Bacon. Haven't had sausage for a while. Must be at least fifty cents difference there. Kleenex. Nothing wrong with toilet paper for a good snort. Three bags of milk. Boppie filler. Add some sugar to powdered milk. She'll love it and it'll probably be lower in cholesterol. Scratch the Coffee Mate, just stir in the powdered milk.

"Maxwell House Instant. Gotta have coffee to stir the powdered milk into. But hold on. Big savings! Get the generic. Gotta be generic coffee." Jerry realizes that he's started talking out loud when he sees two teenage store clerks standing together watching him. He smiles and nods. *Yes sir, Jer, you've got more than enough room here for the pan. More than enough.*

Jerry walks, T-Fal pan in hand, along the aisle, examining the GREAT DEALS and SPECTACULAR SAVINGS! He stops at tables, fingers items, imagines uses for plastic odds and ends. SO USEFUL AND PRICED TO SELL! Happily, he works his way down the aisle, soaring into the time When Things Were Better.

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Jerry in the driveway, bends over the driver's seat and passes the plastic bags from one hand to the other and places each on the roof of the car. Nope. They just don't look wholesome enough to put food into. He has never trusted recycled bags, their lusterless appearance deemed by Jerry to be more appropriate for things bought in a second-hand store. But he loves plastic shopping bags, new or used, enjoys the soft, crinkly sound they make, the smooth texture, like a thin layer of flesh surrounding the things they hold. And then he comes to the bright white and red K-Mart bag. Three bags of serious stuff. One bag of fun stuff. He handles the K-Mart bag carefully, almost fondles it. He straightens up, threads his fingers through the carrying holes in the bags and steps back, two bags in each hand. He pushes the car door shut with his foot and notices that he left the driver's side seat slumped forward. Oh well, make it easier to get Little Red into the car seat tomorrow.

He stands by the car, looking at the living-room window. The play of light against the drapes brings a happy family scene to mind. His family, going about their happy family business--Jerry Junior jumping left and right, up and down as he plays Super Mario, Laurel preparing lunches between her turns on the game, Little Red sitting on the living room floor, banging her toys and cheering Jerry Junior on with a loud "Ye!"

He imagines the excitement when he walks in, when Jerry Junior spots the bulging K-Mart bag. "Dad bought me a videotape, Mom!" Wife-person will nod approvingly and there'll be Ultimate Wrestling on the tube for weeks. He imagines Little Red tearing the plastic off the cardboard backing to get to the rubber Cookie Monster. JUST 59 CENTS! Of course, she'll probably chuck the toy and just play with the packaging. And Laurel will love the plastic pop-up Super Mario that he bought for her desk at work; 'though he'll have to give it to her after Jerry Junior is in bed so Jerry Junior doesn't think it's for him and turn a happy occasion into a pouting scene.

Laurel will frown at first, but, when she sees that the only thing he bought for himself was a frying pan--and that, of course, is really for the entire family--then she'll smile and say: "Jer, you're just like a big kid." He may not score in the Doing The Right Thing Department, but he will score big in the Having Your Heart In The Right Place Department.

Just as Jerry begins to feel like Santa Claus, the light on the drapes flickers into near darkness, leaving just the dim glow of the television playing across them. Jerry realizes that Santa Claus is late, that the

kids are in bed, that Ultimate Wrestling is almost over, that Laurel is sitting by herself in the dark, playing an ancient game of Super Mario in black and white.

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Jerry in the kitchen, splashing down into the gray, lukewarm emptiness. Laurel repeats: "Where are they, Jerry? The bottle liners?"

## The Clearing

Thirty feet past the power company building the road stopped abruptly before a clearing in the woods, as though the road crew had suddenly run out of pavement and gone home. The clearing stretched about two hundred feet, bordered on either side by tall spruces and worm-tattered pines, and then veered off to the left.

It looked to Daniel like a little world, a grand naturescape in miniature, complete with rolling, snow-crested hillocks and white fields, and an ice-covered stream meandering through its center. The naturescape sloped gently towards the stream.

Daniel glanced at his watch and relaxed. It had been years since he'd walked by himself in the woods and he felt an urge to explore, to recapture the magical quality of solitude in a natural setting. The sky was thinly overcast with a cream-colored hint that the sun was melting its way through the other side of the clouds.

Daniel stepped forward and his boot sank a few inches into the snow with a muted pumf. He smiled and made his way into the clearing. Mounds of frozen brown- and white-capped soil jutted through the even white layer of snow. Snow surrounded everything. It stuck like frozen milk to dense boughs of evergreens, pulling the trees into a winter-huddled droop. On leafless trees, it piled like smooth putty filling. In the soft light, the snow appeared warm and comfortable, a glaze molded flake by flake and shifted by wind and the contours of the land into a snug white blanket.

Daniel breathed deeply, savoring the freshness of the winter air untainted by odor, though its absence was a fragrance itself composed inoffensively of the frozen landscape. Another deep breath and he shouted.

"Daniel!"

And the woods called back to him.

danieldanieldaniel

His echoing name scattered his presence into the woods, bouncing off trees and careening into unseen snow banks, giving him a solid sense of affinity with everything that surrounded him. He shouted again.

"I love you!"

And the woods called back to him.

iloveyouiloveyouiloveyou

And he saw in his mind, the woods tucking his words into the beads of crystal water dripping from the trees.

"I am your voice!"

iamyourvoiceiamyourvoice

"I speak for you!"

ispeakforyouispeakforyou

"We are one!"

weareone

Filling his lungs deeply, he broke into a slow run through the snow and down the slope towards the stream. He laughed and shouted.

"I am free!"

And the woods acknowledged.

iamfreeiamfree

He stopped at the stream, amazed and breathless. The stream was no more than two feet at its widest point, but the shallow gully it twisted through suggested another six feet on either side during the spring runoff. Walking along the edge of the gully, Daniel followed the stream as it wound through the center of the clearing.

A sheet of wafer-thin ice covered the stream a few inches above the trickling water. There was a hint of ochre in the tiny glints of reflected cloud light that gave the ice a sense of warmth. In places it fluffed up, sagged further on, and then slanted from one side to the other like a long curving pane of glass.

Ahead, Daniel saw a section of tree trunk imbedded sideways beside the stream, and he felt this was the place to sit, that sitting on the trunk was a significant part of being in the woods by the stream and in the center of the rolling field of snow. It was what the trunk was for. He yelled: "I will sit here!"

iwillsithere

And he made his way clumsily to the trunk and sat down with his feet a few inches from the stream. A long crack split through the center of the ice and portions of the glistening sheet slumped into the water. Where the ice was perched just above the water, the edges melted from sun and wind into jagged fingers so thin that the slightest breeze might snap them. A few inches below them, crystalline water gurgled over pebbles and rocks and reflected light to the underside of the ice, creating smooth patches of iridescence shimmering with lambent life.

From where he sat, Daniel could see that the clearing continued for another fifty feet to the left and it occurred to him that he was at the center of the little world of the clearing. He imagined the stream was a vein coursing through the heart of the clearing, nourishing and sustaining it, and with the snow and ice melting, the stream was beginning to flow again and to pump life into the bushes and trees and the dormant seeds. Daniel opened himself to the lucidity of the moment, a comprehension of something vital, and he was in the center of it.

He pulled the glove off his right hand and scooped up a few grains of course snow from the top of the trunk. They sparkled in his palm like miniature diamonds. He reached his arm out and sprinkled them onto the fingers of ice. Their small weight broke a long knobby splinter off with a *plink* and it fell into the water and dissolved.

Daniel picked up more grains and let them fall onto the sheet of ice, where they bounced lightly and settled like transparent pimples. His hand reached mechanically for more snow, and he scattered the tiny beads until the fragile ice clicked and sagged with a small frozen sigh. Then, he picked up a larger

piece of snow and poised it over the ice and let it drop. It punctured the ice, and the sheet trembled and collapsed into the water like a two-foot blade cutting into the stream.

Where it had been attached, there was now a long, straight edge that looked out of place to Daniel. He felt remotely guilty, as though he had done something ineffably wrong. His hand was cold and he put his glove back on. A shiver passed through his body and he zipped up the turtleneck on his parka.

He stood up and looked with dissatisfaction at the blade of ice breaking apart in the water, beyond his power to repair it. He looked at his watch and remembered the forecast for snow later in the day. The cream color was lost in the sky and the clouds were beginning to thicken as he scrambled up the gully and began to retrace his steps out of the clearing.

The darkening sky cast a gloom over the woods as another breeze rippled across the ground, and Daniel hunched his shoulders. His boots were wet and his toes were numb with cold. He began to jog awkwardly to keep himself warm, and his breath came in gasps. To his right he noticed a long discarded section of power line, snaking in and out of the snow, over and around the hillocks, twisting indiscriminately through the little world of the clearing.

## Fishing the Moody River

Each morning she stood on the bank casting her line into the water and reeling it in slowly as white smoke curled around her nose from a cigarette lodged between her lips. She never puffed, just let them burn away as she stared into the deep brown water. Butts, burned down to the filters, littered the grass at her feet as though they'd just been dropped from her mouth after the tobacco had burned away. Her face was the color of life winding down into a small gray door with a "Do Not Disturb" sign nailed into the center. Even her void black hair, short as it was, emanated neglect and uncaring like oil dripping from untended follicle taps.

Those were pretty much all the details he could make out from this distance. That was pretty much all he knew about her. That, and the fact that he was crazy in love with her.

She was there every morning for about ten cigarettes of fishing time, from nine till eleven, enough time to catch one or two pickerel ... an amazing feat considering that she never used bait, just silver spinners and rubber worms. She hooked the long skinny fishes with the flaring mouths onto a large metal hook that clipped in at the end like a safety pin. The hook was attached to a chain that was moored to the ground with a long metal spike. She eased the dazed fishes into the water where they floated in fish-eyed disbelief.

After ten cigarettes, she reeled in, looped the spinner around the reel and tightened the line. She pulled the spike out of the ground, lifted the fish out of the water, turned and walked along a path up to her apartment building a couple of hundred feet from the riverbank.

Just one fish today.

Dale loved the way she walked, slow and easy, lazy-like and sexy. And yes, she was definitely sexy with her faded blue jean cut-offs and thin, well-tanned body. She was tall, but there was nothing lanky about her: every square inch of her body appeared hand-forged in the Fires of Worldly Lust. But her face...he imagined seeing her face against the river. Only her body would be visible, and her face would be indistinguishable from the river behind it, a deep river flowing out of a bog of haunted waters populated by dour things that had walked the earth long before the Indians and their Gods had set the power of myth loose in the bulrushes and bracken.

But he loved that face, even though he didn't have a clue what color her eyes were, or if her nose were crooked at the end, or if her eyebrows needed plucking. If her brows were anything like her hair, they did.

\*\*\*

Dawn laid the pickerel on a sheet of newspaper spread on the kitchen counter. She used a paring knife to cut open the center of the fish's stomach. It made a "pluck" sound. The fish was dark, stiff and sticky. She shoved two fingers into the open stomach and pulled out a mash of red and white organs and fleshy tubes. She cut off the head. Just before she threw the head into the garbage, Dawn's eyes and the eyes of the dead fish connected. For an instant, they exchanged what could almost have been a look of recognition.

She wrapped the fish in a clean sheet of newspaper and put it in the freezer. She stared into the cold darkness of the freezer for nearly a minute before closing the door. Then she sat down at the table. There was nothing on its dull wooden surface except a package of cigarettes, a green plastic lighter, and an ashtray half filled with cigarette butts smoked down to the filters.

She lit a cigarette and stared into the clouds of smoke that billowed from her mouth.

\*\*\*

Dale hated his job. It was boring. There was no challenge to the work and absolutely no variation. It was the same thing every day, day after day. He entered data from hand-written reports filled out by field agents into the Wahberg Mutual Assurance database. They read like police reports: no colorful words or expressions, no opinions or poignant observations, no indication whatsoever that the person filling out the report had ever had an original thought. They were straight fact stripped of ownership: *The house was seen to display smoke at approx 6 PM.* Some were pared to fact so concisely that they ceased to make sense: *Bar'd in row 8 to sembl w wat damage perim.*

He hated his job. It reminded him of his life: going nowhere, coming from nowhere, and settled into a smooth, bump-free, never-ending ride down the slow lane to carbon copy days and notes-to-self to do something someday. His social itinerary was the TV Guide. He read his junk mail, with interest. He hated his life.

But now he was in love. He was in love with a woman he'd never met, a woman who fished by herself from a swamp-fed river every morning, who smoked cigarettes like a stick incense holder, and who never appeared to smile. She walked easy but looked hard. Maybe it was the discrepancies that attracted Dale to her; she was so much unlike anything that had ever touched on the unvarying days of his life.

"Off on another one of your tangents, Claw?"

Damn.

It was Pat Duncan, his boss for the last three months, three months of pure hell, of humiliation and slow burning anger. She was a big woman who towered over most men and she knew it. She loved it. She played it up, standing as close to men shorter than herself as the edges of political correctness would allow, looking down on them, bullying them with her size. And she had the girth to match the height. She was mountainous. But she drew attention away from the abnormality of her size – except, of course, when she was using it to intimidate – by dressing in nothing but plain slacks and patternless business jackets over white blouses. It was like a uniform she wore at home and at work. She had a bloated Betty Crocker face and neck-length spray-stiffened brown hair.

One other thing: she hated Dale as much as he hated her.

Dale had a flaw she couldn't stomach. She'd told him as much soon after she took over the office: "You look like a preening pigeon when you scratch your nose with it." She was referring to Dale's left hand. The inside and outside fingers were missing, severed by a lawn mower when he was a child. It gave Pat the willies so badly that she used it as an excuse to spend most of the day out of the office, leaving Dale to do most of the work. She was a bad boss and a bad worker. Dale assumed that she'd been promoted to manager of this office probably to get her out of somebody else's hair, somebody higher up the company ladder but shorter than Pat in staff meetings and around the water cooler.

She called him Claw.

"If you'd spend as much time working as you spend daydreaming, we wouldn't be so far behind on these reports. They want that database ready in three weeks, Claw. / want that database ready in three weeks."

*So sit down on your fat butt and do some work,* thought Dale. He nodded agreement, but didn't say anything.

"Three weeks! That's all the time we have. You've been on this project since before I got here, and you're still not up-to-date. What's wrong with you?"

*I'm all alone*, he thought. *I've got nobody helping me on this damn project, especially not you.* He nodded as he entered data, eyes on his computer screen. Pat watched the two fingers of his left hand race over the keyboard faster than most people could type with a full hand of fingers. She frowned.

"I need a coffee," she said, and she walked out of the office. Dale's shoulders relaxed. He stopped typing. He looked out the window. There she was. Standing on the bank by the river, smoke curling around her head, right hand circling as she reeled in the baitless spinner. His heart pounded.

*Some day*, he thought, *some day.*

\*\*\*

"Unfit," they'd said. "Unfit to raise a dog let alone a child." She'd known what was being said behind her back, the whispers and the knowing looks. And worst, most of it was coming from people she called friends, from family, people she'd grown up with, and people with whom she'd eaten Christmas dinners. They were people who knew her past. Some even knew her secrets. And suddenly, they were turning their knowledge of her against her.

"Two men at the same time in the back of the car. That was in grade ten."

"Sat right down on the couch without a stitch of clothing on, beer in one hand, joint in the other, dozens of people around, most of 'em men, just talkin' away as though everything was normal."

"Stealing things from stores ever since she was seven. Amazing that she hasn't ended up in jail by now."

"She was my sister's best friend. Or so she thought so ... until she found out that she was screwing my sister's boyfriend. And helping my sister with her Math homework at the same time."

"Unfit," said the judge, and that was that. She'd be lucky if she ever saw her daughter again, and even then, it would likely be with someone appointed by the court or, God forbid, her ex, watching every movement, listening to every word, monitoring the situation because, let's face it, the judge had said: "Unfit."

Her line tugged ... a muscular, resistant movement, a movement of sudden shock, of realization and running. She gripped the reel tight, and began to reel in the line in spite of the frenzied pull in the water.

\*\*\*

That night, Dawn was sitting on the couch watching the test pattern on the television. She had no idea what time it was. She had no idea that she was watching a test pattern. The ashtray was filled with butts, bent in the center from having the fire squashed out of them. Behind her, pictures hung askew on the wall. In the pictures, people smiled. Dawn smiled. She held a dark-eyed girl – barely visible under a mass of red snow suit – in her arms. The girl laughed as she pushed both her mittened hands into Dawn's face. Behind them, a wooden toboggan lay on the brilliant white snow under a flawless blue sky.

Staring at the television, Dawn's eyes were as empty as the pattern on the screen.

\*\*\*

In his dream, Dale stands at the riverbank. In his dream, the woman he loves casts her line into the water and hooks onto Dale and begins to reel him in. Dale swims away from the tug of the lure and feels pain. Then, in his dream, he stops fighting the tug toward the shore ... and the woman, along with the pain, disappears.

And then Dale woke up and said: "That's it! That's it!"

He wrote a message to himself on the pad by his bed and went back to sleep, smiling and strangely calm for a man who'd just dreamed of being a fish hooked on a lure.

\*\*\*

Dale was late for work, and for the first time ever, Pat was early. Early. On a Friday morning. Normally, she wouldn't come in on Friday morning, showing up maybe an hour or so into the afternoon. But there she was ... big and Betty Crocker-faced, white blouse, business jacket and all. She was frowning. She was always frowning, but today her frown took on new significance.

She actually had something to frown about as she stood by her desk, all starched collar and heavy perfume. This was a frown of self-righteous, better-than-thou, caught-you-in-the-act legitimacy.

Dale would have balked, but he was too excited about the large plastic bag he had in his hand. That was why he was late. He'd stopped off at the hardware store to buy something that, if everything went well, might just change his life.

"Whatcha got there, Claw? Hope whatever it is, it's worth coming in late and putting your job on the line for." The frown changed to a scornful smile.

"Sorry about being late, Pat," said Dale. "I just thought ... it being Friday and all ... and I put in some overtime this week ..."

"Stow it, Claw. What's in the bag?"

Dale smiled immediately, his eyes neon with excitement. He lay the bag on his desk and pulled out a long clear plastic package. "Going to take up a new hobby," he said. He turned the package so that Pat could see a complete angler's set: rod and reel, fiberglass line, spinners and sinkers, two lures, an assortment of tiny black hooks, and a small plastic box to store the equipment.

Pat stared at the plastic package. Then she looked at Dale, and then back to the package.

And she burst out laughing. She laughed so hard her face turned red. She laughed for at least two minutes before the laughter started to break up into quick gasps for air and gurgling sounds that could have been strangled guffaws or screams from her stomach. She pointed a thick finger at Dale and smiled meanly while she brought her breathing under control. "You ... you wouldn't be able to catch a cold if it bit your nose." Her eyes widened and she fell into her chair, shrieking with wild laughter.

Dale just stared at her. She laughed and she laughed, pointing her finger at him, slamming her fist onto her desktop. Not a muscle on Dale's face moved as Pat laughed until she'd exhausted her stockpile of vindictive mirth. Then she shook her head, stood up and walked across the office to Dale. She took the fishing kit out of his hand, stared at it a moment, smiling even more scornfully now, and shook her head again. She tossed the kit on his desk, snapped around quickly and walked to the office door. Before leaving, she turned to Dale and said: "Have a great weekend with your new hobby, Claw."

Dale could hear her laughing all the way down the hall, until finally, the elevator doors smothered the sound.

He looked at the fishing kit on his desk and smiled.

\*\*\*

"She was the bad one in the family," her mother had told the judge. "The others all turned out good. Don't know what happened with her."

A small gray cylinder of ash dislodged from the cigarette in her mouth and fluttered to the ground, shedding flakes and ash bits all the way down. She stared into the moody water as she reeled the line in slowly. A movement to her right caught her attention and she looked.

She saw a skinny man in a white short-sleeve shirt about fifty feet downstream. He was wearing a tie. For some reason, this irritated Dawn.

It just ... irritated her.

\*\*\*

Dale tried to keep his eyes off the dark-haired woman. His hands shook as he cast his line into the water. He was terrified. *What am I doing here?* he thought. *What the hell am I doing?*

He stared straight ahead, his head and body immovable like a stump of wood hammered into the riverbank. Whatever color he'd had in his face had drained into the ground around him like white blood.

*What the hell am I doing?*

\*\*\*

There it was: the tug of muscle, so distinct from the snag of reeds or submerged logs. This was the feeling of instant, horrifying realization, telegraphed right up the line and into Dawn's hands. She had a fish.

She let the line out a bit, playing the fish, and then reeled in slowly, played the fish again, and reeled in slowly. Each time she reeled in, she brought the fish a bit closer to her than before she played it. Now, she could almost see the swimming shadow just under the surface of water. And then she felt a strong tug and the line went slack. She reeled in a spinnerless, fishless line.

*Just like my life*, she thought. She glanced over at the skinny stranger, and caught him looking at her. He immediately made a face and turned away.

*Was that anger in his eyes?* she thought. *Or was that disgust, or something? Does he know me from somewhere?* She picked up her things and looked in his direction again. His head pointed stiffly at the river, as though he were deliberately trying to avoid eye contact with her, to ignore her.

*Screw you*, she thought. And she walked, without fish, up the path to her apartment building.

\*\*\*

Not a single muscle in Dale's body failed to shake. He felt like his stomach was somewhere at the back of his lungs. Lines of sweat streaked his face. The armpits of his shirt were soaked.

*She caught me looking at her!* he thought. *She looked right into my eyes! And I didn't even smile or nod or anything.* In his mind, he reenacted the entire eye-brushing incident, each time with a different scenario: smiling at her, nodding to her, waving to her, calling out something about how's the fishing, or nice day. All the things he didn't do. All the things he could have done. All the things that haunted him as he packed up his things and walked back to the office.

\*\*\*

That night, Dale made up his mind that he would approach her first thing Monday morning, even if Pat were in the office and he had to just get up and walk out right in front of her, he would do it. He had to do it. He would apologize for not being friendlier on Friday morning. He would tell her that he'd watched her ... no, that sounded almost like stalking ... he would tell her that he'd seen her fishing a number of times and it made him think that he hadn't been fishing since he was a kid and so he bought a fishing kit, and here it was, thanks to her. That's what he would do ... he would approach her and thank her for inspiring him ... no, too slick-sounding ... he would thank her for reminding him how much fun he'd had fishing as a child. And that would probably lead into something to talk about, maybe into fishing in general, or childhood experiences, anything.

*I should have said something.*

\*\*\*

*It's not a cold feeling at all*, thought Dawn. *Kind of warm and relaxing*. If she kept her arms still in the soapy water, she couldn't even feel the pain in her wrists. And then her thoughts turned to fishing. She stood by the bank of the river with a beautiful little dark-eyed girl. They laughed as they cast their lines into the water under the flawless blue sky.

\*\*\*

He checked his watch again. Ten o'clock. *Where is she?* thought Dale. She was like clockwork, on time every day, Monday to Friday, out on the riverbank at nine and there for ten cigarettes ... eleven o'clock. Except for last Friday. But maybe he had had something to do with that. Maybe she liked to fish alone. *Oh jeez*, he thought, *what if she doesn't want me out there fishing at the same time as her*. Would she leave early again today as soon as she saw him? Would she move farther down the riverbank away from him? Dale was already starting to sweat when Pat walked in.

She looked at the fishing kit leaning against the wall by his desk and smirked. Trust her to be the only person alive who could put the devil in Betty Crocker eyes. "Catch anything this weekend, Claw?"

"Not yet. But I'll try again today. I ..." He realized suddenly that Pat wasn't listening to him, she didn't even seem to be aware of him as she walked over to the window and looked at the building where the dark-haired woman lived.

"I think that's the building," said Pat.

"What building's that?" said Dale, puzzled.

Pat shot him one of her looks and said: "Where the woman killed herself. It's been all over the news all weekend. Don't you listen to the news, watch television?" She smiled a smile that twisted the right side of her face into something clouded and brutal. "Or have you been fishing all weekend?"

Dale just stared at her.

"Something wrong, Claw? Cat got'cher tongue?"

He looked out the window at the building. He knew that it was her, that it was the dark-haired woman who fished. He'd known it since the first time he'd seen the life-drained outline of her face, as though her body moved around carrying on a daily ritual of deception.

She moved on.

And it was time for him to do the same.

He stood up and grabbed onto the fishing kit. It wasn't until he was almost out the door that Pat noticed him leaving. "And where do you think...?" The door closed on her voice and on the skewed Betty Crocker face.

Outside, the day was clear and the sky cloudless. It didn't matter to Dale whether he caught a fish or not. No, just casting the line would be enough; in fact, it would even be a big improvement.

# arrival

he called it arrival

a cross dimensional jump  
he said  
into a place or a state

or a "just knowing" the arrival

that was when he could still talk  
when he was still knowing here and  
still knowing the cubes and spheres of three dimensions  
of things that could be described  
he said  
in the cubes and spheres of here

these things he called the

disjointed

broken speech  
of half realities  
foundering on a plateau  
of meanings  
crippled and foundering  
he said  
flat  
formless and lifeless  
compared to arrival

all around us  
he said  
look  
vibrations in a pool  
crinkles and folds  
just foundering around in the pool  
and we're drowning in the pool  
he said  
drowning in the flip flop of  
broken meanings

arrival  
he said  
would be painful but not  
nearly as painful as the dull  
gray  
swatches of ordinary here and now

fuck the sureness of straight lines and smooth curves  
he said  
screw the rules and the fixed perspectives

the safety of the knowable ordinary  
the slow death of sameness

he dissolved them  
melted the lines and the curves  
axon by axon  
dendrite by dendrite  
as his brain dissolved  
into a pool of new meanings  
disconnected  
in the fields of his arrival

in there  
once  
close to arrival  
he saw an ancient Indian wandering through the woods  
his body  
disintegrating with each step  
and all the parts of him falling to the ground  
fingers and ears falling to the ground  
seeping into the ground part by part  
and the last part of him to seep into the ground  
was his smile

I am that beautiful Indian  
he said  
seeping  
seeping into the porous ground of arrival

he went back again and again  
to arrival  
to be that Indian  
to escape the cubes and spheres of here  
he said  
and seep visit by visit  
into the knowing of his arrival

and then there was nothing left of here  
to seep into there  
into the rich red earth of arrival

and now his eyes  
stare  
into a place beyond his stare  
where he dances on the ceiling of his mind  
and yells  
I'VE ARRIVED  
through the yellow  
incomprehensible  
portal of his arrival

# A Mean Leaning Ringing Machine

## (Excerpt from Team Player)

It all started with the widow Berta of Bernardo of dell'Opera di Santa Maria who had a dream one night in 1172 AD, or at least, a dream according to friends and relations, but not to Berta. No sir, according to Berta, her dead husband Mr. Bernardo (aka Bernie) came to her one night with much concern and worry creasing the lines of rotted flesh and matted hair on what was left of his head. In a raspish voice he commanded: "Build a tower!" and then stared off somewhere between here and there with half empty eye sockets.

Berta thought about this for a moment, keeping her eyes on the floor and away from the remnants of her dearly departed's mostly departed eye-stuff. *Hmmm. Yes, build a tower. Hmmm.* And then she looked up, with much confusion shadowing her countenance, and asked stridently: "What you say? Build a tower? What I wanna go build a tower? You binna dead too long."

Bernie rolled what was left of his eyes and repeated: "Build a tower!"

However, as it was throughout their marriage, and even now in widowhood, Berta was not one to be told what to do by anyone, least of all Bernie, who couldn't even muster the energy to live as long as her, and she wasn't having any of this tower business.

"What you just stand there an-a say 'build a tower for'? I'm-a look like crazy woman to you? Is-a what you think? I'm a crazy woman? Why you think I wanna build a tower?"

Bernie's hands were shaking; his remaining strands of grayish white skin darkened with whatever terrible pigmentation the dead use for darkening; he lifted his head and arms up towards the sky in a gesture of I-told-you-so. Then he cast the remnants of his gaze directly at Berta. "You gonna build a tower, or I'm-a gonna tell every one up there all about your snore so loud at night."

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Just before she died in 1172 AD, the widow Berta of Bernardo of dell'Opera di Santa Maria amended her will to bequeath sixty coins to the Opera Campanilis petrarum Sancte Marie to buy a few stones for the building of a tower.

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Those stones would eventually form the foundation of one of the most beautiful buildings on earth; also, one of the oddest. The tower was to compliment the cathedral in Pisa which was located in the "Field of Miracles" in the downtown area. What would happen to the "Torre Pendente di Pisa" (aka Bell Tower of Pisa) would indeed be a miracle.

The original architect, Bonanno Pisano, was reputed to dabble in bronze and foundries, and was, in many historical accounts, voted least likely to succeed at building a tower. But history aside, Bonanno Pisano began construction of the tower on August 9, 1173, and everything went just fine until about the third stone from the left into the third floor, at which time the builders noticed that the tower-to-be was no longer performing to specs. In fact, it was beginning to *lean* prominently to the north.

The experts came in and hummed and hawed and concluded: "You build a tower on-a marshy soil an-a big hole ... it's-a gonna lean."

Which, of course, was completely wrong, the truth being that the now deceased widow Berta of Bernardo found out that Bernie had already told everybody “up there” all-about-her-snore-so-loud-at-night, and she was pissed ... so pissed that she came all the way back down from “up there” and kicked the living daylight out of certain key stones in the tower’s foundation. “It’s-a gonna point to Hell, where the old bastard should-a burn his big-a-mouth ass off!” She kicked and she kicked and she kicked all night, and when she was sure that certain key stones were sufficiently weakened to tumble the tower by the time it got to the third stone from the left into the third floor, she went back “up there” and waited smugly for Bernie to hear the news of his tower in a hundred years or so.

But a hundred years later, the tower was still standing – leaning, but standing – and the widow Berta of Bernardo visited the foundation again. And again, she kicked and she kicked and she kicked all night, and when she was sure that certain key stones were sufficiently weakened to tumble the tower, she went back “up there” and waited again for the news.

But for all the wrathful widow’s heroic kicking effort, the tower instead of tumbling did an about face and started leaning to the south. Now the widow Berta of Bernardo was pissed enough to fry eggs on her forehead, so pissed, in fact, that it wasn’t until 1934, nearly eight hundred years after the first stone was laid that Berta cooled down enough that she could float down from “up there” and have at the tower one more time.

Unfortunately, for the widow Berta of Bernardo, a group of Save The Tower fanatics picked this particular year to shore up the tower’s sagging foundation with concrete. The concrete was actually drying as the widow kicked and kicked and kicked, and though she managed to increase the lean, by the time she ran out of kick, the concrete dried and solidified and the tower just hung there, a little more to the south. Nobody, of course, was aware of the widow Berta of Bernardo’s kicking rampage, so the Save The Tower fanatics, instead of being up to their ears in kudos for saving the tower, were actually blamed for making it lean even more.

The tower still stands today. It still leans. And all the elaborate plans devised by all the elaborate minds to stop the lean from eventually reaching the ninety degree level in a pile of rubble have proved about as practical as tilting the entire city to straighten the tower (which, of course, would create a new puzzle for elaborate minds ... how to straighten the Leaning Town of Pisa while keeping the tower straight).

On the other hand, if the tower had been built straight in the first place, the universe would have ended eight hundred years ago.

## Chapter 3

### (Excerpt from Heavy Load)

(Hint: This novel is narrated by a laundromat.)

Let's talk about clothing. I mean, that's what I'm all about, right? Yeah, OK ... and towels, blankets, drapes, face cloths, handkerchiefs, pillow cases, throws, and a few other things as well, but clothing is the main thing people bring into me. Some people don't even own a handkerchief, but everybody owns clothing and their clothing reads like a personal diary.

For instance, Sally has mostly cheap clothing. No, pardon me; that was harsh. Sally has mostly *inexpensive* clothing, stuff she buys on sale or at discount stores, or hand-me-downs from friends and relations. But, being a single mother with three kids, a ton of bills and a small income, that inexpensive clothing that she washes and folds so carefully is the best that she can do. It's an expression of her situation at this point in her life.

But Sally has something special, a special piece of clothing, an expensive white and navy blue striped, drop-shouldered, short sleeve T-shirt with padded shoulders and side slits. It's not a silk blouse – it's polyester cotton – but her parents sent it to her for Christmas, and they sent the receipt in case she had to exchange it. It was forty-five dollars. That's Sally's cable bill for a month, and it took an enormous act of courage, fighting against guilt (and doubt and a grocery list that already had three things scratched off and left for the next check) for her to keep the T-shirt and not return it for the money.

Sally loves that T-shirt. She doesn't handle it; she fondles it. She treats it with a little bit of wonder, wonder that a piece of gear like this really belongs to her. And she fondles it slowly into the washer, and then quickly into the dryer, and takes it out gently before it's completely dry. And then she folds it carefully. I've been in her mind while she's doing this, and her thoughts are like a bouncy musical interlude, with a beautiful new house, a shiny new mini van, an adoring husband, and three wonderful kids with good grades who can't repeat enough: 'We love you, Mom.' She has wind sweeping through her hair the moment she touches that T-shirt.

And that's what I learned about Sally from that piece of clothing. She has dreams, and she hangs on to them just as she hangs on to that T-shirt. I've been inside a lot of people who don't hang on to their dreams, people who would take the shirt back for the money.

Like Eddy. Eddy doesn't dream about anything. He just watches TV, reads magazines, hangs around machines tapping his fingers on them, and looks at everyone else as though they're getting on *his* nerves. His clothing is all drab solid browns and grays. Solid, except for the stains. He just tosses his stuff into the washers, pulls it out, tosses it into the dryers, pulls it out, and tosses it into a garbage bag, showing about as much respect for his clothing as he has for his life.

Clothing. It's like wearing a thousand pictures.

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Got some serious eye motions going on here. The tall woman with the long chestnut hair is loading two washers across from Jeffrey, about fifteen feet away from him, and she glanced in Jeffrey's direction while he was looking at her. She's interested. But what does Jeffrey do? Glances away just as soon as they make eye contact, and the woman turns her head back to her laundry and, on the way, sees Baxter glance away from her. But in that instant, Jeffrey sneaks a peek at the woman and sees her looking at Baxter. Jeffrey looks at Baxter just as Baxter looks at Jeffrey, and they both quickly look back at the woman, who's given up looking at either of them and concentrates on her laundry. Good thing humans don't

depend on eye contact for reproduction. The race would disappear in a blink. Blink. Get it? OK, so maybe I'll just put the puns on the back burner, or at least let them slip by unannounced.

So, the woman is using two washers. Very good. Whites in one, colors in the other. Blouses and slacks, a floral cotton dress, and a very skimpy, very black, very sheer bra. So she does wear them. A few halter tops, socks, stockings – everything looks new and in good repair, and she doesn't just toss things in; she places them into the washer, and ...oops ... what's that. Hey, lady! A pair of skimpy black panties just fell down between the washers! Don't lose those! They go with the bra.

Oh good, Jeffry saw the panties fall. Go ahead, Jeffry, walk over and tell her. Do it with discretion, grace, elegance. She doesn't want to break up that great set. She'll be grateful. Maybe she'll take you home with her and make you forget about your boss, your job, your life. But he's not doing anything. He's just standing there with his eyes focused on the dark space between the washers where the panties fell. Come on, Jeffry, be a gentleman, tell her about the panties; don't just stand there gawking, or maybe you're just too shy to tell her, or maybe just a bit too hung over. Shake it off! Take a deep breath! What's wrong with this guy?

Let's take a look.

Now, I don't usually do this until after I've built up some background, but I want to get into this guy's head and check out what's going on right now, not the past, the *right now*. And bonus – this will give you a chance to see what it's like inside a person's mind in the present, and it'll give you some appreciation of the editing job I'll be doing on the fly later.

And I'm in, into the messy Latin stuff.

*... her panties panties panties black and sheer oh yeah ask her out yeah sure and why's that asshole looking at me you fucking look at me you turd sheer black oh yeah and those legs clickclick click clickclick click is that buttons so soft never mind and she didn't see them tell her she lost them yeah sure shit it's hot I don't even know the fucker foot's sore again aw fuck my eyes hurt clickclick click clickclick click buttons maybe zippers she doesn't know get over there without her seeing no just mention she'll be grateful she'll be pissed why's he looking at me punch that fucker in the face and probably get the shit kicked out of myself gotta be a way to get over there she didn't see or did she oh yeah so sheer black...*

And we're out of here.

OK, he's not shy, just has a fetish for panties, and maybe he is a bit shy too, and got a severe rejection complex. And he's going to steal those panties, break up a perfectly sexy bra/panty set. Shame on you, Jeffry, you skinny pervert, she smiled at you.

And look at Baxter, looking the woman up and down. Bet he's forgotten whether the pain attached to the performance evaluation is inversely or directly proportional to the amount of preparation that goes into the evaluation. Looks like he's evaluating the woman, and Jeffry. He keeps glancing in Jeffry's direction as well. And look at that ... the woman just looked at Jeffry again, sort of casually, looking around: 'Ho hum, in the laundromat, putting my clothes in the washer, putting my coins in the slot, pushing the coins in, glancing around, glancing at the man who wants to steal my panties.' Naw, not really. I said that. Not her.

Let's do what every man in me would like to do, except Jeffry of course, but that's another kettle of fish; let's jump into the woman.

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Let's see, we seem to be in, oh yeah, been in one of these before, her right nipple. Like I said, memories are spread out *everywhere* in the human body. The memory is about a year old. Don't ask me

how I know that, just something that comes with experience. It's a warm spring night, and the woman's name is Hillary. I like this name. And I like this fragrance. Lilacs.

'Mmm ... smell those lilacs.' That was Hillary. She's strolling along a sidewalk, looks like a residential area, trees, shrubs, lilac bushes, lots of big mature lilac bushes spilling over the sidewalk. And trees form a canopy over the street. Hillary has her arm around somebody's waist. A man.

'Yes, summer's coming when you smell the lilacs.' His name's Tim. He's about an inch shorter than Hillary, light blond hair, and smooth features. No lines or worry marks. Just ... smooth. And smiling.

*Don't worry about later. Don't let them destroy tonight. Here I am, walking with Tim. He's different. Tonight, it's going to happen. Tonight's the night. Don't worry about it. It's going to be different. And don't talk about work.*

'Summer ... oh god, yes. Just a few more weeks and it's back to the beach and sandals and shorts and hot sunny days ...'

'You seem to be a summer person.'

'I am. I love shedding my clothes down to the bare essentials.'

'Really! Miss Harris, I didn't know I'd been dating a woman of the nudist persuasion.'

'Not nudist! You wish!' She pulls him closer, and they laugh. Hillary has a beautiful laugh, deep and resounding. It fills this street.

*Keep it simple. You're going to make love to this man tonight, and it's going to be different. This is going to be it. And don't talk about work.*

'I just like to keep it simple. Throw something on and get outside. Life's too short for bootlaces, zippers, and buttons, and picking out the right scarf, and long johns when it's really cold. I hate long johns!'

'You wear long johns? No!'

'Yes! You don't? Not even when it's minus twenty?'

'Real men don't wear long johns.'

She pokes him in the side. 'What do real men wear?'

*This is going great, Hil. Just relax. It's going to be different.*

'Real men wear fortified underwear and aftershave that doesn't smell like flowers.' They laugh again.

*Oh, just look at me ... I'm falling in love with this man. Keep it going. This is it.*

'Hey, wait a minute!' says Hillary. 'Fortified underwear is like long johns! They just don't come down as far.'

'No, they're not ...'

'Oh, there's another lilac bush. I love that aroma.'

*Careful, Hil, you just cut him off. Slow down.*

Tim nuzzles his head into her ear and whispers. 'Would you like to take some home?'

Hillary looks doubtful. Go on, Hil, take some home. 'They're on private property, Tim.'

Party pooper.

'But look, there's hundreds of them. They're not going to miss a few.' And there are. Hundreds. They're in a yard beside a huge old Victorian house with a doorway that comes right up to the sidewalk. The lilac bush is giant, about ten feet high and nearly as wide, with hundreds of light purple flower tops. And there's no fence.

'I don't know. What if someone sees us?'

'Take a look around, Hil. There's no one else here.' He's right, Hil. Look around. It's just the two of you on the whole street and it's dark. Go for it!

*Don't get prudish, Hil. Let him do it. You've picked them yourself before. Just relax.*

'OK. But hurry, please. I'll whistle if anyone comes.'

*Yes, keep this night going.*

'Back in a flash!'

*God, look at that bum, so tight and small. This is going to be different.*

Tim's beside the bush now, being very picky about the flowers he picks, only has one so far. Hillary keeps an eye on Tim and snatches glances around the street, up the sidewalk to her left and to her right, back to Tim. 'Hurry!' I don't think she said that loud enough. It doesn't look like he heard.

*Don't push it, Hil. Relax. It's going to be different.*

Uh oh.

*Oh no!*

Lights just came on in the doorway of the big old Victorian house. And the door just opened! Oh good, Hillary sees it.

*Relax, Hil. Whistle.*

She whistles, a long low whistle. Tim looks at her. He heard it.

*Why did I let him do this?*

An old man backs out of the door. Looks like he's holding something. No, he's helping an old woman out. He has both hands on her arm. They don't see Hillary yet.

*Why did I ... stop it! Just relax, Hil. Act like nothing is wrong. Tim is hidden in the bush. They won't see him.*

The old woman steps slowly and carefully down the two wooden steps to the sidewalk. She's talking to the old man, but Hillary is too far away to hear what she's saying.

*Stay hidden, Tim. Don't move. Why did I let him do it? Because you did, and you would do it again. Relax, woman. They won't see him.*

But they just saw Hillary. The old man saw her first, and then the old woman looked in the direction he was looking. They look curious. Hillary is just standing there on the sidewalk.

*My god, they're looking at me! Do something. Don't just stand there. Look for something!*

Great thinking, Hillary! She pretends to look around the sidewalk. And now she looks at the old couple, standing at the foot of the steps looking very frail and looking at Hillary. 'Hello!' says Hillary. 'Beautiful evening, isn't it? Wish the streetlights were brighter, though. I lost my favorite hair clip. Right around here somewhere, I think.'

The old man smiles. 'Would you like me to get you a flashlight, Miss?' The old woman gives him a look that would wilt a charging bull.

'Oh, no. It's all right. Don't bother. It could be anywhere along this street. If I don't find it tonight, I'll probably have better luck in the morning, in the sunlight.'

*Very good. Don't move, Tim. I've got things under control.*

'No, it's no bother.'

*Oh, please, mister kindly old man, please just leave.*

The old woman whispers something to the old man. He nods. 'Well, Miss, good luck.'

'Thank you. Thank you very much. I'll find it.'

*Woman, you are good. Things are going to be different tonight. God, he has such tight buns.*

The old couple shuffle slowly to a long gray Crown Royal parked in the street in front of the house, and the old man helps the old woman in while Hillary starts walking slowly along the sidewalk, scanning the ground.

*Make it look convincing. Move slowly. This is going to be all right. Tonight is going to be wonderful. Tonight's the night. It's going to be different. Tim is going to make you forget. And what can Tim be thinking? Poor Tim. Trapped in the bush.*

Looks like Hillary is almost laughing. The car starts up and drives by her. Hillary looks at the old couple. The old man waves a hand. Hillary waves back to him, smiling. The old woman frowns.

*Perfect. You are too good!*

When the car is about a block down the street, Hillary hurries back to Tim, who's just coming out of the bush with a big bouquet of lilacs.

'For you, Madame. From your admiring partner in crime.' And he bows as he presents the bouquet. Hillary cracks up with laughter, takes the bouquet and almost throws herself around Tim's neck.

'He wanted to get me a flashlight!'

*Now. Now take him home. It's going to be different. Those tight buns. It can't happen this time. It can't. Don't let them destroy tonight.*

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Yep, she'll do nicely, along with Jeffry and Baxter, my stories for this Saturday morning. There seems to be some kind of bond or common denominator, maybe just some loose connection, between the three – I sensed it in them – besides which, I'm interested. I mean, will Jeffry get the panties? Will he get the lids to the washers open to get his laundry out? Will he and Hillary smile at each other at the same time? Who's trying to destroy Hillary's 'tonight'? Will Baxter and Chuckie watch that game together? Why is Tim's face so smooth? Was The Spin Ahoy! murdered? Or was it really an accident, faulty wiring? Does the answer lie in the bond between Baxter and Jeffry and Hillary? Probably not, but ...

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Guess what?

# The Great Nano Canyon

(Excerpt from *The War Bug*, now available from Double Dragon Publishing)

Less than a hundred years into the new millennium, the human race came close to becoming cheese soup. It started with the world's smallest computer, a computer so small, it could only be seen with an electron microscope. It was the first assembler nanobot, a concoction of seven atoms that had been circuited and programmed and instructed to build ... though what the nanobot was supposed to build was never known because, in the process of building, it killed ten million people, including the people who had programmed it, and the last communication with them had been from the project's lead Nano-applications Specialist, Milton Nadd. His pallid face had filled the phone monitor as he whispered: "My god, it's cheese soup..." And then the screen had gone blank.

No one will ever know why it was cheese soup, but here's how the nanobot was supposed to work: it was supposed to visit neighboring atoms and nudge them around until it had built another nanobot exactly like itself. And then the two nanobots were to visit neighboring atoms and nudge them around until they had built two more nanobots exactly like themselves. And then the four nanobots...

It was much like E-bola, only faster. In fact, it was so fast that, by the time Milton Nadd had said "cheese soup", he was cheese soup. And his videophone was cheese soup. And the other researchers and scientists and administrators and computer technicians in the room with Milton Nadd were all cheese soup. Desks, computers, chairs, paper clips, Far Side calendars, pencils and papers and books were all cheese soup. A million dollar electron microscope shook twice and then collapsed into a splash of cheese soup that turned most of the floor into cheese soup. The walls literally flowed into the floor and the ceiling fell and bubbled into the yellow-orange liquid. Within minutes, the entire underground high-security maximum-containment, fool-proof, fail-safe, absolutely accident free and "Senator-Jonz,-you-won't-ever-have-to-worry-about-anything-escaping-from-this-place-or-my-name-isn't-Doctor-Milton-Nadd" facility was cheese soup, and it was working its way up through the ground, turning layers of red granite, quartz schist and an elevator containing junior research assistant, Jaqui Wright, who, strangely, had always wanted to be cheese soup, into cheese soup.

And now the assemblers were in gear, revved up and ready to rock, rarin' to chew into the atoms of igneous and metamorphic rock, bite into the neutrons of trees and grass and asphalt, and spit out cheese soup. Highways, lakes and towns, swimming pools and rivers, airports and trains, canoes full of frothy cold beer, and entire cities all churned into cheese soup. Hundreds of square miles of North Dakota were cheese soup by the time the news began to spread. Around the world, people panicked and rioted while others prepared quietly to become cheese soup. Jerry Springer was thawed from cryostasis and hosted a special on people who had sex in vats of cheese soup. Leaders of the Unified Global Village pondered and debated over international chat forums and concluded that it was time to try something new ... and soup was always OK. And just when the world was ready to accept cheese soupness, the assemblers stopped.

Just stopped.

There was no apparent reason. They just stopped, after having created a mass of cheese soup that stretched from Winnipeg to Fargo and from Williston to Duluth. The whole planet held its breath in unison as the ocean of cheese soup trembled like gunky jello without advancing a single atom in any direction. It stayed like that for three days. And then the giant mass of cheese soup went "ping", not a loud ping, but a barely audible "ping" like two expensive Champagne glasses toasted by lady bugs. And by the time the "ping" had "inged", the cheese soup was gone. In its place was a perfectly round bowl in the earth, its walls polished and smooth. Millions of people who had flocked to the edges of the cheese soup stared quietly, their faces like a wall of open-eyed non-expression around the massive hole left by the cheese soup.

Nobody knew why it disappeared. Nobody knew why it stopped. Only the handful of Nanotechnologists Milton Nadd had called just before he became cheese soup knew why or how it had started, and they later restricted all nanoresearch to space stations far from the Earth's orbit until the research was proved safe. Or at least, somewhat reasonably safe.

And, of course, there were those who thought that that a giant empty bowl was a big improvement over the former landscape.