

THE
ADVENTURES
OF
THE
FATTEST
CRIMEFIGHTER
IN THE
WORLD

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CHAPTER ONE: THE MAGIC DEFLECTING SUPERHERO SATIN CAPE

It all started in a stairwell. Around Christmastime. The Fatman was only a boy then, just eight years old, and he found it impossible to choose between the delights of watching his mother prepare the house for the holidays, OR listening to his father during those same late afternoons, sitting in the dark, dank basement with his buddies, planning their next hunting trip, and bragging about what game they'd bagged the weekend before.

His mother's decorating and baking for the holidays started the very day after Thanksgiving, and continued straight through the holidays, including a swoop to the After Christmas Sales. She would start right in on one of her festive holiday chores every day in the late afternoon, as soon as she came back from her Monday through Friday job of running the library, or from her Saturday-Sunday job of doing volunteer work at the Red Cross.

Eavesdropping on his father's fishing and hunting trips was something that the Fatman did when he could, but that happened only a couple of nights a week. It was the bustling of the Christmas preparations that captivated him the most: helping his mother unwrap the nativity scene that had been handed down through the generations, festooning the mantle and the stair banister with greenery and red ribbons, decorating the tree, and most wonderful of all, helping his mother with that delectable holiday baking. He would lurk and linger in the kitchen, inhaling all those delicious cooking smells that made you want to die of happiness, they were so reassuringly fragrant.

Oh, by the way--the Fatman was not particularly fat, then. In fact, as a boy, he was a bit on the lanky side. But even as a kid, the Fatman was something of a loner, probably because he had found all the friends he needed living between the covers of the books. . .those glorious, mystic storybooks that were stacked to the ceiling of his father's study! And these heroes--these do-gooders, these top dogs, these warriors, these exemplars, these knights in shining armor, these paladins, these pancratium, these di minores, these Samsons, these Davids, these devah, these Chutzpaniks, these conquistadores, these

Übermensches--this pantheon of paragons, these creations, these companions, all made the other kids in the neighborhood seem like shabby company by comparison.

Except for Toby W. Smith, who was more impressive than all the other boys because:

1.) He had a name that sounded important, like an adult's, the "W" with the period after it somehow more impressive than a regular middle name.

2.) He proffered pictures of naked ladies for a nickel or for certain food treats. (The books in the Fatman's father's study did not contain any pictures of naked ladies.)

AND

3.) Toby W. Smith had once swallowed a frog whole on a dare. And all the time after that, he would hop about sometimes for no reason, an aberrant bit of behavior that all the kids were sure was a result of the frog which, rumor had it, didn't die once you ate it, because you were breathing for it and it subsisted off of the food you ate, especially the spiders and gollywhoppers that Toby would also eat on a dare, or for a nickel.

If these aren't convincing enough reasons for you to want to hang out with Toby W. Smith, and for bestowing upon him the coveted title of "best friend," well then I just don't know what.

Toby and the Fatman's favorite sport was to do things they weren't supposed to do, for they had discussed it many times and it was clear to them that this was precisely what all the heroes they worshipped started off doing: right before they were offered the chance to do something heroic, they did something forbidden. For Toby and the Fatman, both of whom just *knew* they were going to be heroes, this seemed like the time-honored and time-tested way to start. So you can see that right off, when they did that which was not allowed, it wasn't, for them, just a matter of kids will be kids. Rather, it was all part of a much grander scheme to be knighted or crowned or honored or granted immortality or to die tragically young or something like that, such being the various fates of various heroes that Toby and that Fatman had studied assiduously.

It was this philosophy--one born of "Fire in their Bellies", that gave Toby W. Smith and the Fatman the courage to do something that they both knew would get them about a thousand lashes each with the Cat-O-Nine Tails while lashed to the mast of their pirate ship. (Or,

more specifically, get them a dozen lashes with their dads' belts in the woodshed. But somehow the thought of the punishment seemed less terrifying if the setting were more, well, heroic. Hence they imagined the ship, and not the shed.)

Toby and the Fatman would look at each other and give each other the secret signal and ultra-secret handshake, which they were to share with no other living soul. Unless one of them were to die in battle, in which case the survivor could share it with one other living soul. That living soul was to be a close personal soulmate of the deceased--and to be chosen by the deceased--but to be chosen, of course, before he was deceased.

Toby's choice was his older brother Walter, who was studying to be a magician. Toby's father, who was a doctor, disapproved--of Toby's brother being a magician that is, not of Toby's choice to pass the handshake on to him in the event of Toby's death. Oh, and the Fatman's choice for whom to pass the handshake on to, in the event of the Fatman's untimely demise, was Luke Skywalker, whom the Fatman believed to be an actual living breathing person.

So after giving each other the secret signal and ultra-secret handshake, Toby and the Fatman first made absolutely sure that the Fatman's dad was at work and his mom at the library. The Fatman and Toby would even call both of the Fatman's parents, with some contrived question, to make sure both grown-ups were safely enmeshed in their adult responsibilities of earning a living. . .

. . . Then, they would sneak down to the Fatman's basement and open *the trunk*, for it was in this trunk that the Superhero raiments were stored.

And under the shredding wedding dress and crumbling bridal bouquet and photo albums from his mom's youth, and from his dad's youth, and old political buttons all living together in the same box (no small accomplishment, as the Fatman's father's folks had been Republicans, and the Fatman's mom's people Democrats), and under an ancient teddy bear and more clothes--dresses that his mother had worn before the addition of "Mrs." to her name: fancy prom dresses cotillion frocks and theatrical costumes and old Halloween get-ups--amidst all these treasures were hidden the *Superhero uniforms*.

Oh, to be sure, they were not originally intended to outfit superheroes, but these shiny satins, which were spectacular when caught by the sunlight--these satins of good-guy white and

Knights-of-the-Roundtable purple, Superman blues and reds, and able-to-swim-under-water-without-ever-even-coming-up-for-air aquas and greens, these fly-into-the-sun-which-is-this-Superhero's-powersource oranges and golds. . .all these secret lengths of satin which you could drape and cape and swath around your body and over your face like a mask to hide your mortal, dreary, daytime identity. . .these hidden treasures made the best Superhero costumes in the world. Toby and the Fatman would play for hours, imagining that they were slaying all kinds of enemies and vanquishing all kinds of evil, until a half hour before the folks came home, when they would put everything back in the trunk, just the way they'd found it, even the dust, and then return to their drab existences of liver and Brussels sprouts, homework, and one hour of TV before lights out.

(Oh--important point: the Fatman was *not only not fat* as a boy, he was also not unhappy as a boy, for he was given everything and hardly felt at all deprived. Which is odd, if you think about it, because most kids mostly want everything in the world.

But no, he hardly felt deprived at all in life.

So you may well ask, what lack was it then that led him to compensate by stuffing his face until he reached his adult weight of--of--well, the Fatman made me promise never to actually divulge his actual weight. Anyway, stay tuned, and you will understand what led him to stuffing himself with the frantic and maniacal energy of a taxidermist on cocaine.)

Oh, wait. There was one thing that made the Fatman, as a slim boy, feel a bit deprived. Left out, if you will. And that was the fact that his father, his dear old dad, whom the Fatman admired inestimably (closest thing to a real hero that the Fatman had ever known in real life), *never* took his son along on his hunting trips. Oh, they went fishing together, and to baseball games and to the city for supplies and on assorted errands, but his father would never take him hunting. The Fatman could not help but feel left out. He was sure, just sure, that there were all kinds of Superhero skills he could learn, if only he would be allowed to go along on the stalking hunt. . .if only to be quiet and watch. . .and just take it all in.

But the Fatman's ninth birthday came and went, and *still* he was not taken along on his father's hunting trips. Which really did start to rankle him, because by the age of nine, most of his other friends

were allowed to go hunting with their dads. Perfect example: his best buddy Toby W. Smith, who was kind enough to finesse an invitation for his pal, the Fatman.

Still, hunting with Toby and his dad, for squirrels and crow, rabbit and possum, well it just wasn't the same. The fact that the Fatman's father wouldn't take his own son along, who was nine now and practically a man, reminded the Fatman that in the eyes of the world, he was still a child. The Fatman didn't like being reminded of that. He had never read about a single Superhero who was a child. In fact, he hardly knew much at all about the childhood of any of his favorite Superheroes. They were all pretty much shrouded in mystery.

All of this sense of mystery and deprivation and feeling left out and too small and generally being underestimated was what led the Fatman to cook up the most audacious of all his schemes to date, and needless to say, Toby W. Smith was to be in on it.

Alright, fine. If the adults didn't think that the Fatman was old enough to go hunting and receive the ritual of blood on the face from the first kill, and do his part in stocking the basement freezer for the winter, well the Fatman would just secretly follow his father on one of his hunting trips, unbidden and uninvited. Toby thought it a marvelous idea, and announced that in honor of the audacity involved, they should wear the Superhero satins on their big adventure.

It would be painfully easy to pull off, too. All they'd have to do was hide under the clutter and canvas in the truckbed. Then, when the hunters got into the deep woods and stopped to do whatever it was hunters did to prepare for hunting, Toby W. Smith and the Fatman would leap out of the truckbed quiet as ninja warriors, hightail it into the woods, and follow the hunters at a safe distance. Just to be sure that they had the time and opportunity to do all of this, Toby took along his slingshot, with plans to create a distraction when the truck stopped.

(Oh oh oh, Toby W. Smith was aces on a slingshot. He could take out a person's eye at five hundred feet. No, he'd never actually taken someone's eye out at five hundred feet. But once, Reginald Joiner and Newt Dabit and Rusty Winkler had stolen a mannequin from Miss Marzipan's Dress Shop when Miss M., whose real name was Bertha, was in the back with a lady's hat salesman with the door locked. A bunch of the guys took the mannequin, still dressed in its Jackie O. pink Chanel suit, {which is what the cursive sign called it,} and they

toted the mannequin, still wearing its matching pink pillbox hat, out to a field on Handlebar Road, where they'd set it up in Beau Tittle's rusted out Rambler, and let Toby have at it with his slingshot. There was some milk money on these games, let me tell you. Newt had even taken a little plastic pouch, with some pig blood in it, and taped it right over Jackie O's left eyeball, so that if Toby could make his boast, about hitting the pupil from five hundred feet, well, it would be even that much cooler to watch.)

And let me tell you something, it was spectacular. True to his boast, Toby hit poor Jackie first: right in the eyeball! But it was the *right* eyeball, so no splattering of pig blood yet. Then, Toby took aim at Jackie O's finger, which broke off and it turned into a tiny airborne missile when Toby's rock hit it just right. Then another rock hit her ear, then one bull's-eyed her tittie, saving the little packet of pig's blood right under her left eye for the very last, creating a dazzling splatter of real blood all over Jackie's pink Chanel suit, when Toby hit it amidst the cheers and admiring shrieks of his compadres. Jackie's frozen smile never left her face the entire time.

It had been a magnificent afternoon, as guys' afternoons go. So no, Toby W. Smith had never actually shot out a person's eye, but now the whole gang knew that he sure could do it if he wanted to, so this made kids respect him even more.

In fact the whole business with the Jackie mannequin and the splattering blood gave Newt Dabit, the wildest one in the gang, a diabolically wonderful idea: he made sure that his folks could hear him coming home, the whole gang making lots of noise, whooping and hollering as they made their way home at sunset on the dusty side streets. Then, Toby raised his slingshot and Newt pretended to be hit; he grabbed at his eyeball and splattered another baglet of the pig's blood all over his face and clothes, and his mother screamed and had spasms all over the front porch and then she and his dad ran to him.

Newt, he just bust out laughing and laughing, and it didn't even hurt, he informed Toby and the Fatman later, when his dad took him into the woodshed and let him have it good. Even as he was being swatted, it was all Newt could do to not bust out, howling with laughter again. See, kids took it in the woodshed a lot more back then, and if you were any kind of tough kid, it didn't get to you nearly as much as you might think nowadays. I mean, at least a kid knew that his dad cared enough to take a whack at him.

But anyway, so now you know about how everybody knew that Toby was a crack shot. His plan was, (to return to the Audacious Scheme concocted between Toby W. Smith and the Fatman), Toby's plan was that they should sneak along in the truckbed and keep hidden under the tarp all the way from the house into the deep woods. Then, when the truck stopped in the middle of the forest, Toby would shoot a rock into some distant tree, and there would be the usual ruckus of birds taking flight and wild things commenting on the disruption, and then the hunters in the truck would check that out, or be distracted or whatever. Sounds like a plan. . . .

So on the Friday that the Fatman's dad and his cronies were going out to hunt, Toby met the Fatman after dinner, just when the sun was setting. They hastily dressed in their Superhero satins, and then they hid in the truckbed. The Fatman's mom thought that he was spending the night at a friend's house, so he wouldn't be missed.

Sure enough, Toby and the Fatman made not a sound as they hid under the tarp. They grinned at each other as the truck started up, and only winced and giggled a few times as they jostled along on a road that got increasingly bumpy as they headed from their tiny town into the rolling countryside.

By the time they got to where they were going, the night was black as tar, and, well, all Toby and the Fatman knew for sure was that they were in the belly of the forest, alrightie. The woods were very dark, and very deep. Though neither of the two superheroes-in-training would admit it to each other, it was all pretty scary.

It was even more frightening still when their perfect plan--to pull out the slingshot, create a distraction, leap from the truck, follow the hunters, etcetera--didn't even have a chance to get started. What happened when the truck stopped, and Toby and the Fatman popped their heads up from under the tarp, was that there was a distraction alright. But not one created by Toby's slingshot.

What happened was another truck, this one a battered up red rusty truck, screeched up next to the Fatman's dad's truck. But the Fatman's father and his cronies were obviously expecting this red truck, and showed no surprise when it came screeching up, rather THEN began the enthusiasm of the hunt, the zeal for the kill. It was already well underway, and the men, who, to the Fatman's astonishment were wearing *his* Superhero satins (for the Fatman had come to think of them as *his own*), these men wasted no time in dragging Toby W. Smith's brother and father out of the back of the red truck, where they

had been bound and gagged, and the hunters all proceeded to string them up from a high tree, but not before calling them all kinds of names, mostly variations on "nigger," and also not before castrating both of them.

All of this as Toby W. Smith looked on, mute, still clutching the little slingshot in his hand--but, it appeared to the Fatman, quite paralyzed, unable to fire or fight back.

Toby W. Smith never spoke another word after that night. And three years later, on Christmas Eve, Toby went into the outhouse in his backyard, and blew his brains out.

That is how I came to know the ultra-secret handshake.

You see, after Toby W. Smith killed himself, and was dead and buried, it was time for the Fatman to pass on the Superhero handshake.

But, you may remember, his instructions had been to pass it on to Toby's older brother, who had long since been laid to his rest, and. . . well, so *devastated* had the Fatman been by the whole ordeal--first his witnessing of the hunt, then, years later, the suicide of his best, and in fact only, friend--that the Fatman just never got around to teaching the handshake to anybody else.

Also, the Fatman's belief in heroes was pretty much shot. Mostly because the only real life hero that he had ever known, his father, had turned out to be the spawn of hell, near as the Fatman could figure. Certainly the Fatman had given up all hopes of ever being a Superhero himself.

At least, he did for several decades.

It was also not until decades later, after the Fatman had related this horrific episode from his childhood to me, that I finally cajoled him, with appropriate sensitivity, and with dark jokes fitting the morbid mood of his revelation, to show me, me the Homeless Dude, the Mysterious Ultra-Secret Superhero Handshake.

He did. And now I have it down cold.

So I have that going for me.

TOBY W. SMITH'S DEATH: AN AFTERWARD

And so the soul who was one day to become "The Fattest Crimefighter in the World" passed his youth as the angriest and saddest boy in the world--or at least, one of the veryiest.

Now, what you should know is that in spite of the unspeakable horrors that those two little boys witnessed that black Friday night, they never let the hunters know they were there, crouching in the back of that truck. Somehow they did not scream, did not cry out. No, they made not a sound, and said not a word the whole ride home. Then, when the men had gone inside, both boys leapt from the truck, under cover of darkness, and ran their separate ways.

They did not talk about what they had seen.

As to the first, most obvious question: did any of the hunters know that the boys were hiding in the back of the truck the whole time? Did the Fatman's father, who seemed to find out everything, suspect that his son had witnessed the horrors of the hunt?

The Fatman was never to know the answer to that.

But he was certainly to wonder. Oh, he would wonder. . .

But as I said, he was never to know for sure. Oh, in the days that followed, the boy was certain, just certain, that his father knew that his son had witnessed everything!

The next morning, the boy feigned illness when his father came into his room, oh so early, to take him fishing with the usual Saturday gang that met up at Kempf's Creek. When his father came home late that night to show his son the big basket of trout he'd caught, the boy pretended to be sound asleep, snoring loudly. But the boy was sure that his father knew he was faking, and then surely his father would wonder why his boy would do such an odd thing. What was the kid trying to hide, he would surely wonder?

The next day was Sunday--family day. The boy, who usually loved Sundays, was dreading it. He knew he could not go on feigning

that he had the bubonic plague, for that is what he'd told his parents he was suffering from. He had read about it in many books featuring adventures that took place in dark continents and humid jungles, and it had certainly sounded like a disease dire enough for the boy's desperate purposes.

But suddenly that sweet boy woke with a burning need to go to church. To hear a sermon. To talk to God. To pray as he had never prayed before, for answers, insights, mercy, epiphany.

Also, he always looked so forward to this day of rest. (He was an odd child, in this way.) In fact, he ached for Sundays: Sundays, so he could go to church and see the rainbow of colors from the sun shining through the stained glass as it played on Leslie McClain's white choir robe, and her golden blonde hair. The boy would listen rapt, as she sang like an angel. An angel!

So he dragged himself out of bed, and put on his Sunday suit, but as soon as he slipped into the kitchen, it started. . .that feeling that his father knew. . .he just *knew* that his father *knew*. . .

How did he know?

Because his father was cold, distant, casting him sidelong glances during all that long tense Sunday that it seemed would never end.

First at church, as they stood on opposite sides of mother.

Then at the pancake breakfast after services, where his father guffawed in a huddle with his hunter friends from two nights before.

Then, all the rest of the day, as they both skulked around the house. And all the way up to that night, when guests came by, and everybody sat on the porch and had shoofly pie with hand-cranked ice cream.

Yes, he was sure his father knew.

But then, the boy realized that nothing was different with his father. Not really. It was all just in the boy's imagination, his scaredy and overactive imagination. Because, the boy reminded himself, as he hid away in the treehouse all by himself, (naturally, after what they had witnessed two nights before, Toby W. Smith had not shown his face, he had not shown up for their regular Sunday after preachin' meetin'), the boy sat solitary and realized that his father had always been like that.

Cold. Distant. Casting his son sidelong glances. The boy's father didn't understand his son, never had, never tried. Sometimes the boy felt that his father flat out didn't like him.

It sure as heck was true that his father didn't like a lot of things about his son. Like the way that blasted boy always had his nose stuck in a book, instead of going out in the dagblamed sunshine and tossing the pigskin around with the other kids in the neighborhood. Like the way that weird kid would just sit there in the dark by himself and pick out tunes on his mother's piano, and the way the kid actually looked forward to his weekly piano lesson from the Widow Higgenbothom, instead of trying to worm out of it, so he could get out in the dagblamed sunshine and horse around like a normal kid. And why was he so darn pale, that kid?

His father sure hoped that his son didn't turn out to be one of those faggots.

No, the boy realized, as he sat in that treehouse, watching dusk fall, and his childhood fade before his eyes. . .no, his dad was no more distant, no colder, no more given to loathing looks than he had been in the past. It was the boy's feeling towards his father that had changed.

Why, two days ago, at this time, his father had been his hero. Distant, yes, judgmental, even, but still, the boy worshipped him.

But now, he hated him.

But what the Fatman hated more than his father, was how he felt about his father. He hated that he hated his father.

So he said nothing. His mother's milk of human kindness and his Sunday school teachin's and the essence of his own sweet soul all kept him from expressing any of the hatred he held in his heart. Kept him from speaking the truth about what he had witnessed. Kept him from breaking that commandment which ordered that he should, "Honor Thy Father and Mother."

It was a crime, how much that boy held it all in.

But something had to give. Something had to give. So along with all of the anger and betrayal and shame and injustice and horrible words he swallowed, that little boy also swallowed food. Every day now, from the moment he woke up until long after lights out, when he sat under his covers with a flashlight and his comic books and a hidden cache of food--he did not mourn, he munched.

Instead of releasing his rage, he buried himself in books.

Every time he looked at his father, he felt sick to his stomach. But that did not stop him from filling it almost to the bursting point with food.

Food, dear readers, dear listeners. It was food he allowed himself to gorge on, instead of his rage and pain.

Not grief, but groceries.
Not grousing, but grub. And lots of it.
Not tantrums, but take-out.
Not quarrels, but canapés.
Not back talk, but banquets.
Not fighting, but feasting.
Not confrontation, but epulution.
And with his father, not "high noon," but midnight snacks.

Was there ever a soul as tormented as this solitary child? He dreamed of bringing these wicked men to justice for what they had done to Toby W. Smith's brother and father.

But wishing true justice on the bloody murderers would have meant that the courts would, in turn, kill the boy's own father. Oh, the conflict! While the powers-that-be lackadaisically pursued answers as to what had happened that night under the full fat moon. . . well, suffice it to say that loyalties ran deep in that town, and if blood is thicker than water, well--oaths are thicker than blood. *Because there is blood, my friend, and there is blood.*

And there is blood.

What there is none of, is JUSTICE in the Fatman's small universe, which is now barely big enough to hold his ever ballooning expanse of self. In his daydreams and in his nightmares, the Fatman dreamed of a justice that would never be.

And so, unable to seek the satisfaction of justice, instead, he sought the satisfaction of food.

Not vengeance, but vittals.
Not Karma, but calories.
Not fury, but fodder.
Not just desserts. Just dessert.
Not Justice, but Jujubes--and Milk Duds, Mike 'n Ikes,
Chuckles, Zots, NonPariels, Red Hots, Twizzlers, Sugar Babies, and

assorted candy bars swiped by the handfuls from Tittle's Movie Palace, while Beau distracted his father on some false pretext.

Not "eye for an eye" but ice cream--by the gallon, by the tubful. Eating it in the treehouse, all by his lonely, during the long hot, summer afternoons, while also devouring Superman, Batman, Spiderman, Aquaman, Hawkman, Plastic Man, Green Lantern, Green Hornet, Green Arrow, The Human Torch, Captain America, Captain Marvel, The Fantastic Four, The Flash, The Spectre, The Shadow, and The Spirit

A couple-few years after the lynchings, the castrations (who knew how long; time was a blur of gorgings), then came the death by his own hand of Toby W. Smith. And the child's mammoth meals increased even more in size and frequency.

That poor little boy was well on his way to being a poor big boy. Then, there was the day he finally heard the jeers: "Fatboy!"
"Fatboy! Hey, Fatboy!"

He was well on his way to being the Fatman.

It was a goal he had to achieve with little assistance, because you can just bet that as his parents watched in horror as their child ballooned to over two hundred pounds, they certainly did not try to assuage the pain of their son's profound loneliness with treats, oh no they did not. They gave him no more food than a normal boy would eat, and tried everything from money bribes to cruel threats to get him to stop sneaking food. They would sit in their bedroom late at night, watching the Jackie Gleason Show and wondering where that boy pilfered the food from? He couldn't possibly be getting it all from the kitchen, for mother had stripped it down to Ghandiesque necessities only, in a desperate effort to keep her son from getting even fatter. But the kid just kept packing it on. Ten pounds a month, sometimes fifteen or more.

What they did not know is that when they thought the boy was hanging with his friends after school, cutting up, as boys are want to do: getting in trouble, but in a harmless way, you know, oh, vandalizing, shoplifting, sneaking and thieving, terrorizing kittens and old ladies and such (which is what kids should be doing, after all, else what is youth for?), what the Fatboy was *really* doing when his parents thought he was out making trouble, is he was actually *working industriously*, every day after school, mowing lawns and clipping

hedges, and tutoring other children and even babysitting, so that he could secretly stockpile the war chest of dimes, nickels, quarters and folding money, that bankrolled his growing appetite. . .his appetite for food to fill the emptiness that he felt every time he sat alone in that treehouse, because his best friend was gone forever. His appetite that worsened every time he looked at his father, every time he lied for his father, for how can you send you own father to the electric chair? And so it was. . .

Not hero worship, but hero sandwiches.
Not father's loving son, but mother's home cooking.
Not cold looks, but cold cuts.
Not smoldering rage, but smorgasbord.
Not betrayal, but barbecues.
Not divine retribution, but his mom's homemade divinity.
Not retaliation, but rumination.
Not lex talionis--but Let's Eat.

Even when those men from the government in the dark car with the dark suits and the dark glasses that the boy secretly thought were pretty cool showed up on the doorstep and wanted to talk to the boy about his dad, to chat privately if that was OK with the young man's parents--even then, the boy was oh so mindful of his father's glares, cast at him from the back porch. Painfully aware of it the entire time, he was, of those squinting, spying eyes.

Ultimately, there was no divulging what he knew his father had done. What he knew his father to be.

So the boy swallowed more guilt. . .and more food. And instead of being a rat, he was a pig. . .

Not squealing, not squawking--but gobbling.
No spilling the beans, but beans and franks.
Not tattle tail, but tator tots.
No Judas kiss, but chocolate kisses.
Not daring to speak, but Dairy Queen.
Not the hanging noose, but the pfeffernuse.
Not Oedipus, but oeufs brouilles.
No entre nous, but entremets.
Not second thoughts, but second helpings.
Not "all you remember about that night, son," . . .but "all you can eat buffets"

And so it happened that one day he woke up, and he was. .
.The Fatman.

HERE ENDS THE FIRST CHAPTER
OF THE ADVENTURES OF
THE FATTEST CRIMEFIGHTER IN THE WORLD

EDITOR'S NOTE

What you are about to read is the story of the Fatman and his sidekick, the Homeless Man. (Or, as he prefers to be known, The Homeless Dude.) Please understand, I realize how egregiously inappropriate the appellation "Fatman" is. But I use the phrase "Fatman" not only with the permission of, but at insistence of, the Fatman.

Do not ask me to plumb the depths and tell you why this should be so; I am not a psychoanalyst, merely an underpaid editor. I can tell you what he related to me, though: he loved being called "The Fatman," because, quote, "it conjures images of Sydney Greenstreet in his fez. . . Casablancon intrigue, and powerful men making big deals in dark coffee houses, biding time, playing chess, playing both ends against the middle, whilst treachery lurks in the marketplace, whilst villains hide in the shadows against the glare of the Moroccan midday sun, whilst Sam is playing piano in the background, whilst the Nazis are always closing in, closing in. . ."

An odd image to embrace, given that the Fatman's true hometown is Hollywood, where anyone but Nazis are in control, and the bigwigs who make big deals in dark coffee houses have just come from the Sports Club L.A. There are no Fatmen in Hollywood.

Except the one.

Ah, the Fatman!

He is the most exasperating man I have ever worked with; frankly, this is the most difficult project I have ever undertaken. Lesser souls would be driven to drink and prescription drugs and delusions of

quitting and pursuing self-employment, after six months of such an assignment. I just thank just God that I recognize my destiny as being that of a small cog in a great machine, and I carried out my task of editing these notes as best I could.

The story that follows is a rough and frustrating compilation. Do not expect your experience, in wading through these memoirs, to be either enjoyable or satisfying. Nonetheless, I predict that you will plod through them with the same sick compulsion that motivated me.

What follows is essentially an amalgam. I started with everything from hand scrawled pages, many of which were actually found in shopping carts, to computer disks found among the Fatman's personal effects, following his arrest and incarceration. Parts of the story were found in safety deposit boxes as far away as Mexico. I paid one gentleman from a prominent national tabloid a large amount of money for data which he had purloined. How is that for a switch?

Of course, there are segments of this big fat story which you have no doubt already heard about, because the Fatman's adventures are parts of even bigger adventures that have had their way with this city, Hollywood. Held it captive. Held it spellbound. You will now get to know the behind-the-scenes regarding certain bizarre crimes and murder sprees and high profile felonies, about which you currently know only a little bit.

Please forgive the gaps and omissions. Unfortunately, much of the most interesting data is in the hands of local, state, and federal authorities. Because the Fatman's adventures took place at a time when ownership of information on the internet was still a matter of debate, we have managed to put together many of the pieces.

The rest you must fill in as your imagination, and your sense of justice, dictates.

Having decided to retire and pursue a career that I have already put forth in rosy and promising terms via an Infomercial, (which surprised me with its astonishing success), I leave the Fatman's story in your hands, literally. And though I have never met you, in a weird way, I wish you well.

The story can do much for you. To you.

CHAPTER TWO: GOT CRIME?

FIRST THINGS FIRST: HOW THE STORY ENDED: It ended with the Fatman being world famous.

But in the beginning, it was not about the Fatman's fame. It was not about fame, at all. It was a quest for justice and perhaps love.

And I ask you, doesn't that give you much in common with the Fatman, already? For isn't that how it started with you? Didn't it start out as a simple search for justice and love?

Here is a story about the kind of whimsy the Fatman was given to when he was in one of his whimsical moods. Unfortunately, in all the years that I knew him, I only saw him in a whimsical mood once.

If you had been driving down Sunset Boulevard on that balmy February morning, after the storms of El Niño had blown off into the ocean during the night, clearing the way for the return of the smog, you would have seen it, too.

HA!

Oh, yes, you would have seen it, big and bold and brazen as a pair of 40 double DD's.

It was a billboard.

Had you seen it, you just might also have been lucky enough to be a part of the internationally headlined forty-three car pile-up that put the grills of eight Mercedes, four BMW's, three Lexi, 17 SUV's, two Porsches, two limos, a mint condition '57 Chevy, and one Ferrari

(in addition to as many uninsured cars of lesser vintage driven by persons who were not even on U.S. soil legally, much less properly insured OR authorized by the State of California to even drive) in serious need of major orthodonture work.

Yes, it was a billboard. And where, just the previous night before, there had been a giant picture of the voluptuous Angeline, lounging in her lingerie and lusting down at you in your car as you stared up and waited for the light to change--now there was a "GOT MILK?" ad.

Yes. . .Dear, sweet, funny, freakish, aging Angeline, who, like Judy Holliday in "It Should Happen To You," had divined a magnificent plan whereby she would pay big bucks to get her picture plastered on billboards all over Hollywood, and then become famous because of it, instead of the other way around, like all legitimate talent has done since the beginning of time.

Angeline, for those of you not lucky enough to reside in Hollywood, is a real live Barbie Doll who can be spotted driving around Hollywood in her Barbie Doll pink Corvette. (Pink is her signature color, by the way.) When she featured that color prominently in her gallery opening, during those fifteen minutes that she fancied herself a painter--The Finger reviewed the show and described it as just so much puking of Pepto Bismal onto an unsuspecting virgin canvas.

Angeline, a fixture around Hollywood and Vine, sixty if she's a day, but still sporting neon pink Spandex. Angeline, who, like the picture of Dorian Gray, is definitely beginning to show the unmistakable signs of the ravages of time, manifesting tragically, (if Angeline growing up can be called tragic) what it means to be an aging Barbie Doll, taking it on the chin, so that the plastic Mattel version will never have to.

But for those who were accustomed to staring up at Angeline on that billboard every morning, they were. . .well, they were not exactly disappointed. Surprised, yes, shocked, even, but almost everybody agreed that the "GOT MILK" ad was a change for the better.

You see, this was not any ordinary "GOT MILK?" ad. One had the distinct feeling that this one was not sanctioned by the American Dairy Council.

The billboard featured a mother holding a baby, who was smiling hugely, his eyes wide as he stared at a substantial bosom oozing out of the voluptuous mother's crisp, starched, partially unbuttoned

white blouse. Below the gurgling baby and his waiting meal were the words:

GOT MILK?

Now admittedly, most of the people in the forty-three car pile-up weren't too amused at what happened as a result of the overnight guerrilla posting of the new billboard art, although they had found it to be a real hoot just seconds before their accident. But everybody else thought it was hysterical. Pedestrians thought it was hysterical and other drivers who managed to avoid the mass accident thought it was a riot and tourists lining up early for a premiere at Mann's theater later that night thought it was wild, man. Between all the police and EMT's and helicopters and news vans, and of course, the rubbernecking Lookie-Lous, it turned into a regular Woodstock.

Even the police, although they tried valiantly to hide their disappointment, were visibly dispirited when the "GOT MILK?" ad was peeled off, revealing a much dilapidated Angeline.

Some incredibly enterprising young entrepreneurs, who at the time of the accident had been selling maps to the stars' homes, really hustled after they heard the fenders crunching and saw the billboard, and they had "GOT MILK?" breast feeding T-shirts printed up, and managed to sell hundreds by the end of the day, when the last of the cars were being towed off to repair lots, the last tourists had taken the last pictures on their last rolls of film, and the last of the news vans were driving off into the Sunset (Blvd.).

T-shirts hadn't sold like this since the O.J. trial.

NOTE: ANGELINE COULD NOT BE REACHED FOR COMMENT.

EXCERPTS FROM THE TRIAL

The trial that eventually came about as a result of the "GOT MILK" billboard was, needless to say, a three ring circus, with Angeline, the victims of the pile-up, and the state all suing, and making a huge hew and cry. But the defendant spoke eloquently, enough to turn it around for him.

When asked by a dapper attorney for the plaintiff why he did it, the defendant stared straight into the eyes of the jury, and said, unflinching:

"Sure, I knew what I was doing when I did it. Now Miss Angeline's lawyer here claims I defiled her image. But the way I see it, I didn't defile her image. In fact, I'll go so far as to say the opposite is true. I was sort of fightin' for her honor. You see, I had a sister who came out here a few years ago--that's actually why I came out here, to Hollywood, to look for her. Turned out that her job sort of involved taking her clothes off for a living, too. I remember what it did to me, to see my little sister taking her clothes off till she was wearin' not much more than Angeline is on that billboard, while all these old drunk men leered at my baby sis. I remember what it did to my ma and pa, seein' their daughter like that. . .I dunno, it just don't seem right, to me, a nice lady like that Angeline, plastered up there on that billboard, practically negged, and well, I think I was kind of doing a service, covering her up. Not that I think she can appreciate it right now. But she'll understand, one day. Kind of like when I took my sister's hand and led her off that stage at that Seven Veils place and put my jacket around her and took her right out of there, right back to Boise. Anyway, I don't think I defiled Miss Angeline's image. I think I honored it."

The defendant had the jury eating out of his hand, and the jury was really quite put off when the snotty lawyer for the plaintiff said, "Well, if you're so interested in propriety, why did you choose to cover up Ms. Angeline's image with an equally lewd and suggestive parody of a very wholesome dairy advertisement? Weren't you at all concerned with the welfare of the drivers who would see the ad? You weren't afraid that their shock might lead to driving accidents?"

The defendant leaned forward in his chair and he said, "Well, mister, I'll tell you what I think. I think that for many many years now--and by the way, don't you think that Angeline is gettin' a little long in the tooth? --anyway, for years now, folks have been drivin' by a nearly naked jumbo-size picture of a very well-endowed blonde woman, and not gettin' into any accidents, right? BUT an innocent picture of a happy little baby gettin' ready to do the most natural thin' in the world--and suddenly *that's* causin' car crashes the magnitude of a disaster movie? Well, I'll tell you what I think, sir. I think the people of this town gotsta re-examine their priorities. Their personal shock meters, if you will. . ."

The jury was loving this guy.
All of Hollywood loved this guy, in fact.

It was all bunk, of course. He had no sister, and he didn't particularly want Angeline covered up. He rather enjoyed leering up at her in the mornings as much as anybody. But he chose her particular billboard to cover up, because he knew that would cause a lot more stir than covering up a billboard for, oh, say, Krispy Kremes or the Getty Center.

Why had he done it at all? Risked the jail time and the lawsuits and the infamy? Simple. *Because* of the infamy. He *wanted* the infamy. He wanted the fame.

Because after that incident, the chubby bucks came rolling in. Chubby bucks he received for interviews and appearances on talk shows and magazine articles and oh, there was even talk about a movie of the week. All of it was fuel for the fire in his belly. Because he had a dream too, and it would cost money.

There is a last bit of information I should mention, because it provides a valuable insight into the Fatman's psyche, to wit: his fantastic crime fighting abilities, as well as his sense of humor.

In case there is any confusion:

The person they had caught and pinned the billboard misdemeanor on was NOT the Fatman, although of course the "GOT MILK" billboard was the Fatman's brainstorm. But the person who actually made the billboard happen was an ambitious young entrepreneurial type looking for seed money to start an internet web site business. He found that funding in the Fatman, in return for the billboard job. His cohorts (it had taken several men to do the job) had never been found, and he had never ratted on them because they weren't even in this country legally. He had found them crawling around the parking lot of the Home Depot looking for day labor. When they were offered fifty bucks each, what the heck. Night labor, that seemed OK too. Por qué dinero es dinero, eh amigo?

Our enterprising young ring leader took his licks, paid his fine, and in case you are wondering, presently lives a grand life in Rio de Janero, where he runs a thriving internet site that sells--guess

what--FAME. Guaranteed fifteen minutes of fame. For an amount usually in the mid four figures, he and his band of Merry men (who are not associated with the Fatman now, but who all hold The Fattest Crimefighter in the World's exploits in very high esteem) will guarantee you no less than fifteen minutes of international fame.

Although in a follow-up poll that he does not disclose on his web site, most customers admit that they wish they'd never gone through with it. The search for Fame At All Costs. . .

Such is life.

But now, before returning to the Adventures of the Fattest Crimefighter in the World, a little about me. My story.

CHAPTER THREE: ROCK BOTTOM

It was the worst point in my life, up to that moment. The night it came time for me to get. . . A SHOPPING CART.

I could not believe it. I absolutely could not believe it, but there I was, out on the streets, with all my worldly goods. Not very many at all it seemed, but more than I could carry in the Little Mermaid backpack that Steve's daughter had given me. I had gotten a ride from some compassionate teenager kids in a big car on their way to Big Bear.

They let me out south of Pico, and then laughingly announced that they were on their way to an even worse part of town to buy drugs and, if they got high enough, to get tattooed, before heading on to Big Bear. They drove off, waving.

I swallowed hard and looked around. I could see the skyline of Century City, the tall silver gleaming buildings jutting into one of the most glorious sunsets I had ever seen.

Or perhaps it was not that it was such a glorious sunset, but rather that most sunsets are more or less glorious, but also more or less ignored by the likes of types like me, who sit in those tall silver buildings and make big deals and get big ulcers when we fail big, and get big hard-ons when we succeed big, and experience big fat ennui during those times in between.

Very, very unlikely for big guys such as I had been, was the notion that stopping to witness a sunset, regardless of how glorious golden and copper and apricot and peach and rose it was, could possibly provide me with even a minute bit of amusement.

And as I was thinking all of that, a dog peed on my leg.

The feeling of the warm piss soaking through my pant leg startled me out of my reverie, and as the dog was trotting away with what I swear was a look of smug amusement, I did not even dare to yell at him, much less take a swat at him, because he looked mean. Great, just great, that was all I needed right about now, to have a wild dog

attack me. Besides, it seemed like the perfect symbolic gesture from the gods.

Now, why I had even been in a reverie about the sunset, who could say, but it was something I always did. . .drifted off into a fantasy land when the real world was bearing down all around me. And you know what? I had always thought that was the essence of my success, my ability to fall into fantasy, and I figured it explained why I had once been this big successful director slash scriptwriter slash producer. But in truth, it only served to explain why right now, I found myself on the street. Homeless.

My God, here I was. Sitting on a street corner in a not very good part of town, with bags and sacks and suitcases, and with night setting in, and more chill in the air than you would ever expect of a Hollywood night.

I had been doing anything and everything to push this next chore out of my mind. Had I been making out one of my TO DO lists, (which I had done every day of my life since I was sixteen, even during the days of my craziest cocaine highs, and I had only abandoned the habit in the last couple of weeks, as the horrible reality of my situation closed in on me), I would have put this chore at the top of the list, for it was urgent indeed. But I never did write it down, because putting it in writing would have made it real, and I couldn't face that.

I had to get a shopping cart.

Aw fuck it. I'm leaving stuff out, because I'm afraid it will make me look like some kind of lunatic vagrant, the kind you give a wide berth on the streets. I have to back up a bit, and tell you what I *really* did next.

Yes I took in the sunset, and yes the dog peed on my leg, but then what I did was I got so mad at my life, and the whole goddamn world that I took this autographed Petey Wheeler baseball bat--which I had kept not only out of sentimental value but also because I thought I could hock it for some bucks--and I took it and I whacked the hell out of the first non-human thing I saw. No, not the dog. It happened to be someone's mailbox, and as soon as I realized what I had done--not like me, I've never been a violent person, but I was soon to learn just how much desperation can change a man--anyway, as soon as I realized what I'd done, I started running. I was terrified.

I wasn't sure which thought terrified me more: the possibility of having the owner of the mailbox come racing out of the house and

beating the crap out of me. (It seemed like the kind of neighborhood where people kinda took the law into their own hands.) Or the thought that I would get arrested, and once they found out who I was, there would be front page headlines all over the L.A. Times, Variety, and the Hollywood Reporter:

**Academy Award Winning
Writer-slash-Director-slash-Producer
Arrested for Vagrancy, Homelessness,
And Whacking the Shit out a Mailbox
Shaped like a Pioneer Wagon.**

All I remember is running and running until I was about a block away, then peeking out from behind a row of stinky dumpsters. But nobody came out of the house. In fact, nobody seemed to have noticed that anything was amiss. Perhaps this was the kind of neighborhood where loud noises and disturbances of the peace were routine enough not to rouse people out of their La-Z-Boys in front of the TV.

Shit. It started to rain.

But my mind was on my stuff. It wasn't much, but it was all I had, and it was precious to me--everything from immediate necessities to those few items that I still believed were going to make me a player again. An Armani suit, some decent shirts and ties, some copies of scripts, that kind of thing.

But in running away from my own violent outburst of temper, I had let my precious stuff out of my sight for a moment. It was now down the block, sitting in the rain. I could only thank God that nobody had come out of the house to pick through it. But I was sure that someone would happen by my goods any minute, and get curious, and open up my bags and suitcases. (This also struck me as a neighborhood where people stood to better their lot in life and improve the decor in their home by going through garbage left on the street.)

Then, I heard my own thoughts, actually listened to them, and I asked myself why was I being so condescending, when I myself had fallen so far? When I had managed to become--well, I must say it--homeless.

There I was, squatting behind these dumpsters in the rain, squinting at my worldly goods down the street, still stacked there at that

corner, while I cowered and shivered. Even if I did mosey back down the block to where my autographed bat was laying next to the decimated mailbox and my stuff? What was my plan, after that? What would I do then? Just sleep by it all night?

It had happened. It had come to this. I had to get a shopping cart. I had tried to be in denial as long as possible, and now I had to attend to this little matter of business.

What was so embarrassing is that because this was a part of town that I had never been in before, a part where poor people lived, the fact is I didn't even know where a grocery store was, so I could go there and steal a cart.

Nobody was around. It was late and unseasonably chilly and misty, and who was I supposed to ask where was there a grocery store? I couldn't exactly walk up to somebody's front door, walk up to the front door of one of these houses with the golden glow coming from the living room or bedroom window--a glow that was starting to look pretty damned inviting, even if this was a poor neighborhood--and ask the person who answered the door where there was a grocery store so that I could steal a shopping cart for my few worldly possessions?

I did the only thing I could think of, I stood at an intersection where there were at least a few cars passing by occasionally, and that is where I learned a sad truth: nobody wanted to talk to the likes of me. Before I could even get the question, "Do you know where there is a grocery store?" out of my mouth, they would zoom off.

At the same time that the cold and fatigue were working on me, the reality of my life was finally sinking in. I had been an Academy Award winning director, and at that same time I was a cocaine addict, and now--I was a homeless man.

All I remember from the beginning part of that first horrible night was walking. I kept looking for lights. Not the warm glow emanating from living rooms, but the neon lights that cut through the mist with color, signaling the business district of a town. I have never been so happy to see a parking lot in my life. Re-energized, and anxious to get the shopping cart back to my stuff before somebody stole it or picked through it, I jogged across the lot to the drug store,

slap-dashing a plan together in my mind. I had a few bucks which I was planning on rationing out until some of my schemes to get back on my feet panned out, but I would have to go into this store and buy something--in fact, it would have to be something big enough to justify wheeling a basket out to the parking lot. I had already looked around, and there were no shopping carts in the lot.

Man oh man. I couldn't believe the kinds of things that I was suddenly having to figure out. I needed to buy at least enough bulky stuff to justify wheeling a shopping cart out to the parking lot, but without spending too much money. Toilet paper, I figured, or paper towels, they were certainly bulky. I would have to buy a ridiculous number of rolls to justify a whole shopping cart, but what choice did I have? It would probably cost me most of my precious money to fill up a shopping cart, that I would then wheel out to my supposed car, that I hoped they'd assume I owned, even though I was starting to look pretty homeless, truth be told. Wet and rumpled and bedraggled.

Oh well. Had to give it a shot.

So I tried to look casual, so as not to look desperate, because a desperate looking person in a pharmacy in the middle of the night is not a comfortable picture. Yet not so casual as to look vagrant, because homeless people often looked to me rather casual, as though they were not in a hurry to get anywhere and not answering to any daytimer. (Or so I had thought as I cruised by them in my sports car, back in my better days.) So I was trying to look directed, as though I had a shopping list to fill, without looking desperate.

Casual and directed, not vagrant and desperate. Yes, that was the ticket.

I made a B-line for the paper products and started loading up on toilet paper. You could actually buy them in these jumbo packs of thirty-two rolls. Who knew? Certainly not me, I was not used to shopping for myself.

It took about six of these jumbo thirty-two packs to fill up the cart, enough to justify needing to wheel the shopping cart out to the lot. I mean, after all, bulky as they were, they were also quite light, and if I didn't get enough packs of TP, surely the clerk would have simply put the rolls in some of those jumbo bags and expect me, who looked hirsute enough, to simply carry them out with my muscles. (I used to work out for fifty minutes every morning at the L.A. Sports Club) No,

I had to get enough rolls so that the sheer bulk of them, if not the weight of them, would justify the cart.

Then, when the cart was full up, I realized that all these thirty-two pack rolls of toilet paper, and nothing else, might seem to the clerk a bit excessive. And weird. After all, what kind of person buys over a hundred rolls of toilet paper and nothing else? Perhaps they might think I ran some kind of children's camp or old people's home? But then wouldn't such a person, who ran some kind of children's camp or old people's home, have a truck that delivered such paper items?

It was all too much for me, that I was even thinking these things, cogitating about toilet paper, trying to figure these matters out, and realizing that my life had come to this sorry pass.

But there was nothing to be done about it. I ended up going the general way of paper products, because they were the cheapest way of filling up the cart, while not sticking only with toilet paper. I branched out into paper towels and even some disposable diapers, which, even though pricier (and, something I had no use for whatsoever in my life on the street) were nonetheless bulky and would justify my needing a cart. All in all, I thought I had selected an assortment that would make me appear legitimate. Like the kind of person you would trust, letting him wheel a shopping cart out to the parking lot.

The cashier, who was tired and cranky and kept herself awake by chomping at her gum, seemed to think nothing of my purchases. She simply rang them up and I paid the cash and I breathed a sigh of relief as I wheeled the cart into the crisp cool night air. The mist was thickening, and all I could think of was getting back to my stuff. I was hoping like hell that somebody hadn't stolen it or picked through it.

I quickened my pace, wheeling my cart over the bumpy lot, when I was actually paralyzed by a voice:

"HEY YOU! STOP!"

The thought of not stopping never occurred to me.

Not only would it have been impossible to flee effectively pushing a shopping cart full of Pampers, but it was not in my psyche to flee. I had never done anything wrong--not wrong like that, I mean. I'd never stolen from strangers or stores, you know, the kinds of people who would pursue or make a big deal of it, I'd only ever ripped off friends and from my job, so I wasn't conditioned for fleeing. Except of

course the cocaine, yeah, I had often carried felony amounts and I'd dealt a little. But that was at a time when I was too stoned and too famous to imagine that I could get caught.

But now I was caught. And for what? Stealing a lousy shopping cart! Before I even turned around, I knew what I would see. The security guard who had called after me was a fat ol' Bubba. (In fact it whipped through my mind that he was exactly the kind of guy we would search for if we needed an extra to play a cop in a movie. He was right out of Central Casting.) He ambled over to me--"moseyed," I think, was the term these guys used. He had his arms crossed and I noticed with some nervousness that he had a gun. I had always thought that these guys didn't have guns. It took me a moment to realize, so petrified was I, that there was actually a look of compassion on his face.

"Look, pal, I don't know what your story is, and I am very sorry to tell you, but you can't rip off that cart. They're expensive, those carts, and you can't just go wheeling it off because you need a place to put your crap. You're gonna have to manage some other way. Now I gotta ask you to take your toilet paper and your Pampers and carry it home, 'cause that shopping cart is staying with me."

I stared at him. An hour ago, I didn't think that my life could get any worse. Finding myself homeless on a street corner with all my worldly goods, having to go off in search of a shopping cart.

But my life had gotten worse. Somebody had taken my shopping cart. First someone had stolen my movie treatment, then someone had stolen my dignity, and now this guy was wheeling away my precious cart.

What am I saying, it wasn't even my cart.

It was so weird. Even later, when my life would get much weirder, I would still remember the time that I walked into the black wet night, carrying dozens of rolls of toilet paper, and a whole lot of useless Pampers.

The last time I'd carried a bag of Pampers was when the maid was asleep and my wife had sent me on a midnight run for my daughter.

My only daughter, long since grown out of Pampers, where the hell was she now? I did not know. But I'm afraid I must tell you. .

.it was *her* I was thinking about, as I trudged through the dark night, thick with mist, looking for neon.

NEON.

Which meant another shopping center.

Which meant another chance at a shopping cart.

Which meant I would have a safe little haven for my possessions.

Which meant I would be a Homeless man pushing his stuff around Hollywood on four wheels and a dream.

Which was much the way that I had entered into this town.

Only then I was younger. Back then, the four wheels were a car, not a cart. And my dreams had not yet been infused with nightmares.

I stashed my bags of toilet paper and my Pampers in some bushes, nearly dancing a jig after I spied another grocery store a few blocks away. What a contradiction my looks must have been by now. Very expensive designer casual clothes, but rumpled and mist soaked. I didn't really care about the bags of paper products, I was much more focused on getting the damn cart, so I could hightail it back to my stuff before someone else got to it.

I tried to make myself look relatively together and sane, but I have to confess to you, I was feeling neither. As I approached the store, I was elated to notice that there was no security guard posted outside the store this time; I had a few more bucks in my pocket and all I had to do was repeat the same ruse. Then if I could just get out the door of the store, I would be home free!

By then, of course, I would have twice as many jumbo packs of unnecessary toilet paper and also the Pampers, and would have spent some much needed cash in acquiring them, but I could not think of that foolishness now. All I could think about was putting one foot ahead of the other. I had to take this "getting back on my feet" bit *one step at a time*.

(Maybe I could sell the Pampers and TP to some poor woman at a discount. In this way, she would fairly benefit, and I would at least get some cash back. I couldn't tell if this kind of weird wheeling and dealing meant that, God help me, I was starting to think like a desperate homeless person, or perhaps it just meant that I was still thinking like a producer--getting funds from wherever, nip and tuck the budget wherever possible. I decided the latter. I was still thinking like a producer. I was still a Player.)

Anyway, as I entered the second drugstore, I tried to assume the role of a harried father, ordered by his frantic wife to the all-night drug store for some disposable diapers, toilet paper, baby wipes, whatever. I strode confidently into the too-brightly lit store. And then, I stopped in my tracks. Just as I was about to lunge for some new real estate--my precious shopping cart in which I would carry my few worldly goods--I saw that attached to each cart was a long horizontal pole, about six feet high, whose purpose was to prevent exactly what I had in mind. . . wheeling the cart out blithely of the store.

This store's plan was clearly that you use the cart to load up on as much crap as you needed, but once you had paid and gotten to the front door, you were on your own, pal.

I turned around and walked out. As soon as I was outside again, the reality of my situation closed in all around me, like a great, dark, bat. I walked a few feet, and then just collapsed by the dumpster.

I cried. I can't believe I'm telling you this. For the longest time, who knows, it might have been ten minutes, it might have been an hour. I didn't have a watch; I'd hocked my Rolex for blow in Vegas a few weeks ago, but anyway, you know, I got my pride, so after a while I got a hold of myself and I began the long walk back to my stuff--to do what about it, I did not know. To guard it, I guess.

Well, sometimes, just when you think you've hit rock bottom and you can't go on, Fate swoops down and solves the problem for you.

As it turns out, I didn't have to sit up all night in the rain, guarding *my stuff*. Nor did I have to wonder what the hell I was gonna do with all *my stuff*, because when I got back to that corner where I'd left *my stuff*, *my stuff* was gone.

Here's the deal: my stuff wasn't even picked through or anything for the most valuable items. Someone had obviously just hoisted all my bags and suitcases and my backpack and stuff into their car, or maybe they just put it into *their* shopping cart, (if they were lucky enough to have one, Whoopie!), and then they just got the hell out of there, so they could pick through my stuff later, in private. I guess.

It was a mind-bending experience. Over the course of the last few months, and then accelerating over the last few weeks, and then

days, and then hours, I kept thinking my life couldn't get any worse--and then it did! It kept getting worse, it just kept getting worse! I felt like I was free falling downwards, through levels of hell that I hadn't even known existed.

HOMELESS. PENNILESS. WITHOUT A CART. AND WITHOUT MY STUFF. IN THE POURING RAIN. HUNGRY AND COLD AND TOTALLY WITHOUT HOPE.

I couldn't imagine what I had done, that this would happen to me, except for being cocaine addicted for a few years, and also being pretty much an asshole ever since I had become a producer, which some people would tell you was a redundancy. And bedding a few under-aged wannabee starlets while feeding them the most outrageous lies and promises, and maybe funneling every film's petty cash budget into my own Swiss account, the reserves of which had long since gone up my nose.

But hey, hey, by Hollywood standards, nothing that unusual. Nothing that bad. Nothing that half of the other producers in town weren't also doing. Surely I hadn't done anything to deserve this.

But now, what had been a thickening mist up till midnight had turned into an El Niño temper tantrum of the first water. The rain was coming down so hard and in drops so big that they hurt when they hit you, and the wind was whipping so wildly that the rain pelted into me horizontally, rather than falling from the sky.

Shelter. I needed shelter. I looked around the streets, saw a place that might do, and I crumpled into a ball under the awning of a pawnshop.

I couldn't remember the last time I had been this exhausted. The reality of realizing that I was actually going to be out on the streets, plus that big ugly scene at the Bordonaro's just twenty-four short hours ago, had robbed me of sleep the night before. And now, all of that, compounded with the fatigue of despair. . .well, it was all just catching up with me, man. . . .

If I hadn't pissed Joey Bordonaro off, I could be bunking down in his guest room tonight, but I have a right to be just as mad at him as he is at me. I told that prick over and over again I would pay him back as soon as I could, and I meant it. That really pisses me off. When your friends don't have faith in you. Really pisses me off.

As for that bitch of a girlfriend Joel Tannenbaum lives with--she had her nerve, kicking me and my stuff out, right into the street! Three blocks from CAA no less, with everybody we know driving by on their way to work. What an inconsiderate bitch. I don't know how Joel stands her. Sure, she gives head, but badly, OK, there, I've said it, what an amateur, and her already showing her age--she's twenty-six if she's a day.

OK, yeah, I did hock their TV, when I was jonesing bad, but the TV was in the guest room *I* was staying in. Christ, they have three other TVs, and how many times had Joel said to me, "What's mine in yours, bro," in that hysterical New York Jew accent that shouldn't even attempt trendy eubonic slang like "bro." Joel's girlfriend is such a JAP bitch.

I was shivering bad. I didn't know if it was the cold, or not having had any blow in a few hours, but nobody deserved to be this miserable. I made a mental note that when I was back on top and a Player again, driving around in a bigass limo, I would be a hell of a lot nicer to homeless people. Yeah, I'd show 'em. . . I'd show 'em all.

I was noticing that a lot of creepy punks in old cars were giving me some very menacing looks as they whizzed by. I think I heard some threatening things said in Spanish. Squatting under the awning of this pawnshop suddenly didn't seem like such a great idea after all. One heard such horrible stories about what some folks did, who didn't have so much compassion for the homeless--especially after they'd had a snootful of hard liquor and a bellyful of smelly vagrants sleeping on bus stop benches.

And so. . . I did it.

I hit another "new low."

In that moment--I believe it was around midnight--I wandered into an alley, and spotted a big appliance box off in a dark corner. I also saw a filthy pillow sticking out of a trash can, and although it was the nastiest pillow I had ever seen, with God knows what kinds of stains on it, it actually did not seem any more disgusting than the thought of putting my head on the ground. Ferreting through the dumpster a bit deeper, I found a newspaper that had not even been read; it was still in its plastic bag. I arranged the clean newspaper over the pillow, pulled my coat over myself for a blanket, and I went "to bed."

God help me. Before drifting off to sleep, I prayed for the first time since. . . I was trying to remember the last time I prayed. I know it

wasn't when my wife took my kid and disappeared; my spiritual response then was not to pray to God, but to curse him. I wondered if this was God's payback.

No, the bleak truth was that I could not remember the last time I prayed. But, I gave it my best shot. I gave it my best shot.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE RED BEARDED VIKING WRITER TATTLES, AND LITTLE BOY BLUE

I suppose, given the "descent-into-hell" motif that is the theme of this account (and remember, I am not making any of this up), what you would expect next is that I woke up because some brute was kicking me, or trying to rob me or rape me, or because some punks were pouring kerosene on me in an effort to clean their neighborhood of bums, like in "The Fisherking."

But what happened was ever so much simpler. So much more poignant.

I was awakened by a voice--the soft, innocuous voice of an ancient, obese black woman, who I don't think was actually homeless, but she was definitely a few sardines shy of a tin. She was wearing the most outrageous battered straw hat, with big lavender flowers on it to match her purple dress, and she wore Barbie ankle socks and had shredded black lace gloves and a straw purse with a jeweled owl on it. She was a sight.

She was babbling. Oh, was she babbling.

"So then my daughter calls and she says she's not gonna be able to make it home for Christmas dinner and I says 'But I got this turkey, and a ham too,' and my daughter she says she'll send me a check to cover the groceries, but her boyfriend wanted to go to Miami beach for the holidays but she said they'd check back with me, you know, drop in when they got back from some business, some kind of big business deal, that he had down by Boca Raton, with some nice Cuban boys. . .and I've been lookin' in the mailbox for the check but she hasn't mailed it, yet, I'm sure she'll send it but I am getting a little concerned because my dog Lola, she's a little Pekinese mutt mix Samoyed or whatever, I think she's so cute, but she's got this big old growth on her rump. I mean at first it was like a little cyst, just like a goiter or something, but it keeps getting bigger, and now I'd say it's about the size of a lime or a kiwi? You know how big a kiwi is? And she doesn't seem to be in too much pain about it--Lola, the dog, I mean, not my daughter--although she does walk a little funny because of the big kiwi

growth I was telling you about. . .there is a little hitch in her getalong, know what I'm sayin'. . .anyway, I am starting to get a little concerned. . ."

All this time, I was coming to consciousness, slowly sitting up and rubbing my eyes. Contrary to what you might think, I did not awaken startled, wondering where I was, for I knew immediately where I was. I had been having nightmares about it all night. But I didn't want to move too quickly or startle the poor old woman. I was trying to orient myself and get my bearings and generally figure out what the hell I was going to do now.

I mean, even if I did manage to extricate myself from this situation and leave my box, it's not like I had a pressing meeting to attend or a daytimer full of business that needed review.

I listened to her a while longer. The whole story about the dog Lola was really rather touching. Then I had a very stupid whim, although I suppose in hindsight that it was one of the nicest impulses I'd had in a long time. I pulled out a wad of bills to give this poor old lady, to help her dog to get an operation. I pressed the money in her hand, and then, just as her big brown eyes were lighting up, I realized that this wad of singles was all I had left in the world. So I rudely grabbed it back from her, pocketed it, and then, embarrassed about having gotten her hopes up, I scrambled to my feet and bolted from the alley.

I walked and walked, deep in thought and lost in the terror of what my situation had come to. It had to be obvious to anyone who looked at me. Between my filthy, wrinkled clothes and the frantic expression on my face and yes, when I checked myself, smelled my pits, you know, jeezus I reeked, and then there was the fact that I had actually started talking to myself--well, there was no question that I looked homeless. In fact, I probably looked like I had been homeless for a long time, rather than merely--well, officially, less than twenty-four hours.

I had a terrible headache, which was the last thing I needed right about now, and I tried to use some biofeedback techniques I'd learned at some Deepak Chopra seminar a long time ago, when I still had the chubby bucks you have to pony up, in this town at least, for having the secrets of the universe revealed to you, but after doing the mental exercises that I had learned at that seminar, the headache just got worse.

That's when I realized, I hadn't had any coffee yet this morning. Usually by this time, 8:30 a.m., I had consumed at least a couple of Starbucks double or triple lattes. But I hadn't had a drop yet this morning.

I spent a buck for some nasty old Seven-Eleven coffee--man, you could sure tell the difference between this stuff and Starbucks. I could ill afford it, spending a whole dollar on coffee. Still, at this point I was ready to do anything to get rid of this headache.

As if to continue my Dante-esque journey into hell, then the next horrible thing happened. Had my brain been clicking away in its old directorial mode, before the drug haze enshrouded it, I might have anticipated this next thing. I would have seen this coming. I didn't.

But he sure saw me coming.

Someone I knew. SOMEONE I KNEW. FROM THE BIZ, NO LESS. In this horrible condition, I spotted someone I knew. I was standing there at the intersection, drinking the last of my coffee and wondering what the hell I should do next and thinking that a Bloody Mary would hit the spot right about now. . .and then I started thinking back to the dark days of my addictions, and wondering whether it was worth it to just say Fuck It and get myself a flask of vodka and get stinking drunk for the day, what difference would one day make, more or less. . .in a lifetime? Yeah. . .

That's when it happened. I was at the intersection of 4th and Pico in Santa Monica, a few blocks away from the glorious Pacific Ocean and a perfect white beach, which is where I was thinking of passing out for a few lovely, oblivious hours, while I got my courage back and made some big plans to get back on my feet--and that's when a beautiful car drove up, a yellow Vette, and this guy in the passenger seat with a big red bushy beard like a Viking leans out and squints at me.

I knew exactly who it was in a heartbeat. It was one of the hottest screenwriters in Hollywood, who I knew from my salad days when I was riding the crest of a three picture deal--and me barely out of film school. And man, he and I were both arrogant pricks back then.

Anyway, this writer and I had gotten into a pissing contest about some rewrites, and I had won. I had pissed so much longer and stronger than he had, the only catch was that I was too young and naive and stupid to realize that pissing contests are like nuclear war, in that: the only lugs who engage in pissing contests are morons whose only

true claim to any evidence of brain matter is that they never forget, and the guy whose shoes you piss on today will come back to shit on you tomorrow.

Oh, this bushy bearded writer, to whom I had been so unnecessarily and unforgivably brutal--so addicted was I to power in addition to my other chemical dependencies--and here he was sitting in a car a few feet away. He had recognized me, alright. This eyewitness sighting, combined with the rumors that were flying around town, about my fall from grace. . .well, I figured that it was only a matter of hours before Mr. Bushy Beard e-mailed everyone in the business and told people he had seen me.

Even years after the fact, it is hard for me to actually write this down--he had seen me *panhandling*. I knew he would gossip via e-mail, because that was a known idiosyncrasy of his; he was like an old woman about gossip, worse than Aunt Bea. I remember he would joke that he used e-mailing his friends as one of his many forms of procrastination when he had a writing deadline. I shivered to think: this time the gossip would be about *me*.

How ironic, I thought, when the entire reason that I had bitten the bullet and made the decision to be rootless, homeless, go underground if you will, was so that it wouldn't get around that I had become a total loser and was mooching off friends, sleeping on their sofas. No, in this town, better to disappear, then resurface with some great story like I was shooting a documentary in Tanzania, or location scouting in the south of France, whatever.

Then, I had a glimmer of hope! Maybe Bushy Beard would reflect on what he'd seen, and doubt his own eyes. He wouldn't believe it was really me. Like, he'd think "*surely not even that asshole so-and so can have fallen that far, how could that even happen?*"

I wondered who was in the driver's seat of that car? A lot of what would happen from this incident depended on who was in the car with Bushy Beard. (No, of course I'm not going to tell you his name--although I can only think of one hot-hot-hot writer in Hollywood who resembles a Viking and sports a big, red, bushy beard. But enough about that.)

Ironically, I believe that in the long run, him recognizing me was the best thing that could have happened to me. For while my worst fears came true. . .(oh yes, I found out later, he had jumped on line, probably while he was still sitting in the car, he'd e-mailed everyone in

the entire motion picture industry about what he had seen, *who* he had seen), but let me just say this--that incident, getting spotted like that, it certainly did impel me to fix my situation.

But not right away. First, I did as I was afraid I would do. Under the circumstances, and with so very much that needed forgetting, I did slip back into the bottle for a while, I am ashamed to say.

In case you're curious, I had written about this episode in loving detail, for there is something perversely fascinating to the alchie about his journey back into the bottle. But the Fatman, who is, after all, going to pay for the publication of this tome (albeit sub rosa, for both of us have committed numerous felonies)--the Fatman put a big fat red magic marker to those prose sections which were, I have to agree, a second-rate poor man's homage to Down and Out in Paris and London, or "Days of Wine and Roses," "Lost Weekend," you get the general idea.

Oh well. I might be able to slip that part back in later, so keep an open eye.

I slipped back into the bottle because--well, it should be obvious why. In the name of finally coming clean, I have tried to make it abundantly clear that for much of my life I had been a self-centered, self-indulgent, arrogant industry mogul who fancied himself eternal and invulnerable and also had a propensity to lie, and if that isn't the profile of someone primed to slip into a never ending war with booze, well then I just don't know what.

You see, the reason that I was saying that Mr. Bushy Beard seeing me was probably the best thing that could have happened is because of how I felt some days later when I read in this cheazy industry rag, circulated only in Hollywood, of what was rumored to have happened to me. Even though it infuriated me to read that I had supposedly become a homeless wino sitting in an alley, I must confess that I was sitting in an alley a block or so east of Grauman's Chinese Theater without a roof over my head and guzzling from a bottle of cheap muscatel at the exact moment that my eyes fell on the story, so what could I say? How could I argue the gossip?

At that moment, it became clear to me.

I had to make a plan. I had to change all this.

Now, the last time that I was determined to kick the bottle, I walked into an AA meeting, and I have to admit, after a few false starts, it took.

But now, everything had changed. I was known in this town, my face was recognizable (as recent incidents had proved), and those twelve step meetings were absolutely littered with industry people. You can't swing a dead cat in this town without hitting a proud member of some twelve step program. And you can say all you want about anonymity, the fact is that if I walked into a meeting, it would only be a matter of hours before, once again, tongues were wagging about me. I had a reputation to preserve, I told myself, so no AA for me.

I could still hope against hope that nobody would believe Mr. Bushy Beard. He was a known boozehound himself. (Although he had always found a way to work it artfully into the business of creating some wonderfully credible cinema characters--hardbitten alcoholic cops, and such--rather than having it detract from his career, as had been the case with me.) So at least I could hope that people would respond to his gossipy little e-mails with *'No--PANHANDLING? That couldn't have happened to **him**? That wunderkind who was nominated for an Oscar four times and won twice? The guy who, up to a year ago, had a personal assistant fielding 500 or 600 calls a day for him? The guy who can get a meeting with anyone in town and had most of the town beating down his door for a lunch schmooze?'*

"No," I fantasized people would say, "that vindictive e-mail must be Eric the Viking with a snootful again, delusional, having those furious Nordic visions of revenge against all those snot nosed under-30 year old directors, who rewrite his material, so the Viking is just spreading a rumor that the guy is homeless. Why, the guy is probably just off location scouting for that new movie, in the South of France or Tanzania or something."

But I didn't really believe that was what people were saying about me. I believe that people were starting to believe--and speak--the worst about me.

I made a mental note. It was definitely time to change my life for the better.

There is one last part that I insisted on putting in, even though the Fatman insisted that this was not to be a tome about homelessness, but rather our sub rosa Crimefighting; that part is the business where I came to own--if you can properly call something that you stole, something you "own"--how I came to own Blue.

Blue is my dog, and was to be a tremendous influence on me, largely because all dogs have all the good qualities that (almost) all of the power brokers in Hollywood are lacking--kindness, warmth, loyalty, discretion and an ability to discriminate amongst souls. And often, a genuine sense of humor, God bless those dogs. Playfulness, spontaneity, that sort of thing. The ability to roll around on the floor, to hug and be hugged. Not that I wished then or now, to go around hugging producers mind you, but I think you know what I'm getting at. I don't say that out of sour grapes or because I ended up homeless and on the streets. I would have told you the same thing about producers when I was on top of the world; in fact I would have told you that *I* lacked all those very same fine qualities that a dog possesses.

I'll tell you what else, I lacked them purposely, and by design, for qualities such as loyalty, warmth, guileless sincerity, genuine concern, blind devotion, etc., get very short shrift in Tinseltown. They don't get you anything, they don't get you anywhere. They don't even get you the "cherse" woman, oddly enough, and since it takes time and energy to farm these fine qualities, I figured, why the hell put forth the effort?

But I was soon to learn a great deal about what I had been missing in people. What I secretly admired most and craved most in people. And I was to learn it all from a dog, of all things. A dog.

I first met Blue sometime *after* that first, horrible night when I had failed to even find myself a shopping cart, but *before* I met the Fatman. I shudder to tell you how long I had been on the streets, but let us say that weeks had passed by, much of them in an alcoholic haze. I had made up my mind to stop drinking, which was damned hard to do when you were on the streets, where it got so chilly at night, and where there was so little to provide solace or amusement but the bottle. So I didn't *quite* stop drinking. But I did spend a lot more time thinking about how I should stop drinking.

I guess that counts for something.

I remember vividly the night before the morning I hit rock bottom. I remember it vividly because it was the night I met Blue. I

was in a profound depression, because the big appliance box that I had been calling home had been usurped by someone far angrier and crazier than me. I would be damned if I was going to fight him for it.

I had a backpack full of stuff to call my own--you know, stuff I'd pilfered from dumpsters--an art that I had truly mastered, by the way, and could write a fine fat tome about, but the Fatman is always reminding me that this is a story about him, the Fattest Crimefighter in the World, and not my days on the streets. He further points out that since he is paying for the publishing of this tome, I should be darned grateful that he's allowed me to put in this much about my life and hard times.

Anyway--I had some useful stuff I'd found in the trash, and also, that I'd bought from the 99 Cent Store after panhandling. I hated panhandling, I only did it as much as I needed to get food and booze. I was off the blow. No more coke. I was so proud of myself for that.

My mind was clearing up a bit and I spent this marvelous new gift of spare time that homelessness had suddenly bestowed upon me reading and writing. Even back then, before I met the Fatman, I spent most of my time writing--ideas ideas ideas--and reading paperbacks that I'd buy for a quarter from the used book store. All the books I was supposed to have read in college, but avoided, thanks to, of course, Cliff's Notes. If I'd had a good day panhandling, I would go to the 99 Cent Store and buy razor blades, a bar of soap, a pair of socks, a roll of toilet paper, that sort of thing. Hey, I may have been on the streets, but I was not an animal. And yeah, I still owned a few nice things, but I was far too bad off to show up at any friend's house for the odds and ends they were holding for me--I just couldn't look like this and go traipsing through the rich bitch neighborhoods of Malibu and Beverly Hills and the homes off Mulholland.

But luck was with me! That morning, after I'd learned that a slobbering lunatic had taken over my lovely appliance box, I was dumpster diving and I found a nice soft insulated bedroll that someone had thrown out; it was only a little stained. I was so grateful, because I hated sleeping on the ground. I wandered through a poor neighborhood that was new territory for me, and found a bit of enclosed space, hardly wide enough to be called an alley, where two gardening sheds from adjoining properties butted up against each other. Between their overhanging roofs, and the thick bower of trees overhead, it was almost like sleeping indoors. I arranged the sleeping bag over a pile of dead leaves, used my backpack for a pillow, and I'm telling you, it was almost plush.

Because of incidents that had happened to me in the past, I was leery about actually sleeping inside one of the sheds. I remember one time, this crazy homeless guy crawled into the shed where I was sleeping, and he was a real big guy, and he proceeded to--well--always the Fatman edits. The Fatman edits. Suffice it to say that here, in this crawlspace between the two sheds, I suspected I wouldn't be seen or bothered, except by the beetles. I ate a slice of stale pizza that I'd found leftover on a restaurant table, where folks had dined al fresco. I had grabbed it and stuck it in my pack and hurried along, embarrassed when I heard other diners muttering sad remarks about "that poor bum."

But I was alone and cozy now, here in this secret place, the moon was fat and full, and I pulled out a paperback of "The Brother's Karamazov." All this leisure time had given me the opportunity to get back into reading again. Hollywood producers never had time to read, they were always too busy making movies.

I was just up to the part where one of the brothers is explaining his suicide, saying something like "*If one small child must cry alone in an outhouse, then. . . I return my entrance ticket,*" and I could really see what he meant.

I'm trying to recall the exact passage--remember, I am writing about my homeless days, which were quite a long time ago, but if memory serves, Karamazov is writing about someone who is about to commit suicide, whose lot is not so terribly bad. . . *but who has a keen eye for and acute sense of all the suffering in the world.* The suicidal character has just come across an article in the newspaper, about a child found dead in an outhouse--horrific abuse of a child--a small child whose parents locked him in an outhouse, covered in his own feces, just because he wouldn't stop crying.

---and with this incident being just a microbe on the monster of cruelty that has roamed the planet since the beginning of time. . . well, queries Karamazov's character before taking his own life, why would anyone want to live right in the middle of all that suffering? Even if they are living in Brentwood or Bellaire or Beverly Hills, I asked myself?

Unless of course, you can blind yourself to it. In many ways, that is by far the most satisfying option, if you can pull it off.

But in that moment, in that crawlspace, my situation suddenly felt so overwhelmingly sad that I could not read on, I had to close the book, yet it was too cold to fall asleep. I thought of the children I had

seen on the streets who were also homeless. It was something I never thought about, back in my fatcat days. I thought about what it must have been like for those children. How cold they must be too, shivering through a long night like this. Hell of a way to start out your life.

But at least thinking about them and wondering how they managed to get by kept me from pitying myself, until I started reminiscing about my little daughter, and wondered where she was at that moment. . .was she safe and warm tonight? What kind of a young lady would she turn out to be? I was beginning to doubt that I would ever see her again. I started to cry. I must admit--I cried more during those weeks on the streets than I had the entire rest of my life.

Then, the next moment, I heard a sort of moan, a whimper, and for a moment, I thought it was myself, that *I* was the one crying like that. I sat up on my elbow and squinted into the darkness and saw that it was not me, it was a tiny puppy. It was such a dark little thing, I could barely see it in the pitch black night, the clouds had covered over the moon. But I heard a rustling as it made its way through a flower bed towards the fence to check me out. I put my fingers up to the chain link and it licked at them.

As I had said before, we were in the throws of El Niño, and it was the coldest I could ever remember it being in Los Angeles at night. Thirty-five degrees, I had read in the paper. And while I'm sure that many of you who live in colder climes will howl to find out that we Los Angelinos consider thirty-five degrees to be biting cold, still--the fact remains that I had shivered and wept my way through the last few weeks, and for the life of me, I couldn't figure out why a little puppy would have been shut out of doors on a wet, cold, cruel night like this.

In the darkness, I could not tell what kind he was. I would have guessed him to be a mixed breed with a strong line of Black Lab. He was just growing out of puppyhood into that funny, gawky age where the legs are too long and rubbery, and the puppy can't quite control them and the paws are too big for the legs. This puppy was at that peculiar age when either owners start to find him more adorable than ever--discovering his way in the world as the dog is, interested in everything, getting into absolutely everything--or else the puppy is just old enough to have lost his attraction for the owners. I'm referring to the kinds of owners that buy it on Christmas Eve or the night before Valentines Day, and then, four months later, after the first few incidents of stepping in poop or finding a flea, or the owner being kept awake by

the puppy yowling, and the owner has been hit by a couple of vet bills--this is when the puppy is treated much as a woman would an old purse or a man would treat an old lover, both of which have lost the interest of their owners, but which the owner cannot quite bring themselves to trash.

I had known such people before, and I can tell you that, as insensitive a prick as I had come to be, I never would have treated a dog this way. But I do remember one horrible summer working at a county dog pound (a summer in my youth so horrible that I have successfully blocked most of it from my mind), where a woman brought in a puppy and wanted to leave it at the pound, because it had gone for a romp in the woods and gotten ticks. I was only sixteen that summer, and I remember scrambling to no avail, to find a home for the little dog, and I wept and wept the day they put it down. I can only pray that the woman who dumped the dog will return in her next life as a tick, a job description which I imagine, based on her vanity license plate, will not be much of a stretch from what she is in this life.

Anyway, I am rambling, back to this dog. I had just tucked my "Brothers K" into my knapsack and pulled a bit of plastic tarp around me, when there it was at the fence, licking my fingers and staring at me. I looked into its big brown eyes and they seemed to be suggesting that the puppy had found a soulmate in me, and that we ought to commune about it. We were both cold, wet, hungry, and unloved. What two better souls to mingle their spirits in the middle of a dark, dismal, El Niño night?

(Oh by the way--how I came to name him "Blue." When the clouds rolled away from the moon, I could see him more clearly. So jet black was his coat, that in the moonlight, it had a blue glint to it. He was just a mutt, but I thought he was so beautiful. So noble. Also, of course, I called him Blue because he and I were both so sad and blue on that night we first met. And we would share many sad nights after that.)

I kept my fingers linked through the fence and he licked them, his tiny pink tongue keeping them warm, the warmth spreading through me like an injection, until I fell asleep, inhaling that wonderful, inimitable smell of puppy breath.

I woke early the next morning. I always woke up early on the streets, except those few times I had passed out quite drunk. But also, I always woke up exhausted. The sleep never came soon enough, and it was never deep or satisfying, but the early morning noises and light and

dew and damp pulled me out of my snoozing, no matter how badly I needed it.

I got up, stretched, yawned, then I turned to find the puppy staring intently at me. I gotta tell you, it was so cute. For a few minutes, I thought about taking him.

But, for better or worse, he did belong to the people in this house, and let's face it, I was barely feeding myself these days. What business did I have adopting a dog? Nope. He travels swiftest who travels alone, I told myself, so I put on my backpack and started to trot off.

I made the mistake of looking over my shoulder as I was leaving. The puppy cocked his head, and looked at me so sadly with those big brown eyes, and it nearly broke my heart. Then it started to make this little whining, crying sound. . .

I steeled myself, and headed out into the city.

I would see Blue several times over the next month, but since it is not a good idea to get in the habit of bedding down in the same place every night when you are homeless (mean house dwellers and cops find out about you, and come chase you away), I spent many nights falling asleep in some alley quite completely alone.

It was soon after this, while I was still on the streets, that two things happened to me which changed my life forever. When I look back on them even today, *especially* today, I see that it was for the best, that these things did happen to me.

When I tell you about the first thing, you will hardly see how it could possibly be called "a good thing." In fact, at face, it appears to be about the most disgusting thing that could happen to a person. All I can say in hindsight is that I must have been building up some very nasty karma as an evil producer, to have happen what happened to me.

Because the truth is, I really shat on a lot of people. Back when I was somebody.

So on to the incident that changed my life for the better:

It was a nasty, rainy night--but then, so many of them were, lately. It seemed that El Niño had just started in earnest right around

the time that I became homeless. Just my luck, right? It continued unabated for weeks and weeks. This night was no exception; worse than most, in fact.

I had been chased out of several places where I'd tried to hunker down for the night, so I returned to my old haunt in the alley between the two houses, where I had first met Blue. I had come to really adore Blue, and I treasured his nuzzling and the licking of his warm tongue on my fingers. He was really getting to know me, and I think he came to cherish my visits as much as I was fond of his company.

And so, with my assortment of tarps and quilts and old pillows, I made a makeshift bed for myself in the alley between the two gardening sheds. Blue wasn't there that night for some reason; perhaps his inexplicably cruel owners had taken pity on him during this storm, and were letting him sleep inside for the night.

I popped a couple of over-the-counter sleeping pills, which I had downed along with a small flask of Wild Turkey, and I slept amazingly well throughout that whole stormy, blowy, rainy, windy, monsoon of a night. Morning brought with it dry crisp air and a balmy ocean breeze.

And a man shitting on my face.

**CHAPTER FIVE:
A DUNK IN THE DEEP BLUE SEA,
JAMBALAYA JONES,
AND I DO SOMETHING VERY BRAVE**

A man shitting on my face.

Now that requires a bit of explanation, I should imagine?

I have to say to his credit that 1.) He was a homeless man and really quite nuts, so he did not do it out of malice. And 2.) He did not know it was a person's face he was shitting on, and so again I say, he did not do it out of malice. Apparently, during the night, I had pulled the thin, THIN piece of dark green plastic, part of a huge garbage bag or something, over my head against the pelting rain. So I guess, this poor insane vagrant thought he was taking a squat on a tossed out bit of tarp, kind of like a dog looks for paper if he must go in the house. Then, when the vagrant was done squatting, he took a good long piss.

I am not sure which woke me first--the smell, which was of course hideous and disgusting, or the sound, because it was a loud bowel movement (use your imagination), or the feel of the plop of the dump on my cheek, with only a thin piece of plastic protecting my face. All I know is that I was instantly awake and I sat bolt upright.

Needless to say, I scared the poor vagrant out of his skin. I must have seemed to him like the troll under the bridge, emerging as I did from under the mound of green plastic. It was all a blur to me, though; all I can remember is that he high-tailed it down the alley, screaming something about the evil pixies.

I leapt to my feet and in doing so, I jostled the dump he had taken; now shit and piss were all over me, and I bellowed and jumped up and danced about like a monk in the throws of St. Vitus' Dance. At first I just screamed and screamed and then I stopped screaming and started running, and as I flew down the streets, I kept yelling out all kinds of things like "YECH! EWE! GROSS! GODDAMN!" etcetera--

-- *Please do take a moment to picture this, friends*, I am running, running down the block as fast as I can, and screaming, past pedestrians, folks going to work, dressed for their day, talking on their cell phones, drinking Starbucks, folks walking their dogs, shop owners unlocking their stores, delivery trucks, moms taking their kids to day care--I'M RUNNING AND SCREAMING all nine blocks down to Santa Monica pier, where I kept running until I was shoulder deep into the water, plunging into the Pacific Ocean, my clothes still on.

Only after I dove down deep a few times and shimmied around underwater to get all the loathsome shit off of me did it occur to me that I must have made quite a spectacle of myself, and just as I was contemplating whether or not the lifeguards had seen me, my query was summarily answered by a burly bronze man who looked like the poster boy for Gold's Gym, who grabbed me by the collar and started pulling me towards shore.

Of course I didn't need rescuing--in fact, for a split second, I thought it was a shark. Which made a bizarre situation even more bizarre still, for when I felt what I thought was a shark, I spasmed and freaked even more. By now, another lifeguard had joined Mr. Golds; clearly they both thought I was tripping out on drugs (and who could blame them), and together they dragged me back to shore. I was out of the frying pan into the fire, if you'll excuse the trite and not quite appropriate cliché, but this story is so mind bending I don't quite know how to tell it right, except to just spit it out.

Because as soon as I was out of the water, the lifeguards did not release me, instead they both subdued me so they could get a closer look. In the next few seconds, I explained to the guys pinning me down what had happened, and I must tell you, it was so very far-fetched that they actually believed it. Who would make up a story like that? Also, they could see I had calmed down a notch, so they figured it wasn't drugs after all.

But my problems were just beginning; a crowd was gathering, and I was terrified, absolutely terrified, of being recognized. I had done a pretty good job of keeping a low profile while on the streets thus far, and except for the Bushy Bearded Screenwriter Viking, I don't think any industry people had recognized me in the last few weeks. But suddenly, I was surrounded by tan, lean, beach squabs, any one of whom might recognize me from my numerous television appearances and yes, those narcissistic Hitchcockian cameos that I had insisted on doing in all of my movies.

And you'll never guess who was the first one to place me. One of those damn lifeguards--once again, bad karma kicking me in the keister--I recognized him as an actor that I had dragged through many callbacks and finally turned down, but not before screwing his girlfriend who had puppy-dogged along to all his callbacks. That lifeguard just stared and stared at me. His buddy was not quite sure what to do with me, *about me*, but the lifeguard who recognized me just gave me a mighty sad smile and convinced his buddy to let me go on my way.

So I did--in a state of spiritual, if not physical shock, trudging my way back to that same alley where some poor lunatic had taken a shit on my face, so that I could retrieve my few meager belongings. Not even the lovely California sun shining down on me, drying out my clothes, gave me any comfort.

Oh, and of course, of course, when I got back to my secret alley, someone had stolen all my stuff.

Again.

That was the sixth time in as many weeks that my stuff had been stolen. I tried to hold it together. At least, I thought to myself, I had some cash in my pocket, but when I dug around in my pocket, it turned out that a ten dollar bill--a fortune to me then--had washed to the bottom of the Pacific Ocean when I was underwater, scrubbing off the shit. Now I had no clothes to change into. And no bucks to buy any.

At least up to this time, I had managed to keep myself relatively clean, having scored some new t-shirts from the 99 Cent Store, and a couple of pairs of new used pants from a surplus store. (The thought of being unclean was anathema to me; I viewed it as the ultimate sign that one was not only *homeless* but *helpless*, as though one had given up all desire to be socially acceptable, and was totally resigned to life on the streets.)

Here I was, still soggy, and I could still smell the feces and urine, and my clothes were stained and--well, this whole incident was to be the Final Humiliation. I wondered what Fyodor Dostoevsky, that riveting Russian mouthpiece for the plagues and plights of the common man, would have to say about this. Having a man shit on your face while you sleep homeless in an alley?. . .I believe this is what they call "ROCK BOTTOM."

It was time to do some personal inventory.

It was time to do some serious soul searching.

It was time to. . .dare I say it. . .time to do something I hadn't done since I had become a homeless man.

It was time to make a TO DO List.

Of course, even this was not immediately possible; I had nothing to write with and nothing to write on. And while I guess I could have settled for a mental list--suddenly, starving though I was, and getting a caffeine withdrawal killer headache (for even on the streets, I started every day with a couple cups of coffee), with no clothes but this shirt and pants that had been stained with shit and urine, (oh, did I mention that my shoes had floated to the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, along with the ten dollar bill?)--in spite of all this, nonetheless, the most important thing in my universe was suddenly: TO MAKE A "TO DO" LIST.

No time to lose!

I bummed a dollar in change--this alone took me a half an hour. Then I marched into a 7-11 and got some coffee, swiping the clerk's pen in the process, because I felt like the universe owed me, and I grabbed a few napkins to write on.

The particulars of the list, the list that was to jettison me back into the world of winners, are not interesting enough to recount here. In fact, in many respects, it's probably not that different than your "TO DO" list. (NEED NEW SHOES, STOP BY POST OFFICE, CALL SO-AND-SO, ORGANIZE STUFF, UPDATE ADDRESS BOOK, PLACE ADVERTISEMENT, etc.) But where the list *took* me is important.

Or perhaps I should say, *to whom* the list took me was important.

It took me to The Fatman.

This is where my ad in the paper enters our story.

You see, I realized that I was going to have to take this business of getting back on my feet seriously, damned seriously. I needed a plan, a serious plan, a specific plan, with goals and tiers and phases and steps: I needed a Tony Robbins-sized plan.

But, like everything else that happens in Hollywood, it was going to take a little cash. Also, it would require a bigass goal, to get

me motivated. And a way to achieve it. And no, I'm not just talking about that casual, long range, beach bum planning about "where do you see yourself in ten years," that I had lately languished over in between panhandling, boozing it up, reading paperback classics, and tanning myself on the beach. (How we homeless in Hollywood do suffer.)

No, that would not be enough, not by a long shot. For I realized now that I had fallen so very far, the only way to rise back up and become a Player again would be if I had a Fire in my Belly--and now I had it! It was a Fire in the Belly that had started burning when I felt that burning piss on my face, and felt the man take a dump on my head.

That is when the Fire had started. And my dunk in the deep, blue glorious Pacific had not put that fire out, not one little bit.

And for what it is worth, nothing since has ever quenched that Fire In My Belly.

But how to do it? HOW TO BECOME A PLAYER AGAIN, when I had no decent clothes, no place to wash and make myself acceptable, no address, no mailbox, no phone, and I swear I was developing two big cavities, one on an incisor and one in the lower left rear of my mouth.

But, I kept telling myself, I had put together multi-million dollar motion picture deals, and steered those projects through more crises than you can imagine--surely I could do it again. I would do it again.

This is where my ad in the paper comes in.

Quite simply, my plan was this. I would put an ad in a couple of L.A. rags that come out once a week, announcing that I would do anything legal for money.

ANYTHING LEGAL FOR MONEY.

I was very curious to see what would come of this ad. Maybe I was wa-a-a-a-acky with optimism, but I don't think so; I have never been particularly optimistic. But I believed that this ad, "WILL DO

ANYTHING LEGAL FOR MONEY," would be very lucrative, and perhaps even, in the process, very interesting.

(Which would be a nice change, because among other things, being homeless is boring, boring, boring.)

But that was not even an issue, really--I was not doing this to ferret out some interesting stories in the naked city. I wasn't feeling that artsy, believe me. I was feeling cold and hungry and filthy, always some variation of that trinity, and with the cash from this crazy plan, I figured I could buy myself some decent clothes. Then I would rent a small room, and maybe I could even afford a used computer and printer.

Then, if I could just come up with a couple of dynamite treatments and create the façade that I was still a winner--perhaps even spin some yarn (to counter the rumors spawned by the red-bearded Viking) that I had been in Africa location scouting or something. Surely as a result of my days on the street, I had acquired the rich, deep George Hamilton tan to make the location scouting story credible. In fact, the more I thought about it. . .but enough about that.

First, though, there was a slight continuation of my "rock bottom," because now, OUCH, I had to hitchhike to *the Valley*.

The Valley. How I loathed *the Valley*.

There was a man named Jambalaya Jones who was chief cook and bottlewasher in a great soul food restaurant in Sherman Oaks, on Sepulveda Boulevard. Whenever I hung around there, he made sure to give me some leftover food at the end of the night. Once he even gave me his jacket, which was in excellent shape, although he said he'd bought a new one that day and didn't need it any more. (I know he was lying about getting a new jacket, I think he had just taken pity on me, and was afraid that I would lose any shred of self-esteem I had left, if I thought I was accepting pure charity. I wouldn't have, though. Lost self-esteem, that is. I would have taken the jacket because I was cold, even if I thought it was his only jacket. After all, Jumby got to spend his whole life indoors. As for self-esteem, I really didn't have any more to speak of.) Anyway, this man was, in his humble way, one of the kindest men I've ever met, and my comeback plan depended largely on him.

I hitched a ride with some really strange little old lady who played Captain and Tenille turned up full blast all the way to the Valley, and when she let me out on Sepulveda, "Muskrat Love" blaring into the

intersection, I thanked her and told her she was a fool to pick up hitchhikers, I could have been anybody, a crazed serial rapist, I chided, but I said it in a caring way, and then I forgot all about that because I was so anxious about my big plan that I jogged the dozen blocks, went to the back door of the soul food restaurant, knocked, and asked to speak to Jumby.

Oh, FYI, "Jambalaya Jones" was a nickname he had apparently acquired after years of playing fabulous jazz piano in New Orleans. He had come here because some studio executive who was in New Orleans for Mardi Gras had lots of bourbon while listening to Jumby make love to "Rhapsody in Blue" one night on the ivories, and he was so wowwed that he invited Jumby to come be in the MGM orchestra that played for movie soundtracks. Jumby believed him, sold all his worldly goods, said goodbye to everything and everyone he knew, and made the journey West. But by then, the studio exec had sobered up, and forgotten his drunken job offer; that's why now Jumby was a fry cook in the Valley. Something like that.

But back to my story: after I knocked, Jumby poked his head out, and immediately flashed me a compassionate smile. It was raining hard, a fact that I had hardly noticed, so empowered was I by my new plan, my new energy, my new hope. In fact, I welcomed the rain! I raised my arms to it! I bathed in it! For after my scatological scare, it seems I could not get washed enough by the heavens.

Before I could say anything, Jumby disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a piping hot bowl of gumbo. Only when I took it between my chilled fingers did I realize how very hungry I was. I hadn't eaten all day. Jumby muttered that he couldn't let me in, the manager was still lurking about. Before I could respond, he realized that he'd forgotten to offer me some of his world famous cornbread to go with the soup, and he came back with a napkin full of it.

"Thank you, Jumby," I blurted out, "But before you disappear again, I need to talk to you. It's very important. I'll wait here in the alley, in that wide screen TV box, until you signal me. I know you don't owe me a thing, Jumby, but Lordie, I'd be grateful. . ."

Jumby nodded, winked, and said he would signal me as soon as it was safe. I thanked him, then went into the wide screen TV box to wait. I crawled in and thought, how ironic! I'd gone from having my movies broadcast on television to hiding out in a television box. But all of that was about to change.

An hour later, I was sitting in the kitchen with another bowl of gut grinning gumbo. He looked at me, and I looked at him,

unflinching. "Jumby," I said "THIS IS IT! I've hit rock bottom. A vagrant shit on my face today! But I'm *glad* that it happened, and do you know why? Because now, I got the *fire in my belly!* Jumby, I'm ready to get back on my feet. And I know how to do it. Now, I know what you're probably thinking--why don't I just go out and get a job? But the thing is, Jumby, you know what I am, what I *was*, that is. I USED TO BE SOMEBODY. You know damn well that once it gets out that I'm flipping burgers or managing a Die Weinerschnitzel or digging ditches or whatever, I will immediately be so humiliated that one.) I'll never be able to direct a movie again, and two.) I'll feel like such a failure that I'll go right out of my gourd. I'll no longer be just an ordinary homeless guy, Jumby. I'll be one of those crazy, mad-as-a-hatter homeless guys you see talking to themselves as they shove their carts, you know, the ones you cross the street to avoid. . ."

I realized that I sounded rather crazy as I was spouting all that. But Jumby said nothing, he just nodded understandingly, waiting for me to go on. So I explained:

MY PLAN. OK. I had no phone with which to receive calls, so I needed an address where the responses to my whimsical ad could be mailed--responses that I had no doubt would come pouring in. In case you're wondering, a post office box was not an option; I didn't trust those pissed-office employees, and the whole thing was just too risky.

Why, Jumby asked?

Because, I explained, first of all, most of the industry people I knew had private post office boxes (because most of them were having affairs, or were secretly gay, or were receiving porno in plain brown papers, etc.) and there was way too much chance of running into one of them at the post office, and having my sad plight hit the grapevine.

But there was a second, equally compelling reason. The paparazzi was unbelievably brutal and ruthless in this town: for example, there is one guy named Jack, who routinely bribes postal employees to pinch celebrity mail and turn it over to him. Now this fact, that the U.S. mail is not secure, here in Hollywood, just seems to shock the bejeebers out of some wholesome Midwestern type folks, but a person can make well into five or six figures for stealing celebrity mail. If you can keep the scam going for a while, you can retire on your chubby bucks an actual millionaire. (That's if the Feds don't catch up with you and toss you in the pokey.) Also, some paparazzi just stalk

the post offices, waiting to catch a disguised celebrity trying to slip in sub rosa. And I was recognizable. I had once been famous.

So no, I explained to Jumby, no post office box. Oh, I was so hoping he would say yes. . .so could the responses to my ad be hand-delivered here to the restaurant, or to his home?

I couldn't believe Jumby's graciousness, but he eagerly agreed. The Fire In My Belly must have been burning in my eyes, is all I can think.

And so, with Jumby's blessing, I placed the ad just before deadline, leaving Jumby's address, and then I hit the streets again, happier than I'd been in months.

My life was going to change for the better, I just knew it.

Oh wait. Wait just a minute. It does occur to me, upon reviewing my notes, that I told you, when I began recounting what had been the weirdest day of my life--my "shit-out-of-luck" day, as I fondly remember it--I see now that I did tell you that there were *two* things that happened on that day which changed my life forever.

Well, you are about to hear the second thing. Please bear with me. OK, here's what happened next. Placing that ad had landed me not too far from Blue's neighborhood, so I figured, why not?

You might think it odd that I would return to that alley where I had been shit on just that morning, but what the hell, I thought to myself. Something was drawing me back there. (In fact, I have frequently revisited that same alley many times, as my success has once again skyrocketed, so that I can remember my lowest moment, my rock bottom.)

Once I got to my alley, I noticed that Blue wasn't in his yard. But amazingly, I found my bedding still there, snug and unsoiled, and I began settling in for the night. Shew, I was exhausted

Then, SUDDENLY, I came to know why I had been drawn there.

It was to rescue Blue.

To make him my new best friend, which he has been ever since.

It happened like this: I was just falling asleep when I heard it: young male voices. Loud, wild, partying, crazed, male voices. They had stepped out onto the second floor porch of the run down house where the puppy supposedly lived, although Lord knows I had never seen anybody in that house give it any shred of affection.

I sat up as soon as I heard the voices, not wanting them to see me, of course. I quickly discerned that these guys, who couldn't have been more than sixteen, or eighteen, were getting very drunk, and very stoned, and they were also high on something else, what it was, only the Devil could say. I peered up at the dark balcony, wondering how long I would have to hide there in the darkness before they would get bored and go in. That was when it started.

But first, let me set the scene a little better. I have already told you that two gardening sheds butted up against each other, but what I have not mentioned was that on the other side of the yard of this ramshackle house, there was a vacant lot, adorned with the usual vacant lot garbage and gewgaws. There was an abandoned refrigerator, an assortment of boxes, trash bags, ratty furniture, rusty stuff, car parts, including a dented fender from a Rolls Royce that caught my eye. I bet there was a story behind that.

Also, on this particular night, a pack of stray dogs had lumbered into the alley. My eyes were growing accustomed to the darkness, and it seemed to me that this was a rather charming pack of dogs. Not like you think stray or wild dogs would be--mean and growling and ready to attack at the least provocation. But more goofy and fun-loving. That's how these dogs looked to me.

I almost chuckled out loud, watching them explore, and cavort, and they reminded me of the pack of dogs on an Andy Griffith episode that is one of my all time favorites. They were all sizes of dogs, various breeds, and mixes of breeds, and yet they seemed like one big happy family. One of them tipped over a trash can, and when they found a surprise cache of food, I was charmed and surprised to notice that the dogs did not fight over the food, rather they shared it. Astonishing for a gang of stray dogs, I thought at the time, but I was later to learn that this kind of familial concern is really not at all unusual among packs of wild animals, wolves imparticular--in fact, they often behave in a far kinder and more sensible fashion than many human gangs.

I smiled: there the dogs were, ten of them, I think I counted, romping, playing, gamboling, ferreting for food.

Then the hell began.

The punks on the porch had weapons.

Out of nowhere, it was unexpected, nothing provoked it, for no reason, one of the punks, after swilling the last of his Tecate beer, tossed the bottle into the vacant lot, then pulled out a gun and fired it into the pack of dogs. A little terrier went down, it happened so fast I thought my eyes were deceiving me. The terrier was laying there in a pool of blood, and the dogs all stopped munching at the pizza crusts they had found in the trash and they ran to see what had happened to the little terrier. They sniffed at it and nuzzled the corpse and cried out--I must tell you it sounded like human weeping--do dogs weep, I wondered? The dogs bayed and cried for the little terrier that was lying there, dead.

The full moon, which up till that moment had been shrouded in clouds, came out from behind the clouds, like a special effect from a movie, or maybe that's just how I see the world, but anyway, it was under this bright moonlight that the sadistic shenanigans continued.

The punks all began arguing over the gun, they were grabbing for it--yeah!--everyone wanted to take a crack at the pack of dogs. But then (I translated as best I could, my Spanish is not so good), apparently one of them remembered that his brother owned a BB gun. He ran inside, and emerged with the gun, loaded. He aimed and pointed it at a big old dog--beautiful, it was, brown and black, I judged it to be a black lab/shepherd mix. That poor dog, it got hit in the rear leg.

The dog let out a yelp that twisted my insides, and this big noble dog, who looked princely in spite of being a wild mutt, it suddenly collapsed. When it tried to get up again, it collapsed again. It kept trying to get up, and kept crumpling. It limped, it dragged its leg, and all the while, all the other dogs, its surrogate family, were yelping and circling and barking and spazzing around, all with great concern, trying to alert someone--but who--to help them? They were all looking at the dead terrier, and at the wounded big dog. A rivulet of blood was oozing from its wound, and then, one kid grabbed the gun from the first kid and said something to the effect of watching how well the stupid fucking dog could do on just two legs, and then he laughed and he took careful aim and he hit the dog's front leg--but not on the same side.

The first kid had gotten the left rear leg, and the second shot took out the dog's right front leg, and me, I was thinking crazy things like how I gotta get the dog to a vet, but how to do that without a car, *and* without getting shot myself?

On the porch, money was changing hands now, and the game had gotten even more sinister. A third punk grabbed the real gun and shot at a beat up old mongrel who, I only noticed just at the moment they shot him, was already maimed because he just had three legs. The punk's aim was perfect. He blew the dog's head off.

Just at this moment, when all of these thoughts were flying through my mind, another one of the gang grabbed the BB gun. Did I mention that bets were being made at this point? The kid with the gun swilled from his bottle of Tequila, then pointed the BB gun, taking careful aim at one of the little ones--a charming mongrel it was, white with black patches, and a black patch over his left eye, as though someone had given him a shiner--and this black patch highlighting his eye served as a bull's-eye for the drunk punk who pulled the trigger and hit the dog's eye, dead on. The dog emitted a scream such as I have never heard out of man nor beast, but the dog didn't die from this, blood started flowing onto his white snout, and he began running 'round and 'round in circles, and his hysteria made the other dogs even more crazed--

--At this point, I think I was screaming too, but I cannot be sure. Had I been screaming, it really would not have made much difference, because the yelping and baying and wailing and moaning and crying of the dogs was making such a cacophony that I'm sure the punks would not have heard my voice above it all. I was trying to figure out what the hell I might do to stop this madness, but I knew at that moment there was nothing I could do, because it was so clear to me, drunk, and full of rage as these boy savages were, that they would think nothing of putting a bullet through my brain, or a BB through my eye, or--

--And just at the moment that it was agonizing clear to me that there was nothing I could do to stop the torture and slaughter of these poor dogs, in that cruel bloody moment. . .the rules of the game changed.

I thought, God help me, I thought I heard them utter the words "Fuego," God help me, doesn't that mean "Fire," I thought? But there

weren't any fires anywhere that I could smell, no, they were saying "fuego" and laughing, and then I realized what it was they had in mind--Oh My God.

One of them had pulled condoms out of his pocket, then they got a tank of kerosene that was sitting next to a leaf blower and went to work. They were not so drunk they could not pour kerosene into the unrolled condom, one carefully holding the mouth of the condom wide open, the other pouring carefully--all the while, the screaming and whining and baying and moaning of the confused dogs continuing of course--those poor dogs were torn, some nosing and sniffing around the three or four dead that had been killed by bullets, the others clustered around, but impotent to help the wounded ones.

By now, the kerosene balloon was ready. One of the guys on the porch, a gangly kid with a budding mustache and a Tasmanian Devil t-shirt, took that kerosene condom balloon and pitched it, and managed to hit the one dog that to me was about the cutest one of the pack--a little Jack Russell terrier, but fuzzy, a long-haired, I think they call it.

At first, when the kerosene balloon hit him, the dog just looked around, startled. But then, that was when one of the worst moments of my life started. Somebody had taken a tennis ball dipped in kerosene, lit it on fire, and then fired it or lobbed it or swung at it with a bat or something--anyway, once again, with astonishing accuracy, they hit the little bewildered, kerosene soaked terrier, smacked it good and hard in the rib cage with the tennis ball, and in that moment the dog lit on fire like a Roman Candle.

The dog emitted a scream such as I have never heard out of man nor beast.

Fire. Fuego. Flames.

The dog screamed these dog screams and started running around, and as it ran, it fanned those flames, as the other dogs ran around the poor creature, helpless. I watched in horror as a second punk prepared another flaming tennis ball.

That was when we spotted it! I spotted it at the same time as the gang--little Blue had toddled out through a rip in the chain link, and was wandering confused in the midst of the gang of dogs.

Then, as Fate would have it, something happened that was to save the little puppy's life. An old banged up El Camino screeched up to the house on the other side of the street, and another gang of hoodlums got out.

I saw my chance. It was a shitty thing to do, but I didn't have much choice, my poor pup was terrified and running about trying to dodge the fire arrows.

I picked up a rock, happy that I'd worked on my pitch for those summer games at Malibu where our people took on those pussy agents from William Morris--and I lobbed the rock at the El Camino as hard as I could and it shattered the whole windshield. I wanted to whoop with delight at my great aim but I dared not; instead I ducked behind a dumpster and waited for the fallout from my deadly deed. All the drunken punks from the El Camino gang were swearing, looking around in the darkness to see who had thrown the rock, and they spotted the drunk punks on the second floor porch.

They screamed a string of profanities in Spanish and charged up the steps leading to the porch two at a time, and I could see that they were all groping for weapons jammed in their pockets and belts and boots.

I winced, knowing what was about to happen, and then I said a prayer that nobody had seen me, because if they did, I was a dead man for sure for sure for sure. Oh, I had never been so scared in my whole life.

But they didn't see me. They never suspected that I was the fucker who had perpetrated the whole thing.

A deadly brawl ensued, I heard gunshots, and I felt so very bad about being the one to start it, but what the hell else could I do? I stared over at the bodies of the dead dogs, and in that moment I knew, Oh God, it was time to do it! It was now, now--or--let what I was too cowardly to do haunt me forever. I knew I was taking a risk with the brawl going on so close by, but I had to take the chance.

I ran into the yard. Blue, my precious little puppy, was shivering behind a battered up Fisher Price fairy princess castle. I grabbed my puppy, hoping the dark night and my dark clothes would blend in together. I darted back down the alley, Blue trembling in my arms.

I looked behind me, sure, just sure that the punks were following me and would drag me down and torture me before killing me, perhaps torturing the puppy while I watched, just for sport.

But that didn't happen. All I could hear was the bloody sound of the fight escalating. Then, sirens.

A symphony of sirens, the song of the sirens, as fire trucks joined police cars. All the neighbors must have called in complaints.

But still I kept running. Long after I knew they were not following me, I clutched that puppy to me, and I kept running. I did not know it at the time, but I was running towards a new life. A new identity.

I was running towards the Fatman.

CHAPTER SIX: THE HOMELESS DUDE MEETS THE FATMAN FINALLY

Having related to you the story of that horrible night when I acquired my best friend, Blue, I now return to the story of how I met the Fatman. Everything changed.

I ambled down the street, clutching the address in my hand. I don't know why, but I was very nervous. Blue was following a few yards behind, checking out the al fresco diners on the Promenade, hopeful for snacks. I noticed out of the corner of my eye that he did score a few times.

Charisma. Blue had it.

SOME BACKGROUND ABOUT MY AD:

Let's back up a couple of days: there were only a few basic categories of responses.

Weird and erotic sexual requests, including requests for me to pretend to be somebody's brother while they--well, use your imagination. Then there was one person who wrote a creepy letter using stationery with the letterhead of a popular bowling alley on it, asking me would I murder their supervisor for five hundred dollars, obviously ignoring my stipulation that whatever I did would have to be "legal." Also there were a number of other petitions requesting that I commit acts of violence.

Less interesting but no less poignant, there were lots of letters asking could I please spend time with people who were lonely?

Last but not least, there were people wanting me to help them move, clean out an attic or garage, etcetera. Truth to tell, I was actually disappointed in how dull and drab most of the responses were.

But then, I read the Fatman's response.

I remember it vividly. I was sitting outside of a Dollar Tan tanning booth emporium, eating a bag of jalapeño pork rinds, with triple strength hot sauce, and I was watching several large black boys performing in a rap video being shot in an alley around Hollywood and

Vine. Set dressers had taken out all the trash that was in the alley and brought in their own. It didn't look any different to me, by the time they got done, but I'd been in their shoes, I had directed such scenes, I knew what it was like. Someone else's garbage just never looks as trashy as you own. If you want something done right, etc.

The catering people with the video had taken a liking to Blue and were giving him snacks and scraps, and I opened the last reply in the pile of responses to my ad that Jumby Jones had handed me the night before, along with some crawdads to go:

I stared at the response, with its large block printing. At first I chuckled, and then I reread it:

BATMAN SEEKS ROBIN
KEMOSABE SEEKS TONTO
GREEN HORNET SEEKS KATO
CAPTAIN AMERICA SEEKS BUCKY
AQUA MAN SEEKS AQUA LAD
FLASH SEEKS KID FLASH
SUPERMAN SEEKS SUPERDOG
GREEN ARROW SEEKS SPEEDY
BUTCH CASSIDY SEEKS SUNDANCE
ROBIN HOOD SEEKS LITTLE JOHN
THELMA SEEKS LOUIS

I still can't quite pinpoint what it was, but something about the letter made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I can only describe it as a sixth sense. . .that this was the beginning of something very big in my life.

For a fleeting moment, I thought maybe this weird letter was a gay thing, you know, because of the male on male nature of the pairings, plus the two women thing at the end. Was this guy some nut who wanted me to dress up in Superhero costumes while he whacked off?

But then, like I said, some instinct--well, not so much an instinct, because in Hollywood we don't have those to tell us what to do; instincts have been bludgeoned out of us. For instincts we have substituted preview audience exit polling. No, I didn't really have any instincts left, but rather it was some premonition that told me not to sully this impending adventure with those sordid thoughts about whether it a gay come on or not.

Something told me I was on the verge of a grand adventure. The Fire in My Belly was blazing---and no, don't make any indigestion jokes about the jalapeño pork rinds and triple strength hot sauce: we are talking about my life here, my future, the divine hand, and, well, the Fire in My Belly.

"Blue!" I suddenly announced, startling the people around me, "Blue, c'mon, we're going to have an adventure! A good one, not a scary one like the other night--well, who knows, Blue, it *could* turn out to be scary but--"

I noticed everyone was looking at me like I was crazy. Heck, maybe they were right; at this point I probably was a few species shy of an ecosystem. But I didn't care what people thought. I smiled at the crew, and chuckled at the thought that they didn't even know who I really was! Or was about to be again, soon.

I hooked Blue's leash back on him, which I used for high traffic areas. He was a puppy, and a fool, and likely to get himself hit by a car. It took a bit of a yank to pull him away from the beef tri-tips some gaffer was feeding him, but soon, Blue was more interested in my plan than food, amazingly. I pointed to the letter excitedly and looked at Blue. "See, Blue! See where it says, 'Superman seeks Superdog!' There's even a special request for your services!"

We sashayed down the street into God only knows what was about to happen next.

FORGOT TO MENTION: FASHION UPDATE!

I was broke, broke, broke. Jumby Jones had insisted on giving me a few bucks. I knew this was a lot of money to him, and he also insisted on driving me to the Salvation Army so that I could get some pre-owned clothes. Jumby pointed out pointedly that mine were beginning to stink big time. I knew this to be true because I could smell myself too. And if I, whose nasal passages were almost completely burned out from cocaine, could detect a reek, well I knew it must have been bad.

Also, if I was going to take turning my life around seriously, I was going to have to look just a little more dapper than I did after weeks of sleeping outside in the rain and wearing the same clothes.

I went with the best that Salvation Army had to offer on that day--some beige lined linen slacks, which were very nice except for a black grease spot on the rear of the calf, but which wasn't noticeable

when you were walking towards someone, only when you were leaving them, walking away. I figured that by then, I would have already made my impression, be it good or bad, and how I looked walking away didn't make much difference. Besides, I told myself, rich people got stains too; maybe people would think I had gotten it changing the tire on my Testarozza or something.

Besides which, Jumby had only been able to spare eight dollars to give me, so I didn't have much choice. Four dollars went towards a pair of pre-owned loafers, the pants cost two dollars, a cotton print shirt cost a dollar-fifty (no stains), and fifty cents went towards new underwear. I had learned that it was practically impossible to find new underwear in thrift shops, although you could find used underwear.

And even though I had been homeless for weeks (well, OK, months now), I refused to sink to the level of used underwear. So, I kept washing mine out, and sometimes I'd replenish my supply by purchasing new underwear at the 99 Cents store. And believe me, ultra-cheap underwear is a trial you have to experience to understand.

But in this particular instance, I got lucky. For those of you affluent enough to have been deprived of the Salvation Army Experience, what you do not know is that sometimes, somebody drops off huge inventories of items for resale at the Salvation Army, dumping merchandise, you know--new items that never moved in the department stores. Usually, a marketing ploy that did not work: Florida Election, the Board Game! Osama Bin Laden Action Figures! Or a product based on cartoon characters or pop culture icons that have gone out of vogue: Ally McBeal food measuring scales, Spice Girl tampons, Robert Blake's book of Single Dad Tips.

Or, in the case of my new underwear that I am about to describe, unsold holiday merchandise from a season that has come and gone.

But the merchant's loss was my gain. Someone had left for resale a couple hundred pair of red and green plaid bikini briefs featuring a reindeer with a silver bell stitched around his neck, right at the crotch, and "JINGLE BALLS!" embroidered in gold thread exactly at the appropriate spot. Now, I wouldn't have paraded these holiday briefs in front of any woman, but hey, my life would have to change in vast ways before any woman was going to look twice at me anyway, so what the hell did I care? All I knew was that I had clean underwear again, jingle jingle.

After ringing everything up at the register, I ducked back into the dressing room, and within minutes, I was wearing brand new briefs, and it felt great! The reindeer with the jingle bell was my secret humiliation, but I couldn't argue with the fit!

Jumby then gave me and Blue a ride to the Ten Freeway in Santa Monica, Blue hanging his head out the Rambler window the whole time, but as Jumby had already made himself late for his other job by helping me, it was up to me to hitch to the 3rd Street Promenade, which was where the address on the "BATMAN SEEKS ROBIN" letter was.

No name was given, just an address. Then, scrawled in elegant handwriting, "Ask for proprietor."

As I have said, I do not know why, but I was nervous walking up to the address. Of course, I was always nervous walking the Promenade. I was terrified that someone from the Biz would spot me, hail me over, and expect me to explain my circumstances. It had already happened a couple of times, but I was always able to dodge the person, and I think they figured they must have been mistaken. I looked so tragic, nobody could believe it was really me. Surely it must have been my homeless loser doppelganger.

I got to the address and stared at the façade.

It was a bookstore. It was a charming façade, with a green and white striped canopy coming down over the front of the shop, and shaded by the awning, there were some inviting white wrought iron tables and chairs. For a moment I conjured an image of myself sitting under this lovely canopy, reading a dog-eared paperback of some classic masterpiece and enjoying a cup of Earl Grey tea as a balmy breeze rolled the clouds along.

How ironic, I thought, that when I'd had the means to live such a life, I was always too busy to stop and enjoy. The only classic literature I had ever read was *after* I became homeless, and was suffering one of the worst maladies of homelessness--sheer and utter boredom. I discovered that the used bookstore in Venice Beach had a constant supply of paperback classics that you could buy for just a quarter; college students dumped them off by the bagful, unread. So finally, me who had been in the business of storytelling for years--and one of the most successful at it--finally, I was reading books again. For the first time.

I was lost in my thoughts, in my reverie of picturing myself sitting in the chair under the awning, when HE appeared in the doorway.

He took me so completely by surprise, that I know I must have had some rudely obvious facial reaction, before I could even catch myself. In the future, I would always feel so bad that his first impression of me was **my reaction to him--in horror, at how grotesque he was.**

At first appearance. At first appearance! Only.

I wish The Fatman could understand that while horrified astonishment is naturally folks' first reaction to him, because he was--well, more on that in a minute. But I just have to say right off that after getting to know him, I came to see him as one of the kindest men I had ever known. And a man with a fierce sense of justice.

Of what is good, and what is evil.

"You're the one who placed the ad."

This from the gargantuan man standing in the doorway.

I blinked a couple of times, still taking it all in--taking HIM all in. I couldn't believe how--how *huge* he was. I remember swallowing hard, my eyes bulging out, sort of like a cartoon character's reaction to seeing something shocking.

Let me tell you, it wasn't just that he was fat. It wasn't just that he was the Fatman. I had seen many fat people, heavy set, full-figured, lardass, stocky, chunky, steatopygous, roly-poly, corpulentes, obese, overweight, pleasingly plump--what is the politically correct term this week? Anyway, I know lots of big folks. Love 'em. Some of my best friends are toting a few extra pounds.

But this man was not just fat, he was mammoth.

He must have weighed somewhere between four hundred and five hundred pounds. I am not exaggerating. (But when I closed my eyes and pictured him, it seemed like he weighed a thousand pounds.) His face rested in a mound of chins, and he had a galaxy of moles all over his neck and face.

But I guess he was used to reactions like mine. A subtle but unmistakable wave of pain and humiliation washed over him.

"Uhm, exactly how did you know that I was the one who placed the ad?" I said, startled. How could he know why I was here or who I was? I had not even walked into his shop. He smiled almost imperceptibly.

"Because. You're holding the note I mailed to your P.O. Box.

"

"Oh. Yeah. Sure. Uhm. Yes, this is me."

"Well, it's a beautiful day," he said awkwardly. His awkwardness was rather touching. "Shall we sit down and have chat, friend?"

"Sure, fine."

Blue came wandering up. He had been waylaid by a waiter who was giving Blue the remains of tofu burger. When the Fatman saw Blue, he did not look pleased.

"That your dog?"

"Uh, yes it is."

"I hate dogs. Does he bite?"

"No. He's very friendly. Look, he's just a puppy."

"Whatever. Listen, just keep him away from me. I hate dogs."

"You said that already, friend."

The Fatman glared at me.

"Smartass, huh? Well, what should I expect. Putting a weird ad like that in the paper. You must be just a little screwy? Or desperate. Maybe both."

"Hey, you're the one who answered my ad with this weird note," I snarled.

The man was right, I may have been desperate, but I had no intention of starting out our professional relationship by letting him insult me. I had my pride. My dignity.

I pulled at the back of my jingle bell underwear that was riding up the crack of my ass. I wished I'd bought a LARGE. Usually mediums did me just fine, but these were cut on the small side. Also I hoped the Fatman hadn't heard the telltale jingling of the jingle bell; I made a mental note to cut off the jingle bell at some more opportune moment. But I have an idiosyncrasy wherein I never ask people if I can use their bathroom within minutes of first meeting them. And I definitely don't ask if I can borrow their scissors.

But the Fatman was still absorbing my touché remark.

"Fair enough," said the Fatman. "I got some brioche for breakfast, and I was just going to have myself a cup off coffee. Care for some?"

"Actually, I'd love that."

He was really a rather affable chap, I thought to myself. Under all that, well--under all that Fat. I noticed that he had twinkly blue eyes, and a very kind smile.

I settled myself into one of the comfy chairs, admired the little row of violets in the window box, and in a moment he returned. With a tray, no less. Here I was, this homeless bum, and the guy is waiting on me with a tray! Coffee, creme, and sugar or honey or sweetener, as I preferred, and brioche on a little plate. Not even a paper plate, but a china one. And butter and jam.

It touched me, that he invited me to join him. Here I was, almost just the way I had fantasized it a few minutes ago, sitting under the verandah, having the most delicious gourmet coffee. Cinnamon vanilla, did I smell?

Then I remembered that I was here because I had put an ad in the paper which announced that I would do "anything legal for money."

I fidgeted nervously as the Fatman eased himself into his chair. It was one of those sweet little wrought iron garden benches made for two, but it barely held the Fatman's enormous girth. I smiled perfunctorily and helped myself to a brioche.

"Look, here's the deal," I said, cutting to the chase--it felt weird, laying down my terms at the same time that my mouth was filled with his brioche and gourmet coffee. "I have gotten a lot of weird responses to my ad. But I meant what I said. I'll do anything legal for money. I had my reasons for placing the ad, but I won't do anything illegal."

"Calm down," he said, buttering his third brioche already, "What I want you to do isn't illegal. I just want you to follow someone."

"That's it? Follow someone?"

"That's right, just follow someone."

I nodded knowingly.

"Let me guess who you want me to follow--some chick?"

"It is a YOUNG LADY," said the Fatman, bristling.

"You got a thing for her?" I asked, leaning in conspiratorially.

"Why do you want me to follow some chick around? Did she dump you? Are you a stalker?"

"No, I'm not a stalker."

With great effort, he got up from his chair.

"Thanks for coming by, but I don't think this is going to work out."

Suddenly I realized that I had acted like a jerk. I was *living* like trash, I knew that, but somehow, I had crossed some line, and I had started to *act* like trash, as well. Being mean-spirited and assuming the worst about the guy. After all, I was the oddball for placing the ad in the first place. I leaned closer to him, in a conciliatory stance, and got my first whiff of his B.O.

"I'm sorry," I said. "You're right, that was uncalled for. Let's start all over again."

The Fatman eyed me for a long time, before sitting back down.

"You're not used to this, are you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Being down on your luck."

"How do you know that?" I asked, suddenly very self-conscious.

"We don't have time to talk about you, friend. We've got to help her. I've got a creepy feeling that she's in real trouble."

I stared at the Fatman. Something was scaring him; you could see it in his eyes. Suddenly, the uncomfortable tension between us just dissolved away.

"Tell me about her," I said.

"First I'd better answer your questions," he said, slurping his coffee. "They were rudely stated, but they were honest, logical ones, so let me address them. First of all--let's get this straight--she is not a 'chick.' She is a young lady. And if I ever hear you refer to her as a 'chick,' you will have me to contend with, and that constitutes a dire threat indeed, for I believe myself to be her only defender, and I take that charge seriously."

I just smiled, and nodded. Perhaps chivalry was not dead after all. The Fatman swilled his coffee and continued.

"In answer to your other questions. No, I do not have a 'thing' for her, as you so romantically phrased it. Look at me! I'm gargantuan, I'm a monster, I'm Jabba the goddamn Hud! What would any woman possibly want with me? Why would I set myself up for that kind of rejection?"

"I don't know." I said. I did not know how else to respond.

"As to your last question. No, I am not a stalker. Quite the opposite. I am undertaking this project because I want to protect her. It is my wish to keep her from harm, not to bring more harm upon her."

I chewed my lip while I thought about this. Already, this was more complex and weird than I thought it would be. (Although what I had expected when I put in the ad, I don't quite know.)

"Look," I said, "Why don't you just hire a private investigator? Oh wait--we haven't talked money yet. Let me guess, a P.I. costs too much, right?"

The Fatman tossed down his napkin and got up to go in. He trundled over to a bookshelf and began lovingly dusting a display of Little Lotta comics.

And me, I don't know why I felt such a need to toady to this man, but there was something about him. Something about him. I don't know how to explain this to you so it makes sense. This is going to sound strange, in light of how hideous I just told you he looked--huge, and with the moles, and all the chins, and the B.O.--but the Fatman had a weird kind of *charisma*.

Yeah, that was it. Charisma.

Once I realized that's what it was, I could hardly believe what I'd stumbled onto, but it was true.

CHARISMA!

Oh, I don't mean that kind of
"Baywatch-Hollywood-pecs-and-abs-tanned-and-untainted-charisma"
that *I am so very burned out on*.

I'm not talking about that
"five-foot-ten-Supermodel-with-the-great-eyes-(which-are-really-colored-contact-lenses)-and-the-impeccable-skin-and-capped-teeth-charisma"
which attracts me *not*.

I'm not talking about that
"Robin-Leach-Lifestyles-of-the-Rich-and-Famous-drive-up-in-a-Mazar-adi-and-breeze-into-the-restaurant-nobody-can-get-into,-but-you-can-get-into-it-because-you-have-on-your-arm-a-famous-starlett-who-has-on-her-arm-diamonds," no, I am definitely *not* referring to that kind of charisma.

That kind of FAKE CHARISMA that I've come to so despise. No, I am not talking about that kind of charisma. . .

I'm talking about the rarer kind, the kind that has become almost invisible to people in this town, at least. I'm talking about the

charisma of kindness, the charisma of karma, the charisma one associates with souls that have been on this planet *more* than a few times. The kind of charisma one associates with grace, and wit, and certitude, and Audrey Hepburn--the charisma of someone who lives by an agenda that is crystalline and unflappable, based on some grand cosmic scheme which they have divined after a soul's journey to the underworld and back again.

I'm talking about those of you who have spotted the cosmic cab with the VACANT sign glowing on the roof, watched as the taxi eased up to you, peered into that hack from hell, and seen the glower in Charon's wild eyes when he asks, "Can I drop you someplace?" and you announce, "No thanks, it's a lovely night, I'd rather walk!"

Now, all of this is not something you'd notice about the Fatman when you first meet him, though. Probably because, as I would learn in time, The Fatman usually has a stain on his shirt or crumbs in one of the folds of his--well, crumbs in his folds, that image should suffice.

In fact, it was just at that moment when we were both debating whether or not to terminate this association even before it really started, that I saw the first stain appear.

It was perhaps the Fatman's most annoying habit. Dripping big globs of things onto his clothes.

Poor guy. He always began the day cleanly turned out, but that never lasted. Now, his shirt--a white shirt no less--was taking its first hit of the day.

As the Fatman was finishing the last bite of brioche number four, a blob of marmalade fell onto his shirt.

Then, I don't know, some strange blend of curiosity and pity, along with the Fatman's urgency and charisma, made me do this next thing. I put my hand on his arm to stop him from his frantic dusting of the Little Lottas, and I spoke in low tones.

"This girl you're worried about. . .tell me more."

The Fatman looked at me. He was starting to trust me, just as I was starting to trust him. "See, here's the thing," he said, sitting down on the wide steps that led upstairs to more books. "She comes in several times a week, here to the bookstore. She's just a little waif of a thing. Skinny, dark hair, big eyes. But she's such an oxymoron, because even though she's meek and timorous, and flinches if I so

much as slam a book shut--still, she's very rich. So it's odd that all those other adjectives apply to her."

He stopped a moment, trying to formulate a phrase.

"At first glance, you'd assume she was one of these rich, spoiled rotten Hollywood wives. She drives a brand new creme colored Mercedes XL. Wears designer clothes, expensive jewelry, writes her checks with a Mont Blanc, and doesn't bat an eyelash at spending a grand a month in here. She collects rare children's books."

I nodded, taking it all in.

"So. What's so compelling? Sounds like any one of hundreds of women you see strolling the Promenade. And, uh, between you and me, well, you wouldn't know it to look at me, but I've known a lot of those women. I've wined them, dined them, bedded them, and for what it's worth, they were some of the dullest dates of my life."

The Fatman chuckled at this.

"So you used to be a player? Yeah. . .like I said before, you don't look like you're used to life on the streets."

His comment bruised my pride. I thought about my new pre-owned clothes. I thought about my clean underwear. I thought I looked pretty good. I hadn't even walked away yet, so he can't even have noticed the grease spot on the back of my pants.

"What makes you think I live on the streets?" I asked. I had to know.

"I've seen you around, friend."

Well, that shut me up. But he was on a roll.

"We don't have time to talk about you, friend. Back to this woman. Yes, she's all those things. Rich, and with a Beverly Hills address on her checks, and jewelry. But she doesn't come off like that, not at all. That's why I said that if you just looked at her rather than watched her, you'd think she was one of these princess wives. But then when you watch her, she's not confident, arrogant, sophisticated the way those women are. She's the shyest, most terrified little thing. Once I slammed shut a book in the back of the shop, and it startled her so badly she let out a little scream. Once, she came in here with her boy and he got chocolate on a rare book and naturally I got a little upset, but I think she thought I was going to haul off and hit the poor kid. Or her. Or both. Then, one day when she didn't think I was looking, she took off her big fancy Chanel sunglasses, and I saw a nasty bruise on her cheek."

The Fatman's eyes grew wide, as he poured himself another coffee and sprinkled in five sugars.

"Then, the next week, the same thing! Only this one was even worse, a real shiner. A nasty looking one."

"Oh, I get it," I said, "I see why you want me to follow her."

"Frankly, I am scared to death for her," said the Fatman. Since that time I've noticed other scars and bruises. On the little boy, too."

"Say no more," I said. "I knew a woman once, a dear friend of the family, she had a husband who beat up on her. It was horrible."

"And what scares me even more, is I think it's getting worse for that poor lady," said the Fatman. "The other day, her son came in with his arm in a cast. When the lady was buying her book, I commented idly on it, and she had to pause for this awkward moment before she blurted out that it happened while he was playing. I'm sure she just made that up. The kid just looked at his shoes the whole time, trembling. Now, that's not right! You know kids, when they hurt themselves, and they get a cast, they brag all about it, oh, they're so eager to tell you all the details of how they got it, the cast that is."

I sat down again, deep in thought. The woman I was referring to ended up having her back broken. Now she lived in a wheelchair. Her husband had been one of the most prominent citizens in town. He just moved away, started over. Got a new wife, who he also beat up regularly, I heard through the grapevine. I leaned forward in my chair.

"You want me to follow her, and see if some guy is really beating her up?"

"As a matter of fact, I do."

"Look," I said, "I don't want to be a prick, I asked you this before, but why don't you just hire a P.I.? Is it that you can't afford it? That's it, isn't it?"

"No, that's not it. It's because I want someone who gets personally emotionally involved in this," said the Fatman, smiling genuinely for the first time since I'd met him. "I know it's crazy, don't ask me why I thought I'd find such a person on the other end of your advert. But somehow--"

The Fatman stopped talking, and oh my God, suddenly he looked as though he was going to burst into tears.

"Look, friend. How can I explain this to you? It's just that. . .well. . .I haven't done so very much with my life. Oh, I like selling books for a living, alright. But I know damn well that with the strain I put on my heart, being so big and fat like I am--"

Now, I must interject at this point: right here was the moment in the conversation, when a big person mentions their size, that your sense of diplomacy goads you to blurt out some interjection like "Oh, you're not fat, you're just big boned," or "You aren't overweight. You just look healthy. Who wants to look like those stick models anyway, they all look anorexic!"

But the truth was, this fat man, *The Fatman*, he was just too fat to bullshit. Any comment I would have made to diminish his own remark about how fat he was, would have sounded like just what it was. Bullshit. I just couldn't see doing that to him. I didn't want to start our association out that way, with a lie.

So after a very awkward silence, it was the Fatman who pressed on:

"Anyway, because I'm carrying as much weight as I am, I don't have too long before my ticker just gives out. I'm nearly forty, you see. And my doctor, well, I'll tell you, my friend--every single time he sees me, he makes a face about as horrified as you did when you first laid eyes on me. A professional man like that, no less. He blanches every time he sees me, like it's the first time. Every doctor I've gone to does that. I don't know why I can't stop eatin' so much. That's a discussion for another time, I guess. But my point is, doctors tell me I got a few more years--five, max--before I have the mother of all heart attacks, and keel right over."

The Fatman sighed and caught his breath, as if in just stating this, it took years off his life. But then he pressed on:

"So anyway, I made up my mind, right after that poor waif left with her black eye, and the poor kid with his broken arm. I decided, what the hell, I'm gonna do some good in this world before I leave it! Without worrying about the consequences, get it? Because I got nothin' to lose. And I need someone like you, friend, who also don't have diddly to lose, to help me do it." The Fatman leaned close, a twinkle in his eye, as he said, *"Do some good, that is. In a style that is, shall we say. . . inimitable, and invisible."*

I smiled in spite of myself and I hit the "rewind" button in my brain, and I played those words back several times: "Inimitable and invisible." "Inimitable and invisible." It sounded like some kind of secret oath for Superheroes. . .

He saw me chewing on this, grinned wryly, but said nothing. He waited for me to speak. I eyed him, thinking out loud.

"So let me make the leap here. If you hired a P.I., he'd follow her, come back with the upsetting but not so startling news that some guy is beating on her, the P.I. would take your money and run, and you'd only be worrying worse."

"Exactly," said the Fatman, smiling huge. Blackberry seeds were stuck between his teeth, berry guts blackening some of them, and it made it kind of hard to look him in the eye, but I got the feeling that looking him in the eye was extremely important right about now, so I tried to ignore it. The blueberry guts, that is. I pressed on.

"So let me see. You figured from my ad that I sounded just desperate enough, so that maybe between the two of us, we could do some good. You were waiting to decide, of course, until after you met me, and saw if I was too desperate, too weird, in which case you would have started over from square one?"

The Fatman nodded his head, beaming, but half-shutting his eyes. He was so pleased I'd "gotten it." When he spoke, it was almost in a whisper.

"You know, friend, this town destroys most of the good spirits that want to take root here. A lot of folks, they're just too nice for Hollywood."

"What exactly is your plan?" I asked. "After I follow her and confirm about the beatings, what then? Because I meant what I said in the ad, about not doing anything illegal. I'm not some wiseguy, you know. I'm not gonna whack the guy for you."

"Oh, I know that," said the Fatman. "I respect that. Whacking the guy is not what I had in mind at all. In fact, just between you and me--I don't have a plan. Didn't when I answered your ad. But I also didn't have an ally, then, and I think I have one now."

I smiled, but I was hesitant. Frankly, this all this struck me as a little too weird. And that's when it happened. A limo pulled up in front of a post-production company called LAST CHANCE, the place where I had put the finishing touches on some of my finest films, and Stephen Spielberg got out. He and I were actually buddies once, before I--well, we used to golf together. (By the way, everyone in Hollywood claims they're tight with Stephen, but in my case, it was really the truth.) Suddenly I looked at Stephen, in his Hawaiian shirt and his Raybans, then I looked at the Fatman with his fat and his folds and his blackberry teeth. I pictured myself squatting in the muck, spying on some chick. Then I remembered Spielberg's barbecues in Malibu. What the hell had my life come to?

"Hey, this has been very interesting," I said, brushing the crumbs off my lap. "I mean that sincerely. Maybe when I have some spare change, I'll come back and buy some of your books. But this whole business of following the woman and spying, well, it just doesn't sound like my kind of thing. A little too cloak and dagger for me."

The Fatman glowered at me for rejecting him.

"Why not? Is your daytimer all filled up with important meetings?" snapped the Fatman, dismayed at my refusal. But then, he remembered himself. "I'm sorry, stranger. I just had a real good feeling about you for a minute there."

For a split second, I was flattered, and wondered just how long it had been since some nice person had a sincerely "real good feeling" about me.

We shook hands, about to part ways forever, when suddenly the bloodcurdling sound of a man yelling and a woman screaming caught our attention. The Fatman grabbed my arm.

"Hey! It's her."

I whirled around and saw what the Fatman was staring at. At the corner of 3rd Street, a thin woman with dark hair was getting out of a Lexus, when suddenly she was jerked back inside by the driver of the car.

"YOU FUCKING BITCH!"

Some monster was inside the car, screaming. He was holding her by the arm, not letting her out of the car, but he was yelling vile things at her so loudly that even diners brunching al fresco could hear him. The windows of the Lexus were tinted, but the passenger door was ajar, and I watched in horror as the monster in the driver's seat hauled off and gave the woman a sock in the jaw.

Then, a little face leaned forward from the backseat, and everyone for a hundred yards could hear a boy yelling, "LEAVE MOMMY ALONE!"

The boy took a swing at his father, and in that split second, the woman pulled free. She threw herself between the monster's fist and the kid, and she took another one in the face. Undaunted, she leapt from the car, pulling her child after her. The Monster's voice growled from inside the car.

"JUST DON'T YOU BE LATE TONIGHT, OR I SWEAR--"

That's all we heard, and the car screeched off. I never got a good look at his face. All I saw was a mask of rage and those dark sunglasses.

The monster's voice was echoing in my ears; the terror on the woman's face and the fear in the boy's eyes, they were registering on my memory. Forever.

You see, here's the thing:

I had lived in a rarefied and beautiful world, up till recently.

I had been a rich man in a world called Beverly Hills.

And the primary aim of all the many gatekeepers of that world was to shield its inhabitants from all things ugly--ugly sights, ugly smells, ugly textures, ugly scenes, ugly squabbles, ugly feelings.

But all that had changed in the last few weeks. My beautiful world had been methodically obliterated, and I realized that even if I had been granted all my money and power back again, as if by magic, I would never be able to go back to that world again. . .

The woman was on her knees, on the sidewalk, hugging her little boy and checking him to make sure he was alright.

The Fatman just stood there, obviously feeling very helpless. I didn't want him to know that I saw, but there were tears in his eyes. I felt paralyzed with rage. Then, it hit me. The Fatman wasn't helpless. I wasn't helpless.

I turned to him.

"Alright. I'll do it. I'll follow her. I'm not saying what will happen after that, but I will find out what you want to know. Yeah! I'LL FOLLOW HER, AND THEN I'LL FOLLOW THAT BASTARD MONSTER HUSBAND OF HERS, AND SEE WHAT HIS STORY IS!"

The Fatman held out his hand. "Partners?"

"Partners." I said, and we shook on it.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE ADVENTURES BEGIN

I stood frozen. I couldn't get the image of that monster beating on that poor girl and the kid out of my mind. Suddenly I swore and pounded my fist into the wall.

"Shit--we should have gotten the license plate number!" I said, the thought occurring to me when it was seconds too late. But the Fatman was shaking his head "no."

"No use, dead end. This isn't the first time a scene like that has taken place. I jotted down the license plate once before, and had a friend trace it. The car is leased, and he couldn't find out to whom."

"Oh, well, I'm new to this," I said, privately impressed that he'd taken it this far already. "But what the hell. My life is in the toilet. Every day is more boring and depressing than the next. What have I got to lose? I'll jump on your bandwagon. What do you need for me to do?"

The Fatman smiled and clapped me on the back. Then he walked over to his cash register and opened it.

"That's a good man! I told you, I had a good feeling about you!"

He proceeded to pull out several hundred dollar bills. Then he shut the register, lumbered back over, and handed them to me. I know for a fact that my mouth was hanging open, because he had a large gilt mirror hanging over the self-help section, and I caught sight of myself in that mirror. But the Fatman, as he handed me the chubby wad of cash, he was acting like the gesture was nothing.

Or, more properly, like it was *something*--the beginning of a partnership, and this money was sealing the deal.

He pressed it into my hand and stared at me in great earnest. "Now don't get so excited, this isn't for you. This isn't payment or anything, not yet. This is so you can go buy one of those videocameras. Isn't that the way they're doing things lately? Remember that drugged out jerk, Rodent King, how they caught the cops beating him up on tape? And all those reality cop shows, and stuff? Catching the heinous crime on videotape?"

"Well, yes," I stammered, still in a state of shock. This man, who had known me about ten minutes, had just handed me nearly a grand. In cash, no less. The Fatman was so excited that he spit little droplets of saliva on my new-used shirt as he spoke.

"I want you to go to the store and get outfitted. Buy a camera, some blank tape. What else would you need? A tripod?"

"Actually no, probably not for this kind of work."

"Well, whatever, just talk to the salesman, figure it all out."

I was just standing there, stunned, still clutching the wad of money in my hand.

"Aren't you coming with me?" I asked.

Suddenly the Fatman looked sheepish and stared down at his shoes. I had never seen shoes so wide in my life; they looked like twin harbor barges.

"Uh, I don't care for going out in public," he said, looking away in embarrassment. I, too, was embarrassed that I didn't anticipate why he wanted me to go instead of him. Then, as if to dissipate the discomfort between us, the Fatman added quickly,

"Besides, this is a very busy time of year in the bookstore. I can't just close up, just like that."

But I was still in shock. I stared down at the money clutched in my sweaty hand.

"But--you're just *giving* me this money?"

He nodded impatiently and actually started pushing me towards the door of the bookstore.

"Yeah, I am, and you're giving me a panic attack, because while you are just standing there with that stupid look on your face, this woman's tormentor is getting meaner by the minute."

I looked at him. He wrapped my hand around the money.

"Go already. There's a Sears on 4th Street. It's within walking distance. Or better yet, here's another twenty, take a cab, your dog will be fine here in the store. I don't like him, but I'll watch him, I promise. Now just get the ball rolling, man! The clock is ticking for our damsel in distress!"

I nodded slowly, and turned to go. I gave Blue a look that he should "SIT, STAY," which he did, and then I looked back at the Fatman, still amazed, and then. . .I just walked out of the store, clutching a thousand dollars cash.

As I did, I heard the Fatman calling me. I nodded cynically when I heard the waves of his thunderous voice hitting me in the back. Yes, that was more like it. Now it was coming--some caveat, a threat.

No doubt he was going to warn me not to rip him off, betray his trust, some dire threat perhaps, should I abscond with the cash.

"Hey friend," bellowed the Fatman. "You know, you got a big grease spot on the back of your pants. There's a little Chink dry cleaner, Kim Lee, a couple of stores down. He can squirt something on it, so it won't set."

I nodded and muttered thank you.

Then I headed off to buy a videocamera

As I was heading back to the bookstore a couple of hours later, still stunned over everything that had happened, and loaded down with Sears bags, I saw something. More specifically, I spied something which gave me yet another insight into the Fatman's character. I cannot say that it was my first look into his soul, because I felt that he had revealed quite a great deal about himself already.

But what I found out that night on my way home (although I guess that is a Freudian slip, I was homeless, the Fatman's bookstore was not my home, although it would come to feel like one, and quickly, the nearest thing I'd had to a home in--)

--Well, anyway, there I was, walking down the street, taking in the glorious sunset over the Pacific Ocean, and munching a corndog that some tourist kids bought for me out of pity. In spite of my new pre-owned clothes, I apparently still looked homeless; they assumed that I was a bag man and the Sears bags contained all my worldly goods. I thought that this was pretty ironic--the corndog that is, for two reasons:

1.) I still had over a hundred bucks in change in my pocket, from the video purchase.

2.) I also found it very painfully ironic, since one of the kids was wearing a t-shirt with the movie poster on it from my last big hit motion picture.

How Fate Loves a Jest.

It was dark out, and I was a jumble of confused emotions. My life had gotten even weirder, but definitely better. The boredom was certainly gone. My life looked like it might get more dangerous, but

more worthwhile. Yes? In short, there now seemed to be a reason for living. A point to my life.

All of that had been the gift of the Fatman, and his valiant cause.

However, incidents like the gift of the corndog and the jab of the T-shirt could send me plummeting into depression. I had made that movie. I had made movies for years. Then, damn it to hell, that demon coke got ahold of me and my life was in the toilet. On Pacific Avenue, Jags and Porsches and Mercedes all whizzed by. A year ago, that had been me. Now I didn't even own a skateboard.

Yet why did I feel like I was having more fun lately than I had in the last couple of years in the movie biz, watching all my pet ideas get shot down, while my agent and the studio put together stupid predictable repetitive formulaic crap for me to direct?

Oh well. I was just heading into the alley that led past the back of the Fatman's store, when I stopped short. I heard Blue's bark. I got very alarmed all of a sudden; that tragic night that I had saved him from a fate worse than death flashed through my mind. I started to run towards the sound of his barking--then stopped and listened more carefully. That was not his upset bark. That was Blue's playful bark. I knew my own dog, I'd know that bark anywhere.

I trotted down the alley, and what do you think I saw?

There was the Fatman, sitting in the backyard of a house, just down the alley from the bookstore. I learned later that this was where the Fatman lived. The Fatman was plopped down in his big old chair, and he was playing with Blue. Apparently, that sweet old Jabba the Hud had gone and gotten Blue a toy, behind my back, some plastic thing that resembled a rolled up newspaper.

"Go Blue! Fetch the paper!" the Fatman yelled, and sure enough, Blue would bound after it to see where it had gotten to--the rose bushes, or in the spice garden, or behind the shed. Then Blue would come bounding back to the Fatman, proudly bearing the toy, and taunting the Fatman to throw it so that Blue could fetch it again.

And the Fatman did throw it again, and Blue did fetch it again, and they went on like this for the longest time. I must tell you, it was delightful.

I stayed there until they were finished, hiding myself from view.

Finally the Fatman went in, and he came back out, and whaddy know, he'd made up a big old bowl of food, which Blue

wolfed down gratefully. Then, when Blue was finished, I ambled up to the Fatman's house. Blue greeted me warmly, barking and bouncing. The Fatman saw me from his kitchen window, waved, and trudged out. He had two open bottles of Yoohoo in his hand, and he offered me one. It wouldn't have been my beverage of choice, (Yoohoo was not big in the circles I'd traveled previously), but I took it when he offered and drank deeply, not realizing how thirsty my pilgrimage had made me. The Fatman smiled expectantly.

"Well, how'd it go?"

"Fine," I shrugged.

I handed him the big bag with all the camera equipment, a receipt, and all the change left over from the money he'd given me, down to the last penny. He nodded, and patted me on the back.

"Thanks. Uh. Thanks. Well, it's getting pretty late, so we'll get started tomorrow. If you have time in your schedule."

And no, he didn't say this sarcastically. He just waited for me to respond and I nodded awkwardly and sipped my Yoohoo.

And he took a swig of his.

Dum de dum de dum. . .

Finally, I couldn't stand it anymore.

"Look," I said, blurting it out, "I have to know--why did you trust me, a perfect stranger, with a thousand dollars in cash? You just handed it over to me, and you trusted that I'd come back with a videocam and all the trimmings. You didn't even want to go along with me. Why on earth would you do something so naive? Please don't take this wrong, but it seemed like a very foolish thing to do."

But the Fatman did not get upset. He just smiled softly.

"No, I won't take that wrong at all. It's a fair question, and you're right. It could have appeared to be a foolish thing to do. But, as Hamlet said, "I am but mad north by northwest, I know a hack from a handsaw."

The Fatman leaned towards me and smiled.

"I am but mad north by northwest!" the Fatman repeated dramatically, with a wag of his finger.

I didn't know what the hell he was talking about.

"What the hell are you talking about," I asked, finishing off my Yoohoo.

He eyeballed me. He looked annoyed.

"You know, friend, for a storyteller, you don't know much about the greatest storyteller of all time."

I coughed up some Yoohoo that'd gone down the wrong spout.

"What are you talking about?"

His annoyance seemed to flex.

"I'm talking about what's wrong with Hollywood! You movie makers have no grounding, never studied Shakespeare or Shaw or Greek mythology! Why I bet you haven't read a dozen great novels among the lot of you."

I blinked and stared.

"You know who I am?"

The Fatman nodded.

"Serendipity," he said, smirking, "Oh. Sorry. For the not-very-well-read among us, that means 'a twist of fate.' Yes, of course I know who you are. I have a customer who's a fanatic for horror film memorabilia, and I came across some stills showing you working backstage on one of your features."

I was shocked. The Fatman smiled slightly, just the left side of his mouth curving up.

"Does it make you feel bad, Mr. Homeless Man? I mean, that I know that you fell so far from grace with the sea? 'Whom the gods wish to destroy, they first call promising!' and all that."

I bristled.

"Well, I wouldn't have phrased it quite that way."

"Of course not," he retorted. "You're not that poetic."

"Hey! There's no need to be purposely mean," I said.

Because I really was hurt.

"Yeah, I'm mean sometimes," he said, picking absently at the label on his Yoohoo. "I suppose that's because life has been fairly mean to me, and sometimes I feel like lashing out. But I'm willing to bet that you screwed up all on your own. Nose candy? Sniffy-sniff? Was that what did you in? Because, I hate to be blunt, but a couple of failed movies don't land you on the streets. Oh, it may cramp your style a little, but you must have been rolling in money."

I humphed.

"Yeah. OK. You're right. Powdered poison. I got into it real bad. But I haven't touched it in months. Well, weeks. And I never intend to touch it again. Just a drop to drink, every now and again."

The Fatman nodded. He knew I was being honest, and he respected that. Suddenly he chuckled and patted me on the back again, this time nearly knocking me off the bench. He snorted when he laughed hard.

"I didn't mean to be cruel before, kiddo. Man, it must hurt, to have been King of the Hill, and now be homeless."

I looked in his eyes.

"As much as it hurts to be really, really, obese?"

I KNOW, I KNOW. Looking back on that moment, I still can't believe I said it. But I didn't say it in the spirit of being hurtful. I SWEAR I DID NOT. It's just that from the very beginning, there had been a kind of candor between the Fatman and me. And trust. We were talking frankly, about weird subjects, no less. How can I explain this? The man was so large, so very fat, so unusually huge, that his malady was more along the lines of a person missing one leg, or with a horribly scarred face, or in a wheelchair.

And the truth is that at some point in your friendship, it has to come up, because if you never do bring it up, it gets to be like the metaphorical elephant in the room that everyone knows is there, but everybody is afraid to confront. Eventually, not asking becomes more awkward than the awkwardness of asking. Does that make any sense?

Of course, if you met someone who was merely overweight, you'd never be cruel enough to say anything like that. But remember, the Fatman was not just overweight, he was surely one of the fattest people in the whole wide world. But that Fatman was also no fool. In addition to being a very wide man, he was also a very wise man. He knew that sooner or later, his astonishing size had to be acknowledged. So I chose "sooner" so as to clear the air, and that's my explanation, and I'm sticking by it.

And so, after the comment hung in the air for a few moments, like an undissipated fart, the Fatman just looked at me with old, sad eyes.

"Yeah. It hurts to be obese. Just like it hurts for you to be homeless. And for me to know that you were once one of the princes of this town."

He pulled a mini-bag of Funyons out of his pocket and munched sadly, absently. He talked with his mouth full.

"I had to let you know that I knew who you were, my friend. Even though I knew it would humiliate you, to realize that someone else knew how far you'd fallen."

I shook my head, not satisfied.

"But that still doesn't explain why you gave me all that cash. Surely what you knew about me would have made me seem that much more desperate. How on earth did you know I'd come back?"

The Fatman just grinned.

"Because you're no fool. Look at it logically. Robbing me would have been a one time deal. Then you'd be on the run. Couldn't even beg out in the open. But you're smart enough to figure out that there's much more money to be had by doing my bidding, coming back with the videocam and my change, and just bidding your time. Why, you're a Hollywood producer! You don't steal small, it's not in your blood. You want a percentage of my blood, is what you want! Of the gross, not the net. You wouldn't be satisfied with a mere pound of flesh. See, you figure, if the Fatman's got that kind of cash and I'd casually trust you with it, you're sharp enough to know there's more where that came from. Wait till the moment is right, and surely you could get away with a lot more."

I took no offense at what he said, instead I just shook my head and stared at him.

"I gotta say it again--no offense, but how do you know I'm not planning that right now? To run off with your fortune or nest egg or whatever. How do you know you didn't just put the idea in my head?"

"Because. . ."

He said it slowly, the Fatman did, and he leaned forward towards me when he spoke, ". . .Because that's not your style. See, I figure that what you want, what you really want, what you dream about when you fall asleep under that Santa Monica Pier at night, is not women or sirloin steak, or a comfy bed, or having your Mercedes back--"

"--Actually I drove a Jag."

"Don't interrupt. Time for you to get your manners back. You know what I mean. What you dream about obsessively is none of those things. Nor do you dream of those days before the coke had you, before it flushed your life down the crapper."

He paused a moment, looking at me with a twinkle in his eye.

"What you fantasize about, Mr. Homeless Dude, is your big comeback."

I said nothing. He had me pegged. This was kind of fun. Like going to a gypsy fortune teller. He continued, relentless.

"Since you don't originally come from the gutter, my friend, you're smart enough to figure out that what you could steal from me

wouldn't be enough to really get you back on your feet. Not Hollywood style. Hell, you'd need a hundred thousand up front, just to get a decent address, passable wheels, the right clothes, folding money for all the best stores and restaurants. Also, of course, you've got to be able to get a woman to ornament the passenger seat. So even if you didn't know that *I know who you are*--which means, of course, that if you *did* rob me, you'd probably get caught, unless you dropped out of sight and moved to Mexico, which is the last thing you want--that would be the opposite of a comeback."

I was chuckling in spite of myself as he waxed on. He was completely accurate.

"And since you've been beating your brains, trying to figure out how the hell to come up with that kind of cash, and since you've resigned yourself to the fact that it's impossible-- Lord have mercy, that realization must have depressed the hell out of you."

He paused for drama, allowing the momentum to build.

"But there is one thing Hollywood can't resist, even from a guy in a cheap suit and a dented car. And that is--a killer story. Hollywood adores a great story. All the more so if it's weird and cutting and edgy, and has sex and violence, good and evil. Especially if the person who has that story to tell also happens to have the connections to get a pitch meeting. Isn't that what you call those little confabs? I mean, hell, everyone knows this town is built on nepotism and incestuous deals. From what I hear, there's only about twenty-seven really powerful people in this whole town, and you only talk to each other to get your ideas. Cripes, Hollywood is more inbred than European royalty or that front porch on Deliverance. That's why so many of your movies are so abysmal, by the way."

Well. I was not enjoying the direction his rant was taking quite as much as I had been. Still, most of what he was saying was right on the mark.

He jammed a hunk of cheddar into his mouth, and talked as he chewed, gesturing grandly with the paring knife.

"Admit it. With me, my friend, you are starting to sense a story. Oh, I'm not saying my life story would make a blockbuster--although I am looking for someone to write my personal biography before I keel over from this overworked heart. But this business we've started up, following this poor waif around, the whole plan. Well, it feels like a story, doesn't it? I'm not even saying that *this* is the story you'll use to make your comeback, although who knows? I

know things about this poor waif that you don't. Yet. What I *am* saying, however, is. . ."

Then his eyes darted back and forth, as if to see if anybody was watching.

"You see, Mr. Homeless Dude, since I don't have very long left, I told you I intend to do some good. I'm not just talking about giving money to charity or leaving my fortune to some worthy cause. . ."

Then his eyes got really beady, and he spoke in a low voice:

". . .I'm talking about fighting crime. Ever see 'Star Chamber?' I love that movie."

I blanched.

"Hey, slow down. You're not talking about going around killing people, are you?"

"No, nothing that extreme," he said, yawning casually, as if we were making small talk. "I'm one of the good guys, remember."

"Yeah, but Michael Douglas and Hal Holbrook were the good guys in that movie, and they were whacking people left and right."

"Well, regardless, I'm not talking about that kind of thing," said the Fatman, his wicked grin coming back. "I'm talking devious, yes, creative. But more like this thing with rescuing this poor woman. Plus, I got a few other things up my blousy sleeves."

I eyed him, but said nothing. He smiled.

"Ah, I can tell you're intrigued. Look, don't do anything you're not comfortable doing. But these are some real stories you'll be able to tell. Just settle into that idea for now. Does that sound like a plan, friend?"

An awkward silence fell between us. I suppose because now, our first meeting was over, our first day together was over, and he pretty much intuited what I was going to do now. Just head off down the alley with my mutt dog and go be homeless again.

But you could just tell what he was thinking. He was wrestling with what would be the right thing to do next. He had obviously decided to cut me loose for the night. In his place I would have agreed--that he couldn't exactly invite me, a perfect stranger, a homeless guy, a vagrant, an addict, into his house to do what? Live with him? Because even if he had decided to be, you know, nice, and ask me to stay the night, well then what's he going to do, kick me out again the next day? That would have seemed even colder than not asking me in the first place.

"Look, friend, I'd ask you in," he said, "But I just got a stack of new catalogues I need to look over tonight. You understand."

"Oh sure," I said.

"By the by," he mumbled, handing me a Tupperware container. "I made a huge batch of spaghetti with sauce. Too much for even me to eat, if you can imagine such a thing. So I figured what the hell, you'd probably have an appetite by the time you got back. Oh, and here's another cold Yoohoo to go with it. Also I wrapped up some brownies in foil. Iced. I make them myself. But now, if you'll excuse me, I gotta go in. Got a lotta things to do."

I tried not to let him see that I was smirking. He was such a sweetheart. Oh, he tried to act so tough, but he was a pussycat.

He got up and lumbered over to his humble abode. He let himself in, and as he was shutting the door, he leaned out--

"Oh. And take that dog with you. I hate that dog."

I smiled and nodded, called to Blue, and we headed off into the night.

CHAPTER EIGHT: A WHIFF OF THE BOOKSTORE AND I SPY

I spent the night under the Santa Monica pier, and as usual, I did not sleep well. Except tonight, my sleeplessness was of a different sort than all the other nights. I rarely sleep soundly, which I have already told you, and this night was no exception.

But it was an exception *sort of*, you see, because this night it was excitement, and the anticipation of the next day's adventures, that was intruding on my zzzzz's, rather than depression and desperation and doldrums, which are so endemic to my subspecies that you might call them the three D's of Homelessness.

I don't think I mentioned this before, but Blue was the most wonderfully attentive companion. From the first night I got him, he seemed to have this sixth sense about my worry and preoccupations, and whenever I woke my eyes in the middle of the night, I would find Blue, wide awake, staring right at me, as if offering to help. Lend an ear. Somehow, in his mystical doggie way, he always intuited my profound concerns, just before they woke me: he always woke up first.

Damn, I love that dog.

But to return to my tossing and turning. Huzzah, it was not demons that pricked at me that night, waking me up a half a dozen times. It was the excitement of this weird new role I had assumed. Was I really going to follow her around and lay in wait with my camera, like a stalker or a P.I. or a Paparazzi? It was titillating.

What would we do with this information? What would we do if I came back with footage of some brute beating the hell out of a frail young woman and helpless little boy? The Fatman had said he wouldn't ASK ME to do anything illegal, and he seemed sincere when he said it, but the Fatman had not said that HE would not do anything illegal about it. I pondered all these things as I shared a half-eaten burrito with Blue that I'd found in the trash. It was still warm, and only

had a couple of bugs nibbling who got there first. I picked them off and started munching. The burrito, not the bugs, that is. Tasty, tasty.

And what about after this adventure was over, would there be more cloak-and-dagger to follow? And money! Gosh, we hadn't even discussed payment.

I finally did fall asleep. Tomorrow--but I guess it was actually today--would provide all the answers.

We hadn't even decided on a time to meet next, but I was so anxious that I ended up being there at the bookstore at nine a.m., clutching a styrofoam cup of coffee, waiting for the Fatman to open the doors.

Imagine how startled I was, then, when the door to the bookstore opened and *she* was standing there. She was the one that had opened the door for me. That frightened little bird of a creature. So shaken was I that I swallowed my coffee wrong and snorted it through my nose. Embarrassing, embarrassing.

"Uh--I--Uh. . ." is what I believe I said.

She smiled. She was wearing her big Chanel sunglasses and you couldn't see her bruised eye, and I guess she knew that, because she didn't look too self-conscious about it.

"The owner just went down the street for a moment. But the store is open."

"Oh," I said, nodding stupidly and easing my way in. I moseyed over to the stairs and headed up. I didn't want her to get a good look at my face, in case she might later spot me and recognize me when I was shadowing her.

Taped to the stairwell was a big note written with a really fat magic marker:

GONE FOR BAGELS
BACK SOON
BROWSE AT YOUR LEISURE
--PROPRIETOR

I shrugged, finding that very odd, indeed, that he would leave the place unattended, but what was that my business? I made my way to the second floor, found a little stool, and spied on her. Taping her was out of the question, I had left all the new equipment with the Fatman.

So instead, I took rapid notes--something which I was not used to doing. I had never in my life taken dictation, and I don't think I ever even took notes in college, although I should have been doing so for four years. Like everything else that REALLY MATTERED in my pre-homeless days, I had found a way to avoid it.

But now, ooh, now I could not write fast enough. This was the first entry of my Adventures with the Fattest Crimefighter in the World and I wanted to remember every detail of it.

Here are those notes. (I should add that later, the Fatman went over what I have written about the bookstore below, and he fattened it up with his own poetic stylings:)

mm.....rough title. . . .
BEHIND THE CHANEL SUNGLASSES
OR,
OUR ADVENTURES BEGIN.

Well, the Fatman had been right. The young woman was obviously not poor, quite the opposite in fact. You could tell if you looked at her clothes, jewelry, and accessories. If you knew a little something about Rodeo Drive, you could tell she was not poor. (Although you could see why, when the Fatman had first seen her, he had assumed that she was poor, because of a waifish poverty of spirit that she exuded: lack of confidence, lack of a lust for life--which, by all rights, a person with her bucks certainly ought to enjoy, since she possessed, he found out later, the bushels of dollars needed to satisfy any lusts and whims she might have.)

Also, she was quite beautiful, but lacked that casual and confident arrogance that one associates with a woman who is stunning, and knows it.

No, instead, this little thing would creep into the Fatman's bookstore, almost as though she was unbidden and unwanted. This is what he told me, by way of background information:

The first time she had come in, she had crept in so noiselessly, like a ghost, that she somehow managed to *not* make the little bells over the front door tinkle. The Fatman remembered this vividly, because he was sitting right behind the register--his beautiful, old-fashioned cash register, Victorian, ornate gold. . .it hearkened back to a simpler time that he treasured. . .and he should have heard that bell over the front door tinkle, but he didn't. Why not?

And then, for a split second, he thought that perhaps she had it in her mind to steal from him, for the Fatman had many valuable books on his shelves. But one look at this poor little waif, and you just knew that she did not have it in her. She had the unmistakable look of a frightened soul, a terrified creature, who had difficulty even laying claim to that which was her own--like her self-respect, or her right to laugh out loud spontaneously, or her right to leave a function when she found it dull, or generally speaking, the right to claim her share of the cosmic poo-poo platter--much less being able to purloin that which belonged to somebody else.

The Fatman had been immediately intrigued and moved by this creature. No, not attracted to her, although certainly she was mighty pretty, he noticed. But his first reaction to her was more. . .more protective, like. As though she was the daughter he might have had, had the Fatman not been so obese, had he been capable of attracting a wife, a trick that even the homely among us can usually pull off.

He had watched her meander through the store, a dreamy smile on her face, as she pulled some of his rarest and most wonderfully precious treasures from the dusty shelves. She seemed to have an instinct for picking out some of his most valuable books.

. . .Oh, you may be wondering why he didn't have these rarest and most wonderful treasures behind glass or locked in cabinets. I have asked him this question myself. A lot of folks are inclined towards sticky fingers, after all. Well, there were several reasons for that, he explained to me.

The first reason is that most everything in that store was somewhat valuable, and if the Fatman had been *that* paranoid about thieves, he would have ended up with everything in that bookstore being under lock and key. It would have become a fortress. It would have lost its casual and friendly and welcoming atmosphere, which is what he loved most about it. It was one of the reasons that folks always came back to hang out in the shop. And since his customers constituted the sum total of the Fatman's human contact, this was very precious to him. Very precious.

The second reason that he didn't lock up all of his old and valuable books and bits was that doing so might change the smell of the place. . .that inimitable, indescribable "used bookstore aroma" that was

a blend of dust and must, ghosts and guises, treacle and dreams. And indeed, there were many folks who came in for that alone.

I knew just what the Fatman meant when he said that, for I had noticed it right off, first time I entered the bookstore. The shop seemed to smell different than any other place I've ever been in, wonderful. Delightful.

But not "delightful" in that oh-so annoying way that twee little gift shops smell, that have been sprayed to a fair-thee-well with odorama, and planted with little land mines of cinnamon-vanilla-apple-spice and gardenia-rose-mulberry-spring-blossom-potpourri-topiary nestled amongst linen hankies and napkin rings and lingerie sachets, lurking and ready to explode an anthrax of aromatherapy into your nose. And for the rest of the day that cloyingly sweet smell sticks to your clothes and in your sinuses.

No.

The Fatman's bookstore smelled of all the memories and spirits, philosophies and phantoms, that it truly did contain--what Tennyson called "the eternal landscape of the past"--what the Fatman called, "the relevant revelants"--that it truly did contain, I came to believe this.

It smelled of sweet little grandmothers with their lavender toilet water and their tin of licorice, giving you quarters from a hankie pinned to their calico dress, so you could buy comic books, which were forbidden by your parents. . . . it smelled of chaps sipping brandy and stuffing tobacco into their meerschaums, sitting in their libreez, in their deep leather chairs, discussing the events of the day, whilst surrounded by books hearkening back to the manifold mysteries of the past. . . . it smelled of sneaking the gingerbread cake that you weren't supposed to touch into the attic, so that you could munch it while you read Nancy Drew or Hardy Boys on the sly, even though you knew darn well, young man, knew perfectly well, young lady, that you were supposed to be doing the multiplication tables that chalky old Miss Peachtree assigned just hours ago, in that grey brick classroom dungeon, while you stared out the prison bars beyond the moat, at the green greener greenest spirits of trees, on the most perfect first day of spring you could possibly imagine. And you could imagine a great deal.

The bookstore smelled dank and dangerous, as dank and dangerous as the heath bogs that Cathy and Heathcliff wandered, as they gathered heather and played "gypsy and the lady." It smelled of soggy tartan shawls and wet dogs and crackling fires you curled up in front of, to fight the chill of those misty maudlin moors. And cuddling-huddling next to the dancing flames with your beloved, you pledged eternal devotion or revenge, whichever came first, whichever lasted longest: "They say ghosts have walked upon the earth! Haunt me then, Catherine Earnshaw, only do not leave me alone in this abyss, where I cannot find you!"

That book store, it smelled of musket fire, still smoking from the gun of a young civil war soldier who has just killed a man for the first time--his best childhood friend from the hill over the way in the Shenandoahs. . .It smelled of venison being cooked over a campfire in the middle of the deep woods as you, an explorer, squatted down with a Cherokee--you are the only one the Indians would trust to talk to; they spoke a bit of broken English, and you spoke a little of their tongue, and the two of you not only negotiated a fragile peace, but even told jokes and laughed as you cut off hunks of venison with your bowie knives, then let the laughter fade into the dusky air as you stared up in reverent mutual silence at the tall tall trees, their branches black against the sky that had become an inferno of clouds in the setting sun.

It smelled salty, that bookstore, of fish and sea foam and wet wood and whiskey and sweat, as you struggled with the rigging while the ocean winds slapped you around. A nor'easter was blowing up, and one mistake could scuttle the ship and cost the crew its life. . .It smelled of fresh summer morning air and pig poop and sawdust and the aroma of oats being poured for the horses as you, still wet behind the ears, did your morning chores, not knowing that in just a few minutes, the adventure of a lifetime was about to begin for you--you, just a wee lad who watches the golden tall corn ripple in the fields, while you dream that it is the rolling dark waves on a high blue sea.

It smelled of big cities, of young girls in straw hats clutching tattered suitcases getting off the bus, and being assaulted by the bus fumes and the smell of the steam (mustard and meat and kraut) from the sausage vendors and mob B.O., the smell of fresh fat bouquets of the flower vendor just outside the tall silver building which reached to

the clouds, and you had to hold onto your hat as you craned your neck and squinted way, way up to see where the skyscraper met the skyline.

It smelled like bloody murder, that bookstore did, my friend, it smelled of very foul business indeed. It reeked to the high heavens of trouble, three day old trouble, as you, dressed in your black and white pin stripe double breasted, left the diner down the street where you was having a casual cupa Joe, kiddin' around with Helen the waitress, askin', "Was she ever gonna replace the bulbs in the neon sign, cause with the last two letters of her name burned out, it read "Hel's Diner"--and that's when you both heard the scream! You hurried down the alley, your wingtips slapping against the pavement, echoing in the lonely dark night, and throwing your shoulder against the door to break in and discover what that scream was all about, suddenly you enter a black and white room from a grey grey world outside, into this film noire alcove of shabby crimes and shattered dreams, where a black and white corpse was sprawled out on a black and white Persian rug, the blood splattered all over the black and white love seat and the black and white bric-a-brac, and the black and white paintings on the walls (one drop of blood had splattered the portrait-in-oil of our heroine, and it was there on her white cheek, just like a bloody tear), and even though the blood, too, was black, just like this whole world stank of black and white--you thought, as the thunder and lightning crackled across the film noire pages of your book, that it didn't make it any less real, any less of a damnable nasty business where you knew, just knew that you were going to meet some mighty shady characters, take on the cops and the D.A. and yeah, even trade a couple of left hooks with your best pal, and get crossed by a dame to boot, but her gams and her sweet puss and that way she French exhaled those smoke signals from her non filtered eleventh digit-had made you her patsy. Oh, you'd have given it all up for her! If only. . .if only. . .

The bookstore smelled of tea and cakes, honey and haycorns, and the Hundred Acre Woods, as bears romped with best friends and played Poohsticks at the Hundred Acre Footbridge crossing the babbling brook, as you chattered about which adventure to have today--discover the North Pole, or rescue a friend from their most trembly fears. And always, always, the Heffalumps lurk all around you, threatening your dreams with spookalishish nightmares. . .

The bookstore smelled of castles, dank dark grey castles, full of specters and secrets and shadows that were thrown upon the wall, as you carried your candelabra up the musty stone steps, leading your visitor--a stranger who had stumbled to the gothic entrance doors, frantically pounded the front knocker and then fainted--and now you were leading them to their bedroom chamber, something you felt vaguely guilty about because you knew that was the bedroom where. . .well, let's just say, shrieks and moans, terrifying otherworldly cries and whispers had been heard coming from (shriek!) that very room, ghostly apparitions seen, objects moved, and reflections of those long dead seen in the mirror.

That bookstore smelled of smoke, but not just any smoke--the smoke that belches from the Orient Express, as you hurry to the First Class car that is reserved exclusively for you and your party, as the porter struggles under the weight of your seven tapestry bags and your steamer trunks. You lick your lips, imagining the gourmet meals to come, as bheesties brush by on their way to the restaurant car, with their crates of geese and salmon, cheeses and fruits, oysters and lobster, shrimp and shallots, sweetmeats and patisserie and gateau, delicacies as decadent as a demimonde--tins of Beluga from points east, and boxes of foil covered confections from the tiny Swiss villages whose sweet tidy inhabitants had done nothing for centuries but tend to their chalet flower boxes and make the best chocolates in the world. And last but most importantly, the crates of vintage wines from France and Italy. . .and oh, woe is you! You could not begin to imagine that in a few hours, your corpse would be lying dead and mangled on the tracks, as the Orient Express whisked to Istanbul. . .but so enraged was your ghost, by its fiendish killer snuffing out your youthful life, that you haunt the Express, until brilliant detectives wrest remembered details out of frail young ladies, dark histories from rich pompous passengers, and confessions from killers who seemed, from all outward appearance, like the last people in the world who would push you from the train car, as you stared at the full moon and savored a Turkish cigarette with Anisette. . .ah, tragedy!. . .and who is that mysterious man in the burgundy fez, twirling his mustache? Who, indeed?

Here is the thing, though. A Super Crown just didn't smell like that. A Super Crown, with its New York Times Bestsellers and its Martha Stewart Tips For Beautifying Your Bathroom, and its coffee

table books about the Wonders of New Jersey and its EUROPEAN TOURING FOR DUMMIES and its little pocket gift books about how funny it would be if your cat could speak French and its colorized Shepherd illustrations in the Pooh books and its Dilbert pocket protectors sold as gifts near the clerk, who when you ask them where is the Proust has a puzzled look on their androgynous face and has to look it up on the computer. No, a Super Crown did not smell anything like the Fatman's bookstore.

Nor, even, did an Amazon.com, which while offering those wonderfully obscure titles, and while existing in a whole 'nother earthly dimension, still did not smell like the Fatman's bookstore, still did not contain his wonderful treasures. . .And even the noble Barnes and Noble *could not* produce for you, upon request, as could the Fatman, with a Santa-esque wink of his eye, old Green Lantern comic books or Shirley Temple Paper dolls or politically incorrect first editions of Tom Sawyer and Little Black Sambo, or Boy Scout Handbooks printed the year you graduated Webelos, or Life Magazines published the week you were born.

The Fatman's bookstore smelled of--

--Suddenly, I heard the bells tinkle over the door. It pulled me out of my reverie, which was probably just as well, for I had almost forgotten that my goal was--our goal was--for me to follow this poor girl, who was just a few yards below me, fingering her way gently through a first edition of *The Little Prince*. I studied her with affection, murmuring to myself, "my job is to follow her and watch someone twice her size beating the shit out of her. Beating the crap out of her, and a little boy half her size."

Christ, what had I gotten myself into?

The Fatman saw me crouching upstairs, and with a look and a gesture, he beckoned for me to come down. We hustled into the backroom, and within a minute, my head was spinning. The game, it would appear, was afoot. This was how the adventure began, and so let's begin.

The Fatman wanted this whole thing put together with lightning speed. The second order of business (the first had been buying the camera equipment) was go buy a cellphone and activate an account. And to do this he gave me his car keys--oh, once again I must

back up a bit (everything was happening so fast, I hardly know where to start)--yes, the Fatman had a car.

What was the most bizarre part of all, it was a Volkswagen bug! Not the new model, either, but the old kind! Orange, with rust. Oh, I know, you're thinking the same thing I did when he took me around to the little garage by his house, down the alley from the bookstore, where the bug was parked. No, of course he didn't drive it. He obviously couldn't fit into it. Hell, he was practically bigger than the bug itself, and I truly don't mean that in a cruel way, just as a matter of fact. I can only imagine that he drove it a long, long time ago, before he'd gotten as big as he was now. Or for that matter, maybe he had acquired it some other way, payment of a debt or something. If there was a story behind that odd little car, I never heard it.

The most important thing was that I tried to hide my shocked reaction, because the deep truth was, I didn't want to hurt his feelings. Even before he had given me the wad of money, I found myself coming to care for this sad, fascinating man, because it was just so apparent how good-hearted he was.

Just how long had it been since I had associated with truly good hearted people? For that matter, had I ever?

Suddenly, there I was, toodling around town in the bug (making a mental note that we were going to have to rent a less noticeable car, if following people was going to become a regular thing), cell phone in hand, getting everything set up to follow her.

Meanwhile, the Fatman informed me that he was going back to the computer, to do a little hacking, to find out where the girl lived. Turned out the Fatman was a savvy hacker. The trace of the license plate on the rented car had been a dead end, as had been the address on her checks. But now, the Fatman announced, with me as his ally, and with the plan officially underway, he was sure he could track her down with a little creative. . .well. . .let's leave it at that.

So anyway, outfitted for my new job with all the gadgets and toys I would need, I headed back to the bookstore and sure enough, he had found the address. It was a very fancy address in Beverly Hills. Already there was a glitch in the plan. It was one of those gated communities. I thought maybe this would make the Fatman want to give up on this whole crazy scheme, but he had already worked out the whole thing. The more time I spent with him, the more I came to learn just how brilliant his chubby old brain really was.

As fate would have it, one of his regular bookstore clients was a very successful screenwriter who happened to live in that same gated community. And it turned out, fortuitously enough, that the writer had been in search of some obscure books that the Fatman had recently tracked down for him; the Fatman would hand deliver them himself, and this was the ruse that would get us into the gated community.

Anyway, so here was the plan, crazy as it might sound. The Fatman was really obsessed with this plan by now, really driven--well, let me tell you about our conversation. You really had to hear it. Unfortunately, this was before I had the presence of mind to start tape recording our conversations. But I recall it vividly. It went like this.

"You want me to *what*?" I remember bellowing.

"You heard me. Hide in the trunk."

"You've got to be joking. Are you nuts? For one thing, I couldn't fit into a VW trunk, and for another thing--"

"No, you clodpate. Whenever I have to go out--I try to avoid it whenever possible--but when I must leave the store, I have a car and a driver that I hire from time to time. So, anyway, this is my plan to sneak you and your camera into Kingdom Beverly Hills: I call for a car. They *always* send the same guy, I insist. I don't fancy change, perhaps you've noticed. Anyway, the driver opens the car door for me. Then I distract him, I tell him to get the box of books for me from the back of the bookstore, and that's when we slip you in the trunk. Then my man just drives into the gated community, gets waved in by the guard, who knows we're coming, we drive to the writer's house, which is just down the block from that poor young lady's house, and slip you out of the trunk while the driver is delivering the box of books. Then you just ninja around and do your thing until you get what you need."

I stared at him, nonplused.

"You're crazy. First of all, I don't think anything you said will work. Not getting in the trunk, not getting out of the trunk. What makes you think he'll leave the keys behind when he goes in the bookstore so you can open the trunk in the first place?"

"He always leaves them in the ignition, because he knows I like the air-conditioning full blast and ice cold when I get in. It's a metabolism thing."

I furrowed my eyebrows at him. OK, so maybe that part we could pull off. But, but, but--

"And furthermore--" I was sputtering now,--"Furthermore, what if there's nothing to catch on tape for days? What am I supposed to do, just squat in the bushes all week?"

The Fatman looked both angry and amused all at the same time. He spit when he talked.

"Hey pal, when you came to me, you were homeless! What were you doing then, but squatting in bushes, or close enough? Squatting somewhere. Outside, all day. All night. Only difference between then and now, is then you were scrambling for your next meal, whereas this time, you'll go in with a backpack full of provisions."

He pulled a backpack out from under his desk.

"I have some clothes in here for you to change into, so you'll look like one of those rich folks' gardeners. Be sure and wear the hat, pull it down low. I also took the liberty of having these food supplies sent over from Ski Chalet. Half of this food is stuff that will last, like beef jerky and stuff. The rest of it is from Fountainhead Deli--sandwiches and such."

My eyeballs must have been bulging from my head. The Fatman was chuckling at me.

"Oh, and the other difference I might mention is that before you met me, when you were squatting in the bushes, you probably had what--five, ten bucks in your pocket, if that? Do this for me, friend, and you'll be squatting in the bushes with a nice crisp one hundred dollar bill."

I laughed out loud, so absurd was it all. But at the same time I was really furious, I must tell you. I had just assumed that all this cloak and dagger stuff would also lead to big bucks. I'd noticed that the Fatman was rather casual with money, he certainly wasn't hurting. In fact, I had concluded he must have a pile of it socked away. And I'm supposed to go through all this for a lousy C-note? I had anticipated that he'd be paying me a grand easy, maybe five or ten times that.

"Forget it," I said. "That's an insult. You know very well what I used to make."

"Oh really? Like last week, last month?"

"That's insulting."

"You're desperate."

"I'm not that desperate."

"No, but *she* is."

"Then call the cops."

"You know that'd be pointless."

"Why won't you pay me more?"

"I'm not sure what you'd do with it. Might just get yourself in trouble."

"Hey, it's not your job to watch over me!"

"No, it's my job to watch over *her*."

"It's too dangerous."

"I know we can do this, friend."

"What *we*? You aren't going to be the one squatting in the damn bushes, facing possible arrest and sitting there for God knows how many days!"

"Interesting. You were so enthused, until the issue of money came up."

"If it's so damned important, then why don't you pay me more?"

"Good God, how can anyone who's had as many bad breaks as you claim you've had, *still* be so self-involved? Don't you get it? This monster could be beating up on her as we speak. This isn't about spying my friend, this is about Crimefighting!"

This was the first time I had heard him speak these words. Something about the way he said it. . .can't quite put my finger on it. He softened and looked at me.

"Trust me, my friend. This whole Crimefighting partnership is based on trust. You *will* be a Player again. And part of that will be thanks to me, The Fatman. I'll see to that!"

I didn't know what to say. I was beginning to think that I was as nutty as he was, because I knew that I was going to go through with this.

So let us cut to the chase. In the beginning, it all went so smoothly as to be, well, uninteresting. I would have thought that this whole elaborate "trunk" ruse that the Fatman had planned would have been, at the very least, the stuff of vaudevillian comedy, if not outright film noire drama. (What a picture: me locked in a trunk, breathing up all the precious oxygen, as the plot unfolds, when suddenly!, there is some snafu in the plans, and I am left trapped in that trunk! Suffocating. . .) But no, nothing that dramatic transpired. What happened was this:

When his hired car arrived, the Fatman ambled slowly out to meet it, and the driver, who obviously knew the Fatman well, hurried to help him. The Fatman looked to make sure that the keys were still

dangling in the ignition, and then he politely ordered the driver to the back of the shop to help with some heavier boxes.

I crawled in the trunk with my backpack full of gear, and the Fatman quickly slammed the trunk. Then I could hear him having a casual conversation with the driver, who suspected nothing. I huddled in the trunk and shook my head in amazement. How strange this all was. There could be no question, the Fatman was motivated. Clearly, he saw this as his first foray into being a true Crimefighter.

The Fattest Crimefighter In The World, perhaps, but a Crimefighter, nonetheless. A sort of Super-sized Superhero. He was bound and determined to rescue this poor girl and her son.

Well, before I knew it, the engine was starting up and our first Adventure was about to begin.

(Oh, by the way--I was not one of those people who found myself, at the critical moment, suffering from a horrible case of claustrophobia brought about by some childhood trauma. Instead, I was rather enjoying myself in that trunk.

You see, while you have probably seen just enough movies to automatically flash to the guy who gets left in the trunk because the person who is supposed to rescue him is arrested and carried away, or has a heart attack, or gets shot by a carjacker, I have made just enough feature films to know that that is the stuff of fiction, and that behind the scenes, even as this tragedy I have just described is unfolding for this character in the trunk, there are in reality, a dozen people standing just behind the cameras to attend to that actor--for that's all he was, in your fantasy, he was just an actor. The reality is that minions are waiting to hand him a mineral water and pat his make-up and blow air on him, and to offer him blow, for that matter. So even though I was not an actor in a movie. . .still, somehow, under the large and benevolent Shadow of The Fatman, I felt safe and snug in that trunk, and I believed that given our appointed mission, the Angels were fighting on our side.

Being in that trunk was kind of exciting and cozy, both at the same time. It reminded me of those times that I'd huddle under the covers, reading Hardy Boys after lights out by flashlight. Or the times I'd crouch in closets, in various buddies' sisters' bedrooms, where I would make my first humble forays into movie making. Blue movies of these babes undressing, that I would then screen in my folks' basement on Thursday nights, while my mom was at her quilting class and dad was at his Elks Lodge meeting.

I would charge my buddies a dollar a head. It was the seed money for film school. My rich parents had just declared bankruptcy. Thank God I did not pursue a career in porn, however, because had I been into porn, there is no doubt that the Fatman would never have chosen me to play Robin to his Batman.

I include all of these thoughts because these were all the memories that ambled through my mind as we trundled over the bumpy roads. They were resurfacing Sunset Boulevard, youch!, and I kept bumping my head on the trunk hood. And then, my cell phone rang. That was weird. Nobody had my number. I fumbled for it in my deep, baggy, homeless man's pants pocket.

"Hello?"

"Hi. You doin' OK back there? Got enough air? Not suffocating, are you?"

"No. I'm fine, as long as we don't hit a traffic snarl and the sun starts baking me."

"Nope," said the Fatman. "Smooth sailing out here. We should be there in ten minutes. I'll see you when I open the trunk. Call me if you need anything."

He hung up. And for the next ten minutes, I just thought about how bizarre my life had become.

Suddenly, with no trip-ups in the plan, we arrived at our destination, the trunk door popped open--and the Fatman was smiling down at me! I jumped out quickly in a panic.

"Hey, what if one of the neighbors sees me getting out of a trunk and calls the cops?"

But the Fatman had already thought of that. I glanced around and realized that we were surrounded by a lush thicket of tall shrubbery. We were in the driveway and I could see the driver making the delivery of books to the maid at the front door of the screenwriter's sprawling Victorian. Time was of the essence.

I peeked out from behind the trees and that's when I went into shock. I turned and stared at the Fatman.

"This is not Beverly Hills! This is Brentwood!"

The Fatman smiled weakly.

"I know. I was afraid if you knew, you wouldn't go through with it. Now hurry along, the chauffeur will be back any second. Here's her address. Hurry, I say! She's in danger!"

I glared at the Fatman.

"You know, don't you? Somehow, you know. This is my old neighborhood! I used to own the house on the corner, damn you!"

The Fatman shrugged, a Cheshire cat smile on his face, and then he literally shoved me on my way.

CHAPTER NINE: DAMSEL IN DISTRESS

I didn't even dare look back at the Fatman to scowl big at him, lest the chauffeur see me and blow the whistle. I hurried down the street, pulling my hat low, per the Fatman's instructions. Now I knew why the Fatman had been so emphatic about that.

And now, I guess, it was all in my hands. Rather an amazing and brazen scheme that the Fatman had set up, and suddenly it was all up to me. I glanced at the address. If memory served, it was a house that had been up for sale, way back when I lived in this neighborhood. I had no idea who lived there now. Our little abused waif did, I guess, that poor thing.

At first I hurried down the street, almost running in my excitement and nervousness. Then I realized that my frenetic pace and furtive face were creating the wrong demeanor, all wrong. After assimilating my surroundings, I realized that the more casual my saunter and lazy my look, the better, for then I would look like one of the many Mexican gardeners puttering in yards up and down the block. And although I was a WASP by heritage, I did have something of a swarthy and unshaven look from my weeks on the street, so I figured I could blend in convincingly. I was just a gardener on his way to a job; yes, that was the ruse I would choose.

Only if you had seen the slight smirk-slash-scowl that crept across my face as the Fatman's big dark car drove slowly by, would you have suspected that I was there to do anything but prune your hedges. As for my backpack, well if some rich bitch peered out her window to check me out, she would just figure that it contained my hedge clippers and a brown bag full burritos.

But then, just as a confident arrogance was overtaking me, it happened again. My phone rang.

I was immediately torn over whether to answer it, which was sure to draw attention to me (a cellphone didn't go with my itinerant gardener façade, and Hollywood rich people sitting in their homes are paranoid by nature), or should I just let the phone ring, also destroying my façade, and surely drawing the attention of anybody within earshot.

But as luck would have it, there was a Port-a-Jon nearby, where construction workers were adding an antebellum wing to some

post-modern monstrosity on the corner, and I ducked into the toilet before a choice had to be made. I barked into the phone before the Fatman had a chance to say anything.

"Blast it, what the hell are you doing?" I bellowed. "You want to get me busted before we even get started? Bad enough that you lie to me about where we're going, Mr. Trust Me, Mr. Ethics, Mr. Crimefighter, driving me in a trunk to a neighborhood where you know someone might recognize me, but what's worse, you gotta call me and--"

"--You're right, you're right, I'm sorry!" he blurted out "But I was thinking about it, and I decided that I gotta tell you exactly who it is she's married to."

"But what does that matter?" I barked back. "If he's beating on her and the kid, bruising and breaking arms, he's gotta be stopped, no matter who he--"

"--Look, he's somebody famous," said the Fatman, cutting me off. "Somebody real famous. I was afraid that if I told you who her husband was, and if you happened to sort of like this guy, you know, maybe you'd worked with him or were friends from the biz, the old days, well then maybe you wouldn't go through with it. I mean busting him on tape and everything."

"Now *you* look," I said, sitting down on the john, suddenly already tired before my job had even started, "Once I commit, I don't back out. You think I don't have a sense of justice, too? You think I don't have a sense of right and wrong?"

Suddenly, the Hollywood part of me kicked in: "Famous? This guy is *really* famous? Who is it?"

"It's Butch Davis."

When the Fatman said these words, I blanched. Famous wasn't the word for it.

"Butch Davis--that was the monster in the Lexus? Are you serious?"

"Yup. That's the one. They've been married three years. Live mostly on a big sprawling ranch in Nevada. He just owns the Brentwood place for when he's got meetings here in L.A., or shooting a movie."

The enormity of the Fatman's revelation was still sinking in.

"Butch Davis?! The guy that successfully made the career change from being a sports hero to a leading man, and who just got inducted into the football Hall of Fame the same week he got named Number One box office superstar?"

"That's the one," said the Fatman.

"Butch Davis? Who won a Golden Globe for the first movie he was ever in, playing a gay priest suing the Vatican for sexual harassment?"

"That's the one."

"Butch Davis? Who won an Academy Award last year for his incredibly sensitive portrayal of a man trying to raise four kids after the tragic death of his wife when she dies in a Yosemite bungee jumping fundraiser for testicular cancer?"

"That's the one," said the Fatman.

The connection was breaking up and I could hardly hear him. Just outside the john, a guy with a leaf blower was blasting in my ear, a couple of feet away.

"Holy Cow," I said, half to the Fatman, half to myself.

"Yeah," said the Fatman. "We're gonna bust one of the big boys."

Suddenly someone was knocking madly on the Port-a-Jon door.

"Look, I gotta go. Someone's gotta go."

And I was outta there.

Well, I hurried down the block and got to the address, scoped out the place, and had no difficulty finding a place to hide. I set myself up, conveniently enough, in a treehouse. It was located right next door, at a residence with not much of a security system. Apparently, they were counting on living in a gated community as being security enough, bless their naive little hearts.

Now at first glance, you might think, *a treehouse?* This might strike you as foolish, a good way of getting caught. But you see, I figured out very quickly that this treehouse had long since been abandoned, because it was dilapidated, and most kids and their club buddies are pretty darned good about club maintenance. But in this treehouse, the girlie magazines were real old ones, the calendar with the full moon circled was from two years ago, the food cans and food wrappers were old and there were no new supplies. Even the trading cards were of superheroes that had long since gone out of vogue, and that no kid gave a flying fart about anymore.

Hence, I figured these kids must have grown up and given up the nonsense of treehouses for the nonsense of the adult world.

So I felt it would be safe to set up shop here. The digs were quite spacious for a treehouse. You could tell that this had been a rich

kid's professionally contracted and constructed treehouse, not some poor kid's claptrap wall of shingles, so I had plenty of room for my supplies, even to stretch out and sleep if I needed to. Who knows, I might be here for days. The Fatman had told me to prepare for that. I laid out everything neatly: in one corner, the camera supplies, in another, assorted food, in a third, minimal toiletries (well, my rolls of toilet paper), and in the fourth corner, my bedroll.

But, as Fate would have it, I was not to be there for a few days. I was not even there for a few hours. It was only a matter of minutes before all hell broke loose next door. I had just scoped out all the windows of the house, and breathed a sigh of relief that most of them were open, affording a fine view with my telephoto lens--and that's when I heard the voices.

They walked in the house together, that little waifish thing and Butch Davis, and they were obviously in the midst of continuing an argument that had been raging when they were enroute home. Although it would be wrong to call it an argument; it was more him screaming at her and berating her in the foulest fashion, even as she tried however lamely to defend herself. The specifics of what they were saying was being drowned out by that damned leaf blower who was still going at it, now only about fifty yards away. But I could hear the argument between Butch and his wife getting louder, and she had added crying and sobbing to the mix as he followed her relentlessly from room to room. Suddenly I remembered the Fatman. I grabbed the phone and dialed. He had just gotten back to the bookstore and he picked up almost immediately:

"Fountainhead deli? Christ you guys took long enough--"

"No, it's me, it's me. How can you think of food at a time like this? Anyway I'm here, I'm set up, and they're here, they're both here, they're fighting already, they were screaming at each other from the minute they walked in the door!"

"Well start filming or taping, or whatever!" yelled the Fatman.

That's when I saw it and heard it, both at the same time: the monster hit her really hard, and she screamed a scream like I have never heard.

"Oh my God," I yelled, not thinking in that moment that somebody might hear me, "I've got to go over there!" I yelled, and even as I said this, I was scrambling down the treehouse steps. I could still hear the poor girl screaming, and who gave a damn if people saw

me emerging from the treehouse, in fact I hope they did see me, then they could help me stop this vicious--

"NO, DAMMIT, DON'T INTERFERE!" said the Fatman over the phone. For some reason, I still had the phone glued to my ear, maybe because on some instinctual level, those instincts that had reawakened to keep me alive on the streets, I knew that the Fatman was wiser than me, I should listen to him for guidance, he would know what to do, he would know what to do. . .

"DAMMIT, DON'T GO OVER THERE!" he warned, "I know you're running to save her, but you can't stop him, you can't--"

"FUCK YOUR GODDAMN VOYEURISM," I yelled, "HE'S BEATING HER TO A BLOODY PULP!"

"LISTEN TO ME!" cut in the Fatman, "IF YOU TRY TO STOP HIM, YOU WILL ONLY GET HER KILLED."

"What?" I said, and then I stopped short. Not only because I wanted to fathom his logic, but also because I'd come to a very high fence. "What are you talking about," I barked, "If I *don't* stop him she'll get killed."

"Listen very carefully," said the Fatman with quiet urgency, and I could tell he was choosing his words carefully, "Listen to me. She's survived beatings before, and she'll surely survive this one. God wouldn't bring us this far with the intentions of you making a snuff film."

The Fatman continued talking to me with calm, strong determination, like someone talking a man down off a ledge. In point of fact, he was talking me down from the wall which I was starting to scale, even as the fighting next door continued unabated. The Fatman's words froze me in my tracks, his voice hypnotic.

"Friend, what you are about to do is so noble, but so dangerous for her. I intend to get that girl out of those circumstances, but that can't happen in this moment, so listen and listen carefully."

But her screaming was more persuasive than his words; I had scaled that fence, and was running towards their front door.

"STOP WHERE YOU ARE, FOR HER SAKE!" I heard on the other end of the phone. "Friend, you mean well, but if you bust in on them and break up that fight, maybe he'll stop beatin' on her for now, but you know as well as I do that later she'll just get it worse, because he didn't get all his rage out this time. Or what is worse, that monster will think you're her lover. God yes, in fact of course he'll think that! And then he *will* kill her! Now listen to me, partner. . . calm down, just

document what is happening, this one last time--and we will take it from there. I promise you."

I stopped running. I hated to admit it, but what the Fatman was saying did make perfect sense. Grim, chilling logic it was, but it did make sense. What were the odds of this bastard actually killing her today? Horrible as it is, one woman can survive hundreds of individual beating incidents without getting herself killed. It happens all the time. And yet, what were the odds of him killing both of us, both her and me, if I were to burst in? Scary high. More importantly--what were the odds of getting this thing handled, once and for all, if I didn't do what the Fatman said, and actually document these horrors?

Then, I realized. There I was, in broad daylight, standing on this big movie star's front lawn. Not only could I get caught and thrown in jail, but what was worse, what was worse, listen to this: *it would keep me from doing what I HAD to do*. Suddenly, I was really into it, this business of being a Crimefighter. I could let nothing stop me.

In no time at all (the Fatman still had me on the phone), I was back over the fence and had shimmied up the stairs into the treehouse and I have to tell you, it was one of the most chilling moments of my life as I quickly started the videocam rolling and pointed it right at this horrible scene, the abusive beating that this guy was giving this girl. This big movie star who had been called "sensitive" and "every woman's fantasy," this monster who was brutally attacking this poor helpless thing. He wasn't actually hitting her the whole time. Sometimes there would be ugly screaming exchanges, and sometimes she would run into the next room, him following her like some nightmarish monster from a horror movie.

My hand was shaking, so the image was wobbly, and both the Fatman and I were to notice it and comment on it later. But it made no difference; the reality of what was happening was coming through clear enough and it was blood-curdling. I felt like Zapruder must have felt when he realized what he was filming--President Kennedy getting his brains blown out and the brains splattering all over Jackie O.'s pink Chanel suit--but some instinct made Zapruder keep filming, just as the Fatman had gotten me to resume taping. Seconds seemed like minutes, I cannot tell you how horrible it was to watch. I can tell you this much though, certainly it was one of the most horrible moments of my life.

After what seemed like a hellishly long time to me, but which was probably only three minutes or so, she ran out of the house and screeched out of the sprawling driveway in her car.

Ironically, it was to the Fatman's bookstore that she was fleeing. It had nothing to do with the Fatman, of course, nor had she any idea of how the Fatman and I were later to figure so prominently in her life. She was heading to the bookstore because, as it turned out, she, like the Fatman, escaped into her own little world of fantasy, of books, of stories, of fairy tales. Of men who were heroes, not villains. Of a land where all giants were gentle. It was the Fatman's bookstore to which she escaped after the beatings, I later learned.

Not only was that bookstore crammed with all those wonderful smells and stories, not only was it safe and comforting in that way, but one other reason she sought it as her refuge was because it was the only public place she could go to without being too self-conscious, too embarrassed or humiliated--our little waif wife figuring that she was bruised, but the Fatman was obese. And so their averted eyes and self-consciousness would be mutual.

I guess it kind of jives with my own personal belief, in a way. . .that we are *all* bruised and abused, and marred with scars that we try to hide from the world. . .that we have all been battered and beaten by life, in one way or another. . .and also, that you might just say, we are all fat, chubby, obese with swallowed rage and indescribable indignities and bitter memories and anger over injustices, and all the Karmic calories of all those things we should have said, should have raged to the world. But we swallowed it instead. We swallowed it instead.

But back to our story.

I must tell you, I was trembling with outrage by what I saw. Very shaken up. So much so, that I was not as careful as I should have been in taking my leave of the gated community.

"What the fuck are you up to, you fucking pervert!"

Before I knew it, two beefy guys were tackling me and cuffing me. How could I have been so stupid? I, who had been on the streets long enough to have learned how to survive, how to be observant, how to elude authorities. Before I knew it, the local Westec patrol civilian security beefheads had cuffed me, tossed me into their car, and worst of

all, absconded with my videotape. I was petrified. I was furious with myself. I was sure that the Fatman would break all ties with me after this moronic, horrible blunder. But I am getting ahead of myself.

I sat there in the back of the civilian security car as we all waited for the "real" cops to come. Westec had radioed them, of course.

"Fuckin' paparazzi," one of the Westec goons muttered, as he lit a cigarette and started going through my backpack.

Obvious conclusion to leap to, I guess, although as you and I know, not entirely true. The other guard, though, was apparently a bit brighter, because he had decided to dig a little further than the obvious. He gave me a sly smile, and hit *69 on my cellphone to see who I had called last. He discovered that it didn't work on this phone, but I had to give him credit for the smarts to try.

Needless to say, I didn't give them any help in telling them who I really was; certainly I hadn't been stupid enough to carry any ID. All the security guards found were the kinds of supplies one would have if planning to camp out in a treehouse for a few days, and the camera stuff. I figured my best shot was to let them think I was paparazzi.

The worst thing that could happen to me as far as criminal charges was trespassing. Worst case scenario would be a little jail time. And I doubted that, even, because Hollywood jails are so overflowing with real criminals. You know, violent pricks, who really ought to be behind bars.

As far as civil charges went, paparazzi are notoriously poor, that much is common knowledge. For like most mercenaries, while they get paid enormous amounts when they do get a hit, it is usually a long time between bonanza photographs, the travel and equipment and bribes and living expenses in between are hefty, and of course they blow money rather liberally once they get a whopping check. So pressing charges would be a stupid move for a rich actor.

Famous actors usually only do this when they can go after an established tabloid, or, more importantly, when there is a matter of principle involved. And I very much doubted that Butch was going to stand up for the right to beat his wife to a bloody pulp. Needless to say, the tape would come out in a civil trial if Butch pressed charges, which is how I knew he wouldn't.

So I figured, as horrible as this whole hassle was, I was pretty safe. The upshot: I was going to slip out of this--after dealing with the authorities, adding to my criminal record, and eating some prison food

if they tossed me in the pokey overnight. (All of this *after* lying about my identity, of course, so that my whole humiliating fall-from-grace didn't come out.) I figured, eh, a night in jail. Which I didn't mind so much. Worse had happened to me after months on the street. Believe me. Just call me Mr. Academy Award Winning Producer turned Homeless Dude. But of course, like so many of my stories, the Fatman has edited that nightmare out, red penciled it, my amazing story, my incredible riveting prose, because he said this is not some prurient sex story and blah blah blah the Fattest Crimefighter blah blah blah.

Odd as it was, sitting in that car, waiting for the real cops, the most upsetting thing about this is that I figured the Fatman would lose all faith in me. This I found oddly heartbreaking, for not only did it really matter to me (I was just discovering in this moment) what the Fatman thought of me--but more importantly, I began to realize that I really was getting into playing Robin to his Batman.

For I must say that in very little time, I was getting to know the Fatman. How his mind worked, his psyche, and what drove him, and man, was he driven. I sensed that this adventure to save the little abused waif was just the first of many, many adventures that suddenly I wanted very much to be a part of--adventures that seemed to be ending before they'd even started, dammit! My mind boomeranged back to that poor waif, and how the worst part of this was that I had blown our chance to do something about those images that I had a feeling I would never be able to erase from my mind, even if the authorities could erase those images from the tape.

Then a very strange thing happened. Something wonderful. Fate stepped in.

The second security guard was no slouch, no he was not. While I was brooding in the backseat of the car and steeped in worry, he got it into his head to rewind the tape in my camera and just take himself a look at what nosy footage I'd managed to acquire. My ears perked up when I heard him hit the PLAYBACK button, and the beating of that poor girl started playing out again for the three of us to view in living--and I use that word loosely--color.

Then, a second amazing thing happened. I heard the police sirens. A shiver went down my spine. *What if I DID get thrown in jail for an extended stay with a bunch of Anal Annies? By the end of this miserable day, would I have a date for the Prison Prom?*

The real police sirens were getting closer. . .

Just when I was starting to really sweat bullets, the security guard who had been watching the playback of the beating turned to me, with the most curious look on his face. The expression on the face of the other security guard was rather peculiar also. He was studying his partner, and clearly he didn't know what his partner, who apparently held some kind of seniority, was up to.

Just at the moment that the real cops were getting out of their squad car with an authoritative slam of the door, the security guard handed me the incriminating videotape.

"HIDE THIS!"

Well, I didn't know what the hell was going on, and his partner still had that oafish look of befuddlement on his face, and then one of the real cops leaned in the car window. The real cop perused the three of us as he chomped his gum, which I didn't think was regulation.

"Whazzup? Wha'd this asshole do? Casing a place to rob it? Or is he another one of those goddamn paparazzi?"

As the cop asked this, the Westec security guard who was taking charge had gotten out and opened the rear door of the Westec car; then he yanked me out of it, as if to release me. He smiled stupidly at the real police officer and spoke in an apologetic tone.

"No, no, this isn't your man. This is just some poor gardener who got a look at the guy. Uh, I'm afraid the "perp" got away, just after we radioed for you guys."

The real cop rolled his eyes.

"You fuckin' Barney, whadda ya mean, you let him get away? Did he pull a weapon?"

"Oh no," said my guard, "He wasn't no thief or rapist or nothin'. It's like you said, he was a paparazzi! See, I managed to wrangle his backpack from him."

The real cop took the camera out of the backpack, examining it. "That's odd. Why isn't there a frickin' tape in it?"

At this point, the other security guard looked at his sharper partner, puzzled, then at me. For some reason, he decided not to squeal on us. The other guard shrugged his shoulders.

"Probably took it out of the camera before he bolted."

"Wha'd the Spic see?" interrupted the police officer, peering my direction. I shrugged, smiling blankly.

"Yo no intiendo ingles. Yo no veo nada."

The real cop had had about enough. He absently scratched his crotch and grimaced at the Westec guard in charge.

"Look, you ain't got a perp, you ain't got a witness who speaks English. And most importantly, you ain't got a crime. Except for some Lookie Lou, and this camera with no film. We'll just take this, and for chrissake, the next time you Barneys bother the real police, you better have a better story, or you'll be the ones under arrest."

And with that, the police officer turned around, his partner following, muttering under his breath, but audibly enough: "Damn rent-a-cops."

I had been just standing there the whole time, making a mental note about everything that had happened, knowing this would make an incredible chapter in a book someday. But I was as baffled as anybody.

It was at this point that the security guard who had masterminded the whole scene turned around and deftly pulled the videotape from under my jacket where I'd stashed it. He just stared at it; I could tell he was replaying it in his mind. Then he looked back at me and studied me for a long moment, his eyes a steely grey.

"You know, I had a baby sister. I really loved her a lot. I was always real protective of her. The guys she went out with always knew that they was accountable to me. But then she goes and marries this arrogant fuckin' racecar driver. The whole family didn't like him; he gave me the heebie jeebies, but what can I say? She was in love with him, or so she said. Sure enough, it was just a matter of time before he starts beatin' on her, and we did all we could to get her to leave him. Finally, she did. But he found her. Then one day, when the rest of us was at the ball game, he came over and beat her to death. I came home and--"

Then, the security guard just stopped mid-sentence. I thought the poor guy was going to break down and cry. There were tears in his eyes. Then, he did the oddest thing. He pulled out his wallet, flipped it open to an old photo, pulled it out and handed it to me. I looked at the picture. It was obviously him and his sister. They were kids, and they were each holding fishing poles. The security guard stared lovingly at the photo, pretty choked up. (Oh, and as for his partner, his partner had said nothing this whole time. He just stared, still mystified, but starting to understand, I guess. He let his partner ramble.)

"We were visiting my grandparents at Lake Titicaca the summer that picture was taken. God, I loved that kid."

He looked up at me, his eyes suddenly ablaze.

"But I'll tell you who I never did like! I never did like that fuckin' Butch Davis," he said, tearing up the paperwork on me that he

had started. "Those pussy-ass sensitive movies. My wife loves those movies, but I hate 'em. I don't know which is worse, a man who plays those pussy-ass 'sensitive guy' parts, or a guy who plays them as unconvincing as Butch Davis. Oh yeah, sure, sure, I know, he got that big fancy ass Academy Reward. But the problem with him is that he never gets *upset* with his women in his movies, he's always just so understanding, and he's so good at relating to his leading ladies, never loses his temper, in those movies. Frankly, that just convinces me that the guy is either ready to snap in a real scary way, or he's covering up something big. Because let me tell you, if a man really loves a woman, I mean *really* loves her, sometimes she just makes him crazy, and he can't always be so sensitive to her. He can't always be understanding. That's what makes it love, is that sometimes you don't understand, sometimes you lose your temper, but you love 'em anyway. And you don't cross the line."

He looked at the picture of his sister again, and I could see the rage starting up in him. Then, as his partner and I watched, he put the tape back in the camera and let it play again, watching it all over again. He shook his head, his face turning all red.

"But no man. . .no real man *ever* lets a woman make him that crazy. *You don't hit a woman.*"

He handed me back the camera and tape, and gave me the weirdest smile.

"Listen, buddy. I don't know what the hell you have in mind with this little grenade you got here. But I hope you take this guy down for the count."

And his partner, who still had said nothing all this time, grinned and finally spoke just three little words.

"Bury the fucker."

The head Westec dude then handed me back the tape, patted me on the back, and stared straight into my soul.

"Now get outta here. Gowan. Go."

And I was gone.

Well, as you can see, this little segment of our first great Crimefighting Adventure ended rather amazingly--in spite of the fact that I had screwed up, allowing myself to get caught.

What happened next was this. I made tracks back to the Fatman's bookstore. I guess I didn't mention that I had lost the cellphone in all the craziness. When I informed the Fatman of that fact, I don't know why, but the Fatman was very casual about it. I also came up with an elaborate lie about being mugged and having the camera stolen--no way I was telling him what really happened--but still, the Fatman was unruffled, and without a word, he handed me the cash to replace the cam and the phone. Cashflow was not a problem for him, I was learning.

But first, before all that happened, the next chapter of the drama began--as soon as I got back to the bookstore. After hitching back to the Third Street Promenade, I ran in the rear entrance of the store.

"OH CRIPES," I blurted out as I bolted in, "You'll never guess what--"

I stopped short. She was there. The Fatman spoke not a word, but just gave me a look, and nodded his head over her direction. She was crouched in the corner reading, or more likely, pretending to read. A children's book or a comic book or something, I couldn't tell. But really what she was doing was trembling behind her Chanel sunglasses.

The Fatman lumbered over to me and said, in an oddly loud voice, "Well finally! I've been waiting for weeks for those books to arrive! Just take them to my back office and I'll sign for them."

Obviously the Fatman's plan was to converse with me in private. He turned to the girl.

"Oh Miss, I e-mailed a Florida lady about that book you asked about last week. If you hang on a second, I'll check my e-mail to see if it's been shipped. "

The trembling waif nodded, trying not to look like she was trembling, but you could notice it if you looked close. Her sunglasses were huge, too huge for her face. I knew all too well she was covering up quite a shiner. I hurried to the backroom and the Fatman trundled after. I was a bundle of nerves; I knew we were on the tracks of doing a very good deed, but still, everything seemed akimbo.

"She's here?" I said, for that seemed to me a very odd thing indeed. To decide to read a book, after someone's beat the crap out of you?

"Yes, she's here," nodded the Fatman solemnly. "I had the feeling she would be. I'm fairly certain she comes here right after every--well, after the incidents. I've picked up on it, her whole demeanor. . ."

And then, he added, "So show me the tape, for Pete's sake!"

But I was staring through the half-opened door of the office at her, shaking my head.

"I don't get it? Why on earth would she come here afterwards? Some meathead beats on her for half an hour, and her response is to come to a used bookstore and settle into a dime novel? That's weird."

The Fatman gave me a very exasperated look.

"You still don't grasp it, do you, you dolt? This is not a used book store, this is a haven of escape! These aren't mere books, these are precious dog-eared pages pressed between coffee stained covers, they're talismans people can rub and get as much luck out of them as the human imagination can muster! This is not just four walls that I rent on the Promenade, it's a castle with a tower where a damsel in distress can wait for her knight in shining armor, while she flees into a fantasy world of happily-ever-afters, that's what this enchanted place is, you ignoramus, now SHOW ME THE FRICKIN' TAPE!"

I rolled my eyes. Man, he was an odd one. I opened my backpack and stuck the video in his VCR.

"Yeah, well, this tape is pretty raw, so let me at least close the drawbridge gates," I said, shutting the office door. I grimaced as I reached to push PLAY.

"You ready for this?"

The Fatman nodded impatiently.

"Play the tape already--but with the sound down."

So I did. It was so surreal, this silent horror show being played out, as the actual victim cowered a few yards away, buried in a battered up copy of "Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm." The Fatman scowled and grimaced and tightened his fists and turned bright red with rage, and I've got to tell you, I thought he was going to have a heart attack right there and keel over and die.

But he didn't. He just took it all in, and then looked at me. Then he glanced over to see the poor thing cowering in the corner of the children's section--

But she had disappeared.

We both bolted out of the backroom, the Fatman right behind me, amazingly agile for his size. We looked up and down the stacks, then outside. No sign of her. He looked at me, panting.

"You think she overheard something? Think somehow she knows what we're up to?"

I shook my head.

"No. No way. We were whispering and the volume was down." I looked around, shrugging my shoulders.

"So what do we do now?"

The Fatman thought a moment, chewing a fingernail. I could hear the cogs in his brain working, working.

"I know what I said to you earlier, about not breaking in on them to stop it, because it would be worse for her. Like he might think you were her lover or something, and kill the both of you. But now. . .but now. . ."

He trailed off. The Fatman's mind was sorting, processing.

"I still think that's the case. But what I said before, about how she'd probably survive that beating without your breaking it up, because she'd survived so many before, well I just don't know anymore. Now I'm getting this weird feeling in my gut like the clock is running out on this poor thing. I don't know, maybe it's just actually seeing him beating her, right there on film like that."

"Tape," I corrected him. "Seeing it on videotape."

"Whatever!" He glared at me. "Still, my friend, something tells me we've just got to get to her. Get her and her boy the hell out of there! But without taking the chance of him thinking she's involved with some guy. Oh, you and I both know, a foul suspicion like that, that's all it would take to send him over the edge, that bastard! And that means we can't go over there. I can't call. No men's voices on the phone, that's critical."

He was thinking, pacing, thinking.

"DAMN IT!"

"WHAT?" I said. The Fatman was erupting. He was starting to scare me.

"Well," he said, groping for a plan. "I'm not sure what we should--I just--I didn't think Crimefighting would be so perplexing. Oh, I knew it would be challenging, requiring the balls to make tough

vigilante decisions. But I didn't think it would be so perplexing; I thought I would instinctively know what to do," he said.

Then he just plopped down for a moment, and stared morosely at his snowglobe collection. Impressive collection, by the way. But more on that later. After a moment, he looked up at me.

"You know, part of the problem is that because Butch Davis is this big, popular movie star that everybody loves--"

--"Not everybody," I interrupted, thinking of the Westec guard.

"What?" said the Fatman, looking at me quizzically.

"Nahthing. . ." I said, tossing it off. "I'll fill you in later."

I realized that the Fatman still did not know anything about the whole business of my not escaping out of there quite so deftly as we'd planned. Right about now, he didn't look like his heart could stand hearing about the whole fiasco with my getting tackled and the odd confrontation with the security guards and the cops. What the Fatman didn't know, for now, wouldn't hurt him. Then, he said the one thing I dreaded. He looked up at me, renewed determination in his eyes.

"Well, you just gotta go back in, friend."

"What?" I blurted out, remembering what it felt like to be bodily tackled by two chubby security guards. Frankly, nothing like that had ever happened to me before. I guess you could call it a new low.

"Listen, Homeless Dude," said the Fatman, his tone pulling me back to reality, if the weird adventures we embarked upon could rightly be called reality, "The thing is, I wish there was some other way. I didn't think that trying to right a few wrongs was going to get this weird. I didn't realize we'd end up playing Peeping Tom. But frankly, the truth is, I hadn't really thought it through. I just got scared for the girl, answered your ad, and the next thing I knew--"

--"Excuse me," I could not help but interject, "I believe *I'm* the one who's playing Peeping Tom. I believe *I'm* the one they would cart off to jail, if I was caught going back in."

"Enough of your sniveling, already," said the Fatman. He truly had taken the role of Crimefighter to heart, and was going to have no part of my whining. He gave me a sneer, eyed me up and down, and said, "You are replaceable, you know! Like I can't find some other unemployed homeless cross-addicted producer-director to do this for me, if you weenie out--"

OK, OK," I said, genuinely sorry that I'd lodged the complaint. Because, truth to tell, I really did want to be a part of his adventure. "It's just that it is a big risk."

The Fatman was pawing through some papers, looking for what, I did not know. He ignored my last remark and ranted on.

"Look, first things first. We have just got to get to her. And that means catching her when she is at the house alone, because I think if a man calls her or shows up at her house, that's the best way to get her killed. But we can't take a chance on just waiting for her to show up again at the bookstore," he said, and then added with a flourish, "Because, time is running out for her, I can just feel it!"

Apparently he had found what he was looking for. He was clutching a manila file, jammed full of newspaper clippings.

"Secondly! And here's what really steams my beans," he said, waving the file at me. "That asshole Butch Davis is just well enough liked, that even with this tape, it may not be enough to take the prick bastard down. Folks can rationalize just about anything, if they want to. The average fool is too damned dexterous at explaining away things he don't wanna believe. Why, Butch Davis's diehard fans are likely to look at that tape you made--not that it isn't primo footage, by the way, I'm damned proud of you--but they'll justify it by saying 'it was a one time thing' or 'she did something to have it coming' or some bullshit like that. I don't think it's enough to know he did it once, I think it's got to be a pattern."

The Fatman pulled out some newspaper articles about the Trial Of The Century, if you believe media hype. The one that had captivated our local and national headlines for the better part of a year. The Fatman was waving the front page article, with the ugly arrogant face of that murdering scumbag right in front of me. The Fatman started bellowing.

"Remember this? That goddamn sports hero-turned movie star, Orin T. Halliran, killed his wife and his x-wife, when he found out they were lovers? He got off scott free. Left jail and didn't even go home to see his kids, instead the fucker hit the links. Prick. Now he's getting rich doing lawn-care ads. Hell, people even ask him for his autograph! Jeezus Christ, what's the world coming to? Well, if he can get off the hook with all the evidence they had against him, whaddo you think the odds are that one little videotape can bring down the hottest box office draw of last season? People can find a way to be in denial about anything, aren't I living proof of that?"

(Again, I thought, what a peculiar but insightful thing for the Fatman to say. I was learning that under all those layers of lard was a truly fascinating soul.)

"So anyway," the Fatman ranted on, "I think if I'm gonna help her and hurt him bad--real bad--I need to be able to prove that this is a pattern. For obvious reasons, I need you to do that for me, get some more tape of him beating on her. Cripes, can you hear how damn casual that sounds? But seriously, we want to ram down peoples' throats what a monster he is. You with me on this, Mr. Homeless Dude?"

I had learned from long experience that this was what he said when he sensed my mind was wondering, and he wanted my full attention back. What I had been thinking was how weird it would be to walk into my old AA meeting and tell the honest !! truth to the speaker's pointed question, "Well hey there, we haven't heard from you lately? What's up with you?"

I turned to the Fatman and returned his intense eye contact.

"Yes, Fatman. I'm with you on this."

I could say that to him because I knew my calling him that didn't hurt his feelings. It had been his idea from the very beginning that I address him as "The Fatman," instead of calling him by his Christian name. He told me it gave him a "Sidney Greenstreet" sort of feeling, more a sense of identification than humiliation.

I said what I said with such emphasis, "Yes Fatman, I'm With You On This," because I had decided that I, too, wanted to be a Crimefighter.

I could not get the image of Butch pummeling that poor girl out of my mind.

Once again, it was Serendipity that made the reprise of my sub rosa plot far easier than I'd ever imagined it could be: i.e., going back in for more covert videotaping.

It happened like this. I was in a convenience store, loading up on Ding Dongs, Twinkies, Hostess Fruit Pies, etc., for the Fatman. (Yes, my many duties for the Fatman did include these banal little errands.) I was ambling over to get a copy of Hollywood Reporter, because I did so enjoy seeing what mediocre remake of a brilliant film

from decades gone by had gone into production that very week--when who did I see staring at a tittie magazine and sipping a Slush Puppy?

None other than the Westec security guard who had covered my ass just the day before. He sensed my presence. He looked up, and his attitude immediately changed from horny to remembered rage--you've been there, right? You know how your mind switches gears in a heartbeat, yes?

His rage was not directed towards me, of course, but towards the images on that videotape--images that my presence had no doubt pushed back into his consciousness. He was up on his feet in a flash, apparently not the least bit embarrassed about having been caught with his nose in "The Joys of Jugs," but neither did he treat me like the perpetrator of any kind of wrongdoing. Quite the opposite; he treated me like I was a man on a mission, doing something cool and heroic that ought to be jollied along. The first thing out of his mouth, freighted as it was with inflection and questions, was:

"Well?"

That was all he said. He stared at me with his big bug eyes, more intensely, even, than he had been staring at the titties only a moment before.

I stammered. I was caught off guard myself, having run into him so unexpectedly.

"Uh, well. . ." I said--and then, I figured I would just cut to the chase. I had too much respect for this guy to do otherwise. I leaned in towards him and whispered conspiratorially: "It's like this. My silent partner feels we need more footage, to really nail this guy. He's convinced that one day, and one day soon, that Butch bastard is going to beat that poor girl to death."

"Say no more," said the guard, cutting me off, "I was thinkin' the same thing. I can't get it out of my mind. And you know why? Because folks will explain away stuff they see just once. Like aliens, miracles, wife abuse, stuff like that. When it comes to movie stars, this town is frickin' crazy. Once they got that statuette, folks will defend 'em to the death. Like that gives 'em license to do whatever they want to other folks. Beat on their wives, drink and drive, do those fuckin' movie remakes that ain't one tenth as good as the original. I hate that kind of shit--excuse me, that kind of 'goin's on'--my wife is on me to stop swearing. We got a baby due in three months, and she doesn't want it raised around profanities."

I smiled. I smiled genuinely. (I made a mental note, in that instant, that I had smiled genuinely more since living on the streets than I had in the last few months in the Biz. Not smiled more *times*, necessarily, please take note, but smiled more *genuinely*. I'm sure you understand the distinction. Gosh, I hope you do.)

Within minutes, even before the buzzer on the Seven-Eleven microwave beeped to indicate that the security guard's bean cheese chimichanga was done, it was all set up: getting back into the gated community that afternoon was as simple as being driven in, sitting in the passenger seat of the security car, and the man at the gate just waved us through. He even offered me and the security guard, whose name I learned was Toby, a piece of Tewksberry gum. And then, Toby, dropped me off a block or so from Butch the Bastard's house, and I returned to my treehouse set up.

(Note: it is a complete coincidence that Toby the Guard, who was so useful to our cause, had the same name as the dearly departed Toby W. Smith. There is no deep meaning to this coincitaneous turn of events.)

Where was I? Ah yes, I returned to my treehouse set up.

All I can tell you is that it was probably one of the three most horrible moments of my life, and I have no intention of telling you what the other two were. All I know is that I wasn't in that treehouse twenty minutes, I was just laying everything out again, when *she* came in, and *he* was there waiting. And he started in on her again.

But here is what got me to trembling so intensely I could hardly hold the camera. Just as he was pounding on her so badly that I was saying to myself, "To hell with the plan, to hell with what Butch thinks, to hell with everything! I'm charging in there to stop this barbarity!"

--and then, what do you think happens, but *somebody does!* Stop it, that is. Or try to. As Butch is screaming at her and pounding, and she is screaming, holding her arms up and trying to protect herself, and as it turns out, I was screaming too, which I didn't even realize until the Fatman and I played the back tape later, I was screaming too, but just as I was about to let my knight-in-shining-armor instinct kick in, and I was this close to running over there to stop it, the front door to their house opens and this little kid runs in! Butch Davis's little kid

runs in, and he starts screaming, that's four of us screaming now, and he runs through the rooms to where they are fighting, and he jumps between them and he starts grabbing at his father's pants leg, and he's yelling and punching on his dad. His efforts were pathetic and impotent, though, like a cartoon character trying to pummel another cartoon character bully, whirling his arms madly around in the air, but his fists hardly touching the bad guy. You know what I mean?

And although the kid wasn't big enough to do much in the way of stopping his enraged father, it was when Bruce turned around to give the kid a good whack that the mother got a rush of maternal strength and hit Bruce with an umbrella. She gave him quite a whack, and while Bruce was recovering, mother and son ran out the front door together, both of them bloodied and beaten.

CHAPTER TEN: EVERYBODY'S ALL AMERICAN

"What an idiot I am," said the Fatman, actually whacking himself upside the head as he said this. "Why, why, why, didn't I think of it earlier?"

"What," I of course asked.

"A way we can contact her, without risking him, the Monster, answering the phone. All these last few desperate hours and days, I'm thinking, how in God's name can I contact her? To try and talk some sense into her, and explain my plan for helping her and the kid, without risking HIM intercepting the phone call? Because of that, I've been frantic! Friend, I keep feeling like her time is running out. I got this sick feeling in my stomach, this sixth sense, so I've got to do something to get to her, persuade her to accept my help, come to her senses. But if I call her, and God forbid, HE picks up, and hears a man's voice, he'll no doubt go into a jealous rage and think the wrong thing."

The Fatman had added pacing to the mix; the floor was shaking. "I just know he'll strangle her, that Monster." Then he stopped and looked at me with the strangest wicked smile on his face. "But all I gotta do, friend, is lure him outta the house!"

"Yeah, but how?" I sputtered. "Those Hollywood people are very careful about who calls, crank calls and stuff like that. Hey, wait just a minute--you're not going to try some dumb stunt like pretending to be somebody, are you? His agent's secretary or somebody's flunky assistant, please no, he's too smart for that! It's too easy to check. If Butch does check and finds out it's a set up, he might think his wife is in on it, like she's trying to get rid of him, and we'd be right back where we started. With her in danger!"

"Excuse me," sneered the Fatman, and suddenly he stopped pacing and actually slapped *me* upside the head. "Do I look stupid? Do you think I'd do something so harebrained as to put her in danger? I already got a brilliant plan. The tabloids!"

"What!" I blurted. "How are they gonna help us? I can't understand how some sleazy rag is going to help save the girl."

"No, not the actual tabloids, you dolt, just the *threat* of them. An unflattering candid photo, a compromising shot, a scandalous photograph. It's every actor's nightmare, and you just know that Butch

Davis must have been up to some kind of shit he'd hate to have photographed."

"Oh, like beating his wife," I said, rubbing my head where he'd slapped it. "I see where you're going. But no, no, wait, he'll get mad and figure she set him up, and then he'll just take it out on her."

"Nope, I got that figured out too!" said the Fatman, rubbing his hands together in triumph. "These mythical photographs will have nothing to do with him being a wife abuser. Listen to my plan. I happen to know that Butch Davis was just in New York for a month on a shoot. I'm willing to bet he did something he'd hate to have caught on film."

"You're right," I said, feeling us back in the game. "I've heard he's a terrible womanizer. Good at keeping it under wraps, but insiders know."

"Exactly, my friend. So I'll bluff him. And his wife was here in Los Angeles the whole time, so he's got nothing to "take out" on her. In fact, this "dirt" is something he doesn't want his wife getting a hold of. He keeps proclaiming his love for her, in interviews and crap like that."

"You're right," I said. "His riches are based on his box office popularity, and his box office popularity is based on the perception that they have this picture-perfect romantic marriage!"

"Now you're with me," he said. "Here's something else to think about. If Butch Davis thinks the tabloids have proof of adultery, why that would mean his wife could sue him for millions and win."

"I'm liking this," I said. The Fatman always seemed to think faster than me.

Even as I was pondering this, the Fatman was dialing. I noticed that he was calling not from his private phone, but from some weird looking cell phone, that I didn't even know the Fatman owned. I guess in case Butch had caller ID or whatever. Lordie, the Fatman thought of everything.

You could tell from the look on the Fatman's face--part glee, part nervousness, part wickedness--that Butch Davis had picked up the phone on the other end. The Fatman smiled a sneer.

"Butch Davis? Hello, this is your best friend in the world calling, because I have the power to keep these incriminating photographs that I took of you in New York from showing up in the National Inquirer."

There was a pause while the Fatman listened. Even though I was standing a few yards away, I could hear the irate tirade on the other end.

"Yes, that's correct," said the Fatman. "I'm holding the photographs in my hand now. May I say that the young lady is lovely. May I also say, these pictures don't leave much to the imagination."

The Fatman stared down at what he had in his hand. A Ben and Jerry's two-for-one coupon, with a big picture of a happy cow standing next to a pint. The Fatman was loving this.

"The good news, Butch, is that the photographs and the negatives will only cost you a small fortune. You can afford it. I understand you just signed for the sequel to Spacejackers. Meet me at the Starbucks on Wilshire in Santa Monica at exactly three o'clock. I'll be the guy wearing a Mr. Bubble T. Shirt."

Needless to say, when the appointed hour came, there was nobody waiting for Butch Davis at the Starbucks. The Fatman tried to recruit me to do it; he had wanted me to show up at the Starbucks and bluff like I was this tabloid photographer, but I really did draw the line at this. I just knew that when Butch Davis got his hands on me, even if it was in a public coffee shop, that he would kill me, *literally* kill me. I'd seen what he could do when he was mad.

And so I told the Fatman in emphatic tones:

"NO WAY! If I show up at Starbucks on Santa Monica at exactly three o'clock--assuming I even *have* a Mr. Bubble T-shirt, which I don't, although I have to concede, that was great touch--but if I keep this appointment, posing as the photographer but *without* these so called New York negatives--if he thinks I'm holding out on him for more money or whatever--I'm dead. I'm flattened like the Roadrunner. I'm a grease spot on the Promenade. No way. It's not that I don't want to help this poor lady as much as you do, it's that I can't help her if I'm dead! Besides, we just need to get Butch Davis out of the house for a few minutes."

CUT TO: A few hours later, that afternoon. The appointed hour of the mythical Starbucks paparazzi meeting. It was getting exciting. Tense.

We waited in the hired car down the street from Butch's house, and watched for him to leave. And oooh, you could tell just how furious he was, from the way he screeched out of the driveway and

sped off. He lit outta there, speeding down the quiet tree lined street at sixty miles an hour, and the security guard in the booth at the entrance to the gated neighborhood gave him a real big scowl.

But only after he knew Butch Davis couldn't see it in the rear view mirror.

Seems ol' B.D. made a whole lotta of people quake.

But back to me and the Fatman.

I offered to talk to her, to go up to the front door and knock and tell her our plan. But the Fatman wanted to do it himself, in person. He was afraid that the two of us at the front door might be too overwhelming.

Oh--he had even brought along a "bribe," to sort of quell her fear and astonishment at seeing that big fat bookstore proprietor on her doorstep! The bribe was a vintage, mint condition, full set of Shirley Temple Paper Dolls, with costumes and accessories from all her movies. He knew she had a real fondness for the Temple.

As I sat in the car anxiously, I saw her open the door, gasp, and look around nervously, as though Butch might be spying in the bushes. But that sweet little waif did not dart back inside and slam the door. I watched as she just stood there on the doorstep, trembly but intrigued, her expression skitterish but hopeful. She bravely listened, as she heard the Fatman out. I was dying of curiosity, wondering how the hell it was going. Finally, they finished up their conversation, and the Fatman lumbered back to the car.

"Well?" I asked frantically, as he wedged his way into the roomy backseat.

"She has agreed to come to the bookstore tomorrow morning," he said, pulling the seatbelt around his planetoid torso, "Butch has a costume fitting and he'll be gone for the day. The whole day."

And what a day it was.

She met us at the bookstore at the appointed time. And after the most muted exchange of greetings, we got in the rented car.

I squeezed in the backseat next to the Fatman with my camera equipment. He had told me to bring it, but he did not let me in on what I was going to be taping. Apparently she had agreed to being taped, for she and the Fatman exchanged a couple of words to that effect.

None of us spoke much on the way to the place. It was an office building, and the three of us made our way to a basement conference room.

That's when it started.

The group that was meeting in the dank basement that day. . .how to describe them? Well, they were kind of like those deprogrammers who kidnap the kids that are being held mentally hostage by those weird cults, and then they try to un-brainwash the kids back to sanity, even if it takes a little brutal heavy-handedness.

Now please understand, in this case, they don't take these women by force. These women, like our poor waif, have to walk in that door of their own free will. But God, what these women have to confront if they choose to walk into that dark basement. Well, I have never seen anything like it, before or since.

OK, OK, back up. The group is called WAK: Witness Anger Killing, and the movie they show you features no less than one hundred and eighty straight minutes of relentless brutality. We were basically disallowed to leave during the entire film; there are two five minute breaks for the bathroom, during which no talking is permitted.

And what has been collected by this very determined group of women, sometimes using guerrilla tactics, is both riveting and horrible.

It starts with a collage of pictures of women in morgues who have been beaten to death by their husbands, significant others, whatever. The film holds back nothing; it shows full body shots, even close shots of bruises all over the body and the face. The corpses are nude, of course, so you can see all the bruises that a live battered woman tries to hide with clothes and make-up and sunglasses.

Oh, but there is more, much more. It shows grisly, graphic pictures of children--of little babies, even, who have had the life beaten out of them by brutal parents.

Oh, and it plumbs the horror of not only the dead, but the living.

During the second hour, it expands to include videotapes of women and children brought into hospitals, into the ER. We see them interviewed and they tell how it happened and we hear of the brutality and we witness the screaming and crying of the children as their injuries are treated: their cigarettes burns, and the even more severe burns of having their arms and faces pressed against stove burners, and we watch as their broken arms are put in casts and dislocated shoulders are set. . .and oh, sometimes for extra drama, the angry husband storms into the hospital, and there are police and oh, all kinds of theatrics in this grisly documentary footage.

None of this was staged. It was all "cinema vérité."

Sometimes, if the woman didn't go to the hospital, but instead just called the cops on her abusive husband, the camera crew would stay with the woman at her home after the cops came and took her husband away. Within a few hours, sure enough, the jerk would be let out of jail and storm back to his house, angrier than ever. And the camera crew was there to capture it all on tape. Oh, that footage was--well, you can imagine. You can imagine. I know you can I hope you can I pray you can.

They save the most powerful stuff for the end, though. This is the newest technique: cameras actually *hidden in the homes of the abusers*.

In the cases where women have not yet been convinced to leave their husbands, God knows why, some women were at least convinced to go along with this hidden camera. Why? In hopes that they can finally be persuaded to leave, by watching the harsh reality of it, after the actual abuse has abated for a brief time.

It would seem that sometimes, watching it happen to you after it's all over, it's--well, it's like you're watching a TV show. Some of the women reported after watching this footage that, oddly enough, *viewing it on TV makes it seem more real than when you're actually taking the blows*. Perhaps that is because most women go into a kind of denial or shock when they are being hit over and over again. (Although it should be no surprise that what really, finally impels the women to take their kids and leave these monsters for good, is when the woman are forced to watch the husband's abuse of the children actually caught on videotape.)

Then, finally, there are some sobering statistics at the end, some freezes on faces of babies who were killed, and. . .

Oh, I know I am not telling this as well as a real writer would. This is just rambling from my journal and words blabbed into my handheld as I sat in a corner of that room, stunned. But as God is my witness, I could labor at it for days, rewrite and revise, and yet still I would not quite know how to put into words what I saw in that dark basement. What the day was like.

And I'm not just talking about the film, I'm talking about the dynamics in the room: the reactions of the women watching the film, the emotions felt, the resolutions made, AND the muted terror that spread because you knew, *you just knew*, that some women would leave the basement to walk back into their private hell, and *still* maybe not leave their men. Lord, it was intense. You know what I mean. . .it was that kind of painful intensity that makes you wish you could just go back to being ignorant.

Then, after the film was over, there was coffee and little pastries and cookies, and rows of tables against the back wall, manned by various groups offering literature, urgent information, help, support, phone numbers, and safe asylum for those who wished to flee.

But by the end of those three agonizing hours came the payoff. Butch Davis's wife was quite ready to leave him. I think she knew now that he could and would kill her eventually, although I got the impression that it was fear for what might happen to her little boy that really got to her the most.

So the plan was this: she was to meet us at the bookstore early Friday evening with her little boy, at which point the Fatman would have the two of them whisked off to Big Bear. He explained it to me as best he could.

"Well, I have no real logical reason for Big Bear, just something in my gut tells me to get her the hell out of this God forsaken city of Hollywood. Big Bear is where I see her, in my dreams. Lots of trees, lots of peace. A cabin by the lake. The little kid can fish and swim off the pier. She and the kid can have a chance at bein' happy, for a while at least. I can do that much for him."

When the Fatman said this, staring off at his snowglobe collection, (a fabulous collection, by the way, but more on that later, we're at too serious a juncture now for a tangent), anyway, I just

knew--don't ask me how I knew, but I just knew--that he was thinking about his own happy childhood, and days like that, fishin' and swimmin', before the sad saga of Toby W. Smith transformed him into such a brooding and dark gormand, who swallowed all that food, along with all that rage.

(Oh, just so you know, chronologically speaking, I was not to know of those dire childhood events described at the beginning of this book until much later in our friendship, around Thanksgiving.)

But enough of that morbid crap and rambling.
Let's get back to our plot to take down Butch Davis.

Butch's wife was to meet the Fatman at the bookstore at six o'clock on Sunday with her son. Butch did not keep a tight leash on his wife, he was not that kind of psychotic, so her stealing away with the kid was no problem.

Where would I be this whole time? Heh heh heh.

Well, here's the thing. The Fatman's sense of justice dictated that it was not enough just to take away Butch's punching bag. The Fatman was too afraid that Butch would use his power and money and fame in an attempt to bury the woman who had left him and humiliated him in front of the entire world. Best case scenario: Butch would screw her in the divorce, and God forbid he somehow got custody of his son. Worst case scenario: a man like Butch, in the rage of his life? Well, use your imagination. I, for one, truly shudder to think.

No, the Fatman would be satisfied with nothing less than the complete decimation of Butch Davis in a town called Hollywood.

"The great key to understanding money is not the myth that it can buy happiness, for that is a myth indeed. The great secret to enjoying wealth is this: money can buy your enemy's unhappiness, and therein lies its great power to satisfy, to delight. To catharsize, even!" said the Fatman, and he said this in grand tones with grand gestures as he savored the delicacies from the entire pastry tray of Basilica's down the street, the latest trendy Italian eatery that had opened to cater to Hollywood's easily bored and chronically unfaithful restaurant devotees. The Fatman was in such a good mood about the plot that would unfold tonight at Staples Center, that he'd had the whole damn pastry cart just wheeled down the street! In broad daylight no less, right into his bookstore, and he proceeded to savor it slowly, more

slowly than I'd ever seen him eat, over the course of the entire day. I think it was his metaphor for savoring revenge.

So where would I be the entire time? I would be at a Lakers game! No, it wasn't the season, but it was a special charity fundraiser game, being played for some children's charity, no less. God I love the irony of that.

I arrived long before the game started, to make sure all the elements were in place. The crucial bribe had been placed days before though, offered by me, to a stoned but brilliant young techie in the media pit, a kid who worked for the Master Tape Controller. Bribing him in the mid four figures was very very easy to do. Four figures was not a big deal for the Fatman. Not for this kind of payoff, at least. Bribing this young dude was so very easy, because the nature of the scheme meant that they would never really be able to pin the deed on him anyway. Even if they did--well, life is long, and this kid was young, and two thousand bucks buys a lot of ganja.

This kid's job was to take the videotape of Butch Davis pummeling his wife and simply label it incorrectly, then see to it that it got relocated into a very specific place in the tape archives that had been rotated out for use at the big game that night. The incorrect label was to read:

John Wooden: A Birthday Retrospective.

Then, during the break after the second quarter, when all the fans thought they were about to watch a tribute to one of the game's greatest coaches--what they would really see was the dark truth about Butch Davis.

Surely you've guessed by now, though. It wasn't just that thousands of fans--fans not just of the Lakers, but of the movies as well--would be watching the truth about "the most sensitive male actor to emerge in years." But also, Butch Davis, himself, would be watching it.

You see, everybody knew that Butch Davis went to all the Lakers games. Had seats right up front, next to the players. To sweeten the revenge, the Fatman had even arranged for all the biggest names in Butch's latest film project to be sitting next to Butch. Purloining a couple dozen tickets to the Lakers game was actually one of the toughest parts of the whole scheme, but the Fatman had insisted on this demonic detail.

You see, "Spacejackers," Butch's latest movie, was some really dumb but high concept big budget movie about a sports team that gets highjacked and kidnapped in space--well, let me back up to explain this dumb plot that I probably would have been excited to be involved in, back when I was a player in the Biz. Anyway, there's this rough, roguish band of space pirates, sort of highjackers-slash-kidnappers, who roam the galaxies, kidnapping innocent space voyagers and their vessels. But in this case, they make a mistake, these badguys do, they make the mistake of kidnapping the most formidable sports team in the universe, who are on their way to the Intergalactic Swamp Rugby Finals--alligators in the swamps to tear up the fallen players, you know, that sort of thing--or maybe it was going to be the InterOrbital Olympics with Terrorists from another star system, whatever. I'd heard that there was some really ugly heated debate going on regarding rewrites and bringing in new writers.

Whatever, who gives a flying fart, the point is, the Fatman had arranged for all the cast and major behind-the-scenes powers of the movie to be sent Lakers tickets so that they could all sit together and it would serve as the first major promotional stunt for the movie. Get tongues wagging, so to speak, and get a nice bit of national publicity for absolutely free. Group photo-op and all that.

Of course, what the Fatman and I knew was that the movie project would be in deep trouble by the end of the night. Very deep trouble. At the very least, Butch Davis, who was signed as the lead, would have to be replaced. But naturally, everybody in the cast believed, when they got their anonymous Lakers tickets, that it was a gift from someone high up in the studios, or one of the executive producers of "Spacejackers."

It was great. It was great it was great it was great!

I had gotten to the stadium early, frantic that something would go wrong. But you know what, things went without a snag. Isn't that great?

I went to check on the final details with Rasta. Yes, that was the name of the stoned but very sharp kid we'd bribed. (Even though he was white, he had somehow managed to grow these magnificent dreadlocks, hence he had assigned himself the appellation "Rasta.") I was pleased to observe that everything was going fine. I checked in with the Fatman via cellphone at about six-thirty and everything was fine there, too. Butch's wife and son had arrived at the bookstore; plans were going completely according to, well, plan.

I shall skip over all the highlights of the first two quarters of the Lakers charity game. It was one hell of a first half, by the way, and I made meticulous notes, but of course the Fatman red penciled them, because he says this is not a chapter about the Lakers, but about revenge and justice, and--well, more to the point, the Fatman loathes and despises all organized sports, as I was to later learn.

The only snafu in the plan was that I put my cellphone down for a split second just before half time, and some prick ripped it off, which I knew was no big deal, because when that had happened before, the Fatman hadn't batted an eye. Surely, if he was bribing Rasta to the tune of four figures, replacing a cell phone was a small price to pay.

Also, I knew that the Fatman would have his eye glued to the TV watching the game, even if he did hate sports, he would make an exception in this case, because this halftime would go down in history.

And so it happened. I couldn't believe it! This moment was as huge an undertaking and accomplishment as any high risk, big budget scene I'd ever shot, and it was just as fantastic--yet it was different, because it was real, it was weird, it was wonderful. It was *real!*

The whole stadium crowd stopped their chattering when it was announced that a tribute to John Wooden was about to be broadcast, in honor of the grand old man's birthday. But instead--there came on the screen, bigger than life, the footage of Butch Davis beating his wife and kid bloody, calling her names so raw that even the reddest of the rednecks in the audience turned blue from shock. Everybody just held their breath.

I just stood spellbound. There it was, playing out on the screen in living--and I use that word loosely--color. Butch Davis, who only moments before had received a standing ovation while thousands cheered, was there on the screen for all to see, battering the hell out of his wife and his little boy.

The pie de resistance was this: I had arranged to be sitting just a few yards away. I had my camera trained right on Butch's face, so as to record his fall from grace for posterity. It only took a few seconds for Butch, who was swearing a blue streak, to storm out of the stadium, followed by a host of paparazzi and press.

My only regret was that I could not be in two places at the same time, for I so wished that I could be back at the bookstore with

the Fatman, watching his expression as it played out. He had masterminded the whole thing, after all.

After the paparazzi and news crews had brutally squeezed poor little me out to the furthest periphery of the crowd--which was fine, because I had the first few seconds of Butch's reaction to the tape, nobody else had that. In fact, I and only I knew the whole story, hell, I practically was the whole story! Anyway, I found myself standing next to a pay phone.

I called the Fatman. He started babbling so fast I couldn't even understand what he was saying. Only after I insisted that he please slow down did I grasp in horror exactly what he was getting at.

When Butch's kid had been gently told by his mother that they would be escaping to Big Bear that very night, the kid was quite happy with the prospect of leaving his Monster Dad. But he was very distraught at leaving behind some of his precious stuff. Not just the usual Hollywood kid stuff, apparently, but some secret project he'd been working on for the science fair, and a spy notebook, his collection of toad and mice bones, and other cool stuff he wouldn't divulge to his mom, and then--

--Oh God, when his mother and the Fatman turned their backs for one minute, the kid disappeared and hitchhiked the ten miles back to his house. Of course, his mother bolted after him, knowing that's where her son was heading, and she was out of the bookstore before the Fatman could stop her.

Meanwhile, Butch was on his way home from the stadium in a rage, yelling that he would take care of that bitch wife of his, who was probably behind all this and had humiliated him in front of the whole world.

Also, it would seem that old Butch was not as clever as he thought he was at shaking the paparazzi, because they were peeking into his private rage and into his house only a few minutes later, when he found his waifish little wife running up the stairs and calling frantically for her son, who was upstairs packing.

Butch grabbed her by the hair and threw her down the stairs. Then, in a blind fury, Butch Davis beat her to death with the closest weapon at hand--his Heisman trophy, on proud display in the foyer.

His son stared down from the top of the stairs, a witness to the murder of his mother.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: IT'S A DOG'S LIFE

Our next foray into Crimefighting was an amazing saga indeed.

Oh, it was a thing of beauty.

I cannot be sure if the Fatman--devoid, as he was, of any kind of normal life, and filled with so much love, and rage, and his own weird energy--I cannot be sure if he was actually sent by God to be an instrument of justice here on earth, but he was marvelous at it.

The Voltaire of Vendettas.

The Rabelais of Revanche.

The Einstein of Espionage.

He was the Dionysius of Divine Retribution.

The Nemesis of Nihilists and Ne'er Do Wells everywhere.

As this next chapter in our lives was to prove to me.

Now, before I delve into that chapter, I must state that the Fatman was naturally quite devastated by the death of Butch Davis's wife. More to the point, he was overcome with guilt. He was absolutely convinced that her brutal murder was really all his fault. GUILT such as he had never felt in his life.

It was WORSE, he blurted out between sobs, the morning after the murder, it was WORSE than when he found Toby W. Smith's bloody body in that outhouse, and then spent the rest of his youth thinking that he could have stopped it, if only, if only. . .

But if you are to understand the whole course of events, as regards both the denouement of the Butch Davis business, and the beginnings of our next Adventure, I suppose I must recount it hour by

hour, as it all unfolded. The next few days, following the catastrophic bust of Butch at the Lakers game, were a whirlwind of weird events, so chronologically is probably the best way to proceed.

I should start out by saying this: At the time of the murder of Butch's wife, I was actually in the treehouse witnessing it, for I had hightailed it from the game to Butch's house using a back road I know, and I got there even before a lot of the press.

As for how I got into the gated community this time? Can you guess? I had prearranged it with my Westec Security buddy. You see, I had suspected that Butch might hightail it back to his house, after his domestic crimes were revealed to the world via widescreen, and I knew that was footage--his crazed reaction to it all--oh, that was footage I would want to record for posterity: Butch in a rage, trashing his own house! Butch making frantic phone calls to do spin control, when it was obviously past all hope! Maybe even Butch planning to grab a wad of cash from his safe and put on a disguise and leave the city, the state, the country, anything to get away from the public humiliation and mortification! (Although, of course, I had never anticipated the tragic turn of events, with his wife and son returning, and the unthinkable horror that followed. . .never in a million years. . .) But, anyway, I had contacted Toby the day before about the Fatman's revenge scheme, and told him a sliver of it, and Toby thought it was great! He was waiting for me at the entrance to the neighborhood, watching the game on a portable TV, along with the guard in the booth. Toby then used his pull to get me through the gates.)

As for how all the rest of the paparazzi got into Butch's neighborhood? Well, first of all, the guard opened the gate arm so Butch could drive through. The guard had to let him in, of course, in spite of what the world saw aired at the game, because Butch lived there. But the paparazzi were hot on Butch's trail; they had followed Butch when he stormed out of the stadium. And so hungry were the photographers for pictures, that right after the guard waved Butch in, some of the paparazzi in their big SUVs just crashed that big swinging arm at the gate guarding the entrance to the neighborhood. Just crashed right through it, they did! Then, of course, they all came streaming in, in spite of the chubby little guard's protestations. Even the networks, with their big satellite vans, just eased on in. I was the only one who knew about the treehouse hideout, though.

I don't think I need describe the actual murders in any more detail, because I don't think there's anyone on the planet who hasn't

seen them, if they wanted to see them. The footage has been blasted all over the world, even though the authorities did everything they could to prevent that.

THE AFTERMATH: Minutes after the murder, police arrived, and then everything got even more insane. The first thing the cops did was to arrest Butch Davis, who kept claiming his wife had fallen down the stairs when they were fighting. The fact that his son had seen what really happened--well, more on that later.

Anyway, the police took Butch away, and they took the kid away, Butch protesting his innocence, and his son screaming loudly that his father was a killer. Obviously the kid had no impulse or instinct to protect his diabolical dad, none whatsoever.

The next thing the police did was to corral all the paparazzi and news vans, to confiscate all of their footage of the murder. You would think that the paparazzi would have scattered like roaches when the lights go on, when they heard those cop sirens. But the police were amazingly successful at detaining the paparazzi, and here is why:

TWO REASONS:

ONE: Lots of the paparazzi got greedy. Had they been content with just taping the murder, they could have scurried off and gotten away with their ultra-valuable footage intact. But no, they all wanted footage of the aftermath. The kid's reaction to the murder was particularly juicy, albeit tragic, and the paparazzi were so caught up in doing their job, that they forgot to do the other part of their sometimes illegal job, which is always to **GET AWAY SAFELY** with the goods, i.e., the pictures, videotapes, whatever.

TWO: The other reason the paparazzi didn't get so very far, even the ones who tried to get away when they heard the cops coming, was because they sorta forgot that they were in a gated community, and man, those cops took advantage of that. They were almost as determined to round up all the paparazzi as they were to arrest Butch, and they lassoed a whole bunch of them, because the paparazzi were basically trapped behind the walls of that gated community. Nobody was letting anybody in or out of that front gate. A cop car was parked right where the broken swinging arm sat splintered in a bed of hollyhocks.

I only squeezed out of getting caught because nobody thought to look in that treehouse. (Actually, they did look there when the search for paparazzi got more intense, but by then, Toby the Westec good ol' boy had spirited me away in the trunk of his car. Hoorah!)

But of course, a couple of paparazzi were able to get away. I found out later that one of them knew somebody who lived in the neighborhood, and hid out in that person's house. It was a lawyer who had defended this paparazzi in a lawsuit that some celebrity had instigated--a famous lawyer too. The richest sleaze lawyer in Hollywood, or the sleaziest rich lawyer in Hollywood, depending on your point of view. The cops hadn't gone so far as to search anybody's house; the rich people wouldn't have liked that one little bit, oh no they would not.

The grim upshot of it was this: there were a couple of copies of the actual murder floating around. But they didn't surface. Nobody saw the footage till days after Butch Davis's arraignment.

Why?

Because paparazzi were negotiating with parties all over the world for the highest bidder, and that took a couple of days.

The fact that nobody, except a few paparazzi, had seen the actual footage of the murder explained two things:

1.) Why Butch Davis's lawyer was able to mount a vaguely plausible defense that Davis's wife had fallen down the stairs when they were arguing over, and I quote, "*That vicious thing she had done to him, faking that tape and airing it at Staples Center.*"

2.) It explained why Butch Davis's hardcore fans continued to support him through it all.

Of course, after the paparazzi finally did sell it to the highest bidder, most of the world eventually gave in to the sick urge to view the murder. Several web sites were carrying it. We had fallen a long way from a few years ago, when everybody decided to act like gentlemen, and not circulate the footage of poor dead Princess Di.

AND SO: Where does that leave our story? Ah yes, with me sneaking out in the Westec Security car, on my way back to Santa Monica, with my thoughts now frantic about the Fatman. What had he heard? What did he know? How did he feel?

When I finally got back to the bookstore, it was the middle of the night, and I found the bookstore locked. Finding the bookstore locked didn't shock me; it was past midnight after all. But that didn't make me any less worried about the Fatman. What must he be going

through, I wondered? I hightailed it to his house and found that, too, locked up tight and dark.

Here's what happened next, if you can believe it: I rang the bell, I knocked, I bellowed, I rapped at the windows. I made such a stink that Blue, who was inside, woke up. He came bounding to the door and started to bark and bark, because he heard my voice on the other side of the door. But no Fatman came lumbering.

Well, now I was really starting to panic, because I just knew that that moody old Fatman was in there, and I had this image that the Fatman was feeling so guilty that he had killed himself. Taken his life, in remorse. Too many flashbacks of Toby W. Smith. . . I had visions of him lying in a bathtub full of warm water, his wrists sliced open, bleeding to death! (Then I stopped and wondered, boy, he must have had a bathtub specially built, to accommodate his enormous girth.)

I wondered if he'd taken an overdose of pills? Oh dear oh dear oh dear, it wouldn't take many downers to halt that poor overworked, oversized ticker of his, for all time. But maybe, I thought, I could get to the Fatman in time to save his life! In time to call 911 and have a dozen medics lift his gargantuan girth onto a jumbo stretcher and have him zoomed to the hospital and his stomach pumped. Or in time to bind his slit wrists--I just had to get there in time!

So my knocking got louder and Blue's barking got louder. I panicked; the seconds were slipping away. I knew he was in there--but *still* he did not come! Finally in a panic, I broke the front window near the door, and reached in and unlocked it, and that was when the police came and arrested me.

I know, what a shocker! They had me hauled off before I could even talk to the Fatman! But at least I did find out that the Fatman was not dead.

What happened specifically was this: I was yelling so loud that I had not even heard the cops approaching, and then there was the ear-shattering crash of me breaking the glass. I guess the neighbors had called the cops, but the cops didn't come screeching up in a patrol car or nothin'.

"It's not what you think!" I yelled. "The man in that house has just tried to kill himself, I'm positive! I'm just trying to save him, we've got to get to him in time!" I babbled frantically.

Of course the cops are all "Yeah, yeah, buddy," really cynical, and they wrestle me to the ground, and in the process, they pushed me

into a pile of poop that Blue had deposited on the lawn--how ironic, huh?

"No, seriously," I spouted, "I'm his friend and I'm just trying to save his life!"

I even almost had a word slip, and nearly said, "I'm his *partner in Crimefighting*." Oops.

So what happens next is, as I'm laying there on the ground in dog doodoo, cuffed from behind, I hear one of the cops stride in the house and he's talking to the Fatman, who is just fine, thank you, and I even hear Nick at Night is on and "I Dream of Jeannie" is playing in the background.

Ha! "I Dream of Jeannie." And the Fatman pretends to be this big intellectual. I'm yelling to the Fatman, "Hey, it's me, I'm worried about yah, I thought yah killed yourself, why don't you come out here and save my ass, you prick! What the hell is your problem?"

Well. The Fatman didn't come out and save my ass. I was mad as hell that I'd gotten into this whole stupid Crimefighting mess with the crazy Fatman in the first place, and right at that moment, even being an ordinary, run of the mill, garden variety, homeless bum was looking pretty damn good, because let me tell you folks out there in television land, on a goddamn balmy day on the Santa Monica beach, pushing your shopping cart down the boardwalk, without a care in the world, with a few quarters in your pocket that you've panhandled for a corndog and a can of beer, and you got your dog with you, who loves you, well let me tell you what, folks, that can be a pretty nice rosy fucking existence, compared to the pressures you face every day, pal!

It was definitely superior to being nose down in my own dog's shit.

But thinking about that made me think about Blue, so I bellowed into the house, "I WANT MY DOG BACK, YOU FAT BASTARD!"

But by now, since the Fatman was doing nothing to intercede on my behalf, the cops were dragging me into their patrol car and that's how I ended up in jail.

I was in a holding cell.

It was only about an hour, but it seemed like a day before the Fatman came to his senses and did something he rarely did: left the house. Somehow he got his car and driver to show up in the middle of the night, and then the Fatman came down to the police station. And no, he didn't explain everything to the cops.

That would have meant tying us to the Butch Davis snafu. Instead, he told them some bizarre story, which he would never even tell me the details of.

He left an envelope with seventy-three lousy dollars in it for the clerk to give to me. Don't ask me why that amount, maybe that's all the cash he had on hand, although I doubt it, or maybe the number seventy-three symbolized something, I don't know. And there was no note with it, nothing.

I was informed by the clerk that I was a free man, no charges were pending.

It was only a few blocks from the police station to the bookstore, and I headed back there. I ran back there, in fact. I found the rear door unlocked and no Fatman, but Blue was snoozing in the back room. I reclaimed my dog and got the hell out of there.

OK, here's the part where I look like I'm insane. I was back on the streets for the rest of that night and a whole half a day before I realized that boredom was the worst malady I had ever suffered, way worse than withdrawal from drugs, even. Besides, I was more than ready to give the Fatman a piece of my mind, which was due and overdue.

Blue and I hiked back to the bookstore.

The front door was locked, and there was a CLOSED sign on the door, but I happened to get there just as a little Oriental delivery boy was delivering a Great Wall of China's worth of little white boxes in a huge cardboard flat. I took advantage and bullied my way in, startling the poor delivery boy, who got the hell out of there after the Fatman handed him a wad of cash.

I was just getting ready to really lay into the Fatman at a very loud volume, when he collapsed into his bigass chair in the back room and started sobbing. And he kept sobbing, for the better part of an hour.

Now I know that some writers are real poetic about describing tears, but I don't know how to do that, all I can say is the effect they had

on me, which was that every mean thing I had rehearsed to say to him choked in my throat.

I ended up spending the next twenty-four hours straight trying to assuage the Fatman's guilt over having "caused it." He was sure that he caused it, because making the tape of the beatings was his idea. If the tape hadn't existed, then Butch wouldn't have--well anyway, that was the toughest assignment of my life to date, keeping the Fatman from despairing completely.

He was so bad off, I thought he might put a bullet through his brain or keel over from a heart attack or sadness or whatever. But more on that later. Also more on the actual and specific fallout from the Butch Davis murder, but this is not his story, not really, it is the Fatman's saga. And believe me--right now, if you have come to have any kind of affection for the Fatman at all, you should be very concerned about him.

I spent many long hours trying to get it through the Fatman's fat head that a bastard like Butch Davis would have crossed the line sooner or later, even without the Fatman's machinations, but the Fatman just would not hear me. In fact, he was outright rude to me. He did everything but ask me to leave, to clear out. I knew that the only reason he didn't was because if I left, I would take Blue. . . .Blue, who had been staring up at the Fatman with great concern the whole long time, and who had stayed right by the Fatman's side, ever since the moment that the Fatman first heard of the murder.

As far as I was concerned--well, it was becoming clear to me that our Crimefighting Partnership was ending as soon as it had begun. And even though I told myself that I shouldn't be thinking of myself just now (it was the Fatman I was worried about), still, it devastated me to think that it was all over.

The Fatman's big plans to go around righting wrongs, being this sort of Secret Superhero, the Fattest Crimefighter in the World, with me for his Trusty Partner, his Sidekick--me who was quicker and more limber and could ninja in and out of secret places--but the Fatman, well, he was this big guy with the big heart and big ideas and the big dreams, plus he could finance these escapades. Never underestimate the importance of financial backing in any Crimefighting venture. TO WIT: The Batcave, the Batmobile, upkeep on stately Wayne manor, etc.

But now, the Fatman hardly felt like waiting on his bookstore customers, much less undertaking any bold new avenger ventures.

I realized as I sat there in the store, his mood bringing me down instead of me cheering him up, that now I was just an ordinary homeless guy again. No more secretly videotaping villains. No more Crimefighting. Just pushing my cart, panhandling, wishing desperately for clean underwear and a treatment that would sell for a million bucks, so I could be a Player again in this crazy town called Hollywood.

Also, over the next couple of days, I noticed that the Fatman was eating even more than usual. Yes, a sweeping nay frightening statement.

He was so full of remorse that--well, he didn't actually close the bookstore. He never did that, except for Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter, and Fourth of July. But other than that, he never closed the bookstore. Why, that would be like cutting off his only lifeline to the world, and that thought secretly terrified him, or depressed him or something, I don't know, I'm no good at describing emotions, especially when they aren't my own--but the point was, now, *he didn't seem to want to help anybody who came in for his expertise*, which was one of the primary reasons folks patronized him.

Instead, (and totally out of character, I might add), he mouthed off to everyone.

To a spoiled loud fat kid, who was pointing and whining that he wanted to see gimme gimme gimme one of the rare old Batman comics under glass, the Fatman barked "Oh why don't you shut up and go watch South Park. You got soulless eyes, little boy."

To a lady who came in wanting to know did he have any second hand Martha Stewart coffee table books, the Fatman responded, "Fleeting. Her moment is fleeting, and I do not deal in the ephemeral. Could I interest you in a copy of "Recherche De Tempts Perdue." I have a lovely copy in the original French, mint condition. NO? Goodbye."

"Sun Tzu, Art of War?" the Fatman said absently, repeating back the question asked of him by a young yuppie with a power buzz hair cut and a cup of Starbucks. Not only did the Fatman yell at this guy for bringing Starbucks into the bookstore (you could drink all the coffee you wanted from our bookstore brew, but the Fatman considered

Starbucks an abomination), but when the young man wanted to know which translation of Sun Tzu was the preferred, the Fatman just waved an airy hand and said, "Why don't you just pick out which dust jacket you like the best, you toadying fop. You don't look like you could possibly begin to understand what that poor misunderstood genius is talking about."

Well. When the Fatman said that, I knew he was near the brink. Oh my God, usually just the most casual interest demonstrated in a controversial tome like "The Art of War," and the Fatman would launch into a lengthy and loving dissertation about the merits and debits of each version: this one was the most literal translation, however that one contains more historical annotations, on the other hand, this other one over here has the cachet of being edited by the esteemed James Clavell, and on and on the Fatman would wax!

(I mean, frankly, in the past, when I'd heard him yammering on about all these egghead books and classics and stuff, I was pretty bored and I didn't know what he was talking about, and I wondered like, why would anybody care about some pamphlet written by a Chinaman half a millennium ago?)

But my point is, to hear the Fatman, who was only marginally alive on this planet to begin with by any standard definition of life, to hear him just giving up and turning into an apathoid on even his most favorite topics--well frankly, it scared the hell out of me.

Scared Blue too. He sensed it.

Then, yet another customer ambled in. This was the customer that just about pushed the Fatman right over the edge of the precipice and into the abyss.

It was a college kid, who came in asking did we have any used Cliff Notes for "some Hamlet and Walt Whitman, also some Dostoyevsky opus shit". . . those were the kid's exact words, by the way. I saw the Fatman look at the kid, and scowl real big, and reach for the drawer where I knew he kept nothing else except his gun. Now I'm not alleging that the Fatman was gonna shoot the kid. On the other hand, I knew by now that the Fatman was capable of some mighty aberrant behavior.

"We're just closing up," I told the guy and hustled him out. As I was doing this, the Fatman starts yelling at the kid, "*I do begin to have bloody thoughts! Now I could drink hot blood, and do such bitter business as the day would quake to look upon!*"

By then, the kid was out the door and hurrying down the street, looking over his shoulder at the Fatman, who was running--the Fatman is actually running, mind you--out of the bookstore after the kid, and the Fatman is yelling at the kid, "*I celebrate myself and sing myself, and what I assume, you shall assume. . . I THINK I COULD TURN AND LIVE WITH ANIMALS, THEY DO NOT MAKE ME SICK DISCUSSING THEIR DUTY TO GOD!*"

Now the kid was galloping, fleeing, trying to put as much distance between himself and the Fatman as he could. Then, the Fatman ambled back down the sidewalk, ignoring the staring passersby; he lumbered inside and slowly back to his bigass chair and sat down, a broken man. I locked the front door. No more customers for just now, I thought to myself.

I looked over at him. He was sitting there, fingering his beat up old Superman lunch box, the one he'd had since he was a kid, where he kept a stash of candy bars. But instead of opening it and raiding it for chocolate, as he did several times a day, he just sat there, Blue at his feet. The Fatman stared at the image of the immortal Caped Crusader: the blue tights, the red boots, the big S on the chest, and that magnificent flowing cape. . .

Then, the Fatman began speaking in low tones, to nobody, no soul, impartial.

*"I think I could turn and live with animals,
They are so placid and self-contained
I stand and look at them long and long
They do not sweat and whine about their condition
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented
With the mania of owning things
Not one kneels to another,
Nor to his kind that lived a thousand years ago
Not one is respectable, or unhappy. . .
Over the whole earth. . . over the whole fat earth. . .*

I studied the Fatman. Blue studied him. My mind was racing. . . what to do what to do. . . I couldn't decide whether I should take over running the bookstore, so that it didn't go out of business, just from the Fatman's big huge rudeness.

Or, another possible measure, albeit a drastic one--

That is when the phone rang.

The Fatman just looked at the phone, shrugged his big, beefy shoulders, so I went to answer it.

It was a customer whom the Fatman had known for ages, with the news that he was having a big estate auction. Lots of fantastic, primo Hollywood memorabilia, including everything Shirley Temple. I already knew that Shirley Temple memorabilia was one of the Fatman's secret passions. A lot of money in it, too. But the Fatman would hate me for pointing that out.

And because the Fatman had always been so helpful in the past, the seller was going to give the Fatman first picks. Did the Fatman want to come by this afternoon? The Fatman, who had taken the phone lethargically, said he'd think about it, then hung up.

Later, after I browbeat the Fatman for a while about his lousy attitude, cutting himself off from the world, the Fatman finally agreed to go take a look at the stuff.

Thank God, I thought, at least it would get the Fatman out into the world again.

As was his custom, the Fatman called for a hired car and his usual driver, a guy who knew the Fatman's peccadilloes and peculiarities.

The Fatman wanted me to go with him, not locked in the trunk this time, Hoorah! Presumably I was to go along to help load the car. But I suspected the truth was that I provided some sort of buffer against the ridicule of the world. . .ridicule that the Fatman knew was inevitable whenever he set foot outside the Batcave.

But if this is NOT a story about many things, it is definitely not an account of the ridicule he suffered that afternoon when we left the bookstore. And the Fatman, who has editorial sway, does not want the lengthy lexicon of the vicious remarks we overheard that afternoon at the estate sale, laid out here, in cruel and cutting detail.

He wants me to skip to the ride home, that part about the dog.

He and I were heading back to the bookstore, taking a detour through suburbia, because the Fatman was no friend of freeway gridlock. (Strange--he would rather take an hour getting home, driving twenty-five miles an hour down tree lined streets, peering into the big front picture windows of the houses at the little families that dwelled

inside, than spend a half hour in bumper-to-bumper traffic on the Ten Freeway. I liked that about him.)

But several streets that were blocked off due to a movie shoot forced us to detour to a not-so-nice part of town; then there was police yellow tape cordoning off several more streets. We never did find out what that was about. On the other hand, that kind of thing is so ubiquitous in L.A., as to be uninteresting after a while.

We suddenly found ourselves detoured into a really bad part of town. Although it wasn't bad in the sense you are probably thinking. It didn't look like Watts or Harlem or urban blight. It didn't even look dangerous, exactly.

What it looked like was. . .how to describe it?. . .pathetically poignant. Yes. That is it. It looked pathetically poignant.

Here was a bathtub propped upright, and inside stood a Virgin swathed in blue robes offering a "Saint Mary of the Bathroom Fixtures" sort of beacon of hope. Here was a yard with several vintage cars up on blocks, all hopelessly rusted past salvation. Here was a yard sale, on a Thursday morning no less, selling the most pathetic gewgaws you have ever seen and a sign reading "NOTHING OVER 25 CENTS!" Here was the sight of a recent eviction, with a mountain of broken furniture and dirty clothes, still soggy from last night's rain, sitting on a front lawn. A bedraggled abandoned teddy bear sat atop the heap, staring out at the cold cruel world with big brown terrified button eyes. Here was an old man, sitting in a much abused La-Z-Boy on a front porch, staring out at the world, looking as old and tired as Father Time.

We trundled along, and stopped at a stop sign.

That's when we saw it: a red Corvette stopped about halfway down the next block, pulled over, and a very well dressed man got out. He seemed terribly out of place in this neighborhood; then again, this kind of oxymoron was also not so unusual in L.A. He could have been a cheap bastard, here to visit a bargain basement hooker; he could have been here to pick up a kilo that he would then divi up and mix with baby laxative and sell to his rich clients at a significant markup. Could have been--

Our questions were answered. But in such a way that was only to provoke more questions. Down the road, so to speak.

The guy gets out of his Corvette and walks around to the passenger side and opens the door. The Fatman and I both noticed that

he was looking around furtively as he did. Dropping the hooker off right at her doorstep, I figured. Real gentlemanly of him.

But no. Instead, he starts yelling into the car for someone to get out, but whoever it is, they don't get out of the Vette, see? They don't obey.

So he reaches in, and pulls out this leash, and he starts dragging out this mutt dog, kind of a basset hound, but too hairy to be a purebred. But what the dog looks like is not the point. Anyway, this well dressed asshole is pulling at this dog on this leash, and the poor dog is crying and pulling in the opposite direction, like he doesn't want to get out of that car. But obviously the man is way stronger than the poor dog, so he pulls that dog out of the car by the choke chain. It looks like he is literally going to choke that poor dog to death, and he pulls that dog right out onto the street.

Then he gives the door a shove with his foot, and walks back around the car and gets into the driver's side, stopping to take a quick nip from a silver flask, I notice. But with amazing agility, the dog follows him and jumps into his lap--only this just pisses the guy off more, and he shoves the dog out, really hard, into the street. The dog landed on its back, and from the force with which it landed, you thought maybe the guy had broken the poor dog's back. And the whole time this is going on, the guy is bellowing,

"GODDAMN DOG! GET OUT OF THE GODDAMN CAR! I'LL SHOW THAT FUCKING BITCH TO LEAVE ME! I CAN'T FUCKING WAIT TILL SHE COMES BACK FOR YOU, AND I GET TO TELL HER ABOUT THIS!

The dog just gave him this wistful look, and wagged his tail hopefully.

"DON'T YOU LOOK AT ME THAT WAY, YOU DAMN DOG, YOU ARE NOT MY FUCKING RESPONSIBILITY, GET LOST! THAT CUNT LEAVES ME FOR A FUCKING YUPPIE STOCKBROKER! HA! THAT'S A JOKE. HE'S NO STOCKBROKER, HE'S A COKE DEALER, I SHOULD KNOW!"

Then the guy slams the door, and the dog gave him the most doleful look with his big brown eyes, and the guy starts to screech off--

(Meanwhile, the Fatman and the driver and me, we're just watching it all, like it's a scene from a movie. Very upsetting, it is, witnessing this scene play out.)

--but then, just as the asshole in the Corvette is starting to screech off, he realizes that when he shut the passenger door, he didn't shut it all the way, because it flops wide open, so the guy has to stop his car again in the middle of the street, get out and go around to shut it.

Of course the poor dog, that poor hairy basset hound, he takes this as a sign that the guy has changed his mind about abandoning him, so the dog bounds down the block and is back in the car, before the guy can get to the passenger door to shut it. But again, that dog was kicked out, even more viciously this time. Again it did a roll into the street, like a stunt man doing a leap off a moving train, but this WASN'T a stunt man, it wasn't even a STUNT DOG. Then, out of nowhere, a car comes zooming past the Corvette, nearly running over that poor dog, that dog who was still flailing on his back and whimpering and moaning. The guy just stares down at it, calling the dog ugly names--but I think it's safe to say that this asshole is really directing this hostility towards the aforementioned girlfriend.

While he's doing this, he pulls a vial out of his pocket and helps himself to a nice healthy sniff of coke, looking around furtively the whole time, of course. Then the guy gets in the car and screeches off, the car kicking up a hurtful cloud of pebbles and dust right in the dog's face, as it stares forlornly at the disappearing car.

I saw that the Fatman was scribbling down the license plate of the guy's Vette. Man oh man, I was already starting to feel sorry for that guy in the Vette. Well, I didn't exactly feel sorry for the prick. Let's just say that now I knew he would get exactly what he deserved. What he deserved was some kind of decimation, some form of torture. To know what it was like to be victimized.

Well, anyway--don't worry too much about the dog. The first thing we did, of course, was to bundle that dog into the car. Before we even got back to the bookstore, the Fatman had stopped by a grocery store and ordered me to go in and bring back a pound of ground sirloin. So don't worry about the dog, things would go fine for him. Pity that asshole in the Vette.

On the way home, I watched the Fatman scratching the dog's ears when he didn't think I was looking, and I just kept thinking, hmph, "For a guy who says he doesn't like dogs. . ."

When we got back to the store, the Fatman ordered me to do some errands--I mean little stupid ones, like going to the Hostess

Bakery Outlet Store, so he could load up on snacks. Then, as I'm leaving, he says he'll have some work for me in a couple of hours. My curiosity was piqued.

"Here's the deal," said the Fatman that afternoon, and I could just tell from the look in his eyes that he was up to something. "I want you to impersonate someone from Animal Control," he announced. Then, (I couldn't believe this), he pulls out a laminated card and a gold badge that identified me as a County Officer out of Division Fourteen Animal Control for Santa Monica.

"Are you crazy?" I said, as I eyed the badge which, I had to admit, looked very official. "Look, Fatman, we know that prick in the Vette is mean, and I think he's dangerous. And something tells me he'd be just as cruel to a human who pissed him off as a canine. Forget it, I ain't risking it," I huffed, then nosed around in the Fatman's deli bag to see if there were any crumbs he hadn't inhaled. There were not.

"For chrissake," said the Fatman, "Where is this fear coming from? A couple of weeks ago, you took your life in your hands stalking Butch Davis--a guy who, given what we know now, would surely have killed you, had he found you!"

"Excuse me," I said, "But if you're trying to persuade me to do this, you're not exactly barking up the right tree, no pun intended. You're absolutely right! Only in hindsight have I come to realize how insane and dangerous that whole crazy Butch Davis stunt was, and I like to think that I've learned my lesson about taking my life in my hands."

"Bullshit," said the Fatman, "You loved it. You stood right here and said to me, and I quote, *'This is a fuckin' rush, never have I felt more alive,'* and don't deny it, you remember saying that as well as I remember hearin' it."

"Yes," I acknowledged, "But what I didn't know then was that Butch Davis was capable of murder. Surely if he'd kill an innocent woman, he'd think nothing of killing the peeping tom who put it all on video."

The Fatman was apparently shocked that I didn't leap at the chance to risk life and limb helping him, the Fattest Crimefighter in the World.

"OK, so we took a risk, so things didn't go exactly the way we wanted them to," said the Fatman, fishing around in his cluttered desk drawers for his Chunky bars. He tore open the wrapper and chomped as he talked.

"But don't you see, that's all the more reason we have to do some good, iron out our technique. Look, this guy is too lazy and cowardly to even do the right thing by a dog, I doubt very much he's all that dangerous. Besides which, it makes me just sick to think of him getting away with what he did to that poor dog. Doesn't it make you sick?"

I looked down at the poor dog, who was now sound asleep in Blue's bed. (Blue was out back with a bone, by the way.) I studied the Fatman.

"Yeah. It makes me sick too. But remember, this guy doesn't have to be, *all that dangerous*, as you put it, to hurt me. He would only have to be a little dangerous to still do me some serious damage. I'm frailer than I look."

The Fatman did not offer me a bite of his Chunky bar, but he did look at me, softening a little, and spoke in soothing tones.

"OK, OK. Sometimes I forget that you're trying real hard to get back on your feet, so if you want me to pay you to do this, then I will gladly do so."

"Look," I said, bristling, "It's not about the money! I have a sense of justice too, you know! It's just that--well, how much did you have in mind? To pay me, that is?"

After all, the Fatman was right. I was struggling to get back on my feet. He had to start forking over sooner or later. I'd proved myself by now. The Fatman produced a Milkbone from seemingly out of the air, and fed it to the stray dog as he eyeballed me.

"How much do you think the job is worth, imitating a guy from Animal Control, who supposedly witnessed the abandoning of the dog, and wants some answers?" asked the Fatman.

Suddenly I felt on the spot. I punted.

"OK, how about you decide what you'll pay me."

"Twenty bucks."

"C'mon. Don't insult me."

"A hundred."

"Screw you. My life is worth more than a C- note. This isn't just some singing telegram I'm delivering, this is a goddamn war against evil we're fighting. We're Crimefighters!"

The Fatman said nothing, but just smiled a moment and said:

"OK, I'll pay you nada."

"What?"

"You heard me. Nothing. Zero. Zippo. Rien."

"Where is that coming from? You're supposed to be going up, not down."

But the Fatman just grinned. Finished his Chunky. Picked at the chocolate bits left in the foil.

"Something you just said clicked, friend. That this is a war against evil we're fighting. Very profound. You don't say much that's profound I notice, so this is a significant moment."

"But if I--"

"--If this is, indeed, a war against evil, and if I pay you so much as a dollar, that makes you a damn mercenary. You don't want to see yourself as a hired mercenary. Why, your self-esteem is low enough, with all you've been through."

"Oh man, now you're getting really insulting. I won't do it for less than a grand, and that's my last offer. You gave that stupid Rasta kid twice that, just for switching the videotapes at the Lakers game."

"Keep up that attitude, boy, and I'll make you pay for the privilege of playing the game. After all, did Batman pay Robin? Did The Lone Ranger pay Tonto? Did the Green Hornet pay Kato?"

"Shut up. Just shut up."

"Did Captain America pay Bucky? Did--"

"Hey, those are fucking comic book characters, they're not real people!"

"Friend, most guys would trade their left nut to live the life of a comic book Superhero."

I sputtered. I couldn't figure out what was happening. Was this guy outsmarting me? I mean, I had negotiated with the best. I had faced down Ovitz and won. What was this about? Was the Fatman appealing to my sense of ethics? Because Ovitz had sure as hell known better than to try that. Hell, I didn't even know I had any up till now. But the Fatman just gave me a Cheshire Cat smirk.

"I would appreciate it if you would make up your mind whether or not you're going to rise to the challenge, friend, because I want to get right on this. And I shouldn't have any trouble finding

some other has-been homeless cross addicted writer-director-producer who will do it, if you won't."

I gave him the silent treatment. The Fatman smiled slyly.

"Listen to me. When it's all over. . .when we're done Crimefighting. . .it is going to be one hell of a great story. . ."

It was like I could hear music swelling in the background as he said this.

"A great story. . .lots of great stories. . ." he said slowly.

I bit my lip and clenched my fists. He always knew how to hit a nerve, that Fatman. I eyeballed him, and helped myself to a Milkbone. I was starving.

"OK, OK, I'll do it."

CHAPTER TWELVE: THE DOG DEFENDER

I had agreed to conduct surveillance on the Doghater. Disguised as an operative from County Animal Control, Division Fourteen, no less.

The Fatman just stared me down and I rolled my eyes.

"OK. OK, I'll do it."

"That's my boy," said the Fatman, clapping me on the back with great relish, not realizing his own strength, and in the process knocking me to the floor. I staggered back up, and he did not apologize; instead he effused, "Just think! You can put it all in your next screenplay! Don't deny it, I know you're writing all these weird stories down."

"Yeah, but to what end?" I said. "Within a couple of months, they'll have turned that whole sordid Butch Davis tragedy into some stupid Movie-Of-The-Week, and what will it profit me?"

But the Fatman just smiled and winked.

"Here's what you're gonna do. . .you'll bide your time, then cut loose with the real version. After all, you're the only one who's got the entire inside story. But hey, here we are talking about your career again! How does that always happen--God, you're self centered--when there's CRIME OUT THERE TO FIGHT!" said the Fatman with a flourish.

God, he was arrogant, I thought to myself. I wondered right then and there what I had already wondered so many times in the brief span that I'd known him--why didn't I just march out of his bookstore and leave all this Crimefighting silliness and foolish risk behind, and return to the real world? To a normal life?

Possibly because it would be to return to a shopping cart, and beans out of a can with my homeless dog. That was my reality. That was my return to "normal." So for now, weird as it was, I would settle for the Fatman's fantasies.

The plan was simple, but that didn't mean it was risk free. I had that same split sensation I'd experienced when the whole crazy Butch Davis scheme got going full force--the thrill of the intrigue, *and*

the gnawing fear that my balls were going to end up hanging from someone's rear view mirror.

And so, that afternoon, decked out in some new clothes from a uniform store, I found myself standing in front of the address of the man who had abandoned that poor dog. I had learned by now that such a simple thing as an address, when you already had someone's license plate number, was no problem for the Fatman--and BINGO, I saw the red Corvette sitting in the parking lot. I remember thinking to myself that the car was a lot fancier than the apartment complex.

While this apartment complex was not exactly in a bad part of town, still, common sense would dictate that a person who could afford to drive a red Vette could afford a place slightly nicer than this place, GARBO APARTMENTS, where the "O" in Garbo had been stolen and "AGE" painted in its place. The paint job on the "AGE" graffiti did not even look very new, suggesting that the managers of the building didn't really give a shit about fixing up the defacement. Also, the greenery around the building was ill-kempt, there were some cars up on blocks, kids' plastic toys, discarded sofas and particle board furniture, and assorted garbage strewn about.

Last but not least, dog poop had been plopped about liberally; I became aware of this immediately, because upon getting out of the Fatman's orange VW, I stepped in some. I cursed and cleaned off my shoe under a working spicket at the outside of the building.

(Oh wait, back up: Since I know that *fashion* is important to many of you, and that still others of you are visually oriented, and therefore probably curious to know how I looked when marching into this next ruse, which of course involved not just spying, but confronting this time--well, let me tell you quickly how I looked.

The Fatman had sent me to a uniform company, because he and I figured that I needed to look vaguely official if I was to confront this bastard under the guise of being a county official. The Fatman was not with me at the uniform store of course, but he walked me through it on the cellphone. Not that I needed it, but I know he liked the feeling of being the Crimefighter In Charge.

After strolling the aisles of the uniform store, under the watchful but bored eyes of a gum chomping Winona Ryder look-alike, with piercings in places I didn't know you could get them, I selected a forest green coverall and matching cap. My first choice was khaki, but they didn't have it in my size. Then, at the Fatman's suggestion, I asked

Winona if they had any customized patches with folks' names on them, such as repairman wear, and she said she did, blowing a mammoth bubble as she reached down and gave me an alphabetized shoe box.

Fifteen minutes later I was on my way back to the bookstore. The Fatman looked me over and thought I approximated the part just fine. I double checked the fake ID that he'd trumped up for me, and, emboldened, I headed off.)

Then I got to the address and got the dog shit on my shoe and so now we are so caught up, back to where I was in the story before the fashion commentary.

My emboldened feeling had vanished. But I was partner to the Fattest Crimefighter In The World, and I was determined to go through with this.

I took a deep breath, went up to the guy's apartment, and knocked. I waited a long moment. I figured he was probably home, because I'd spotted his car. Finally, he answered. I couldn't tell if he had hastily gotten dressed as I was knocking, or if this was his usual attire. My question was answered as I looked over the guy's shoulder and saw a very hot young blonde, who for sure for sure for *sure* looked like jail bait, run from a bedroom into the bathroom and slam the door, wearing nothing but a man's shirt.

His expression was a twitchy mix of nervousness at the sight of an official uniform, and irritation at me for interrupting his bliss.

Without flinching, I stared into his nervous eyes and I whipped out my "identification." He squinted at it and said "What the fuck do you want?"

I noticed the girl peeking out from behind the door, afraid. It was pretty clear that both of these souls were skitterish about what they were doing and my interruption of them. This was fortunate, I figured; I had so thrown them for a loop that they would be on the defensive, instead of me being on the defensive, with my phony ID.

I let my mind flash back to the picture of this very same asshole dragging that poor dog out of the car, then shoving the helpless creature out onto his back into traffic, nearly getting him flattened or snapping his spine. I remembered the dog's yelping and doleful look. With that image in my mind, I scowled at that bastard and said:

"One of our Animal Control Operatives witnessed you abandoning a dog yesterday morning, and physically abusing him in the process."

The guy's eyes widened.

Now, I had become pretty street savvy since--well, since being on the street--and I could tell two things immediately. (By the way, I'd hardly realized, until I had some hindsight under my belt, just how smart I'd gotten. The two, no, three things I realized were this:

1.) He never in the whole wide world thought for a minute that he would be busted for this. Man, had I shocked the hell out of him. It was pretty funny, really.

2.) The next thing that I suspected would happen, did: a wave of relief, inordinately exaggerated, washed over his face, which told savvy me right off that he was doing a lot more sinister things than just abandoning dogs, else why that look of relief?

(I knew that look all too well from my druggie days: you're driving around in your Beamer with a few martinis under your belt and a little vial of powder in your pocket, when a cop pulls you over. Immediately your mind starts racing, thanks to that powder in your pocket AND up your nose, and as CHIPS is swaggering up to your car, you figure you're screwed. You are so screwed; you'll end up in jail, and they'll yank your license, and you're gonna be some con's bitch, and he'll--

--but it turns out that all the cop wants to do is give you, Mr. Beverly Hills, a warning that your left blinker is out. Right off, you feel so damned relieved and thankful and grateful, but then, right off, you're careful not to let the cop see how very relieved you are, lest he start wondering why you're so goddamn happy about being pulled over by a cop.)

And this guy, with the peeking young blonde girl behind him, was giving me just such a look of relief. That told me a lot. Like that he wasn't as street savvy (about hiding reactions and so forth) as me, so I knew this dog confrontation was going to go in my favor, after all.

3.) The third phase of the Doghater's reaction I also predicted, and it came right on target: within seconds of the second reaction, which had transpired within a couple of seconds of the first, he looked irritated. Once he got over being happy that my interruption wasn't part of busting him for something worse, then he got pissed because I'd obviously interrupted him and the hottie blonde.

"What the FUCK are you talking about?" he bellowed.

Now actually, I must tell you, this explosion came immediately on the heels of my remark to him about how Animal Control witnessed what he did to the dog. But I thought it was important to offer you that three part sidebar, about what I was making of all his mental machinations, even though they all took place in a heartbeat. Why?

Because this cat and mouse game (notice I'm trying to keep the animal motif going here; I'm working on being a classier writer) was to be the beginning of a mind fuck, of a revenge campaign on behalf of that poor old dog, that was about as exquisite as anything I have ever seen.

Then, I don't know where I got the courage, but I did what I thought was a very ballsy thing. I just stepped right into his little foyer, knowing this was part of a pissing contest that I was determined to win. I guess he was still so thrown by the fact that Animal Control had spotted him, that he didn't say anything about my intrusion. I was happy when he didn't ask to see my ID again, which was, after all, a fake. He might have detected that, had he examined it closely, and it could quite possibly have blown the whole scheme before it even started.

"Look pal," he said, his tone suddenly congenial. He was glancing over his shoulder, looking for the girl, and you could tell he was wondering if I was also empowered to represent any other public concern county agencies. "The thing is, pal, it's not even my fuckin' dog, you know? It's my girlfriend's. Uh, not that chick, the one you just saw. Another girl. An x-girlfriend, sort of, if you know what I mean."

Then he looked around again. More nervous glancing. Where had she gotten too? I could just tell that he was wondering if she was ripping him off, or snooping through his PRIVATE STUFF. You could just tell that this guy had a lot of PRIVATE STUFF.

In a few seconds, she answered his unspoken concerns by emerging dressed, with her big ugly macramé purse slung over her shoulder and announcing, as she slithered in between us and out the door: "Bye Johnnie! I'm out of here, call me baby, byeee!"

Like an ash in a firestorm.

He muttered something to her in the way of a farewell, but she did not look back. Then he turned around and smiled at me, in a

chummy, off-handed way, as though he was accustomed to diffusing situations. He spoke conspiratorially, in a Bronxish sort of accent:

"Look, I wasn't abandoning the dog. I was, uh, you know, teaching it a lesson. You know, it shits everywhere and pees all over these rugs here. You can see I got some real nice expensive rugs here."

(Yeah, right, I thought to myself. Handwoven in the back parking lot of Walmart's.)

"So's, anyway, I figure I'll let the dog sleep outside overnight, you know, sort of teach him a lesson, then I come gets him the next morning, when he's sorry for what he did, and he'll be a better doggie for it. Get it?"

I eyeballed him and said nothing. I knew I had him where I wanted him. I got real brave and walked from his cramped little foyer into a living room crammed with backdrops, camera equipment, and assorted props. Nothing exactly X-rated, but you could tell he wasn't official photographer to the Windsor family or anything.

"Professional photographer?" I asked, amazed at my own insolence.

He retied the tie on his bathrobe and absently scratched his crotch.

"Yeah, pal, something like that, and I got an appointment comin' up here in a few minutes, then bookings back to back, so could you please write me the citation or whatever and get on with it, 'cause I got a real full daytimer today, if you know what I mean."

But there was no stopping me. He had a full daytimer but I had a hidden agenda, and for some weird reason, I wanted to make the Fatman proud.

"Whoah there, pal," I said with a swagger in my voice, if that's a valid descriptor. "It's not so simple as a citation. For a pile of poop on the sidewalk or an expired dog tag, sure, then you're talking citation. But for abandonment and abuse--"

"What the fuck are you talking about?" he asked, getting tense.

"Hey, I'm not just some fucking cog in a wheel!" I snapped, swearing right back at him. "I happened to see what you did to that dog. I was the operative who witnessed you, OK, pal? Fucking cruel it was, what you did to that poor helpless creature! You not only drag him out of your car to leave him in some strange place, where some sadistic stranger might scoop him up to do God knows what to him--medical experiments and--oh, I don't want to think about it! But what's worse still, when the poor dumb creature was loyal to you after all that, and tries to crawl back into the car and lick your face, you shove him out

into moving traffic so hard that you nearly break his back. Good thing you didn't, pal, or you'd be in even worse trouble than you are now!"

My "pal" was looking worried again. I knew where his head was. Slime like this, they try to stay under rocks, because once official types start nosing around their lives, they're back on the grid and under observation. Records are being kept, red flags, and next thing you know, all kinds of things happen. Like people take a closer look at where you got your car, and what business you're in, and do you have a permit, and next thing you know, you're getting an audit letter from the IRS. My pal suddenly became very willing to placate.

"OK, OK, so I was pissed off, I did a shitty thing--look, you got the dog in the car? Give him back to me, and I'll cook him up a steak and take him to the doggie park and throw the Frisbee and pal around and you know, make it up to him. See, I was just going to go get him from that neighborhood just now anyway, you know, figured the dog had learned his lesson and needed some TLC."

"I thought you said you had appointments all day long?" I said, busting him. He gave me an annoyed look.

"Who the fuck are you, Larry the Lie Detector? I was gonna go get the dog. I swear I was. I miss him."

"Yeah, right," I said, and I gave him a look like those coppers from Dragnet.

(Meanwhile, I was scoping the place, checking out details, which was my main mission according to the Fatman. Some mail I'd glanced at and a business card said "SUN MOON AND STARS TALENT AGENCY." That, and the photographic equipment, gave me a pretty good start on figuring his angle.)

Then, after I noticed beads of worry sweat breaking out on his forehead, I said, "And no, the dog is not in my vehicle. The dog is currently in protective custody."

I winced at that last phrase, "protective custody." I sure hope he didn't see me wince, my temporary loss of confidence. Talk about pushing it. "Protective custody" sure sounded like a bluff to me, like I was a fake, but I guess he took me for one of those peon officials with a tiny bit of authority, the Barney Fish type who makes a big deal out of the little bit of power he has. Because the slimeball looked all contrite again, like he just wanted to get the whole thing over with.

In a minute, I knew why. The doorbell rang, and without waiting for him to answer it, another great looking gal, (this one for sure for sure for *sure* no older than fifteen,) came in, also lugging a big

ugly shapeless denim purse. I wondered if these young ladies all shopped at the same place, the Shapeless Ugly Purse store. She smiled at him, seemed unfazed by my presence, and she kissed him on the cheek.

"I brought those costumes you asked, but can we get on with it, 'cause I got to get to work in an hour?" she said brightly, and then added, "I'm going in the john to change. Can we get started then?"

Without waiting for an answer, she popped into the bathroom, her ponytail bouncing jauntily behind her. She had one of those bouncy, jaunty ponytails that is the very earmark of youth and its optimism.

The guy looked at me and shrugged with chagrin, with an expression as though he was going to be doing something far more sinister than just taking her picture. Then he cut to the chase.

"Look, pal, what's it going to take to square this? Is it a fine? 'Cause I got enough cash to pay a real big fine, get what I mean? A real big fine."

A bribe, I thought! Given how broke I'd been for such a long time, you'd think this would have made me ecstatic. Just name my price, pocket the money, and run. To say that I did not take him up on it because I'd developed a weird new set of morals sounds pretentious; I know full well how high falutin' that sounds. And the fact that the Fatman did his generous if grouching part to keep me fed, and dry on rainy nights, that probably was a mitigating factor in my turning down the bribe.

But it was more than that.

It was this Crimefighting thing.

It was getting under my skin.

And although I had done and would do in the future, many, many illegal things in the name of Crimefighting, I felt a nobility growing in me nonetheless. After all, didn't Robin Hood break the law on a daily basis, in his quest to feed the poor? And you know, *you just know*, that Batman is always breaking traffic laws thundering around town in that Batmobile of his, speeding and screeching to a stop, just outside Gotham's city buildings in lanes that *you just know* are reserved for fire trucks, gimps, and waiting taxis.

So I would turn down his bribe and do more illegal things.

I took out a note pad and pencil, and tried to look all official. The Fatman had wanted to know more about this bastard, and this seemed as good a tactic as any for figuring that out. I cleared my throat.

"Just a few facts, pal, before we wrap this up. You said this was not your dog, but your girlfriend's. May I have her name?"

"Well, I don't think that's such a good idea," he said, shrugging again, and flashing what I'm sure he thought was an affable smile.

"Uh, I think it is a good idea." I said, still amazed that he'd fallen for my ruse.

"Well, the thing is, after she moved out, taking her things and a lot of my shit too, I don't mind tellin' you, I come to find out she never told me her real name. She said her name was Rita, but her friends told me it was Helen. From last names, I got no idea."

I nodded grimly, as though this was a matter of great weight.

"I see. . ." I said. Stalling for time, because this was a dead end and I was not sure where I was going with this, I said again, "I see."

Then, I don't know where the hell this came from--I'm sure it's going to sound crazy to you--but then I said,

"May I have the dog's personal effects? I mean, anything that may aid and comfort him while he is in our custody--you know, chew toys, a special blanket, his leash and dog bed."

At first, the guy gave me a weird look, but then he shrugged, and gave me the look of someone who has dealt with just enough bureaucratic assholes and just enough stupid fucked up pointless laws and rules to NOT be surprised by my request, any more than he was at my use of the phrase "the dog is in protective custody."

"Sure," he said. "Yeah, sure, if that's all it will take to wrap this up."

Then he trots off into the kitchen and I hear him pattering around.

Now me, I had no interest whatsoever in the dog's leash or his bed or his special blanket or his gnawed up chew toys with dog spit all over them. I knew full well that at this very moment, the Fatman was seeing to it that the poor abused dog had all new toys and mounds of food and, by the time I got back, just as I predicted, a doggie bed that was nicer than what I had slept on at night.

But there was a method to my madness.

While the guy was nosing around for the dog's "personal effects," and I could hear him fooling with a big brown bag to put it all in, I grabbed the guy's entire rolodex and a handful of files, and I was out the door, noiseless as a Shawnee.

I didn't look back and I had no regrets. Except for the fact that I never got to see what little outfit that sweet sexy redhead with the jaunty bouncy ponytail would be wearing when she came out of the bathroom, and ? did, uh, other parts of her bounce jauntily while she was in said costume?

Alas. I was never to know.

I chuckled to myself all the way back to the bookstore. I was cruising down the Ten Freeway in the VW bug, thinking about how completely that idiot had fallen for it all.

Of course, the whole animal control ruse had just been a gambit to distract the guy, to worry a street savvy prick like him out of being on his guard. Damned if it hadn't worked.

And that poor dog? The dog was now in the safe care of the Fatman. (Actually, he was at a vet's office, getting all the care he needed. The Fatman had called a vet who was a bookstore client, and he'd been able to book an appointment for the dog right away, when the Fatman explained the situation. Then the Fatman went and blew a couple of C-notes on doggie necessities and toys. All this he had accomplished while I was off putting one over on this joker.)

Anyway, this is the upshot of all these events thus far:

It turns out that when the Fatman saw the guy boot that poor dog out of his Vette not once, but twice, the Fatman knew that he had spotted him a real villain. His instincts would turn out to be right on target. Me snagging the creep's personal files and his rolodex--well, that was the beginning of it all.

I was getting to know not only the Fatman's methods, but that mad passion for justice which motivated him. I was amazed at how quickly he turned that stockpile of stolen information into a weapon that cut this guy down to. . .well. . .just wait till you hear.

Just *wait* till you hear what the Fatman did.

Actually, you have no choice but to wait.

Because the next day, the world stopped.
Hollywood stopped.
The business of selling books and busting scumbags stopped.

Life as we know it on this planet came to a screeching halt--

--While a billion folks tuned in, to watch the arraignment of
Butch Davis. . .

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: SIC GLORIA TRANSIT MUNDI

Oh my God. It was astonishing.

I was going to say, "It was beautiful." Except for that after you find out what happened that day on the courthouse steps, I was afraid you would despise me, think me twisted, for describing it as beautiful.

But, to me, it was beautiful to witness. Reacting purely as a movie maker in search of the flawless scene, the brilliant ending to a film, as a director speaking in specifically filmic terms, it was beautiful. Meaning that as the final chapter to a story, nay, a man's life saga, *it was perfect*. It had a poetic finality to it, a sense of ironic closure.

Well, it was almost Oedipal. Certainly it reached the apex of Greek tragedy. And that's not just my take on what happened that day. They even said that in all the magazines and newspapers; yes, even the hacks and journalists waxed philosophical, comparing it to Oedipus.

Although, the way it would be seen by the world, when MY footage of it was aired, was more like something out of a Brian De Palma movie, with the tragic finale played out in slow motion.

We even did that, the Fatman and I. Tinkered with the footage, so that when the climactic moment was reached, it actually played out in slow motion, like the last scene of "Obsession" or some of those shoot-outs De Palma so brilliantly executes in "The Untouchables" and "Casualties of War."

Except for, as it turns out, Butch Davis was not "untouchable." Oh, he was famous, an international celebrity. Even more so, following his arrest, although now it was of the notorious ilk. But even celebrities can be gotten to. As the Godfather has taught us, everyone can be gotten to.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. As usual. I suppose I should back up and start with what happened at the Lakers game, with the details you haven't heard yet, from the moment that Butch Davis saw that videotape of him, himself, beating brutally on his own wife and son.

Now at the Lakers game, because of the way the Fatman had staged it, Butch was literally, physically surrounded by friends. Although you've got to wonder how anyone could be friends with a damnable monster like that, because if they were so close to him, they had to know what was going on. They just had to know. It happened too often. But Butch Davis had had free reign. Even when his police record of DUIs and steroid use and weapons possession and various assault charges were publicized in the past, he had been allowed to get away with everything, all because he was a star. And everyone, from those closest to him who covered for him, to his fans, who heard the gossip and read the occasional incriminating blurb, damned if they didn't all somehow forgive or rationalize or deny that he could be doing those things.

Until that night at the Laker's game. Butch's time was finally up. At the Lakers game, his friends and fans all witnessed first hand the rage that Butch flew into, when the video of the beatings was broadcast to the world.

"I seen Butch mad a lot of times, a real lot of times, but I ain't never seen him that mad before!" was the way a buddy of his was to put it later, when appearing on one of those ghastly exploitative talk shows. You know the kind, where they autopsy everything after the fact. After the tragedy is over, and the dust has settled. Although it seems like whenever these horrible tragic public dramas are over, people just keep trying to kick the dust back up.

But my point is this--those who knew Butch Davis well and long--even *they* were terrified by the rage he flew into, after seeing that videotape. His friends tried to stop him from flying out of the Staples Center, because they were afraid of what he would do when he got his hands on his wife. But Butch was too fast and furious to be held back; he even sucker-punched one of his buddies who grabbed Butch to keep him from flying out the door.

It was like Butch's glorious footballs days, with the whole opposing team trying to stop the unstoppable Snowplow--that was his nickname when he played, you remember, because of his team playing so many games in the snow, and Butch being undaunted by it; it seemed like he just played better in bad weather. It was just like old times, with all these big guys trying to stop Butch as he heads towards the goal line with the ball--but in this case, he ain't got no pigskin, just a head of steam and a hard-on full of rage. And he ain't headin' towards no goal post, but towards the nearest exit and his black Bronco. This

time, the goal is to get his hands on, and I quote, "*That bitch wife of mine, who fucking framed me and humiliated me in front of the whole world!*"

Now. The whole business at his house, vis-a-vis the murder, the poor kid, the paparazzi, you already know about all that, because I was there. The aftermath to the murder, I only learned at the same rate and speed as the rest of the world, so here it is.

(But you have to keep in mind one thing: for a couple of days after the murder, there was no proof that Butch murdered his wife. The couple of existing tapes of the actual murder made by the paparazzi were being kept under wraps by their proud and greedy owners.)

Butch Davis awoke in the hospital in restraints. Not in a prison hospital, but in the UCLA Medical Center. It seems that in the process of being arrested, he had resisted arrest and somehow gotten a concussion. Since no actual proof of a crime had surfaced, Butch's high profile celebrity leftist lawyer, Johnny Dickson, had finagled for Butch to be put not in the prison hospital, but in a nice public one, in a room all to himself, with cable TV and pretty nurses who asked him for his autograph. Granted, there were two bulky armed guards at his door, but there was also Cheesecake Factory cheesecake shipped in by the pound every evening--a demand made by Butch after just one taste of that inedible lime jello.

Here's a detail I just love: apparently one of the things he discussed with his lawyer Johnny Dickson, while he was being held in the hospital, was suing the police department for causing that concussion. Sometimes, you just find yourself saying, "*Lynch mobs, vigilante justice. . .maybe they ain't such a bad thing after all.*"

But hang on. This story gets juicier still.

CUT TO: BEHIND THE SCENES - DAY & NIGHT

All hell is breaking loose in Hollywood. Two major events are going on, each involving hundreds of people. And these two events--two schools of thought, two "camps," if you will, are unfolding at the same time that Butch Davis gossip is flying around town, around the country, around the world, around the web.

The first thing that is happening is that those noble forces, (of which there are many in this town, despite the tone I have taken in this tome), those noble forces are reacting to the shocking videotape they

saw at the Lakers game, which proves once and for all that Butch Davis is a brutal wife beater. And child beater. And most likely, a vicious killer.

Charges will be pressed, the authorities announce--although the defense buzz around town is naturally that the evidence of the beating was obtained illegally and the son's testimony alleging a murder. . .well. . .crazy Hollywood kid, and all that. Butch's defense team, spearheaded by Johnny Dickson, would even initiate rumors that the kid was on drugs.

But the D.A. is firm on this; the gravity of Butch Davis's heinous acts is just too horrific. He *will* be held accountable, his celebrity status notwithstanding. In fact, this new tough D.A. announces (and lots of folks are behind him on this), it is precisely *because* Butch Davis is a celebrity that the D.A. will pursue this with all vigor and seek the maximum accountability. Butch Davis is a role model, he should be ashamed.

Those with a sense of Justice want blood.

But those who have been making the chubby bucks off of the soaring success of Butch Davis--the studios, his agent, the whole host of parasites that suck off of everything from his stardom to his thriving sports endorsement limited corporation shit whatever--they are doing heavy duty spin control. They all want desperately for it not to be true. They are trying to figure out some way for it to not be true, even though the evidence that it is true, is right there in front of them. The spin doctors feel that if they could just hit ERASE, if they could just erase that damned tape, it would all go away.

And amazingly, *amazingly*, the fans are doing the same. His loyal fans are trying to figure out some way to rationalize it. Those who have not seen the tape are sure that it was just a playful slap. They argue that it's not the public's business. Yet entire talk radio shows are devoted to the subject, as people call up and say things like "Bogie slapped Bacall sometimes, but that doesn't mean he didn't love her. . . hasn't tarnished his image as a great movie star."

And the quiet silent shivering sane majority in Hollywood, they are really just too exhausted and cynical to do anything but take it all in. They have just seen far too much of this kind of thing, in this kind of town. They exchange a few despondent comments at the water cooler, or as they walk adjoining stair climbers at the gym. There is

some disbelief, there are e-mails in bad taste. But mostly, folks are all just too overwhelmed at this city and its lunatic inhabitants.

And that they themselves have actually chosen to call Hollywood their home.

Not particularly a wise move on Butch's part was when he, while still in his hospital bed, threw the cell phone that his lawyer had finagled for him through the big widescreen TV that his lawyer had also finagled. This event happened when:

Butch turned on the TV. He saw a pretty blonde, who was hired by an entertainment news show because she was a pretty blonde who could read, announcing the death of Butch Davis's career. He had been replaced as the lead in *Spacejackers*. The beating tape was too graphic, everyone agreed, he would never be accepted again into the Hollywood community, even if somehow he wiggled out of the murder charges.

Then, they cut from the pretty blonde, who looked sad and pouty and troubled by all this, to a bootleg of the tape of Butch beating his wife. Butch's response to this--one that probably seemed quite logical to him at the time--was not to switch the TV off with the remote, but rather to smash the screen with the cellphone.

Not good PR for Butch, although his lawyer was admirably vigorous in his attempts at spin.

But. We haven't gotten to that scene I was effusing about earlier. The perfect scene. The Oedipal scene. The climax of the Greek Tragedy.

It happened a couple of days later. Butch Davis was being arraigned for the murder of his wife. I was at the courthouse to tape the whole thing, of course. I didn't have a press pass. Which is ironic, since it was my guerrilla journalism that had caused the whole thing. I had mixed feelings about the whole world press being there to cover it. Part of me was pissed off, because I felt I had proprietary rights on taping Butch Davis. Hell, I was even rudely shoved out of my primo spot at the front of the crowd by some blonde, leather skinned reporter guy with an Australian accent, ACTUALLY KNOCKED DOWN, to which I say "G'day mate and FUCK YOU, go get your own exclusive!"

This was my story by rights.

Although given the nature of what I'd exposed, I guess there wasn't much point in going to Butch Davis and asking for an exclusive interview.

Now, to answer your obvious question: why hadn't I, and the Fattest Crimefighter in the World, come forward with the tape which proved, beyond question, that Butch was a murderer? (You remember, I had hightailed it back to the treehouse after the game, and taped the whole hellish episode.)

Well, that's easy. There were several answers to that.

1.) The Fatman did not want to be a celebrity. I think by now you know why.

2.) You don't want Butch Davis mad at you. Especially when you're as huge as the Fatman and don't have a chance in hell of outrunning the Snowplow, no way no how.

3.) Even if we could solve the first two problems by mailing the tape anonymously, we knew we didn't need to. One of the other paparazzi tapes would emerge at any minute now, once big money had changed hands, thereby serving the same purpose: incriminating Butch.

4.) Last but not least--and this is my favorite reason--the Fatman thought it would torture Butch more to wonder if there was taped proof: where was it, when would it emerge, and just how damning would it be? Let Butch ride that roller coaster of arrogance and paranoia, false elation and fears of the death penalty. That wouldn't happen if the tape was revealed too quickly.

Buzz. . .buzz. . .buzz:

WHO HAD SHOT THE ORIGINAL TAPE OF THE BEATING? The one that aired at Staples, under the guise of being a John Wooden tribute. That was, of course, a big part of the buzz around town, and around the world, for that matter. Nobody knew, ooh, it was a mystery.

But the big buzz today was the arraignment of Butch Davis. We start our story as the arraignment was ending, with the judge ruling that there was, indeed, enough evidence for Butch to be held and charged.

Outside the courthouse, it was insanity. The cops had divided the crowd into two camps--actually, physically, divided them, on either

side of the steps. A wise move it was, too, because you could feel that everybody was ready to break into a fist fight.

The supporters of Butch Davis were as rabid and virulent as those who wanted to see him lynched on the spot, pioneer style justice. It astonished me, it was truly beyond belief, the signs and posters these lunatics were carrying. "BUTCH DAVIS WE LOVE YOU!" and "FREE BUTCH DAVIS!" and "GO SNOWPLOW!"

I gotta tell you flat out, these people made me sick. After the footage they had seen, Christ, how on earth could they still like the guy? How could they support him?

I was taping it all, thinking to myself, Damn, the only crowd control problems these cops should be having right about now is how to keep the crowd from rushing Butch Davis and beating him to death with rocks and stones. I mean, that's what he did to his wife. What the hell ever happened to the Old Testament? Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, live by the sword and that is how ye shall perish.

But no, half the members of the mob gathered here today were still his devoted fans. Brainless Neanderthals, who were cheering and waiting for a glimpse of him and shouting, "Can we have your autograph, Butch!" Which of course is gonna be hard for Butch Davis to pull off, since now we see he is leaving the courtroom with handcuffs on.

The crowd went crazy! The crowd cheered--well, half of it, at least. The half that had swooped down on the vendors and bought all the Butch Davis t-shirts and hats and buttons and autographed glossies and miniature Heisman trophies, God it was nuts.

The other side of the crowd was booing with equal vigor. They were going nuts too, but they were full of hatred for Butch. I noticed that Butch, who was being led, cuffed, down the courthouse steps towards the prison van, had on a bulletproof vest.

I panned the crowd with my camera, shaking my head in disbelief--and that's when I saw a familiar face. Where had I seen that face?

Well, truth to tell, I had never actually seen that face. The reason that the face looked so familiar is that she looked just like Butch Davis's wife.

Now is that part where, since I know that you are reading this, or hearing this, and don't have the benefit of actually seeing it all play out, as I did--now this is where you want to take what I am about to describe to you, and do that Brian De Palma thing in your mind's eyes. .

.AND AS I DESCRIBE IT TO YOU, PLAY THIS ALL IN SLOW MOTION. . .PICTURING IT IN YOUR MIND. . .SLO-MO. . .

First, picture the cameraman, who is me. But what the hell, don't picture me, instead picture John Travolta, because he played the exact same kind of part as me when he played the cameraman in De Palma's "Blow-Out," and besides, he's better looking than me, and he's got such screen presence, such man-of-the-people machismo, and besides, you don't know what I look like, so how can you picture me? And I really do want you to picture this.

So picture John Travolta, lost in the crowd, holding his videocam. You can tell from the look on his face that he is disgusted that there is actually a whole faction of people who have come out to cheer on Butch Davis. Slow motion as John Travolta pans from the crowd to Butch Davis, who is shuffling, his footsteps labored and awkward because of the leg cuffs. He is wearing the bright orange prison jumpsuit, bulletproof vest, and of course, flashing that brilliant smile. Butch is clean-shaven, suntanned, every hair in place, his pearly-toothed smile twinkling in the sun. As he slowly raises his cuffed hands to wave, the crowd cheers, and you would think he had just come from receiving an Oscar, not an indictment. . .

Clearly he has no concept of reality, or of what just happened in that courthouse. No sense of the vicious atrocity he has wrought. Denial.

But in case you're thinking that what is going to happen is that he's going to get off pleading insanity, well no such thing. I promised you this climax would be about CLOSURE. . .and so. . .keep the slow motion going in your head, picture it: Butch Davis waves, then the cameraman John Travolta pans the crowd. . .and he spots--

--A familiar face! Those large sunglasses, the slight willowy body, that short dark pixie haircut. She looks eerily familiar, just like Butch Davis's wife, the little waif. But wait, that poor abused thing is dead, soon to be buried in the ground. And then you, John Travolta the cameraman--

--your mouth drops open in amazement. It is the poor little waif's *sister*, lurking in the crowd to witness, with furious satisfaction, watching her sister's killer being led away to jail in handcuffs. As you pan down, you see that she is holding the hand of a tow headed boy--it is him!

Butch Davis's son! Yes, rumors were circulating that he had been staying with relatives since the murder, but nobody had been able to confirm where or with whom, it was all very hush-hush. Now here the boy is, standing in the middle of the crowd!

Amazingly, nobody has recognized him. He is staring at his father, Butch Davis, whom the boy saw murder his mother. Had that poor tortured little boy run down the stairs just seconds earlier, he might have been able to stop it, but instead he came just in time to see his father delivering the final blow, as his mother sobbed for mercy with her last gasp of life. Now that poor kid is left with nothing, nothing except the image of his father standing over his dead mother, Butch Davis's fists bloodied, his eyes full of hate. . .

. . .And so now. . .the worm turns. . .and so now. . .the son becomes the father. . .

So full of hate are the eyes of Butch Davis's son, as the boy pushes through the cheering and jeering crowd, he reaches inside his X-Men backpack, pulls out a gun, aims just above the bulletproof vest, and shoots his father dead.

Good aim. He must have seen every one of his daddy's action packed ultra-violent blockbusters. Butch Davis did not have enough intact brain left to wonder if those shooting lessons that he gave his son for his eighth birthday were a mistake, in hindsight.

I hope you're still seeing it all in slow motion. . .as Butch Davis collapses to the ground, with only half a head left. . .and now, you can stage the rest for yourself. . .the pandemonium and the screaming, the carnage and the chaos, the press piranhas and the freaked-out fans; the whole mob is aghast and agog and agape. Nobody is screaming louder than the unsuspecting sister, looking down at her nephew, who is just staring glassy-eyed at his dead father. The news vultures are going crazy, descending, torn as to whether they should get pics of the kid, or the dead dad. . .the cops are suddenly surrounding the kid, hustling him into a squad car to be led away. . .while all the people in the crowd who were standing near to Butch Davis stare down in horror, at the splatters of blood and brain on their clothing. . .

Me, the cameraman, I'm doing my part too, getting some primo footage of Butch--or what's left of him--and then panning to the kid before he's whisked out of sight.

And for just a moment, I am flashing back to this memory of a small ad placed in the L.A. Weekly: WILL DO ANYTHING LEGAL FOR MONEY. Or as the Fatman says: *Si possis recte, si non, quocumque modo rem.*

Well, on to the aftermath.

Oh Lordie. Where to start?

Uhm. Some enterprising types sold their clothes with the Butch Davis blood and brains for some serious chubby bucks. One guy paid ten thousand dollars for a t-shirt.

Then there was the usual scandal and controversy, as a part of the feeding frenzy. You know--con artists going on e-bay and selling Butch Davis t-shirts that they'd bought at the courthouse, and which they *claimed* had Butch Davis's blood and brains on them, but which, after DNA analysis, turned out to be pig blood and brain. But, well, it's e-bay. Just try getting a refund. There's a sucker born, etcetera.

And I know that sounds terribly horribly awful--I mean not that people were running an e-bay con, which is awful in a way--but that folks would actually try to make big bucks selling blood and brain stained clothes.

Except for that:

1.) If you think about, it's really just the free market in action, so what's wrong with that?

2.) Who were they hurting, after all? Butch was dead, and who cared if they hurt him even when he was alive?

And 3.) The Fatman's favorite reason: *The sheer poetry of it.* What he so eloquently dubbed, "The serendipitous symmetry." And "Capitalism as Karma." And "Exploitation most Excellent."

Meaning this. Think back on Butch Davis's early films, excluding the Vatican one. I'm talking about his Rambo-esque stuff that he started right after his football career, before he changed his image and became Mr. Sensitive Actor.

Surely you remember that rancid blockbuster, "Seal of Disapproval." Butch Davis played that X-Navy Seal who freaked out and became a serial killer, whacking military types who had covered up news about MIAs and a secret CIA war or some crap like that. It wasn't a very good movie, but remember the ending? Think back to that final movie scene enacted outside the courthouse, when McGill is leaving the courthouse after he's convicted, and a son of one of McGill's victims blows McGill's his brains out. Right on the courthouse steps, no less.

So really, people snapping up this morbid murder memorabilia were actually making some profound statement about "life imitating art." Not that they knew they were doing that of course, but they were "recreating the reality of the mythos," or some crap like that, is how the Fatman phrased it. If I am recalling it accurately.

But you know what? I didn't care about any of that.

What I cared about, who I was worried about, was the Fatman. Believe me when I say I had mixed feelings about his mixed feelings. Meaning that I was starting to think that I had gotten hooked up with a lunatic, and do you know why?

Because his guilt was suddenly if not completely replaced by a weird feeling of elation about what the kid had done. Yes, I would say there was a whole lot of satisfaction and a bloodthirsty sense of justice and closure, all mixed up with the guilt he was still feeling over having caused this whole mess.

"FINE!" was actually the word he used, and I know I am accurate about that, because I made a point to write it down at the moment he said it, so aback was I taken. The Fatman actually thought there was something "*Fine!*" about the shooting on the courthouse steps.

"MY GOD!" I retorted, "The boy shot his father! The boy murdered his own father, and he has to live with that for the rest of his life!"

"Yes," said the Fatman, cutting me off mid-rant, "And what he also has to live with for the rest of his life is having witnessed his

mother's murder, isn't that right? But that boy--that *young man*--will have the profound and soothing satisfaction of knowing that he did something to avenge her death. He wreaked retribution, divine retribution on the murderer! Immediately, directly, finally. And with the laud and approval of the world, no less! Don't you see? That boy, at the tender age of ten, has become the stuff of legend! The substance of our greatest mythologies! Why, that child has made himself immortal! And he's is barely out of Webelos!"

I just stared at the Fatman, flabbergasted.

"Let me get this straight. You're saying that you *approve*? You're actually happy that he shot his father? Jeezus, are you loving this, or what?"

The Fatman stared at me. He paused for thought. He gave me this look as though he were talking to a "slow" child, and that he, the older, wiser, paternal Fatman, had a duty to help me think this through clearly. He leaned back in his bigass chair, smiled, and spoke calmly.

"Friend, why don't you describe a better ending for me? How would you have had it end?"

I shook my head. "I don't get it."

"Well, you're a writer. Write. In your mind, I mean. Elaborate, elucidate, pontificate, paint a picture so I can visualize. What would be a better ending for this Greek Tragedy?"

I just stood there, nonplused. NON-FUCKING-PLUSED. I glared at the Fatman.

"Fatman, you are out of your mind. I'm serious, I think you've lost it, you are--well, what I just said, out of your fucking mind!"

Then, without warning, he did that thing that always awed me. Startled and frightened and amazed me. The Fatman. . .began to pace. Oh, it was a sight to see! Six hundred pounds of flesh or more, undulating forth and back, back and forth, along the long row of classic used and vintage tomes. . .past Oedipus and "The Iliad," past "The Complete Works Of Shakespeare," past "War and Peace" and "Les Miserables" and "Confessions of an English Opium Eater." Past Dante and Dostoevsky and Dickens and De Toqueville, past Plato and Plutarch and Pope and Proust, past Milton and Marlowe and Machiavelli and Marx, past Blake and Browning and Byron and The Bible, past Shelley and Shaw and Swift and Sun Tzu. . .

I knew what he was doing. He was gathering his thoughts.

Then once again, he issued Word. He looked me right in the eye as he did:

"Look, friend--I'm going to ignore the rather prosaic and profane style in which your insults are rendered; frankly I would have expected better from a writer, damn your trite soul. But here is the truth of it. Yes, I hate what happened. By that I mean, Butch Davis beating his wife to death. I loathe myself for bringing it on. Because while you were correct before, that a monster like Butch Davis would surely have crossed his own personal Rubicon sooner or later, without my interference, the fact remains that if not for me, that poor little waif would probably be alive today. Me having her blood on my hands, along with the dried blood of Toby W. Smith--for I should have seen those signs as well, even back then--the truth is, it all may be more than my broken heart can bear. Even if I can talk myself out of the suicide which I have been contemplating seriously--because there is not even anyone left on this earth to mourn my passing--but even if I persuade myself to go on living, I may very well die of a broken heart, so diminished is the state of my soul at this point. But as to the boy killing his father. Yes. In a way, it was horrible. I see that. Of course I see that. But listen, friend--"

The Fatman stopped pacing, and leaned against a shelf of Gary Larson books. The Larson characters on the wall calendar behind the Fatman's head appeared to be dancing about his head like fat little pixies. He breathed heavily, tired out from the pacing, and continued.

"The only thing I can imagine more horrible than what has happened would be that boy, and all of us, enduring a trial. Long, drawn out, more publicized than the Second Coming of Christ. Oh my God, just imagine that boy having to testify against his father! His torn loyalties and emotions. The horror of reliving the murder, blow by bloody blow. And the greatest travesty of all is that you know, *you just know*, that when it is all said and done, at the end of the day, Butch Davis would walk. Oh, he might do some jail time. But I doubt even that would happen. I believe with all my heart--and it is a big, loving, overworked heart I possess, you asshole--AND BY THE WAY, DON'T YOU EVER ACCUSE ME OF HAVING GONE OUT OF MY, QUOTE, "FUCKING MIND!" MY MIND IS A PRECISION MACHINE, THE MASTER MOTHERFUCKING COMPUTER, MORE STATE OF THE ART THAN ANYTHING IN THE GODDAMN BATCAVE--WHY, MY MIND IS NORAD COMPARED TO THAT MUDDLED CLUMP OF GRAYING CELLS YOU USE TO

THINK UP YOUR HACKNEYED SCRIPTS, BORING STORIES AND BANAL INSULTS."

The Fatman stopped, took a deep breath, composed himself.

"But as I was saying. . .I believe with all my heart that that monster Butch Davis would never even see the inside of a jail cell, after the trial was over and the sentence rendered. I believe that what would happen, especially given the inflammatory nature of our tape which he saw along with the entire world, and which provoked him to beat her to death, is that Butch Davis would be found NOT GUILTY by reason of insanity. He would do a couple of years in a country club sanitarium--which, by the way, would be more lavish than any place you or I have ever lived or will live. Spa facility, digital TV, master chef in the kitchen, topiary sculptured bushes in the front yard, the whole bit. I bet there would even be damn peacocks strolling the grounds. Friend, no jury is ever going to sentence Butch Davis to death, because that would be against everything that James Frasier writes about in "The Golden Bough," don't you know that, you dolt?"

I shrugged my shoulders. Looking back on it, I probably had a kind of "duh" expression on my face, although if I had known that I looked that dumb--well, my point is, I didn't know WHAT the hell he was talking about.

"WHAT the hell are you talking about?" I asked. "I don't know that book, and even if I did, what the hell does some fairy tale have to do with a kid blowing his father's brains out?"

The Fatman emitted an exasperated *hgmphh*, a kind of sighing-snort that sounded like the noise an angry bathing hippo would make on one of those nature shows, and then the Fatman pressed on.

"We're not talking about the boy's act now, we're talking about his dad's hypothetical punishment, had he stayed alive long enough to hear it handed down. AND FOR YOUR INFORMATION, CLODPATE--that book, "The Golden Bough" is only one of the twenty most important tomes ever penned, speaking purely in non-fictional terms, of course. It happens to be about how various societies--mostly primitives, mind you, but nonetheless Frasier's metaphor stands firm--how different cultures view royalty, specifically royalty that has become ill, or aged, or infirm, or their immortal patina otherwise tarnished. The point I'm making, you dullard, is that *celebrity is American royalty*. And friend, mark my words--you never kill your

king. At most, he steps down. A new prince is crowned. But no society kills its king. . ."

The Fatman seemed exhausted by his oration. He trudged over to his desk, opened the drawer, pulled out a bag of fire hot pork rinds, ripped it open, and dug in. Then, after he had crunched up a giant handful, he said:

"Butch Davis would come up for some kind of parole or review or whatever. Within a couple of years, five years at most, he'd be walking the streets, a big celebrity all over again, signing autographs and showing up on talk shows to blab about that big fat bestseller book he wrote while lounging in the asylum. But which was actually *ghostwritten*, by some poor schmuck like yourself, no doubt. On that same talk show, he would no doubt promote his upcoming movie. AND DON'T STAND THERE STARING AT ME LIKE I'M CRAZY! YOU KNOW DAMN WELL THAT WHAT I'M SAYING IS RIGHT ON TARGET, YOU JUST KNOW IT IS. What the hell do you think all of that would do to the boy in question, the poor lost son? That, my friend, would fuck him up for life."

Fatman was right. Fatman was right. . .

I sat slumped, I stared at my feet. And at my dawg, who I was starting to think wasn't really MY DOG anymore at all, EVEN THOUGH I HAD RESCUED HIM FROM CERTAIN DEATH, but who now belonged, in spirit, to the Fatman. The Fatman was right about the kid. . .I was lookin' at my shoes. Thinking how I needed new ones, and how I used to spend five hundred, a thousand bucks on a pair of shoes without batting an eye, a hundred and fifty just for the shoes I wore to the health club.

I felt a nudge. I looked up. The Fatman was standing next to me, offering me the rest of the rinds in the SnakPak-sized bag, and I knew that giving up a snack was a huge effort for him. We're talking major goodwill gesture.

"No," I said. "No thankyou. You finish it. I guess I'll go take a nap under the pier for a while. Suddenly I'm very tired."

"Well, friend, you know what I say to that?" said the Fatman, with an odd tone in his voice, the meaning of which I couldn't quite place, and then he winked at me and added, "To that I say, '*Misce stultitiam consiliis brevem. Dulce est desipere en loco*'."

I sighed deeply.

"I don't know what that means, Mr. Fatman. And you know perfectly well I don't know what that means."

"The words of Horace. Brilliant Latin poet, blind man, lived the century before Christ, on a Sabine farm, and the maxim means, *"Mix a little foolishness with your serious plans. It is lovely to be silly at just the right moment.,"*

I looked up at him quizzically.

"OK fine, but I still don't even know what that means."

"It means. . ." said the Fatman, leaning down and whispering conspiratorially, "I JUST GOT SOME X-RATED TITTY FLICKS IN THE MAIL. Wanna watch?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: MY MORIARTY EMERGES, BRIEFLY

Wow.

Now if Titty Flicks was not what you would have expected from the Fatman, well, I felt exactly the same way. What a shocker! Titty Flicks, from the Fattest Crimefighter in the World! But of course, it turned out to be not at all what I had expected when he first said Titty Flicks. Well, yes, it *was* Titty Flicks, but--well, I'm just confusing you.

Here's the whole story:

It would seem that the man in the red Vette who had abandoned that poor innocent dog out in the middle of a bad neighborhood was not only a hater of canines, he was also a misogynist of the lowest order.

Here's what: during that short period of time in between my stealing the slimeball's stuff from his sleazy photography studio, and now, a couple days after the death of Butch Davis, the Fatman had been a very busy Crimefighter. He had sifted through the various bits of information that I had pilfered, and he had discovered that this scumbag's evil deeds went far beyond mistreating an x-pet.

To start with, he was obviously NOT a Hollywood agent, as he pretended to be. (And frankly, how convincing do you have to be at that lie, to put one over on silly-ass, naive little girls, just off the bus from Jinglepop Kansas, and still riding the high of being elected Junior Cornpone Queen.) But, worse than that, this slimeball had seduced each and every one of these girls, using promises of fame and fortune, then HE TAPED THEM HAVING SEX WITH HIM WITHOUT THEIR KNOWLEDGE! Wait, let me rephrase that. Of course they knew they were having sex with him. But they didn't know that he was videotaping the whole escapade.

You could tell that the girls didn't know they were being taped, because never once, in all the twenty-four statutory rape incidents that we watched, did you see any girl acknowledge the camera or anything like that. Not like in that steamy, sleazy Tommy Lee-Pamela Anderson fiasco that was all over the web. More to the point, these girls were all so young and trusting and sweet and innocent, you could just tell that

these girls weren't the kind that would have allowed themselves to be taped having sex. They each seemed to be genuinely in love with this bastard. Or at least, "in love," as it is defined by a fifteen year old girl.

Oh--to answer your obvious question: how did the Fatman get the tapes? I hadn't grabbed any tapes during my Animal Control Operative ruse. The Fatman explained to me how he did it: that same private dick who had his finger in the files of the DMV, had, at the request of the Fatman, purloined these videotapes from the trunk of the red Corvette. When I asked the Fatman why didn't he get me to do that--I was his partner in Crimefighting, after all?--the Fatman merely replied that he knew I had no clue about how to break into a car trunk. Since he was quite correct, I had no retort.

(Little did I know that this conversation, regarding my covert Crimefighting limitations, was one of several we would have. It was the beginning of a thread that would end in murder. But that's neither here nor there right now, because that happens way later in our story, and we've got several subplots to pursue right now.

And may I just interrupt myself to say that it is so darn hard to keep all these subplots straight, without the time-tested script strategy of using 3 by 5's cards, because there is no sensible place to lay out three-by-fives when you're homeless. I mean think about it? On the sandy beach with the ocean breeze blowing in? On the sidewalk, with foot traffic walking over it? In some dark alley, moist with cat urine and littered with crackheads? It's darn hard to be a successful screenwriter out of a shopping cart.)

Anyway, after the first couple of seducer tapes, I just sat back with my mouth hanging open.

I was aghast.

Let me make one thing very clear: viewing these tapes left us enraged, not engorged, because these were tapes of runaway underage children. Granted, most of the girls were sixteen or seventeen. But still, I was so mad. In fact, it has pretty much turned me off to dirty movies ever since, watching those poor innocent girls being exploited like that.

I am a father myself, remember. So even though, for personal reasons, I do not talk about that fact much in this book, the reality remains, that when you see young girls being exploited so vilely, it is your paternal instincts, and not your sex drive, that comes rushing to

the fore. Because I'm a daddy too, watching these tapes made me want to hurt someone real bad. I was ready to take this motherfucker down. Although, in the name of journalistic accuracy, "childfucker" would be the more appropriate moniker.

And even though I was pretty much convinced that in this fucked up town, we could have had the guy shot for the price of a car stereo, and never have gotten caught. . .still, that's not what the Fattest Crimefighter In The World and I were about.

It was more about Vengeance as an art form. "*Live by the Sword, and That Is How Ye Shall Perish. . .An Eye for an Eye.*"

Shoot the guy in the head, and he wouldn't have time to suffer.

"Explain it to our readers this way," said the Fatman. "*In the villain's crime must be contained the very seeds of his own demise. Of his own destruction. . .*" is how the Fatman put it.

I understood. And I agreed heartily.

Then, something happened that changed everything.

It happened the next morning.

I had left the Fatman around midnight the night before, after we'd watched the last of the tapes, and I'd gone off to spend a sleepless night under the pier, worried about the Fatman. But he had kicked me out of his shop quite brusquely, so I didn't have much choice.

I DID have some choice when he asked me to leave Blue with him. He made up some story about having heard strange sounds outside the window the night before, and he thought someone was casing the place, so he wanted Blue around to bark in case they came back. But I knew that was a crock. I knew that the Fatman was actually just sadder and lonelier and oh, just more despondent than he'd ever been in his life, on account of him still feeling guilty about having caused the death of Butch Davis's wife. And we all know there's no better tonic for depression than a dog at your feet, or lounging by your side. So I left Blue with the Fatman, and I slept under the pier ALONE. I so missed my dawg. And you know what? I was starting to resent the Fatman's self-pity. He had seemed like such a strong soul,

back when I first hooked up with him. You know-- spiritually, and emotionally. But he was turning out to be a softie, in ways that annoyed me.

That's why I woke up in a cranky mood. I got up early and stomped over to the bookstore, determined to say whatever it took to resolve all this.

So I march in, grumble a good morning to the Fatman, who is already there, I scratch Blue on the head, help myself to a cup of coffee, and that is when the Fatman lays into me with some delusional critique of some imagined failure or misstep on my part. I'm just about to carp right back at him, when the bells over the door tinkle.

"We're not open yet," snaps the Fatman, "Didn't you see the sign? It says open nine a.m., it's only eight o'clock. Nobody buys books at eight in the morning; they're too tired from stayin' up half the night reading a book because they couldn't put it down--if it's a good book that is, and what would be the point of readin' a bad book?"

At this point, I come out from that little office in the back to see what poor soul the Fatman is laying into now. And man oh man, did my jaw drop when I see it is none other than the rent-a-cop, my Westec pal, the one who arrested me (eegads!) for spying on Butch Davis, but then who, to his credit, saved my sorry ass.

None of which I had exactly bothered to mention to the Fatman just yet. . .

My jaw dropped--oh, I guess I said that, the point is, I just froze and let my coffee cup slip a little, I was so stunned, and it dripped a little on the Fatman's Persian, so he yells at me, and then looks at me quizzically, and he says, in his early morning drawl, "You *know* this man?"

"Uh. Yeah," I said, "It's a long story. I don't tell you every little detail that happens on my Crimefighting Adventures, you know." Then, not missing a beat, but turning my attention to the security guard, who had his arms planted on his substantial hips, his belly pouring over his belt, I looked at him and said, "So, uhm, how did you know where to find me?"

So then Toby, the security guard, he just sort of rolls his eyes and says, "Well, who the hell do you fancy you are, boy, Anne Frank? Folks see you comin' into the bookstore, and leavin' at all hours of the night, and it's my job to notice shit like that. Christ, you're in and outta

here so often, some folks think you and the big guy here got some kind of weird thing going."

"Oh for chrissakes," I sputtered--but then Toby just breezes by me like he owns the place, and he goes to the portable TV on the Fatman's desk, which is not turned on yet, and he says, "I came to alert you about a show you should watch. Just call me Mr. TV Guide. I take it you haven't seen it."

He turns on the television, and flips the channel. And then, I heard that voice.

I knew that voice.

That was the voice of none other than Rudy Cohen. Rudy J. Cohen, the big, important producer-director who had called me up, out of the blue, when I was a wunderkind, fresh out of film school, with a hit out of the gate. I had made a movie for a tiny budget with huge returns. It was a box office smash, thanks to an eerily timely real-life slaughter that had paralleled my plot, and caused a nationwide ripple effect. The publicity was priceless. And it had been my final film school project for chrissake; one minute I'm getting a B-minus for it from this bitter, untenured professor, Richard Waters, who failed to make it as a real Player in Hollywood. Three months later, I'm on the cover of Time Magazine as Hollywood's newest hotshot.

Shortly after that, Cohen takes me under his wing, and for a whole year, we work on fine-tuning my next script. This story was my real passion project, the magnum opus that I was so hoping the student film's success would give me carte blanche to make. I was bankable, my partner was powerful, and the budget was huge.

--When suddenly, I have to leave town for a few months because of a family crisis, and Cohen blithely takes credit for the whole thing. Just steals it right out from under me! Cuts me out of the loop entirely. And since he's a bigwig in Hollywood and I'm still basically new to the game, naturally I don't have a chance of convincing anybody that it was really *my* story. Even if you do sue and win, that pretty much kills you forever in this town, because nobody wants to look at the work of a writer who sues studios. Why bother? There's too many other hack scripts floating around Hollywood to produce. Why deal with the threat of litigation?

And now, the bastard had come back to haunt me.

And now, this same Rudy J. Cohen was sitting there on a morning talk show and announcing to the world, very smarmy like, "Well, the reason my girlfriend and I made the videotape was that we had been aware of Butch Davis's abuse of his wife for months, because my girlfriend lived down the street from him, and she always found the incidents most disturbing."

That lying bastard. That script thieving, spotlight stealing sonofabitch.

The perky blonde lady interviewer cut in, "Rudy, if may I ask, why didn't you two just call the police?"

Rudy smiled and nodded, unfazed.

"Oh, good question. Of course we called the police. But most of you women in the audience know the typical attitude of the police towards domestic disturbance calls. They just come in, calm things down, and take off again. The poor wife is damned if she does, damned if she doesn't. If she doesn't press charges, her husband is so furious about the humiliation of having the police break into his home and treat him like some kind of criminal--which he is, of course--that he usually beats the woman to a pulp after the police leave. But if she does press charges and the police haul him off, the brute is so blind with rage by the time he gets released on bail a few hours later, that the poor woman's life is literally in danger. On those occasions that we finally did call the police or neighborhood security, it turned into either a travesty or a tragedy."

"That lying pile of shit! He never did call the fuckin' cops. I checked, and that's a goddam lie!" bellowed Toby, our loyal rent-a-cop.

Meanwhile, I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't believe it, that the three of us were standing there, watching that damned thieving Rudy Cohen on this morning talk show, blathering away, and shamelessly taking credit for my secret videotape of Butch Davis. *The tape that I had risked my life to make!* I stared, too stunned to speak, as Rudy sipped his water and spoke with a self-satisfied smirk:

"Naturally, living next door to this monster was a nightmare for my girlfriend, Tawnee. She was afraid Butch Davis would come after her, if she called the police one more time. So she and I put our heads together and came up with this scheme. There was a treehouse up in the backyard where you could get a good look into Butch Davis's house. One thing led to another, and--"

"SON OF A BITCH!" exploded the Fatman. "Just listen to that wily prick! Sitting there in front of God and the world, taking credit for *our* Crimefighting!"

"Tell you what," said Toby, turning to me and patting me on the back. "This is an easy one to solve. All I gotta do is go public with the truth, and say what really happened that day my pahdner and I caught you and arrested your ass, before we found out what you was up to. Sheeit, I'll just tell the world the whole story--about how I arrested you, cuffed you, grabbed yer camera, and purloined that tape."

Needless to say, through this whole rant from Toby, the Fatman was staring at us, thunderstruck by these revelations, because I'd never mentioned a word about it, up till now. I figured the Fatman had enough stress on his overworked heart. Hell, I never thought he'd find out about this Barney Fife and his partner jumping me and taking the tape.

"What the hell is Toby going on about?" the Fatman said, glaring at me.

"Look," I said, chuckling nervously, "I'll tell you later, OK? The show is back on, we gotta hear this asshole out, and figure out what we're gonna do about him."

We all turned back to Rudy on the TV.

". . .So naturally, I wasn't worried about the legal ramifications of making the tape, what with Mrs. Davis's life in jeopardy. And now, with both Mr. Davis and his wife deceased, my lawyer assures me that the legal fallout should be minimal."

"Have you been in contact with Butch Davis's son?" the smiling host queried, flashing her capped teeth. It looked like she was flirting with Rudy.

"Of course not. I'm leaving the boy to grieve privately. Then, after an appropriate amount of time has passed, I'll request a meeting. I think it's terribly important, so that we can understand horrors like these, for the boy to be able to tell his side of the whole story. I'd like to be the one to be able to help him tell that story. To help him heal, that is. Bring a sense of closure."

The interviewer nodded at Rudy and leaned in, crossing her legs.

"I understand that the D.A. is considering dropping charges against the boy, if he undergoes extensive counseling. Would you be making your movie after all these legal maneuverings are over?"

At these words, I snapped off the TV.

"Fuck. I'll kill him."

"And I'll look the other way while you do," mouthed Toby wryly.

"TO HELL WITH HIM," I ranted on, "That prick is going to take *my* story, *my* big risk, *my* goddamn first foray into Crimefighting, and he's gonna make another big goddamn hit movie out of it! Hell, everyone in the goddamn country will watch it, just out of prurient curiosity, and Rudy Cohen will get a big peck of money, and he'll get even more famous for ripping me off again! That's twice in one lifetime! I'LL FUCKING KILL HIM!"

And then, I just sort of went crazy. I guess the business about Rudy stealing my script from me had been eating at me for years, more than I knew. In the past, whenever I brooded about it for any length of time, I would usually slam a few drinks and then get loaded. When I saw Rudy smile into the camera at the end of the interview, I started stomping around the bookstore, throwing things and generally tearing the place up. This kind of behavior is unlike me, and with the exception of whacking that pioneer wagon mailbox, I don't have a history of destruction. It's just that, dammit to hell, for the second time, Rudy Cohen had stolen my fire from me.

For a second, Toby and the Fatman just stood there, stunned. Then, suddenly, Toby wrestled me to the floor, and after a while, the two of them managed to calm me down. Toby stopped sitting on me, when he saw that I was not going to tear up the bookstore anymore.

"Steps will be taken to restore your honour," the Fatman assured me, smiling malevolently.

I wish I could reveal to you exactly what happened to Rudy Cohen. . .eventually.

But that revenge wasn't to happen until well into the new year. Ah, springtime on Hollywood. O.K., Paris it ain't. But it was a spring I would always remember. Except I can't blab about it any more right now, for at this point in our story, spring is still many months away.

We have other Crimefighting to attend to, and the Fatman considers it urgent indeed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: HUMBERT'S TITILLATION AND THE HAUNTED BOOKSTORE (NOT WHAT YOU THINK)

Oh my dear, oh dearie me. Oh those poor, exploited girls.

They had all ridden the bus from Nowheresville to Hollywood with such high hopes, no doubt clutching their straw hats to their heads, as they gazed up at the marquee of Grauman's, The Roosevelt, Chateau Montmartre, and those legendary street signs, Hollywood and Vine. . .and then, to be skipping down Sunset Boulevard, suitcase in hand, and (shiver!) to run into *The Dreaded Doghater and Exploiter of Nubile Young Wannabee Starlets*.

First person they met in Hollywood, and they each felt so very lucky to meet a real Beverly Hills agent right off.

You probably have some of your own ideas about what the Fatman did to avenge those girls. Did he sic the authorities on the Doghater? Buy him a bus ticket out of town, along with a warning never to come back to Hollywood, OR ELSE? Have his knees and his nose and his knuckles broken, mob style?

No, oh no. For you see, I was coming to understand that the Fatman's Justice was far more elegant and original than anything so cliché as those methods. No, instead, what he did was this.

Let me set the scene.

Blue and I trudged in one morning, after spending a lovely night on the beach, and I found the Fatman preparing a bulk mailing for the postman. Stacks of thick manila envelopes were piled in boxes. He turned to me and smiled his Niccolo Machiavelli smile.

"I've been a big busy bee, my friend, as you can see. I was so enraged after watching those filthy videotapes of the girls the other night, that for a while, I felt like just ponying up a grand, and having the guy whacked."

He said this off-handedly, as though he were talking about taking the guy to small claims court. He took a large bite from a breakfast burrito and said, "But then, I realized, after ruminating all night, that just wasn't my style. That just isn't what being the Fattest Crimefighter in the World is all about. So before deciding on a course of action, I made up my mind to dig a little deeper. You see, I've been thinking about our villain, our misogynist, our hater of women and canines everywhere. I've come to the conclusion that he isn't the type to keep X-rated videotapes all to himself. He's not only vile and cruel and lewd, he's greedy as well, I think that's a safe assumption. So I asked myself, if I had X-rated videos of underage young ladies, how would I maximize my profits, beyond just savoring the tapes myself?

I looked at the packets to be mailed, and wondered what the hell could be in them. They appeared to be the size of a videotape. But why would the Fatman distribute dirty tapes? And to whom?

He smirked at me.

"I'm reading your mind. Patience. All will be revealed.

Although given the nature of these tapes, I guess that's a horrific pun. Listen, just listen, to what the Fattest has ferreted out, info-wise. That bastard doesn't just distribute these sex tapes, he sells them on the web, for 19.95, plus shipping and handling. It comes in a two-pack. The audition tapes are, in their way, even more sordid than the sex tapes."

"The audition tapes?" I asked dimly.

"Oh, this seducer of little girls is far too good at what he does.

And we are just going to have to do something about that," said the Fatman, taking one of the unsealed envelopes, dumping out a video, and popping it into his VCR. He started looking for his ever-elusive remote control as he rambled.

"What you are about to see, friend, is not pornography, so don't get your hopes up, or whatever it is that gets up when you see underage girls performing in X-rated movies. Remember, the girls who are his clients are still basically nice young ladies, or at least trying to be. At least ladies who star in porn movies know what they're getting into. But no, these scenes are lurid in a way that no sex tapes should ever be. Good little girls acting just a little too sexy, if you know what I mean. Kind of a "Lolita" thing. Savvy? It's like in "Peter Pan," when the crocodile gets a taste of the pirate's flesh. Then it can never get enough. Croc follows the pirate, goes sniffing after the blood. But what this pedophile bastard has done with these audition tapes, just wait till you see how he gets this footage of these girls--well, watch for yourself!"

The Fatman said these last words with great verve, as he finally found the remote under an old pizza box, and pressed PLAY.

The Fatman was right. His wording had been perfect; what followed was not exactly porn, rather, it was very "Lolita-ish." Let me transcribe for you the dialogue on the videotape, and you can use your own filthy little imagination.

THE SCENE: The slimeball's swinging studio.

THE PLAYERS: A fifteen-year-old girl, with china blue eyes, and luscious long blonde hair you could lose yourself in. She is wearing a short plaid wool skirt, a tight white cotton blouse, bobby socks, and black patent leather shoes.

And of course, the scum seducer is lurking behind the scenes, behind the camera lens. The schoolgirl is so excited about this whirlwind path that her career has taken. This is her first real talent shoot, and she giggles excitedly:

"But I still have my Catholic Girls' School uniform on from the reading you just had me do for "Venice Beach Bunnies." So does the director for "Venice Beach Bunnies" really rent your bungalow? That is so cool. That's the hottest show on T.V."

"Yeah, he really rents my bungalow. Like I said, this apartment is just my office, my working space, you know. I don't like girls coming to my house in Beverly Hills, because one time I gave a chick my address and she developed this huge crush on me and stalked me. Stalked me right into Beverly Hills. So now I like to keep my work place and my home separate."

"It's OK, I understand," said the sweet young thing. "My dad used to always say, 'You don't shit where you eat.'"

"Yeah, that's it. I don't shit where I eat. Anyway, this next scene we're shooting is for that show Special Victims whatever. You play a girl who saw her parents die in a terrible fire, so she reverts back to the last time she felt really safe and happy, which was when she was a little baby in her crib. So I want you to suck your thumb--oh wait, let's put your hair into pigtails real fast--and just kind of play with your legs like a little toddler, and baby talk into the camera. And suck your thumb."

"What should I say?"

"Well, uh, you know. Improvise. If you wanna act, you gotta be able to improvise on the spot, honey. Oh wait, try saying, "Oooh

Daddy, baby wants you to pick me up and hold me tight. . please
Daddy, I'll be a good girl. I'll be good for Daddy."

The poor gullible girl did just like he told her to, and you could tell what fantasy the sleaze was going for. When she was done with that bit, he came out from behind the camera and leered at her. "Now, I've been saving the best for last, honey. They say that producers always remember the very last thing they see on the demo reel. Baby doll, we are going to make sure they remember you for a very long time."

"Oh Goody," squealed the fifteen-year-old, who I found out later was really truly straight off the farm from Kansas. Yes, she actually said "Goody." Then she reached in her big ugly tie-dye bag and chirped, "Guess what! I even went out and bought a new skimpy bikini! Imagine this! A month ago, I was at the State Fair 4-H Livestock Competition, and now here I actually am in Hollywood, auditioning for the new teen lifeguard on "Junior Baywatch, Boca Raton!"

"That's right, baby," said the sleaze from off-camera. You never actually saw him in front of the camera, he was too smart for that. But that sleazy Bronx accent was unmistakable. "I'm gonna make you a star."

She bopped off screen and into the bathroom, and when she returned in her new neon pink bikini, I had to admit that my eyes did bulge, kind of like one of those comic books characters whose eyeballs bounce out about twelve inches from their face on springs, and then snap back in. She was hot. Very hot.

"OK, OK," says the sleaze, and then for a moment, you saw his hairy arm, with its gold pimp rings and a man's gold chain link bracelet come into the frame, holding a tube of something.

"I got some suntan oil here, and I want you to rub it all over yourself, real thorough like, OK? It's like, uh, crucial, 'cause we got to see what you look like under this special sun simulating light, and this cloud diffuser filter lens I just put on. You gotta look OK on camera with lots of suntan lotion on, or you can't get the part."

"Sure, no problem," she said, taking the tube and starting to rub it on. You could just tell that the sleaze wished he was doing it for her. But I think he sensed that if he got too brazen and insisted on applying the lotion himself, our little Lolita would get wise to him and be out the door in no time. More to the point, this sleazeball *did not*

want girls who wanted to be into porn. It was precisely their naiveté and gullible sincerity and childlike eagerness to please that made them so damned sexy. They were sexy, I had to admit that much.

Well, I had a bunch more stuff about this baby doll audition tape and some other misbehaving schoolgirl audition tapes that I saw, but as you may have guessed, the Fatman red penciled it because, as I have noted so many times before, this is a story about the Fattest Crimefighter in the World, not a hot soft porn description of girls making steamy videotape auditions.

I suppose the Fatman is right.

Besides, unless you are a bit on the lurid side yourself, you don't want to hear anymore about all that. Right?

You want to hear about the fathers.

The Fatman had orchestrated it all brilliantly. Starting with putting their packages together.

First, there were those "quote" audition tapes, especially designed to turn on dirty old men with images of nubile young Lolitas pouting and peeling. But of course, these tapes were only "the appetizers."

Then, the main course. The Seducer's slow, steamy seduction of each of these young girls, taped without their knowledge, and oh, were these tapes explicit. Triple XXX. Because each girl was so very anxious to appear grown-up enough to be taken seriously as an actress, and so eager to please her hot new Hollywood agent-slash-boyfriend.

I do have to admit, the Seducer had all the right moves. He knew exactly what to say.

The two tapes of each girl were sold as a set, which you could order from his porn web site: credit card, check, money order, but no C.O.D.'s, please. The disgusting part was that thousands of these tapes had already been sold to, as the Fatman called them, "*ithyphallic onanists all over the world.*"

Yes, it was clear to the Fattest Crimefighter in the World that this creep was no legitimate talent agent, rather he was, quote, "*about*

as foul a villain as even a town as perfidiously decadent as Hollywood could spawn."

And so the Fatman had taken the liberty of having all the tapes copied for his big mailing project. I helped the Fatman prepare the stacks of videotapes for the postman; there were a couple of dozen packets in all, and they were to be mailed to--get this--not to the girls. . . but to their fathers. Get it? Heh heh heh. . .

EXPLOSIONS IMPENDING.

Finding the addresses of all the fathers wasn't too hard, once we'd gotten the full names of the girls, and he and I worked frantically preparing the videotape packets. We did this blithely, this busy work, for we were wickedly looking forward to what was going to happen next. We were actually anticipating it anxiously, and as the postman came in to pick up the boxes, the Fatman and I were laughing and singing. Why, we might have been campaign volunteers preparing a mass mailing for their favorite candidate.

Remember I said that the Fatman had it all orchestrated? Man, did he. It was like some bizarre Tupperware party-slash-family-reunion. But wait! Before I get to that, I have to give you a few more behind-the-scenes details.

What the Fatman had done was very clever indeed. He had withheld just enough information from the Fathers such that they would be apoplectic over what was on the tapes, of course--BUT they wouldn't be able to act it. You see, they didn't have any data except the tape, and were left with no recourse but to stew in their rage. The Fatman also gave no information whatsoever about who had made the tapes, knowing that if he gave out that information prematurely, surely one of the Fathers would bring disaster on himself by getting a gun and handling it personally.

The Fatman set it up such that if the irate recipients of the above described packages wished to be able to act on this new horrible information that their daughters were being thus exploited, well, those Fathers would just need to attend a lovely little soiree that the Fattest Crimefighter in the World was planning. He did not entertain often, the Fatman. But when he did, the event had about it a peerless panache.

One can only imagine the reactions of the daddies at receiving these videotapes of their darling daughters. (Oh--I should mention that the Fatman wrote in large letters on the cassette labels that the girls had *not* known they were being taped when they made these sexy

steamers.) I would have given anything to be a roach on the wall when, one by one, each proud father, each papa bear, opened the manila envelope, carried the mysterious tape to the VCR, slipped it in, and pressed PLAY. Then, watching it in horror, with the mother quite possibly standing right there in the room as the tape played, sobbing and shrieking hysterically. Although I must point out, among the Fatman's sparse instructions to the dads was that nobody should watch the tape, except the man of the house.

In hindsight, I was actually rather angry with the Fatman, that he did not prearrange for me to be spying with my camera on at least some of the Fathers as they received these packages. I mean, given that the Fatman's true lust was for capturing raw intense human emotion on film, these vignettes would have certainly fit the bill.

But then the Fatman reminded me that *"although the Fathers' viewing of these tapes did constitute part of the necessary loop in the fighting of this crime, the righting of this wrong, the punishing of this injustice, the Seducer's horrific wrongdoing!--still, the parents' private rage and pain over seeing their daughters thus humiliated was not something we needed to archive."*

(Part of the above in italics because the Fatman got so emotional when he said that part, I thought he was going to have a seizure or something.)

I guess I agreed. Still, I wish I could have seen the daddies' reactions. That would have been some juicy footage. But then the Fatman further reminded me that my wanting to spy on people's pain, for no valid reason other than to just watch it, meant that I was an immoral prurient. A slimeball, is what he said I was, almost as morally bankrupt as The Seducer. I suppose he's right.

Oh well.

Well, I guess we must just imagine. . . imagine. . .

Anyway, back to the soirée: Along with the tapes that were delivered, the Fathers were given the following information only.

The Fathers were to meet at the bookstore on Thursday evening at eight o'clock, where they would be given an opportunity to focus their considerable fury.

SO MUCH FOR THE FATHERS. NOW BACK TO THE
NUBILE LOLITAS, AND GETTING THEM IN ON THE REVENGE
PLOT.

Inviting the daughters.

Hmmm. A challenge. Getting them all to the bookstore.

Now that was a trickier proposition, because the Fatman was absolutely certain that as soon as he mailed copies of the tapes to the girls--*tapes made without their knowledge of them being seduced by this, yes, HANDSOME villain, then placed for sale on the World Wide Web, no less*--well, the Fatman's fear was that instead of coming to the big Father-Daughter night on the prearranged Thursday, the furious chicks would instead descend immediately on the Seducer's studio en masse, and beat him within an inch of his life with their large ugly shapeless purses, which we now knew they all carried.

Then, as the Fatman explained it, ". . . Even if our scurrilous scoundrel did manage to survive that ensemble harpy attack, it would no doubt tip him off that some greater vindictive power had orchestrated all of this, and the Seducer would then cheeze it for Vegas or Juarez or New York, or some other city where he could get lost among the louses, crawl under a rock, and then re-emerge to resume his predatorial ways again, when the heat was off."

Nope, the Fatman did not want the guy warned. The Fatman didn't want the Seducer to have any idea that we were onto him.

So, in formulating the plan to get the girls to "Father-Daughter Night," the Fatman knew he would have to devise a clever scheme indeed.

He knew full well that what these poor foolish girls wanted more than anything else in the world was to be famous. And in Hollywood, that generally starts with--well, getting an agent, which of course the girls thought they already had, in the Seducer--but after that, you went out on countless auditions for TV shows. The Fatman knew right off that THAT would be the bait.

Guess what. Those poor dear girls fell for it. They were so gullible, it was almost poignant.

The Fatman's first step was to create an "Audition Information Press Packet." And don'cha know, he snuck behind my back and he created it all by himself. I don't mind confiding to you that I was wounded when he didn't even bother to consult me. In fact, this was only one of many instances in which he did not ask me for my input, and I was frankly jealous of the ingenious mini-coups he was managing without me, The Homeless Dude. But that's neither here nor there. Anyway, once the Fatman had purloined the girls' addresses, he created

a promotional package announcing that they were casting for a hot new TV show. It was about a quaint, eerie, romantic sort of "used bookstore." Sound familiar?

The networks loved the educational angle, or so the packet said. It bragged of "strong sponsor support," and THE BIG TWIST to the show was that this gothic, Victorian bookstore (to be shot on a really cool million dollar shooting set, the packet promised) was actually *haunted* by the ghosts of characters in the novels on the bookshelves. You know, Catherine Earnshaw from "Wuthering Heights," searching for Heathcliffe on the moors. Medea bemoaning her tragic Day Care choices. The hero from Dickens' "Tale of Two Cities" talking about sacrifice and honor and how it really was the best of times--perhaps even with a scene of that character after he's gone to the guillotine, headless, walking around the bookstore with just a white ruff at his bloody neck, and him carrying his head under his arm, the eyes still wide open, staring in horror. . .

What else? Other episodes would feature Joan of Arc, Madame Bovary, Tom and Huck, and Romeo and Juliet giggling their way through the stacks together, those poor star-crossed lovers. Also, the show would feature different guest stars each week that would play the ghost character for that episode. These guest stars would be playing ghosts who were trying to resolve something in their past tragic lives, take care of some unfinished business, so to speak, so that they could stop haunting the bookstore and finally rest in peace.

Perhaps Sarah Michelle Geller as "Anna Karenina?" Brandy as Eliza in "Uncle Tom's Cabin?" Luke Perry as Prince Mishkin in Dostoyevsky's "The Idiot?" Danny DeVito as "The Hunchback of Notre Dame?" One of those hot new boy bands, to play Fagin's band of pickpockets in "Oliver Twist?"

The gimmick was that these ghosts would interact with the owner of the bookstore, helping him sort through his own personal demons and dramas. But in this case, the bookstore owner would not be the Fatman, of course, rather in the TV show it would be some handsome but haunted looking gent with deep and soulful eyes. You know, kind of a Keanu Reeves or young Robert Downey Junior, before he wiggled out on drugs, or perhaps a Freddie Prinz Jr. type? The point is, the producers would cast as the bookstore owner some heartthrob beefcake type that all the girls in America would tune in to see every week.

This shy but sexy bookstore owner would also have a female assistant who worked for him part time. While she would appear on the surface to be rather nondescript and homely, the secret truth was this: when she took off her glasses and her dowdy brown sweater (a transformation no doubt jollied along by some handsome ghost haunting her in that particular episode), she suddenly changed from dowdy Girl Friday into a disarming creature who was really quite fetching. A VERY HOT BOD and all that.

Anyway, this contrived "Audition Information Press Packet" was the angle that the Fatman would use to get the girls to show up to Father-Daughter Night. The girls all thought they were coming to a cattle call.

Of course, no such show existed, or ever would exist. But what I was thinking, as I read the press packet, was that actually, by modern Hollywood standards, this really would have been a bitchen TV show. Sort of "Touched By An Angel" meets "Ghostbusters" via "Wishbone," but without the canine. Or hey, why not, we could put a dog in the bookstore! All the big hit shows these days featured pooches.

As I was imagining all these things, and picturing what a hoot this show was, and what a big hit it could be, I figured, all the stars would want a guest spot on the show, but it would be educational too. And in the middle of thinking all this, I'd have to remind myself that this show was never going to happen. It would never exist. It was only "in development" in the weird and wonderful Psyche of the Fattest Crimefighter in the World.

What else? What else? Oh, the Fatman included a phone number that the girls could call for more information about the mythical auditions. The number rang on a private phone line, so that when it rang, he knew it was one of the actress chicks, calling to inquire about this audition package they had received in the mail.

When he picked up the phone, he would talk up the show, just as I have related it to you here, like it was a real show going into production. I was sitting there listening to him, me and Blue chomping on the pizza bones that the Fatman had cast back into the box, and I'm thinking, wow, colleagues of mine used to hear pitch after pitch after pitch from writers, we used to sit around long tables late into the night, brainstorming and trying to come up with ideas for shows that didn't sound exactly like clones of "Seinfeld" or "Friends," (or, I don't know,

in hindsight, maybe that's exactly what we wanted--clone shows, hoping to repeat the lightning in a bottle), anyway, here the Fatman had, in one half-calculated, half-capricious stroke, evolved an idea for a show that would have been brilliant. Yet this show would never be seen by the viewers out there in Television Land.

It was just "the bait."

So I guess that's my point. All the hacks and whores (and here I'm speaking of a kind of writer, mind you, not a kind of hooker) expend all this energy, scribbling for days and weeks and months, and stealing ideas out of lazy desperation, when the Fatman comes up with a more intriguing idea on a whim, as part of a revenge plot. And all of this whimsical genius in fifteen minutes while polishing off a jumbo pizza with double everything on the topping.

I will always regret that I have never gotten to see, broadcast on TV, that show about the ghosts from the storybooks that haunt the gothic bookstore. Anyway, the girls all called the phone number to get more information, so excited were they to get this audition material in the mail. Every single one who received a press packet eagerly agreed to show up at the appointed date, at the appointed time.

I was jazzed.

But I, like you, would have to wait a whole five days before the appointed meeting time rolled around, and let me tell you, I was so excited waiting for this night to come. Putting it simply, the voyeur in me just couldn't wait to see what happened at Father-Daughter Night, where everybody would be reunited after such a long time, and learn more details about the tapes, and, with the Fatman at the helm, calculate exactly what revenge they would execute.

I couldn't wait, because you just knew there were going to be fireworks.

And indeed, I thought, as I sat under the pier and scribbled all this in my journal, I was just like a kid waiting for Fourth of July fireworks, anticipating that angry and emotional meeting. Although as far as my mediocre similes and metaphors are concerned--well, right feeling. Wrong holiday.

You see, the reason that the Fatman decided to let the next few days pass, before actually convening the Father-Daughter meeting, is that it is time for us to all stop thinking about revenge and bloody murder and titty flicks, and to put aside Crimefighting in general.

It is time to fold our hands and say our prayers and give thanks, because--I guess I hadn't mentioned it up till now--but tomorrow is Thanksgiving.

Tomorrow is Thanksgiving.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: IN WHICH THE FATMAN LOSES HIS VIRGINITY

Now I feel obligated to tell you from the outset that this chapter is not going to be about what you probably think it is going to be about. But the Fatman insisted that the above wording be the exact title of this chapter, so I have no choice but to respect his wishes.

(In point of fact, he didn't even want me to put in the above apologia, and believe me when I tell you that behind the scenes, there were some mighty heated arguments about even such petty points as my warning you that this chapter was not going to be about what you think. But sometimes I fight until I win, and I will tell you why--because I just will not allow you, the reader, to embark upon this chapter thinking that something is going to happen to the Fatman in this Chapter that, well, *doesn't happen*.)

BUT: the Fatman had his own very strong reasons for believing that what happened on that Christmas Eve night so many years ago did, in fact, mark the loss of his virginity.

And truth to tell, yes, I can see his point of view.)

"Her name was Leslie," said the Fatman.

Oh first, let me set the scene. It was a wonderful, mellow, late afternoon, when he told me this story, and the bookstore seemed to have about it a rosy glow. But this story took away that glow for me, and made the world seem just a bit colder than it had been before.

It was the weekend of Thanksgiving. You have already heard the amazing stories of what happened to myself, the Homeless Dude, and the Fatman, and other assorted homeless, on that particular day.

(EDITOR'S NOTE: The above reference to the events that transpired on Thanksgiving is one of the "missing" chapters. The authorities are currently in possession of it and have not yet released it to the public. Who even knows if they ever will. END EDITOR'S NOTE.)

For as long as he could remember, it was the tradition of the Fatman to get a jump-start on the holidays, and begin getting ready for

Christmas on the first day following Thanksgiving. The Fatman loved the season, and he liked to drag it out.

And Christmas decorating was at the top of the list. He told me that this was always how it had been in his home, ever since he was a kid--and while he did not want to carry the tradition of Klan membership into his adult life, the Christmas ritual did seem like one vestige of his childhood that he would like to hang on to.

On that particular morning, he did what he did so frequently--just jammed a big wad of cash into my hand and sent me on an errand. *Sure* I wouldn't steal the dough, *certain* I would return--and the Fattest Crimefighter never even asking for a receipt. Hell, half the time, the Fatman didn't even ask about change, although I always gave it back to him (most of it), because I am an honest person (mostly), and I didn't wish to bite the hand that was feeding me.

Even if it was overfeeding him.

My noble errand: GET THE GRANDEST CHRISTMAS TREE I COULD FIND!

The bookstore had high ceilings, wonderfully lofty ceilings, they were, supported by noble thick wooden beams. There was even a ladder that you had to climb, to get to the upper stacks, if you wanted to get your hands on certain obscure books.

And what these high ceilings meant, come the Christmas holidays, was that a really tall tree was called for: a grand, magnificent twenty-footer, perhaps a lovely Scotch pine, would fit in the store with no problem.

What a great errand to do! I, too, had always been a nut for Christmas, especially in my youth. Christmas. . .with its touchy-feely sentimentality, all those home movies and home cooked meals and homespun values. . .all those dreams of sugar plum fairies and happy endings, and all that peace-on-earth-good-will-towards-men stuff. (Although I pretty much let go of all that, when I got heavy into the fantasyland of Hollywood. Because while we do spit out all those movies chalk full of touchy-feely sentiment and happy endings and liberal New Age peace-love vibes, the brutal truth and great irony is that it takes such a cutthroat, take-no-prisoners attitude, and such fucking ruthless brutality to get one of those feel-good movies made, (since the bean counters prefer violence), that the whole process of

making Hollywood happy endings had kind of sapped the milk of human kindness out of my veins, if you know what I mean.)

But the Fatman was getting me back into the Christmas spirit. I will pass over all the adventures I had that morning getting the tree, because they did not have to do with Crimefighting. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Suffice it to say I got a magnificent tree, and paid a couple of guys on the street to haul it the several blocks back to the bookstore, because this tree was wa-a-a-y too big to be loaded onto the little VW bug.

I set it up for the Fatman, and he was in an excellent mood, as he directed the proceedings with verve and pomp. When I was out getting the tree, he had not been idle either, I discovered. The Fatman had whipped up several batches of cookies, and kept on baking cookies as I was securing the tree. (Have I mentioned that the Fatman had a stove in the bookstore? Those kinds of amenities are important when you are--well--when you are *the Fatman*.) While the cookies were baking, he whipped up eggnog and spiced cider, and arranged it out front for store patrons. In fact, he said, they were for anyone who passed by the store, and smelled the ginger snaps, and felt like ambling in for a bit of Christmas cheer.

You had to love this guy.

As I put up the tree, which was no small chore, he opened a big storage closet and produced boxes and more boxes of decorations. The shop was particularly busy that day. Partly because it was a big shopping day, which the day after Thanksgiving always is, but mostly because of the free cookies. The Fatman even requested, nay, insisted, that every soul who came into the shop please hang an ornament on the tree, just to sort of get them into the holiday spirit.

I must tell you, between the smells in that shop, and the old English Christmas carols on the stereo, and the rows of hundred year old leather books, and the antique tree ornaments, I felt like I was sitting plop in the middle of a Dickens novel. (Not that I have ever actually read one.)

But it was most pleasant. The day wafted by, like the smell of turkey cooking, inviting and so satisfying, and by the end of the afternoon, the Fatman and I were both in grand moods. He had made a barrel full of money, and was heartened that so many people still bought books as Christmas gifts.

We were sitting by the tree, and I was hanging still more ornaments. He had unearthed yet another box of really old ones, that his great-grandmother had owned. Crystal ones, from Austria. Just beautiful.

I was hanging them, because the Fatman had pretty much worn himself out that day; I'd rarely seen the Fatman bustling so much. I noticed, as he sat back in his bigass chair, that he had grown quiet, and I thought, a little sad.

So without thinking first, I blurted out,

"What are you brooding about?"

Without missing a beat, he blurted out.

"The night I lost my virginity."

Well, you can bet I was intrigued. I stopped hanging balls and sat.

"Tell, tell," I said.

He looked at me a moment before answering.

"It's not going to be what you think. You'll be disappointed."

I was undaunted.

"No I won't, I promise. Hey, all "losing-your-virginity" stories are cool, or touching, or pretty hilarious in their own way. Didn't ever hear one that wasn't somehow very entertaining."

I immediately regretted it--because I knew from his previous stories and confessions that the Fatman had become quite a lardass by the time he reached the lose-your-virginity age. You know what I'm getting at, the implication that the humor in his story would come from the image of someone of his tremendous girth attempting copulation. In other words, to be crass, now the Fatman has planted in my mind and in yours the picture of a five hundred pound man humping some chick, and that'll stay with you through dinner, believe me.

But the Fatman just nodded at my comment, and shrugged. He didn't look like his feelings had been hurt. Since I got the sense that he wanted to keep talking, I asked:

"What was her name," as I reached for a ginger snap and dunked it in my egg nog.

"Her name," he said, "Was Leslie."

The Fatman leaned back and stared at the angel tree-topper.

"Leslie. . .Leslie. . .she looked just like that angel. Hell, I thought she was an angel on earth. Long blonde hair. Huge blue eyes, blue like the color of--"

He stopped and groped for a metaphor.

"Blue like--well. Certain parts of her were just beyond description," he said, giving up fairly easily. I was hoping the rest of the story wasn't like that. But the Fatman was in his own little world, beaming as he talked.

"She had perfect white teeth, and two dimples, and her blonde hair kind of curled at the ends. And she had this sexy little mole, man did that turn me on, it was right here on her neck," the Fatman said, pointing to a place on his own neck, which kind of creeped me out, because as I've already said, the Fatman had about a million moles all over his numerous neck rolls, and it looked like the Milky Way Galaxy.

"And a body like a little colt," he said.

"Funny," I replied, "The babes I fantasized about never had bodies like horses."

But the Fatman just ignored my stupid remark.

"Oh, you have to understand, friend. She and I were both seven when I first fell in love with her. Actually, I guess I was in love with her since I was born, but I was seven when I felt the first stirrings of lust. Leslie had these little blond hairs on her legs, those legs which were long and limber and always tanned, and the hair on them was so soft and almost invisible, like down on a little chick. By the time I was seven, I had already figured out about copping a feel, and I used to love to try and secretly brush my hand along that downy fuzz on her legs. And I got quite a number of chances to do exactly that, because we used to play together all the time."

"Childhood sweetheart," I said, and he nodded happily, remembering.

"I had loved Leslie for as long as I could remember."

Then the Fatman leaned forward. He stared at me, his eyes blazing.

"Do you ever think back and try to remember the first conscious thought that you ever had? Was it your mother's face, or wanting food, or how the mobile over your crib looked, or some image you saw on TV, or whatever, have you ever done that? Tried to remember back to what were the first conscious thoughts that you, as a human being, a sentient creature, ever held in your head?"

"No," I answered truthfully and took a swig of eggnog, wishing it was spiked. "Nope, can't say that I have."

The Fatman gave me an annoyed look, but continued with his story, his mind far more on the past and Leslie than on the present and my dullardness.

"Anyway, Leslie lived next door. Even when we were babies, our moms would sit on each other's front porch and put us in the same crib. I swear to God, the first conscious thoughts I had were of her. . .of how beautiful she was. It was almost like--like--"

In that moment, watching the Fatman talk with so much affection about his first love, I tried to divine what it was about the way he was telling this story that was different than the way he usually told stories. Then I realized! It wasn't just the passion with which he told it, or the love in his eyes as he remembered back, but it was one of the few times I'd heard him tell a story without him stuffing his face the whole time. And since he always chewed with his mouth full, that meant that if you wanted to watch his face when he told a story--which I think is the polite thing to do, when someone tells a story (and the Fatman *did* have a very animated face, and I *do* believe that the eyes are the window to the soul)--but if you wanted to look at him when he was telling a story, usually it meant staring at a mouth full of creamed spinach or pot pie or masticated pickled herring or banana or whatever.

But in telling this story, he told it with a kind of calm, affectionate dignity, animated though he was.

"I'll tell you what it was like," he said, after pondering. "So close was the bond between us, Leslie and me, that it was like she and I had known each other in another life. I swear, by the time I was more fully conscious, five or six, I swear that when I looked at her, I saw this kind of aura glowing around her head. It was wonderful. It made her even more beautiful, like she really was an angel on earth."

"Wow," I said, much impressed and more than a little moved, especially because of the loneliness into which the Fatman's life had devolved. "You really had it bad," I said, hoping this was alright to say.

"Oh, you know it, friend. Imagine being madly in love, every day of your life, from the day you're born, until. . .until. . ."

He trailed off, and just stared at the twinkle lights on the tree. I was afraid I'd lost him, until suddenly he perked right up and smiled wickedly.

"Anyway, it was so damned tough when I got to be a horny little shit, you know, when I reached masturbating age. Which didn't happen till the night of my twelfth birthday. I remember it vividly. I

know that's a little later than some boys. But what can I say? I was a backward child."

Before continuing, the Fatman threw his head back and laughed.

"The dilemma was that it was Leslie I fantasized about, when I was in the bathroom with the door locked, thankin' the Yankee. But I felt so damned guilty actually fantasizing about her when I masturbated. It seemed too dirty, it seemed to cheapen her somehow, you know?"

He sighed deeply.

"So I did what most boys do. I purloined a girlie magazine from dad's stash, and I whacked off to that. And during those dirty moments, I kept all thoughts of the sweet, pure, princess Leslie far from my mind, so as to protect her from my dark thoughts and filthy fantasies. Even though she was just across the yard, in her ivory tower. Then I would wash my hands, over and over again, with lye soap, to get all the filth off of them. Then I would go back down to my father's library, and lose myself in stories of knights errant. Or, if my masturbating fantasies had been particularly filthy, I would read a bit of the Bible, try and cleanse myself. Only when I figured that enough time had gone by, and that my thoughts were pure again, only then would I venture outside to see if sweet little Leslie was around, and wanted to play."

The Fatman re-adjusted his XXXXXXXX-L sized red holiday Santa suspenders and shook his head, chuckling in an embarrassed fashion.

"I remember a few times, she skipped over to my house and hollered up to my bedroom window, just at the very moment I was locked in the bathroom, feudin' with the ferret. Sometimes I would hear her voice just as I was, you know, ejaculating. I'm sorry to be crass, but oh, it was so mortifying. On those occasions, I just wouldn't answer the door, which I knew hurt her feelings, because she knew full well I was home. Other times, I would wipe my hands on my underwear and pull up my pants and run downstairs, and from the look on my face and the look on her face, I swear she knew what I had been doing."

As the Fatman said all this, I must tell you, I had been mute, the whole time. This was fascinating.

"Wow." I murmured. "You wouldn't even fantasize about her while you whacked off? You did have it bad. This wasn't just about being some horny kid, or teen lust. You really did love her."

"Yeah, I did," the Fatman said sadly, staring off into space. "I could bore you for hours, about what those years were like. But I won't. Except to say--"

But I finished the sentence for him: "Except to say that they were the happiest years of your life?"

The Fatman looked at me, taken aback.

"Yes. That's exactly what I was going to say. I think for most folks, the happiest days are those days when we were a kid, when the simplest stuff made us happy."

"Like masturbating?" I said. "Look pal, that's definitely one of life's simple pleasures, but you don't have to stop doing it, just because you're all grown up."

He glared at me. I immediately regretted what I'd said. It was crass and rude. Here he was telling me an important intimate story about love, and I was talking like trailer trash.

"Are you going to listen or what?" asked the Fatman. "We're talking about the love of my life here. The love of my youth, at least, which is obviously as good as romance is ever gonna get for me."

Man, did I feel bad after the Fatman said that. But the Fatman wasn't looking at me. . .he wasn't even in the room. He had drifted back to another place, another time.

"When we were kids, growing up, it was enough for Leslie and me to go fishing for crawdads in the creek, and munch on a couple of PB&J sandwiches stuffed in a brown paper bag. That was all it took for us to be deliriously happy."

I nodded and smiled. "Wow. I have the exact same kinds of memories."

Then we were quiet for a bit, the Fatman and I. We just listened to the stereo. The Fatman had put on some of his Christmas music, and Bing Crosby was crooning in the background.

"Yes," he said, nodding slowly. "Those universal memories. Which is why I can skip over all those, because you already know them without my saying. What I will tell you, though, is that my most intense memories of Leslie come up again every Christmas. She and I always exchanged presents, usually little handmade trinkets. That is, until the year that everything changed."

I said nothing. I just waited for him to go on. His eyes welled up with tears.

"Christ, this is hard to talk about. But it's just that with my weight, my heart can't hold out much longer, I figure, and I got a lot of stuff, a lot of secrets pent up inside me, and sometimes I think that's part of what's making me so sick."

"Yeah, Yeah," I said. "Everybody needs a friend to talk to."

"Well, I don't know if I'd call you that," said the Fatman, with a bluntness that threw me.

But you know what? I didn't even take offense. I knew that was just the Fatman's way of keeping his distance, because he was scared of getting closer to another soul. Just like the way he claimed to hate dogs.

The Fatman quietly passed wind and continued his reminiscing.

"So here's the story. It was the Christmas just after my fifteenth birthday. Leslie was fifteen, too. Our birthdays were just a few days apart. But the thing was, by that time, I had gotten pretty huge. My weight, I mean. I can't explain it, but this craving, this hunger that just never went away--it set in after Toby W. Smith killed himself, and it never really went away. I got bigger and bigger, and everyone tried to do something about it. My mom tried to give me more Brussels sprouts and fewer hash browns. Dad threatened and bribed. If I kept getting fat, he'd cut off my allowance. If I lost weight, he'd buy me my own rowboat or a pony. But let me tell you, any pony would have run away whinnying in fear, if I approached it and tried to get on it. Anyway, by the time I was fifteen, I probably weighed two hundred pounds. I gradually noticed I couldn't do as much stuff as I could do when I was ten. I had kind of given up climbing trees and running races and playing pirates. I told myself it was because I was growing out of all that, getting older. But I knew the truth. It was because I was getting fatter."

The Fatman shrugged, and then, as though there was no point in trying to resist the urge any longer, he gave in and started seriously chowing down on a plate of Tollhouse cookies.

"I did everything I could to try and not eat so much, but I just couldn't help it. So I buried myself in books, but I was becoming a pretty good musician, too. I wrote songs, I played the piano and the guitar, and so I got it in my head that I would write a musical Christmas

pageant for the church that year. You know, a touch of Godspell, Jesus Christ Superstar. Only I would retell the Christmas story. I got the idea one beautiful Christmas day, when Leslie gave me a kiss under the mistletoe. I worked on it all year, till the next fall, and then I asked Miz Shibbelhooth, the old bat of a choir instructor that we all tolerated. Well, she didn't like the idea at all, she wanted to do the same worn out Christmas pageant that we'd trotted out every year for as long as I could remember. But some of the more hep members of the choir outvoted her. So on this very day, the day after Thanksgiving, a whole cast of kids and the church choir all set about to rehearsing my pageant! I fantasized that someday I would become a great and famous composer of rock operas. A lot of famous composers and musicians are big and fat, you know. Especially opera types. I loved opera. Even as a kid. So let me tell you, friend, I was so happy that fall, attending *my* rehearsals for *my* rock opera. And it was going to be a big deal too, performed for my church and a whole community of churches that were going to attend. Of course, my biggest hope was that it might impress Leslie. Oh, and the best part--she had been cast as the Virgin Mary in my show. She and I were still fast friends, but we had never been able to make that leap to boyfriend-girlfriend. And I knew it was because I had turned into this lardass.

The most humiliating thing was when she would try and talk to me about it. I had started to act like a girl about it, in fact. Oh wait, that sounded stupid, like I was turning queer or something, but what I meant was, I acted like girls do, in that I would eat like a bird in front of her. You know, how girls never eat much in front of boys? Well, I'd eat like a bird in front of Leslie, because I was embarrassed to have her see how much food I really ate. Then, when I got home from hanging out with her, or after rehearsing, I would set in to eat a whole fried chicken, a gallon of ice cream, a tray of brownies. And I'd think about Leslie the whole time. Which meant I was sexually frustrated, so that meant even more food, and more food. But never around Leslie. Leslie would watch me pick at my food and she'd say to me, 'Oh you have such a small appetite, like a girl almost, so why do you think you--' And then, she always had trouble saying the next part 'Why do you think that you're gaining all that weight? Has your mom taken you to a doctor?'

And then, as he remembered, pain flooded the Fatman's face.
"But how could I tell Leslie the truth? That every time I fell asleep, every time I closed my eyes, I did not see her sweet face, much

as I would like to say that was the case. That's what a kid is supposed to do, right? Fall asleep thinking about the girl he's in love with, maybe mixing in a little masturbating, or plans for how he's gonna get his hands on some wheels, so he can make out with her? But that's not what I saw when I shut my eyes at night, friend. What I saw was Toby W. Smith, lying there in the outhouse, in a pool of his own blood, the gun still in his hand. What I saw when I shut my eyes was Toby W. Smith's brother and father hanging from that tree, castrated, lynched. That ain't no kind of thing for a kid to be haunted by. That'll just suck all the childhood and innocence right out of your soul."

I was quiet, taking it all in. Well, this story had sure lost its verve. It sure wasn't anything like I thought it was going to be, when he'd first brought up the topic. His caveats had been right on target. But he continued with his story.

"I guess the reason I ate so much--eat so much, I suppose I should say--is on account of trying to swallow all that anger. Because that's not the only injustice I've seen or felt in my forty-odd years, friend. Anyway, back to my story. Because I was such a big ass boy, it was becoming pretty clear that Leslie was not going to be my girlfriend. Or my first, if you know what I mean. Still, hope springs eternal, and I thought maybe if I could wow her enough with my Christmas musical, she might see me through different eyes. . .perhaps as a kind of minor celebrity. After all, all around me, there were musicians who were also lardasses, and getting their pick of the babes. Pavarotti. Meatloaf. Elvis was pretty porky there, near the end.

Anyway, things were frantic with rehearsals, and terribly exciting. So much so, I almost forgot I was fat. And of course, what made it so perfect was that Leslie was doing wonderfully as the Blessed Virgin. Leslie had a beautiful voice, like a little Christmas bell ringing out, it was. In fact, I have to tell you, when we would rehearse, I would get so excited listening to Leslie's voice singing my words and my music that I would get an erection, and I'd have to grab some sheet music to cover the bulge. See, I wasn't in the musical myself. I was the director, and I was feeling pretty good about myself, except when I got those embarrassing woodies.

But the best news was--there were actually people from the music industry, from Nashville, and the Grand Ol' Opry, coming to see my show! Also, they were filming a movie next town over, and rumor had it that some of those Hollywood types were coming to the pageant.

Was it too much to dream that I would become famous from this? A child prodigy? Maybe that was why God had led me down this painful path, purposely to turn my soul inward, and transform me into a truly inspired musician!

Well, the big night finally came. Mom had gotten me a tux. Oh, it was a huge tux, of course. It had to be custom made, and it cost twice as much as a regular tux would have, because the guy had to use so much extra material, and I had to be fit a couple of times. But I had my tux. And I looked great.

I was so nervous as the orchestra tuned up. The church committee had rented extra chairs, there were even speakers outside for the overflow. It was really something.

I would like to be able to tell you how it went, and I think it went fine, but it was hard for me to judge. The audience seemed to love it. And Leslie sang like a bird! She was so beautiful. I stared at her when she sung the song, the song that I had written just for her, with her voice echoing in my ears so sweetly. . .and I felt I was in heaven. . .and I allowed myself to fantasize about making love to her, to my sweet, sweet, Leslie.

And oh the applause, the applause was wonderful!

But I had to know the truth. Maybe everyone was just applauding so enthusiastically because they were filled with Christmas cheer, mulled wine, or spiked eggnog. Or maybe they just felt sorry for the Fatkid.

I had to know what they were really going to say about my show, behind my back. The real dirt, not the polite stuff they said to me. I had recognized a few of the movie people and the folks from Nashville record companies. I couldn't get over that they were right here, in my own home town, because they were visiting relatives over the Christmas holidays. Were the Nashville record executives really impressed? And how was I to find out?

Hmmmm. . .I saw that this buffet of Christmas treats had been set up and folks were meandering out to the side of the church, where there was a sort of tent, a covered area extending out from the church basement, to accommodate all the people. It was a balmy night, for that time of year, and there were outdoor heaters set up.

A few people had swarmed around me, to tell me how much they liked the show, but then I realized that I wasn't going to get anybody's true opinion this way.

I had a plan. A brilliant plan.

I knew a place where I could hide in plain sight. A place where I would be right in the hub of the party. Then came the coup de gras: I saw a couple of delinquents from the teen youth group, who only participated so their fathers would let them use the car now and again, slip over and spike both the eggnog and the hot cinnamon cider. I could only applaud their efforts, for now I knew folks would be talking freely, speaking their minds. And they would all be huddling near the heaters, which were set up not too far from the church's nativity scene, with its *life-sized figures*.

What if I were to ditch the plaster Joseph, slip down to the church basement where everybody had made up for the pageant, throw on a Joseph costume, a robe and fake beard, and pose motionless in the manger, amongst all the other life-sized figures! I figured folks would meander by, not really noticing the nativity, guzzling that spiked punch, and talking about my show. My masterpiece! I would be able to hear them raving in person! But what if they didn't like it, I asked myself? But still, one way or the other, I just had to know. And so I would do it.

Now I must tell you, friend, that it was only *after* I'd had a good portion of the spiked punch, in celebration of my triumph, that I mustered the nerve to go through with my crazy plan.

So I did it. I made myself up to look like Joseph, and while most of the people were still clustered in the church, complimenting the kids in the pageant, I slipped into the nativity scene. Gently, and reverently, mind you, oh so reverently, I put the fake Joseph under the pine tree by the stained-glass window. I apologized to Joseph for displacing him; it seemed kind of sacrilegious. But I hurried back to take his spot, before anybody was the wiser.

My plan worked perfectly. People started to mingle by, drinking their spiked nog, just as I had imagined it. They were all saying very complimentary things about my great musical pageant. And they didn't even know that I, the author-composer, was standing right in front of them, so this meant that their profuse compliments were sincere. Thankyou, Jesus, they were heartfelt!

Of course, in my mind, that immediately translated into a fabulous future; it meant I had a career as the next great composer of rock operas. Yes, for a brief and heavenly time, standing there frozen, trying not to jump for joy, I let myself fantasize. Perhaps that was my destiny: not to be a Crimefighter, or even a writer--which had lately been taking the place of my old dream of Crimefighting. Because since I'd piled on the pounds, Crimefighting seemed like more and more of a physical impossibility. But maybe my destiny was in neither

Crimefighting nor penning great prose, perhaps I was supposed to be a *composer*. Of world renown, of course, whose music would be immortal!

You see, friend. . . ever since my appetite had become uncontrollable and my weight had ballooned, I had constant terrors of dying early, young--you know, because of my heart. Maybe that is why thinking up ways to make myself immortal, well, it preyed on my mind all the time. I didn't want to die the Forgotten Fatkid.

And so, the compliments of my musical flowed, as people downed the spiked cider and nog.

Of course, I was too young and foolish to know that people drinking spiked eggnog and feeling the Christmas spirit, saying sweet things about some fat kid's pageant, has nothing to do with how that Fatkid will spend the rest of his life. Because when you're a kid, hell, you think you can do anything. You really believe you can become anything you dream of. Even the Fatkid can get pretty full of himself, no pun intended.

But for a few moments there, I was feeling pretty good.

Until the elation started to wear off, and I began thinking about the absurdity of what I was doing. I was a big fat kid hiding in a nativity scene, pretending to be Joseph. Oh no! What if some intrepid person took a good long look at the nativity scene and saw the Fatkid? It wasn't so improbable. In fact, suddenly it started seeming quite probable, that someone would see me. Suddenly I was in this panic that I would be found out and ridiculed in front of the whole church. In front of the Nashville executives and Hollywood bigwigs! In front of Leslie, no less! Ridiculed, in front of my beloved, who I figured was pretty darned impressed with me right about now--

--Right about now, where was Leslie? I started wondering to myself where she'd gotten to; I hadn't seen her in the crowd for the longest time. I had talked with her just after the show, of course, and we had complimented each other endlessly. She had even given me a big hug. Oh, it was the happiest moment of my life, that hug was. And as I was feeling her arms around me, I was not even embarrassed that they wouldn't go all the way around, so triumphant was I feeling in that moment. In fact--in fact--"

Then suddenly, the Fatman stopped, sighed deeply, and gestured for me to get him a refill on the nog.

"--In fact, looking back on it now, that single moment, after my great triumph, standing there with Leslie's arms embracing me. . .that was truly the happiest, most fulfilled moment of my life. And as I was basking in the glow of true love and imminent celebrity, little did I know that within the hour, nipping on the heels of my great triumph, I would witness the unthinkable. . .and my whole life would turn to crap.

I mean, my life hadn't been all that great up till that moment, but now my only source of joy and hope and happiness was about to be taken away from me. No, Leslie didn't die or anything like that--but--well, actually, sweet angelic Leslie, as she had always been to me, up to that moment, she did die a sort of death.

But where was I? Ah yes. . .so there I am, the frozen Joseph, trying to resist the urge to scratch that itchy beard, trying not to think about the fact that pretty soon I was going to have to use the toilet, realizing what a dumb idea this had been, terrified I would be found out. And I was really starting to wonder where the hell Leslie was.

Although I must tell you that all my fear and concerns were temporarily forgotten, when a record producer from Nashville ambled in front of the nativity scene and stopped to chat with a beautiful young woman in a green beaded dress.

"I really thought it was fabulous, Joan, cross my heart. I think I can get the kid a record deal. This musical could really go somewhere--I mean, look at *Godspell*, and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. These retellings of the Christ story are big-titted hits on Broadway, but nobody's done a rock opera of the Christmas story. We get some angels in little costumes, some ethnic shepherds, politically correct kings--oh, this could be big, Joanie! This could be huge!"

Naturally, I was beside myself with excitement--when suddenly I froze. I heard voices behind me. Not exactly in the little makeshift manger, but just behind it. My God, it was Leslie's voice! She was saying something, I couldn't make out what, but that giggle was distinctive. And someone else was talking too, who the hell was that? I remember I was squinting in the semi-darkness, as though squinting my eyes might somehow make me able to hear better.

Buford Crenshaw! Oh my God, Leslie, my beloved Leslie, was sharing some private giggles with Buford Crenshaw. I hated him. He was a redneck, he was a bully, he was a brute, he was an ignoramus, he had a thick neck and pimples, and worst of all--he had been along with the hunters that night they lynched Toby W. Smith's brother and father. Oh, admittedly, Buford Crenshaw had only been about sixteen at the time. But what always made my skin crawl whenever I saw him,

every time since that night, was that Buford had taken everything that happened in stride. I know, because I remember that under the full moon, I watched Buford as he watched the hunters. It was so eerie, the way a kid could see something like that, the lynchings and the castrations, and just sort of take it all in stride. . .like evil was born in him, and was growing up in him, all part of him becoming a man. A certain sort of man. . .

. . .And my sweet Leslie was giggling with him, in the sweet cool Christmas air.

Suddenly, I froze--they were coming in the manger. Shit, my only chance was to stand perfectly still. This was going to be tough, because man, I had to pee really bad.

"It's nice and dark and private in here," I heard Buford saying.

"But it's so close to the party, what if someone hears us or sees us?"

These words from my angel, Leslie. Then I heard Buford Crenshaw's lurid cackle.

"Heh! That just makes it more exciting, darlin', that's the whole point--a little danger makes it that much more fun."

"You're weird," said Leslie. Then, the unthinkable happened.

In an effort to find the most comfortable spot to do whatever it was they were planning to do, she had crept over to a place where the hay was spread all around. Now, she did not know it, and she was never to find out, but she was about three feet away from me, and right in my line of sight. And although it was dark in there, the moonlight was filtering through the cracks in the manger roof--and I saw more than I ever wanted to.

More than I could ever forget in a lifetime.

Leslie was still giggling, in that way that young wild girls do, who are still walking that razor's edge between child and tramp. And Buford Crenshaw, he was only about a yard away from me too, so not only was I totally crushed at finding my Leslie in this situation--I WAS TERRIFIED FOR MY LIFE--because once, a while back, Buford Crenshaw had cornered me and told me that he knew I was hiding in the woods that night of the lynching. Then he said that I'd better never spy on him ever again in the future, and that if I did ever spy on him in the future, I could look forward to having *my* dick cut off too, just like they'd done to Toby W. Smith's brother and father.

It would appear that not only would Leslie and I not lose our virginity to each other, as someplace deep down I had always believed, hoped, prayed--but there was a strong chance that I would never get a

chance to lose my virginity to ANYBODY, because one errant belch or fart or audible rumble of my overhanging stomach, and Buford Crenshaw would cut my dick right off, right there in the manger, with his Swiss Army Knife he was always bragging about--and before I'd even had a chance to put my very good friend to any legitimate use. You see, I had believed Buford Crenshaw's threat from the moment he said it, and lived in the haunting terror of it, every day since. Once, Buford had set a kitten on fire, just to prove he was mean enough to do it. And he didn't put it out right away either, he watched and hooted and howled, as that poor kitten ran around the barn and caught some hay on fire, and Buford set about putting out the barn fire before he even thought about "putting out the cat," and I do not mean that as some horrific play on words, even though it came out that way. I mean, give me a break, dammittohell, I'm talking stream of consciousness, here.

Anyway--I realized that nothing had ever been so important in my entire life as being perfectly stone still, like a statue. And I was. I was. So I bore witness to what happened next.

Oh! Oh, did I mention that Leslie was still dressed as the Virgin Mary? Leslie was crawling around on all fours, swathed in a lovely royal blue robe, wearing a golden tinsel halo that I had personally made for her, to symbolize that she was the Virgin, and had been visited by the Immaculate Conception. She was wearing heavy make-up, because even though I had pointed out to her before the performance that the Virgin Mary was, in all probability, not wearing any make-up when she gave birth to the Christ child, Leslie was emphatic about wanting her eyes to stand out when she was on stage, and her mouth too, when she was singing her solo. She wanted people, even way in the back row, to be able to see her eyes, and her mouth. It turns out that Leslie was hoping to gain fame and fortune from this gig as well.

So there she was, my little Virgin Mary, with the heavily rouged cheeks and red lips, and eyes like a Taiwanese teen whore.

That was when I heard the sound that will haunt me until my dying day. No, nothing as ominous as a gunshot, or even the grunt of Buford spotting me. It was not even a bodily sound of my own, that might reveal my presence to Buford, the castrating casanova.

It was the sound of a zipper being unzipped. And in that moment, in that heartbeat, I knew what my little Virgin Mary was going to do. I knew.

Oh God. I didn't know that such personal pain was possible, without there being a physical dimension to it. I do believe that, with the exception of the Toby W. Smith incidents I have related to you, this was the first true grown-up pain I had ever known.

But it got worse.

"Hey," said my darling Leslie, in a half-flirtatious, half-chiding voice, "The money first. First I get the fifteen dollars. Pay up, I don't trust you to give it to me later."

I remember shutting my eyes for a long moment, praying that the cry in my soul didn't well up and come out of my mouth.

No, no not my darling Leslie! I remember the conversation that came next like my dad remembers the day they bombed Pearl Harbor--

"C'mon, baby, I'm good for it," Buford said. "I left my wallet in the dressing room, I'll give it to you later."

"Liar. I can feel the bulge in your pocket."

"Oh, that bulge ain't no wallet, baby."

"I'm not talking about *that* bulge, baby. Your wallet is in your back pocket. Here it is. I'm taking twenty bucks, just because you lied to me."

"Whatever, whatever, just do it baby! I was watching you through the whole pageant, and I got such a boner."

"You'll burn in hell for that, Buford boy. Then again, I guess I'll meet you there."

Then, my little Virgin Mary got on her knees, and gave old Buford what was apparently the best blow job he'd ever had, because he kept moaning things to that effect. What made it so bizarre, is they were maybe one yard from me the whole time, and there I was watching it, watching it, and dying and crying inside.

I remember thinking to myself, so this is hell. So this is what it's like to be in hell.

I didn't think that it could get any worse. Until he was finished. The zipper went back up. And my little Virgin Mary straightened herself out, and brushed herself off.

Then she stayed there, she didn't move, it was very odd. Buford crept out of the manger, noiseless as a ghost, no afterglow, no small talk, but Leslie just stayed there. For a moment, for one horrible moment, I thought it was because she had seen me, but no. In a few seconds. . . I understood why she had stayed.

Another guy came in. A friend of Buford's, Roy McClain. He, too, produced his money, a wad of singles. Again, the sound of a zipper being unzipped. Then there were some other sounds, too horrible to recount here. Then he, too, zipped back up.

I think this went on half a dozen times, but by now, my need to pee was so fierce, that my mind was torn between concentrating on not pissing myself, and trying to not scream out at the horrors I was being forced to witness, during what had become the second longest hour of my young life.

Although it was probably the most lucrative hour of Leslie's life, I can't be sure. Maybe she'd had many other hours like this, that were equally lucrative. And horrible. Lord knows I had many such thoughts, in the nights and nightmares that would follow this oh so memorable Christmas Eve. It would seem that Fate had bestowed upon me a whole new barrage of nightmarish images to haunt me--threatening to upstage, but never quite obliterating, those ghastly images of the castrations, and the lynchings, and of Toby W. Smith's suicide.

All in all, it was not shaping up to be an idyllic childhood.

For a while after that, I fancied that all this was happening because horrible things had to happen to a young soul, if it was to shape into the psyche of the artist. Yes, a tortured genius, that was what God was molding me into! That was his master plan, that was why I was going through all of this hell, even while I was still just a kid.

But it didn't really pan out that way. Not in the years following these horrible incidents, and it never has panned out. Nothing came of my musical, of course. How naive I was, to imagine that one moment of well received whatever in some small town means anything in the great scheme of things. Oh, and that big Nashville producer, who liked my music, remember him? He ended up being arrested for statutory rape and thrown in jail for a year, then when he got out, he was pretty much washed up. . ."

The Fatman stopped talking, and for a long time, he didn't say anything. He sighed. Whenever he sighed like that, loud and long, it always worried me, because his sighs always sounded all congested, and very unhealthy. I worried for him. But mostly, while I was understandably filled with disgust--the disgust of compassion of course,

for the hell that he had gone through on that night--BUT I was also filled with no small measure of disappointment.

"I thought this was going to be a story about how you lost your virginity," I said to him.

He just smiled weakly, and shook his head.

"Yup. I was afraid you wouldn't get the point, kid. But I still maintain that it is a story about that. See, friend, the way I see it, losing your virginity is. . .well, it's about when you start to see the world in a different way. Like a goddamn grown up. Like an Aadult."

He emphasized the first "A" in "adult" with an anger, a bitterness.

"See, here is the great sad truth for us, my friend. You lose your virginity in that precise moment when you start to look at the world and truly see it for the first time, for the brutal, ruthless, animalistic, secretive, terrifying, and disenchanting place that it is. And all that idealism, naiveté, pollyannaism, is gone forever. You lose your virginity in that precise moment when you stop seeing the opposite sex in the same way. When you permanently stop believing, in an utter and unquestioning way, in the purity of anything at all. It's that precise moment when you know that you can't go back to thinking like a child, seeing the world and the people in it the way that a child does--to living and dreaming and hoping and even praying the way that a child does. It's that moment when you become a little more realistic, a little more savvy, more civilized--and, by extension--a little more savage."

Now it was my turn to sigh heavily and be quiet for a while. Because you see, I realized he was quite right. I shut my eyes and tried to visualize what he had seen in the manger that night. Like I was running a movie in my head, you know. How ghastly. How sad for him.

It was several minutes before either of us spoke, and when someone did, I realized it was me.

"But, based on what you just said--your definition of what it means to lose your--well, I would think that based on that, you lost your virginity the night you were dressed in your Superhero satins, and sat in the back of your dad's truck, and watched him lynching Toby W. Smith's dad and brother."

The Fatman nodded solemnly, and pondered this a moment.

"I guess, actually, you're right. I guess that makes me one of the few folks who can actually say they've lost their virginity twice.

I didn't know what to say. Hell, who ever knew what to say, after some of the conversations and Adventures you had with the Fattest Crimefighter in the World. I shrugged and looked at him.

"So. Leslie never did find out that you were watching her, the whole time," I asked. I had to figure some way to bring this depressing conversation to closure.

The Fatman smiled dimly.

"Nope. My presence was never revealed. I never did fart. Or pee my pants. I took my secret with me, kept it to myself, and nobody ever knew what I had witnessed that night. Of course, Leslie noticed that I was different to her after that. Very different. I was polite, of course, but that was about the extent of it. From then on, whenever she wanted to hang out, because we had been sort of best friends, now I always had some excuse. She was hurt. But I couldn't go back to the way things were. Hell, I had trouble even looking her in the eye."

The Fatman looked at me, and added, almost as an afterthought--

"Something did happen that made me hate her a little less, though. Because yeah, after that night, I was sort of hating her all the time. Pretty intensely. Every time I thought of her, which was about ten times an hour. "

"Really? By all means, tell, tell. I can't quite imagine what could happen to make you hate her less after that," I said, leaning in to listen.

"Well, about a month after the pageant. . .it was about two in the morning. I couldn't sleep. I never did sleep well, not for a long time after that Christmas Eve. I noticed that Leslie wasn't home. Needless to say, even after I started hating her, I still couldn't shake off all those fantasies. Not even the romantic ones. After all, it's hard to break habits that you've clung to every day, for over a decade of your life."

But I was getting exasperated with the Fatman's build ups and waxing on. . .

"Alright already, so your youth had to be dragged from you, kicking and screaming, what happened that softened you towards Leslie?"

"Oh, right," he said. "Well, it was like this. She was out late one night. Which, since Christmas Eve used to drive me crazy, because

now I knew exactly what she was doing. Well, of course I don't know that for sure. She could have been at her 4-H meeting, for all I knew--"

"Wait a minute," I interrupted, "She was in Four-H?"

"Yeah, the Quilting Club. Almost every year, one of Leslie's quilts took a prize at the State Fair."

I made a face like biting into a raw blowfish.

"You're serious? One night she's out playing Lolita hooker, then alternate nights your Leslie is attending a sewing B, is that what you're telling me?"

The Fatman eyeballed me.

"You're a little old to be so shocked at people being multi-dimensional. Damn, no wonder Hollywood movies are so shallow," he said. "Anyway, one night Leslie was out late, and that made my insomnia all the worse. So when she came home, I decided, "What the hell, if everyone else was getting what I had fantasized about for the bargain price of ten bucks, surely I deserve a free peek, after being her sweetheart and neighbor for a decade and a half. So I got out my hunting binoculars that my dad had given me a couple of birthdays ago, ain't that ironic, and I spied on her, so I could watch her undress. And was I shocked when her daddy walked into her bedroom and made himself quite at home. Quite at home, if you receive my meaning."

I blanched. "You mean--her father?"

"I mean that he walked in without knocking and smiled at how she looked in her sheer nightie. Then he went to kiss her, the way a husband might kiss a reluctant wife, or a lover his reluctant sweetheart. You know, in a way that Leslie wasn't shocked when he tried it. Obviously this was an old routine for them, and while she brushed him away, you could tell that this scene had been played out many times before. Well, when she rebuffed him, he got a little pissed, and his face became distorted and he said something, although he didn't raise his voice. I guess he didn't want to wake his wife. Whatever he said, it changed Leslie's mind and she let him do it. Whatever the hell he wanted to--"

Before I could interrupt to babble something I don't even remember what, the Fatman continued, "But more to the point, she also did whatever he *insisted* she do. And it happened again. Another fucking brutal son of a bitch unzipping his pants."

"Oh Christ," I said. I think I'm going to be sick."

"Well, you know where the bathroom is," was all the Fatman said.

Of course I was not really sick. But my gosh, I was sad. What a dismal world it is, I thought to myself. The Fatman was staring at the angel on top of the tree, and lost in his own little world.

"My point is," he said, "Who knows how long that kind of thing had been going on between them. Years, I suspect, from how routine it was, the way they were together that night. Who knows how much it had--well, I do hate to use this word. But who knows how much it had fucked up my darling girl. My little Virgin Mary. How many years had she been hiding that pain while she and I played and romped and enjoyed this idyllic--but listen to me. I'm rambling. Dang, this has ended up being one depressing night. And this used to be one of my favorite nights of the year.

The Fatman got up and lumbered off. I knew that was my cue to take my leave, get the hell out of this depressing place, and go home.

Then I remembered that I had no home to return to.

I made a mental note to try and improve my life, come the New Year. Because I did not care for the debate that was going on in my mind--whether my life, or the Fatman's' life, was the more pathetic existence.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: AM I BEING REPLACED?

OK, here is what is odd.

At least it struck me as odd at the time, yes, oh so very odd: the Fatman planned to be AWOL during the second busiest shopping weekend of the year, for selling books. I have already told you a bit about the odd Thursday Thanksgiving, with my friend's poignant story of his first love, Leslie. And yes, the Fatman did take full advantage of that Friday after Thanksgiving, to sell books.

But then, for Saturday and Sunday, the Fattest Crimefighter in the World just disappears. Or, more specifically, informs me that "you don't need to bother showing your face for the next couple of days, because I won't be here, friend."

I don't know why it was so damned intriguing to me that at the end of Friday's brisk business day, the day after Thanksgiving, he says to me, "Oh, I won't be requiring your services this weekend."

Now normally, this should have meant next to nothing. After all, we were just Crimefighting partners, not roommates, not best friends, and what he chose to do with his weekends was not my business. But, dammit, I felt like it *was* my business! All I can speculate is that the Fatman's morbid yet benign curiosity about people in the world was catching, and yes, in the end I have to admit that it was nothing more than morbid curiosity on my part. I mean, what does an obese man with halitosis and B.O. and bad manners and no people skills do all weekend? Naturally, I became curious to know if he had any family. For some reason, I thought of him as being all alone in the world. By now I knew that he had no brothers or sisters, and his parents were deceased. And he didn't seem like the kind to hole up with a hooker for a long weekend.

Of course, I knew the real reason it peeved me that he told me not to bother coming around. Besides the fact that I looked forward to the leftovers and the creature comforts and the companionship, the truth is that, hell, I was really digging being a Crimefighter, and I couldn't wait to see what he had up his humongous sleeve each morning, to excite my life--because let me tell you, pal, ennui is the most horrible part of homelessness.

Then, a thought occurred to me, and started to eat at me like a skin disease: Was the Fatman conducting covert Crimefighting with some other partner on the side? The more I thought about it, the more likely it seemed. After all, I had flat out screwed up a few times in the past. That whole business of getting caught during the Butch Davis surveillance. For that matter, the whole Butch Davis business had backfired catastrophically. Maybe the Fatman was trying out different Crimefighting partners behind my back.

Jeezus, what the hell was he up to?!? I sensed something sub rosa going on this whole long holiday weekend.

"Remember, don't bother showing up, because I won't be here," the Fatman had said yet again, very late on Friday night. He was almost baiting me, taunting me with the silence and utter lack of explanation that followed.

AND NOW, OUR CHAPTER REALLY STARTS, BECAUSE THIS IS THE STORY OF HOW THE FATMAN CELEBRATES CHRISTMAS. . .

My first Christmas with the Fatman was one that I would remember for the rest of my life. In fact, I suppose you could say that it was *the* most memorable Christmas of my life. Except, of course, for the one two years later, when I--but wait, let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Have you ever bought one of those glossy, touchy-feely holiday magazines, the kind that contains a compendium of stories, poems, song lyrics, Christmas crafts, centerpieces, recipes, and nifty ideas for entertaining and holiday gift giving? They are really quite wonderful, in their own way, if you use them as a guideline for shaping your holidays--which of course requires a little time and effort BEYOND just DRIVING to the mall on December 24th, CURSING the traffic, FIGHTING your way into a parking space, then LOADING up the trunk of the car after LOADING up your VISA card, which is apparently everywhere you want to be, and a few places you don't.

"It always amazes me," my dear mom used to say, "People live for themselves all year, never letting it occur to them to buy a lovely gift for their neighbor, handmade in the Caribbean, while they are on their summer vacation at Club Med, and it never occurs to them to

spend a few nights in front of the boob tube crocheting, instead of munching nachos. Always, it's a dreaded last minute chore for them. Then these same fools sit around and moan that the holidays have become too commercial, and that Christmas has lost its meaning."

Hmph. My mom was great. I love that lady. Too bad I never told her while she was alive.

But the point that I wish to make here is that Christmas with the Fatman was rather like stepping inside the pages of one of those magazines. I have already related to you about how he started right in with preparations the day after Thanksgiving, decorating the towering tree and offering gingersnaps to strangers and having a big fat bookstore sale to promote the purchase of books as gifts.

(SIDEBAR: Actually, as it turns out, the Fatman made preparations all year round for Christmas, but he doesn't want me to give too many particulars here. Because he is sure, just sure, that this book, **THE FATTEST CRIMEFIGHTER IN THE WORLD**, is going to be a humongous hit, and that being the case, he wishes for me to withhold some of his Christmas tips for publication in **FATTEST CRIMEFIGHTER IN THE WORLD: THE HOLIDAY EDITION**, which he is positive, in his boundless arrogance, will also be a bestseller.)

But while the Fatman certainly was an arrogant man, there was no question in my mind, absolutely no question, that his heart was as big as his ego--and I'm not just talking about the pure physical reality of it, being obviously very enlarged because of his great weight. I'm talking about his kindness of soul, his profound generosity of spirit.

(Which, in fact, may explain any confusion you may be experiencing over my statement that he was unquestionably arrogant. How could such a fat, ugly, stained, unilaterally shunned and rejected man have such a huge ego, you ask? I think the answer was that his arrogance did not have to do with his appearance, the way so many people in Hollywood are vain about their looks. I think it was rather that he truly felt in possession of a superior soul. Morally speaking, he felt he was better than most of us. And that was simply because he really did believe himself to be a Crimefighter, who did not merely witness the atrocities of the world and the criminals who commit them, but the Fatman, he did something about the problem. I'm guessing that the more intuitive among you have already figured all of that out.)

But back to the mystery of what the Fatman does on Thanksgiving weekend. I woke up that Saturday morning, and the first thing that sprang to my mind was "Damn! No place to go today. And nothing to do. . ."

And not that it's a big deal, but no delicious morning cup of coffee, from the Fatman's own gourmet blend. I laid there in a foul mood, but the one good thing that came from my brooding was that at least I realized, in that moment, how completely I loathed being homeless, without the goal and grandeur of Crimefighting. I wasn't used to being "just homeless." Blue was restless, but I was in a bad mood and I ignored him.

Chain of thoughts. . .*"Not having anything to do this weekend. . .reminds me that. . .I am only a loser. . .without a roof over my head. . .who has been known to eat half a burrito out of the trash. . .I have to change my life. . .make some calls. . .tell people the truth about where I've been the last few months. . .the whole Butch Davis thing. . .sell the Butch Davis story treatment. . .on the condition that I get to direct and produce and star. . .get nominated for an Academy Award. . .one year from now, I'm walking down that Red Carpet. . .a Winner. . .a Player again! Yeah! Dig it!"*

"OHGNGHSHNAAGHHHAWUGH. . ."

Blue was groaning. Groaning as he took a dump, because we'd had Mexican yesterday, and that was the effect it always had on Blue. Doggie diarrhea.

The daydream bubble burst; suddenly the ocean air was redolent with dog pooh. Yes, I had lingered too long in my blanket, I had ignored Blue's whimperings, and poor Blue, reluctant to stray too far from his savior but having to go real bad, had taken a dump right behind the caisson I was leaning against. I tried not to breathe in as I scratched him behind the ears.

"Oh Blue. Sorry about that. I should know by now that you're not house trained. C'mon, let's get the hell out of here!"

As we trudged up the sand towards the Promenade, I found a half cup of coffee someone had left on a table. I sipped a drop. Tasty, just the way I liked it, with a touch of creme and sugar. With this jolt of caffeine to wake me up, the fear that had been gnawing at my sleep all night now seized me fully:

What if the Fatman was trying to let me down easy? What if the Butch Davis disaster had given the Fatman second thoughts about me? Had he found a replacement? If it came to that, damn, double damn, I wouldn't have anything to do all day, every day, but just roam the streets and bum money. Nobody from the old days was going to give me the time of day in Hollywood, not with me the way I looked at this moment. And by that I don't just mean my clothes or my shaggy hair, or my muscle tone, which had gone slack and saggy. I mean the look in my eyes. . .the look in my eyes. . .nobody was allowed into the rarefied world of Players if they looked this terrified and trodden.

See, here's the secret of being a Player:

You gotta look like you don't want it. Casual. Yet cocky. Like it's a noblesse oblige chore to produce and rake in the accolades. Because the more you look like you want it, and the more frantic you come across, the more it just slips away. . .farther and farther from your grasp.

DAMN!

Why the fuck wouldn't the Fatman tell me what he was doing this weekend? The Fatman told me everything. He had told me about Toby W. Smith, he hadn't told anybody else that. He had shared with me the Ultra-Secret Superhero Handshake.

Now, out of the blue, he orders me not to show up? For days?

That's it. He was either dumping the whole Crimefighting thing--or more humiliating still, he was replacing me.

But replacing me with who? Had he slipped, and mentioned somebody else? I racked my memory.

"Blue, time to go spy on the Fatman. We'll just see who he's lined up to replace me. Yepper, we're going to settle this once and for all."

We both quickened our pace.

I was at the bookstore in a matter of minutes. The CLOSED sign was there on the front door. I still couldn't believe it. The Promenade was thronged with holiday shoppers on this, the second busiest shopping weekend of the year, and folks were peeking in the bookstore window, hammering on the glass, obviously shocked that this store, which never closed, was locked and barred. I couldn't believe it either.

Blue and I trotted quickly down the alley, then through the back street that led to the Fatman's little house.

"Keep a low profile, Blue," I whispered, and we ninjaed through his backyard. The shades were drawn, but I found a slit to peek in:

There he was, the Fatman, filling up a big part of his little living room, and he was pacing, pacing, pacing agitatedly. What the hell was he waiting for, I wondered? Who the hell, and why?

Then, a vehicle drives up to the front of the house. It is a run-down van with no markings, and a man, also looking run-down, gets out. I eyed him up and down. Was this my replacement, I wondered? The guy goes around to the back of the van and retrieves a big box, then carries it to the Fatman's front door and knocks. The Fatman throws open the door and begins berating the guy and pointing at his watch. I am peeking through the back window, and I can't hear what the Fatman is saying, but obviously he's yelling at the guy about being late with the delivery. *What the hell is in that box?*

The berated delivery guy leaves. The Fatman, who is suddenly beaming, hurries the box into the bedroom, dammit, I can't see, I run through the flower bed to the bedroom window, but I can't see, dammit! What is in that box? Damn! Blue is at my feet, looking up eagerly, sensing the excitement. I go back to the living room window, which is the only vantage point I have, and I wait. Minutes tick by, and finally the Fatman emerges from the bedroom again.

I have to pinch myself to not guffaw out loud with delight.

Now I know what the Fatman does on Thanksgiving weekend, when the bookstore is closed.

He plays Santa Claus.

I smile and shake my head. That dear, dear man.

My next course of action, you can probably guess. I am not going to miss this, no way, and so in thirty seconds I have raced to the bookstore, Blue bounding behind, and I let myself in to get my camera. (Of course I know how to get into the locked bookstore by now.) I grab my video bag and leave Blue in the store--he can't go where I'm going. I then race to the Promenade corner where the taxis wait, I jump in one,

and I instruct the driver to head towards the Fatman's house, and we wait a discreet distance away.

Then, right on cue, the Fatman's big black hired car pulls up in his driveway, and HUZDAH, Santa Claus emerges from the Fatman's house! I instruct the taxi driver to follow at a covert distance. I am tickled, because I have a pretty good idea exactly where we are going.

The Santa Monica Mall.

I am right, and we are there in a couple of minutes. You could walk it from the bookstore, if you weren't morbidly obese. The hired car stops, the Fatman gets out, and the rest is every bit as wonderful as you can probably imagine.

For me, it was a pure delight. Another pure emotion. Yet another in a series of PURE emotions, both good and bad, that I have felt since, and only since, living on the streets. And I must say, I had not been feeling pure emotions before that. Always, back when I was a Player, sentiments, feelings, emotions--they were always convoluted and polluted.

Be that as it may, I follow the Fatman in, and already I'm taping. Everybody is staring at him. But here's the thing. They were staring at him with delight, clapping and pointing in glee.

In a heartbeat, it was so very apparent why he did this. . .for a few shining moments during the long lonely year, the Fatman was a hero! He was beautiful, he was the center of attention, but in a great way. For one glowing season of love, little kids pointed at him with admiration and delight, instead of mockery and horror.

To continue: because the mall was crowded with holiday shoppers, it was easy for me to blend in and get close to the festooned North Pole, where the Fatman was holding court in his bigass white chair, the arms and legs wrapped with red velvet ribbon, to make it look like candy canes.

I didn't know it at the time, but as I panned my camera, and trained the lens in various directions, beyond the Fatman was a furniture store with a large mirror in the window, and I didn't know it until much later when I viewed the tape, but I had actually been taping my own reaction to all this. How happy I was that day. . .

In the future, when the whole Crimefighting partnership took a most bizarre turn--one that I never, ever would have anticipated--I would play back that tape and study my own reaction in the mirror, as I

watched the Fatman playing Santa Claus. Sometimes I shed a tear. That tape brought back a part of my childhood that I thought I'd lost forever.

I guess it could best be described as Absolute Delight and Astonishment at the potential people have to surprise you, in the most Wonderful Ways.

Because today, the Fatman was Fat in a *different* way. Fat with love, as he saw the eyes of the children light up. Fat with presents, as he pulled them from a bottomless red velvet bag. Fat with laughter, as he made impatient children, who had been crying in line only minutes before, giggle in anticipation of Christmas. Fat with pride, as his girth served that fabulous fantasy of Kris Kringle. Fat with all the languages he knew, as he astonished children, parents, and myself with Spanish and French and Italian, German and Flemish and Farci, even Vietnamese and Mandarin. Was all this straight out of "Miracle on 34th Street" or what?

This was a good day for me and the Fatman. Yes, it was.

Until, of course, Mall Security ambushed me, wrestled me to the floor, and accused me of being a pedophile. I was, after all, taping little girls sitting on Santa's lap. In the whirlwind of excitement that morning, I had forgotten how much I looked exactly like the disgusting homeless derelict that I was. Miraculously, the Fatman did not see any of this, and did not find out that I was taping him.

I just thank God that the security company arresting me was the same one that hired Good Ol' Boy Toby, my rent-a-cop buddy from the Butch Davis incident. So I made a couple of calls, as I cooled my heels in the mall security office. Thanks to Toby, I walked, since they couldn't prove anything. A week later, Toby would slip me back my video of the Fatman playing Santa, which Toby stole when making a casual visit to some friends in that same mall security office, on the pretext of delivering a holiday fruitcake.

It is good to know powerful people, in a town called Hollywood.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: THE PAPA BEARS

And so now we know what the Fatman does in secret, every Thanksgiving weekend. But more exciting than that, to my way of thinking, and certainly more a part of Crimefighting, was the wreaking of revenge on the Seducer-slash-Doghater.

Finally, the big night arrived. The Father-Daughter Reunion. Oh, where to start? Where to start?

With the shock of the girls first seeing tapes of themselves having sex with the Seducer? With the rage of the Fathers? With the Fattest Crimefighter in the World, and his grand plan for revenge?

Or how about starting with. . .the Finger Food!

Yes, you guessed it. Now I had started this saga of the Doghater with high drama, focusing right in on the rage and cruelty and hunger for revenge. But when the Fatman reviewed my draft, he decided that, darn it, given all the effort he had put into creating a pleasant "party" atmosphere, (it was, after all, among other things, a moving Father-Daughter reunion), well, the Fatman wanted me to include his favorite recipes here for you, just in case you ever decide to stage a Father-Daughter reunion. Or any other soirée that demands just the right tempting and tantalizing finger foods.

The Fatman knew that tasty appetizers always take the edge off of an emotional confrontation, providing a pleasant palletary distraction and a topic for small talk. At the very least, they make the ordeal more bearable, providing you with some pleasant memories of the evening, to offset the sordid ones.

Since there were going to be maybe as many as fifty people there, the Fatman was originally going to have the whole thing catered. But then, after he scheduled the caterers and set it all up, he went ahead and took the loss on the caterer's deposit, and decided to do all of the cooking and preparations of the finger foods himself. You see, the Fatman decided that he wanted as few strangers as possible around, given the intimate emotional vignettes that were about to transpire. (I knew that the Fatman was secretly getting off on this--not in a salacious

way, of course, but since he was devoid of any kind of life of his own, these human dramas always titillated him.)

First, there would be the hope and enthusiasm provoked by the scam under which the Fatman had lured the girls here: vis-a-vis, "The Haunted Bookstore" TV series. (Which the Fatman felt bad about, but he figured it was the only surefire bait.) Then, their outrage and humiliation, as they learned that their trusting lust for the Seducer had been sold for big profits on the World Wide Web. And sandwiched in between all of this, what the Fatman was really hoping for. . .

--PARTLY because he just loved to watch this kind of maudlin stuff.

--And PARTLY because he needed the newly formed Father-Daughter alliance to jolly his revenge plot along. What the Fatman was hoping was that these outraged Fathers and estranged Daughters would fall into each other's arms, weeping at this unexpected but secretly longed for family reunion. There could be no question, if it worked, that it would be really splendid and gratifying to watch, and it would justify all of the Fatman's highly questionable methods and manipulative machinations.

I do have to say that the Fatman's ways and wiles were rubbing off on me. He had turned me into a voyeur of the visceral. I was looking forward to it. I couldn't wait for it all to come down.

I was also looking forward to the canapés, which were such a big hit that we have decided to include some of these tasty recipes here in this chapter, for you to recreate at home. Starting with the first appetizer that the Fatman whipped out of his oven, just seconds before the irate fathers burst into the bookstore. RECIPE NUMBER ONE:

DANDY CRAB DABS

one 12 ounce can crab meat, or fresh crab if you

prefer

1/3 cup fine soft bread crumbs

2 tablespoon dry sherry

1 teaspoon chopped chives

1 teaspoon dry mustard

10 slices bacon cut into thirds

a pinch salt

Drain canned crab meat, or, if fresh, remove any shell or cartilage. Combine all ingredients except bacon, chill 30 minutes.

Shape crab mix into thirty small rolls, wrap bacon around crab rolls, and secure with toothpicks. Broil the Crab Dabs for 8-10 minutes, roll them over, and tan them for another 4-5.

Tasty, tasty!!!! And I have to say, even in the middle of the cacophonous babble that ensued during the first five minutes of the Father-Daughter reunion, amidst it all, you could still hear rave reviews for the Crab Dabs.

Now this is just one of a whole bunch of appetizers that the Fatman fussed with that afternoon, but more on that later, because what you really want to hear about next is:

The big banner that the Fatman had printed up at great expense. It read:

FATHER-DAUGHTER NIGHT:
REUNITING FAMILIES THROUGH VENGEANCE!

I remember this conversation, earlier that afternoon. While hanging the banner for the Fatman, I squinted at it.

"Interesting choice. I'd have thought you'd have said 'Justice,' instead of 'Vengeance.' "

"No," said the Fatman, as he removed Saran wrap from the first of the cold canapés that we don't have time to give recipes for. "You see my friend, justice is what *society* does, to put things right. Vengeance is what must be wreaked to make it right again in the *individual* victim's soul. It's more personal. More cathartic."

I eyed the Fatman.

"That sounds bloodthirsty. A touch sadistic. Like enjoying the criminal's punishment and suffering is part of the revenge?"

"Of course it is. The Draconian approach to punishing wrongdoers is underrated. Perhaps it's time for a return to 'Vengeance is Mine, Sayeth the Lord,' and all that."

"Yeah, well then maybe it's God's job, not ours."

"Oh, believe me, friend. Once you start letting vengeance have its head with evildoers, there's plenty to go around. Enough for the Lord, and for all of us good guys to savor. Kinda like the loaves and the fishes."

"What?" I said. I was losing him, in my ignorance. "Is that a reference to the appetizers? Say, those look good, what kind of fish are they?" I asked, tasting the aforementioned Crab Dabs.

"God help us all," said the Fatman, rolling his eyes at me, as we started to set out the booze. Now, the Fatman was not a big advocate of alcohol consumption, but neither was he a puritan. And I can say to his credit that he was savvy enough about human nature to understand that this was a night where hooch could do a job uniquely suited to its nature--something which neither rhetoric nor non-alcoholic beverages alone could jolly along: in this case booze would, all at the same time, serve as both relaxant and stimulant. It would relax those fathers nervous about seeing their daughters for the first time in a long time, after an uncomfortable feeling of estrangement, because some of these girls were runaways or something like that. Yet the booze would also help to appropriately enrage the collective paternity when, after an hour or so of debriefing, they were ready to take matters into their own hands RE: The Seducer.

And so, alcohol was served on heirloom silver trays, out of 25 percent Czech leaded crystal. But not to the underaged daughters, of course.

(Note to the Reader-slash-Voyeur. There was one very important issue that the Fatman was waffling about, right up to the last minute. Should I, the Homeless Dude, be taping this whole evening? This evening, with its veritable salad bar of emotions displayed. Should it be made available for public consumption on the web? As a part of a great wrong righted, of course. Of families finding their way back to each other?

The Fatman and I both went back and forth on it all afternoon, and the Fatman, who was ultimately the Crimefighter in Charge, decided that no, it would *not* be appropriate to tape this highly charged and intimate evening.

The Fatman changed his mind once again though, deciding just minutes before the first ambushees arrived that he *did* want to tape it after all. This forced me to scramble to get my camera and everything set up, but we agreed that we would not continue to tape the evening, unless all parties present concurred to that plan. God knows, these girls had already been video victims enough for one adolescence.

On the other hand, the poor girls had already been exposed on the web in a sordid and unflattering fashion, so perhaps this grand launch of the revenge plot to bring down The Seducer would be

cathartic for them in the long run. Happily, after taking a vote later that evening, they all agreed to let us air it on a special site, www.vengeanceismine.com. (Except for there was one catch: people cruising to the site would have to pay to watch it or download it, and the chicks wanted a pretty healthy bite of all the money we got from said downloads. Hey. They were learning. And good for them. They should get some tangible profit out of this, after all the hell they'd gone through.)

Oh--did I mention that the Fatman dressed for this affair? I had on clean but functional working clothes, but the Fatman wowed me by emerging from his workroom in a suit. A very nice suit. That it was custom tailored goes without saying; nobody manufactured a suit off-the-rack large enough for the Fatman, and indeed it was a vast, rippling affair, consuming yards and yards of blue serge. But in his own gargantuan way, he looked fine. Considerably less scary than he did when wearing his Mr. Bubble t-shirt and over-alls, for example. Tonight, he was positively dapper.

But on with the show:

As the Fatman had planned, the daughters arrived first, tumbling in excitedly at 8:00ish, thinking this was an audition and burbling their excitement to each other, whilst also throwing catty glares and sizing up the competition and checking their lip gloss in tiny pink plastic mirrors that they whipped out of their, you guessed it, big baggy bulky ugly purses of macramé and denim, vinyl and tie-dye, fake fur and faux leather.

MEANWHILE---The Fatman didn't want the Fathers to get there until nine p.m., after all the girls had arrived and settled in. Now, the Fatman knew full well that the Fathers would be so enraged when they got the tapes, that no way would they agree to wait till nine p.m. on the appointed date to rendezvous at the bookstore. Most of them probably suspected that the sleaze who made the XXX-rated tapes was the same person who had set this whole evening up, with plans to blackmail or extort the Fathers or whatever. Their rage would have sent them descending on the bookstore immediately upon receipt of the tapes, some waving guns no doubt, had the Fatman been so foolish as

to give them the bookstore's address at the same time that he invited them to this soirée.

(The Fatman had to play this very carefully, oh yes he did: if the ugly shapeless purses didn't beat him to death, the angry Papa Bears would.)

So the Fatman did not give the Fathers this last crucial piece of information until one hour before they were all supposed to be here. This part was complex, logistically. You see, since some of these Fathers were from out of town, and were flying in from other cities and states, it was not like the Fatman could call these guys up at home, at the last minute. So instead, he included with the videotapes only the fact that he would meet them somewhere on the Promenade in Santa Monica, a suburb of Los Angeles, on this date, at an address to be revealed at the last minute, AND ALSO the Fatman included a phone number which they should call after 8:30 on the appointed night. When they called, they received a message the Fatman had prerecorded with the bookstore's address on it. Complicated plot, yes, but it was the only logical way to keep those irate Fathers at bay. And ourselves alive, for chrissake.

Staggering the time when the Daughters and the Fathers arrived was something that the Fatman had thought out carefully. You see, the Fatman was afraid that if the daughters saw their fathers right off, the girls might just bolt. We had learned that many of these girls were completely out of touch with their fathers, and had left home with bad blood between them. Some were not on speaking terms; most were runaways. Tragic. Tragic. Under the circumstances, the Fatman thought it best to not just throw them all together, Daughters and Fathers, not right away.

No, better to lure the girls in first, with the promise of the "screening of test rushes" from the Haunted Bookstore TV show. Sadly, this highly dishonest approach was the only approach that the Fatman thought would work for sure. So this was the Fatman's added ruse: that the girls supposedly auditioning would also get to vote on which, of all the males auditioning for the lead part of bookstore owner, was the sexiest, and had the most audience appeal.

Now, no such tape existed, of course, but this pretext would at least get the girls all sitting down and about as shut up as teenage girls are capable of getting, armed with their diet soft drinks and popped corn served in little bags and tubs, just like the kind you get in the theater. (The Fatman had even gone to the bother of getting some bags

and tubs from the multiplex down the street, purchasing them from the pimply-faced boy behind the counter, who said cruel things to his buddies about the Fatman's astonishing girth, as the Fatman was walking away. It always amazed the Fatman, that people seemed to assume his being fat, also made him deaf.) Anyway, thus fortified, the girls would then proceed to watch the evening's entertainment. But it would not turn out to be audition tapes of young male hunk leads. Rather, what they would see playing on the widescreen TV before them was the X-rated tapes, featuring these nubile Lolitas as reluctant stars on the World Wide Web.

Another touch the Fatman added: the X-rated tapes were preceded by that vintage "singing hot dog" bit that advertises snacks available in the lobby. You know the one, where the candy and popcorn and beverages all sing and dance in a rumba line, urging you to munch on, munch on. This bit was included merely because it appealed to the Fatman's love of the quirky, a personal peccadillo from which he could not escape, even on a night as sordid and somber as this one. The snack jingle was then followed by a cartoon that the Fatman had arranged for, to sort of get the girls lulled into a happy place. Put them off guard, so to speak. So, don'cha know, the first thing the girls thought, as they watched the vintage Betty Boop cartoon, was *"Hey, this is not ordinary popcorn I'm tasting! This is really delicious! I want to get me some more of this! Say, can I have the recipe?"*

Sure as shootin', you can:

CARAMEL CORN

6-7 quarts popped corn (air popped works best)

Then, boil for 5 minutes the following ingredients:

2 cups brown sugar
2 sticks margarine
1/2 cup light corn syrup
1 teaspoon salt

Stir the mixture constantly, and after it boils, add:

1 teaspoon vanilla
1 teaspoon soda

Pour syrup over popped corn. Mix well in large greased pan, such as a turkey roaster. Bake at 250 degrees for one hour. Stir every fifteen minutes. Cool and store in plastic bag or tin can. Keeps well.

Or for those of you who like a zestier taste to your popcorn:

MEXICAN POPCORN

The Fatman had a big bowl of this next to the caramel corn, because he is a creature of excess. He loves to have plenty of everything, and lots of variety. Gotta love him.

1/3 cup grated Parmesan cheese and or cheddar cheese
3/4 teaspoon paprika
1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper, or to taste
1/2 teaspoon ground cumin

10 cups popped corn

Melt butter in a small saucepan on top of the stove, or in a glass measure in the microwave oven. Remove from heat, add Parmesan cheese, paprika, cayenne, and cumin; mix well. Pour cheese mixture over popped corn, toss to coat well.

But enough with the recipes. No more cartoons, my friends. Betty Boop is a memory; it is now time for our feature presentation.

The tape started to roll. . .the girls were watching, breathless. .

And let me make this perfectly clear. These were not the softly sexy AUDITION videos, that the girls knew full well they had sanctioned the Seducer to tape. These were the secretly taped videos of the girls in bed with the Seducer. Very wild, explicit sex it was, in each and every case, with each girl obviously anxious to impress her handsome new "agent-boyfriend." Her agent, who claimed to have all the powerful connections needed to snare her a part on that hot new series now in pre-production, "Baywatch Kuwait," or whatever

mythical piece of tripe the Seducer had concocted, to get the hopeful little doe-of-the-day into the sack.

The Fatman had orchestrated it brilliantly. Needless to say, the screening of these lurid sex videos created no end of hysteria and rage; there was such a sense of group betrayal that when all the girls' crazed voices joined together, it sounded like the audio version of Michelangelo's Last Judgment, painted on the side of the Sistene Chapel, with all those demonic, homunculean, terrified, bitter, angry little creatures screaming, as they hurtled down to the darkest regions of Hell itself.

You see. . .the cool, calm turning of the human mind towards the plotting of revenge. . .Ah, vengeance!. . .Virtuous, volcanic, vindictive, voluptuous Vengeance, that most lusciously tempting of all the goddesses. . .*that* kind of cold calculating was not yet within the ken of these silly-ass little teen nymphets.

They had not yet learned that the only truly effective or artful response to betrayal profundis is best captured in the subtle but deadly non-verbals of The Godfather. That smallest of gestures, the glance or inflection, wink or nod that sends a chill down the viewer's spine, because he knows that everyone can be gotten to. And it is not the *Horseman* who is going to be Headless--not in this fairy tale from hell.

No, they did not quite grasp that, these little girls.

They were just, like, so, like, pissed, dude.

But the revenge proper--that would be left to the Fathers.

The Fatman had expected the girls' hysteria. He had caused it, and he knew it. The Fatman let them yell and scream and burst into tears and jump out of their seats and threaten to call the cops and so forth. Finally, when I guess they had just run out of steam, or the sugar buzz from the caramel corn had worn off, or whatever--

--That is when The Fattest Crimefighter in the World calmly invited the young ladies to stand around his computer, so they could discover that *not only* had the Seducer videotaped each and every one of them in bed with him; moreover, *their escapades had been posted for purchase on the World Wide Web*. And sales were very brisk, thankyou for asking.

Well. When the girls saw just how brisk sales of their tapes were, oh, there was such a hue and cry, I thought the ceiling would fall

in. Blue was right in the thick of it, don't you know; he sensed the general alarm, and he was baying and barking and running around in circles as the girls went banshee on us. The hysteria was something to see; it was as though a sort of group seizure was going on, the kind of thing you see in documentaries about primitive tribes who chew the leaves of certain peculiar plants.

But once again, the Fatman just leaned back in his bigass chair, the very picture of calm, and let their anger play out. After a few minutes, the Fatman announced that if they would calm down, he would unveil to them his plan for Divine Retribution.

Oh dear.

It was about this time that the Fathers showed up.

As if to make it even more climactic, they all arrived at once.

All the shades were drawn, so that the men could not see into the store, and a large sign on the front door directed them to go around back. Of course, the enraged Fathers tried that door, and found it locked and bolted. There was another note on the back door, which stated that the Fathers would not be allowed in, until all the Fathers had arrived. By then, of course, the men had had time to talk amongst themselves. They had their own communal head of steam going, and when I went outside, per the Fatman's instructions--nay, orders--to tell them that they would be allowed inside soon, they had to hold each other back, to keep from killing me.

If you want to know the truth, it was pretty damned scary.

They had gotten it into their heads that I had something to do with making the sex videos! One crazed man even pulled a gun, and for a split second, I imagined that this was how it would all end for me. Here, in this dirty alley behind the bookstore.

In hindsight, the Fatman and I both agreed that his ordering me out there, all by myself, was a rare lapse in the Fatman's usually sharp judgment, in his knack for troubleshooting. But the Fatman, who was watching from inside, frantically sent one of the smarter girls out to cover my ass, and she quickly persuaded the Fathers that I was one of the good guys. She had already heard just enough of the Fattest Crimefighter in the World's plan to realize that what happened from here on out was *pure revenge*. It was actually going to be gratifying. Fun, even. The grumbling Fathers agreed to calm down, at least long enough to hear the Fatman out.

Well! As soon as the daddies were ushered in the back door, all ire against the Fatman was forgotten, as each father saw his Prodigal Daughter and made his way through the crush of people to embrace her. Whatever arguments or differences had estranged each parent from each child in the room. . .all of that was swept away, and replaced by hugs, kisses, tears, forgiveness, and heartfelt invitations to please, please, please come home.

And the Fatman, who wrought it all, he just stood in the middle of the display, bathing in it, basking. It was exactly how the Fatman had envisioned it would be. Wonderful. So warm and wonderful.

That joy part lasted about five minutes.

Then, it came flooding back. The collective rage and righteous indignation, all of it directed against the Seducer. Everybody in the room suddenly had no quarrel with or antipathy against anyone else in the room. There was just this unspoken alliance bonding them all together, a united yen to see something horrific happen to this man who had so exploited these underage darlings.

UNDERAGE, of course, being the key word.

The Fatman then pounded a gavel on his desk. Then he announced that, since there was a lot of business to attend to, would everybody please grab a chair. He had rented a couple of dozen from one of those party supply places, and placed them in a big circle, because the Fatman felt that sitting in a circle was generally more amicable than sitting in rows.

He then produced yet another round of hors d'oeuvres, since this roller coaster of emotions that everybody had been riding for the last hour had built up in them quite an appetite, and everybody was suddenly very hungry. Also, they were reluctant to hurt the Fatman's feelings by turning down his hospitality, even though a lot of folks had more burning issues than finger foods on their minds.

There were lots of tasty appetizers, but here's the Fatman's personal favorite:

PORK SATE

1/2 lb. boneless pork loin, sliced to 1/8 in. by 2 in. pieces

1/4 cup oil
3 cloves garlic, peeled, and mashed into a paste
1/2 teaspoon ground cumin
1 teaspoon coriander seeds, toasted and ground to powder
1 and 1/2 teaspoon paprika
1/4 teaspoon ground hot pepper
2 to 3 tablespoons "nam pla"
2 pieces cilantro roots, washed, chopped, and pounded
1 tablespoon palm sugar
1/2 can (14 oz.) coconut milk for basting

Also Bamboo skewers, soak in water 2 hours or overnight

Place cut up pork in a bowl. Add all the ingredients except coconut milk. (Don't add the skewers, of course.) Mix well to blend all the spices. Marinate overnight, so the marinade will penetrate the pork.

String pork on the bamboo skewers.
Grill until pork is done, around 2-3 minutes on each side.
Serve with Peanut Sauce. Which is my favorite part of it:

THE PEANUT SAUCE

2 tablespoons oil
2 cloves garlic, peeled and mashed into a paste
1 shallot, peeled and finely diced
1 cup smooth peanut butter
1 teaspoon "nam pla"
1 tablespoon palm sugar
1/4 teaspoon ground hot pepper
1/2 cup ground peanuts
(14 oz.) coconut milk
1 and 1/2 tablespoon paprika

In a saucepan, add oil, garlic and shallot; stir-fry for two minutes. Add peanut butter, nam pla, palm sugar, and hot pepper. Cook on low heat for 2 minutes. Stir frequently to avoid sticking.

Add ground peanuts, coconut milk, and paprika. Mix well to blend paprika. Cook until oil floats on top.

Serve with Pork Sate. YUMBO!!!!

F.Y.I. "Nam Pla" is a Thailand Fish Sauce prepared from fresh anchovies and salt, which are layered in wooden barrels and left to ferment. It is available from Oriental food stores. It doesn't taste nearly as nasty as it sounds, when prepared properly in Pork Sate.

The Fatman usually enjoys his Pork Sate with a light Oriental cucumber salad. Yeah, like he cares about calories.

But enough munching, we have revenge to wreak. Time to move on, to the Fatman's personal vision of how, if we all pulled together, we could arrange for the Seducer to take it up the butt for the next, oh, two-to-five years, at least. Maybe ten-to-twenty. Maybe longer.

The Fatman stood up there in front of everybody, and I stared at the planetesque silhouette that his form made against the accidental back lighting. I had not thought about it, up until this moment, so caught up had I been in first, the scheming, and then, the emotions. But it was only in this instant that I realized how agonizingly difficult this must have been for the Fatman--opening himself up to intense scrutiny, and making himself the center of attention, as he let strangers stare and study and surmise whether or not they should follow his lead. The Fatman cleared his throat nervously.

"Uh, friends, fathers, and victims. First, I would like to thank you all for showing up here tonight, because I realize that this is the culmination of a very difficult ordeal. An extremely humiliating and painful tribulation, indeed. I would also like to apologize profoundly, for luring you young ladies here under false pretenses. But ladies, I felt that if you were to learn of how you had been exploited by that nefarious ne'er-do-well in any other way than this, you surely would have descended upon him in that fleabag studio of his, collectively scratched his eyes out, and then thrust your nail files through his heart--an act of retaliation which would surely come back to haunt you, although certainly such a bloody end is no less than this spawn of hell deserves. To use the vernacular, you probably would have cut his dick off, and then argued amongst yourselves about which of you got to dangle it from your rearview mirror."

Applause and chuckles from the group, although you could tell that some of the girls were having trouble understanding what the Fatman was saying. He smiled modestly, waited for the applause to die down, then pressed on.

"Also, I must apologize for upsetting the Fathers so very much. But I reasoned that, in the final analysis, it was better that you know the truth about your daughters being so grossly exploited, rather than leaving you wondering, during those deep dark nights, what was happening to your little girls. As alarming as those tapes are to watch, I believe you'll agree that the thought of *not* knowing about them is far more upsetting."

Nods from the Fathers, as they looked at each other and nodded agreement.

"So you understand why I did, what I did? Why I concocted this whole charade? You forgive me, then?"

(You could tell that this was really important to the Fatman, by the way. Everyone's approval, I mean.) The Fatman paced.

"Seriously, ladies, any premature confrontations with this scumbag would have only served to warn him that his jig was up in Hollywood, and he would simply move on to some other thriving metropolis, and he would no doubt be running the same racket on some other trusting young ladies, within a week's time. Your en masse assault would have accomplished nothing. In fact, it would do more harm than good."

The Fatman paused a moment, and saw the girls all shrugging and agreeing. Then he looked the Fathers in the eye, and addressed them.

"As for the Papa Bears in the room. Well, I'm afraid I have never experienced the joys of paternity myself, but I think I can predict your reactions to the tape accurately enough to say that if I'd told you who this villain was, and where he was, the Seducer would surely be dead by now, and by one of your own hands. *You* would become the hunted man, leaving some family without a father, thus perpetrating the damage done by the man whose downfall is the focus of tonight's meeting."

Now it was the Fathers in the audience who nodded, looking at each other as they did. This situation they were in right now, the whole damn evening, it was weird, with its hors d'oeuvres and its calm, calculated vengeance--but it felt good. It felt right.

The Fatman smiled, knowing he had them all in his big wide deep pocket.

"Thankyou for your understanding and cooperation. By now, the more astute of you have figured out that with nothing more than a few rotations of the noble wheels of justice, we can see to it that this Seducer is put into prison, where, with his youth and dapper appearance and buff physique, he will enjoy endless hours of carnal knowledge. Moreover, he will be able to appreciate it, from, shall we say, the feminine point of view, a perspective he has been denied up to this point."

OK, now when the Fatman said this, I must tell you, there was a split in the reaction from the group. The girls all looked mystified, because, truth to tell, the Fatman was talking over their liberally moussed heads. But the Fathers, oh, they gave themselves over to these slow, wicked laughs, that started out in their throats, low and guttural, and then eased out as baritone chuckles, each man's guffaw having an evil overtone to it. Some of the girls pulled at their daddy's sleeve, and I overheard one father whisper to his little darling: "Honey, we throw him in prison and let him take it up the ass for a couple of years, and see how *he* likes it, that's what the big man is suggesting."

She responded with a bizarre pubescent giggle, which sounded like someone trying to dislodge a chicken bone caught in their throat, and that laugh was to punctuate the rest of the evening, getting on all of our nerves.

Then, after passing around refills on the refreshments, the Fatman had a surprise in store for us. Nothing less than a guest speaker. In the middle of all this madness, the Fatman had arranged for a guest speaker! I hadn't even known anything about it.

Haven't mentioned myself, by the way. I was sitting in the middle of it all, taping everything, but with their permission this time, and I was happy not to be hiding, for a change. The camera was on a tripod, so I was helping myself to a bit of baked brie, topped with slivered almonds and drizzled with the most lovely orange liqueur. It was Grand Marnier--only the best for the Fatman!--and then, after drizzling the almond-lanced-brie with the Grand Marnier, the Fatman just popped it in the oven for about ten minutes, until it got all melty and goozly. Then, he just served it up with French bread slivers. Oh, and needless to say, Blue was in the middle of everything, scarfing up all the dropped bits and bites.

The Guest Speaker, it turns out, was a gentleman named Thaddeus Washington. He was of the Negro persuasion, wore a very colorful suit and tie, was articulate from the get-go, and generally came across as most non-threatening, his six-foot-six, three hundred pound physique notwithstanding.

It seems that Thaddeus had once been incarcerated in one of our grimmer local prisons, a reservation secured by a long history of gang involvement and drug trafficking. It would further seem that Mr. Washington had, one day, while working in the prison laundry, found GOD, had been born again in a heartbeat, no less, in that moment when the steam from the laundry clouded up on the window to create the unmistakable image of the Virgin Mary weeping. A half dozen other prisoners, of mixed ethnicity, gathered 'round the window to see what the buzz was about, collectively fell to their knees, and all agreed that yes, this was a bonafide miracle, a vision, a sign.

When the guard noticed that the pace of work had halted, and saw the cause of the disruption, he quickly grabbed a fingertip towel from the pile, and he started to wipe the image of the Virgin from the window. Thaddeus quickly yanked the towel from the guard's hands, not wanting the guard to risk eternal damnation for destroying a sign from GOD. . .and what do you think Thaddeus saw, my friends, when that shred of dirty towel was held up to the dim sunlight that filtered through the steamy window? It looked exactly like--**HOLD ONTO YOUR PRISON STRIPES HERE--THAT TOWEL LOOKED EXACTLY LIKE THE SHROUD OF TURIN.** Yes, if you stared and concentrated and had faith, you could see the face of Jesus Christ, complete with crown of thorns, embedded in that fingertip towel! **SAINTS BE PRAISED!**

On that day, Thaddeus Washington truly did find God. He experienced a change of heart, and it was immediately evidenced in everything he said and did henceforth; he truly was a changed man. Eventually, even the cynical prison officials were convinced.

Thaddeus began attending church services, read the Bible voraciously, and took all the classes they offered in prison, so that he might better himself and prepare for life on the outside. When he walked away from those prison bars, he was a new man, working for God, and turning young people away from gang life.

But you know what? Thaddeus shared that with us only by way of an introduction; he wanted us to have a bit of background about

who and what he was. But he had not been invited here tonight to proselytize, preach, or otherwise convert the heathens.

No, he was not here to tell this odd and angry group how to FIND GOD. Most of them had already done that, in some fashion or another.

No, these folks were interested in FINDING THE DEVIL. In Dancing with the Devil. . .

And even though Thaddeus had left his dark days behind, he did not mind talking about his prison years.

(Oh no, dear listener, in case your mind is racing ahead, and you're thinking that the Fatman had hired Thaddeus to go do something dastardly to the Seducer, you're wrong.) Thaddeus was just here to give a little talk, the topic of which, was, to use his own silky bari-tones:

THE SEXUAL ROLES OF NEW INMATES IN INCARCERATION,
TO WIT:
MALE-FEMALE ROLE-PLAYING,
OR, TO USE THE BERNACULAR:
WHAT IT BE LIKE TO BE SOMEBUDDY'S BITCH

Uhm. I don't think you need to hear my recreation of that speech, just use your imagination. Thaddeus later told me that the speech was nicknamed "Poking in the Pokey," by guys in the know. Thaddeus actually gives a toned-down version of that same talk when he addresses high school students, as part of a "scared straight" program. For a copy of T's presentation, you can go to our website and see if the Feds have left any shred of it up, but other than that, well. . .let's just say that Thaddeus pretty much scared the boogers out of us with his stories of boyfriend-girlfriend relationships in all-male prisons, parsing a lexicon that was new to all of us, even for me and the girls who thought they were street savvy. As Thaddeus explicated about the grisly, graphic specifics, the men in the audience winced and made faces like they'd just bit into a pickled rat. And the girlie-girls squealed such as only girlie-girls can.

By the time he was done with his speech, both the girls and their Fathers were convinced that calm, cool, calculated vengeance was unquestionably the best choice; i.e., making sure that the Seducer ended up behind bars. The law was on our side; let it take its course.

Yes, that little talk had the exact effect on the group that the Fatman wanted it to have. Now, the Fatman was sure that nobody in

the room would run rashly over to the Seducer's place and do anything to him. After every graphic, gross thing Thaddeus had to say about "Prizun Luv," believe you me, nobody in the room wanted to deny the Seducer this cruel and sordid fate.

We would wait. We would bide our time. Thanks to the brilliant machinations of the Fattest Crimefighter in the World.

. . .Who, at evening's end, served up some lovely dessert dishes, so that everybody could mingle and debrief, and otherwise vent.

As Fathers and Daughters left in happy pairs, another meeting was planned for the very next night, during which the lawyers in the group (there were three of them among the Fathers) would lay out the steps necessary to make sure that everything went as badly as it possibly could for the Seducer.

But as they were leaving; it was not all rage and *revenge*. There were also many grateful handshakes and hugs shared with their host, as well as heartfelt thanks expressed on the part of the Fathers for what the Fatman had done, in reuniting daddies with daughters.

And many requests for the following recipe:

FATMAN'S DOWNFALL (CHOCOLATE CHEESECAKE CHOWDOWN)

12 ounces chocolate wafers, crushed
3/4 cup unsalted butter, melted
32 ounces cream cheese, at room temperature
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1 cup sugar
8 ounces semisweet chocolate, melted
3 large eggs
1 cup sour cream

Combine the crushed wafers and melted butter, and press into a 9-inch springform pan. You do not need to bake it.

Cream the cream cheese until smooth. Add the vanilla and sugar and beat well. Add the chocolate and beat until blended. Add the eggs, one at a time, scraping the bowl and beating after each addition. Add the sour cream and beat until smooth. Pour the filling mixture over the crust and smooth the top. Bake in a 375

degree oven for one hour. Turn the oven off and let the cake stand for several hours, until completely cooked, or leave overnight. Leave it in the pan, and refrigerate until cold.

AND NOW FOR THE TOPPING!

1/8 tablespoon unsalted butter, melted
3 ounces semisweet chocolate, melted
1 tablespoon water
1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
1/3 cup confectioner's sugar
Strawberries for garnish

In the top of a double boiler, over simmering water, melt the butter and chocolate. Add the water and vanilla extract, and stir until blended. Add the sugar and whisk until smooth. Pour over the cooled cheesecake and refrigerate. Garnish with strawberries, or elegant chocolate cookies.

A real treat after a long day of Crimefighting!

Look, my concentration is going as I write this, because I know there's some of that cheesecake left in the fridge, and I think I'm gonna need me a midnight snack.

But as I help myself to a slice, and share with Blue a forbidden treat, and he and I gaze at each other, I have to just comment that isn't it all so weird? How all this crazy stuff started because a guy was cruel to a dog?

And I realize that this is a terrible thing to say, and it reveals how sick I am in my soul--but even now, remembering what he did to that poor dog that day, when we saw him shoving the pup out of the Vette and into the dusty road, nearly breaking the dog's back and getting it creamed by passing cars--well, the truth is, witnessing *that* upset me more than what the bastard did to those girls.

I know that's wrong; I know that's crazy. But we're all a little crazy, each in our own way.

At least, all of us are, in a town called Hollywood.

CHAPTER NINETEEN:
THE SANTA SUIT,
NO SPIN ZONE, AND TONIGHT'S STALKING POINTS

The next morning, after the meeting with the Fathers and Daughters, something happened which made us temporarily forget our plans for revenge against the Seducer. The moment happened for the Fatman when he opened a letter which came in the morning mail. It was a registered letter, and he had to sign for it.

"Jesus Christ!" bellowed the Fatman.

I sat up suddenly. I had come into the bookstore earlier and was buried in my book, lost in the prose, and I had totally lulled myself into another world, another time, forgetting myself in Remembrances of Things Past, when the Fatman Prousted me out of my fantasy world into reality, with his uncharacteristic epithets.

"What!" I snapped back. The Fatman hardly ever swore, and he had scared me when he took the Lord's name in vain. That wasn't like him.

He was clutching a piece of fancy letterhead stationary.

"I just got a letter from the department store where I played Santa Claus! Some lady is suing both me and the store, because she claims that I molested her little girl when the kid was sitting on my lap."

My jaw dropped and my Yoohoo dropped and made a puddle all over Le Recherché, and even though it was an old edition, worth big bucks, the Fatman was so upset about the letter that he didn't even say anything about the book.

He was pacing, pacing, pacing. (In his own inimitable fashion.)

"I can't believe it! I just can't believe this is happening!"

(And now, a quick aside from me, the Homeless Dude. An editorial, if you will. From the minute that this incident exploded in the Fatman's face, there was no question in my mind that he was *not* guilty of this. The Fatman may have been many things, and not all of them good, but he was most certainly not a child molester. Don't ask me how I knew this, I just knew. I would have sworn to this in a court of law.)

The reason that the Fatman had learned about this pending lawsuit through the U.S. mail and not a court official was that the ugly court process of being served official papers had not started yet. It would seem that the woman was anxious to shield her little girl from having to testify in court, so she first went to the head of the department store, to see what could be done about it. Her little girl, who had allegedly been sitting on Santa's lap, had been mighty garrulous about what had gone on, though. Very explicit.

OK. THIS IS HOW IT CAME DOWN.

The Fatman got a letter from the store. I guess the reason that they didn't simply call him on the phone was that they wanted a paper trail of all proceedings, in case it did end up going to court, which the department store was hoping desperately it would not. I won't name names, but this was a very rich, very hoity-toity store, and like all department stores, it counted on Christmas to bring in about a third of its retail revenues. Man oh man, that's all they needed, was a big long ugly protracted lawsuit, and month's worth of ugly publicity, as shoppers heard that the department store Santa was slipping his fingers up some innocent little girl's panties, while she was burbling her wish list and describing what particular dolly had caught her eye this year.

Oh no, they did not want any publicity. Indeed they did not.

But a phone call just didn't have that legal resonance to it, so they had written the Fatman a letter requesting that he meet with people in the department store's administration, along with their legal team and the woman and her little girl.

What could the Fatman do?

After rereading the letter, and making a few phone calls, and being unable to get through to anybody helpful at the department store, mostly he just talked to a menu, and then to one presumably live human lady who said "How can I direct your call?" But after she kept misdirecting his call and accidentally cutting him off, even though the Fatman had politely answered her question the first time, finally, he told her EXACTLY where she could direct the damn call, in no uncertain terms, and then he hung up and gave up.

The Fatman swore a few more times under his breath. He looked at me, a little scared, yeah, he looked a little scared, but actually he looked more angry than scared.

"What the hell can I do? I guess I got to meet with these bastards. Lordie."

I thought it was interesting that he never even bothered to defend himself against the charges to me. I think he knew that I knew that he had not done such a terrible thing as this woman was accusing him of.

But the thing of it is, if you looked at the Fatman through a stranger's eyes--a stranger who is a member of a society that loathes the ugly and mistrusts the lonely--and if you were on a jury, you might just look at that little blonde Shirley Temple clone testifying, with her ringlets and her fancy pants, then look at the big fat huge Fatman, with his halitosis and all those goiter moles on his neck, and you'd think about how hideous and alone he was in the world. . . *and you might just figure he was guilty*. Yes, your mind just might possibly go in that direction.

The Fatman might just land his fat ass in jail.

God help him. I prayed for him. Blue knew something was very wrong, too. Sometimes, Crimefighting ain't like they show in the comic books.

When last I wrote in my journal, you will recall that the Fatman had just been accused of the most horrible things, accused by that villainous hag of unspeakable acts. If found guilty of these crimes, the Fatman could find himself facing serious jail time.

The Fatman in jail?

I trembled at the thought, and I knew that the possibility must have scared the hell out of him, too. He would never survive it. He could not survive jail. The ridicule, the assaults, the loss of his freedom to graze freely--meals limited to three times a day, and when he was fed, it would only be those tiny, unpalatable piles of unidentifiable food, whatever they could mound onto those little stainless steel compartmentalized trays. Also, where would they ever find an orange jumpsuit in his size? And if I sound like I am ridiculing the Fatman or

trying to joke off the horror of what jail would mean for the Fatman, well I am not. I was terrified for the Fatman.

But switch gears. Switch gears. The Fatman needed to calm down, before he had any chance of dealing with this whole matter rationally. The meeting with the department store people was not for a week, and in the meantime, the Fatman had committed himself to another meeting--

--Which, while not necessarily being more important," he explained to me, as he set up chairs for the Fathers, who were due here any minute, "Nonetheless, this meeting will be cathartic for me. What this vile woman is doing to me makes me feel momentarily powerless against the Evil Forces of the world. But what we are going to do tonight, now this should be fun!"

Now, the particulars of that lengthy and emotional Fathers' meeting would only slow our story down at this point; suffice it to say that after a lot of heated bickering amongst all those Papa Bears, they finally arrived at a consensus.

The plan that we all agreed upon that night was to place all of the dirty tapes in the possession of the District Attorney's Office, then guide the D.A. to the Seducer's website, which was still in operation.

One of the Fathers was chomping at the bit to use his connections to get into that website and stop the damnable distribution of those sex tapes of his daughter, and it took the combined efforts of all of the Fathers to convince him to keep his mitts off for just twenty-four hours--long enough for the D.A. to actually confirm that tapes of minors were for sale on the web. This confirmation would serve to damn the Seducer to jail for a very, very long time. Everybody reminded this antsy daddy about all the anal sex to which the Seducer would be treated while in the pokey.

(Oh, and in case you're thinking that turning the case over to the D.A. seemed a bit too tame for the Fattest Crimefighter, and disappointingly above board, not nearly sub rosa enough, I suggest that you have faith, be patient, and read on.)

Since our chapter is not nearly over, let me briefly sum up the events:

1.) The Seducer is arrested on 24, count them, twenty-four criminal counts of statutory rape. Obviously, these are enough to get him tossed in the slammer. As for the other charges: making the tapes

without the girls' consent, selling them on the web, oh, there was going to be a barrage of charges volleyed against him.

But those would come later, and the charges would take a while to prepare. Each father and daughter would file a civil charge against the Seducer, of course. Who knew if this slimebucket had any money? But that wasn't the point. The Fathers weren't interested in getting rich off of any stash of cash the Seducer might have. Rather, in the spirit of Goldman haunting Simpson, they just wanted to make sure that the Seducer was flat broke for the rest of his life, which he would live out as a haunted, hunted man.

2.) The actual arrest of the Seducer was delicious.

Oh, the simple, pure joy of watching it from a distance, as it unfolded. I was taping it all, of course, as the police burst in on the Seducer's apartment. He was in the middle of seducing yet another Lolita, by the way. It was the nail in his coffin. (That would mean twenty-five counts of statutory rape, and even more jail time.) Then came the warm, fuzzy feeling of watching, as he was led away in handcuffs, the Seducer sputtering and protesting all the while.

We were all careful not to let him know that we were watching him, though. We didn't want him to know just how big this thing was. We wanted him to seriously underestimate his enemy.

I shall skip over all the boring legal machinations that went on, as you have no doubt seen enough TV shows about cops and criminals and the justice system to know pretty much how this kind of thing goes. Just fast forward in your mind through the arrest, the arraignment, all that preliminary courtroom proceedings stuff. It all happened in about seventy-two hours.

Oh, and oddly enough, as noted before, in spite of the fact that a few of the Fathers had pull in high places, the Seducer, we found out later, had something on somebody too. It seems he had been into making covert home movies of secret Hollywood bondage dungeons, before he discovered the even more lucrative field of teen porn. And apparently, there was something very incriminating on one of those tapes. The point is, he had enough on someone in power to be able to get out on bail. **GET OUT ON BAIL!**

He was free and walking the streets while he awaited trial. Evil scumbag.

Our first priority, of course, was that we had to make sure the sonofabitch was around to stand trial.

We had to make sure he didn't bolt.

So at an emergency meeting, contingency plans were made, because everyone was positive, just positive, that this asshole would try to flee prior to trial.

And do you know what? The Fathers were all hoping desperately that the Seducer would try and do just that. Tag Team, that was basically how I would describe the approach the Fathers took. The pursuit, that is. It all started with putting a 'round-the-clock watch on the Seducer's apartment.

One of the dimmer Fathers, who ran a car parts business, foolishly suggested that as soon as the Seducer tried to flee, the minute he left the house with a couple of suitcases, we should nail the guy. But the other fathers, who were obviously all thinking the same thing, just laughed and said that was the very last thing we should do.

"LET THE BASTARD RUN! LET HIM RUN FOR HIS LIFE!" was what they all bellowed. Let him run like hell towards the border, out of state, into Mexico, just let him try, they said.

Not only did they *not* intend to call the cops if this guy looked like he was going to bolt; just as importantly, they did not want him to suspect that he was being followed everywhere, all the time, from the moment he was out on bail. Because if the Seducer got any hint at all that he was being followed, he would no doubt abort his effort to flee.

And catching the bastard crossing the state line, when the terms of his bail specifically forbade it? That was exactly what we were all praying for.

So they followed him. They stalked, they spied, they seethed in anger as they waited for him to make his next move. All in all, I was in awe of the restraint on the part of all those Fathers, but you know what? We must set aside that adventure for one moment, because guess what happened in the middle of all this cloak and dagger?

Do you remember that woman who was suing the Fatman for allegedly fondling her little girl? The truth is, all these Crimefighting

adventures were happening so fast, I hardly had time to write them all down. But I've kept records as best I can.

Okay, here was the deal. The Fatman had decided to call their bluff. Monday morning, at the Fatman's insistence, he had the department store meeting moved up. He wanted it the day after next, not next week. He didn't want any mollycoddling. He informed them that he would NOT be bringing an attorney, I believe his words were, *"I'll be damned if I'm gonna shell out a grand to have some suit come in and start defending me against something I did not do!"*

Instead, he informed them--he did not ASK them, mind you, but he INFORMED them--that he would be bringing a video camera and would tape the entire proceedings. When they made a huge hue and cry, he asked them to ask the woman what she had to hide? And when she protested, (never to the Fatman's face, of course, this all took place through a frantic flurry of phone calls, using go-betweens), anyway, when she protested that she did not want cameras present because she was trying to protect her daughter, the Fatman informed her that if she refused, he would simply meet her in court.

In a word, he had called her bluff. She agreed.

That's when the Fatman knew he had her. Or at least, he was pretty sure.

You should have seen that tape of the meeting. The Fatman insisted on playing it for me as soon as he got back. Jeezus, that little girl couldn't have been more than five years old. I mean she really was sweet; looked just like Shirley Temple, she did. I really don't see any point in reprinting here the very graphic text of what she said the Fatman allegedly did to her; suffice it to say that it was as disgusting as what you are imagining and probably worse. But the Fatman's reaction to it all was calm and methodical.

He took the tape to a prominent child psychologist, of whom there are thousands in Hollywood. There is an inordinate number of very screwed up kids in Beverly Hills-Brentwood-Bellaire, the Three-B triangle; it is the toxic combination of all that money, sunshine, and chlorine. That, and the fact that these kids always have a cellphone glued to their ear, emitting dangerous waves that ultimately fry the brain.

Guess what. The shrink announced that based on that little girl's taped testimony, the child's nonverbals, eyes glancing to the upper

right, rather than the upper left when answering questions, thereby indicating that she was accessing that part of the brain which *creates* rather than *recalls*--oh, and last but not least, finally passing the child's voice through that new computer software that specializes in detecting lies, even in children. The verdict: the shrink was convinced that the kid was making it all up. He would happily testify to that in a court of law.

The woman became incensed, as did the paranoid department store owners, who had assumed from the outset that the Fatman would pony up his cash portion of the settlement, just as the department store intended to pony up theirs. After all, the woman was being so reasonable about wanting to settle for a modest amount, rather than having her poor daughter traumatized by an ugly and protracted public lawsuit.

But the Fatman refused to have anything to do with "settling."

"I don't think so, ma'am, no. If court is what it must come to, then by all means, ma'am, proceed with your lawsuit."

"But--well I--that is--in the past--I don't see why we just can't--" the woman had stammered and sputtered.

The Fatman and I had laughed about it later. Because he had taped all of this, too. He had taped every meeting.

It turned out, in the end, that this woman had fooled with the wrong St. Nick. Apparently, child molestation is such a buzz-whine, so sure to cause panic in the circles in which it is uttered, that this woman had been able to perfect a lucrative scheme. It required the considerable coaching of/ and acting talents of/ any given little five-year-old. But it had netted this wicked woman close to a million dollars over the last ten years.

She had never failed to put the fear of God in every store, and/or company that she approached with this scam. After finding out that it was oh so lucrative, she expanded her act to accuse the Easter Bunny, (at least three rabbits each Easter season,) and for the last few years, she had also gone after clowns-for-hire who serviced children's birthday parties. Usually, the clown himself didn't have a lot of money, but the woman had developed the knack of getting the little girl, the little "actress," into private children's parties, where the parents were loaded and gullible.

Her scheme apparently always worked, because the sad truth is that even if charges aren't true, once someone is publicly accused of

child molesting, the stigma sticks. So even the innocent, she had learned to her greedy delight, would panic and pay.

Until she met the Fatman. He put the hounds on this woman.

Oh, she had covered her tracks well, mind you, changing her name many times, and spending a great deal of money having somebody cloak her past well. But I guess she hadn't spent as much as the Fatman, who later told me that he relished every penny he spent on this project.

I happened to be there when the Fatman got the phone call from the private dick that he'd hired to dig into her past.

"HA! HA HA HA!" howled the Fatman into the phone, after he had picked it up and listened for a moment.

"What?" I said, jumping up.

"Fax me a hard copy!" he barked gleefully into the phone.

"Well, I guess that wraps this one up," announced the Fatman, hanging up with a flourish.

And when he said it, he said it with such panache and verve, that he really did sound like a Crimefighter. It was like something right out of a film noire flick, except that they didn't have fax machines in film noire movies, but you know what I'm getting at.

The Fatman grabbed the pot of coffee, and came over and poured me another cup. Then he offered me and Blue from the box of Entemann's. He was waiting on us hand and foot! Actually sharing food! Then he sat down and helped himself to coffeecake.

"I knew it! I just knew it! Wait till you hear!" he blabbed with his mouth full, which is what he did when he was excited. And sometimes when he wasn't. "This vile hag has been pulling this same scam for over ten years!"

I called on my few remaining brain cells and did the math.

"Wait a minute! That girl is only five years old. How could she possibly--"

The Fatman rolled his eyes at me.

"Don't be thick, you dolt. She pulls the scam using all different kids. Coaches 'em thoroughly. Her song-and-dance is so convincing that these department stores, or rich folks giving a children's party who have hired some circus clown, whoever, anyway, she extorts money, but keep her demands low enough that people are willing to pay."

"OK, I'm gettin' it," I said. "The amount is low enough that they'd rather just pay it, than risk a court case and publicity?"

"Exactly," said the Fatman. "My guy that I had checking her out said that she's really perfected her act. Turned it into big business. He said that last year, she pulled this at no less than twelve different major department stores over one Christmas season. Raked in about fifty-thousand dollars in the month of December, alone!"

I laughed and slapped my thigh. "Jeezus! Just when I thought I'd heard it all. But how did your guy find all this out, and nobody else ever caught onto her?"

"Oh, she covers her tracks well, friend. If someone were to conduct a superficial or standard investigation, nothing incriminating would come up on her. She would appear to be a poor, helpless, single mother, without a criminal record. She doesn't stay in the same place, she moves around a lot, going from state to state."

"So, tell, tell," I interrupted. I was literally on the edge of my seat. "How did your guy crack it?"

"Well, this woman got these stores and rich families in such a panic, and the story she coached these poor little kids to tell was so morbidly specific, that nobody dug any deeper than just having her checked out. What my guy did, he did the real grunt work. He started checking with department stores, not just local but all over the country. My guy has got a guy that went through a bunch of databases. He had to check out thousands of stores before he hit pay dirt. Then, finally, he found another store reporting a similar molestation incident. And a settlement. Then another store, and another store. At first he was thrown, because the woman didn't fit the description at all, and the gender of the kid changed. But then, he started putting it all together. In fact, my little idea to tape the proceedings really paid off. My man sent the tape around to those stores--and don'cha know, everybody recognized that greedy bitch."

The Fatman sat back in triumph and chomped his coffee cake. Me, I just shook my head in amazement. I studied my jumbo buddy.

"So what happens to her now?"

The Fatman leaned forward in his chair.

"Well, I'll tell you this much. It ain't good."

Oh, and when further details came out--of how that woman and those poor kids she used for her cons actually lived in an old VW van, driving around from state to state, the kids having no friends, never going to school, eating out of rest stop vending machines, their

clothes practically never washed. . .well, you could do nothing but applaud the denouement that the Fatman had arranged.

Also, the Fatman was very curious about what the woman did with all the money she made, and with his usual persistence, he found out about her little heroin habit. (She was a between-the-toes-girl, so it wasn't something that the authorities noticed right off.) Between her expensive habit and the cost of covering her tracks, no pun intended, she became just another one of those grifters who rakes in six figures, yet lives on the streets.

What a weird world.

It was a couple of days later that the Fatman made one of his rare visits out into the world, to the police station, to testify against her. That's when he had occasion to witness, up close and personal, just how deeply she had scarred those poor kids. One of them was coming out of a questioning room, just as the Fatman was going in, and all this happened at the same moment that the police station Santa was making a "Toys for Tots" appearance. The little girl just screamed and trembled at the sight of that Santa Claus.

It was tragic. It infuriated t.F.C.i.t.W.

Right then and there, the Fatman decided that not only should the grifter woman end up in jail, for accusing him of the unthinkable, he FURTHER decided that everybody in that notoriously brutal women's facility should learn exactly why the woman was there, and what she had done to those kids. Not content with just seeing to it that the story was circulated in prison, the Fatman had me edit all the footage into an informative documentary about it, and arranged to have it circulated amongst the female felons.

By the time the warden figured out the videotape wasn't the season finale of *The Sopranos*, (that's what the label said, it was too late.) Those lady felons knew everything. And since at least a third of them were in jail for crimes they'd committed to protect their children--i.e., killing a battering spouse, stealing to pay the rent, etc.--they were pretty miffed with the new inmate. Things got very ugly for her very fast, right from the get go. Last I heard, she was self-mutilating herself in order to spend as much time as possible in the prison hospital, because that was the only place she felt vaguely safe. Even that safe haven was not safe for long, though. But this isn't a story about her stay in prison.

More importantly, what happened to those poor kids?

Well, they were put into foster care, of course.

But typical of the Fatman, it was not just any foster care situation. The Fatman--what a heart. And he was tenacious. Very tenacious.

Through the same kind of digging that had discovered the woman's scam in the first place, the Fatman was able to hunt down a grieving couple who had lost all their children to a drunk driving accident, when their church bus was hit by some drunk driving an El Camino. This had happened the weekend of Thanksgiving, before Christmas--right about the same time that I was hearing of the Fatman's first lost love, Leslie. Their children's Christmas presents were already all purchased and wrapped and hidden away in closets. And the children were all wiped out in one horrible moment.

But by Christmas, that home was filled with laughing children again. Oh, the wounds were deep, and the scars would always be there, for everyone in that newly-formed family. But the healing had begun. Isn't that a pretty picture? Imagining it sure added some much needed cheer to my Christmas--my first ever spent on the streets.

Take a moment to picture those parents, still devastated from the loss of their children. And now, suddenly, they find themselves surrounded by four new tiny faces staring up at them, so hopeful, so full of need, so full of love to give. Those four little faces, whose last Christmas Eve was a tailgate party out of the back of a VW van at a rest stop in South Jersey. Two dollars each for the vending machine, anything you want, kid. In fact, that's what they told their new parents. Christmas dinner had been drive-thru White Castle, and they'd each gotten a new pair of underwear for Christmas.

Ironically, even that was taken away from them eventually, to use as evidence.

But now, even though it was a thrown together family, with everyone's heart in the right place, like leftovers made with love when your mother is scrounging--well, you can see, as you imagine it, that this is one Christmas that was actually starting to approximate a Christmas card.

And that woman, that user of innocents, that Hag from Hell--her Christmas dinner was eaten in her cell, and it consisted of

pressed turkey loaf, some lumpy gravy, dried up stuffing, and cranberry flavored Jello. The bruises from the holiday beating she got from her fellow inmates were healing nicely, but she was one of the few inmates that did not receive any gifts from friends or relatives, to cheer her Yuletide.

Although actually, that's not ENTIRELY true.

I understand that she received a gift from the Fatman. It was a little Santa Claus Sno-Globe, from his beloved collection, (more on that collection later), that featured Santa Claus with a little boy and girl on each knee, and when you wound it up, it played, "Santa Claus is Coming To Town."

"Oh, you better watch out,
You better not cry,
You better not pout,
I'm telling you why. . .
. Santa Claus is Coming to Town.

He sees you when you're sleeping,
He knows when you're awake,
He knows when you've been bad or good,
So be good for goodness sake. . .

He's making a list,
Checking it twice
Gonna find out
Who's Naughty and Nice,
. Santa Claus is Coming to Town

Kudos, I say, to the wickedly wonderful Christmas stylings of the Fattest Crimefighter in the World.

Don't mess with the Fatman.

CHAPTER TWENTY: THE CHASE IS ON, SOME MODOC INDIANS, AND PENITENTIARY PORN

But what about those angry Fathers?

And the Doghater Misogynist?

One of the Fathers, who was a highly placed executive with a fondness for those James Bond type high tech espionage toys, covertly arranged to be able to monitor the Seducer's phone calls. What we found out from his eavesdropping was this: in the days since he had been released on bail, the Seducer had made a number of lengthy calls to Juarez, Mexico.

It was further learned that on one Friday afternoon, he went to a local bank, where he traded in a considerable number of American dollars for Mexican pesos.

The Fathers, who were all keeping in very close touch with each other, and who had been following their prey since the day that the slime got out of jail on bail, were absolutely certain that the guy was going to flee the country, probably that very Friday night, and head south of the border.

They were ready for him, though, and within hours, they were waiting in cars at crucial points along the main stretch of highway that took you from Los Angeles to Juarez.

THEIR GOAL: They wanted the bad guy to get about two feet from the Mexican border before he was arrested, because the fact that he was trying to flee the state, thereby violating the terms of his bail, was the best way to assure a guilty verdict and get him thrown in jail for good.

Of course, they did not want him to suspect, even for a moment, that he was being followed. The guy was already hyper and paranoid; he had figured that there must have been some kind of

ringleader responsible, for bringing all those ditzzy chicks together to prosecute.

The plan was simple: the cars following the Seducer would switch every so often.

Like I said: Tag Team.

One car would follow him out of the San Fernando Valley.

Then, another father, communicating with the first guy by car phone, would start following our felon just a few miles later, innocently merging onto the 405 from Sunset Boulevard, just when the first father telephoned him with the tip that the guy was passing that very exit. Then, the first car, which the guy was starting to think was following him, would suddenly get off at an exit, never to be seen in the fleeing felon's rearview mirror again.

The second father would follow him from Sunset to around Santa Monica Boulevard, and so forth and so on, down past LAX, Seal Beach, the posse continuing this strategy all the way down to La Joya and San Diego, and then, finally to the Mexican Border! And when our man got there, a dragnet of cops would be waiting to nab him. Our lawyers in the group had enough pull to make sure of that.

The air was electric as darkness fell. We just knew that he was going to run tonight, we could just feel it. The Fatman and I were in the bookstore, manning the phone, waiting for any news at all that he was bolting. The bookstore was what you might call "Checkpoint Charlie." The Fathers kept calling in all night, to find out the status of the chase.

Still, the Fatman was restless, and felt left out. (As he had his entire life, he muttered under his breath, in a way that struck me as so very poignant.) He was agitated and pacing, that rare and dramatic marching of hundreds of pounds of flesh past the walls of novels. It was something to watch. Yes, the mere act of his pacing was like a geological event, something you'd see on the Discovery Channel.

"Damn it!" he said, and exclaimed that he wished he could be there to see the guy go down. Even I couldn't be there to tape the whole thing this time, since the plan depended on no car being a constant in the chase.

The phone rang. It was Mr. Stuart X (no last names, of course), who was sitting in the parking lot of Garbo apartments, with the news that, sure enough, "the Seducer has emerged from his

apartment, carrying two fat suitcases, and giving furtive looks all around. . ."

The Seducer did not notice Mr. Stuart X, who was slouched down in his driver's seat, cleverly camouflaged in an '89 Cutlass. In that parking lot, trust me, the car blended in perfectly.

Mr. Stuart had called us second, though, after he had FIRST called Father Number Two, whose engine was running in a Seven-Eleven parking lot just down the street, ready to start following our man--although Father Number Two would make it look like he had just casually driven out of the Seven-Eleven parking lot. He even had a Big Gulp that he was holding up prominently, to add to the illusion.

Then, after following our man for a couple of blocks, he would actually *pass* the Seducer's car, be seen eating a corndog, and generally driving in a half-assed fashion, too slowly, feeding his face with one hand and steering with the other, such as people do when they eat and drive at the same time. His goal was to piss off the Seducer. What better way to hide the fact that you're following someone, than to draw attention to yourself by passing them, driving badly, and annoying them, thereby goading them to pass you again.

Three different cars started tailing him within twelve short blocks, the previous one always turning off onto some side street.

Our logic was this: as any woman driving home alone in the dark knows, if you are driving through a suburban neighborhood, and a car follows you block after block after block, it's either your neighbor, or it's trouble. Hence, many changes of cars when first following him through residential streets. Sure enough, he was headed for the freeway.

Then, our strategy would change: once you're on a major highway connecting two big cities, like the one that connects Los Angeles to San Diego, it's not so suspicious for a car to stay on that highway for long periods of time, stretches of even an hour or more.

The game was afoot!

That was when the hitch came. The hitch in the scheme that almost caused the entire plan to fall apart right in front of our eyes.

When he got to the freeway, the 405, that is, the bastard didn't head south. He headed north. What the hell was that about?

A frantic flurry of phone calls ensued, and there was a barrage of questions. What about all those long phone calls he'd made to Mexico that afternoon? And the pesos? And the travel brochures we'd spied in the glove compartment of his car?

We panicked. Perhaps he just had some quick, sleazy business north of the Valley. Someone owed him money, he was going to score drugs to take with him, whatever. But as he kept heading north on the freeway, and didn't turn off anywhere, we all freaked. The father driving a gold BMW, who had trailed our man from the Valley, was starting to panic, because he was getting the feeling that our fleeing felon now knew he was being followed, and that would blow our whole plan.

Fortunately, one of the Fathers who was not manning an automobile at one of the points heading south, but who was sitting at home, found out from the Fatman about the bastard's change in plans. As it happened, this guy lived up by Magic Mountain, north of the Valley, the direction our guy was headed. With lightning speed, he jumped into his old battered up blue truck, and drove onto the freeway, just in time to start following our villain.

The Fatman and I could just imagine the sigh of relief felt by our fleeing felon, as he saw the car that he was starting to think was following him--a gold BMW that had trailed him from the Valley--suddenly take the Magic Mountain exit and disappear from his rearview mirror!

And why would our villain then have any reason to suspect that an old blue truck, that had entered the freeway at the Magic Mountain on-ramp, was in actuality following him north? Especially since that blue truck had a "Bakersville Bikes" sign painted on the side of it, and that's where the blue truck appeared to be headed.

It quickly became apparent that our guy was fleeing, yes, but he was heading for the Oregon state line. Who knew why? It was a longer drive than the other options out of state, and he certainly could not spend his pesos there--but, well, the point was, we had to hustle.

With the Fatman at the helm, manning the phones, we were able to arrange for a different car to take over about every forty-five minutes or so. It was a damned tense night; we were throwing this together minute by frantic minute.

For example:

An ex-wife of one of the Fathers had been previously filled in on the story of the Seducer, and what the Seducer had done to her beloved ex-stepdaughter. As good fortune would have it, she lived in San Louis Obispo, and she was a journalist no less, anxious to play her part. When the crucial moment came, she was waiting on the side of the freeway in her little red Toyota, and she doggedly followed our villain from a discreet distance for about seventy miles.

Another guy had a business partner who knew all about the whole sordid mess, and happened to be vacationing in Monterey; he thought it would be a grand adventure to follow the guy for a couple of hours.

In fact, all of the Fathers had favors they called in. The timing was perilous, mind you; sometimes the person who'd been brought on board at the last minute could barely pick up the trail in time. But once they knew to look for a red Vette, they would head to the appropriate freeway entrance, keep the engine running, and wait for their cell phone to ring with a call from the guy who was actually following our felon at that moment.

The phone conversations sounded something like this:

GUY FOLLOWING FELON: "OK, you said you're at the Valley Pine Exit? Well, he's almost there. We just passed a sign that says Valley Pine Exit 3 Miles. I'm following him about three quarters of a mile behind, and there's two cars between us. I don't want to follow him too close; I've been on his ass an hour now, and I think he's getting suspicious. . . you're picking up his tail just in time. . .OK, I see the overpass for the Valley Pine Exit just ahead. . .remember, he's in a red Vette, you can't miss him. . .

Then, like clockwork, the car on the freeway entrance would start following the Vette, and the car that had been following it would suddenly turn off the freeway, no doubt causing yet another a sigh of relief from our man on the lam.

Of course, there were some inventive twists. The woman driver, the ex-wife of one of the Fathers, added her own unique flourish. So that it wouldn't look too much like she was following him,

she got onto the freeway before our man approached, was about a mile ahead of him, but like so many female drivers, she clutched the steering wheel and kept her speed limit at a rigid 55, thereby actually provoking our villain to angrily honk the horn and pass her; then she slipped into the slower lane, but managed to follow him the whole time. It was a perfect ruse. She never had to change her driving pattern and start speeding up to stay tandem with him, because just at the moment that our villain honked at her and flipped her the bird and passed her, a state trooper merged onto the freeway, thus forcing everybody, including our villain, to slow to 55, making it possible for our lady to follow him, without having to speed up.

We also had a bit of luck just north of San Francisco, when our man stopped to booze it up a little. He was observed surreptitiously taking an empty bottle in a brown paper bag out of his car and buying a fresh Jack Daniels at a dive just off the freeway. He also stopped long enough to buy a peanut butter-bacon-tuna melt at a rest stop and wolf it down.

This cocktail break was a gift from Fate, because just at the time that he stopped, we were running out of people placed at northerly points to follow him. We were rapidly running out of contacts and favors to call in. All we had was a convoy of half a dozen dads, who had actually followed the guy all the way from L.A., but several miles behind, so as not to be seen.

If they were to scoot up behind him, our villain might change his mind about fleeing the state, which was exactly what we wanted him to do--flee the state, that is. But our villain's lingering over the peanut butter-bacon-tuna melt and several beers (I guess the Jack Daniels was for later, on the road), gave these dads a chance to zip ahead and position themselves at points further north on the freeway, keeping in communication by phone the whole time, of course. This stroke of luck was just what we needed to finish out the journey north.

Then came the *pièce de résistance*, which was better than anything out of a movie. If you saw it in a movie, it would have been so poetically perfect as to seem forced.

This journey had started at dusk, you remember, so it should be no surprise to you that it was after dawn of the next day, by the time our man got to the northern most part of the state.

(We were all exhausted too, but every one of us, in our whole network, were cruising on adrenaline, and waiting with baited breath to see how it would all play out.)

OK. Cut to a small town poised just inches south of the California-Oregon border, a town called Hilt.

Here's what you need to know about Hilt: the Sheriff's Department and the local Police Department have a big fat rivalry going. Now exactly how that long-standing rivalry evolved, that story is a chapter in itself, but it doesn't have to do directly with the Fattest Crimefighter in the World, so you won't be hearing the specifics. Not in this book, anyway.

Know this, though: enmity ran so deep that fistfights ran rampant, broken noses occurred, profanity was routinely hurled within earshot of young children; porch lights and pink flamingos and garden gnomes frequently received the brunt of the hatred. Finally, a truckload of manure dumped during the dead of night in the police chief's wife's coy pond, and her crying jag that ensued, provoked a Mafia like sit-down which, after four hours and one hundred and twenty-eight beers and twenty three dozen prairie oysters, finally, at one-thirty in the morning, resulted in a more formal, structured way in which the sheriff's boys and the gang of police might take out their mutual hostilities.

Now, we are pleased to report, they take out their deeply rooted hostility towards each other, the sheriff's boys and the cops, in a relatively benign fashion, in the form of a BATTLE RECREATION. I know you're all familiar with these; you surely know how popular Civil War and Revolutionary War recreations are, way over there on the east coast.

Well, in this case, the Police Department and the Sheriff Department of Hilt were recreating a famous battle between Cowboys and Indians, specifically, between the Modoc Tribe and the United States Cavalry. Because the Fatman is a champion of the Underdog, and he thinks that the way we treated Native Americans is shameful, he has authorized this brief aside, by way of setting up the Cowboy and Indian battle that led to the downfall of the Seducer in the red Vette.

THIS IS NOT MADE-UP FICTION, THIS IS IN THE HISTORY BOOKS:

(Not that any other part of this journal is made-up fiction.)

The Modoc Indians were mighty angry, ever since the gold rush had sent legions of white men into Modoc territory, where the whites claimed all the land as their own, killed all the buffalo, and generally disrupted the peaceful life of the Indians, who just wanted to live in simple harmony with Good Mother Earth. The whites tried to put the Indians on the reservation. An Indian leader nicknamed Captain Jack resisted, and left the reservation with a bunch of other brave redskins. Around Christmas of 1842, white Indian fighter Ben Wright lured the Modocs out from hiding, under the guise of truce, and gunned down a tribal leader in cold blood, as his confederates also opened fire, leaving forty-one Modocs dead, in a tribe of only a few hundred. These slayings and the burning of the Modoc village led the Modocs to counterattack, killing white woman and children.

All of this bad blood led to a final confrontation, and while it ended badly for the Indians, full of carnage and corpses, and with the death of Captain Jack, and the Modocs finally being forced onto the reservation for good, the Sheriff's Department and the Police Department recreate this last great battle every year, and happily, sometimes the Indians win. It doesn't do any good for the few actual Modocs still knocking around the California-Oregonian borders, who want nothing more than the legal right to host gambling on their reservations, but it is still a big damn deal in the town of Hilt, and it was to be a spectacular part of the downfall of the villain of this chapter.

CUT BACK TO: OUR CRISIS--One of the Fathers who is a lawyer, has a brother who is in the Sheriff's Department in this small town. But that sheriff is not being a sheriff right now; he is dressed as a Modoc Brave, and being a Modoc Brave preparing for battle, he does not have his cellphone on him. But his wife gets the frantic call at home, and she jumps on her moped, (hubby took the car that morning), and she speeds out to the battlefield, just as the battle is starting up. It is an odd sight, this feisty wife on her moped, heading into battle and waving her arms and telling the white men and the Braves that they must halt their warfare long enough to bust this statutory rapist.

Needless to say, all these guys, who are all revved up on testosterone at this point, happily put hostilities aside, long enough to capture them a real live criminal. YEEEEHAAAAH!

The rest is just--well, it was beautiful. Imagine it! Dozens of police Cavalry, in official uniforms, with handlebar mustaches and western style hats and swords and authentic guns and sabers and everything, and also dozens of sheriff Modocs, dressed surprisingly scantily, given the December weather, with full war paint and head dresses and bows and arrows and tomahawks and the whole nine yards.

But the beautiful part of it is, their cars are parked a ways away, and it's faster to get to the highway if they just stay on their horses and make a gallop for it. So, oh, picture it, I love it! Dozens of Cavalry and Indians, charging not towards each other, but together, towards the highway, where the Seducer is speeding in his red Vette towards the Oregon border, thinking he's nearly home free! He might have managed it, too, except that one Modoc, whose horse had thrown him, had instead hightailed it to his own personal Porsche, which he had picked up on the cheap at a police auction, and he sped down that freeway in his Porsche, still dressed as a Modoc Warrior, and, along with a couple of cherry tops who heard about all the excitement on their scanners, they blocked the road! As if that wasn't a freaky enough encounter for our villain, can you imagine the look on the Seducer's face when he looks in his rearview mirror and sees the entire Modoc tribe and the United States Cavalry charging down the mountain after him!

I, for one, am deliriously happy that local news helicopters also zoomed in on the story, because you wouldn't have believed it, if you hadn't seen it: all these Cavalry and a bunch of pissed off Modoc Indians, leaping all over this guy, making those crazy Injun sounds, "WHOOOWHOOOWHOOOWHOOOWHOOOWHOOOW!" and generally having one hell of a Sunday morning. It was like no recreation battle anybody had ever seen. Apparently, the two departments did not fight much amongst themselves after that, such grand memories did they have of their joint bust.

ADDENDUM TO CHAPTER NINETEEN

DENOUEMENT: IN WHICH THE SLEAZE IS LET OUT OF JAIL

I guess the Seducer's saga didn't really end with the Cavalry-and-Indian apprehension of the Seducer. Technically, of course, there was the whole business of the trial, but that part of the story was so anticlimactic and fraught with legalese, compared to that climax at the border, that we decided to red pencil it, the Fatman's Adventures being so numerous, and editorial choices being unavoidable in this tome.

Suffice it to say that all of us were there in court to watch it come down. Fathers, Daughters, myself, even the Fatman had emerged from hiding to show up in court. We all looked on as the Seducer got what he rightfully deserved--ten years in jail. (Out in five, with good behavior.) Actually, we thought he should have gotten much more, but we had done our part, and everybody was glad to see that at least some level of justice had prevailed.

Of course, the Fatman had no intention of letting it go at a mere five years. As always, he had a long-term Master Plan.

The closing mini-chapter in this chapter called "A DOG'S LIFE" requires that I leap ahead in time, past many other Adventures that the Fatman and I were yet to have. You shall hear about those forthwith, but for now, let me reveal to you what was to be the final disposition of the Seducer.

The Fatman had really developed quite a hatred for the Seducer. It had started with us seeing him boot that poor dog out of the car, then turned into our uncovering his thriving child pornography business, and it ended with--

--Well, there is one last atrocity that the Seducer committed, and this was actually before those Modocs and the Cavalry got ahold of him. During that period after the Seducer had been arraigned, but before he actually landed his ass in jail (this happened right before we nabbed him for trying to flee the state), he visited one of his old clients. It was a girl who had slipped through the cracks. The Seducer had started her on a sordid path, setting her up to "entertain" at bachelor parties. Now she was living the high life as an upscale call girl.

Please understand, she had been no part of our big bust, but for some reason, the Seducer had gotten it into his head that *she* was the ringleader of the girls, and that it was *she* who had talked them all into turning him in.

And so, in a dark and stormy rage, and quite high on crystal meth, he descended on her one night, showing up at her penthouse and bullying his way in. He then proceeded to do things to her which were too unspeakable to repeat anywhere but in a court of law or True Crime Magazine.

Now, the Fatman and I did not know about it, not at the time that it happened. We found out long afterwards. But when we did learn about this horrible thing he had done to this girl, the Fatman and I decided that, yes, oh yes, we needed to perpetrate one last cruel act of retribution upon him.

Here is what the Fatman cooked up.

Skip ahead five years.

The term of the Seducer's prison sentence is coming to an end. During the time that he was in prison, he was held in great esteem--or very low esteem, depending on how you wish to interpret his inmates choosing him for their paramour. The bottom line: he took it as badly as he had given it. In a word, he was their bitch. Thaddeus Washington's dissertation re: "Prisun Luv" had been horrifyingly accurate.

Imagine his shock, then, when he walks out of prison, into the bright sunshine, after serving a term in hell, and what do you think he sees? His car. His red Vette is sitting there, and in the driver's seat sits the most luscious blonde you can imagine--and I suspect you can imagine a great deal. As if by magic, the passenger door opens. And when he gets a gander at the gams on the dame in the car, noticing her short red dress, that is the exact same hot cherry red color as the car, and her hair, her long, thick, wavy, bedroom fantasy blonde hair, and she even has wonderfully huge breasts that, our Seducer thinks, looks like they might even be real, a rare treat in this town. Oh, he is in heaven!

NOW, THE FUN BEGINS:

He ambled over, thinking that maybe this was Fate's way of making it up to him, for all the horrors he had suffered as of late. It would be nice to be on the giving end, instead of the receiving end, for a change.

As if to make the fantasy complete, she crooked her finger, beckoning the Seducer to come over. He did that thing you might expect he'd do, looking around to his left and his right, and over his shoulder, as if to say "Who Me?" She nodded back, as if to purr, "Yes, you. . ."

(Oh, and just so you know. This vision of loveliness was not the girl that the Seducer had beaten up, oh no no no, that would have been a stupid choice on our part for this revenge set-up. It was, in fact, a lesbian girlfriend of that same young lady, though. The Seducer had never seen her before in his life.)

He ambled with as much male mystique as a guy who had been reamed several hundred times by large hulking felons could manage, and he leaned into the red Vette. He smiled winningly. He could not know that his somewhat lackadaisical oral hygiene habits, that he had slipped into while behind bars, had led to a rather bad case of phylorria. But she pretended not to notice.

He leaned into the car, wondering for a moment: Was she, too, still all part of the revenge plot that had landed him in prison, in the first place? But no, after looking at her carefully, he did not recognize her. No, she was surely some gift from the gods, some attempt by Fate to compensate him for the hell he'd been through.

Then he took a closer look at the car. Of course, he had immediately recognized it as one looking just like the dream machine he had once driven, when he was on top of the world. But suddenly, the amazingly possibility occurred to him. He crooked his head, and smiled at her, and said,

"This is gonna sound crazy, but I swear to God, this used to be my car. I know how weird that sounds, but maybe you could tell me--where did you get this car?"

She answered him, beaming blithely.

"Sure, I can tell you. I got it a police auction in Pasadena."

"That's amazing. I know this sounds weird, but I think this really is my car. Sorry--was my car. It's yours now, of course, I certainly didn't mean to imply anything. It's just that, well, frankly, you saw me walk out of prison, and I ain't exactly one of the guards. It's just funny, is all, because while I was in there, I heard through the

grapevine that after the cops seized my car, it went up for auction in Pasadena."

She said nothing, but just flashed him her most sultry smile, and patted the passenger seat lovingly. She had long, red scratch-your-back nails. Hot damn, this was one of his favorite fantasies. She cooed at him:

"Well then, handsome, I think you'd better get in and take a little ride with me."

Once again, the Seducer looked around quickly, but this time more furtively. Then, his smile fell and his confidence plummeted, as he remembered exactly who and what he was. A loser x-con.

"Are you sure?" he asked weakly. "I mean, uh, ain't you waitin' for someone? A boyfriend, maybe? I just naturally figured, when I saw you pull up here, lookin' so regal in red, that you was waitin' for a sweetheart or someone. Except, I didn't know about anyone else they was springin' today."

She stared at him hungrily.

"Well, handsome, you seem pretty sweet. And no, I'm not waiting for anyone. You just looked so delicious, walking into the sunshine out of that dark, dangerous place. Like the Marlboro Man, or a hero from one of those old black and white movies. What do you call them? Those film "newer," film "nore?"

She purposely mispronounced it. She watched him watch her struggle with it. Then he smiled.

"It's "film noire." I love those flicks too."

"Well. I'll tell you what I love," she said, and then she giggled. "I love bad boys. I don't know what it is, I just can't seem to get my fill. Know what I mean? Can't seem to get my fill?"

He thought about it for one more moment, and tried to peer up her short skirt, and he said,

"Sure. What the hell. I could use a lift."

He got in. And they sped away.

She spoke in sultry tones as they drove.

"Look, I just broke up with my boyfriend. I was on my way over to his place to pick up my stuff, when I saw you. God, I hate that part of breaking up, don't you? Where you go to each other's pads, and divide up the stuff?"

"It's a bitch. But I'll tell you what, Scarlett darlin', you are well rid of any guy who is so stupid as to let you get away."

"Why, sugar, what a sweet thing to say."

"Sweet? Try, it's a fact. Look up "gorgeous" in the encyclopedia, and I bet it's all about you."

"Hee hee hee! You *are* full of sweettalk. Anyway, I was dreading going over to his place to get all those depressing boxes, so when I saw you, I just had this really crazy whim. I've always fantasized about writing to guys in prison, you know. I love watching those shows, where these cons and felons unload about how they got to where they are, behind those cold steel bars. And it seems like those prison guys are almost always real good looking. So I'd been fantasizing about actually becoming pen pals with one. You know, maybe mailing him some pictures of me in lingerie, to help the poor baby get through those long, dark, hard nights. And that's when I saw you. It's like we were destined to meet!"

The Seducer got bolder. He put his hand on her lovely, tanned shoulder.

"Believe you me, Scarlett, I am a big believer in destiny. In fact, what's weird is that you and I almost didn't meet. I was supposed to leave sooner, but a few of the guys gave me a little going away party. If I hadn't stayed for that, you and I would never have met."

"Oooh, I wouldn't have liked that. I'd be boxing up my loofah sponge and my Cuisinart and my CDs right now, all alone and sad and horny. How depressing is that!"

The Seducer grinned a leer.

"Well, I realize what I am about to say is very forward, but if you was my girlfriend, I would spend every wakin' hour, and every sleepin' hour, makin' sure you never got depressed. You hearin' me, Scarlett?"

"Scarlett! Hee hee. I like that. Just like Scarlett O'Hara."

"You got spunk. Just like her."

She smiled over at him, wetting her lips.

"Speaking of spunk, bad boy--do you know what a hate fuck is?"

"Yeah. I know what a hate fuck is."

And then she smiled.

"Gosh, I can't believe I'm saying this to you, a total stranger. But like I said, bad boys get me going. And something about the idea of fucking you on his bed, on those new satin sheets that he bought us

on Valentines Day, and which he later used to seduce his goddamn colorist--he's so vain about his hair, that bastard. Anyway, something about fucking you on his bed, that really gets me hot. You know what I mean?"

"Oh my darlin' Scarlett, there are no words to describe how badly I would like for that to happen. But, uh, I'm kinda lookin' forward to livin' life again, after bein' on the inside so long. And if your boyfriend was to walk in on us, I am fairly sure my life would be over. And I ain't takin' any chances."

"Oh no, bad boy, you don't have to worry about that. He left for Tokyo this morning, and he's not coming back for a week. I even drove him to the airport, to make sure that the dickhead got on the plane. I've never been so happy to see anybody leave the country!"

The Seducer's hard-on was turning into the Great Redwood of Woodies. This was all too good to be true. Yes, surely this was Fate sending him this Boy-Toy, to make up for the fact that he had been a Boy-Toy for so long, to so many.

"OK, baby. If you're really sure we'll be alone."

"Oh, I'm sure."

Now, so very involved had the Seducer been this entire time, in the charms of Scarlett, that he hadn't really watched what road they were taking on their journey. After all, why should he? He had not given her an address, nor a destination. He was allowing himself to be chauffeured, and now that they had agreed on a course of bliss for the afternoon, they would no doubt be going to the apartment where her stuff was. Her stuff, and those wonderful red satin sheets. The thought of her red nails and white skin, against those red satin sheets. And that blonde hair splayed out everywhere, him grabbing it by the handful. . .

But no. He had not been watching where they were going. Until finally, he took it all in: they were driving through a not-so-upscale part of town. Crap, he hoped they weren't going to some fleabag. Snatch was snatch, whether you got it in a palace or a tent. But he just wanted to start his first day of freedom with a touch of class. It would bode well for the future.

She found a station she liked on the radio, some steamy jazz, and she rambled on.

"I bet you could use a cold beer. Jeezus, I bet it's been forever since you've had a decent buzz. Steve always has some pot stashed somewhere. I love to screw while I'm high."

"High, low, whatever, it always hits the spot," he murmured, suddenly nervous.

"Oh, I'll show you how to hit the spot," she said playfully, and they turned down another street. Here was a bathtub propped upright, and a Virgin swathed in blue robes, offering a "Saint Mary of the Bathroom Fixtures" sort of beacon of hope. Here was a yard with cars up on blocks, all of which were hopelessly rusted past salvation. Here was a Yard Sale, selling the most pathetic crap you have ever seen, and a sign reading "NOTHING OVER 25 CENTS!" Here was a recent eviction, with a mountain of broken furniture and dirty clothes, still soggy from last night's rain, sitting on a front lawn. A bedraggled, abandoned baby doll sat atop the heap. Here was an old woman sitting on a front porch, staring out at the world, looking as old and tired as Teresias the Oracle

And the Seducer did not notice this next thing, because he had never been that sensitive to women--but the Woman in Red changed her expression; it became oh-so-subtly wicked.

"You know," she purred, "I think it really was Kismet, us meeting like this. And since you have just been released, I think we ought to make a damn party out of it. Stay in bed for days. I got a whole drawer full of lacy underwear that I've never even worn. What's your favorite color lingerie?"

The Seducer beamed. He had to consciously remind himself not to drool on himself.

"Purple. I love purple. Or black with red trim, you got that?"

"Sure I got that. Do you like black spiked heels?"

"God, yes."

"And how about black stockings, the kind with a seam up the back, you know, with a garter belt."

"Oh man, Scarlett, you are hot! You are a fox. I don't know if I can wait till we get there. Have you ever done it in a car, babe? In fact, now that I think about it, fuck, I have done it in this very car."

"Oooh, but we have to wait till we get to Steve's place, so we can set up the camera."

"What?"

"I want to tape this. That's the real turn on for me."

"Whoah, babe, no way. I appreciate your turn-ons, but my life has been weird enough, lately, I don't want some tape of me floating around."

"Oh, bad boy, where's your sense of fun?"

"Look, gorgeous, we'll have fun without the camera."

"Well, then where's your sense of profit? I figured we could sell our escapades on the web. You used to have a good, greedy hard-on going, when you taped those poor girls without their knowing it."

"Fuck! Let me out of the car!"

"Hey, baby, calm down. At least I'm telling you about it up front. You didn't tell those poor girls what you were up to, did you?"

"I said, let me out of the car!"

"Why would you want to walk? You said yourself, this is your car, you love this car."

"I'M TELLING YOU FOR THE LAST TIME, YOU SCHEMING BITCH, IF YOU DON'T STOP THIS FUCKING CAR RIGHT NOW, I SWEAR I'LL KNOCK YOU OUT OF IT!"

Our heroine, who had been carefully coached by the Fatman, was as prepared as any Girl Scout, toting everything from mace to a feminine little gun. She was unruffled by the swelling tension in that sports car. She pulled out her cellphone and dialed three numbers. The Seducer's eyeballs bulged.

"What the FUCK!"

"I'm dialing 911. You just threatened me. You, an ex-con on parole, threatened me."

"No I didn't, I just meant--shit, please don't!"

"Hello, police? I want to report an assault. I'm in my car, I picked up a hitchhiker."

"JEEZUS, STOP PLEASE, I'M BEGGING YOU! JUST LET ME OUT OF THE CAR, AND I SWEAR I'LL--"

But she was ignoring him, cooing into the phone.

"Yes, officer, we're in my car, at the corner of Clark and Ticonderoga, in Santa Monica. He told me he's just been released from prison, and he's out on parole. His name is--"

By now, he is freaking out and trying to grab the phone, and she is just laughing and keeping perfect control of the car. How brave she was, I thought.

Meanwhile, the Fatman and I, who were following not too far behind, moved in closer, so that I could tape what happened next, for posterity.

Also, we just wanted that Zen feeling of circularity that would be achieved when we saw *him* ejected from that car going fifty miles an hour. You could hear him screaming in pain as he bounced out onto the hard pavement and then slammed into a cement divider. He looked around, dazed. It was wonderful.

It was almost the exact same spot where he'd booted that poor dog out of the car. What poetic justice! It was a lovely moment for the Fatman and for me. The scumbag tried to get up, but he would later find out that his ankle was broken. He cried out, wincing as he limped. But in spite of the pain, he limped pretty darn fast, because I guess he believed squad cars, with their lights and sirens, would be screeching onto the street at any moment now, searching for him, to toss him back in jail for more of that scrumptious Prizun Luv.

The Fatman, in his tremendous foresight, had brought along a bottle of chilled champagne. This was a delicacy he enjoyed whenever he was celebrating the close of a chapter in Crimefighting. We opened it right there in the car, and offered some to the driver to be polite, although of course, he declined. Designated Driver, and all that.

The Fatman and I just sat back and relished the sight of this Seducer, this Conman, this Exploiter of Women, this Hater of Dogs. While I was videotaping it, the Fatman whipped out his camera and took some very fine still photographs of the guy in his desperation. The Fatman later went to great expense to have them properly matted and framed.

We hung them in the bookstore above the "PET CARE" section--our private joke, for there are no animals in the pictures. Then again, I guess it all depends on how you define "Animal." Anyway, the photographs look kind of like those artsy fartsy pieces you'd see in some modern art museum or trendy SoHo gallery, these snapshots of this limping desperate aimless homeless guy, lurking and hiding and weeping in a bad neighborhood, in a bad dream.

POST SCRIPT: I saved the best for last. I have been purposely restrained about describing what happened to the Seducer during that time he was in prison, and apparently the hottest little number in a numbered jumpsuit. Belle of the Ball, you might say.

HOWEVER: The reason that the Fatman edited out all of those lewd and lurid prison details from the middle of this chapter has nothing to do with restraint, or good taste, or wanting to spare you the more sordid aspects of prison life. It's just that we didn't want to blow our wad, so to speak. We wanted to save it for the end, the big finale. Because here's the punch line of this Crimefighting Adventure. The Exciting Climax, if you will:

If you want to buy some videos of the Doghater-slash-Seducer's sexual encounters with cell mates, you can buy them on the web. One big lifer, who had a lot of pull with the guards, arranged to have the trysts secretly videotaped, and now they are being sold on the same porn sight that sold the videotapes of those poor girls. (Those tapes are no longer for sale, of course.) But if you want to see the Seducer's on-screen debut, in prison, go to the XXX-porn website I told you about earlier, and just type in the words "JAILHOUSE COCK."

All proceeds will go towards putting those poor used girls through community college. The Fatman has set up a special fund.

Fattest Crimefighter in the World. Gotta love him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: HOMELESS FOR THE HOLIDAYS

It was Christmas Eve and I was profoundly depressed. I couldn't help but think about where I was one year ago at this time--specifically, I was partying as wildly as a sober person can at this BIG producer's house, lounging next to his BIG pool and eating from this BIG plate of carpaccio with capers, while starlets who thought they could use me to get into the movies clung to me like freezer burn on a leftover.

I was just a couple of months out of rehab; a fact which I had tried desperately to keep under wraps, because that can be death to producers and directors in this town. Oh, for stars, with the right public relations manager, it can be a coup for their career--part of the "dark journey to the center of one's soul." And if one comes out the other end, (as in, without overdosing, keeling over from a cocaine induced coronary, or ending up as a bloody heap of flesh in a mangled twist of wreckage at the bottom of Mulholland), yes, if one manages to survive the journey, there can be a nice big fat book deal in it, and a whole series of talk shows, magazine covers, and lots of free publicity, even if you don't have a movie out to promote. You can talk about your pilgrimage into cleanly sobriety.

But for behind the scenes talent, (i.e., those of us who work for a living), you'd better watch out: get a rep as a druggie, and everybody worries that you'll snort up the budget, fall behind schedule, scream at the celebrities, and generally become impossible to work with.

But as Fate would have it, some petty enemy of mine had sworn that he'd seen me at the Cannes Film Festival with somebody else's wife at the exact same time that I had actually been in rehab; needless to say I vehemently denied the rumor about being in Cannes with a high profile wife, knowing that this would fan the flames of that rumor, making everybody think it was true, and thereby diverting the suspicion about my stint in rehab. So my sordid secret was safe.

Where was I? Ah yes, the big producer's party!

I remember that as the clock struck midnight, and in one moment, it went from being Christmas Eve to Christmas, I was having sex with two of the starlets, and the part of me that could still hear the

voices from my rehab twelve step meetings, the part of me that remembered Christmases from my childhood, the part of me that was thinking of my child and what she might be doing at that moment--this lost, shrieking ghost in my soul wondered if this romp in the sack, this bout of mutual usury was really the way to celebrate the Christmas spirit. But since most of the people at the party did not celebrate Christmas, I was caught up in the bacchanalia all around me and thought to myself, as the three of us reached Nirvana, "How many times in a lifetime does an opportunity like this come along, anyway?" I remember very vividly, as I was throwing a robe on, twenty minutes after midnight on Christmas Day, and watching the nude cuties run around, I found myself feeling guilty, and I made a mental note that I would do what I could, in the coming year, for those less fortunate than me.

How Fate Loves a Jest.

(I murmur to myself, examining the depths to which I have fallen.)

In the space of one short year, I had become the kind of person that a year ago I had sworn to help.

Admittedly, my state was a little better now than it had been some months earlier, when I first found myself out on the street. Now I had better clothes, and a few bucks in my pocket. Granted, I was, for all intents and purposes, homeless. But, I told myself, trying to raise my spirits, I was employed, sort of. If you could call those odd things that the Fatman jollied me into doing every day, "employment."

But today, his assignment for me had not served to distract me from my woes, or from feeling sorry for myself; rather it had only made matters worse. You see, the Fatman had ordered me to spend Christmas Eve Day and part of Christmas Day documenting what life was like for the homeless. He was going to spend the day taking the helm at the bookstore, of course. It was after all, December 24th. Second busiest day of the year for merchants.

But one of the saddest days of the year for those without a dime to their name. That was to become profoundly clear to me as the day dragged by.

Thoughtful pause. How to put this?

In my own lame way, I have tried to find *some* way to make what I saw that day on the streets *somehow* moving. Or socially redeeming. Or artsy-fartsy, in the writing of it, you know, give it just the right spin that might raise it to the level of Greek Tragedy. I don't

know what that means, exactly, raising it to the level of Greek Tragedy, but the Fatman blabs about that alot, so I know that's some sort of a writing goal when talking about sad shit. Or to give it some kind of ennobling quality, touching as it did on the human condition. You know, the way real actual real writers like Dickens and Victor Hugo did. Both of whom I was supposed to read in school, but actually I didn't get around to cracking their books until some long nights spent in the Fatman's gardening shed, with "Les Miserables" and "Great Expectations" clasped into my hands, because the Fatman had recommended them. Highly

But try though I might, labor though I did, to fancy up my Christmas Eve vettings and voyeurism, the gross fact remains that what I saw--whether you, too, see it on tape, broadcast on the web, or just read about it--what I saw that Christmas Eve day was just plain sad. Sometimes scary, occasionally disgusting, but always ALSO, ALL SO sad.

I saw some punks rob a street vendor of his meager day's take, and although he screamed and stumbled, his head bloody from where they'd whacked him, murmuring about police and a doctor and please help and how was he gonna buy his little girl a Christmas present now, but folks just ignored the spectacle and passed by, clutching their gaily wrapped packages, and as they hurried down the streets to their car, oh they gave that poor sad soul a wide berth.

Then I saw Mojo Potato, (whose moniker I knew from hanging with him on the street), and ol' MoJo Potato had somehow gotten himself up on the church's roof, and he was sitting just under the Cross, alternately eating red pistachios and playing Christmas carols on his harmonica, which was really a rather awe inspiring picture he made, if you even bothered to look up, which most people didn't, so they missed it, because they were all more interested in seeing what Banana Republic was doing in their Christmas window, rather than gazing upward at the Cross of Jesus. What else?

As I was hiding behind a dumpster, taking a dump, unseen by the world, I saw a little Oriental guy come out of the back of a restaurant, look around furtively, grab a stray dog, and take it into the restaurant. I wish I'd caught that with my camera, but I was enroute to buy more blank videotape at the Rexall when I witnessed that miniature atrocity, which was then followed by some very savage sounds coming from that restaurant kitchen. I made a mental note not to eat there in the future, even if it was free leftovers from the Fatman's take out. No poochi pork for me.

I saw a baby all alone in a shopping cart, wearing nothing but a red Santa hat and a stained Piglet T-shirt, crying its eyes out. And don't even get started with me about why I didn't get involved or call the cops or family services or anything, and anyway you can calm down, because ten minutes later I saw its mother pushing the baby in the cart blithely down the Promenade, and her looking higher than even I had ever been, and I would place this mother's age at somewhere between twenty-five and a hundred.

I saw some bums who had actually gone to the bother of decorating a tree in the abandoned shack that was their home. They exchanged gifts. Pipe tobacco, a pair of gloves, a mini travel chess set, etc.

I saw a homeless girl, who couldn't have been much older than sixteen, giving a blow job to some guy under the Santa Monica pier, in exchange for some crack.

The lesson of that day was dull but important. Sometimes Tragedy is not ennobling or cathartic or moving or transformative or Greek. Sometimes it is just heartbreaking. Heartbreaking.

And maybe one day, when we all get a bellyful of how sad it really is, without the attendant attenuations that dilute its disgusting essence by "raising it to the level of art," maybe *then*, we'll finally do something about changing it.

Or else we'll be so disgusted that we'll go to even greater personal lengths than we usual do to ignore it. Build higher fences.

You see, that's the difference between reality and art. Art is ugliness transmogrified to the point where we can look at it just long enough to assuage our guilt and convince ourselves that we are not blind, insensitive, self-involved mediocrities, too incompetent and impotent to effect change. We at least have the courage to examine it as an audience. Or at least, that's what we tell ourselves.

But Reality is--well. I'm not even starting in on that one. Because even if I could mold a definition of reality which satisfied me, I doubt you would agree with it, because you have never been squeezed through the asshole of the world, as I had these past months.

And so anyway, dear reader. . .let us agree to disagree.

I am sorry. I am not projecting a "'Tis the Season" attitude.

But I guess my most noteworthy activity for the day was that in the early afternoon, I made my way, almost unconsciously, back to

my friend's house. No, not the Fatman, not that friend. I mean an old friend from better days. It was because of something that I had read in the "Hollywood Reporter" a couple of days earlier. Something that I hadn't dwelt on at the time. But after I'd processed it. . .well, it was like this.

A couple months back, before I was actually homeless, a friend of mine had agreed to store some of my stuff for me. I had told him some elaborate lie about changing residences because of a stalking x-girlfriend, and also my having to leave the country on work. Anyway, the upshot of it was, I'd read in the "Hollywood Reporter" that my friend had just gone overseas on a project, and I realized that it would be possible to show up on his doorstep without being put in the humiliating position of having to cross paths with him--as in, explain how awful I looked, confess my current reality, etc. I knew his housekeeper, though. We were on friendly terms. Once, I had bestowed upon her some very expensive designer sunglasses that an old girlfriend had left at my place, after walking out on me. I was sure that the housekeeper would let me in, and keep my secret if she suspected it.

It would give me a chance to retrieve some of my stuff, which was something I'd been hankering to do, but couldn't up till now, lest word of my situation leak out and spread like wildflowers. And while there wasn't much stored at his place of great value, what I really had a deep yen to do (which I cannot really explain, but did not want to deny), is I wanted to look through some my boxes of memorabilia.

Auld Lang Syne.

When I got there, Joan, that housekeeper, opened the door. Her jaw dropped. I had done the best I could to try and look presentable. Yes, I had washed and shaved, and my clothes were clean and even semi-unwrinkled. But I guess I had not realized until that moment just how much hopelessness had enshrouded me.

(Later that day, after seeing Joan, I did do something that I hadn't done in months. I took a good long look at myself in the mirror. (I don't count shaving in the Fatman's bookstore bathroom mirror, distorted as that reflection always was.) I mean I looked in a real full length accurate mirror, in an antique shop off of Rodeo Drive, and I saw that day how much despondency and desperation were written all over me. Mostly piercing from my eyes. I tried to change my expression, to fake the kind of self-confidence I'd feigned so often in the old days, but it did not work. It just did not work.)

Whatever. Well, to return to my story. Joan was appalled when she saw me. The fanciful fiction that I had concocted, just for her benefit, as I hitched over to the fantasy part of Hollywood--you know, the Beverly Hills/Brentwood/Bellaire Theme Park, well, my story evaporated from my brain when she opened the door. I could see that there was no point in telling whatever lie I had cooked up. She just looked at me, very uncomfortable, and said,

"Jeezus Christ!"

After a moment, she collected herself, and forced a really unsettling smile. She stammered as she spoke. "Uh. . .Your timing is not so good. . .Look, my ride home for the holidays is waiting, but uhm--"

"Oh, forget it then, Joan," I stammered back, "No problem, I'll come back another time."

"No," she said, "Uhm, don't leave, gosh, if you really need your stuff, it's in a box in the bungalow. And, uhm, look, we were going to drop this stuff at the Firemen's Food Drive, but hey, why don't you take it?"

That was all. I think we said a couple of other things, but with that brief exchange, my mood plummeted to the lowest it had ever been in all my months on the street. Which I guess means, the lowest it had ever been in my life.

I spent the remainder of the afternoon eating food earmarked for the Firemen's Food Bank and staring at a scrapbook of me when I had a family.

But this is not a story about me when I had a wife and daughter.

It is about something else, and you know what that is. Still, I will always remember that picture I must have made. Sitting on a stoop, with my family in one hand, and my Spam in the other. And nobody to blame but myself.

Merry Christmas, Motherfucker.

A year ago at this time, I thought to myself, as I dug into the Spam, I had spent Christmas brunch sitting around that same producer's pool, after sleeping till noon in one of his guest bedrooms, eating lox and bagels with a shmeer of cream cheese and Vidalia onions.

Ah well. I made my way back to the Santa Monica Promenade, killed some street time feeling sorry for myself, and then,

at about five o'clock, when I figured the Fatman would be closing up the store, I trotted in. Blue greeted me warmly. The Fatman, who was hulking over his books, did not.

"Afternoon."

No exchange of pleasantries of the season. But please understand, I did not fault him for this. I had gathered from hints and clues that, as hard as he tried spread the spirit of the holiday, the actual approach of Christmas, for the Fatman, just made all the more vivid those memories of happier Christmases from his childhood, prior to the brutal murder of Toby W. Smith's family. And before Toby W. Smith's tragic suicide.

But as it turned out, in that moment, the Fatman was not brooding about Christmases past, rather, he was preoccupied with a project forming in his mind. He wanted me to come tape it. The Fatman had heard of a church where they were giving out free gifts to homeless children, and he had decided that this was something we just had to videotape. Potential for a lot of poignancy, he kept saying. A lot of poignancy. The Fatman had a thing for "poignancy."

I agreed to do it, of course, not just because he was technically my employer, but more importantly, because I thought it would keep me from feeling too sorry for myself on this, my first homeless Christmas Eve.

And amazingly, the Fatman wanted to go along, and watch the distribution of the gifts in person. I have already shared with you how much he loathed going out, because of his enormous size, and because it tired him to walk very far. Mostly, I think he was terrified of people ridiculing him. But he was determined to accompany me this time, and spy on this bit of pathos.

I think I knew what all of this was about. It was becoming apparent to me that the Fatman was attracted to situations involving displays of human emotions of any kind. Not movies where people weep it up, but I mean places where *real* human drama, however petite, is happening. I figured this was because the Fatman had created a world for himself apart from the human race, and that, of course, meant that he never saw any real human emotions. I don't think he even let himself feel anything, if he could help it.

Whatever. Anyway, he had ordered a private car, and when it came, he lumbered out to meet it, leaving Blue with a huge beef bone that the Fatman had special-delivered from the deli. He bellowed for me to haul ass, and when I climbed into the hired car and squeezed in

next to the Fatman, I observed that he had brought along provisions: a towering plate of sugar cookies, and the biggest thermos I had ever seen, containing spiked cinnamon eggnog.

Without speaking, we sat in a bit of traffic until we got to St. Francis Church, parked in the lot, and waited.

As soon as I laid on eyes on the scene, it started to get to me. Images of Christmas are supposed to be of happy children sitting on Santa's knee, announcing exactly what they want for Christmas, and then on Christmas morning they get it, and lots more. That's how it had always been for me, and I must have been a teenager before I finally got that it wasn't like that for everybody. But here, crowding the lawn in front of the church, was a herd of skinny, raggedy children, clutching their mothers' hands--children who looked like they had nothing, and would have been happy for anything. All of the children and their mothers, and a few fathers, looked very homeless. The drawn faces, the undernourished bodies, the hopeless eyes. Let me tell you, my friend, I get a chill every time I remember it. There were a lot of shopping carts in that parking lot. A lot of crammed shopping carts.

The Fatman opened his thermos and poured himself some nog.

"They start giving out the gifts when the bells start ringing for six o'clock mass. I watched this last year," said the Fatman. "Pretty sad stuff. Really makes you grateful for what you have."

I dug out my camera and got ready to tape, sighing deeply.

"And all these kids, they're all homeless?"

"Yeah, from the shelter next door," said the Fatman. Now he was shoveling in the cookies. "But those shelters have a two week limit for how long you can stay there, so even that situation is precarious for them."

I couldn't get over it. All these kids, sleeping in a shelter on Christmas Eve, standing in line and waiting for one dopey little toy from a guy in a clerical collar who wasn't even pretending to be Santa Claus. Then, as I peered through the viewfinder, I noticed mothers opening their purses and taking out their wallets.

"Why are those women getting money out?" I asked. "I thought you said the gifts were free. You don't mean to tell me they're charging the homeless?"

"No, no," said the Fatman. "But the mothers have to show their shelter admittance cards to the padre giving out the gifts, so he knows that the people lining up for free presents are really homeless, and not just out for freebees."

"Wait just a minute!" I said to the Fatman. "Are you trying to tell me that there are people who aren't homeless at all, who would actually come down here and try to take free gifts meant for homeless children?"

For about a minute, the Fatman didn't respond. He just chuckled at me and munched, putting a serious dent in the pile of cookies. Then, finally, he spoke.

"Christ, no wonder there's so much crap coming out of Hollywood anymore. You fools are way too insulated, sitting up there in those big houses in Beverly Hills. You all inbreed, marrying people who live in the same zip code or belong to the same country club or whatever. It's obviously shrinking the gene pool, it's making you stupid. Of course people would come down here and try to get free gifts, you clodpate, if it means that some greedy bastards can save themselves from a trip to the mall and spending their own money!"

"Son of a bitch," I said. Just thinking about that level of greed was now threatening to kill off any Christmas spirit I had left.

The Fatman was laughing out loud at my naiveté. He poured me a cup of eggnog as well, and kept ranting on. "Don't you remember after the earthquake of '94, when millions were without water, and the National Guard rolls in after a few days, with bottles of water to give out? And they *request*, mind you, they ask nicely if only people who are without water take the free bottles of water, and then, the news cameras focus on all these princess types from Brentwood and Bellaire, who had come up to the Valley to stand in line, in their sequined sweats. When the reporter said that those areas still had running water, the princesses admitted "Yes, they still had running water, but they wanted to stock up on plenty, in case there were any aftershocks and their water got cut off."

"Is that true?" I said, incredulous. "They really did that?"

"Hell yes. Rich women with running water, loading up on dozens of bottles of water, while poor women from Northridge are standing there behind them in line, with their babies in their arms, and then they can't get any, because these rich bitches took it all."

"Unbelievable," I said, swilling the eggnog. It was spiked. It was good.

"So anyway," says the Fatman, pouring himself more nog, "That's why these parents gotta prove that they're actually as poor as they say they are. Because people can be greedy bastards sometimes, don't you think?"

I studied the Fatman, and then I said, without thinking,

"You're one angry son of a bitch, aren't you?"
The Fatman nodded wordlessly. Then I asked,
"Do you think that's the reason you eat so much?"

This, too, I had blurted out without realizing what I was saying. But now that it was out there, I let it hang. And hang in the air it did, like an undissipated fart.

I immediately wondered why the hell I'd said that. Why was I always flirting with danger and doing things that could make the Fatman cut me off for good, and put me right back out into the alley for people to shit on--*literally*.

But still, I worried so very much about the fate of the Fatman. He was so very fat, that I wondered if perhaps he was not long for this earth. It just seemed like if I could get him to talk about it, to think about it, then maybe I could help him somehow. After all, surely his huge size, and the repercussions it had on his life, was on his mind almost all the time. It had to be. Hell, maybe he secretly wanted to be able to talk about it with someone.

After a silence which seemed interminable, but which had probably only lasted a few seconds, I do believe that the Fatman was about to answer me--when our car was bodily slammed with a bunch of punks who were whooping and hollering it up, because they'd heard that someone was giving away free gifts. A security guard that had been hired by the church, just in case of such incidents, shepherded the pissed kids away from the gift table. These punks were far from homeless, that much was obvious.

But the incident served to deflect the conversation away from my question, and the Fatman changed the subject:

"Anyway," he said, pouring himself some more nog, "They have to make sure that--" and then, he interrupted himself, and grabbed me, spilling nog on both of us. He was always doing that, spilling things on himself and me.

"Look," he said excitedly, pointing in the direction of the crowd. "Those four kids over there, with the dark hair, and big brown eyes."

"Cute," I said, holding up my camera and beginning to tape. "That will make for some really poignant footage."

"No, it's not that," said the Fatman, growing animated. This always amazed me. When he added animation to his tremendous girth, he became a kind of weird physical phenomenon unto himself, the Eighth Wonder of the World.

"I know those kids!" he yelled. "Their mother comes in all the time, to the store. She buys ancient coins and first editions!"

I blanched.

"You mean she's got money, she's not homeless?"

"No, no way, she's rolling in it!"

"What the--" I sputtered. "And she's sending her kids into the homeless line for free gifts?"

"Looks like," said the Fatman. "We hit pay dirt already!" he shrieked, gesturing wildly. "Start taping, hurry! I want to document this!"

And I did, I went into high gear. This was kind of fun--uncovering the cons, videotaping the vultures, seeking out the scams. The four children had gotten to the front of the line. They smiled up at the priest, looking very waiflike, their large brown eyes full of Christmas hope. The priest smiled down at them.

"Hello! Where is your mommy?"

The oldest one took the lead.

"Oh, she's down at the welfare office, seein' if they got the job they promised for her."

The priest looked concerned.

"You mean, your mommy just left you here alone?"

One of the two little girls jumped to the rescue.

"Gosh, she said we should be safe in front of a church."

The priest smiled awkwardly.

"Of course you are, dear, but it's just that your mother should be here with you--"

The kids all started crying very loudly, and the priest went into a panic.

The Fatman, watching from his vantage point in our car, chuckled.

"This is great! Are you recording all this?"

"Yes, of course. But not the sound, my microphone is too weak."

This made the Fatman very upset.

"What are you talking about? The windows are down! I can hear everything just fine!"

"Yeah, but the mike isn't that sensitive, that kind of equipment costs a hell of a lot more than you gave me."

"Well, whaddya want," sputtered the Fatman defensively, "I handed you, a homeless stranger, nearly a grand, on trust!"

"I know that and I'm grateful and I'm doing the best I can with the equipment I have. Now be quiet, I want to listen."

While the Fatman had been talking, the sweet old priest had asked the woman who ran the shelter if she recognized the children.

"No," she said, squinting at them over her glasses. "I'm sure I'd remember if four such lovely little children--no, I don't remember them. Never saw them in the shelter."

At this news, all four children started to whine and cry, very upset at the thought that they might not get their Christmas toys.

Finally, to keep hysteria from spreading through the crowd, and also, I suppose, because the priest saw the Channel 7 news van pulling up to the church, the priest gave the four children each a little present.

The four children cheered as they clutched their wrapped gifts and ran off, the priest wondering where to, watching the kids with a worried look as they ran down the street.

NOW THIS IS WHEN the Fatman went into high gear. He ordered the driver to follow the children, which the driver did, and the driver didn't have to follow them very far. Needless to say, the Fatman was ordering me to "keep taping, keep taping!" And I did, I taped the kids running down the sidewalk triumphantly with their presents, tearing away the gift wrap, unable to wait.

One got a Winnie the Pooh something, another got a Transformer thingie, one got a Barbie, and one got some kind of jumbo squirt gun, which looked exactly like a real semi-automatic machine gun, by the way, except that it was bright pink plastic.

The kids turned a corner and our car followed, and I was glad that my tape cartridge lasted long enough to record the kids running up to a big huge shiny new SUV. Their mother jumped out to greet the excited kids. The Fatman laughed and swore angrily, all at the same time.

"That's her! That's the rich bitch who shops in my store. Buys her husband a gold coin every goddam birthday!"

The woman hugged all her kids and ogled their gifts. Then, she herded them into the SUV, and they sped off.

"Merry Fuckin' Christmas." I muttered, still taping.

"Taking toys from homeless kids. . ." muttered the Fatman.

"Cripes, is that the lowest thing you ever heard of, or what?"

What the Fatman would decide to do with this tape, who knew. All I did know was that both of our moods had been inestimably fouled, yet strangely invigorated, all at the same time. Fouled because it was disgusting to think that some well-to-do, blessed person would pull a stunt like this, at Christmas no less. But invigorated because, after all, this entire ordeal was just part of a larger project whose goal was to get real footage on the real story behind suburban villains. And also to get the straight dope on those who just *pretended* to be homeless.

By the time we were done with the project, including submissions from all over the world, to be broadcast on our web page, we would learn sadnesses about the true homeless that could rent your soul.

But then, there were evil frauds like this woman.

"Think of the example she is setting for her children. That's the real evil of it," muttered the Fatman, as he told the driver to go back to the church, so we could observe some more.

Of course, the Fatman had jotted down the woman's license plate. I knew by now, that detail recorded was the beginning of the end for any do-badders whom the Fatman wanted to wreak revenge upon. I hate to admit it, but I took a perverse delight in wondering what humiliations this woman was in for, as a result of her greed.

But the Fatman was anxious to hurry back to the church.

When we got back to the church, they had run out of presents. Oh no! The Fatman and I just stared; his jaw started to twitch, and I could tell that he was thinking about that greedy woman.

"This has never happened before," said one of the nuns, a sweet, middle-aged woman, who bore an amazing resemblance to Audrey Hepburn. "I don't understand it, because we have more presents than ever before. But I guess there are just more people here in need than ever before."

As I zoomed the camera in on her, she got a puzzled look on her face. "The thing is, we did a head count of the shelter check-ins earlier. We should have had enough."

Then, out of nowhere, the Fatman smiled.

"Beau!" he bellowed to our driver, for that was his name, "Back to the bookstore! Make tracks!"

I knew what he was up to. You see, one of the peculiar benefits to being around the Fatman is that the "operative philosophy" is that there should always be enough to go around.

ASIDE: THE FATMAN'S EXCESSES

The Fatman hated to run out of food before he was absolutely glutted and engorged, but also, he was not so rude as to not offer you some, if you happened by. So the requirements of his own vast appetite, in conjunction with his traditions of Southern hospitality, meant that he was in the habit of stockpiling, ordering, preparing, whatever--huge amounts of vittles. A rather grossly indulgent philosophy when applied to food, but his Falstaffian philosophy had translated rather wonderfully into certain other situations; this Christmas crisis was no exception.

When he had been buying gifts for the hundred neediest families, he had, of course, not just bought a hundred gifts, because each family surely had more than one child in it. When his research efforts to find out just how many children and what the genders were became too complicated, he solved the problem in typical Fatman fashion by buying far more gifts than could possibly be needed, just to make certain that everybody would have enough.

It was with a whoop and a holler and a rare burst of physical speed that he trotted through the bookstore and unlocked the storage room, where the beautifully wrapped presents were waiting. (He and I had wrapped them in one long marathon weekend that started on Friday night with "Miracle on 34th Street," and continued with a host of other Christmas movies, and ended with the Peanuts Christmas Special.)

Well! It was like something out of a feel-good Christmas movie. Only this was real. This was not made up stuff. This was really happening.

We had to hurry loading those presents, the Fatman and the driver and I, because even as we had been speeding away from the church at the Fatman's orders, the malaise over the homeless gift crisis at the church was spreading through the crowd. The disappointment that they had actually run out of presents was palpable. As we were returning to the church, we could hear the crying and wailing and sobbing of the disappointed kids. You couldn't have staged something that would pull so hard at your heartstrings.

Well, actually, you could. You could stage such a thing; Hollywood does it all the time, but that's neither here nor there. What is important is that this wasn't staged, and the folks were dispersing with a despair and disappointment that was practically visible; it hung over the crowd like a dark cloud over Eeyore. That's why we had to hurry, so we could get back in time to save the day before everyone had left.

And we did, we made it just in time. News trucks from the TV stations were still there. The priest was still there, and the people were still there, and the homeless kids were still there, and it was perfect. It was so perfect because everyone looked so very sad--well, of course, I don't mean it was perfect because everyone was sad--I'm not explaining this well, I'm so excited as I write this. But I mean it was perfect that everyone was so sad, because of how happy it was about to get, and you needed the sadness part for contrast--do you get what I mean?

Just picture it. There are these sad parents, who are homeless, and don't have a buck to their name, trying to explain to their cold, crying kids about why these poor tykes weren't even going to get one lousy present for Christmas. Lots of audible sobbing going on. But my favorite part was those goddamn manipulative news crews, who came out here to snag their token Christmas Eve feel-good story to air on the evening news, you know what I'm talking about, when suddenly it had turned into this real sad saga, and the news people--the roving reporters and the crew and the techies who huddle in the van and check the monitors--they're all having this emergency confab trying to figure out, damn, is there any way they can put some kind of happy spin on it? Because you can't leave the viewers with this downer story on Christmas Eve. And the nuns are panicking, and praying for a miracle--when suddenly it comes, the miracle comes, in the form of the Fatman!

Fattest Crimefighter in the World! Take that, you gift-stealing Bitch from Bellaire!

So the Fatman's big black car drives up, and the driver pops the trunk, and he and I get out and run around to the back, and just when the sadness of the scene was overwhelming, and the news anchors are figuring they'll have to go with that reality--Here comes Santa Claus, Here comes Santa Claus, Right down Santa Claus Lane.

It was great.

The only thing was this. The Fatman didn't want anybody to know what mysterious benefactor had shown up with the presents. And I could understand. You see, you have to realize that no matter how kind and generous an act the Fatman was committing, as soon as the attention turned to him, nobody was thinking anything wonderful about him. Instead, they were just totally overwhelmed at his physical grotesqueness. The Fatman was far too perceptive not to notice this, and it cut him to the quick. And he just couldn't bear it. He knew instinctively that if the news cameras were to train on him, with the roving reporter revealing the Fatman as the hero, then everybody who watched him on TV that night would not think, "Oh what a wonderful man!" Instead they would think, "*Man, is he fat! Look at him, Maude, why he's the Fattest Man I ever saw! Isn't he the Fattest Man you ever saw?*"

So the Fatman hid. He had come to the rescue, and now he could not even take credit for it.

(The Fatman always thought ahead, though. I was to learn that there were few details in an operation that missed his attention. For example, he always ordered a dark car with tinted windows, so as to avoid the cruel stares and glares of strangers. That was to come in handy, in this moment.)

It was surreal. I was still taping the whole thing, of course--the whole wonderful change of the crowd's mood. The children's tears turned to laughter and gasps of delight, as they opened their gaily wrapped presents. Their parents were sobbing with relief and elation, so deeply had they felt their children's disappointment, these parents who could not afford to give their children a Christmas, and who were so completely dependent on the kindness of strangers. All the nuns were practically dancing, thanking God, and some of them had turned into singing nuns.

Finally, of course, predictably, threatening to ruin the private joy of the man responsible for it all, there were the news reporters, who were all over us, banging on the windows of the car and trying to see who it was inside, who had done this wonderful thing. But they could not see inside the dark windows, not even when they shone their bright lights on the tinted glass. The driver and I were both tight-lipped, true to our promise to the Fatman, refusing to reveal what mysterious man was inside that car. We somehow managed to slip back inside the car

after finishing our deliveries, without the nosy cameras being able to get a glimpse of the Fatman.

We drove off. Nobody could jump in their news vans fast enough to follow us, and everybody else was all engrossed in their gifts. I could see that there were tears in the Fatman's eyes. I didn't tape that part of, I gave him his privacy. Well, actually, that noble sentiment on my part, to give him his privacy, that didn't last. Didn't last long at all. But I still don't feel guilty about what I did that night.

"Listen to me," said the Fatman, turning to me as we were pulling up to the bookstore. "I appreciate everything you do, but tonight is off the record. I'm happy to invite you and Blue to Christmas dinner tomorrow, but my delivery of the presents to the Hundred Neediest Families is not for the chronicles. I don't need a cameraman with me on this trip. Is that clear?"

"What?" I said, truly taken aback, "Are you kidding? What we just shot in the church is some of the most poignant stuff I've ever seen. And tonight, with you delivering more gratis prezzies to these Hundred Neediest, man oh man, if I got this to the right sources--and believe me, I have connections--why, this could help get my career back up and running. Maybe I could even edit it into a little documentary, win a prize or two--"

Then I froze, because I realized, a bit too late, just what I was saying, and how self-centered I sounded. Except for that I also meant the part about wanting to document this "feel-good" stuff because, well, it felt good. I really did believe that people should see this stuff, instead of always just seeing the negative, cynical, evil stories. What I had meant is that it was exciting to be part of a project that was about helping people instead of--

But the moment was lost. The Fatman just glared at me, and then I guess he calmed down a little, because he said,

"Look. I realize that being part of something that feels so very right and noble is alien to you. Because of your recent occupation. Bein' a Hollywood producer, and all. 'Rather be a piano player in a whorehouse,' as my uncle used to quip."

Then the Fatman just smiled sadly, and he eyed me a moment before continuing.

"What I mean to say, friend, is this: I realize that philanthropy is about the most fun a body can have, and by your own admission, that's a new sensation for you. That's why you're the Robin and I'm the

Batman. . .But here's the thing. My rules are very clear on this. You don't go broadcasting your good works to the world. Charity should be given freely and anonymously, lest the darker motive of lust for approval be revealed or fostered. So nobody can know about what I'm going to do tonight. As far as these kiddies and their parents go, Santa Claus is coming to town, and that's the long and the short of it. No taping tonight. You go do whatever you have to do. Go play Secret Santa with your other homeless friends, or go to church and pray or something. Or if you prefer, you and Blue can just stay in the bookstore and read. The Christmas stories section is set up right next to the Kosher cookbooks. But you aren't coming along with me tonight, savvy?"

I nodded, so that he'd know I understood.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: A BIG FAT LIE TO THE BIG FAT MAN

Bullshit I wasn't going along.

What happened tonight was going to be great, and I was quickly becoming a true documentarian, in that I was addicted to capturing real live in-your-face human emotions on film, even if these were going to be the happy kind, and therefore less marketable by Hollywood standards than cruelty and grief.

Hell yes, I was going to follow him and tape him.

I knew how to outsmart him, too. I was starting to know how the Fatman thought, and as a result, I could stay one step ahead of him.

The thing is. . .*of course* he would expect me to try to follow him, in spite of the superficial agreement we had just come to. So I had to figure a way around this. Around him figuring a way around me, that is, which is what I knew he was doing right now.

And I figured fast. By now, it was past sunset, by the time we got back from the church bit, and the Fatman had a lot of houses to hit that night, so he wanted to don his Santa suit and be out of there with his driver as soon as possible. The driver and I loaded the trunk and the car with toys, as many as possible, although it was clear that the Fatman would have to make a trip back to the bookstore for more loads later on, in the middle of the night.

I couldn't believe how carefully the Fatman had planned it all; he'd fed the Hundred Neediest Families addresses that he had acquired from his sources into the computer, and then he ran a program that created an intricate map and set of directions, indicating which addresses were closest to each other, and the computer printed out the most expeditious route from address to address. If the Fatman worked from sunset Christmas Eve, all night, through a chunk of Christmas Day, he would be able to deliver all the toys. Many of the addresses were in close proximity, so that helped. About twenty hours straight, is what he had planned, scheduling about five stops an hour.

He had also planned provisions, since, as you and I both know by now, the Fatman could not get through more than two or three hours

without consuming a pretty sizable heap of food. So it did not surprise me when I saw that the backseat was loaded up with snacks and meals jammed into assorted bags, tins, and Tupperware containers.

"Won't have time to stop and eat, so I packed the sleigh full of delectables!" he announced to the driver, in a voice that was already redolent with Santa Claus jolliness.

But the best was yet to come. And it was the finishing touch that made me decide, unquestioningly, that I was going to follow the Fatman and tape him--because I knew, *I just knew* that after the fact, when it was over, he would thank me for it. There was so damn little in his life that filled his heart with joy, or allowed him to feel really good about himself, and dammit, the Fatman deserved this.

Last but not least, I rationalized to myself, "Hey, the Fatman was always spying on people, having me videotape them against their will or without their permission, because he felt some higher moral good justified it." So why couldn't I use the same logic? After all, it's not like I was going to use this against the Fatman. Just the opposite, I would surprise him with it one day, when he was feeling blue. Maybe I would coax him into posting it on the web, because the world needed desperately to know that there were souls as kind and generous as the Fatman who were still out there, doing good deeds. If you didn't know this, well, sometimes the stuff you saw on the news could just depress you so much that you didn't even want to go on. Do you know what I mean?

Where was I? Oh, yes! The finishing touch. The Fatman planned on delivering the gifts while wearing--what else--his Santa suit. He lumbered out of the bathroom, beaming. He was so cute.

"How do I look?" he said. He could not help fishing for compliments, although he knew damned well that he looked great. He had told me, during that whole business when he played Santa at the department store, (which he only confessed to me when that nasty lawsuit came up; he still did not know that I had secretly taped him), anyway, he told me that he had spent nearly a thousand bucks on this Santa suit, and it was quite the grandest one I had ever seen. The glorious white flowing beard, which alone had cost a couple hundred, hid his galaxy of moles and his quadruple chin. And with his Falstaffian girth and twinkly eyes and those yards of red velvet and that thick white fur trim and those massive black boots and the hat with the jingle bells--well, he looked wonderful. Just wonderful! He was Kris Kringle.

"You look mighty spiffy yourself," he remarked, and I did, for I had put on what decent clothes I had, and even a holiday necktie that I bought for a quarter at a yard sale, but which looked like it cost at least ten times that.

(How far I had come, I thought, and how many Adventures we had survived, since the day I met him in my out-of-season jingle bell reindeer thong underwear that rode up the crack of my ass.)

"In honor of the solemnity of the night," I said, "I am going to church. Blue will hang here with his new beef bone, and after services, I will take your suggestion and soothe myself to sleep reading "A Christmas Carol." I have only ever read the Cliff's Notes version and seen the Bill Murray movie. I look forward to reading the original."

"Good man!" said the Fatman, clapping me on the back. I nodded and smiled.

"Also," I said, "I wish to thank you for the hospitality of offering your store for shelter. Looks like it's going to be unseasonably cold for L.A."

Well, when I said this, the Fatman, he smiled at me and nodded, but he was squinting at me, trying to figure my angle. He thought I had said that big alibi in an attempt fool him, and that in actuality, I would start dogging his footsteps as soon as he left with his driver. Maybe he thought I was even stupid enough to try and follow him around in the VW.

This time, I had him outsmarted, though.

I was going to follow him, but not around, from house to house. The Fatman was too sharp for that; he would have been sure to notice me. And scream at me and send me packing. Or insist that I hand over the camera and he would destroy the tape.

Besides, (and here's how I knew I was becoming a true documentarian), there was no good footage to be gotten from watching the Fatman lumber through the darkness, drop the gifts, and bolt. It was what would happen *inside* those houses *after* the toys were delivered that promised to bring a tear of Christmas joy to the eye. To the Fatman's eye, impartial. So my plan was just that.

Not follow him to every house. But to be lying in wait at certain houses, to be waiting when he arrived, to spy in windows and tape the reactions of the families. Especially the children.

I knew from discussing it with him earlier than certain of the Hundred Neediest Families were even more needy than others. Several of the families had kids in wheelchairs or otherwise handicapped; it

was these physical maladies that had pretty much destroyed the families financially. I read about one family where there was no dad, and the mom had no arms and one leg, or no legs and one arm, something like that--all this tragedy because of a terrible run-in with an uninsured drunk driver, a gentleman new to this country, who apparently did not understand the meaning of a red light. The family had been dirt poor even before that, so now they were maybe the most pathetic people on the whole list of pathetic people.

Anyway, my plan was to beat the Fatman to several of these cases where his Santa visit would be particularly poignant. I would lurk, linger, and document the joy. Then comes the Peace On Earth, Good Will Toward Men. All that cornball stuff. Gotta have it. Gotta love it.

As it turned out, the Fatman did later agree to post the footage I shot on the web. But it was not for the reasons I thought we'd want to world to see it. I mentioned, did I not, that I thought it would be a good thing, a heartening thing, for the world to see this--wait, I even have it here in my notes--yes, here it is, "*The world needed desperately to know that there were souls as kind and generous as the Fatman doing good deeds.*"

And yes, some of the Hundred Neediest Families vignettes turned out that way. And because they didn't involve anything litigious or illegal, we not only posted them on our Christmas link, but the authorities let them stay up, even after investigating the Fatman.

As for what I documented that night, you shall hear about that shortly, seeing it not so much through my eyes, but rather through the eyes of the Fatman. . .the Fatman on Christmas Day. But as for the question of whether or not I got away with it. . .my sub rosa following of the Fatman. . .

OK, friends out there in Movieland.

CUT TO: Next day, Christmas Day, under the pier.

I am sleeping, and sleeping hard, visions of sugarplum fairies dancing through my head, no doubt because the last thing I remember seeing, as I fell asleep about three in the afternoon on Christmas Day,

after following the Fatman around all night, is seeing two gay homeless dudes, Kevin and Stefan, going at it madly, about ten yards away, under the Santa Monica Pier. As planned, I had followed the Fatman around all night and through much of Christmas Day, this day. By the way, I was amazed at the Fatman's ability to just keep going and going, but he did it. Amazing. He delivered all the gifts to the Hundred Neediest Families. When he was done and headed back for the bookstore, I snuck back to my usual place under the pier, and I fell sound asleep, and that was that.

And that's when I had the dream about the X-rated sugarplum fairies. Specifically, the dream was about a sex bordello, decorated in a North Pole theme, with midget elves facilitating orgies, and most of the beautifully wrapped presents in the dream contained bizarre sexual toys, and lots more weird stuff happened, reindeer and snowmen that came to life, and there were Lapland dances, but the dream is neither here nor there.

Then, a most amazing thing happened. I wish I could have been awake to tape what I am about to describe to you, because, Lordie, what a sight it must have made!

First, he appears in the distance: a gargantuan giant in an elaborate cherry red Santa suit, with a glorious flowing white beard, and black boots the size of an elephant's leg. This Santa emerges not from his sled, but from a dark car with tinted windows, parked right down near the beach on Ocean Avenue. This satellite-sized Santa emerges from his mini-limo, and, using his jolly cane with the Dandie Dinmont dog head on the crown to help him on his way, he storms down the street, to the steps leading down towards the crashing waves, then he stomps across the sandy Santa Monica bike path, annexing the beachhead, making his way, unafraid, until Santa is standing under the dark and ominous pier, where the Pod People stand, amazed.

(The Pod People, for those of you not in the know, are the homeless who lurk under the Pier, and who live in a blur of time that knows no holidays, punches no time clock--only the seasons of heat versus rain, nights and days of danger and laziness, and the plodding, paranoid preoccupations of the Pod People: the rush-hour of those souls with absolutely no place to go: the politics of panhandling, the gridlocks of grifters. . .)

Now, normally the Pod People cannot be fazed, but I later heard that even these jaded souls were astonished by the mammoth

Santa. The crowd of looming and loony Pod People parted for him; it was like Moses (AKA Charleton Heston) parting the Red Sea. And this big Santa was headed right for me, he was! He poked me with his walking stick, and that's when I woke up, and I was wide awake in a heartbeat. Blue was not around to bark, (he had passed the night in the bookstore, you remember), so there was no warning bark, only that harsh jab in my ribs to startle me into sudden consciousness.

I blinked, not believing my eyes! The Fatman had emerged from his cave.

"What are you--how did you--I can't believe it!" I babbled something to that effect, then I just stared. The Fatman glowered.

"You taped me! You taped me when I explicitly forbade it."

I squinted at the massive Fatman, whose girth blocked out the sun.

"OK, I did. Yeah, I taped you, because you were doing a nice thing, and the world needs to see that, and besides, I get tired of just taping depressing shit all the time."

"I can't believe you taped me without my permission!"

"Excuse me," I said, my brain starting to function, "But how is that worse than us taping strangers without their permission?"

"You know very well how. You're my partner. It's a matter of trust."

"OK then, *partner*, it was for a higher good--isn't that what we're about?"

"What we were about. *Were* about! Past tense. The Crimefighting is over. Oh, I know you don't tell me everything, Mr. Homeless Dude. I know you've kept exactly three-hundred and forty-two dollars in small change, in the last weeks and months. I know everything! I knew you were taping me last night. And after I ordered you, begged you, not to do it! I'm sick of it. This is not the way it was with Kimosabe and Tonto."

I jumped to my feet and was brushing the sand off me. He started to stomp away, but I followed him.

"You're nuts, you know that! Can we talk about this after I've had my coffee?"

"It's over. You are not welcome in my bookstore again."

"Oh yeah? Well then give me back my goddam dog!"

"Whatever. I hate dogs."

I couldn't believe how fast he was stomping away. I could hardly keep up with him. The Pod People were just gawking the whole time. I ran after the Fatman.

"Fine. I'm sick of this craziness, anyway. I risk my life, and for what? So you can get material for your stupid web page? So you can feel like you have some kind of life, beyond just your collection of postage stamps and your smelly old books and your big piles of food? Well you can just go to hell!"

He turned around and glared. I found it withering, but not really. What I mean to say is, I wasn't scared of him. I just hated the thought of not being a Crimefighter anymore.

Twenty minutes later, I got to the bookstore, ready to pick up my dog and get the hell out of there. Screw it. I could take the stories from the street I'd already accumulated and make a big hit movie, real artsy-fartsy stuff. Bigass award stuff--and the Fatman just might not come out smelling like a rose, either. I stormed in to get my dog. The Fatman was just sitting there, in his Santa suit.

"Do you have it with you?"

"Do I have what with me?" I snarled.

"The tape of last night. I wanna see it."

Just like that, it was over. The fight was over. Yeah. I had the tape in my backpack. We sat down and we watched.

Since this was one of the few videotapes that the authorities allowed us to leave up after the investigation ensued, I refer you to our website. Or, if it has been entirely taken down by the time of this publication, you can surf to any number of the mirror sites that will no doubt be carrying it. This was very sweet stuff, those Hundred Neediest Families getting their Christmas loot. And a picture is worth a thousand words.

At least it is in this town.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: FLYING THE REINDEER, RIDING THE DRAGON

When I stopped writing last, I left you to see for yourself on the web, the tape of the Fatman delivering gifts to the Hundred Neediest Families. And I have to say that every time I have watched it since, I am torn between feeling happy at the elation those kids felt, and depression over the simple raw festering fact of all the want and poverty in the world. A Hundred Neediest Families.

HA! What a joke. Christ, there are millions more in the world, without a Fatman to come to their rescue. But sometimes, watching the tape cheered me up. All those kids, so insanely happy to be getting their gifts, when I don't think they thought they were going to get anything. My favorite one was where the kids got the puppy to replace their other dog. Oh, if you could have seen their faces. But what am I saying? You have seen their faces. That tape has become the stuff of Christmas legend; this generation's *cinéma vérité* "It's a Wonderful Life." The hits to the website were through the roof that Christmas holiday, and the numbers still increase everyday.

But back to the rest of Christmas Day. My impressions of the Fatman watching the tape. I had finally gotten my first cup of morning coffee, even though it was now well into the afternoon on Christmas Day. I was watching the Fatman out of the corner of my eye. I could tell he was not enjoying the tape nearly as much as he thought he was going to. And when I glanced back at the VCR, I knew exactly which house we were nearly up to. The one that had turned my stomach. Christ, I thought, I just had to change the subject. I had to turn off this damn tape.

I stood up and yawned hugely.

"C'mon, enough of this. I'm sick of watching TV. It's Christmas! Hey, let's go to church! In fact, how about if we go--"

"SHUT UP AND SIT DOWN." said the Fatman, staring unflinchingly at the TV screen.

"What's the point?" I said. "You've seen most of it. You've got the idea. OK, so their surroundings are depressing. So they're miserably poor, and we can't fix the problems of the world. Hey, you

gave 'em some toys, and you cheered 'em up. You did your part. Hey, do you know of a decent restaurant open on Christmas? I'll even pay."

The Fatman eyeballed at me. "Good God. Whatever is next on that tape must be really sad, if you're offering to spring for dinner." I stopped jumping around and stared at the Fatman.

"Yeah, OK. It is. And this is the last thing you need to see today. Look, you did a wonderful thing. Can't you let it go at that? Why do you purposely do this to yourself?"

And then, the Fatman scared me. He sat up straight in his bigass chair.

"Because I'm a *Crimefighter*, that's why! I'm the Fattest Crimefighter in the World," he said. "And how do you think a Crimefighter fights crime? By first taking a good, long, look at it. By ferreting it out, and by not being afraid to look it in the eye."

"OK, fine, look evil in the eye!" I blurted out. "You know your problem? You never give yourself a break. You're a nice guy, you obviously love Christmas, why don't you just enjoy the day? Look at all the good around you. Shit, there's generosity and people giving gifts to people they don't even know, and more volunteers than the shelters even need, and families all gathered together, and lovely little rituals. . ."

But it was hopeless. The Fatman just smiled at me sadly, put his finger to his lips to shush me, took the remote, and pressed PLAY.

And as for what was on that tape: well, since you cannot see it, I will recount it for you, as I wrote it in my journal.

For a moment, there was only darkness, as my camera stared into the black night and waited for the Fatman to get out of his car. The driver got out first and held the door open for him. Then, the Fatman, AKA Santa Claus, got out with his bigass bag of toys and crept up to the front door.

He pulled several brightly wrapped packages out of his bigass sack, as he had all the other times, left them on the front stoop, and rang the door bell, trundling back into the gaily festooned black sedan, as fast as his legs would carry him.

And then, just as before, there was a long moment, while whoever was in the shabby little house woke up and padded to the front door, to see who the hell was ringing at this time of night.

The door opened. And the person who opened it was mighty creepy.

Now, I know that at the time, the Fatman probably couldn't have seen this, not from his vantage point, because he was sitting way across the street in his car with the tinted windows, squinting at his computer printout to see where was the next address on the Hundred Neediest Families list.

But because I was the sneak who was documenting all of this, I could see the guy answering the front door. I had ninjaed up to the house and was hiding near the window. (In retrospect, I realize that I was yet again taking my life in my hands; I was lucky someone didn't see me and take a shot at me.) Anyway, the guy who opened the door was deathly skinny, and he was wearing these Tigger pajama bottoms and a stained t-shirt, and his eyes darted around in the darkness.

"What the fuck--who's that--who's there?"

I could hear the paranoia in his voice, even from where I was hiding behind some crates. I knew that tone. It sure as hell sounded drug-induced to me. Then, shit, I noticed he was holding a gun. This skinny man in the stained shirt was holding a gun, as his eyes darted around, trying to peer into darkness.

"Oh God, please don't let this lunatic see me," I prayed into the dark night. "I'm just here with a guy delivering Christmas presents, please don't let me die this way, not after I've survived as much as I have. Oh please let me live to tell about it."

The skinny man couldn't see the Fatman's car, which was around the corner and shrouded by some trees. Thank God for that, at least, I said to myself.

Then, someone else appeared at the door. It was a woman, who looked frighteningly like the man, in all the creepiest respects. She held a half-empty bottle of some kind of cheap booze. She, too, was rail thin; she too, had bug eyes; and she, too, was wearing some kind of baggy pants and filthy shirt. But whereas he was balding, with what hair he did have pulled back into a greasy ponytail, hers was very kinky, and dyed an unhealthy looking whitish-yellow, with black roots.

They both looked down and saw the presents at the same time. First, they quickly looked around to see who had dropped the gifts, but then, all paranoia and curiosity vanished. They were just too stoned to sustain any normal reactions to the world around them. Instead, they just grabbed up the presents, like such anonymous generosity happened

to them all the time, and was the most normal thing in the world. They examined the loot with greedy delight.

Then, at about this time, several waifish children toddled out from their single bedroom, rubbing their eyes sleepily and yawning, until they saw the gaily wrapped presents. Their faces lit up, and suddenly they were wide awake. They all began squealing and babbling at once.

Suddenly my heart sank. Something in my gut told me. . .well, let's just say, I knew how it was going to go from here. You could just tell from the wicked gleam in the man's eyes, the creepy smile on the woman's face--and the track marks on both their arms.

The children were leaping and grabbing for the presents, but their parents--if you can call them that--were yanking them out of reach of the children and yelling "No!" The kids responded with protests and crying and wheedling.

"Please can we have our presents? It's Christmas!"

"Yeah, you said there wasn't no Santa, but you were wrong! There is a Santa Claus, I know there is, because look, he brought us all this stuff."

"Yeah! And you know it's supposed to be for us, because he left it all right here at our house."

"QUIET DOWN!" bellowed the man. "CAN'T YOU HEAR THE NEIGHBORS YELLING FOR YOU TO SHUT UP!"

But the screaming and whining and crying of the children continued unabated. Then, the mother looked down at her children.

"That's OK, babies. You're gonna get toys for Christmas, just not these toys."

She looked at her man. She grinned, her incisors like fangs.

"Oh honey, are you thinkin' what I'm thinkin'?"

"You bet I am, baby. Fuckin A! Our prayers our answered!"

The woman smiled sickly, then looked at her crying brood.

"Yeah, hon. But don't sell all the toys, OK? Or if you do, make sure you get somethin' for the kids at the 99 cen' store."

"How the fuck am I supposed to do that, it's two o'clock in the goddam morning?"

"Well, then buy them somethin' from the Sevneven. Some Pokeyman or Tellytubby shit or somethin', just please come back with somethin' for 'em. I mean shit, it is Christmas."

"OK, OK, I'll take care of it. But for Chrissake, get them to shut up. That's the last thing we need, is to have the neighbors call the cops."

Then he yanked one of the wrapped gifts from a taller child who had managed to snag one. And with that, the woman dragged the kids back into the house. This made their screaming and crying even worse. I winced as the door slammed, but still, I could hear their wailing, even through the front door. My heart was breaking for them.

And then, a few seconds later, the man emerged again. He had yanked on some nasty windbreaker, but he was still wearing the Tigger pajama bottoms, and he was wearing house slippers.

He jammed the presents into a filthy pillowcase, chuckling this nasty laugh as he did, and muttering to himself. He took one last belt from the bottle before he left the house. I just knew I had to follow him. If the Fatman was about fighting crime, which started with documenting it for all the world to see, then I just had to get this on tape.

Now I have to tell you that frankly, this loser was too fucked up on the booze and God knows what else to have any idea that I was following him. Still, once he left the house, he was paranoid of everything and everyone.

He walked down the street to an intersection that abruptly changed from neighborhood side street to urban. It was busy, this street, and there was nothing "Christmassy" about it. Hookers were out in abundance, and shadowy figures meandered in and out of strip joints and peep shows and twenty-four hour XXX-rated video stores. And of course, lurking in doorways were the dark and dangerous looking creeps who were always ready to deal. Twenty-four/Seven, open during the holidays for your shopping convenience, they were always ready to make a deal.

The skinny man with his pillowcase was strutting now, and feeling good, because he knew what was going to happen in just a minute. The second best feeling in any addict's life. He knew he was about to score.

There were so many seamy, sneaky looking sorts, that I was able to blend right in with very little trouble. I had put the camera in my bag, of course, with the lens sticking out the secret hole, and I was able to get fairly close to the guy.

He stood around on the street corner, calling to assorted passersby.

"Hey, anybody want some toys, cheap? Anybody forget to do their Christmas shopping? Put it off till the last minute? Well, tonight's your lucky night!"

And then he chuckled a vile little chuckle.

"Avoid that shoppin' mall traffic jam! Hell, the fuckin' mall is closed! What am I saying, it's Christmas! I'm your last fuckin' chance!"

A street hooker ambled up to him, and looked at him with lovely stoned brown eyes. She used the delicate tips of her long red fake fingernails to gingerly open the filthy pillowcase a little wider. The skinny man held it out eagerly. I had my zoom lens on him, and I saw he was missing a front tooth.

"Go ahead, sweetheart. Take a look. I got it all. I got a pretty little baby doll, I got a Transformer, a stuffed Pooh Bah, some baby clothes."

She peered inside the pillowcase.

"How much?" she said, taking some of the items out and examining them. All in good shape, you could tell she was thinking. Not used, not broken, and all still in the original boxes, all in their shrink wrap.

But then, the hooker looked at him a long moment, and with great disdain. And she said something which, in that moment, gave me, the voyeur, some much needed hope for the human race on this Christmas morn.

"You sick fuck!" said the hooker. "You think I don't know what you've gone and done? You've gone and stole your babies' Christmas presents that their mommy or grandma or whoever done bought them, and here you are selling 'em for drug money! You think I can't see how bad you're jonesin'?"

The sleazebag saw his drug money slipping away, before he even had his hands on it, and he violently shook his head "no."

"No, no, it's not like that! My babies, why. . .their presents are all wrapped up and under the tree, I swear to God they are, ready for my kids to open. This is just some shit I took from work, yeah, I ripped these off from my job I hate. . .yeah, that's it. . .see I work at Toys 'R Us, and I jes' stole these off the delivery truck. I'll give you a real good price. "

And me, who was spying on it all, I just shook my head. That part about him saying that he stole the presents from work. Good lie. . .Man, was that a scam I knew all too well. When you lie to get a fix,

make sure that it's a believable one, one that makes you look just like the scumbag that you are--a junkie in need of a fix.

But the hooker was eyeing him up and down.

"You lyin' shitbag," she said. "You're selling your kids' Christmas presents. Why don't you do the decent thing, and get your ass back home and put those back under the tree? Think of how your kids is going to feel when they wake up and don't find nothing under the tree?"

Suddenly, the jonesing man flipped out.

"Fuckin' whore! I ought to fuckin' cut you, what fuckin' business is it of yours?"

"Don't fuck with me, fuckwad, or I'll call my pimp."

And sure enough, the jonesing man looked up, and what did he see lurking in a doorway? A tall man, with coffee colored skin and a well trimmed beard, expensive but flashy clothes, and he was observing everything that was going down. The jonesing man muttered profanities and hurried on down the street.

I followed. I prayed that nobody would notice me, that I didn't end up lying in a gutter with my throat cut, but this was about as painfully real as a real life Christmas documentary got, and I wasn't going to back off of this one. Oh no I was not.

The jonesing man tried to hail several passing cars.

"Hey! I got some neat Christmas presents for your kids here! Want to put a smile on your kiddies' face Christmas morning? How about a nice Pooh Bah to cuddle up to!"

Amusingly, it was the pimp who hailed the jonesing man over. At first, the jonesing man did a double take. He looked at the pimp, and then pointed to himself, as if to say, "You want to talk to me?"

And then the pimp just smiled and nodded yes, a sly grin on his face. The jonesing man crossed the street and hurried up to the doorway, where the pimp was lurking. I followed, darting through shadows, and I got pretty close. The pimp looked exactly like John Turturro--which I do not say by any intent of insulting Mr. Turturro, whom I very much respect, but I only mention it in passing so you can get a real picture of what this bizarre Christmas card looked like to me, through the camera's eye.

And what was best of all, the pimp was all decked out for Christmas. Very much into the spirit of the season. He wore a red felt Fedora hat with a sprig of green holly in it, with red holly berries and a little spray of pine cones painted gold and silver. He sported a red pinstriped satin suit and a green shirt. And a light-up Santa Claus tie,

no less. But tasteful. In a pimp sort of way. And the finishing touch: His purple plastic boombox was playing Bing Crosby singing assorted carols of the season.

Oh, he was a picture. In fact, I actually have a photograph of him. I had one blown up from a still frame of the videotape. I don't know why I went to all that trouble--well, actually, I do. But if you can't figure out why, well, there wouldn't be much point in explaining it to you.

Anyway, the pimp took the filthy pillow case from the jonesing man. He perused the toys and nodded approvingly.

"Yeah. You got some good shit here. How much?"

The jonesing man lit up, his eyes full of deadly hope.

"Well, let's see. There's about five or six good toys in here, still in the boxes and the plastic. Plus the baby clothes. Fifty bucks."

"HA!" laughed the pimp, handing the pillowcase back. "Who the fuck do you think you are? Mr. Macy?"

"Hey, you just said yourself there's some good shit in here."

"Yeah, but it's fuckin' stolen shit, and my bitch down the street was right. You're jonesing bad. But I'll tell you what, my friend. By my watch, it's three in the morning, and that makes it Christmas day, and I am fuckin' Santa Claus! And Santa is in such a good mood that here's what I am gonna do. I am gonna take these off your hands for a fair price, considering it's stolen shit, and then, Santa Claus is gonna make it snow. Right here at Hollywood and Vine, a regular blizzard. I'm gonna set you up with what you need. Within a matter of minutes, you can be taking a magical sleigh ride to the North Pole, so you can see first hand what all those little elves and flyin' reindeer is up to."

The jonesing man was nearly drooling, he could almost feel the rush, already. . .

"The smack for the toys?"

The pimp nodded largely, smiling, and when he did, the little gold bells on his hat jingled. He pulled out a tiny baggie, and waved it in front of the jonesing man, who frowned.

"All these fuckin' toys for that little bit? Fuck you! There's dealers all up and down this street."

"Yeah, but they only take cash, not fucking Winnie-the-Pooh shit. You're lucky I'm willing to deal at all."

The jonesing man looked all around him, his eyes darting about like a caged rat.

"OK, but I need enough for my old lady. She'll kill me if I come back empty handed."

The pimp pulled out another baggie. The jonesing man frowned again.

"That won't fuckin' last us till noon. C'mon, it's Christmas! Where's your fuckin' Christmas spirit?"

"Hey," said the pimp, suddenly losing his temper. "Don't fuckin' push me, man, this is twenty dollars worth of smack you're lookin' at, and I'm giving you a good deal, and you know that, and you better take the smack and give me the toys, or else get the hell out of here so I can sell my shit to someone else, because let me tell you, little man, this is one of the busiest nights of the year. A lot of people celebrating, lots of folks gettin' high, gettin' in the spirit of the season, you know. So if you don't want to buy it, someone else will. Twenty bucks worth of shit. Take it or leave it, snowman."

The jonesing man sighed, shrugged, handed over the toys, took the smack, and got the hell out of there.

I was going to follow the jonesing guy, but there was a last flourish that ended the scene, and I just had to capture it on tape. The pimp was still standing at the intersection, when someone he knew drove up in a big Lincoln Continental. The pimp hailed him and strutted over.

"Hey, Harvé! Did you stick enough presents under that tree of yours? I know how you love your little baby girl. Look, I got this big stuffed Pooh Bear, brand new, even got a bigass red bow around its neck. I happen to know that F.A.O. Schwartz sells out of this particular seasonal Pooh Bear in October. Price tag here says sixty bucks, I'm gonna let you have it for twenty."

And so persuasive was the pimp that the guy in the car handed him a twenty spot, just for that one toy, and the pimp proceeded to work that corner until all the toys were gone, and he had made a hundred bucks.

Fortunately, the pimp worked fast, because I was really wanting to follow the jonesing man back to his house and tape the sordid scene that would be coming down there. I ran down an alley, and I was able to get back to his place just as he was getting there. I slipped through his backyard. It was an eyesore of broken appliances and dangerous rusty things that the kids could have stepped on--broken bottles, jagged edges, discarded tools, used diapers, a lonely dog

crying. Don't get me started, oh, it made me sick, just making my way through there. But I snuck over to the window and watched.

I watched as the jonesing man hurried up the front walk, while inside, his old lady and the children were sitting on the ratty sofa. The kids were more agitated than ever. Even though it was about four in the morning by now, and they should have been sound asleep, their excitement over having Santa show up, and then the trauma of having their Christmas presents yanked out of their hands, had left them wide awake, and they were still wailing and crying, just as much as when their daddy--if you can call him that--had first left the house.

And then that bastard, he burst in, not even seeing his kids, but grinning ghoulishly at the woman.

"Look what Santa Claus brought you!" And he held up the baggie.

The woman looked up when the front door opened. I saw that her face was all broken out, the way it happens, with hardcore coke heads. God, she was hideous. She was frightening. She grabbed the man's arm and tried to be heard over the crying of the children.

"Did you save any toys for them? Did you get anything for under the tree?"

"Fuck no man, would you stop bustin' my balls! It was all I could do to get this shit for us. Give me a fuckin' chance, I'll get them something in the morning."

And in that moment, her need for a fix, and her deluded, deluded belief that they could fix everything, when they were high enough to face reality and Christmas morning--it all overwhelmed her, and she let him tie her arm. He had injected himself first, of course, while she hustled the kids into their bedroom and told them not to come out, or Santa wouldn't come back to visit. And then, when the junkies were alone again, the guy finished cooking their Christmas hit, and he injected his old lady. But still, she was thinking about those presents.

"But tomorrow's Christmas morning, hon. All the stores will be closed by then."

"Oh fuck, I'll find something for them. Honey, have I ever let you and the family down? Weren't you just saying an hour ago that you didn't know where the hell our next hit was coming from, and didn't I go out and get you a fuckin' hit? And don't you feel better now?"

The heroin had hit her. A lazy, easy, pleased smile crept across her face. She smiled at him, a smile that was missing a couple of teeth.

"Yeah. Baby, you always come through."

She kissed him. And then they were silent, and the house was quiet, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse--except for the soft whimperings and sobbings wafting from the bedroom.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: GOD BLESS US, EVERY ONE

Well. I don't know. . . Ho ho ho and Merry Christmas.

Now, as I said before, since this part of the tape ended up not being on the web, I have tried to describe it for you as best I could, so it should be no surprise that watching it play out served only to depress the hell out of the Fatman. I watched him out of the corner of my eye. He was sitting there in his bigass chair, studying all of this, just watching it on the TV, a glum look on his fat puss. He was so crushed by what he saw. I was so hoping that the sweet images of him making the other 99 families so happy, over and over again, would have mollified his misery. But all he could focus on was this last horrific incident, and how it had all turned out. So ugly. So sad.

The Fatman was despondent.

I tried to cheer him up, but to no avail. And Blue, sensing that the Fatman was, well, Blue, he lumbered over and buried his head in the Fatman's lap, as if to commiserate or offer some primitive form of doggie compassion. Nothing. The Fatman just stared off into space, absently scratching Blue in his favorite place behind the ear, but refusing to make eye contact with the dog. It was now late in the afternoon of Christmas Day, and since the Fatman had been up all night delivering gifts, I suggested that maybe he should take a nap. But he just snapped at me and suggested that maybe I should leave.

Then it happened.

There was a knock on the front door of the bookstore.

The Fatman was slumped, his head in his hands. He looked up, annoyed.

"Now who the hell could that be? It's Christmas, don't folks know what day it is? Why the hell aren't they home celebrating?"

He began the long trudge from the back office to the front door, still muttering.

"I'll give whoever it is a piece of my mind, you can believe that."

He trailed off, but I got up to follow him; for I, too, wanted to know who in the name of Kris Kringle was knocking so insistently.

Now I must set this up, so you can picture it: the Fatman had drawn the blinds over the windows and could not see who it was, so when he threw open the door, what he saw was a total surprise to both of us, and completely unexpected.

It was *The Family*. That brand new, makeshift family that had been thrown together, that had come together after that awful woman tried to sue the Fatman for pedophilia and got her ass thrown in jail. The Santa suit scandal, remember? Her poor kids had to be put in a foster home. . .and the foster parents were those same parents who had just recently lost their own children to a drunk driver.

Lo and behold, here they were! All six of them, shouting "Merry Christmas," and standing at the front door of the bookstore! They were all bearing gifts festooned with big bows, and even though this is Los Angeles and it wasn't snowing out or a white Christmas or anything, still, it was cold enough that they were wearing these Christmassy sweaters and Santa hats. It was wonderful.

And the Fatman--oh, he was so beautiful when he was so happy, because it was so rare, and even though he was so hideous, his joy made you forget he was ugly. Like the Elephant Man, sort of, if you've seen that movie. He was positively glowing, and he gestured for the family to enter, enter!

"Oh dear, come in out of the cold!" he said, although it was a clement fifty-five degrees. He flung the door wide open, and they all tumbled in.

The kids were almost the same ages as the four children whom the parents had so recently, so tragically lost--five, seven, eleven, and fifteen.

Gosh, I was as overwhelmed as the Fatman. And good ol' Blue, Blue was going bonkers, jumping up and down excitedly; he knew this was a good thing that was happening, good people who were invading our territory, and he was barking a heartfelt greeting.

"Oh, I have to tape this!" I blurted out excitedly. I had become one of those people who wanted to videotape everything now, and it occurred to me that this would be the first time that what I would be taping for the Fatman would *not* be some Crimefighting footage. It would *not* be depressing evidence of awfulness on somebody's part, nor would it be spying, nor voyeurism, nor blackmail--but instead, these would be good, old-fashioned home movies.

These were our first home movies. Everyone talked at once, as the Fatman scrounged for chairs. While everyone helped put the chairs in a circle, I remember thinking, as I taped, you wouldn't know that this tribe had only just recently become a family, for they already had a bond. The chemistry here was palpable. You would have thought that they had known each other for years, that they had always been a sixsome, a happy, wholesome half dozen. There was no trace in their faces--not the young ones, not even the old ones--of the horrors and humiliations and heinous events they had just survived. No trace in the faces, no trace in the voices, no trace in the eyes . . .Hallelujah! That was a miracle, if ever there was one.

I liked the mother right off. She was a regular Donna Reed. She was bustling around the bookstore, just like it was her own house.

"The thing is, I suppose we should apologize for bursting in, but we all got to talking this morning, you see, we all got up at the crack of dawn before church, and did the stockings. . ."

(Was this for real, I was thinking as I taped, because it was almost too sweet to be real.)

"So we all got to talking, and we just decided that darn it, it wouldn't be Christmas without seeing you, and thanking you. Because after all, if it weren't for you, we wouldn't be together. We wouldn't be a family. So we decided that on our way home from church, we would stop by and make sure that you had a Merry Christmas, too."

Well, the Fatman was very choked up at this, and I don't mind telling you, my chin was quivering a little. The Fatman suddenly realized that he had already failed in his duties as host.

"Uh, refreshments, we need refreshments! I have some cookies in a tin, and we could have some fruit punch."

"Oh no no no!" said the mother, "We already thought of all that. Why, you don't think we would all descend on you, without bringing provisions! I have a big thermos of hot cider, and cartons of eggnog in the car. Mary and Susan baked cookies. But that's not all--"

At these words, the Fatman turned around and saw that the kids were stashing Christmas presents under the Fatman's grand and glorious tree, and everybody commented at length about how it was the most beautiful tree they'd ever seen, and what lovely ornaments, that looked like they had been handed down through the generations.

After they were done arranging the presents, the two girls went out with their mother to the car and returned bearing nothing less

than Christmas dinner. An entire Christmas feast. The Fatman's eyes were bugging out of his head.

He threw me a glance, and I knew what that glance meant:

"Were you in on this?"

I shrugged in amazement, for truly I had nothing to do with it. But I was so glad it was happening.

The table full of History of War books was cleared off and a tablecloth spread. The mother and the girls were buzzing about and setting everything up, letting the Fatman supply a few odds and ends. He arranged some angel Christmas candles for the centerpiece, and he played Bing Crosby Yuletide on the stereo.

I was videotaping everything, and as I did, I wondered how it was they knew that the Fatman would be alone, all by himself, here in the bookstore on Christmas Day. But then I put that out of my mind. This was a perfect moment. If I had put it in a movie, folks would have said it was too perfect, too contrived, too cloyingly sweet. "That kind a shit just doesn't happen," people would say. And it is true that for the most part, that kind of sweetness has gone out of the movies. Nobody has been able to put that kind of spin on the screen and make it work since Capra. It made me feel all warm and fuzzy that for once, life had trumped the movies.

Dinner was a feast. It, too, was like something out of a storybook. Not turkey, but an actual Christmas goose. Stuffing, both in the bird and baked in a dish. Yams, mashed potatoes, gravy, cranberry dressing, green beans, Waldorf salad, homemade bread, with cider and some full-bodied red wine to accompany it.

What I liked best about it, besides the food, was the conversation. The family babbled on and on about what they had done in the last three weeks since they had become, well, a family, I guess you'd say. The father had taken off work, to get to know his new family. They had driven to the Grand Canyon for a genuine family vacation. The kids were getting ready to start school in the spring and were excited about that; they had gone shopping for new clothes and school supplies and said it was "about the most fun that they could remember having in, like, forever."--that was exactly how they put it.

But the best part of all, and what made the dinner more marvelous than I could have imagined, is that they were also very interested in the Fatman. They wanted to know more about this man that was their savior, their benefactor. And the Fatman opened up and talked all about himself. Of course, he didn't talk about our secret Crimefighting, nor did he bring up the sad and sordid parts of his life

and times. But he had a lot of interesting stories to tell, touching and hilarious stories that I had never heard; I laughed so hard I spotted, except that he made me turn off the camera when he told them, and he has said that I can't share them with you here. Maybe in a sequel, he says, after he thinks about it. You have to admire his moxie, thinking that his book about "The Fattest Crimefighter in the World," will be a huge hit and leave people clamoring for more.

But my very favorite part of the Christmas visit. . .the presents.

The Fatman was overwhelmed when, after we finished dessert, the kids all crowded around the tree and dug out their presents for the Fatman. Big, substantial presents they were, with bright paper and fat bows, befitting the largesse of the Fatman himself. They piled the gifts in front of the Fatman like offerings.

And this is what he got:

The mother and father insisted on giving their present first, since they figured it was getting restless. Mary, the oldest girl, had snuck upstairs to the second floor of the bookstore and hid it there, while the Fatman had been helping with the dinner preparations.

It was a bird. A parrot, but that little kind of parrot, I don't know exactly what they're called. Anyway, when they whisked the cloth covering from the cage, the bird cocked its head and eyeballed the Fatman, and chirruped this sort of garbled "Hello!" and the Fatman laughed and clapped his hands.

I think they thought the Fatman was probably a lonely man, and that the bird would keep him company. Which I guess is true. He and the bird took right to each other! The Fatman opened the cage, and the parrot climbed right onto the Fatman's arm. Blue just watched, smiling a doggie smile; he was not jealous at all. Actually, Blue was more interested in the gingersnaps the kids were slipping him.

From the oldest girl, Mary, the Fatman got a beautifully framed sampler. She had needle pointed the whole thing herself, over the last few weeks, learning the art from her new mother. I know what you're thinking--had I not seen it myself, I, too, would have thought it too corny to be true. But I talked to Mary later that day, and you see, well, it's like this. Amazingly, when you have been raised in a van, sleeping in fleabag rent-a-cabins, and eating out of rest stop vending machines, and watching "Touched By An Angel" on the black and

white TV in the sleazy motel room, and sleeping some nights in the hotel bathtub, if mom brings home a man, unless, of course, the man she's brought home is intended for you--well, if this has been your youth to date, then the idea of a fantasy mom who bakes cookies with you and teaches you how to needlepoint is actually something you fantasize about at night. And daydream about during the days. And embrace when it appears before you.

I guess the upshot is this: I realize that this hodgepodge Brady Bunch sounds too annoyingly cloying to be true; the needlepoint and the baking all sounds like something no teenage kid you ever met would crave--but oh, this family was clinging to each other. Were they ever.

After he had unwrapped the sampler, the Fatman studied the detailed little stitches which made up the lettering that read: *"A ROOM WITHOUT BOOKS IS A BODY WITHOUT A SOUL"* --CICERO

The Fatman oohed and aaahed.

"I love it! What a wonderful quotation! It will be a perfect companion to my Petrarch and my Goya!"

He took it over to the front foyer and he hung it up, right in between two other framed quotations:

*"BOOKS HAVE LED SOME TO LEARNING,
AND OTHERS TO MADNESS."* --Petrarch

"THE SLEEP OF REASON PRODUCES MONSTERS." --Goya

"Now isn't that sweet!" acclaimed the Fatman, standing back and enjoying the effect of the three all in a row.

Moving on with the presentation of gifts:

From the boy, Joseph, who was eleven, the Fatman got another lovely piece of art. It was a framed picture of the bookstore that the little boy had sketched over the last several days, sitting outside on the Promenade, giggling the whole time, because the Fatman never suspected he was there. (Someone spying on the Fatman, for a change, hee hee hee.) The picture was really quite good, and the Fatman hung it proudly where his calendar had been. The Fatman was near tears the whole time.

The little seven year old boy, Jeffrey, had made a hand painted tie from a kit he bought in a craft shop, and the tie was--well, quite

beyond description. It was Very Van Gogh, in its way. The Fatman immediately put it on, and displayed it proudly for all to see.

About this time, the youngest little girl, Caroline, was clamoring, wanting to know why he hadn't opened her package yet, and the Fatman leaned over to her and informed her that he was saving the best for last. I was now taping again, and there was something wonderful about the way this sweet, angelic kid seemed totally unfazed by the Fatman's size; she was totally fixated on his twinkling eyes.

It was a big present, a big present for a big man, and it had many parts you had to open separately, and when you opened it, you could see why.

It was an entire desk set. A blotter, a pencil can, a stapler, a letter opener, a special tray for little bits of things, like clips and tacks, and there was even a desk clock.

"Oooh my goodness!" said the Fatman, oohing and aaahing, as the little girl looked on. "This is magnificent," he effused, "It's just exquisite! Did you buy this in one of those museum stores? Or one of those fancy art galleries in Beverly Hills?"

"No, I made it myself," squealed the little girl, "And those are different glued on kinds of macaronis that I painted all myself."

"Well, so they are!" effused the Fatman.

"Yup, mom bought every shape they had at the store. Only I didn't cook them. I just painted them."

"Well, so you did!" said the Fatman, winking right at my camera, and then examining the desk set carefully. "I see red elbow macaronis and blue seashells and green rotinis and purple zitis! I can't get over how elegant it is! I never had anything so grand as this! Let me just get rid of this old desk set. This new one you made is ever so much more splendid!"

He took the beautiful lapis lazuli desk set, that he once told me he'd gotten at an estate auction for nine hundred dollars, and he stuck it in a shoe box, and he set out the new priceless pasta desk set, laying out each piece lovingly--the blotter, the tray, the stamp holder, the letter opener, the decorated stapler. He transferred his pens and pencils from the lapis lazuli holder to the rainbow-colored macaroni-covered juice can.

The final gift was from the parents to the children. Oh, they had heaps of presents at home, waiting for them under the tree, they assured the Fatman. But this special gift, they wanted the children to open here, at the bookstore.

Now as you know, children are usually not thrilled by gifts that consist of flat envelopes--but in this case, it was an exception. The children all clustered around, as the oldest gingerly pulled the papers out of the envelope:

It was adoption papers.

Then, after that was over, we all just sat around, loosening our belts, fat with food and joy and Christmas cheer, and we thought it couldn't get any better.

That's when we heard it. The faint sound of singing outside the Fatman's bookstore. Voices, charming voices, mostly on key, sopranos and altos and tenors and baritones, all belting out "We Wish You A Merry Christmas."

All four kids jumped from their seats and ran to the front door and threw it open. I panned my camera to see who was what, and my lens recognized them immediately. The last time I'd seen these lovely ladies on tape, it had been in a very compromising position, and quite without their knowledge. How fresh scrubbed and rosy cheeked and wholesome they looked now, the Seducer's bevy of underaged beauties. But now, it was a row of proud fathers who stood stalwart behind them, singing boldly.

Again I say, Ho Ho Ho and a Merry Christmas! But maybe less cynically this time. We invited them in for nog and cookies, of course, and I just stared through the camera lens, transfixed, at this strange and wonderful amalgam of souls, who had come together through the Fatman's magnificent Crimefighting efforts--and my efforts too, crawling through the asshole of Hollywood and the city's underworld of dark dealings. I mean, pardon my being crass, but that's just about the way it was. And now, here, everybody is sitting around like something out of a living Christmas card. It was all very Frank Capra meets Quentin Tarantino.

Then, because it was more Capra than Quentin in this particular moment, we all gave in to that great tidal pull and decided, Oh why not! We all watched "It's a Wonderful Life." Because it is, you know. Really. It is.

And that was pretty much our Christmas.

Finally, everybody bundled back up against the frigid temperatures outside, (it had dropped to forty-three degrees by now), and they all went on their way, leaving the Fatman and I alone.

This next part, I did not know how to say. For a moment, my mind Rewound, then Fast Forwarded through all the strange relationships and friendships and bonds and intimacies that I had known in my quirky yet ultimately banal life, and I found it odd, that after all was said and done, I should feel so awkward and stammering in the company of the Fatman, and I truly did not know how to say this next thing.

So, as is always best when one is feeling that way, I just blurted it out.

"I got you a present."

I went to the bag I had hidden in the corner, and brought it back over.

"Actually, I got you a couple of presents," I said, with an "aw shucks" sort of bashful pride in my voice, because me, a Homeless Dude, had actually managed to get not *one* but *two* presents for someone at Christmas.

"I got you two, because I'm not sure if you can actually count this first one as a gift. Maybe you expected that I was obligated to give this to you, in return for the spare change and leftovers you've thrown my way over the last few months."

The Fatman chuckled at my awkward ramblings. I shrugged sheepishly.

"Anyway, it's the Crimefighting book. All the stuff we've done, up till now, at least. All committed to record. And, uh, well, uhm, the thing is, I guess that none of this went the way we thought it would. In hindsight, I suppose I did think it would be more of a "Star Chamber" type "Batman" type thing. But it made for some good stories, and it was good to get back into writing again. But hell, what am I talking about? Get back into writing? I was never a real writer. I was never that creative. Never that good with words. Never that wildly imaginative. The most prosaic I ever got before this, was when I'd write SLOW DISSOLVE or EXT: BEACH - DAY. Anyway, what I mean to say is that some of the stuff we've tried has kind of backfired,

you know, uhm, not turned out the way we thought it would. . .or at least not like it would in the movies. And, well, the thing is, you don't seem as enthusiastic about this whole Crimefighting thing as you did, you know, back when we first started out. So I thought I should at least wrap things up with a summary of what we did, so that years from now, down the road, we, neither of us, forget, I mean it was interesting at least, you have to admit that. And, oh, I dunno, I've been thinking that maybe you'd want to dissolve the partnership. You know, start the New Year with a clean break. "

As I stammered this jumble of words, you know what I was hoping for, of course you do, you're onto me--I was feeling him out. And man, was I happy when he looked disappointed at this suggestion. I mean, that we dissolve our partnership.

"But anyway," I continued, "I wrote it all down. Some of it's a little smudged, where I wrote it in the drizzle, or Blue slobbered on it, but it's all there. The whole Butch Davis thing, and what you did to that bitch who sued you. I called that chapter "The Santa Suit." Isn't that clever? I think this stuff would make a neat movie. But like you said, you bankrolled it. So I won't use it without your permission--or maybe you want to help write the script, or finance it, or something like that? Maybe you want to be a producer?"

The Fatman just smiled wryly and said, "Thank you. It's a lovely gift. I'm proud of you. I hope it made you a better writer."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," I said, looking at Blue as I said this, and not at the Fatman, for some reason. "But hey, on to your second gift, your main gift. I didn't know what to get you. I mean, you've got plenty of money, and you have some nice stuff, and you're very self-sufficient. What do you get for the man who--"

"--For the man who eats everything?"

I looked up suddenly and stared at him, shocked that he would say this about himself! How bizarre was that? I chuckled nervously.

"Anyway. I wanted to get you something, and, well--go ahead, open it."

I pulled it out of the brown grocery sack. It was shabbily wrapped, I guess, but to me it looked good. The fact that a homeless person had gotten it together enough to give wrapped Christmas gifts seemed kind of cool, like I was starting to get my act together again.

. . .OK, OK, so I had used up all the Christmas paper on the "Hundred Neediest Families" toy wrapping project, and by the time I got to the 99 Cent Store to wrap my own personal gifts, late Christmas

Eve, they were out of Christmas paper, and all they had left was some silver wedding anniversary paper, with some hearts and flowers and white doves and bells and shit on it. Still. It looked nice. The bow was red and green, at least.

The Fatman unwrapped it. When he saw what was inside, he howled. He threw his head back, and he just cracked up for the longest time. I thought he was going to have a spell.

"A FEZ!" He announced proudly, holding up the burgundy velvet hat with the fancy tassel, a flurry of multi-colored jewel-tone threads. He plopped it on his head, turned, and admired his reflection in the mirror above the Self-Help section.

"Now, it's official!" he crowed proudly. "*I really am The Fatman*, because I look just like Sydney Greenstreet in *"Casablanca"*, don't you think? Why, if I do say so, I look handsomer than Sydney Greenstreet."

My goodness, I was terribly pleased with the Fatman's reaction. I was really so excited that my gifts were such a big hit. I hadn't even gotten this excited over what my x-wife thought of her Christmas presents. Then again, maybe that's why she was my x-wife.

The Fatman whirled again, like a mighty planet in its orbit, and he beamed. "Where on earth did you get it? Did you mug some shriner at a convention?"

"Oh no, don't you get it?" I said, smug and boastful. "That's the best part! That really is Sydney Greenstreet's personal fez from the movie *'Casablanca'*!"

Now it was the Fatman's turn to be incredulous and overwhelmed. He yanked it off his head and looked inside. The initials "S.G." were sewn right into the hat band, in gold thread. He gave me a sidelong glance.

"You're foolin' with me. You sewed this in yourself."

"Nope," I said, "I can lie to everybody but you. That really was his fez. I used to be a Player, remember? I had a mistress who was the granddaughter of a wardrobe mistress who worked on yes, *"Casablanca."* She kept it as a souvenir. Greenstreet didn't want it, the studio didn't care--remember, that movie was not a hit when it came out. People weren't falling all over themselves for memorabilia, not like they were with the ruby slippers. So I was able to put my hands on it. After all, who else should end up with it, but you? Sydney would want it that way. And you sure do look fine in it!"

There was an awkward but pleasant silence. The Fatman seemed amazed that so many folks had remembered him on this Holiday of Holy Days.

Suddenly, the Fatman burst out with "OH! I got you a present, too!"

Then he ran to his desk, as fast as his great redwood legs would carry him. For a moment, his back was to me, and I couldn't see what he was doing. I heard papers rustling, and when he turned around, he was holding--AN ENVELOPE.

Immediately, two thoughts go through my head. The first thought was that he never really had a present for me at all. This was merely a necessary and well mannered if awkwardly timed response to my gift. Because, you see, this envelope was not gift wrapped; there was no festive bow, no "me getting to shake it, to guess what's in it." But he obviously figured that after my presentation, he had to counter with something, so he had obviously just jammed some cash in an envelope, figuring that any *normal, typical* Homeless Dude would be elated.

I flashed back to that memory of being a kid, just a little nipper, and that sinking feeling of how a flat envelope is always disappointing. Even if it is a sizable check, it's not the same as finding a Lionel Train or a Matchbox Grand Prix or a new bike under the tree on Christmas morning. It's also not the same as ripping open a big box and finding a ball and glove, or a cowboy outfit, or a deluxe chemistry set, or maybe even a puppy inside. My dad, cold and estranged, even way back when I was little, gave me a lot of flat envelopes over the years. And although mom always let me use the check to buy my heart's desire, still, Christmas morning memories were always lacking something for me. . .

Which led me to my second thought, which came because I realized that the Fatman hadn't bothered to get me a real gift. It was in that moment that I started thinking, "Hey, maybe we weren't really friends, after all." Because after all, he had said as much, on more than one occasion--that he didn't consider me a friend. Once, he even said that he didn't like me, but at the time, I had considered this all bluster and blow; the defensive knee-jerk reaction of a big man who'd suffered big betrayals, and hence, kept the rest of the world at arm's length.

But now, I was starting to see the truth of it: maybe we were Crimefighting partners only, and we were questionable at that. After

all, the man had still allowed me to live on the streets, after months of acquaintanceship, and surviving great Adventures. And now. . .the poor, embarrassed man had panicked after my gift of the fez, and had stuck some cash in an envelope.

I took that flat, bowless, unshakable envelope from the Fatman, and I forced I smile. I opened it, and all the while I'm thinking, "Look, don't be a jerk, you could use some folding money, be grateful, it could be worse." But dammit, this would be the first Christmas since I'd been born that I hadn't gotten a real present.

I pulled out the check to see how much it was for.

Oh. It wasn't a check. It was a certificate. I squinted and read it. Then, I looked up at the Fatman, befuddled.

"A star? *You got me a star?*"

"Yes. A star."

I looked up when I heard the voice, because I could hardly believe it was the Fatman speaking. He sounded like he was a little kid again. His face was all animated, and he gestured excitedly.

"I don't know if you know this, friend, but you can arrange to have a star named after you. Officially. NASA does it. Right here, see these numbers here? These numbers and letters tell you exactly which star it is, and where it's located in space. This astronomical map here, that comes with the certificate, it tells you how to find it in the night sky. And here, right in the middle of the certificate, is the information certifying that this star has been officially named after you, now and for all time!"

I stared, dumbstruck and a bit giddy. I didn't know what to say. But then, as is always the case with people who don't know what to say, I said something anyway.

"Cool! Are you serious? Like a real live burning mother of a star, right out there in space, and it's really named after me? Me?"

The Fatman nodded proudly.

"Yup. It's official. I got it for you to remind you that you are going to be on top again too, a star in your own right. Every time your faith gets shaky, you just look up in the night sky."

Then, startling me, he hurried around from behind his desk. "Come back here with me, friend. I don't believe you've ever seen my telescope. I have it all set up, aimed right at your star."

Giddy and dumbstruck, (I guess I said that), I followed him to the back room. No, I had never seen his telescope. I walked up to it and squinted, letting my eyes adjust.

There it was. My star. I had a star named after me. It was the closest I had come to feeling immortal since--well, none of my movies were going to gain me immortality, I could see that now, in hindsight. No, this was the closest I had come to feeling immortal since. . .the day my daughter was born. . .and who knows what had become of her? Although more and more, I was realizing that once I was back on my feet, I would have find out.

I would have to find my baby girl.

But for now, the Fatman had given me a star for Christmas. A real star.

I turned to him. He shrugged shyly.

"Look, friend. I know you've been down a long road. And a lot of it has wound through regions of hell that I'm sure you never thought you'd visit. . .Listen, I don't want you for a roommate, and sometimes, I'm not even sure I like you. But I want to hang around, to see how you end up. It's got me real curious. Anyway, I thought about seeing what kind of favors I could do for you, to help you get back on your feet. You know, sort of get you back into the swing of the business. But for one thing, I'm not connected with those people. And for another, I think you've got to manage this all on your own, this return to being a Player, if it's going to mean anything to you, this time around. Lastly, but not leastly, I think this road you're walking, including being homeless, without a roof over your head--well, it's just the path you've gotta walk, if you're going to get where you're going in style. It's the only way you can arrive there, without turning back into what you were before. You know what I mean. You know what I mean. And--well, it's Christmas. I don't want to go on in a way that will insult you or depress you."

The thing is, I could only half-concentrate on what he was saying, because I was all absorbed in looking through the telescope.

"This is so cool! A star, man! I'm a star!"

Finally I pulled away from the scope and turned to the Fatman. I had never seen him look happier. His fez tassel danced about his head, as he talked and gestured grandly.

"I thought about getting you one of those stars on the Walk of Fame, using the connections I do have. But last time I was up that way, on Sunset Boulevard, I saw a little sharpé dog take a crap right on Merv Griffin's own personal star. The owner didn't even pick up the dog poop. And who wants some star on the pavement that people can walk

on, the sky can rain on, dogs can poop on? But now, with your own star in the sky, you're above it all. Literally."

I grinned at him.

"Merry Christmas, Fatman. My, that fez looks fine."

"Merry Christmas, Homeless Dude. And for what it's worth. . .when you get back in with the big dogs, you're going to turn out some classics. I can just feel it."

We hugged. It was awkward. But it was, after all, Christmas. So I guess there's nothing more to say in this chapter except, "Merry Christmas To All, And To All A Good Night."

God Bless Us Every One?

Oooh, oh, I almost forgot! Speaking of "big dogs." The Fatman didn't forget Blue, either. He surprised Blue with a Mighty Ducks dog sweater. Along with a whole pile of chew toys, and a primo new dog bed that was better than where I was sleeping, and a butcher beef bone, stuff like that. I have a picture of Blue in his Mighty Ducks dog sweater that I carry in my wallet.

Oh, I forgot to mention that the Fatman also gave me a wallet!

It wasn't a fancy one, he had made it himself from one of those Injun Kraft Kits that you sew yourself. He had even hand tooled some wee cowboys and Modoc Indians on the front and back. (One of our greatest triumphs, over the Doghater, remember?) All these personal touches made the wallet that much more valuable to me. I'd have rather had this wallet (which I still cherish) than any fancy designer one from Rodeo Drive.

The Fatman said that the wallet was symbolic. That it represented hope for me. He had also custom commissioned for me a T-shirt that said "WILL WRITE FOR FOOD." You gotta love the Fatman's taste in gifts. Anyway, he really looks very smart in his sweater. Blue, that is, not the Fatman.

Ask me about the snapshot that I carry in my new wallet, of the three of us at Christmas, wearing our gifts, should you and I ever meet on the street.

I will not pretend that I don't know you.

(People do that in Hollywood. I used to. I don't anymore.)

I will not pretend that you and I aren't good friends. In point of truth, you are almost in the club.

EDITORS' NOTE, QUOTED VERBATIM FROM THE FATMAN:

Here ends the first part of the trilogy, "The Adventures of the Fattest Crimefighter in the World."

The Fatman and the Homeless Dude are to have many more strange and amazing Adventures, which you shall hear about forthwith. But for now, it is the wish, *nay the demand*, of the Fatman, who, though he is passionate about books, feels that you, too, should keep the spirit of the Holidays, even if they are not occurring as you read this.

And by that he means, "Get your nose out of this book, go out into the world, and do some good!"

Dare I say, do some Crimefighting of your own. . . .

THE END