QONVICTS, QUEERS

AND Qripples

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By

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ABSTRACT

QONVICTS, QUEERS

AND QRIPPLES

By

Douglas Weaver

Master of Arts in English

Qonvicts, Queers and Qripples is a collection of short stories that explores not simply the underclass of American society, but people who find themselves at the extreme margins of the underclass: They are all part of the LGBTQ community, they’re all drug addicts, most have AIDS. They are also, to varying degrees, members of the criminal class of citizen. The stories in this collection, instead of furnishing meaning from utilizing a traditional linear, character-driven cause-and-effect sense of narrative, Qonvicts, Queers and Qripples relies instead on techniques that include a focus on voice and a spiraling digression – or a deferral of meaning -- to ultimately provide, through ambiguity and suggestion, what meaning there is to be found.
The sun is shining outdoors. The limping ceiling fan, slightly out of balance, blows syncopated calypso-beat bursts of stale air over my face while worn bearings in the motor click off a kind of jazzy counterpoint. And all I can think of is the skinny black man, freshly showered and scented, hanging newly ironed shirts, light yellow or blue, on a rack in the next room. He is attractive. I restrain myself, though, because it’s not clear whether he’s a cross-dresser or not. Those pastel shirts, cheap pants and fruit salad cologne may be part of his day job, so to speak, constituting the male drag that supports his decidedly unmanly hobby. Now don’t get all judgmental and holier than thou here, Mr. Reader. What makes you think I should be grateful for every morsel of man meat that crosses my path anyway? Even I have my standards, for god’s sake. After all, a man like myself prefers real men -- and as I’m writing this, I wonder if it’s better to say a man like myself or a man like me? Which one’s right? I know that every time I’ve used the emphatic über reflexive myself instead of just the plain, simple, unadorned me, it’s sounded impossibly self-absorbed, self-important and, frankly, kind of embarrassing, while using the me form retains a slight scent -- a tiny bouquet of humility. And I realize, during all my flailing about in this puddle of self-reflexive sludge, that – even though I’m still prone from the night before, my shoulders have begun to shimmy and dip, my hips are bumping and grinding and I’m chanting under my breath, following the syncopated Jamaican beat of the ceiling fan: *A man like me -- a man like me -- a man like me.* No one’s here to see me, but I suddenly feel self-conscious and try to pull myself together just in case I might have to explain myself: *I’m not weird -- really -- I was just --* but I pump the brakes on this thought quick because it really *is* weird.
Truth be told, I actually respect cross-dressers -- I admire them, mainly because you can’t be a pussy when you’re not a pussy and you insist on dressing like a pussy. It’s just not my cup of tea. That’s all. And please: this is NOT an invitation for you to strain my sexual appetites through some sieve of critical thinking. My revulsion to fornicating with a cross-dresser can easily be traced to any number of my own glaring shortcomings. Only one request: If you insist on judging me, pleeease -- save it for another day. Thank you.

But what to do? How do I learn the identity of this man without risking considerable embarrassment? “Excuse me -- but could you refresh my recollection? Just who are you and what is your name? Silly me -- I seem to have forgotten.” What if we’re neighbors or even lovers? What if he’s not a cross-dresser, but is just some hot guy I met recently who’s decided to iron my shirts (or his shirts), and he becomes offended that I’ve already forgotten his name? Or he gets all beatific, and some sad, caring expression forms on his face -- the pitying eyes with all that infinite understanding as he tries to keep to himself the word he’s thinking: Dementia -- poor dear. I tell myself that it doesn’t really matter what he’s thinking about me or who he really is, and roll over and pull the blankets up around my head. He’s obviously not dangerous, I tell myself and try to will myself back to sleep. But I’ve been denatured. Just a pickle who can’t, by any force of will or god, revert to being just a plain old cucumber again. Wide awake and I can’t cast out this cursed awareness and simply order my eyelids to relax, even for a minute.

Climb out of what could generously be called my bed, because, frankly, it’s more like a landfill than a place of repose -- grab my rifle and, like a sleep-deprived zombie,
drag myself out to the front yard to shoot targets on the hill in the distance. Just targets -- not people or animals or anything. Still wearing the boxer shorts and stained t-shirt I wore to bed last night, but it doesn’t matter. The neighbors have seen much weirder than this. They’ll get over it. Pull the trigger once, twice and try to gauge the black man’s reaction as the bullets stir whiffs of dust on the side of the hill. If he’s a real man, he’ll probably take the shooting in stride. If he’s a cross-dresser, he’ll become hysterical. The blood drains from my cheeks when I notice that Mrs. Olsen, the lady who lives nearby, has carried a watering can over to her geraniums. Whether she is oblivious to the nearby shooting or is just being polite, I can’t tell, but I feel like a fool for not making sure there was no one in my line of fire. Could have shot her easy, and then where’d I be? It would have ruined my whole day -- probably a whole series of days, with police investigations, prosecutors -- the whole nine yards. How to explain her death to the authorities? “I was only shooting the rifle because I wanted to spend a little quality time swinging on what I hope is this guy’s monster cock for a few minutes, which I wouldn’t do, officer, if he was really a cross-dresser.”

Then the thought strikes me: What if he’s here to save me? That would be really cool. Life has been so hard recently -- and it doesn’t seem to be getting any easier. I start thinking about the different ways he might try to save me, and like a tiny snake slithering into my consciousness and whispering in my ear, I begin to suspect that this guy might be from A.A. What if I called them and I just don’t remember? I hope not though, for a couple of reasons: first, I already let him into the house. They’re like vampires. Once you invite them in, they suck the kink right out of your capillaries. And second: they really don’t appreciate a good debate. Trying to explain the symmetry of how our beliefs
are diametrically opposed is lost on them: “Some people go to work, have families and play golf -- and I shoot heroin and speed.” Simple, and no big deal. But with somebody from A.A., it becomes an exhausting verbal wrestling match during which the A.A. practitioner will right away call out his big guns to support his position: god himself. And who can argue with god the All Infallible, All Powerful, All Seeing, All Knowing, All Judging, All Forgiving, All Bronze Age Brawn and Victorian Age Virtue, All Capital B Boring?

For the briefest moment I consider what it might mean if this black man is an imposter -- only pretending to be in A.A. or whatever, but the implications of such a thought make me dizzy, so I turn toward the front door and almost trip over Fluffy, my big white dog, who died a couple of weeks ago. Don’t even shake your heads, all judgmental and everything, like this is just what you’d expect from somebody like me, because really, I’d have moved her but I’ve just been so busy that I didn’t have time.

After Fluffy’d been lying in the front yard for a few days, I guess I figured that she’d just blend in to all the discarded shoes, broken bicycle frames, dried-up caulk guns and random junk there, but her long thick fur, which used to be all bright white exuberance, began to brown a little in death, and she became a little conspicuous. So I took a white sheet and covered her up, thinking that when I got a few minutes of free time, I’d give her a proper burial in the back yard. But guess I just got used to seeing the white sheet in the front yard because it’s been there for a while now. Fluffy’s paw peeks from the corner of the sheet where it’s come loose, so I get a brick and secure it back the way it was. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the black man, wearing his slacks and light yellow shirt and a pair of sunglasses, jump into a Toyota in the driveway and start the engine. As he backs
out, he waves to me, but I can’t see his eyes because of the sunglasses. I want to say something, but all that happens is my mouth opens a little. No sound comes out. He drives away and I wave back. There’s such intense loss and desolation once he’s gone. Still can’t remember who he is. James? Paul? Who knows? I think about putting the barrel of the rifle inside my mouth and pulling the trigger. And I’m not surprised that I’m thinking these thoughts, just a little concerned that my decision not to blow my brains out has been borne, not out of shocked revulsion, but from plain old featureless, flat, dry boredom. Apparently the thought of killing myself is about as novel as watching a couple of episodes of CSI: Miami. Finally hear my own voice while standing in the crisp morning air, the sunlight brilliant in my eyes, a .22 caliber rifle cradled in my arms: What the fuck is going on here?

I go back in the house and lock the door tight behind me. It’s dark inside. Quietly peek out through the blinds covering the front window. Front lawn is dead from neglect—completely desolate—-not even weeds grow there. Just all the random junk and, of course, Fluffy’s white shroud is rustling in the breeze. Go in to where the black man was ironing and look at the tags on the hanging slacks: Sansabelt. And the shirts: Faded Glory. Okay—probably not a cross-dresser. But anything is possible, this being the San Fernando Valley and all, which, unlike Venice or Santa Monica where the debris meets the sea, the Valley is where the debris is manufactured and perfected, where completely respectable folks—mixed in with liver-spotted TV stars, inbred police with prepubescent penises and toothless, crab-infested outlaws, when all stirred and simmered together at normal Valley temperatures, which are as hot as the Space Shuttle re-entering the
atmosphere, are magically transformed into gold-plated, pay-at-the-window, come-as-you-are, opposable-thumbed nightmares.

I begin to think. Think about who the black guy might be, but more important, ponder my own identity. And it’s not easy. No foothold or signpost or anything surrounding me has any resonance at all. I’m completely numb. Life/death, hot/cold, wicked/holy -- it’s all the same. Lost in this house that grows more unfamiliar as each second passes. Think about hell and Catholics and how right they were about damnation. Eternal Perdition -- forget about those nine graduated rings of hell, there’s nothing worse than being lost. Frantically – desperately, like the last ball bearing in a pinball machine -- I roll from room to room, literally bouncing off the walls until I need to take a leak, and somehow, miraculously, I know where to find the bathroom. Lurch through the door at the same time I unzip my pants. Pull my dick out and aim it into the toilet, and as the wonderful, cathartic, robust stream of piss hits the water, I look up, and there, written in a scrawl of cocksucker red lipstick on the mirror of the medicine cabinet are the words: “YOU are a seafood soufflé.” And I feel hopeful for the first time I can remember, not because I know how to make a seafood soufflé, but because I know there’s a cookbook in the kitchen.

There’s a whole section titled Soufflés with various headings. There’s a turkey soufflé, a chicken soufflé and ones made of cheese or spinach or even sweetbreads. There’s not one soufflé, though, made of just seafood, which is fine with me because I have a bit of a sweet tooth. There are soufflés made of almonds, and caramelized almonds, with cointreau or curacao. There’s a rum and macaroon soufflé too. I settle on
a chocolate soufflé because, frankly, my dears, chocolate – in both men and desserts – makes my knees buckle. I’m in love with the chocolate.

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The recipe begins with a caveat: “Chocolate needs special treatment for soufflés because it is heavy.” And it’s fitting, I think, that I will need, merely by virtue of my special nature, special treatment. Eagerly I rise to meet the challenge. I gather the ingredients and tools and start to work. I will be made of seven ounces of semi-sweet or sweet baking chocolate, one-third cup of strong coffee, quite a bit of butter, some milk, some flour and various pans and soufflé dishes. Because of my experience with eating chocolate soufflés, I take the liberty of adding to the recipe a generous jigger or two of rum – doesn’t rum go with just about everything? And, of course, I add a dusting on top of myself a bit of powdered sugar once I’m done. My mouth is watering at the thought of it. I question, but just for a split second, the obvious difference in volume between what currently constitutes me and the seemingly niggardly volume to be rendered by this recipe. I consider trying to increase, by use of mathematics, the quantity of my ingredients, but restrain myself because, Number One: I am terrible at math; and Number Three: Who am I to question the wisdom of Julia Child, the drunken PBS kitchen maven, whose cookbook of French recipes has served generations of homos as both Bible and toilet reading, and is the creator of this very recipe? But this is no time to dawdle. I preheat the oven to 425 and then smear some butter inside the soufflé dish. There’s a certain charm in the fact that, during my creation, I’ll need to place a collar made of aluminum foil around the top edge of the soufflé dish in order to inhibit, I think, any unwanted accretion of heat that might manifest itself in burned places around my
chocolaty upper periphery. Whether it’s significant or not, collars and me go back a long way – most recently, of course, with those on the Faded Glory shirts hanging in the next room, but more especially those of the Elizabethan kind.

There could be no better time than this moment for a bit of honest self-disclosure: A few years back I advertised for sex partners who were willing to participate in what came to be called “library sex” wherein I’d meet other men in a library, and if we decided there was sufficient chemistry between us, we’d check out the appropriate books, then either go to a motel or sometimes just the bathroom inside the library, strip naked, become aroused and then place tiny Elizabethan collars around our penises, who would then recite sonnets to each other. Of course, our penises didn’t actually recite to each other, we just pretended they were talking to each other while we manipulated the little slit on the top of the glans as if they were tiny mouths opening and closing during speech. Let me explain. First off I want to make one thing clear: I’m not weird. Library sex, rather than being just some random manifestation from the imagination of a prissy and twisted queen, was actually my attempt at subverting the manifesto (if there is one) of the leather community, who seem to believe that it’s the gear that makes the man, with all those color-coded handkerchiefs that, I’ve come to realize, rather than signifying varying degrees of dominance or passivity, actually signal to others the level of physical integrity one’s anus has retained after years of abuse. But my main criticism of “leather men” was the patent dishonesty of it all. I’m the last person to condemn a little theater now and then, but the kind of make-believe these guys practiced was downright embarrassing. I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve found myself sucking some leather guy’s cock only to have him affect a masculine, deep timbre, then look down and spit out words in a
manner designed to get me to believe that he’s a Marine drill sergeant, and not a ribbon clerk at Macy’s, “Suck that cock -- yeah, suck that cock.” And I’d look up at Mr. Whoever and respond, while trying to mask my annoyance at the patent stupidity of his request: “I am!” which, even though it’s only two words and two syllables, is still difficult to say with a mouthful of penis. It remains a mystery to me why some guys get so chatty during sex. I was so disenchanted with the whole leather scene that I invented “library sex” as a kind of rejoinder to it -- an exercise in the ridiculous. It wasn’t planned this way, but library sex actually became a whole new genre.

As in most sexual practice weighted heavy on dressing up and pretending, which library sex certainly is, it’s not about the orgasm or climax, but, as they say, it’s the journey. Just as some stories derive a different meaning from an endless deferral of meaning, this kind of sex only becomes meaningful with the avoidance of any sex at all. After all that dressing up, who has time to fuck?

There is a narrative portion of the recipe that describes the evolution of this particular chocolate soufflé, and I learn that I’m modeling myself on a new and improved version from the old recipe, that, had it been used to remake myself, I’d have suffered the considerable risk of collapsing in on myself. Apparently the earlier version of the recipe created a soufflé that was too “fragile.” Basically, the changes to my new sturdier self will be affected by simply “folding the chocolate mixture into a meringue.” Rather than adding the sugar to the chocolate sauce base at a later stage in the recipe, I will simply “whip it into the egg whites,” early on, thereby firming myself up. There is, however, a tradeoff: In exchange for exiting the oven as a kind of sturdy, self-reliant version of my
previous soufflé self, I will be sacrificing what’s characterized in the recipe as “dramatic puff.” Sacrificing!? Dramatic puff!! The words cut deep and induce in me waves of shame as I think back over my life, and I wonder, if the tables were turned, and I was a chocolate soufflé reading a recipe on how to make a drug-addled homosexual in the early 21st century, it might look like this:

**Self-Hating Homo (Southern California)**

_Serves anybody_

5 – 12 years of parental injunctions against _any_ sexual thoughts

3 – 7 years of coveting your sister’s Barbie dolls instead of the toy guns you received at Christmas

2 – 3 years of realizing that when your dad is drunk, you can play with his junk and he’ll never know

4 high school years of pretending you wanted to throw a football when you really wanted to dance around on the sidelines with your girlfriends shaking the blue-and-white pom-poms: Two, Four, Six, Eight – who do we appreciate? GO Scorpions!!

10 plus adult years of unlimited drug use (can include any combination of anything as long as it has the ability to cause figurative blindness and literal paralysis)

10 plus years of running as fast as you can from any kind of signifier that’s anything less than motor oil, meth and men, blindly – numbly piloting your engorged cock past anything considered feminine.
Equal parts of fatalism and laziness: Responsibility puts such a hole in my day.

All I really want to do is watch TV and suck cock

I’ve spent my entire time on earth trying to outrun this sewn-in fag label, but deep down I know it’s true. I’m as dramatic and puffy as any of them. Some homos are, seemingly without effort, or somehow employing a high level of advanced rationality or intelligence, able to reconcile themselves with the inherent dramatic puffiness of being a gay man. Cross-dressers embrace it, for Christ’s sake. But I’m not one of them.

It began, I think, when I started reading the Black Beauty books when I was a little boy. I didn’t know any better. My sister and her friends seemed to be attached to them. They sighed and giggled and whinnied and galloped about, bucking their heads as if they were actually horses. So I began reading the books as well. And I reveled in the stories told from the beautiful black horse’s point of view, who grew from being a sinewy and mistreated colt into a champion runner, and who was such a keen judge of human character. The house I lived in was a couple miles from Casa de Oro Elementary School -- and was actually equidistant from the school and the bus stop. During good weather I sometimes walked to school up a dirt path in the middle of a hillside meadow that turned golden in summer. And during these early morning walks I often pretended, after scanning the hillside for anyone who might be watching, that I too was a beautiful black colt. I flicked my tail and bucked and whinnied, much like my sister and her friends did, and I felt free and completely, horse-ily magnificent. Then one day – the day my report on Alaska was due in Ms. Tendler’s fifth grade class – I was casually trotting up the hill. The air was crisp and brilliant and I was practically dancing, rhythmically tossing my
mane and whipping my imaginary reins back and forth, playfully cuffing the hard earth with my spirited hooves. Completely alive and lost in the shimmering sunlight; the yellow weeds, the dirt path and the frosty air. And during my labored ascent I repeated over and over in my unashamed soprano voice, as if it were a breathy chant rhythmically affirming my place in the world: “A boy like me -- a boy like me -- a boy like me.”

Then, like a thudding, lumbering monster blocking my way, I heard Billy Crane, the sheriff’s son, in his sneering, leering 15-year-old voice: “Playing horsy this morning?” He was grinning. I tried to scream but no sound came out, and I imagined myself running up the hill as if I weighed nothing at all like critters do all the time in cartoons. I would have given my life if I could have jumped up and landed inside Ms. Tendler’s classroom in one motion. And I realized at that moment that I was not only a slave to gravity, but to the forces that terrify me and freeze my vocal cords and my ability to explain and my will to defend myself or even escape. Years later, I sat front row and center for a completely naked off-off Broadway production of Equus and realized what I’d been missing: a hoof pick.

But as in most things, there’s another side to all this drama, to this litany of despair. The cookbook describes the new and improved version of my soufflé self as one that “stays up and retains its primal soufflé character.” “Primal soufflé character!” I continue reading those words over and over again and goose bumps form on the back of my neck and on my arms as the thoughts wash over me: I’m not doomed to be all just puffy and fluffy drama forever -- I’m going to be primal! Julia! My savior!

With renewed vigor, I continue reading through the directions in the recipe and I realize that the moment of truth is near at hand when I will enter the glorious oven to
begin my transformation. My baking time seems quite brief – a mere 35 to 40 minutes, during which time I will do my soufflé thing, meaning I will rise up and become firm enough to resist the forces of gravity and air pressure. When a wooden skewer is poked into one of the several cracks that will form on my surface during baking and is pushed down into my innards, I can pronounce myself done if, when it is removed, it’s only lightly coated with chocolaty residue. This will be a welcome change, because, as I exist now, I’m no more than a cold, flaccid puddle of dark brown sludge -- although I am rather sweet, if I do say so myself. Maybe I’m inconsistent, but I could be quite satisfying as a dessert to be spooned into the mouth like soup. Here, I remember a saying my high school French teacher used to repeat to her students: “La persévérance est la mère de toutes les vertus.” So I soldier on. Break with my own tradition and I resist settling for the status quo. I set the timer and enter the pre-heated oven.

After baking it’s evident beyond a shadow of a doubt that I’ve been transformed. I feel substantial and robust, but at the same time sensitive and -- I guess there’s no need to be modest or hide from my nature anymore so I’ll just get on with it: I feel sensitive and delicate. There. I said it. But it’s okay, because I know I’m completely and consistently delicious. I feel somehow more worldly too, like I’ve traversed the dark night of the soul, I’ve survived and I’ve discovered I have my own voice. I have an urge to put a bumper sticker on the rear of my car that proclaims: *I’m Sensitive, I’m Delicate, I’m Proud -- I’m a Chocolate Souffle!!* I set myself aside to cool a little, and I sprinkle a bit of that wonderful powdered sugar over my surface. And the particles are so light, they don’t fall in a straight line. They are more like snowflakes, drifting with the whims
of unseen currents of air, whose masters are temperature and pressure and friction, born from the infinite brooding vistas of frigid dark clouds who never utter a vowel, but are only capable of whispering in nonsense consonants, multitudes of them, each one a unique frozen crystal that will, when the storm is over, gather to blanket my feet -- and my arms -- and my eyes -- and the bright chilly morning -- and my hillside path of weeds.
The Hideous Beast

A few days ago I cut the head off the Devil. I know it was a foolish thing to do, but I was just so goddamned tired of running -- not to mention scared out of my wits. The Devil was chasing me, like he’s supposed to, me being a mortal and him being the Devil and all. Who wouldn’t be scared? There must have been a glitch in my human schematic or something, though, because wasn’t it supposed to be permanently and indelibly imprinted in my DNA that human beings could never outrun this Most Unclean, this Dragon of Hell, this Wrecker of Nations, and that any showdown with him would be a complete clusterfuck? Guess I just forgot all that because there I was running frantically through neighborhoods that were only vaguely familiar, looking behind me to see if the Lord of Temptation was keeping up. And I remember feeling a little smug because it seemed I was able to increase the distance between me and the Hideous Creature, with all his red skin and horns; his elegant Vietnamese manicure and polished hooves, and the wide shit-kicker belt with the giant, shiny cloisonné Confederate Flag belt buckle that reflected light beams as if it were an exploding star.

“It’s working,” I thought, as I bounded over entire front yards and picket fences, imagining myself, due to my superior strength and cleverness, losing the Devil in the scramble of weirdly canted ramps with hairpin turns, as every time I turned to see if the Devil was still behind me, I could see less and less of him. The last moment that I gave myself permission to turn and look, I remember seeing only a tiny amorphous spot of red, and maybe just the slightest whiff of reddish sulfur steam in the far distance. But I pressed on. With one last heroic effort that seemed to have been borne more out of faith
than athletic ability, I leapt over an impossibly wide canyon and landed safely on the
other side. After rolling several times, I came to rest in a thicket of sweet-smelling
meadow grass, the chasm just a few yards away. “I did it,” I thought, as I lay there, chest
heaving in and out, savoring my miraculous escape from The Ultimate Trickster, The
Evil One. After I caught my breath, I stood up and had the distinct feeling that, even
though I wanted to head for home, that there was something missing – something
essential that I should really have in my possession, but I couldn’t really put my finger on
it even though the word was literally on the tip of my tongue -- sounds like -- picture of
yeti? Apple brown Betty? Oh, yeah: the machete that I’d kept with me during the chase
even though it was quite a burden due to its considerable heft and length. I was relieved
and reassured that I’d remembered to hold on to the deadly blade.

Feeling more alive than I can ever remember, and awash in waves of self-
confidence and accomplishment, I began sauntering down a country path that led into a
charming village. There were tiny, prim-looking cottages and happy people who were
dressed in 19th century European-looking garb, the women with bonnets and the men
with wooden shoes. It must have been an agrarian-based culture, because most of these
people carried rakes and trowels, shovels and scythes with them. I was hungry but
resisted the urge to stop at one of the many pastry shops and get an apple tart with custard
or something like that, because, even though I now enjoyed a degree of safety and
comfort, I hadn’t forgotten my previous sense of urgency: The Devil was almost
certainly still after me, but I possessed so little real information about the Deceiver of
Hours that it was impossible to know for sure whether he is supposed to be known for his
tenacity or whether he’d be inclined to lose interest in me and head toward greener
pastures. All I could do, really, was speculate. I could have kicked myself for not paying closer attention in English 305, *Literary Perspectives From the Pit of Hell: The Binary of Salvation/Damnation*, with Professor Lenore Grubbmann-Stitz, while we were studying *Paradise Lost*. I’m sure Milton could have been quite helpful in fleshing out the details surrounding The Evil One, but there was no way to glean this information now out of thin air. All I knew at the moment is that I didn’t want the Devil to come along and pounce on me while I was woofing down some gooey dessert.

I tried to direct my attention away from food by admiring the many window displays of various businesses, all of which might have been completely interesting and attractive had I not been so hungry. I turned a corner and found myself walking down a fairly steep cross street lined with parked cars, one of which, I noticed right away, was a late-model V.W., blue in color, rocking rhythmically back and forth and up and down, the kind of movement that most men would I.D. pretty quick as the motion of back seat sex play. Walking sideways like a crab, I carefully approached the bouncing V.W., and as soon as I got close enough I realized the people in the car were both men, whose lanky masculine legs, only partially covered by pants that were unbuttoned and pulled down, spilled un-self-consciously out of the open passenger’s door toward the sidewalk. One man was dark and one was blond, and after a few moments of horrible recognition, I realized that the blond was none other than *my* boyfriend Arnie, who I know has an appetite for Mexicans. Actually, reporting that Arnie and I are currently boyfriends isn’t exactly accurate, because there have been a few problems between us recently.

This admission, however, can do little to break the waves of betrayal and jealously and inadequacy searing my insides at the moment as I watch him reveling in his
partner’s brown body, his hard cock and his willing mouth. And as if I had become a disembodied and unseen entity, much like an expensive motion picture camera mounted on a complex boom, I was able to get intimately close to the men in the V.W. and spy at close range the abandoned love-making between them, the kind of love-making that Arnie and I had only rarely known, or maybe any such intimacy was only in my imagination. I can’t really remember though -- and it doesn’t really matter that much, because now I just want to punish myself – to jack the skin right off my cock – or to flog myself like Catholics and Muslims do all the time in movies and documentaries – for being such a prude – a prim and proper prude, like I had all the time in the world to taste the fruits of sexual abandon while holding on to my precious propriety. I’m positively Victorian, I tell myself. Miss Havisham! I’m just like Miss Havisham, with all those high collars, bustles and girdles and lace hankies and clean sheets and doilies and elaborate tea sets and ridiculous arcane rules, being sustained right up unto death’s threshold with nothing but dusty memories and regret, who, when describing something that was no longer in style, rather than simply saying the words “old fashioned,” would instead emote with Rococo hand flourishes and an embarrassing degree of lyricism that transcended the limits of tenor, alto, and even falsetto, the expression: “My dear, it’s positively antediluvian,” and the “u” in diluvian would be stretched to the point of breaking, as it spiraled up and up into the stratosphere before the final suffix attaches itself at the last possible instant and drags the vowel back down to earth. How could I not have seen this before today?

Why couldn’t I ever just let myself go with Arnie -- or with any of my sexual partners, including, of course, my wife Anne, who I still sleep with most nights. Poor
Anne -- poor trusting, cockless, childless Anne, who worships me and waits for me. What patience she has! If sex with Arnie was a bit sterile, sex with Anne was downright rabbinical! I wonder if I’ll ever be able to come clean with her. I suspect the time will come -- when the planets and the stars will all be aligned or whatever -- and we’ll sit down at home -- probably after a simple dinner -- and I’ll try to be gentle as I confess in a rational way that the man she married covets not her cooch, but her shoes, that it’s not anyone’s fault, that I’d still like to remain friends -- and I may even ask her if she has any interest at all in meeting Arnie (or whatever man I’m currently involved with), but something stirs deep inside me warning me that suggesting any such meeting would probably result in a few broken plates, mixed in, of course, with more than a few broken bones (mine).

All this thinking about Anne is causing me considerable discomfort, so I try to focus on Arnie and his friend from south of the border, but at the same time I become aware of new and different sexual situations with other men in the area, which I want to pursue, because, honestly, these guys are just standing here and there, in doorways and alleyways, some in the process of doing their jobs, but most at leisure -- and they’re literally like low-hanging fruit just begging to be picked. And frankly it’s a relief to be free of all those feelings of inadequacy and betrayal because what’s-his-name is fucking some Mexican instead of me, and guilt because my WINO1 dutifully waits at home for me while I’m usually splayed on some guy’s bed, legs in the air like I have helium-filled

ankles, with poppers stuck up my nose and screaming to the world: “Fuck me! Fuck me!” which, to the casual observer, might seem to have crossed the boundaries of abandoned behavior -- but I know -- hopefully we all know that screaming in the sack at the top of one’s lungs is a poor substitute for truly unmooring oneself from the shackles of decorum. And in a second -- superficially or not -- I am propelled by the prospect of knocking off a few of these other men, and it feels good to be on the hunt again. But there’s this loud-mouthed transvestite -- rather fat -- wearing flip-flops and a stained pair of light blue sweat pants, who is bellowing at a handsome youth across the busy street: “Where’d you put the goddamned key, you idiot --I can’t pay the rent if I don’t have the goddamned key to the (air-quotes) product.” Ah, I think -- it’s dope! That’s what’s going on here. They’re dope fiends. And I get a feeling that I know this tranny -- at least know of her, but I can’t remember the exact context of our involvement. The thought, however, of getting high strikes me as terribly attractive, so I take a few steps toward the flip-flop wearing sexually malleable tower of cholesterol, and the closer I get to her, bits and pieces of my memories of her come into focus, and I’m reassured that we’re at least friendly, so I begin waving my arms. Lois! That’s her name: Lois. And I begin screaming it: “Hey Lois -- what’s happening? Remember me?” And Lois’ attention is drawn from the handsome youth across the street to me. She turns herself directly toward me, and I’m slightly taken aback by the expression on her face, which is one of recognition, but more than that, it’s one of astonishment. She takes a step toward me and her astonishment shifts to a look of rage. Her pace toward me quickens and with each step, she is transformed before my eyes from Lois, that fat transvestite with the sunny disposition to Lois, the fat transvestite who looks like she wants to cut my bowels out.
And in an instant I realize that describing our relationship as “friendly” was probably a bit generous. A hazy memory begins to form -- I can’t be sure exactly -- that I burned her in a dope deal a few weeks ago. But by now she’s flat out running at me, looking much like a St. Bernard with a mean disposition whose benign appearance belies the mayhem she’s capable of inflicting. I consider protecting myself with the machete at my side, but decide against it, mainly because Lois isn’t armed and there are a bunch of witnesses. And for the second time in a day (at least I think it’s been a day), I turn tail and run, but like a speeding locomotive, Lois tackles me. And all I remember thinking before her enormous clenched fist comes down and clobbers me in the side of my face is how weird it is that I was able to outrun the Devil, but I’m no match for a fat drag queen.

I woke up -- or came to really, and there was no sign of Lois anymore, so I slowly began walking down the dusty sidewalk. I can’t explain it, but as each second ticked by, I began to sense that it was more important than ever to press on toward my home. I quickened my pace and the charming cottages began to give way to a kind of generic, mustard-colored, low-slung type of building. And the people – the townspeople, the boys and men and everybody else -- seemed to have simply evaporated. I was, all of a sudden, completely alone. The sun was at its zenith and the heat became oppressive. I turned a corner and came upon a circular place with a dry fountain at its center and several roads radiating out from its periphery. Feeling lost, I turned several times trying to decide which direction to take. I turned one last time, and out of a wide door across the place emerged the Devil, who began striding right toward me. I felt the strength drain from my muscles. Paralyzed by the enormity of my folly, I couldn’t move.

“Please,” I said, as he got closer. “Let me live -- I promise I’ll…” but I didn’t
really know what I should promise the Devil. “I promise to be very very bad for the rest of my life?” That seemed a little obvious. And promising to be pretentious or prideful or slothful or to eat like a pig everyday until I died seemed like an impossibility, and so transparent that it would guarantee my quick execution.

But the Devil, it seems, wasn’t terribly interested in killing me right away. He seemed a little -- a little distracted. Instead of just vaporizing me, like I’m sure the Devil is capable of doing, he walked around the dry fountain, looking inside it with a concerned countenance. I got the sense he was going to say a few words to me, but he didn’t. I got a sick sort of dangerous feeling in my gut, and as the Devil, with knitted brow, stood peering down into the dry fountain, I raised my machete high over my head and lopped his head clean off.

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Oddly enough, there was hardly any notice that the Prince of Darkness was finally vanquished. One would expect at least a tiny bit of celebration or maybe even acknowledgment for accomplishing this, but that wasn’t the case. I went back to work just as always and nothing much had changed at all. While sitting at my desk, actually reassured that I was safe and sound, I saw the framed picture of Anne and me on New Year’s Eve six years ago, at a masquerade party when we’d traded genders: Anne resembling a lumberjack with jeans and plaid shirt, and me dressed as a pregnant candy-striper. Jimmy, the office boy, roused me from my musings when he dropped a memo off at my cubicle. “The boss wants to see you,” he said, sotto voce. “The boss? Wants? To
see me?” I said. Jimmy was a bit of a pill. “Yes, the boss wants to see you. You know -- the boss?” I followed Jimmy’s gaze, which was directed at the mahogany doors in the corner of the building. There was reddish smoke escaping through the joint where the doors met, and from the space under the doors, and it hit me like a ton of bricks: The Devil can’t be killed. He was there and I worked for him, because he was in that office. My mouth was so dry that my voice lost its timbre. I looked at Jimmy, pleading with my eyes, desperate for a solution. “I can’t go in there,” I hissed. “I cut his head off -- you think he’s not going to be completely pissed off? He’ll totally recognize me.” Jimmy turned for a second. “If I were you,” he said, “I’d get out of here -- pronto.”

Before bolting out of the office, much like a cartoon character making a getaway accompanied by the sound of an energetic bongo solo, I quickly checked to make sure that my house keys were in my pants pocket. But before I’d taken even a few steps toward the door, I stopped in my tracks, certain that I’d forgotten something else -- something essential. *I’m forgetting something -- what the hell is it?* And after a few seconds of panicked rumination, I sheepishly returned to my cubicle where I stooped and retrieved from a storage bin my trusty machete.

Even though time was of the essence, in an uncharacteristically expansive moment of abandon, I took a few seconds to set the machete aside, sat on the floor to stretch for a few moments, then I stood and performed for Jimmy and everybody else in the office a series of American cartwheels, Polish Mazurkas and French *pas de deux*. In the midst of taking several well-deserved bows and throwing imaginary roses out to my fellow workers, I bent down, grabbed my machete and scurried on pointed toe down the
stairs and out into the town to get as far away from the Devil as I could.
The AIDS Clinic

Even though the temperature outside is like a piece of falling space junk burning through the atmosphere, the chilliness of the room makes me wish I’d worn a fur-lined parka. Two handsome youths, minority flavored, radiating purpose, tinged with humility, look directly at me from a large flat screen television affixed to the wall. They’re both wearing vague smiles, and their teeth, which are firmly planted in beds of healthy pink gums, are enviably straight and white; their clothes are clean. The boys exude an energy suggestive of nothing except an easy relationship with each other, with me, and with the world; they project the sense that they’re touched with the courage necessary to propel them through impending adversity, or that they’ve just escaped certain doom relatively unscathed -- ‘relatively’ because let’s be frank: AIDS isn’t exactly a butt-load of lilacs and sequins. The boys seem to be hovering around a shiny old car -- or maybe a waffle iron, perhaps a book of some sort – it’s not even clear if they’re inside their living room or out in the wilderness. It doesn’t matter though because the gist of this video scene is that they’ve met the scourge of disease by drawing from the fount of good will and pragmatism that’s available to everyone who visits this clinic. And they’re flourishing -- they’re brave. The implicit message seems to be: You too can experience life as we do, if you do as we’ve done. As they continue with their easy grins and focus-starved gazes while still hovering around each other, a robust woman’s voice, knowledgeable, compassionate, slightly smoky, provides context. She is speaking Spanish, and I suspect she’s saying something about the clinic like: “At [insert name of clinic here] our knowledgeable and professional staff of board-certified doctors, competent nurses,
assistants, social workers and office staff are here to provide the very best of care to HIV-impacted people living in Los Angeles, regardless of their ability to pay.” I believe this is what she is saying because I recognize that the Spanish expression for AIDS, El SIDA, peppers her speech. But mostly I believe this because the Español side of this particular loop alternates with the English version of the video, which I, and most of the flip-flop wearing obese transvestites, pious A.A. acolytes, gin-sipping dowager empresses, black do-rag wearing hip-hop thugs, skinny love-struck cha-cha queens with the most elaborate ring tones, and toothless, gum-gnashing S&M tweakers with puffed up protease inhibitor veins on their legs, all stuffed into the waiting room, have seen it about a thousand and one times.

Even though my vitals were taken within minutes after my arrival at the clinic, I know better than to give in to my impatience and lodge a complaint with the office staff about the nearly 90 minutes I’ve been waiting to be called in to see the doctor. I shift my weight in my chair and continue watching the AIDS video. The only reading materials are printed versions of the video, in untranslated Spanish, so all I can only identify are a few common Spanish words that everybody knows: ahora = now; para = for; quando = how much -- I think -- which is kind of like finding yourself in a scary part of town and epileptically waving to the smattering of people who you recognize because you shop at the same market, hoping they’ll recognize you too. And, of course, you can always admire the photographs of sizzling hot boys who the publishers of this tract want us to believe have AIDS, but they’re probably models who have a standing-room-only crowd of T-cells stampeding through their veins.
When a nurse appears to call someone named Freddy inside for something or other, I look through the open door into the innards of the clinic, which, from past experience, is always anticlimactic: just beige walls and white coats and busy, busy, busy people. But this time I look in and see directly into an examination room where Dr. Stein, wearing latex gloves on her tiny hands, is probing (past the knuckles) inside the ass of a man who could be the identical twin of Rick Santorum, completely nude, who is face down on the examination table, on his knees, ass up in the air. And sitting in the same room as Rick and Dr. Stein, but off to the side of the examination table, busily texting on his iPhone, is someone who is a carbon copy of Mitt Romney, but instead of being dressed in his usual suit and tie, he’s stuffed into a pair of Daisy Duke cut-off shorts, with pastel sandals and a flowered blouse. Over-sized sunglasses rest on the bill of a too-small rose-colored baseball cap, and a gold chain is attached to reading glasses balanced on the bridge of his nose. And right away, I feel cheapened -- indignant, like my boundaries have been violated because I too have an iPhone. “How dare he!” I think, “The bald-faced usurper! The pretender! The trespasser!”

Dr. Stein pushes deeper into Santorum’s ass, and even though I can’t hear what’s being said, I sense from their body language that she’s inquiring from the Senator about whether this anal intrusion is causing more discomfort than he’s willing to endure. And he turns his vaguely handsome face up and around as far as he can toward the doctor, his Supercuts hairdo a little messy from perspiration, but the expression on his face nevertheless bravely conveys his permission for the doctor to probe deeper. Romney looks up momentarily, his eyebrows arched in concern, but he quickly returns to his task,
probably reassured that Rick is fine. “Wow!” I think, “Santorum’s got a substantial amount of back fat.”

Indeed, on each side of his spine is a generous outcropping of flab – kind of like draperies made of fat -- onto which are growing thriving patches of wiry salt-and-pepper back hair. And I’m disappointed because I’ve imagined him shirtless countless times, an admission that I’m reluctant to make because, let’s face it: Senator Santorum isn’t exactly a smoldering hunk of burning muscle -- on the contrary, he’s completely mou, as they say in la belle France: He may have been all hard muscles at some point in his life, but time has softened him into a tower of human butter, but a tower of butter with a certain je ne sais quoi that I find particularly sexy. It’s similar to bookishness, which I really love in men, but “bookish” isn’t an adjective I’d ascribe to Santorum either – he’s more like an avid fan of Extreme Home Makeover who gets all teary-eyed sitting on his couch watching the downtrodden reap the largesse from big media conglomerates, which has its own kind of charm, I suppose, but it’s certainly not sexy. It’s his piety, I think, that turns me on because it’s devilishly fun to watch pious guys trying to find detours around their faith just to get to my cock. It’s almost like slowing down to see the carnage of a terrible accident on the freeway. And piety, in my book, often spawns the kind of wild sexual abandon that makes up for his lack of good looks: Pious men – especially plain-looking ones wearing collars -- will do anything behind closed doors. Maybe I’m being a little hard on Rick. He’s certainly not ugly – there are patches of handsomeness here and there on his face and body, it’s just not concentrated to any appreciable degree. Regardless of his physical limitations, I’ve often fantasized about Rick coming to pick me up for a dinner date. “I’m five minutes away,” he’ll say when he calls from his cell
phone, and in his voice, I can sense a forced air of abandon which belies the impossibly tangled knots of deception he’s had to construct and the various leaps of faith he’s had to make just to free himself from the clutches of his tight-knit and prodigiously enormous Catholic family -- even for the small amount of time we’ll be together -- with all their faux Friday night sacrifices, all the waiting ‘till midnight to eat meat – the catechism attendance and dictates of various Republican strategists and the Catholic clergy itself. But he’s coming to see me -- little ol’ me. And frankly it makes me feel special and quite like a smitten school girl. “Hurry, my love,” I whisper into the phone after he hangs up. And when I hear his car outside, I hurry out the door, all the while knowing that there will almost certainly be no overt public displays of affection between us, which I’m willing to accept because – well, I’ll just say it’s a small price to pay for being part of such a monumentally forbidden romance. And during this fantasy dinner date, I find it sweet -- and unflaggingly charming -- that, rather than dining at some swanky, sparkling French restaurant with a maitre’d and wine sommelier, Rick has decided to take me to an Applebees because he “really likes their peach cobbler.” I could almost cry at the utter humility of it all, prompting me to make a mental note to change from being a registered Democrat to a Republican so I can vote for Rick in the upcoming erection – I mean election -- sorry about that -- because I know what he’s really like. I also want to cry when I’m yanked from my reverie by the spectacle of his flabby back – probably the result of all that fucking peach cobbler – as he’s on the clinic’s examination table, and I make another mental note: Buy yourself a bunch of long-sleeved dress shirts – they cover everything.
Dr. Stein is now up to her elbow inside Rick’s ass, which I find a little off-putting because Rick’s facial expression is one of bliss: His eyelids are closed lightly over his eyes and the corners of his mouth are upturned in a slight, easy grin -- and his ass – well, his ass seems to be engaged in a rhythmic fertility dance, bouncing side to side begging for more with a grin of its own. I wonder the obvious: What on earth is the doctor looking for? What could possibly be wrong up inside his ass like that? While my gaze is laser-focused through the crack of the open door, I begin to wonder about how Rick caught HIV. In my own case, for the first ten years or so of being infected, I always told people that I caught it from shooting dope with tainted needles, a circumstance which, from my perspective, carried with it a kind of outlaw/cowboy flavor that dripped with the darkly mysterious imperatives of a free spirit – but that wasn’t the case. Even though I’d shot speed a few times, that wasn’t the vehicle this particular virus jumped on to get to me. As one of the millions of garden-variety homos with the Butt Flu – one of those guys who got a squirt of The Secret Sauce up his rear end – in a rather queer inversion, I placed a premium on my advertised masculinity, a value that would certainly be eroded by the knowledge that I take it up the ass, that I told little white lies.

And one more time during this impromptu session of voyeurism, I begin to question my pre-conceived notions of Mr. Santorum’s standing as a man who caught HIV through one of the three completely neutral non-sexual methods of infection: Mother’s milk, blood transfusion or child birth, even though there’s a certain deliciousness in imagining a multi-generational provenance of AIDS infection within the ranks of a staunchly Catholic Pennsylvania family. I can just see the scandalous headlines in the Butler Tribune or whatever: Catherine Santorum, Mother of GOP Senator, to be
**Arraigned on Third Prostitution Arrest.** As attractive as this prospect is, it presupposes that Rick suckled at his mom’s *very mature* teat well into his 30s, so I reluctantly rule out the nursing option, as well as childbirth.

I hear myself saying: *It’s either gay sex or a blood transfusion.* I know I want to rule out the blood transfusion option simply because it’s so prosaic -- so boring, so I allow myself for the briefest moment to consider the possibility that Santorum\(^1\) has yet another hidden facet – besides his history with me, of course -- of a secret life, and I imagine him in the middle of a dimly-lit room at a bathhouse, surrounded by other men who dose themselves with the same needle without bothering to bleach it out. And when it’s Rick’s turn, he eagerly and expertly ties himself off and pumps the syringe full of meth into his veins, then lies back as it hits him, reveling in a sea of cocks, literally like a queer in a dick tree -- *la vie secrète* indeed!

Dr. Stein’s arm has now been occluded up to her shoulder, and I realize that the sight of this has caused my jaw to drop in astonishment, and I’m unabashedly breathing through my open mouth. She’s probing right, left, up and down, making scraping movements -- what the *hell* is she looking for? All of a sudden she freezes -- even her uneven stance becomes completely static, and I suspect that she’s getting a grip on what she’s been looking for. This is confirmed by Rick’s expression, one of thankful surprise. I’m no lip reader, but I can clearly make out what the doctor is saying: *Don’t move!* And slowly, carefully, she begins to remove her arm from his ass, stopping now and then

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\(^1\)Santorum (San-TOR-um) n. 1. The frothy mixture of lube and fecal matter that is sometimes the by-product of anal sex, Wikipedia.
to inquire about Rick’s well being. My breathing becomes shallow as she reaches the senatorial exit. She stops to get her bearings and consider a strategy. She says a few words to Romney, who stands, wiping sweat from Santorum’s forehead, then like a sunken ship being brought to the surface of the ocean, Dr. Stein slowly pulls from Rick’s ass the fortieth anniversary edition of Milton Friedman’s *Capitalism and Freedom*, gold-leafed hard copy, of course, which is a substantial tome, but one I haven’t myself read – mainly because it’s at the top of most archconservative reading lists, and I’m a staunch liberal -- at least that’s what I broadcast to the world around me. But I want to keep an open mind, so I make a mental note to give it a read even though I feel slightly sick in the stomach due to the fear that I may agree, at least partially, with Friedman’s theses: my liberal leanings may not be as solid, ahem, as I’d like people to believe.

Now I feel exhausted, as if it were *me* who was giving birth to this substantial and quite girthy alien object. I’m panting in relief as I turn my attention back to Mr. Santorum and the doctor, and one more time I’m flabbergasted, but this time by the sight of Dr. Stein tugging on a leather tether attached to the back cover of Friedman’s conservative manifesto. *Oh...my...god* I hear myself saying out loud as I realize that Friedman’s book is just the first of what I’ll call a Republican string of Ben Wa balls.

*You pig!* I whisper to Rick under my breath as Dr. Stein pulls out of his ass, in succession, *Inherit the Wind*, *The Origin of Species*, *U.S. Catholic Catechism for Adults*, and finally, *Pope Gregory XI: The Failure of Tradition*, which causes me – and I’m sure would cause anybody really to wonder where *The Holy Bible* fits into this – I’d call it a hierarchy, but that would suggest a deeper order, and I guffaw at the thought and say to
myself: *There is no order here, my dear, but Rick’s ass hole is deeper than the Mariana Trench!*

As amusing as this little comparison is, it does little to satisfy my curiosity. So many questions! Are these books that Santorum likes or hates? Conventional wisdom dictates that he probably *likes* Friedman’s book, the Catechism and the one about the pope, while he *dislikes* the Darwin and the one about the Skopes Monkey Trial -- but if that’s true, does he dislike *The Bible*? Is that why he didn’t cram *The Bible* up his ass because he reveres it and yet hates the Catechism? Is this a tacit confession that Santorum is leery of the overabundant ritual in the Catholic faith? Did the papal biography find a place in his ass because he’s a parishioner at St. Catherine’s Church, St. Catherine being the nun who convinced Pope Gregory to return to Rome from Avignon in the 14th Century, and Santorum sees himself as the quintessential problem solver; a shaper of histories? Or does it have to do with the fact that St. Catherine is the patron saint who guards against sexual temptation, and Rick is hoping she’ll keep his feet at home and on the ground instead of floating around his head as he’s suspended in a sling somewhere screaming, “*Fuck me! Fuck me! Fuck me like a Nazi Socialist!*”? Or is it really the inverse of all these assumptions, that he *likes* evolution and *hates* Friedman and Catholicism? Can one assign value to what’s been crammed up one’s ass or is it just meaningless and random? God…I really want to ask him to explain himself. *How did you get AIDS? Is there any meaning attached to which books the doctor pulled from your ass? Did you cram the books up there yourself or did somebody else do it for you? Do you think we could go on a date sometime? Why is there so much fat on your back?* I’m veritably swimming in a vortex of questions, the answers to which, I’m coming to realize,
will more than likely remain hidden from me forever. I don’t know Rick Santorum any better than Saint Nick, and asking any of the clinic’s staff would be a futile exercise, thanks to our government’s HIPPA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) regulations, which guarantee patient confidentiality, at least from people like me who can’t afford to bribe information out of anybody.

So almost at the same instant of realizing I’m stuck with just my own opinions about Rick Santorum’s life and appetites, I watch as a lab assistant, dressed in a white smock, enters Rick’s examination room carrying a vial of some concoction, which he gives to Dr. Stein, who holds it up to Santorum’s lips while cradling the back of his head with her other hand. And, as Rick drinks, his facial expression conveys that this stuff tastes about as appetizing as fermented cat piss. He resumes his previous position, on his belly; ass in the air, while Dr. Stein counts off seconds as she watches her wrist watch: 1, 2, 3 -- all the way to 30 or so -- anyway, it was less than a full minute. And almost as if I’m in the room with the doctor, Rick and Mitt, I sense what can only be described as a stillness-before-the-storm kind of feeling. As if there were nothing else in the world, I focus in on Santorum’s butt hole and watch as it dilates and begins to excrete what I assume is a natural lubricating liquid around the edges of his anus. Then Dr. Stein, with both hands, expertly dives into his ass one more time and begins pulling on something. Rick lets out a scream that sounds like a wounded water buffalo or something – it was horrible to hear – and in one seamless motion, she pulls out of his ass the quivering bodies of Oprah Winfrey and Michelle Obama, completely nude, locked in a passionate 69 position, appearing as if they are absolutely oblivious to everything except each
other’s cooches -- especially the fact that they’ve been inside Rick Santorum’s ass for at least some period of time.

-- What could this mean? --

Who can tell? Who would I ask? Is there even a point?

The soundtrack of the AIDS video slowly comes into focus again, this time in English: “…our knowledgeable and professional staff of board-certified doctors, competent nurses, assistants, social workers and office staff are here to provide the very best of care to HIV-impacted people living in Los Angeles, regardless of their ability to pay.” The hot Latin boys continue to hover around each other while invoking hope in those who wait.

A nurse appears in the doorway of the waiting room, radiating a smile, then looks straight into my eyes and says: “The doctor is ready for you now.”
You know how sometimes you just randomly meet some guy and after a few hours of shooting meth, snorting ‘K’ and performing most of the essential big city homosexual mating protocols you’ve perfected over the decades – which always have a component of showing whoever you’re with that even though you’re completely twacked out and would be hard pressed to maybe drive a tractor or fly an airplane, you still have the wherewithal to rig, in a matter of seconds, a series of mirrors that are not only at dildo level because, for whatever reason, we really like to see ourselves putting stuff up our butts, but they’re also at TV level so you won’t have to spoil the mood by sitting up to watch the gay porn that’s always playing on the DVD. And you’d never admit it to anybody, but you’re completely bored with gay porn because it’s so fucking earnest – probably because if it weren’t earnest it would just be a bunch of queens fucking each other, and that’s not exactly sexy, so the porn actors are always growling at each other and being earnest cops or coaches or convicts. You realize this greasy routine has somehow moved past the meaningless ritual stage and you’re both actually having a pretty good time, probably because you become aware that this guy has quite a few qualities of the perfect man:

1) He can negotiate the ins and outs of drug-induced paralysis.

2) He can appreciate the indescribable weirdness of being stuck in a ‘K’-hole without turning it into something “significant.”

3) He’s okay with driving around with you in the morning to deliver dope, and he’s totally not weirded out by the word “felony.”
4) And most important: He knows – like you do – that sex is about as important in the scheme of things as watching reruns of *Lost In Space* – that sex is only something you do to fill the spaces of time between doses.

So the sun comes up the next morning, you’re still with this guy. And this is so uncommon that you feel like putting up a plaque commemorating the occasion: On such and such a date, you actually spent a complete 24-hour day with another human being without being locked up in a cell with him. And the second day starts with some casual cock sucking, or if you’re really energetic, maybe sharing a complicated enema with a mixture of various drugs and booze, which is a great way to get to know somebody really quick, or you might drag the leather out of the closet and get dressed like cops or whatever where you strike a few poses and issue a few commands. And spending this much time with somebody carries with it certain circadian responsibilities, like eating and bathing and changing clothes. So in a grand gesture of hospitality, you pour out two bowls of Fruit Loops and serve your new friend breakfast in bed. Then you shower, get dressed and head out in your truck to drop off various deliveries of meth to some of your straggling customers.

And during these little errands you both kind of realize you’re not in any big hurry, kind of like the *andante* section of a Schubert sonata, like you’re both walking at a comfortable pace down the halls of an art exhibit, where you’re not thirsty or hungry or bored or even particularly interested in looking at the pictures on the walls -- or you’re just on a really nice, really easy drive – like you’re both just rolling down the road in like a black Camaro or something and the windows are all open and the wind is hot and you
know you look cool and you know where all the switches are and everything. And you can take time -- *take time* -- the words seem so weird like they’re from a third-world country or something, but it’s still got some nice scenery here and there with trees and clouds and shit, but the important thing is there’s no drama at all, and you realize that you’re usually comforted by emergencies – you’re addicted to them because you know how to act in an emergency, like when the cops are chasing you, or the Geisha went all psychotic in the check-out line at Home Depot, or what’s-his-name turned blue in the bathroom because the heroin he shot is a bit potent.

And being with this guy gives you a little hope that things might be different for a while. It reminds you of a scene in a movie where two people are in love or something, like -- I can’t think of anybody right now though, but it’s like when two people like each other a lot like couples in movies or commercials, whatever, and there’s usually like a slow motion scene with just the two of them in a meadow with millions of flowers or something and that’s like all there needs to be. And you’re thinking that you and this guy might be -- I can hardly breathe the word – *compatible* – that you’ve turned into a kind of *unit*; that you might actually have the potential to be like Dick and Tom, who’re actually the perfect couple; who could actually be in the Guinness Book of World Records for shooting more meth over a seven-day period than anybody in history. They just seemed to fit together somehow. Even when they were homeless, which was most of the time, somebody from another country or another planet would look at them and there would be no doubt that Dick and Tom were perfectly matched, but instead of like a normal couple, they were perfectly matched kamikaze pilots, or maybe like twin Cadillacs from that book *Slaughterhouse 5*, but with suicide doors, where they just keep going full speed
until there’s no tires left and they don’t even use roads anymore, and body parts fall off faster and faster, but they don’t slow down until they just disintegrate into nothing. And Dick and Tom are so connected that there seemed to be a kind of force field around them that the police can’t even penetrate, or maybe it just made the police blind to them, kind of like they were crystal meth Batman and Robin or Obi Wan Kenobi and Master Luke, or Ivana and Donald Trump or something, which was pretty weird because, from the perspective of anybody who got loaded with them, they were anything but invisible. They were outrageous, which is really saying something from the point of view of another dope fiend, but it was true. Dick and Tom’d be up for a few days and they had this habit of taking their appetites for twisted sex with other men right out in the daylight, like during rush hour on Franklin Avenue, and the sun is blazing away at like 7:30 or 8 in the morning and they’d pour peanut oil all over their jeans so you could see the shapes of their cocks through their Levis really plainly, and they’d stand where there’s a stop light at the intersection of Beachwood Drive and rub their bulging crotches, like they were tweaked out fag fishermen in a boat out on Lake Homo trawling for nibbles from the schools of the elusive giant cockfish who are known to inhabit the area. This strategy probably worked eventually, but everybody who knew Dick and Tom thought it was really intensely outrageously stupid, like you’re just asking to be arrested because in all those millions of cars packed onto Franklin Avenue all the time, there’s usually a few black-and-whites. And even if any of those cops are homos, which I’m sure some were, what do you think’s going to happen? Even if fate or the powers that be decided to pair two fag cops together as partners on patrol, which is about as likely as the people finally rising up and seizing power, do you really think they’d be driving down Franklin Avenue
and look over and see these two saucer-eyed oily clowns on the street corner and say, “Gee, Marvin, let’s take a few hours off so we can pick up these two studs and enjoy a few hours of crazy twacked out sex with them?” Anyway, that’s Dick and Tom. Maybe somebody’ll write a memoir about them some day.

So you and your new friend head back home and you get high together and smoke some really potent weed, which makes you stupider than you’d like, but it’s nothing you can’t handle, mostly because you’re a pro and have a kind of awareness of certain pitfalls, and, for the moment, you’re okay with this guy having become part of your routine. But then after a while you realize that a considerable length of time has passed since this guy has said one word -- has made one sound or actually given you one signal that he’s still on the same planet as you, which gets your attention a little because in normal circumstances this silence is a little bit of a red flag, and you try to remember exactly how long it’s been since he’s said anything. You think back to the previous hours and you make concessions because of the compatibility thing and you tell yourself that he might just be a quiet sort of guy, but you need a little assurance that things are cool, and you maybe conduct a little experiment by fixing yourself a dose in a spoon -- and when you do it, you make sure that you squirt the water into the drug inside the spoon and stir it up in a way that’s really obvious. And usually doing this around another dope fiend is like cutting up a pork chop in front of your napping dog. They’ll all of a sudden give you their undivided attention, as if you’re the center of the universe. But there’s no reaction from this guy -- he’s just lying there on the bed like a raw piece of steak and you say to yourself: Fuck! but maybe it’s out loud or maybe you just thought it, but it doesn’t matter because you know he won’t hear anything anyway because you’ve been fooled:
this guy is totally tripped out and his brain is busy busy busy constructing barricades and escape chutes and the most complicated contraptions that make perfect sense to the builder, but to anybody else who doesn’t literally live inside his own head, they’re completely fucking cuckoo.

And you maybe remember the first time you got fooled like this which was shortly after receiving your journeyman meth dealer’s merit badge, which was a couple of years ago. You’re living this ultra cool dealer’s life and you get a phone call from this guy – somebody you’ve seen around here and there, and he says he’s a dealer too; that he’s noticed what a nifty operation you’re running, which should have been a sign that something was weird, because calling your little business an “operation” is kind of a stretch. But being a pig for praise, you say something really bright like, “Oh, really? Golly thanks!” He says he wants to meet with you to discuss a business proposition, so you’re really honored at the moment. And you’re kind of amazed that he sounds so businesslike, like he has a briefcase with papers in it with graphs and stuff. He comes to visit, and sure enough, he’s dressed clean and neat and he’s actually carrying a fucking briefcase, so you start to think you’re going to have to concentrate on what this guy has to say. But you’re just playing it by ear, because you don’t really have a clue about what’s supposed to happen, and you both go into the bedroom but you don’t get high because, after all, this is strictly business. And he says he wants to join forces with you, to make a kind of alliance of meth dealers or something, and he begins to make his case to persuade you. And of course he doesn’t have a curriculum vitae or a business plan or anything for you to read, which is okay because you wouldn’t have understood it anyway, but what he does instead to prove to you that he’s a person of substance is tell you all the steps he’s
recently had to take to trick the sheriff’s department from focusing on him as a person of interest and a potential defendant. And and and -- as if he’s the founder of the Meth Dealers’ Peace Corps or something, he describes in the most self-aggrandizing and heroic terms how he’s perfected a method that will confound law enforcement one-hundred percent of the time, which consists of erecting a series of 50-foot mirrors in the back of his apartment building, which, according to him, rendered him and all his business dealings, completely invisible to all the hundreds of sheriff’s deputies and crime-fighting scientists who were out to get him. And before he gets five minutes into this pitch, you’re trying to figure out how to get rid of him, because it couldn’t be more obvious that he’s a guy who really needs to lay off his own product, or turn himself in for a few sessions of ultra high voltage Edison Medicine or maybe even submit to a little slicing and dicing of his amygdala.

It’s kind of like that with this silent guy. You get pissed off at yourself because you’ve seen this before more times than you like to admit and everything changes in a heartbeat from budding love affair to babysitting duty and your newfound ally has been transformed into just some potentially dangerous piece of luggage, and you try to remember the last time there was somebody tripped out like this who landed in quiet land, because ideally, after a silent stretch, they’ll start squawking about their impending death, like they’re one hundred percent sure their pulse is out of control and they can feel death beckoning and what’s going to become of them? You just wish this guy on the bed with you would start spewing words – any kind of bullshit craziness, because words give you kind of a foothold so you know where things stand -- words make the situation more quantifiable. You begin to wonder how long it’s going to be before this guy starts his
ascent into sanity and you can safely send him on his way -- or maybe drive him to where
he lives or something, because experience has taught you that this condition has certain
pitfalls: you turn them out too soon and they have no more wits than a puppy, who finds
himself out on the street in an unfamiliar part of town and is about as inconspicuous as
naked Santa Claus roller skating in the middle of the street, carrying a surfboard under his
arm and with a huge black dildo sticking out of his ass and maybe a propeller cap on his
head and blood dripping from his arms where he’s just slammed some meth. And just
like a real puppy, this guy starts to panic because he’s scared that he’s been abandoned
and will think nothing of walking up to a cop or maybe even into a police station and
describing the place where he’s been for the last day or so, and he wants to go back there,
and this will create a real fucking nightmare, so you reconcile yourself to being stuck
with this guy for as long as it takes and he lies on the bed for an hour, for two hours, and
then three. And you start to wonder what’s really going on with this guy, but don’t get
drastic. There’s a certain amount of faith in your experience – a belief that it’s just going
to take a little longer. And finally, after almost five hours, he gets up and walks into the
bathroom and pisses. And you feign good will and maybe say something innocuous like
“How you doin’?” But after he flushes the toilet, he claims his spot on the bed and
settles back into his silence, totally ignoring the question. There are all these wheels and
gears inside his head spinning out unspeakable tapestries of paranoia. And this causes
more concern because it’s almost nighttime again and something’s gotta give pretty
quick, so you sit on the bed next to him and try to watch some television or something,
and the phone starts ringing. It’s probably people calling for dope, but you don’t answer
because of this weirdo on the bed who started out being just a cool guy but is now a 100
percent liability and it’s become obvious that this little mini-romance will start to affect your income if something doesn’t happen soon. But with the patience of Job, you lie down next to him like there’s nothing wrong. Turn off the TV and you’re both just lying there. And for a few minutes it’s peaceful, like there’s nothing wrong. You take a wistful look at him, admiring his body and his handsome face and muscular arms -- and there’s a certain amount of frustration because in a perfect world he’d actually be a real catch, and you maybe feel a little twinge of loneliness and self pity because your imagination has created something out of nothing -- *one more time*, and in a panic you scramble to put these thoughts out of your head because acknowledgment of them creates a painful awareness that you’re alone and not getting any younger; that your life is as arid as the moon. Try to banish the last ten years of bad decisions and drug use and arrests and stretches in county jail and trying to avoid seeing your parents and brother and sister, but there’s so much distance from where you need to be because there’s usually a needle stuck in your arm and running amok has become normal. And a little prayer escapes into the air that will hopefully take the edge off these desperate thoughts, something maybe like *please god* -- *please give me a sign of what to do* -- *I promise I’ll* -- but you stop before adding any real substance to this prayer because praying is foolish and you’re glad no one has seen you in this moment of weakness. So with all the will in the world, you pry these thoughts away from the direction they’ve taken. And because you can’t think of anything else to do, you snuggle up close to this quiet guy, like spoons, and it feels good. You listen to his insides and it’s so quiet – kind of like the ocean at rest. There’s a kind of deep, confident rhythm resonating deep inside him. And after twenty minutes or so you sense a slight stirring. His breathing changes slightly, like there’s a tiny increase
in frequency and a decrease in depth, but it’s so slight you listen harder. There’s a little catch in his lungs, and you can almost feel blood flooding into his dormant muscles. Then, in a kind of singular seamless slightly magnificent motion, like an out-of-breath diver breaking through the surface of the ocean, he powers through your easy embrace, he sits up at once, looks around frantically like a cornered animal, then wildly – desperately screams to the world: “I...!” but the thought dies with the utterance of the pronoun, seemingly smothered by the paranoid imperatives of his overactive brain.

And your hopes, at least for the moment, are dashed with the reality that this guy is completely lost. And you wonder what it was he was going to say. I what? “I want to go home?” “I like you?” “I like puppies?” “I miss my mom?” Is it a truncated version of an expression containing the contraction “I’m,” and he was going to say “I’m sick,” “I’m the rightful king of France,” or maybe even the plain, unadorned, “I’m horny.” You consider for a moment the possibility that he may have been conjugating the future tense “I will,” but stop before finishing your speculative thought. I will what? You know it could be anything, and you catch yourself before descending into your own puddle of paranoia by settling on the possibility that the only verb that makes sense in this context is kill: “I will kill you.” And no matter how hard you try, you can’t stop yourself from going there -- from conjuring scenes of your awful, inevitable fate: murdered by an unbalanced trick who couldn’t handle his dope. And all you can think of is how vulgar your death will have been. “I wasn’t born to die this way,” you think. “I haven’t accomplished anything.” And you think about how your parents will be so disappointed, along with your aunts and uncles and their kids, as they shake their heads in support of your parents’ grief. “You’re not to blame. We are sooo sorry...” And you want to call
them and tell them you love them, and you’ll come and visit soon, and you allow yourself
to think about when you were a kid and you were happy and things were so much
simpler, and your parents still trusted you. But you know that history has taught them not
to put any weight at all in your promises anymore. And after you shake off these bullshit
memories, you imagine yourself being resourceful, somebody with courage and a will,
and you think that this could all be solved if you just killed this crazy motherfucker and
deposited him in a dumpster somewhere.

This is crazy, you think. Maybe saying “I…” has nothing to do with the self-
referential pronoun. It could be the truncated form of an expression of inner pain, like
“Aiyyeeeee!!” or any combination of vowels strung together to give voice to the
tortured soul; utterances that are so common in Italian opera or Mexican love songs:
“Aiyyeeeee! -- this is the only sound capable of conveying the profound pain I’m in” -- a
concept that is completely antithetical to the non words so common in British songs,
which stay as far away from any acknowledgement of inner pain – or even
acknowledgment of an existence outside of lovely decoration -- as possible, and which
are instead cluttered with measure after measure of silliness like “Fa la la la la, la la la
la,” happy sounds which seem designed to deny the existence of any emotion at all: “Oh,
let’s not talk about that messy stuff, old man -- have a spoonful of sugar and a jar of plum
pudding and we’ll all go a-caroling after the wind dies down.” And being a human
American citizen, you try to ally yourself – along with the rest of the population – with
the hot-blooded Italian/Latin side, because the British nonsense syllables seem so
goddamned silly in comparison, so frivolous and superficial. “I have emotion,” you
might say to reassure yourself that there is absolutely no connection between you and the
United Kingdom. And you don’t know how long it takes – probably about 30 seconds or maybe just a fraction of a second – until you realize that no matter how fast you run or how many somersaults your brain does, no white guy from Southern California like you is going to be able to claim ownership of the authenticity so implicit in Italian opera.

You’ve actually, over the years, mostly during Christmas season, sung all those British nonsense sounds, the fa la la la, la la la la more than once and it felt good, it felt right, like you were full of nothing but good will, and were a contributing member to the brotherhood of man, and you wish you could reclaim those feelings, like you’re just so fucking tired of being some low-life who’s always running into emergency rooms and away from the cops. You deserve to feel good, and you just want somebody to realize this fact too, kind of like Bloody Mary from that Rogers and Hammerstein musical, South Pacific, that sounds so much like the music of Brahms with all that mature lyricism growing from thick foundations of rich, complex harmonies that are sometimes more like superficially cracked dishes of brown gravy than music, and you can just see corpulent, blossom-encrusted Bloody Mary with her brown skin and bare feet, standing on a promontory of that tiny south seas island describing her plight in song through the gossamer fog partially obscuring all that rich mountain top verdure, pouring her heart out in her pidgin English to all those millions of eyeballs and ear drums in all those darkened theaters, not only in San Diego, but all over the fucking world: “Sweet and clear us can be too!” And her words embolden you until you’re able to claim your share of legitimacy in this tiny instant of creation. And you might even make a pledge to yourself to remember to go caroling next Christmas so you can again sing: Fa la la la la la, la la la la la!, but the syllables still sound vapid and you begin to feel self-conscious about how
mindless they are, so you try to ennoble them, to elevate this silliness to a higher plane so you can own them. And what comes to mind right away is *The Messiah* by Handel, especially *The Hallelujah Chorus*, that seems to offer some substantive provenance to these nonsense filler syllables. That’s it! George Frederick Handel and you to the fucking hubs! George and you, dude! You might be condemned for singing silly sounds, but they’re actually heroic -- heroic and brilliant -- forged on the crucible of faith -- sung by superior people that don’t get bogged down in all that morass of self, the narcissism that invites injury and hurt feelings. Fucking self-absorbed Italians! Get on with it, man! Stiff upper lip and all that. Carry on!

And by now your new friend has closed his eyes. He’s just lying there -- you can’t tell if he’s sleeping because you can see no evidence that he’s even breathing. And you realize you’re exhausted, so you close your eyes too, but your mind is still active and you’re thinking about what all this means. You want to go to sleep, but you wonder about what it might have meant if this guy had screamed another pronoun, like “You!...” or “She…!” or “They…!” instead of that self-limiting and overly mysterious “I…!” But you’ve been around a bit -- you’ve read a few books -- and you know a thing or two about human nature, and you know deep down that it doesn’t matter how far any pronoun drifts away from the first person, the big personal signifier “I” -- it’s always going to ultimately return to some form of self-reflection. That’s god’s cosmic joke on all of us, you think, and you’re struck by the futility of it all, that in all of human endeavor throughout all of history, and even before anything was ever written down, no matter how selfless or altruistic you’ve told yourself your motives are -- you can never ever ever move past yourself; that everything you experience and everyone you meet will
ultimately be mediated through the filter of you. And in what can only be considered an uncharacteristic flash of humanity, you look at this guy with a little compassion, and when you do, you see yourself, but more than that, you see mankind, flawed and fucked up and struggling and wanting – needing more than anything else to be part of something, to be safe -- to be loved. So you turn off your phone, you take off your clothes and lie down next to this guy because in this instant, you’ve realized that we’re all the same -- just clawing climbing clinging microbes, hungry and striving for primacy, so maybe we can finally catch a lucky break and somehow squirm over the walls of this Petri dish. No one gets over on anybody else and no one gets out of here with a gold star. You close your eyes and go to sleep.
Western Avenue (a.m.)


Reassured by the moist dewy feeling of the morning. Plenty of time yet. The Coral Seas Motel is muffled under a blanket of stillness – all of Hollywood glides through its summertime early morning vichyssoise that, more often than not, carries within its sleepy breezes the slightest hint of sour milk. Climb down the stairs, walk nonchalantly through the office, focusing all my attention on avoiding the night manager’s gaze -- he doesn’t like me – he’s Indonesian or something -- very suspicious about the white man, which also might be some kind of social injunction where white guys – or maybe just cocksuckers -- are an affront to his religion or something. Who knows? I don’t think he likes anybody though. It must be a genetic thing -- sleazy Hollywood motels and mean-tempered Indonesians -- or maybe they’re all part of some huge Pan-Asian clan that’s building its fortune on Hollywood sex motels.

Exit out onto Western Avenue where I look squarely – haughtily at the smattering of passing BMWs driven down from the Los Feliz hills by young buttoned-down executives on their way to Paramount or Raleigh Studios who want to get their tongues firmly planted in their bosses’ buttoned-up butt holes before 8 a.m. I know they’re
stealing glances at the *Coral Seas*’ parking lot as they pass too – just to gauge how much action they missed last night. I’ve seen them here before. I’ve watched as their propriety erodes – sometimes slowly; sometimes in a flash – with bigger and bigger doses of their favorite drug, which ends up being just S’more-of-whatever-you-got – as they cross the boundary separating detached spectators with Rococo loafers to slutty man-whores with fat credit cards, *Yippee!!*

Unremarkable walk to Starbucks -- just the previous night’s residue of sleaze – I don’t want to offend anybody, so I’ll spare you most of the details -- just used-up rubbers, used-up syringes and used-up baggies -- discarded by scary people who were used up a decades ago – all stuff that’s invisible to normal folks, but is pretty apparent to the expert class, my membership paid for most recently with six weeks in county jail. My customers see themselves as the leisure class, café society, bourgeoisie -- but normal people in the country call them wastrels and bums. I call them none of those. I prefer the moniker, *victims of inertia*, even though that particular signifier’s sheen has eroded somewhat over the decades due to simply an awareness of guilt: Everybody spewed endless streams of bullshit. No one is innocent, especially me. Claiming victimhood at this stage of my life is pretty funny. I sell drugs because I like getting high, I like breaking the law -- and most of all, I like fucking all those boys who will do just about anything for a free dip into the bag. The princess in my room just wouldn’t shut up -- I remember that much. Wouldn’t shut up and wouldn’t leave, so I did what I usually do in extreme cases of motor-mouth: Gave the little faggot a shot of heroin, which usually has a quieting effect. But apparently this time it was a bit too much. Man, I really want my Starbucks.
The strip mall is the city’s stab at urban renewal, an attempt to build an edifice out of nothing but green-and-brown decorations. There’s a Chinese fast food place begging for attention under a useless finial, and an Aaron Brothers picture framing store peeking from the space between a couple of faux Greek columns, and, of course, the Starbucks. It’s all supposed to nod to the past while looking to the future, which doesn’t make any sense at all. I mean, didn’t the architect who designed this place and the business consortium that funded it and the politicians who okayed it think that we’d notice that post-modern is really just another way to say, I’m too lazy to come up with anything new, so let’s just dump all the pieces into the blender and hit pureé? That the designers of this building actually are the true victims of inertia? And putting it here? At this intersection? Really? Is there no respect for the past? This place has history, even though it may not be the same kind of history like Gettysburg or the Smithsonian or even that sad dinosaur museum over on Wilshire Boulevard. All putting this building here really amounts to is erecting a cheap tent over an oozing lesion, then pretending everything’s fine. The city should embrace its oozing lesions -- they’re disappearing at an alarming rate. Come to think of it, I can’t remember what used to be here, but it had to be better than this piece of shit. One thing I know for sure, though: No amount of good intentions can compete with the force of tradition. This street corner, despite all these cosmetic changes, wrought by statute and pretention to greed, will never relinquish its reputation as a place built on itching drag queens with enormous limp dicks, glory holes, smelly drunks, dope fiends, pretty boys and mayhem. The intersection of Western Avenue and Hollywood Boulevard will be forever fixed as one of the earth’s great and
holy shrines of wasted potential where amateur standing at just about everything vanishes merely by virtue of finding yourself on foot here.

I’m not a fighter. I stay as far away from physical altercations as much as possible, but just at the moment I walk into Starbucks I lay eyes on a guy standing in line – John Ramos – and just like it was an automatic reaction, I walk right up to him and sock him in the face, which is at least as shocking to me as it is to him. And he says something really bright like, Wow, you hit me. Why’d you hit me? And I say: You little snitch! I just got out of jail. You gave me up, you little motherfucker! And even while I’m saying this, I think about the evidence I’m basing this belief on, which was supplied to me by none other than the deputies in the jail, which already begins to poke holes in my theory because they’re like the world’s greatest liars. Even if they had, by some weird stretch of the imagination, a stake in telling the truth about this, it’s more likely than not that they made it up just to fuck with me. They do that. They are merchants of chaos – just like Mexican gangs. They fuck with you just because they can. That’s one of the weird things about control. You’ll be sitting in your bunk, trying to ignore the seconds and minutes going by, hoping that enough of them have elapsed that you’ll open your eyes one day and voila! You’re being rolled up for release, which probably has never happened once since jails were invented. And these deputies in the jail have made you their own personal little soap opera, their own little ant farm or diorama. It’s got to be cool to have complete control over so many people in one place, really. They’ll call your name and order you to come out of your tank, and you know it can be for any number of reasons, but what it usually is, they’ll try to get you to roll over on your friends. They’ll take you into some sergeant’s personal office and there’s all kinds of
pictures of this sergeant hanging out with various convicts like they’re best buddies or something – and you recognize some of these guys, but most of them are before your time. And he’ll offer you a cigarette or a Coke and act like he’s your best friend in the whole world. And that’s what happened with me. This sergeant told me that Johnny Ramos is the guy who rolled on me, and he tells me the story of how it only took like five minutes or so when Ramos was being arrested and he just spit out my name -- and I could be released soon if I cooperated like Ramos did. But I just say no thanks because I have honor.

But I already hit Ramos and I can’t backtrack now. Even if I don’t honestly believe that little Johnny Ramos is capable of narc-ing on me, there’s no way I’m going to say something like, Oh, gee, I’m terribly sorry. I might have made a mistake. Please accept my humble apology. So I hit him again right there in line at Starbucks. And like I said before, I’m not a fighter, which I’m not, so I was totally amazed at what happened next: He starts crying -- right there in line. His nose is bleeding and he’s standing there crying among all those people drinking their coffees inside this post-modern monstrosity and I feel like the world’s biggest piece of shit -- like I’m the world’s most horrible person and I want to explain that I’m not known for fighting, I just thought it was my duty to hit him because I thought -- no need to go back over this again, you get the picture. And he’s crying and looking at me like he can’t believe I just hit him and I can see in his eyes our history together, especially when we first met, which was like over 15 years ago during the height of the AIDS epidemic, and guys were still dropping like flies and every weekend you’d get at least two invitations to go to somebody’s memorial service, where all these queens would stand up at a dais and give little testimonials about
whoever’d just croaked. And more often than not, these testimonials were pretty much bullshit where so-and-so would be described as having all these really spiritual qualities, like he volunteered at a leper colony or whatever, and you’d wonder if this person testifying actually knew so-and-so because it’s sort of common knowledge that he was just your regular run-of-the-mill dick pig/bag whore. Yes, it’s always sad when somebody dies, you know this, so you don’t say what you want to say out loud to the benched crowd: you’ll miss so-and-so, yes, it’s true, but only because he never sold you short bags of dope. Not that you know of, at least.

It was at the end of one of these memorials when I met Johnny Ramos. There were all these queens milling around inside this church in their cable-knit sweaters and there’s lilies and wreathes all over the place and guys are sipping coffee out of little Styrofoam cups and holding little cubes of yellow cheese skewered on toothpicks. And pretty much everybody there has AIDS too, so these queens are thinking about how their memorial is going to be so grand compared to this one: I’m going to have Mozart’s Requiem performed at mine or Mine’s going to be on the cliffs of the ocean and all the guests will wear white! And usually I wouldn’t have even noticed a guy like Ramos except it was pretty clear he and I were in the same camp, meaning that we were part of the crowd of guys who’d dropped out of A.A. for the moment, while the other half were all sober and smug, in their 12-step dogma and program regalia, basking in their realized potential and the sunlight of the spirit.

So Ramos and I sort of trade glances now and again, because I guess it was pretty obvious that we’re both twirling a little, like house flies probably have longer attention spans than we do. And I think Ramos is kind of cute, so I follow him into the bathroom
and suck him off during one of the testimonials about whoever it was that died. And when we get done, we sort of separate for a few minutes until he comes up to me and he’s with this fat old Jew, who everybody called The Rabbi, but his name was Sol Liebowitz, who drives this really expensive BMW 740 like it’s Bathsheba’s barge, or maybe Lindsey Graham in her B-17 Flying Fortress. And Johnny introduces me to Sol and we all, meaning me and Johnny and Sol and a fat guy named Bob, take off together in Sol’s sedan. And I’m guessing that we’re going to cruise around and maybe smoke dope and pretend we’re happy and privileged, but we just head down to Robertson without a puff of anything. And Sol parks in front of some exclusive Persian rug store, and just like he rehearsed it, he turns to Johnny and me and says: You guys are gonna die from AIDS pretty quick, so here’s what I propose. And he describes this group of guys who all have AIDS and Sol pays them big sums of money for doing these outrageously brazen burglaries in West Hollywood and Beverly Hills, where they take manhole covers and heave them through the window of one of these deluxe rug stores, then grab a chest-high stack of rugs and book. And then this fat guy named Bob explains that he’s got AIDS too and has been doing these robberies for Sol for a couple of months – and he qualifies it by saying he’s probably only got six months or so to live -- and that it’s such a fucking rush – that you can be so fucking brazen because you don’t have to worry about your future because, after all, how long do you think you’ve got anyway? So I say something like, Wow, that’s totally fucked up, but I say I’ll think about it, and Johnny and I get out of Sol’s car and walk to my apartment, which isn’t that far away, and we get high and spend the afternoon fucking.
So that’s how I met Johnny. We never stole shit for Sol – we only sold dope to each other over the years now and then, we had sex a few times and got high a bunch of times and stole some shit here and there -- anyway, we were friends. And while we’re standing face-to-face in Starbucks, Johnny’s sobbing and he’s got this expression on his face like he’s my pet dog who’s been with me for years and years and he can’t understand why I hit him, like I just abandoned him in some field of weeds or something, like I totally betrayed him. And the harder he cries the harder I get. Open up my arms and give him this really big hug – right there in Starbucks – and we embrace really tight, me saying in his ear, I’m so sorry, Johnny, I’m so sorry, Johnny, over and over and over. And by now I’m crying too, and I start kissing him all over his face, and then he starts kissing me back. And we just stand there hugging each other and kissing and blubbering like a couple of delicate gay boys at a Spielberg movie, and -- this is weird: We sort of start feeling a little conspicuous at the exact same moment because there’s all this snot and blood running all down our faces and everything. So we start to laugh because it’s just so real, hugging and crying and laughing and kissing and bleeding and everything right there in Starbucks. And the more we laugh, the harder we laugh and it snowballs until people are backing away from us, and we both know we have to get out of there pretty quick because some good Samaritan is going to call the cops in about one second. So we head out of the Starbucks as fast as we can, and we can’t stop laughing for about two blocks. And neither of us got any coffee, which makes us start laughing again, but we put the brakes on that pretty quick, because we’re thinking kind of parallel at the moment, and we realize we really like each other and we want to get high and fuck.

What time is it, I say. Johnny looks at his phone: 10:30. Dude, I say, I got a room at the
Coral Seas, but checkout time is at 11. But I know even when I’m saying this that I only have enough money for half the rent for another night. You got any money? I ask Johnny, and he says yeah, not to worry about the money because he’s got plenty. So we head back to the motel, and all we’re thinking about is getting high and getting naked, so we’re walking pretty fast.

We get to the motel office just before 11, and Johnny, being the good guy that he really is, kind of takes the reins and says to the asshole manager that he’s going to rent the room for another night, and he plunks down the hundred bucks or so for another night and he fills out the hotel papers and stuff and shows his driver’s license. We get back to the room on the second floor and it’s exactly the same except the little blue dude is gone, and I don’t say anything because what’s the point. I’m actually pretty grateful that he’s not there because who wants to deal with this tweaked out chatty Cathy all night and then in the morning too. So me and Johnny get high together and it’s fucking great and we’re really digging each other’s naked completely twacked-out bodies, and this goes on for an hour or so, until there’s this little knock at the door.

And I open the door and it’s the asshole night manager, who’s looking pretty tired at this point, and behind him are about a dozen LAPD officers and a couple of detectives, who push their way in front of the manager. And my heart sinks to the bottom of my gut, and I know I’ve lost my voice and my thoughts are so fucking random, like there’s a short circuit going on in my head, because I know this has something to do with the blue princess, but I’m not sure what because I’m almost completely sure he wasn’t dead when I left earlier. And honestly, it feels like I just swallowed a bowling ball and I can feel my heart beating right out of my chest because I just got out of fucking jail and this is so
fucking fucked up. And I’m ready for the worst to happen, when the cop says, John Ramos? And all of a sudden it’s Christmas. I step aside and point to my friend. That’s him, I say.
Inversion Therapy

Not that I would never do such a thing – I’ve often imagined slipping on women’s fishnet nylons, a tiny skirt, and high heels, but still keeping on my black leather motorcycle jacket, and walking around Skid Row downtown in the wee hours of the morning trying to entice some of the swarthy low-lifes there to take advantage of me. I just don’t remember doing it. But it’s about 8:00 in the morning and here I am in fishnet nylons and high heels and my leather jacket, sitting inside a confessional at St. Vibianes Cathedral, which is close to Skid Row – and I’m not even Catholic. How I knew enough to choose St. Vibianes instead of that huge new cathedral over on Temple where Cardinal Mahoney works, I’ll never know. Maybe I have some hidden Catholic genes that are tired of being ignored all these years and finally want some attention. If I were a conspiracy theorist, this would make perfect sense – and actually be kind of poetic – kind of a de facto commentary on yours truly -- a nobody sinner invading a church named after a nobody saint. This is all too astute for a casual observation, though, and makes my head hurt thinking about it. Does the Catholic Church really want me to join up that bad? The prospect does make me feel kind of special, though, but it’s putting more pressure on me at the moment than I’m prepared for, so I retreat to a more prosaic position: That the reason I showed up here is that subconsciously I knew I’d feel right at home in a place where the men wear dresses and boys kneel in front of them. And there’s all that hierarchy – the infallible power of the leather throne and all that, which is a lot easier for me to swallow than thinking there’s some mean-ass angel flying around who wants me to become all holy or whatever because he knows – and God knows of course, that I have nothing to lose and nothing else to do. That’s a little too monumental for 8:00 in the
morning and I’m coming down off a three-day meth run. Man, that’s a load off! Thank you, Lord!

Not exactly sure how this is supposed to work, except when the priest opens that little window, I’m supposed to confess my sins to him. Forgive, me father, for I have sinned…it’s been 45 years since my last – actually, this is my first confession. I only know these words from watching movies. Will the priest will know what I’m wearing -- or will it matter to him that there’s a man wearing women’s slutty clothes inside his confessional? Since I’m not Catholic, will he kick me out? If I tell him all the stuff I’ve done, will he still forgive me? Priests usually tell movie sinners to recite novenas and hail Marys and say certain prayers, then the priest will say something like, “I absolve thee from thy sins, in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost” – I pay pretty close attention in movies – and there are all different levels of sin, everything from thinking bad thoughts to jacking off too much to butt fucking another man to murdering somebody, most of which I’m guilty of, except I never killed anybody. I don’t know how you’re supposed to feel after being absolved of your sins, though, because I’ve never done any of those rituals myself. But it doesn’t seem like it’s a waste of time. It seems like something I’m supposed to be doing.

Actually, the thought of ritualizing parts of my life is something that is very attractive to me at the moment, too. It’s so wonderful when Catholics in movies come into view of the altar inside the church. They kneel and cross themselves like they’re completely serious. There’s something very cool about the lack of self-consciousness of these people. I can imagine myself religiously kneeling before the altar too, and making the sign of the cross and then doing that really cool kissing-your-thumb gesture – But I
can’t remember what it’s called at the moment though. I suspect it’s supposed to illustrate your love for Jesus or some saint or whatever, but I probably would be wearing my normal clothes, not torn up fishnet nylons, a stained miniskirt and scuffed up come-fuck-me size-14 stiletto heels. It would be hard to do in these high heels, actually.

Would the normal rank-and-file Catholics of this congregation be upset if I did go out there and cross myself dressed like a shady lady though? As much as I want to believe that they’d be charitable and welcoming – spiritual – about me, I don’t let myself get too enthusiastic about being embraced. Catholics are, after all, Catholics. From what I’ve heard, I’m pretty sure they believe I’m going to hell.

It’s hot as Hell in here too, and I’m wondering how long it’s supposed to take the priest to come into the other side of the booth. Maybe he’s slothful. I pushed the little buzzer outside the confessional, which is supposed to alert him that somebody’s waiting for him, but I didn’t hear a buzz or anything. Maybe it’s broken -- or maybe it rang in hell and the priest has notified Satan that he’s got a live one here who’s ready to be signed up for an eternity of torture.

Won’t let myself despair. I want to be cleansed. I want to confess my sins to this priest, then walk outside a new man with a new perspective and with a bounce in my step. What will my priest will sound like? I’m kind of hoping he doesn’t have an Irish accent. It would be great if he was just a regular American priest – probably about 35 years old, with a resonant, understanding voice -- and very kind. In my mind there’s a series of all different kinds of priests, like in the underwear section of a catalogue, but wearing priest outfits instead of briefs. Some of them will be really young -- boy priests, like Justin Bieber, and some will be young adult males like Ryan Gosling, and some will
be middle-aged, like Dylan McDermott. What kind of underwear will they be wearing under their robes? Briefs or boxers? My priest will have chiseled good looks with thick black hair, who’s sensual in spite of being a priest. And he’s probably had a rich, full life before deciding to become a priest. But he’s also a little bit troubled and vulnerable. There are still traces of a recent crisis of faith in his voice. I can tell this. And he can tell in my voice that I’m willing to listen to his troubles too -- after all, who’s going to know? He’s probably heard enough of other people’s problems for twenty lifetimes. “You can tell me, father. I understand. It’s all right.” Imagine him leaving his side of the confessional and quietly knocking on the door of mine. I open the door and he squeezes in with me. And I look into his eyes and he looks into my eyes and he starts to sob a little, and I begin kissing him lightly, starting on his forehead and moving down to his mouth. He makes a slight whimper of protest, but I put my index finger over his lips. “Shhhh,” I say. “It’s okay.” And the priest realizes that I’m the answer to his prayers and he puts his head on my shoulder and we embrace. And we fit so well, it feels really good, really right. Time slows to a stop and a tear falls down my cheek because I realize he’s the answer to my prayers too. And I feel saved because I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that this moment is part of god’s plan for me, that right now, this very second, is the culmination of everything I’ve ever done or thought, that it could be no other way. I imagine the love between my priest and me being immortalized by artisans who’ve carved our likenesses out of giant blocks of oak and affixed them onto the prows of noble sailing ships. And together we set out, bravely cutting across the roiling, tempestuous oceans of the world, grateful now for the cherished sweet calm of the sea, but willing to meet even the fiercest, most wrathful storms – storms that would easily destroy lesser
couples. Such is our love: It’s monumental; it has the power to rend the fabric of nations. We can face any adversity together.

Still no priest. I think how nice it would be if I could lie down somewhere safe and quiet, just to get off my feet. It’s been a while since I’ve slept, and the yawning leprechauns inside my brain are multiplying like bunnies, making it hard to keep my eyes open. I surrender to the jelly gods, collapse my shoulders and squeeze my arms out of the sleeves of the leather jacket. It folds up into a fine, substantial pillow. I position it against the little window with the screen, lay my head on it and fall asleep.