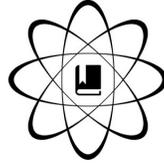


In the Black

M.T. Bass

An Electron Alley Publication



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“The business of America is business.”
~Calvin Coolidge

“Things are more like they are now than they ever were before.”
~Dwight D. Eisenhower

“The future will be better tomorrow.”
~Dan Quayle

“That depends on what your definition of ‘is’ is.”
~William Jefferson Clinton



The Memo

M E M O R A N D U M

January 4, 1965

TO: ALL DEPARTMENT HEADS
FM: Y.T. ERP, SR.

From this time forward, all right-handed people will be left-handed. Left-handed personnel will assume right-handedness.

Ambidextrous persons will be dealt with individually.

Sincerely,

Y.T. ERP, SR., PRESIDENT
ERP INDUSTRIES, INC.

YTE/www

~::~

“Good morning, Mr. Rangely.”

“Hi, Dirk.”

“Hello, Mr. Rangely.”

“Good, er, ah...”

Like those born into the species *Homo politicus*, Dirk Rangely, Vice-President/Marketing, had come into this world with the innate understanding that the “Common Folk”—no matter how repulsive or disgusting they were—needed constant attention and frequent hand-holding, for they formed the true basis for power with a capital ‘P’. On their broad and often sweaty shoulders were laid party platforms, legislative initiatives, foreign policies and economic reforms. At Erp Industries, Inc., the “Little Guys” ultimately did the real work that got product built and shipped, triggering the invoices that generated the company’s income out of which Dirk Rangely drew his handsome salary and against which he filed his excessive expense reports. This concept of practical/materialistic/exploitive reverence for the “Little Guys” was by now so ingrained into Dirk Rangely that it had become encoded in his DNA molecules to curse future generations of Rangelys like other families were cursed with Huntington’s Chorea or Dwarfism.

Dirk Rangely’s peculiar genetic trait manifested itself as his tall, trim figure glided effortlessly—

Dirk Rangely rarely engaged in any activity actually requiring effort—through the manufacturing plant on his self-appointed mission to greet every person he saw in his quick, New England accent with the phrase: ‘Hi-there-how-are-you-today, [insert name here if known]’. He even encouraged the workers to call him by his first name, though many were reluctant to do so, more out of respect for his position than out of respect for Dirk Rangely himself. This canned phrase had evolved during his lifetime into a completely reflexive response to external stimuli, over which he could exercise no control and into which he could inject no feeling. It, too, was undoubtedly DNA encoded, and Dirk brimmed with pride each time he heard the first words out of his children’s mouths: “Hi-there-how-are-you-today?”

This particular January morning, though, Dirk Rangely seemed to walk through the plant in a daze, mumbling incoherently to himself, “H-the-ho-r-yo-toda...”

He was so curiously oblivious to the friendly, grass-roots hellos he so consciously cultivated that a buzz of whispered conversation followed in his wake like the wind through the dry, summer grass of Kansas prairies. Mort Mortenstein, Vice-President/Finance, noticed that those distant horizons upon which Dirk Rangely usually fixed his steely, Marketing gaze were evidently clouded. Mort Mortenstein clenched hard on his pipe, baring his teeth in a hungry grin.

“So, have you read the latest Memo?” Mort Mortenstein probed cautiously as he met Dirk Rangely halfway down the hall at the drinking fountain. Neither he nor Dirk Rangely noticed the young man bent over the drinking fountain sucking at the loop of cool water.

“Memo?!!” Dirk Rangely blurted out in anguished surprise, betraying the root of his sullen mood. Dirk Rangely had not actually read Y.T. Erp, Sr.’s latest memo, but he had eavesdropped on two people discussing its potential ramifications in the company cafeteria, and had quivered with horror at each of their envisioned scenarios. He carefully surveyed Mort Mortenstein’s shorter, pudgier body and the three-piece suit that strained in places to contain it, momentarily awed at this self-inflated accountant’s ability to detect another person’s open psychological wound and stick his finger directly into it. “Oh, er, sure—of course. You, Mort?”

“I most certainly did,” answered Mort Mortenstein earnestly. He pressed his advantage. “Do you think it will help our position in the marketplace?”

“Huh? Who the hell can tell, Mort?” Dirk Rangely said, gingerly passing his hand over the top of his head covered with thick, yet restrainedly curled, salt-and-pepper hair. “I’m beginning to worry about the Old Man and his cryptic memos.”

“He works in mysterious ways, to be sure,” Mort Mortenstein said, adjusting his ever-present, yet never lit pipe from the right side of his mouth to the left. “But let’s not forget his New Year’s Memo of 1957. He quite literally saved the company.”

“Well, I’m not really *that* worried about the Old Man,” hedged Dirk Rangely, suddenly sensing danger. After all, Mort Mortenstein’s department was in charge of Payroll with a capital ‘P’.

“A stroke of genius to sell size three-sixty O-rings as Hula Hoops after that Navy contract went down the tubes.” Mort Mortenstein chuckled around the stem of his pipe, which added sinister overtones to his laugh. “The books never looked so good—as black as spades.”

“Did I say worried? Actually, that was a poor choice of words,” Dirk Rangely squirmed.

“Then, there was the Memo of 1958.” Mort Mortenstein was relentless. He ground his teeth on the stem of his pipe, causing the hairs on the back of Dirk Rangely’s neck to rise. “We called it the *Sputnik Memo*. Now, *that* was a memo.”

“Of course, maybe the Old Man has been under a lot of pressure lately.” Dirk Rangely glanced feverishly up and down the hall for escape from this conversation with Mort Mortenstein. He might have been able to bow out by taking a drink of water, but that idiot was there, apparently trying to drain the Missouri River single-handedly.

“And then, the Memo of 1964,” Mort Mortenstein intoned softly. He took the pipe from his

mouth and pointed the stem directly at Dirk Rangely's heart like a deadly weapon. "I shed a bitter tear. We all did."

"I'll bet lawyers are behind all of this right-hand/left-hand stuff." Tiny beads of sweat began to form on Dirk Rangely's upper lip. "Or it *could* be Engineering."

"Well, Dirk, I'd love to stand here and shoot the breeze all day long with you, but I've got numbers to crunch." Mort Mortenstein stuffed his pipe back into his mouth and smiled savagely, pleased with himself at so unnerving a fellow executive. He walked past Dirk Rangely, giving him a hearty slap on the shoulder. Dirk Rangely thought he heard Mort Mortenstein chuckling to himself as he walked back to his office in Accounting. "And the Memo of 1960—what a sense of humor. What a sense of humor!"

"You know, the Company benefit plan does not cover accidental drownings in a God damned water fountain," Dirk Rangely barked at the youth still hunched over the drinking fountain. When the boy stood up and turned around, Dirk Rangely found himself face-to-face with Y.T. Erp, Jr. It was quickly becoming one of those days. "Christ Almighty—just joking, son—just joking. You know, a joke, eh? So, how about that Mort? What a character, eh? Of course, how much can you say about a man whose favorite Marx brother is Zeppo?"

Y.T., Jr. shrugged his shoulders.

"So, anyway, you're still around, eh?" Dirk Rangely put his arm around Y.T., Jr.'s shoulders and began walking down the hall, pulling the teenager along with him. "Are you down on the shipping dock still?"

"No, sir. I'm working maintenance with the Sugarman," Y.T., Jr. said respectfully, while at the same time eyeing Dirk Rangely with suspicion.

"Oh yes, that's right. That's right. I recall now, but, hey, shouldn't you be back at old Harry Truman High?"

"I took an early graduation so that I can start college sooner. Classes don't start until the twenty-fifth, so I'm putting in a few more weeks here at work for extra spending money."

"College, eh? Ah, yes." Dirk Rangely's eyes suddenly focused far down the hall at nothing in particular. Y.T., Jr. was amazed at how glassy Dirk Rangely's eyes had become on cue and wondered if this man had ever been allowed to attend any institute of higher education anywhere. "Well, believe me, the days you spend haunting those ivy-covered halls will be the best you'll ever know. So, which university will you be attending?"

"University of California at Berkeley."

Dirk Rangely stopped dead in his tracks, knowing that Y.T., Sr. had been a Harvard Man after which he had been a Navy Man (not Annapolis either?) before he became the Old Man, and wondered what to make of this apparent act of disrespect and rebellion on the part of the younger Erp. Dirk Rangely vaguely recalled news reports a few months back concerning students in California stirring up trouble over something typically inane like Civil Rights or Free Speech. If he wasn't careful, he could get sucked into the middle of an Erp family civil war right there and then. This day had certainly been fraught with danger—first the Memo, then Mort Mortenstein and now this. Dirk Rangely hoped that it was not portentous of the rest of the year to come. Rising to the occasion, he smiled down at Y.T., Jr. and said as sincerely as he could, "Well, I'd love to stand here and shoot the breeze all day long with you, but I've got numbers—I've got a million and one things to do. Remember what I said, college days will be the best days you'll ever have," Dirk Rangely smirked and gave Y.T., Jr. a hearty slap on the shoulder. As he began walking down the hall, he called back to Y.T., Jr., "Good luck to you." And then under his breath he muttered, "You'll need it."

"Good morning, Mr. Rangely," a secretary said as she passed Dirk Rangely in the hall.

"Hi-there-how-are-you-today, Margaret?" Dirk Rangely responded like one of Pavlov's dogs.

Y.T., Jr. watched Dirk Rangely say hello to everyone he passed in exactly the same way. He

wondered if Berkeley, California, would be far enough from Kansas City and if January twenty-fifth would come soon enough to get him the hell away from the abundance of phlegm-brains surrounding him before they drove him crazy. Y.T., Jr. turned around and began walking in the direction opposite to the one in which Dirk Rangely had been leading him—in the direction he had been originally going—towards the Engineering Department.

“Damn!” Dirk Rangely exclaimed as he slammed the door to his office shut. “How could I have made such a mistake? How could I have let myself be so cornered—and by all people, cornered by Mort? And *then!* Then, getting ambushed by Little Erp like that!” Dirk Rangely paced furiously and began to soliloquize to the snarling Siberian tiger’s head mounted on the wall behind his desk that he had gotten for a song at a church rummage sale to raise money for Christian Missionary work in Africa after bartering the poor priest insensible and embarrassing his wife into a severe case of hives. “What dark hours are these from which we must forge our days? What troubled waters are these we must navigate on our jour—”

“Excuse me, Mr. Rangely,” said Jo Ann, Dirk Rangely’s secretary, over the intercom into his office.

“Yes—yes, what is it?” Dirk Rangely exclaimed breathlessly, spinning around on his heels to face Jo Ann’s voice as if she were actually in the room.

“Arthur Needleman on line three.”

“I’m in a God damned meeting as far as Needleman is concerned,” Dirk Rangely snapped at the little green box on his desk.

“Yes, sir,” the box responded with Jo Ann’s voice, then stopped hissing.

“This can’t be happening to me—I can’t let this happen to me. Am I losing my edge? I can’t let this happen,” Dirk Rangely muttered to himself. He began pacing his office again like a caged animal. He now ignored the tiger’s head as he became absorbed in his favorite worry: that he was losing his ‘edge’. Dirk Rangely loved to liken himself to a saber, the cutting edge of Erp Industries, Inc., and to keep himself sharp, he constantly ran himself over the whetstone of his past failures and indiscretions. “Imagine, talking to Mort—to *Mort!* That sniveling bean-counter! And then, on top of that, telling him what I was thinking, not what I wanted him to think that I was thinking. And about the Old Man no less! I can’t let this happen. Jesus H. Christ, I’m getting senile like the Old Man. I can’t let that happen until *I’m* the Old Man, and then it will be my unalienable right to get senile if I damn well see fit to do so. I will have earned it by then. But a senile Vice-President of Marketing, that won’t do—no, that just will not do at all. It wouldn’t be tolerated. Hmmm, but what if the Old Man really is getting senile? I might have to act senile to prove to the senile Old Man that I am capable of moving up into the Big Office. But at the same time, I can’t really get senile, or I wouldn’t be sane enough to run Erp Industries. Of course, if I did get senile accidentally, it would be the perfect excuse to cover anything up. I’ll have to stay sharp and develop a sound stratagem for this.”

Dirk Rangely began to feel a faint throbbing at his temples. The time arrived for decisive action. He checked his watch, but it was only nine-thirty in the morning, too early to head down to Dante’s for some attitude lubrication with the usual 10W40 Tanqueray martinis. Dirk Rangely paced around behind his desk and sat down. He opened the top right-hand drawer to get out a packet of Alka-Seltzers. He broke two tablets in half. He worked up a mouth full of saliva and dissolved the halves one at a time in his mouth. The effervescent action against the roof of his mouth made him feel giddy. When he had finished, Dirk Rangely sat up and surveyed the fine oak grain of his desk top.

“What to do what to do what to do,” Dirk Rangely sang to himself softly, feeling much relieved that he had banished a troublesome headache *and* the irksome memory of his conversation with Mort Mortenstein from his mind in one fell swoop. But soon he became distressed when he discovered his finger aimlessly circling a knot in the grain of his desk top. His desk was so neat,

while everyone else's was cluttered with reports, recommendations, statistical charts, P & L Statements, Inventory Control Sheets, Production Run Projections, Production Run Summaries, Daily Totals, Weekly Totals, Monthly Totals, Year-to-date Totals, Supply Requisitions, Specifications, Drawings, Bills of Materials, Expense Vouchers, RFIs, RFPs, RFQs, Purchase Orders, Sales Orders, Document Change Notices, Document Documentation Notices, various memoranda, letters and who knows what else.

Anyone could look important and competent sitting at one of those desks, and Dirk Rangely wondered if, perhaps, for effect he should do something about the pathetically neat condition of his own desk top. It might not have been such a good idea to instruct Jo Ann to keep all that kind of—of—of *stuff* out of his office. He wondered what in the world she had done with it all. Maybe it was all crammed into the bottom drawer of that file cabinet out there by her desk that was always locked so that he could never open it up to see what she kept inside. Perhaps if he just asked her politely enough, Jo Ann would let him use some of that *stuff* to good effect whenever he needed a few props to enhance his aura of competence and efficiency—*but no!* Dirk Rangely pounded his desk top with his fist dramatically. He was no paper pusher. He was a top-level corporate strategist. Let all those other paper tigers wrestle with their reports and recommendations and whatevers, he had more important things to do.

“Right, Rudyard?” Dirk Rangely spun around and rhetorically asked the tiger's head on the wall behind him. Dirk Rangely had occasional bouts with alliteration that Alka-Seltzer did not seem to relieve. He turned back to his desk and took a deep breath. On the other hand, he wavered; it wouldn't be so bad to at least have a few pink telephone messages waiting for him that he could read with an exaggerated scowl on his face before crumpling them in his fist and tossing them into the nearest wastepaper basket in full view of everyone. Or even, if an occasional letter or Telex cable showed up in his in-basket—*but no!* Dirk Rangely shuddered at the dangerous tenor of his thoughts. He really was getting senile!

Letters and cables usually demanded responses and if there was anything worse than exposing one's thoughts in conversations with people like Mort Mortenstein, who existed only for the chance to inflict some mortal injury on a fellow worker's career, it was being irrevocably committed to some indefensibly stupid position or senile opinion *in writing*.

Dirk Rangely tried repeatedly to shrug off these troublesome thoughts, but his shoulders just got sore as he became more and more concerned about the nothing on his desk, and, considering how difficult it is to get nothing out of one's system, Dirk Rangely's stomach began construction again on an all-weather ulcer, despite the two Alka-Seltzers he had just taken. Dirk Rangely knew what he needed: a good, thorough leafing through a trade magazine, the only paper product he allowed into his office besides Kleenexes. Ah, there was something so magically relaxing about flipping each page and studying those soothing four-color vignettes of sleek jets, streaking sports cars and alluring females—the very stuff that full-blown daydreams are made of. But drat, no mail yet today. Dirk Rangely started drumming his fingers on his desk top faster and faster and faster, until they were literally galloping in place.

“What is the problem here? What is the problem what is the problem?” Dirk Rangely sang softly. Suddenly, he reined in his stampeding fingers. “That's it! Of course! I'm spending too much time in the plant! What am I doing here anyway? I should be out on the road.” Dirk Rangely jumped up and ran over to the door. He pulled it open enthusiastically and called out to his secretary, “Jo Ann, book me on the early morning flight out to the coast. Drop everything and get it done right away.”

“Which coast?”

Dirk Rangely immediately slammed the door closed. “Damn insolent secretary! Why do they always have to be second guessing you?” He thought for a moment, then opened the door again.

“Los Angeles. And call Needleman out there and tell him I’ll be out to discuss his forecast.”

“Yes, sir.” Jo Ann smiled.

Dirk Rangely could not be sure, but he thought he saw Jo Ann smile and wondered what it might have meant. No matter. He confidently slammed the door closed, taking comfort in the knowledge that decisive action had been taken and that a business trip was in the works. His spirits could not be dampened now, not even by the fact that he thoroughly despised Arthur Needleman, the West Coast Sales Manager, and often wondered seriously whether Needleman was not, in fact, an agent for the KGB, especially after that night he had gotten Dirk Rangely lost in Los Angeles’ heart of darkness with some dubious directions written out on a cocktail napkin.

Dirk Rangely went back to his desk and sat down to pause reflectively. There was no time like ‘estimated time en route’, he reflected. Dirk Rangely always felt “five miles closer to heaven” every time he sat strapped into a Boeing 707 window seat with a line of midget Tanqueray bottles at parade rest, an in-flight magazine filled with glossy daydreams, and a pair of headsets pouring out the insipid kind of music that so moved his very soul every time he rode an elevator. If only he could be a pilot himself, then his whole job would be to fly from one place to another. As it was now, whenever he got to wherever he was going, Dirk Rangely had to go to work. When he became the Old Man, he would certainly do something about that. Leaning back in his chair and crossing his feet up on top of his desk, he closed his eyes to muse about how things would be when he, Dirk Rangely, became the Old Man.

Suddenly, Dirk Rangely put his feet down and sat up straight. He searched through his desk drawers until he finally found an old, forgotten pad of blank paper. He took his Cross pen from his shirt pocket and, fingers trembling, slowly turned it so the point was exposed. He took a deep, deliberate breath. Dirk Rangely began writing his name, slowly and awkwardly, over and over and over again with his left hand. When he had filled the first page, he flipped it over and began again. It was no use, though. By the fifth page, his hand ached and Dirk Rangely still could not even decipher the twisted and tortured scribbles of his own name. He tossed down his Cross pen in disgust.

“Why can’t I just be right-handed, like I always have been?”

~::~



Frik and Frak

That Smile! At once it repelled and absorbed him. It sent a chill through his body like the cold blade of a knife laid flat against the base of his spine.

Y.T., Jr. quickly averted his eyes and in his desperation latched his gaze upon Wanda W. Willet, his father's secretary, which sent a shiver of an entirely different nature through his body that eventually lodged in his stomach and threatened to dislodge his breakfast.

Wanda W. Willet was a bony, emaciated woman of forty-five who prided herself on her trim figure, yet had, before she left, stirred scarecrows to unionize for job protection in the small farming community from which she hailed. Her entire face came to a point at the end of her nose, giving her a rodent-esque countenance. Her skin was pulled back painfully taut over her cheek bones and her lips were so pursed and puckered that her mouth resembled another, less pleasant bodily orifice. She had a habit of sticking pencils into the nest of hair on top of her head and forgetting about them that added to the illusion that her hairdo had actually been assembled by a pair of mating magpies.

Wanda W. Willet was born and raised in a town called Digby in Finikie County, Kansas, which was so far off of U.S. 283 that the only road through town was a hardened artery of dirt that to this day is unnamed and unnumbered. She was the only child of a farm implement sales and service man, who was quite popular in Finikie County, and his weary, wind-blown wife. Wanda W. Willet's upbringing was an intensely uneventful one, reaching its zenith when she graduated with a degree in Education from the Kansas State University Extension Center in the relative metropolis of Hays, Kansas. Much to her parents' dismay, the day after she received her diploma she scurried right on back to Digby and moved right back into the same upstairs bedroom that had always been hers. She eventually took over Miss Pyle's position as school teacher after Miss Pyle had been discovered dead in her home three weeks after she died. It seemed that none of her students felt motivated enough to report her as missing, so it was left to the Finikie County Fuller Brush salesman to inadvertently discover her body beneath a toppled stack of class essays, stiff as a board.

Wanda W. Willet taught kindergarten, elementary grades, junior high school and senior high school, all in a one-room, red-brick school house just west of Digby proper. Her students were the nepotistic farm hands of the rugged individuals who tilled the high plains of southern Finikie County. Wanda W. Willet found complete fulfillment teaching in a school that had no principals, no other teachers, no Parent Teachers Association and especially no football and basketball coaches who ineptly tried to teach driver's education and typing classes—that had no marching band, no drama club, no chess club, no biology club—that had no proms, no homecomings, no sock hops and no cheerleaders to counsel about teenage pregnancies. Teaching school in Digby was a pure, unadulterated experience of education, unfettered by any extra-curricular nonsense that would require Wanda W. Willet to interact with another human being on a purely social level. The school board was made up of three farmers named Joe who met once a year at Joe Number Three's farm house during the winter when farm duties were at a lull. Sometime during their judicious

consumption of alcoholic beverages and the endless hands of five card draw poker, nothing wild, Wanda W. Willet was given a four and one-half percent pay increase if the past year's crop yields had been good or a two and one-half percent increase if the moisture content was high or the test weights had been low.

All went well for a dozen years or so until that fateful October in 1957 when the Russians played with the thermostat connected to the Cold War by launching *Sputnik I* into orbit. The farmers all knew, of course, that this was a malicious communist plot aimed specifically at them to ruin their crops of newly planted winter wheat by some kind of insidious manipulation of the weather from outer space. Co-incidentally, it was also in that very same October of 1957 that the son of Joe Number Two on the school board, Joe Number Two, Junior, came home with a reading assignment of *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy, who was widely mistaken not only in Digby, but all of Finikie County, for Leon Trotsky, and suddenly the collusionary threat of the Red Menace was right there in their own north forties, just like good old Senator Joe "Tail Gunner" McCarthy had tried to warn them. With her own father voicing the loudest denunciations—sales of plows and discs had fallen off dramatically in 1957—"Red Army Colonel" Wanda W. Willetski was forced to leave Digby. She went to Kansas City, Missouri, and there, Y.T., Sr. recognized the vast, untapped potential of her fascist, dictatorial talents acquired over the twelve years spent in the one-room, red-brick school house.

"My door is always open for you to come to me with your problems and suggestions," Y.T., Sr. would tell his workers during impromptu speeches made on the Machine Shop floor or in the course of informal discussions held with the key punch operators in the Accounting Department. Of course, it was Wanda W. Willet's task to see that not one of them ever passed over the threshold to Y.T., Sr.'s office, and in this task, her well-honed perversion of the Socratic method served her well.

"Ex-excuse m-me, Miss W-Willet," murmured Horace Cooley, supervisor of the Drafting Department, where Y.T., Sr. had most recently been giving impromptu speeches. Horace Cooley was a tall, frail man whose posture had been irrevocably curved by twenty years bent over a drafting board. He wore thick, frameless glasses. His hands shook visibly as if he were afflicted with palsy. He was so soft-spoken that he had not once called attention to any of the occasional shortages in his paycheck that had occurred over the past twenty years. For Horace Cooley to have left the Drafting Department and to have presented himself before Mr. Erp's secretary required that he draw upon reservoirs of courage that were unimaginable even to himself in his wildest dreams. "Ex-excuse me, b-but I would like to s-speak to M-Mr. Erp, please."

Slowly and deliberately, Wanda W. Willet looked up from her desk. Years of inhaling chalk dust had made her voice hoarse and scratchy like the old seventy-eight RPM Victrola records she sang along with in her apartment, making a sustained conversation with her impossible for anyone with normal hearing. "Of course. And you would have an appointment, would you not?" she asked, as always with full knowledge that the petitioner did not.

"A-A-Appointment?" Horace Cooley stuttered, unnerved at first by Wanda W. Willet's appearance and then even more so by the tone of her voice.

"Yes, of course, Mr. Cooley, an appointment. You did make one, did you not?"

"B-But Mr. Er-Er-Er-Erp said..." Horace Cooley trailed off, noticing for the first time that directly behind Wanda W. Willet, Y.T., Sr.'s office door was closed as it always was during the hours of eight to five.

At this point, with an exaggerated sigh of exasperation, Wanda W. Willet would always take off her white rhinestone glasses with the sharply pointed wings and let them dangle from a chain around her neck. She did just that and squinted her brown, rat-like eyes at Horace Cooley.

"Bu-But it—but, this Me-memo," Horace Cooley stammered on bravely. "Th-This is going to

s-seriously e-effect the e-efficiency of the D-D-D-Drafting D-Department. I ju-just don't see how we w-will be able to g-get all of our wa-wa-wa-wa-wa-wa-work done. We are behind as it is n-now."

"And you wish to speak directly to Mr. Erp concerning this matter?"

"He s-said we could c-come to him with p-p-problems and s-s-suggestions. He said his d-door is—"

"But you have no appointment?" Wanda W. Willet turned her head and looked sideways at the trembling twig of a man before her.

"W-well n-no. But he s-said his door w-would always—"

"Mr. Cooley." Wanda W. Willet shook her head. "Mr. Cooley, would you not suppose Mr. Erp to be quite a busy man?"

"Well, y-yes, I would suppose—"

"And just how many people would you suppose Mr. Erp has working for him here at Erp Industries, Incorporated?"

"Oh, g-gosh, I don't know. M-Maybe three hun-or n-no, four—or —"

"Six hundred, sixty-two in this facility, which does not include the warehouse personnel in Lee's Summit. And now, what if each and every employee here wanted to see Mr. Erp today? *Hmm?* How much time would you suppose he would have to speak with each and every one of them?"

Horace Cooley rolled his eyes skyward as he went through the calculations in his head to cipher the answer for Wanda W. Willet. "I-I don't know off the t-top of my head M-Maybe, oh, a minute or—"

"If Mr. Erp worked one hour overtime in the morning and one hour overtime at night and worked straight through his lunch hour as well, he would be able to spend exactly one minute with each employee, less an average of ten seconds for each person to enter into and egress from Mr. Erp's office, leaving a scant fifty seconds to actually conduct their meeting Now, Mr. Cooley, as Mr. Erp's secretary, I am required to take down the minutes of all of Mr. Erp's meetings. You have heard of taking the minutes of a meeting, have you not, Mr. Cooley?"

"Ye-yes."

"Well, certainly in all my years, I have never taken the seconds of any meeting. Have you ever heard of such a thing Mr. Cooley?"

"Er, no, I—"

"Now, if I let you into Mr. Erp's office for only fifty seconds, you and he could not very well have a meeting if there are no minutes for me to take, now could you Mr. Cooley?"

"I-I su-suppose not."

"And if you do not have a meeting with Mr. Erp, then how do you suppose that you and he could have any meaningful discussion about your concerns over this particular memo and its impact on your Drafting Department?"

"If I-I d-d-didn't—"

"And if you do not discuss this situation with Mr. Erp, then you will not have accomplished the task you set out to accomplish when you came here, which would mean that you would have to come here tomorrow and again the next day and the next and the next. Now, Mr. Cooley, if you were Mr. Erp, could you afford to spend all your days having six hundred sixty-two non-meetings which did not allow you to discuss or resolve any of the issues and challenges facing you and your loyal and trusted employees?"

"Bu-but—"

"You see, then, that if Mr. Erp spends all of his time not solving problems, Erp Industries, Incorporated, would more than likely not be the successful and profitable enterprise that it is, would it not?"

unraveled.

Rumor around the plant—feverishly nurtured and fertilized by Dirk Rangely—had it that the ex-Colonel was the bombardier on the *Enola Gay*, the one who had actually pushed the button to drop *Little Boy*, the very first atomic bomb, on Hiroshima, the one who had killed 68,000 and injured 76,000 Japanese with just the slightest single movement of his thumb. The rumor helped intimidate people and sweep them out of the way as the ex-Colonel walked with the ex-Commander through the plant, making cracks about the different female employees like, “I’d sure like to redline that bitch,” or, “I’ve got a heat-seeking missile for her six.”

The truth of the matter about his service record was that the ex-Colonel had been the co-pilot of *Bockscar*, the B-29 that had dropped *Fat Man*, the first plutonium bomb (as opposed to the first uranium bomb), on Nagasaki, killing 38,000 and injuring 21,000 Japanese. After Berlin, Dresden, Frankfurt and “those fucking marble factories in Schweinfurt,” after long months of training in the Utah desert and then Osaka, Yokohama, Amagasaki, Kokura, and Tokyo, Nagasaki was just another day in a long, long war. The ex-Colonel flew the Nagasaki mission with the exact same grit, determination and precision with which he had flown every mission of his career. And when he was done, he did what he always did when he was not flying: he ran a series of low-level, sperm-strafting missions on the naked bodies of whatever willing nurses and/or natives he could find on Tinian or any of the other Mariana Islands. In fact, on the co-pilot side of his B-29, instead of miniature Rising Sun flags, he had painted miniature Betty Grable gambos to mark each of his scores. No one knew how or why, but the ex-Colonel—even though he was only a Captain at the time—had the most impressive record in the Pacific Theater of Operations.

After a tour of flying fighters up the Yalu River to Mig Alley in Korea and a stint in West Germany that entailed many more sexual dogfights than aerial, the ex-Colonel ended up at Area 51 in Nevada as a test pilot on the U-2 spy plane development program. It was there that he first met Y.T., Sr., who was personally supervising the trouble-shooting of the electronic black-box payloads that the then fledgling Erp Industries, Inc. was under contract to design and build. The ex-Colonel was amazed at Y.T., Sr.’s voracious sexual appetite that appeared to surpass even his own record during World War II. In fact, it did, but Y.T., Sr. was not stationed in the Pacific Theater of Operations, but rather spent the war in the Navy Bureau of Aeronautics in Washington, D.C. It was not long before the ex-Colonel was loading himself and Y.T., Sr. into whatever could fly to escape the hot, lonely Nevada desert for anywhere to knock-up anything that moved or simply breathed. Even long after the two men had parted ways after the U-2 program, the ex-Colonel often showed up without notice at the Kansas City airport in a twin-seated F-106 or F-4 to whisk Y.T., Sr. away at MACH 2 to grab a quick piece of ass. After the ex-Colonel took his twenty-year retirement from the Air Force, Y.T., Sr. immediately recognized the need for a man of such caliber in his organization and hired him on as a corporate pilot, even though Erp Industries, Inc., had no corporate aircraft at the time.

That Smile! belonged to the ex-Commander. It was the kind of smile that shifting continental shelves rip in the earth during earth quakes—that lions snarl over a dying antelope as they wait for their prey to expire—that mature cumulonimbus clouds flash in bolts of lightning. *That Smile!* betrayed a wildness, a savage uncontrollableness and unpredictability of the sort that make up the very essence of tornadoes and hurricanes. But there was something more, a human element—the twinkle in the eye of a linebacker charging the blind side of frail split end carrying the football—the chortlings of used car salesmen upon spotting a female senior citizen walking onto the lot—the smile of a fighter pilot on an unfriendly’s six with his AIM-9 *Sidewinder* missiles armed and growling in his headset.

“So, a Navy man,” Y.T., Sr. said, looking over the ex-Commander’s resume on that fateful day the ex-Commander had mysteriously come in off the streets to apply for a job. A series of rented

single-engine Cessnas, Pipers, and Beechcrafts had been used by Y.T., Sr. and the ex-Colonel to execute “missions” to St. Louis or Memphis or Little Rock, until Erp Industries, Inc., was able to afford a used cabin-class twin. Success in the sixties afforded a move up to a Learjet, but it also meant that a co-pilot had to be found for the ex-Colonel, as required by the F.A.A. “Why did you scuttle out of the service?”

“Scorched the wrong gooks.” *That Smile!*

Y.T., Sr. knew immediately that this was his man. “How’s that?”

“In Vietnam. Ruff-Puffs were about to be overrun. Dropped dead on target, but some of the napalm splashed the wrong way. Guess it looked bad to Bar-B-Q a few of the Allies.” *That Smile!* “Besides, I never learned the stall recovery procedures for a desk. If you get my drift.”

“Hmmm. I see. And what about this Air America thing?”

“CIA operation. Didn’t like me flying their precious new 727s fifty feet off the deck through Cambodia and Laos. Claimed I kept getting vegetation stains on the leading edges of the wings.” *That Smile!* “But I think that Company flight Engineers kept getting shit in their pants.”

“Uh-huh. But what about this here? Getting kicked out of the Missouri National Guard?”

“One CAVU Sunday afternoon searching for targets of opportunity in an F-4. Rolled over and dived on a tug pushing three barges. On pull-out, the fuel drop tanks released. Scared the piss out of the tug crew. They abandoned ship. The runaway tug and barges took out a bridge just down river from Hannibal. Radio Intercept Officer got a good chuckle out of it. The Guard didn’t.” *That Smile!*

“And TWA doesn’t want you to fly for them?”

“Suppose not.” *That Smile!* “You?”

“Absolutely.”

The ex-Commander sat erect on the right hand side of the door to Y.T., Sr.’s office and watched the world of Erp Industries, Inc., go by from behind his green, teardrop sunglasses. His clothes were always impeccably neat and pressed. There was not a single speck of dandruff on his shoulders nor a stray water spot on his high-gloss Oxford wing tips. His arms were folded with precision across his chest. His head was always cocked at a forty-five degree angle to his shoulders, a habit long ingrained to broaden his field of view while scanning for unfriendlies. Instead of a cigar, a slender, wooden toothpick rolled methodically from one side of *That Smile!* to the other.

“I am an executive of this company and I am entitled to the privileges normally accorded such a position,” demanded P. Peckerfelt, Vice-President/Manufacturing, of Y.T., Sr. shortly after the ex-Commander had been hired. “I should be able to have access to the corporate aircraft for business travel if it is available.”

“Why I could not agree with you more,” agreed Y.T., Sr.

“You couldn’t?” P. Peckerfelt was almost disappointed. He had rigorously prepared himself for this confrontation with an entire stack of index cards full of arguments that bulged his suit coat pocket.

“Certainly,” smiled Y.T., Sr.

“Then I can use the Learjet to go out to Lockheed tomorrow?”

“Well, I am afraid that is going to be a bit of a problem.”

“But you said—”

“Yes, of course, but you see the problem is that the right engine is getting a hot section and the plane is down at the moment.” Y.T., Sr. appeared to ponder for a moment. “Tell you what, though, just meet the pilots at the airport in the morning. We’ll make arrangements for another plane.”

“Why thank you.” P. Peckerfelt positively flushed with the thrill of victory.

“Have a nice flight,” Y.T., Sr. said through the gritted teeth of his smile.

P. Peckerfelt was met at the airport the next morning by *That Smile!* Instead of a business jet,

the ex-Commander loaded P. Peckerfelt and his luggage into a ragged T-6 *Harvard*, an old, prop service trainer, and they took off. No turn was made at less than a sixty degree bank. Every maneuver pulled at least two Gs, which made the air frame creak and groan in protest—exhilarating to the ex-Commander, but an unpleasant reminder to P. Peckerfelt that he was but a frail captive of the laws of physics and that should they crash, his body would be torn to bits by the forces of the impact without mercy. The ex-Commander flew under power lines and so close to roads that he read over the intercom the posted population of each town they passed to his passenger who was too busy trying not to become ill to pay any attention. He flew so low over the desolate farming regions of Western Kansas that he chaffed the amber waves of grain with the tips of his propeller, sending kernels of wheat up to beat against the belly of the airplane like a hail storm. While in Denver for a fuel stop, P. Peckerfelt quietly slipped away from the ex-Commander and got on a commercial flight to California. He never again asked to use the company Learjet and all Y.T., Sr. had to pay was an extra clean up charge for the inside of the T-6. He never regretted hiring the ex-Commander.

The ex-Commander caught a glimpse of Y.T., Jr. outside in the hallway and smiled a little broader. He unfolded his right arm and gave a slight, crisp snap of a salute. Y.T., Jr. smiled back. He liked Frik and Frak, especially after they had flown him out to Berkeley last October to look over the university. They had taken him to Fu Loin's Bar, Grill, Gift Shop, Curio Emporium, Taoist Book Store, Camera Shop, Photo Development Center, Buddhist Reading Room, Fireworks Factory, Chopstick Warehouse and Whorehouse down in San Francisco's Chinatown. Frik and Frak had put it to the Asians again and again from airplanes and still loved to put it to Asian women again and again in bed—such is the love/hate turmoil that brews in a soldier's soul.

Y.T., Jr. returned the salute and headed on to the Engineering Department, wondering if on the twenty-fifth they would take him back to Fu Loin's for more miscegenational mischief. If nothing else, Y.T., Jr. had inherited his father's insatiable taste for women.

Of course, from his vantage point behind the shrubbery outside the windows to Y.T., Sr.'s office, Wanda W. Willet's shadow, Private Investigator Parmakianski, shivered and watched everything that happened inside, making the appropriate entries in a greasy, grimy notebook.

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The Hall of Science

“The workers you saw out on the factory floor make money for me...and these learned bastards in here spend it all,” Y.T., Sr. would always say as he passed through the Engineering Department when hosting a plant tour for a representative of that hallowed stalwart of capitalism known as THE CUSTOMER. “I am also of the firm conviction that there comes a time when all engineers should be shot in the head so that production can actually begin.”

Y.T., Sr. would always be sure to make this last comment loud enough for Vasili Ivanovich Dzhugashili, Vice-President/Research and Development, to hear, then would wait and watch as the color drained from his face and his eyes squinted shut in a painful grimace behind his tiny, round, wire-rimmed glasses. Outside of adding more than a few pounds to his short, stocky frame, Vasili Ivanovich had changed very little in the years since Y.T., Sr. had met him in a Washington, D.C., radio repair shop in 1946. His hair still thrust straight up into a high plateau of a flattop and his eyebrows were still so bushy that they formed a veritable hedgerow across the bottom of his forehead. His chubby, round face had been lined and gutted by years of oppression under the Stalin regime and then by years of trying unsuccessfully to adjust to the new and very different way of life in America, which had become his home after World War II through the shady arrangements of one ex-Luftwaffe Corporal named Rolf Guderian.

Rolf Guderian had been a guard at the P.O.W. work camp where Vasili Ivanovich endured World War II in its entirety, having been captured on the very first day of the war when Hitler unleashed his Blitzkrieg against Russia. Four years later when the end neared and the outcome appeared obvious, Rolf Guderian, through deft manipulation of what was left of the Nazi Bureaucracy, got Vasili Ivanovich and himself out of Germany. Then, through quite immodest exaggeration of Vasili Ivanovich’s credentials as a physicist from the Academy of Sciences in Moscow, he got them to the United States where the State Department promptly misplaced them and forgot about them in the excitement of laying claim to Werner Van Braun and his cadre via Operation Paperclip, while the Russians got stuck with Poland. With their fates forever interwoven by the exploits of their escape, Vasili Ivanovich and Rolf Guderian opened a radio repair shop in an attempt to stave off poverty. Unfortunately, business was less than mediocre and they were forced to live in near destitution, sleeping on cots and eating from a hot plate in the repair shop itself.

In the autumn of 1946, Y.T., Sr. brought his RCA Console 6000 into Vasili Ivanovich and Rolf Guderian for service. When he returned to pick his radio up, Y.T., Sr. discovered that Vasili Ivanovich had replaced all the vacuum tubes inside with small metal buttons. Business being what it was, Vasili Ivanovich had a good deal of time to tinker around in his workshop and, occasionally, he came up with inventions like those small electric buttons. Y.T., Sr. spent the balance of the day at the little radio shop talking with the bashful Russian scientist. Rolf Guderian silently hung back with suspicion until Y.T., Sr. offered to buy the two hungry foreigners dinner. By dessert, they had agreed to become the first two employees of Erp Industries, Inc. The little metal buttons that Vasili Ivanovich had put into Y.T., Sr.’s radio would, two years later, be re-invented by Bell Laboratories

and would be called transistors.

Correctly reading the ill congressional winds that were beginning to stir with regards to un-American activities and recognizing the imminent danger of employing an ex-Soviet engineer, Y.T., Sr. decided the time was right to leave Washington, D.C., and relocate his company in America's heartland. Erp Industries, Inc., came to occupy the second floor of a shoppette above a Rexall Drug Store, Lucky Pierre's Beauty Salon and Vernon's Bait and Tackle Shop, in Raytown, Missouri, a sleepy little hamlet just east of his mother's hometown of Kansas City. In those early days, Y.T., Sr. was Vice-President/Manufacturing, Vice-President/Sales, Vice-President/Finance, Vice-President/Procurement, Vice-President/Personnel—in fact, he was Vice-President/Everything except Engineering. That role was Vasili Ivanovich's by virtue of being the only engineer employed by the company. In its infancy, growth came painfully slow for Erp Industries, Inc. Each day brought fresh battle against deteriorating odds, as Y.T., Sr. struggled to keep his young company solvent.

"Alright you sons-of-bitches!" Y.T., Sr. screamed as he burst into the back corner of the second floor that served as the Engineering Department. The acrid odor of women getting permanents and the faint rumblings of hair dryers drifted up from Lucky Pierre's Beauty Salon downstairs. "Up against the fucking wall! Everybody! *NOW!*"

Vasili Ivanovich heard the commotion outside the closet that had been converted into an office for him—quite commodious accommodations compared to those he had as an underling at the Academy of Sciences. He got up to investigate and when he stepped out into the "Engineering Lab", still clutching his slide rule, he found Horace Cooley, his draftsman, and Rolf Guderian, his technician, with their backs against the wall and their hands on top of their heads. Pacing back and forth in front of them was Y.T., Sr., waving a forty-five caliber pistol and, apparently, frothing at the mouth like a mad dog.

"You! Get over here!" Y.T., Sr. screamed upon spotting Vasili Ivanovich's portly figure in the door to the closet. He aimed his pistol at his one and only engineer. "You—get your ass over here you red-souled, Russian son-of-a-bitch!"

Vasili Ivanovich set down his slide rule and obediently joined the rest of the Erp Industries, Inc., Engineering Department against the wall with his hands on his head. He had been threatened with execution once before. Outraged that the natural sciences seemed to be straying from the tenants of socialist theory, Stalin ordered a purge of the Academy of Sciences. Vasili Ivanovich, without any knowledge of the crime with which he had been charged—he was being held accountable for the fact that the universe was not conforming to Marxist doctrine—stood silent for four and a half hours as a panel of Communist Party members discussed the seriousness of his unidentified political infidelities and whether or not he should be stood up against a wall and shot. The majority of the panel favored immediate execution, but they acquiesced to the astute Party member who noted that Dzhugashili was also Stalin's true surname. It was agreed that the Party Chairman might take a dim view of the execution of a family member with dire results ensuing for members of the panel. At the same time, though, they could not undermine the effectiveness of the purge by acquitting Vasili Ivanovich completely, so they decided to accept compulsory military service as atonement for his transgressions. Instead of staring back at a firing squad, the bewildered physicist found himself staring at Polish border guards patrolling the other side of the barbed wire fence that demarcated their respective countries. From there, Vasili Ivanovich found his way onto the roll call list of Luftwaffe Corporal Rolf Guderian.

Vasili Ivanovich looked down at Rolf Guderian standing against the wall next to him. Rolf Guderian looked back with an expression that read, 'I told you so, you stupid *scheisskopf*'.

Vasili Ivanovich nodded with resignation at the greasy little ex-Nazi with the head four sizes too big for his body.

“Did those Skunkworks prototypes ship yet?” Y.T., Sr. demanded of Vasili Ivanovich.

“Comrade Erp—” Old habits as well as Vasili Ivanovich’s thick Slavic accent were hard to break. “I mean, *Mister* Erp, we seem to have had problems with random voltage spikes in the output signal.”

“I don’t want to hear about random voltage spikes in output signals or about EMI or about RF leakage or about dithering or about mismatched impedances or about channel crosstalk or about root mean squared amplitude modulated oscillations or about any other lame-brained engineering mumbo-jumbo!” Y.T., Sr. screamed, waving the pistol directly under Vasili Ivanovich’s nose. “You are already five and a half months late in shipping those God damned things. And need I remind you, you maladjusted Muscovite, that this is not the Soviet Union. Here in America, we have THE CUSTOMER. And if we do not ship parts to THE CUSTOMER, we cannot invoice THE CUSTOMER. And if we do not invoice THE CUSTOMER, THE CUSTOMER does not pay us. And if we do not get paid, we do not make payroll. And if we do not make payroll, we shut our doors. And if we shut our doors, I am going to ride you like a mule the hard way, all the way back to Red Square and string you up by your toes.”

“I believe if we can just be allowed time to isolate—”

“I am going to isolate the left lobe of your brain from the right lobe if those units do not ship by five o’clock today!” Y.T., Sr. cocked the hammer of his pistol and pressed the muzzle against Vasili Ivanovich’s forehead.

“But sir!” Vasili Ivanovich exclaimed. He looked up nervously at the round clock on the wall. “I just do not see how that could be poss—”

Y.T., Sr. aimed, fired and hit the dead center of the clock, stopping the hands. All at once, every pore on Vasili Ivanovich’s body opened up and poured forth a steady flow of perspiration. At the discharge, Horace Cooley began trembling spastically and murmuring Hail Marys under his breath. Rolf Guderian smiled in admiration at the efficient manner in which Y.T., Sr. was dealing with the recalcitrant Russian.

“Very well. As you wish.” Vasili Ivanovich sighed heavily. He took off his glasses to wipe the sweat from the lenses, then went to work.

Horace Cooley and Rolf Guderian spent the rest of the day against the wall at gunpoint while Vasili Ivanovich tinkered and tested, tested and tinkered, tinkered and tested, tested and tinkered with the four black boxes stuffed with electronics that the United States Air Force had been anxiously awaiting at Area 51 in Nevada for almost a year. At four-fifty that afternoon, when the problem had been finally isolated, identified and rectified, Y.T., Sr. marched Vasili Ivanovich, Horace Cooley and Rolf Guderian with the four black boxes down the hall to the shipping department at gunpoint. After seeing the prototypes packed up and sent off on a truck, Y.T., Sr. put on his pistol’s safety and, without a word, went back to his office. Horace Cooley fell to his knees and gave thanks to God.

“The Fuhrer would not have let you get off so easy,” Rolf Guderian muttered maliciously behind Vasili Ivanovich’s back.

“Yes. Yes, you are right. Nor would Stalin.” Vasili Ivanovich mopped the sweat from his brow and recalled memories of his short, clumsy, brooding and aloof second cousin as a child in the Georgia region of the Soviet Union. Then, with a heavy sigh, he said, “But we must remember that this is America.”

“America—Shamerica. You *scheisskopf*, I told you that those resistor values were not right, but you never listen to me,” Rolf Guderian sneered. “Next time I hope he blows your God damned brains out all over the wall.”

“Yes. Next time,” Vasili Ivanovich agreed without paying attention, rather thinking that—contrary to Rolf Guderian’s usual inept opinion—he should have been able to predict the

unexpected capacitance between the solder joints on the number three circuit board and the metal cover can that caused the random voltage spikes in the output signal.

Much to Rolf Guderian's undying dismay, Vasili Ivanovich never did get his brains blown out all over the wall, for Vasili Ivanovich was never again late with a prototype shipment to THE CUSTOMER. Above and beyond that, never did a prototype that he shipped ever fail to meet THE CUSTOMER'S specifications. Such was the enduring strength of the impression that Y.T., Sr. had made that day with his pistol. And it was largely due to the inspired performance of the Engineering Department that Erp Industries, Inc., began to gather in more contracts and bigger contracts from THE CUSTOMER. As the company prospered, though, Y.T., Sr. saw that Vasili Ivanovich had less and less time to invent the new and better electronic mousetraps which were at the very foundation of the company's continuing success. So Y.T., Sr. kept pushing Vasili Ivanovich to hire more and more engineers until he found himself responsible for supervising nine engineers and a dozen technicians. But Vasili Ivanovich loathed being the head of the Engineering Department and the responsibilities that were thrust upon him. He did not want to one day become the Old Man like Rolf Guderian or Dirk Rangely or that troublesome head of manufacturing who was always plotting and scheming against Y.T., Sr. as if he had a personal vendetta to settle with the Erp family—that P. Peckerfelt fellow. All that Vasili Ivanovich wanted to do was tinker and experiment in his laboratory. His joy came from the modest inventions (like the transistor) that inevitably found their way into Erp Industries, Inc.'s products.

Rolf Guderian, on the other hand, lusted after power. Before World War II, he found himself in the backwaters of the Nazi Bureaucracy as a tender of meticulous duties that everyone else eschewed. He was physically not front line Aryan Army material, so when the hostilities broke out in earnest, he found himself in an ill-fitting Luftwaffe uniform guarding Russian prisoners of war near Dresden. The life and death power he held over those Slavs infected him with a terminal quest for authority. At Erp Industries, Inc., Rolf Guderian was and always had been utterly worthless as a technician, but he gleefully shouldered the managerial and administrative duties that Vasili Ivanovich disdained and often ignored completely. At first, he immersed himself in such controversies as whether white or canary, legal or letter sized writing pads should be used uniformly throughout the Engineering Department, and the subtle intricacies of properly matching color coded tabs to the subject material for the engineering files, not to mention overseeing the expenditures and the operation of the departmental coffee pot. In the one thousand and one decisions about pencils, paper clips, staples, rubber bands, typewriter ribbons and note pads, Rolf Guderian found personal expression as well as the opportunity to sharpen his skills as an administrator to a ruthless degree. As the years passed, he came to assume more and more responsibilities until he was in charge of furniture acquisitions, the department operating budget, and even the hiring and firing of staff personnel, though engineers and technicians were still hired by Vasili Ivanovich. Rolf Guderian eventually assumed the title of Chief Engineer, even though he had never taken a degree and had no technical experience beyond being Vasili Ivanovich's inept personal technician. Rolf Guderian officially reported to Vasili Ivanovich, but he had slowly and steadily been building up an empire for himself and in private moments envisioned himself as the competent Prime Minister to an old, feeble-minded President—much in the fashion that Hitler had come to take control of all Germany while serving under Hindenburg.

Like all good bureaucratic kingpins, Rolf Guderian measured the success of his organizational imperialism by the number of people reporting to him. Vasili Ivanovich had nine engineers, twelve technicians, and a new secretary for a total of twenty-two. After deft maneuvering over the past two years that brought Horace Cooley's entire Drafting Department under his direct supervisory control, Rolf Guderian out-numbered Vasili Ivanovich fifty-three to twenty-two. Unfortunately, the majority of people in his ranks were file clerks, administrative assistants, technical writers and

secretaries who accomplished little of value, but, of course, this mattered not to Rolf Guderian. What did matter were results as measured on the five-foot by six-foot organizational chart of Erp Industries, Inc., on the wall of his office that he consulted at least as often as Hitler had consulted a map of Europe.

Rolf Guderian had a secret plan for a future Business Reich that he kept under lock and key. He shared these blueprints for a new order only with the two Program Managers who were his closest advisors and blindly obedient henchmen. Co-incidentally, both Adolf Himmlerlicht and Herman Eichmanhoff were uniquely qualified—outside of the roots of their family trees—to be Program Managers by virtue of being graduate engineers who had put themselves through state universities by selling used cars. Everyone who sat in on a meeting with them was spellbound at their dazzling presentations and at the glowing optimism contained in progress reports that might as well have begun, ‘Once upon a time...’ and ended, ‘...lived happily ever after’. Vasili Ivanovich and his engineers had little use for Himmlerlicht and Eichmanhoff and avoided them at all costs. As such these two brown-shirted, corporate fascists had little knowledge of what the Engineering Department was working on. Yet no one had ever noticed that instead of actually managing the new development programs that Erp Industries, Inc., had undertaken, Himmlerlicht and Eichmanhoff had deftly begun reporting on the reports that they were giving until they reached the ultimate efficiency of reporting on the work that they were not doing. Of course, this is not to say that they were not busy men. Quite the contrary, Himmlerlicht and Eichmanhoff were continually on their way from one meeting to the next, briefing Sub-Contract Administrators, Buyers, Manufacturing Managers, Quality Control Supervisors, Marketing Representatives, Source Inspectors, government auditors and, of course, THE CUSTOMER, with their legendary purple prose. When they had no one to meet with, they met with each other and Rolf Guderian to review the Master Plan. Fortunately for them all, Vasili Ivanovich never forgot the day that—quite literally—he had been under the gun to complete a project.

One overwhelming obstacle stood in the way of Rolf Guderian’s ambitious plans: neither he, Himmlerlicht nor Eichmanhoff had the slightest idea of what it was that Erp Industries, Inc., manufactured and sold, and try as they might, they could not get their hands on that precious information. One might have thought that the people who designed and engineered the products would be intimately familiar with their ultimate functions, but Vasili Ivanovich and his engineers were all quiet, serious men who were interested above all else in the advancement of science and technology. They viewed the products they developed for THE CUSTOMER as merely catalysts for their research and cared not at all to learn about the mundane day-to-day tasks performed by the odd-shaped boxes—usually painted flat black with white stenciled part numbers—they invented. Considering the absurd production schedules that never coincided with reality, let alone the Gregorian Calendar, P. Peckerfelt and his manufacturing people never had the luxury of time to investigate and contemplate whatever became of the conglomerate of sub-assemblies that were frantically put together to get shipped before the month’s end. To Mort Mortenstein, the boxes were all just abstract part numbers that his department breathed life into by converting them into dollars and cents via the mysterious, algebraic-like functions of accounting. Perhaps Dirk Rangely came closest when he would say, “Erp Industries, Inc., designs, develops, manufactures and markets sophisticated electronic products—so-called ‘Black Boxes’—for use in the Aerospace and Defense Industries.” When pressed to tell what exactly it was that these “Black Boxes” did when installed in the bellies of aircraft or deep in the bowels of Navy destroyers, Dirk Rangely would always hold up his hands and explain that he was not at liberty to divulge that information as it pertained to United States Department of Defense programs that were classified. Fortunately for the concealment of Dirk Rangely’s ignorance, what he said was true.

Y.T., Jr. did not know what Erp Industries, Inc., manufactured and, quite frankly, he did not

care. At the moment, he was much more interested in loitering outside the door to the Engineering Department where, unnoticed, he could watch Vasili Ivanovich's new secretary as she sat at her desk typing a letter. True to her name, Scarlett Angelina Brookings was a flaming red head with gray eyes and a liberal splattering of light freckles on her cheeks and arms that Y.T., Jr. would later learn extended over a good portion of her body. Even though Rolf Guderian scoffed at Scarlett Angelina Brookings and never failed to comment upon her shortcomings in comparison with a blonde-haired, blue-eyed Aryan ideal, she was quite beautiful.

Ever since Y.T., Jr. had been ten years old, he had spent portions of his weekends and school vacations working at his father's company. He cut the grass, raked the leaves, trimmed the shrubbery, and swept the sidewalks clean—or shoveled them clear of snow in the winter. He even repainted the yellow lines on the blacktop of the parking lot. It was not until the summer Y.T., Jr. turned sixteen that his father gave him his first job working inside the plant in the Shipping Department with Orley Bovine.

Orley Bovine was a hillbilly from the Ozark Mountains whose teeth seemed to shoot out of his gums in every different direction, a trait that he used to great advantage in prodigious feats of flinging tobacco laden spittle from his mouth. Legend had it that he could even spit around corners. Indeed, during his tenure in the Shipping Department, Y.T., Jr. became a respectable spitter himself. He also learned how a mere shipping clerk could afford to buy expensive watches, diamond rings, and a new Cadillac every September when the new models came out of Detroit. Beneath Orley Bovine's uncut, unpolished backwoods exterior beat the heart of a slick marketing representative working for a number of independent distillers so far back in the hills of southwest Missouri that only he could find them. On Mondays, envelopes with numbers on the outside and ten dollar bills on the inside began showing up in the Shipping Department. On Friday afternoons, mason jars of white lightning found their way onto the floors of the cars with license plates corresponding to the numbers on the envelopes. It was not as if Y.T., Sr. was blind to the enterprising ways of Orley Bovine. In fact, he thought it most beneficial to have his son get a gut-level lesson in *Laissez-Faire* capitalism and he never questioned the extra money that Y.T., Jr. got from helping Orley Bovine on Friday afternoons.

The next summer, instead of packing, labeling and shipping out cardboard boxes filled with "Black Boxes" and, during idle hours, lounging on the loading dock out back with Orley Bovine refining his spitting techniques, Y.T., Jr. was assigned to work in the Machine Shop as a machinist's apprentice. Y.T., Jr. had never before been in the Machine Shop and was only vaguely aware of its presence. From the Shipping Department he could hear the dull, steady thump-thump-thump-thump-thump that sounded like the very heartbeat of the building and could feel the faint synchronized pulsations in the floor. But like all the other regular workers, he learned to tune the noise and vibrations out after his first week there. The Machine Shop occupied the entire basement level of the Erp Industries, Inc., building and on the first day his father took him there, Y.T., Jr. hesitated as an animal-like fear welled up inside of him at the sight of the dark hole of a doorway at the bottom of the stairs. As he descended to the basement level, the full orchestration of the Machine Shop—the monotonous, thumping rhythm of the punch presses, the whirl of the grinders, the whines of the drill presses, the groans of the screw machines, lathes, gear cutters, and milling machines—rose to a deafening crescendo. Pausing to allow his eyes to adjust to the dim artificial light enough to follow the lanes outlined with yellow lines on the floor, Y.T., Jr. was taken back by the rows and rows of massive, dark machines tended by shuffling men with missing fingers and measurable hearing loss dressed in heavy boots and oil-stained smocks. The men looked up as Y.T., Jr. and his father passed by, but said nothing and made no gestures. The air felt hot and appeared hazy with a mist of oil. After only five minutes, Y.T., Jr.'s skin felt greasy. He could not hear when his father introduced him to the expressionless man in safety glasses who would be his supervisor

for the summer.

As a boy of seventeen, Y.T., Jr. found himself on the very bottom rung of the sacred ladder of seniority by which everything and everyone in the Machine Shop was measured. Beyond that, everyone in the Shop knew who he was and knew that his stay there would be short. As his father's surrogate, he bore the brunt of any beef or grudge that was held against the Old Man, which is not to say that anyone openly persecuted or abused the boss's son. But Y.T., Jr. worked harder than he had ever worked in his life and worked harder than anyone else in the Machine Shop had ever worked. For that matter, he worked harder than anyone in any machine shop anywhere had ever worked since the outbreak of the Industrial Revolution.

As their apprentice, he learned little about the function and operation of the machine tools. Rather, he fetched the bar stock, rolled steel and castings to feed the machines and keep them running throughout the day. He gathered and carried away their scrap. He cleaned floors, walls, ceilings and the uncleanable machines themselves, often working overtime to finish what had been demanded of him. By the end of the summer, Y.T., Jr. was a bone-weary teenager whose hands were scabbed and scarred from handling unforgiving metals. His skin was pale from days of working from seven in the morning until eight-thirty or nine at night under the artificial light of the dungeonous basement. His ears rang and he never again put Brylcreem on his hair. He was genuinely grateful for the school year to begin for the first time in his life and vowed never again to be subjected to that kind of labor. Y.T., Sr. was pleased, but for good measure, he had his son work in the Machine Shop again over Christmas break and spring vacation.

The summer of 1964, when Y.T., Jr. was eighteen, his father had him work with the Sugarman, the crusty, old Negro who was charged with maintenance of the Old O'Reilly Candy Factory Building that now housed Erp Industries, Inc. Y.T., Sr. had acquired the building in Meadowlawn just outside Kansas City in 1958, when his company had outgrown the second floor above the Rexall Drug Store, Lucky Pierre's Beauty Salon and Vernon's Bait and Tackle Shop in Raytown. The Sugarman had come to Y.T., Sr. with the property. He had been a fixture at the Old O'Reilly Candy Factory Building ever since 1925 when he first started looking after the building and the equipment that poured out tons and tons of chocolate confections. The Sugarman had grown old with the building. Together their facades had become lined with the passing of time. Their joints creaked and their respective plumbing often got clogged up. Even so, the Sugarman still brimmed with vigor and life, and from his workshop located at the very center of the building, he kept his protégé of so many years up to the task of serving Erp Industries, Inc.

On quiet days, when all was well with the Old O'Reilly Candy Factory Building, the Sugarman would receive visitors in his workshop for idle conversation and, perhaps if they so desired, for a sip from his hip flask, which was always filled with the crystal clear liquid that Orley Bovine supplied him free of charge. Besides Orley Bovine, Vasili Ivanovich was known to stop by late in the afternoons when the burden of responsibilities oppressed him. When Arthur Needleman came into the plant from the West Coast, he always made sure to stop in at the Sugarman's workshop for a shot of moonshine and a few laughs before he went to the Marketing Department, which, of course, made Dirk Rangely doubly suspicious of that night in Los Angeles and of those dubious directions on that cocktail napkin that lead him into the very heart of urban darkness. Horace Cooley occasionally sought out a moment of peace and quiet there to calm his nerves and to find the strength to finish out another day's shift. Frik and Frak came so that Frik could barter trinkets from Fu Loin's in return for the right to borrow another issue from the Sugarman's complete and up to date collection of *Playboys*. Even Y.T., Sr., himself was known to pass a few idle hours in the Sugarman's workshop, which was a source of agonizing annoyance for people like Dirk Rangely, Rolf Guderian and Simon Salisbury who would not lower themselves to call upon a mere janitor and could imagine no reasonable explanation for such behavior in others.

“You don’ keep them feet together, boy, you gonna be walkin’ all over you balls. Then you be sorry, fo’ sho’,” the Sugarman scolded Y.T., Jr as together they picked up a desk to move it to the opposite side of the Marketing Department offices. For the New Year, Dirk Rangely had embarked upon a major re-alignment of Erp Industries, Inc.’s corporate marketing strategy, beginning with a bold re-arrangement of all the desks and file cabinets under his command. As a result, Y.T., Jr. found himself at work on a Saturday moving furniture with the surprisingly spry Sugarman. After they set the desk down in its proper new space, Y.T., Jr. and the Sugarman sat down side-by-side on the desk top to catch their breath. “Who the hell taught you how to lift, boy?”

“There isn’t anybody that has to teach me how to lift,” Y.T., Jr. responded with good-natured rebellion, knowing that he was sure to get a lecture on the subject for his own good.

“You better learn to use those legs and learn ‘em good, cause that back of yours ain’t gonna stay young forever. Fo’ damn sho’.”

“Get out of here.”

“Boy, I know that one day you gonna wake up with a crick in your back sos you can’ never stand up straight.”

“Oh, go on.” Y.T., Jr. laughed.

“You go on you self, boy, and you be bent over looking down the rest of you life—in fact, you be looking down at you balls on the floor, oozing up twixt you toes, ifen you don’ learn a thing or two from your old Sugarman. Fo’ damn sho’.” The Sugarman pulled out his hip flask and took a short pull. “Ah, now ain’t that as sweet as rain on them daisies in the graveyard.”

“Did Orley come through with a good batch?”

“That man is a saint of a sinner. Fo’ damn sho’.”

“Say, let me have a taste, huh?”

With his eyes widened to show a broad band of white all around his irises, the Sugarman gave Y.T., Jr. an exaggerated look of shock and dismay at his request. He held the flask away on the other side of his body.

“Please?” Y.T., Jr. asked with a sweet and polite voice. “Come on, it’s Saturday.”

The Sugarman narrowed his eyes down to slits and scrutinized Y.T., Jr. carefully.

“So what’s the big deal? There’s no one around.”

“I don’ rightly know ifen you can handle it, boy.” The Sugarman exaggerated his concern.

“Come on. I worked with Orley on the dock. I helped him every Friday and he sometimes let me have the leftovers for the weekend.”

The Sugarman knew that already. “Well, I tell you one thing, you ain’t no desk and you ain’t no file cabinet neither. And ifen you fall down dead drunk, I ain’t picking you up and moving you, too. Fo’ damn sho’. No, sir.”

“I’m not going to fall down dead drunk from *one* sip.” The Sugarman reluctantly handed Y.T., Jr. the flask. When he took a healthy gulp, the Sugarman poked him hard in the ribs with his elbow. Y.T., Jr. choked and began coughing. He tried to speak, his voice only a hoarse whisper.

“Sheee-it damn, boy.” The Sugarman grabbed back his flask and shook his head in disgust.

“You don’ know how to lift and you don’ know how to sip—what is the Sugarman to do with you, boy? Ain’t you never gonna learn nothin’ a’tall?”

Y.T., Jr. could only cough and laugh at the same time.

“So you tell me, slick, I just wants you all to tell me one thing here.” The Sugarman took another drink, then capped and returned the flask to his back pocket.

“What’s that?” Y.T., Jr. asked, his voice still hoarse and broken up.

“How come you be going back to that there Engineerin’ Department every time I turn around?”

“To, you know, to adjust the heat back there,” Y.T., Jr. said softly—almost under his breath. He

coughed again and tried to clear his throat.

“Uh-huh. Uh-huh—boy, ain’t no heat that needs to be ad-justed five, six times a day. Uh-uh. Fo’ sho’.” The Sugarman shook his head slowly from side to side.

“And, ah, I had to change light bulbs that were starting to flicker and stuff.”

“Twenty-three times? Sheee-it damn, boy, ain’t but twelve lights back there and I *know* they all didn’ take no powder all at the same times.” The Sugarman gave Y.T., Jr. a stern, fatherly look. He shook his finger at the boy. “Now don’ you go a lyin’ to your Sugarman man, boy.”

“Well, I...” Y.T., Jr. trailed off and looked away.

“Well you—well you—well you what, boy?”

“I, ah...”

“Come on, boy, come on—sheee-it damn, you don’ even have to tell me. It’s written all over you face like this mornin’s headlines.” The Sugarman laughed from deep within his belly. “Fo’ sho’—that’s fo’ damn sho’. I can read you like this week’s scratch sheet, boy. You been goin’ down to make time with Miz Carrot Top, huh? Little Missie Red—tell me now, boy. And don’ you go lyin’ to your Sugarman.”

Y.T., Jr. looked away to try to hide his wry, half-smile.

“Ha-ha. I knowed it.” The Sugarman laughed and slapped his thigh. “I knowed it—I knowed it. I got you collared, boy.”

Y.T., Jr. looked down at his feet dangling just off the floor and shrugged his shoulders.

“So tell me, boy, are you in the funk, yet? Hmmm?”

“In the funk?” Y.T., Jr. asked, looking up at the Sugarman, who smiled broadly and flared his nostrils.

“Sheee-it damn, boy!” The Sugarman groaned and slapped his forehead. “In the funk! Laid some pipe—don’ you tell me that you don’ know nothin’ about chippies neither. What in tarnation is the Sugarman gonna do with you, boy?”

“Hey, I know about girls,” Y.T., Jr. protested.

“Uh-huh, uh-huh. You know about chickie-poo, now do ya? Well what do you know, boy? And don’ tell me they tuck you in at night and bring you breakfast in the mornin’. That ain’t no chippie, that’s you mama. What do you know, boy?”

“I know enough to get sent off to school ‘cause I got one pregnant,” Y.T., Jr. blurted out defiantly.

“Ha-ha! Sheee-it damn, I knowed you was alright, just like you old man.” The Sugarman took out his flask and offered it to Y.T., Jr. “So, tell me now, boy, we gonna have a God damned little red-headed Erp diggin’ round and round?”

“No. That was a different girl—from school. This past summer, she, er, she went away.” Y.T., Jr. took a drink and passed the flask back to the Sugarman. He watched him take a pair of huge gulps and put the flask away. “I don’t even know that red-head’s name.”

“Well, why don’ you ask her, boy? It ain’t as if you ain’t had no damn opportunity. You probably done wore out them valves on the radiators in that damn Engineerin’ Department.”

Y.T., Jr. sighed heavily. “I don’t know. She’s different. She’s not like anyone else. Not like that—that cheerleader that, you know, went away. She’s—she’s different somehow. I can’t explain it.”

“Uh-oh. Uh-oh, boy, that sounds like love.” The Sugarman shook his head slowly. “She’s got you by the short hairs, boy, and she’s draggin’ you to a bed full of rattler snakes.”

Y.T., Jr. looked down at the floor and nodded.

“Hi-there-how-are-you-today, men?” Dirk Rangely blurted out as he walked by the desk where Y.T., Jr. and the Sugarman sat. The smell of white lightning in the air slowed Dirk Rangely down. He stopped, turned and looked back at the pair staring blankly back at him, until they slowly got down off the desk and started moving furniture again. Dirk Rangely hurried back to his office to

check on their progress as compared with the special blueprints he had coerced Horace Cooley into secretly preparing for him.

From his very first day back to work over Christmas Break, Y.T., Jr. found himself gravitating towards the Engineering Department more and more. He had, indeed, adjusted the heat so often that the room was a perfectly constant seventy-two degrees. He had replaced all the light bulbs—even the ones that were not flickering—had caulked every window, had oiled every squeaky chair, had spackled and retouched every mar on the walls, and had even planed down the door on the back storage room that had been sticking for the past thirty years. But Y.T., Jr.'s over-powering attraction for Scarlett Brookings had an almost equal and opposite reaction that held him suspended in an orbit around her. He could not stop thinking about her, yet at the same time, he could not bring himself to approach her any closer—not even simply to say 'hello'. When January twenty-fifth came, he found himself, his steamer trunk and his suitcases on the company Learjet streaking down J-80 on his way to college in California and he had not spoken one word to Scarlett Angelina Brookings. Frik and Frak tried to cheer him up with a dinner on Fisherman's Wharf and, of course, a visit to Fu Loin's.

"Ah, Flick and Flak, you come again. So good to see you," said the short, balding Fu Loin as he shuffled up to the drunken trio. He bowed deeply and peered over a pair of eye glasses with lenses as thick as Coke bottles. "Ah, good to see you. And so good to see Little Whitey again."

"No, no—not Whitey. Y.T. It's Y.T. Y-period. T-period," Y.T., Jr. tried in vain to correct the grinning Fu Loin.

The ex-Commander smiled That Smile! at all the young, scantily clad Asian prostitutes lounging around the "Reading Room" portion of Fu Loin's establishment. The ex-Colonel's excitement was betrayed by his doubly-widened eyes and the large, hot, bulbous red glow at the end of his cigar.

"Ah, Flik and Flak, I have many good sclews for you. Many good sclews for you and you little fliend."

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The Car Pool

“The man was truly one of the great unsung geniuses of our time,” Mort Mortenstein pontificated to his two companions. They were seated at their usual Wednesday noontime table in a dark, quiet corner of Dante’s.

“Come on, Mort, the guy’s a twit,” said Hugh Betcha, Vice-President/Materiel, through a mouthful of spaghetti. Another forkful circled in a holding pattern in his right hand, while in his left, a thick slice of garlic bread made a final approach to his gaping mouth.

“He had those chiseled good looks. He could sing. He could dance.” Mort Mortenstein waved his unlit pipe around in the air as if he were trying to conduct the conversation like a maestro might conduct an orchestra. “The man did the undisputed best Chevalier impression of them all. No contest.”

“A twit, Mort,” Hugh Betcha said with a dozen threads of spaghetti dangling from his mouth like worms.

“It is a shame that so few can appreciate and respect such a truly superb talent. It is an art. An art, you understand.” Mort Mortenstein bit hard on the stem of his pipe and threw his head back to focus on the ceiling. “There are so few who can lay claim to that unique blend of timing, poise, grace, intuition, humility and talent—not to mention the ability to think quickly on one’s feet—required to be a bona fide genius at such a craft. Look at George Burns. Now here we have another outstanding straight man, but he only had to carry his wife. He could not hold a candle to Zeppo Marx, though. After all, Old Zep was supporting three comedians with his performances, not just one.”

“A twit.”

“Sure, the others got the laughs, but where would they be without *him*? I’ll tell you where, flat on their faces. Zeppo was the one that laid the groundwork, built up the background, provided the context, to give their punch lines meaning and relevance. Do you think that is easy?” Mort Mortenstein shook his head. “Simpletons. Groucho, Chico, Harpo—*buffoons*, all of them. And they got the recognition. But, of course, Old Zep got all the girls. And I understand the man made a fortune in California real estate.”

“A flaming, bug-eyed twit.”

“A genius of the first order—a man decades ahead of his time!”

“A God damned, mother-fucking T-W-I-T, *TWIT!*”

The third man at the table, Simon Salisbury, Vice-President/Personnel, sat between Mort Mortenstein and Hugh Betcha, silently enduring the argument that was as regular as their Wednesday lunchtime meetings. He methodically picked out the clam bits from his linguine and washed them down with measured sips from a glass of Chablis. Simon Salisbury was a slight, scholarly man who wrote memorandums to himself and often seriously considered whether or not they might warrant some sort of reply. He refused to squander his mental energies on the trivial matters, such as movies, baseball, television or the weather that Mort Mortenstein and Hugh Betcha

always disagreed about. The two seemed to argue for no apparent reason other than to argue, for certainly their debates showed absolutely no great depth of understanding or keenness of vision on either man's part. Every week, Simon Salisbury quietly ignored their inane banter until the argument would begin to boil over from the verbal to the physical. Mort Mortenstein would begin brandishing his pipe as if he had pulled it from a sheath and Hugh Betcha would begin stabbing and slashing at his food with a murderous look in his whiskey-filmed eyes. At the very moment that an eruption appeared imminent, Simon Salisbury would bring the table conversation back to the matters at hand. His voice was soft, but of such clarity that no one failed to hear what he said. Wiping a stray drop of wine from the corner of his mouth, Simon Salisbury interjected, "So, gentlemen, now that Erp the Younger has embarked upon his collegiate career, do you believe that our little dilemma in the Hallowed Hall of Science can be rectified such that we may begin collecting from Mr. Dzhugashili?"

"Huh? Oh, sure." Mort Mortenstein broke off his glare at the hulking Hugh Betcha, who shoveled the last of his spaghetti into his mouth and gnashed his teeth down hard upon it. "Actually, though, I'd be more pleased if we could place a few more secretaries with his engineers. If we lose a bit with the red head in return for more business, eh, it will have been worth the investment."

"You know what I heard? I heard that the Old Man gave the jail bait that Little Erp knocked up an all-expense paid trip to Sweden—if you know what I mean." Hugh Betcha wiped the splatters of tomato sauce from his ruddy-complected face. He signaled the waitress over to order a second helping of spaghetti. "Hey, you know what they call an abortion in Prague? *A canceled Czech.*"

The accounting overtones of Hugh Betcha's joke shook loose a chuckle from Mort Mortenstein. Simon Salisbury grimaced at his partner's poor taste, but politely took a sip of wine to mask his expression.

"A canceled check," Mort Mortenstein said, taking out his black, hard-covered journal and making a note in it. "I like that. A canceled check. That's very good."

"Yes. Well," Simon Salisbury winced. He pulled a memo he had written to himself from a file folder and glanced over it. "I met with Rolf Guderian Friday. He asked if there might not be a more appropriate job title for an Administrative Assistant's Assistant."

"What did you tell him?" Mort Mortenstein asked with interest.

"I told him that, yes, there was a more appropriate title, 'Secretary'. Of course, he protested, claiming that there was a clear need for another class of administrative worker to help bridge the gaps in his organization that are hampering the efforts of his people to be able to effectively perform the functions expected of them. He is obviously scheming to hire more people."

"And? So?"

"I told him that I would have my staff work up a job title and issue a job description for him to review. I did make it clear, though, that this new position would have to be filled exclusively with women."

"Very good," said Mort Mortenstein, smiling and making a note in his journal.

"Of course, that did not entirely displease Mr. Guderian," smirked Simon Salisbury. He re-filed his memo in the folder.

"I'll bet not—the horny little kraut," Hugh Betcha noted with contempt. He blew his large, bloated nose into his napkin with a series of loud, juicy snorts.

"He also inquired into the number of salesmen that Dirk Rangely has working for him," Simon Salisbury added with a measure of concern in his voice. "I checked with our people. It appears that Mr. Guderian is concocting a plan to change the job title of all salesmen to 'Sales Engineer' and then have them transferred to his department's payroll."

"That guy has a real talent for being an asshole," Hugh Betcha said as he carefully watched the waitress set down another plate of pasta in front of him. "He'd make somebody a hell of a straight

man, eh Mort?”

Mort Mortenstein ignored Hugh Betcha’s backhanded slap. “Well, the Assistant’s Assistant thing is good, especially since Rolf is always willing to pay a premium for his blonde-haired, blue-eyed beauties. But this move to get hold of Dirk’s department, I don’t like it. Dirk’s a good client, too. If Guderian gets his hands on the Marketing Department, that will upset the *status quo* and the balance of power. There might be no stopping him then, which might very well mean trouble for us.”

“Mr. Guderian cannot do anything without going through me,” said Simon Salisbury with Chamberlain-like certainty. “I think we can keep the situation under control and hold Mr. Guderian’s ambition’s in check.”

“Very good,” Mort Mortenstein said, making another note in his journal. “Now, what about commodities?”

“How about ‘em?” Hugh Betcha shot back.

“What do our positions look like?”

“Warehouse is running about seventy-seven percent capacity. No sweat. Stock turnover is running seven to ten weeks, a bit longer on some of the strategic metals, but everything is copacetic.” Hugh Betcha took a big gulp of Jim Beam whiskey, then attacked his spaghetti again.

“I saw in the *Wall Street Journal* where magnesium prices are quite depressed,” Simon Salisbury said, implying impending doom with the tone of his voice.

“Magnesium’s down?” Mort Mortenstein asked with concern. He looked at Simon Salisbury, then at Hugh Betcha. “Do we have magnesium?”

“Yeah, Mort, we have magnesium. But that’s just spot market fluctuations,” Hugh Betcha dismissed with a wave of his fork. “*No sweat.*”

“Yes. Right. Well then, what about this Asian thing?” asked Mort Mortenstein. “Any chance of a favorable situation developing for us?”

“Nah, I’m telling you we’ll just roll over the slant-eyed bastards like we did on Guadalcanal—or drop the Big One on them and be done with it,” Hugh Betcha said into his plate, punctuating his opinion with a slurp of noodles.

“I have done a good deal of research into the current situation and into historical precedents that are likely to forecast future trends,” Simon Salisbury said with a look of disdain aimed at Hugh Betcha. He pulled another memo to himself from his file. “Contrary to our learned colleague’s views, I believe that this conflict is likely to escalate soon and continue on for a number of years. Besides one another, the Vietnamese have been fighting the Chinese, the Japanese, the French—for nearly ten years after World War II as De Gaulle tried to save this little pearl of their empire—and now, vicariously, the United States as our government tries to shore up the Huong regime in the South. Historically the place is a tar pit and has been so for thousands of years. Once a foreign power steps into a conflict there, it cannot get itself extricated from it. The way which I envision events, first the advisers, then the off shore ship activity and the aircraft sorties all lead to an inevitable conclusion. With the passage of the *Tonkin Gulf Resolution*, it will not be long before President Johnson commits ground troops.”

“Confidence factor?” asked Mort Mortenstein.

“Eighty percent within the next twelve months. Ninety percent within the next eighteen months,” Simon Salisbury read matter-of-factly from his memo.

“Alright, then, I think we should get moving and see what we can do. Hugh, I want you to start looking at copper, samarium, magnets and, of course, ball bearings. Let’s see what we can do to lock up deliveries at least as far out as the end of this year and perhaps into 1966 if possible.”

“We could get massacred if we actually have to take delivery of what we commit to Mort,” Hugh Betcha warned.

“But, if they start shooting up hardware in a big way over there, we’ll be sitting in the cat-bird seat when lead times start pushing out.” Mort Mortenstein said with a growing grin as he clenched his teeth down hard on the stem of his pipe. “Especially ball bearings. Everyone will be screaming for ball bearings. See what you can do to get them locked up all to ourselves. Especially ball bearings.”

“Might take some up-front money,” Hugh Betcha said. “And we could run into a bit of a warehouse crunch in the short term.”

“Let me take care of all that. You just let me know what you need. I think Simon here is right that this Vietnam thing will go big,” Mort Mortenstein made a note in his black journal. “That’s all I have. Fellows? Anything else?”

Simon Salisbury shook his head and put away his folder of memos.

“Did you hear what happened down in manufacturing?” Hugh Betcha asked with a tomato sauce-stained grin. “That stupid son-of-a-bitch Peckerfelt. Somehow his people sent four ship sets of completely empty boxes to the Navy—absolutely nothing inside, not even solder droppings. Just empty tin cans. Boy, the Navy really blew their bilge at that one.”

“You mean, the units went all the way through Quality Control testing and nobody detected the omission?” Simon Salisbury asked with astonishment.

“You mean old ‘One Hundred Percent Test’ Tillman?” Hugh Betcha laughed out loud. “That idiot tries to watch *I Love Lucy* on his oscilloscopes.”

“Is the Navy going to come down hard on us?” asked Mort Mortenstein. “A team of auditors is the last things we need right now if we are going to move on this Asian opportunity.”

“Nah, the Old Man smoothed it all out,” said Hugh Betcha. “I think he got Orley Bovine to take the rap and sweet talked the Navy into believing it was a mix-up with another spares order in Shipping. But I’ll bet a dollar to a dime that Peckerfelt’s ass is in the Old Man’s sling.”

“I wonder what the Old Man’s got on Orley Bovine,” Mort Mortenstein said, thinking out loud. He made a note in his journal, then snapped the cover shut.

“Empty boxes? Unbelievable.” Simon Salisbury shook his head.

“Well, believe it. Obviously, Peckerfelt is running a class act down there in Manufacturing.” Hugh Betcha let out a thunderous belch. “And you know what else I heard? You know why Dirk Rangely doesn’t have any Negroes working for him?”

“No, why is that?” asked Simon Salisbury with special interest, being in charge of personnel.

“Because he doesn’t want any *black marketeers* in his department.” Hugh Betcha laughed heartily, but his joke drew only icy stares from his car pool companions.

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The Freshman from Ukiah, California

Y.T., Jr. owed it all to a seventeen year old, auburn-haired cheerleader named Rebecca Sue Simmons.

On the home team hash mark at the south forty-seven yard line, Y.T., Jr. did what every male pupil, teacher, administrator and janitor—*especially* the janitors—at Harry S. Truman High School dreamed and only dreamed of doing. Rebecca Sue Simmons, who represented the widely acknowledged pinnacle of beauty in Meadowlawns, Missouri, the affluent suburb of Kansas City where Y.T., Jr. and his classmates lived, did what she had never-ever done before, not even with Barry Boswagger, her steady boyfriend since sophomore year who was the Truman *Fighting Eagles'* alleged “triple threat” football team captain.

Three months later, upon the death of a laboratory rabbit labeled ‘AZ-776’, Rebecca Sue Simmons began a list of *if onlys* that, like arithmetical *pi*, continued on *ad infinitum* and can only be approximated by rounding off. *If only* she and Barry Boswagger had not argued at the Fourth of July fireworks display. *If only* she had not left her purse in his car when, furious with Barry Boswagger after their tiff, she decided to ride home with sister cheerleaders Donna, Denise and Robin. *If only* they had not stopped at Steak and Shake for French fries on the way home. *If only* Y.T., Jr. had not come in just at the very moment when she was alone, penniless and embarrassed at the cash register. *If only* she had not, in her anger, foolishly hit upon a scheme to make Barry Boswagger insanely jealous by letting Y.T., Jr. buy her French fries, sit with her and even drive her home. *If only* she had not been so completely disarmed by Y.T., Jr.’s sly, infectious smile and his alpine-lake blue eyes. *If only* she had known the evil exhilaration of racing a motorcycle through the night on winding country roads at speeds well in excess of all posted limits. *If only* she had not drunk any of that strange, clear liquid out of the mason jar that Y.T., Jr. had with him. *If only...*

Rebecca Sue Simmons was destined to spend the rest of her days factoring out her life through formulae that would never equate with reality. Yet in all her calculations, there was one variable that she blindly refused to admit or allow: *If only* she had not been secretly and inexplicably attracted to the handsome, aloof teenager who seemed to be the very antithesis of all the holy tribal hierarchies and sacred social rituals of life at Harry S. Truman High School that were as real to her as hard wooden desks and bland cafeteria food.

In the Harry S. Truman High School yearbook, the *Eagletarian*, Rebecca Sue Simmons’ picture seemed to be on every other page, year after year. Y.T., Jr., on the other hand, was nowhere to be found, even though his thick, wavy blonde hair and his strong, ruggedly cut features would have made a striking portrait. Though perhaps a bit lean for five-foot, eleven inches, he was tall enough and athletic enough—as tall and almost as athletic as Barry Boswagger—to be a football quarterback or a basketball guard or a baseball pitcher, but Y.T., Jr. never tried out for any sport. Rebecca Sue Simmons had never-ever seen him at a football game or a pep rally assembly or a Friday evening bonfire or a homecoming dance, such was the depth of his atheistic rejection of school spirit. Instead, Y.T., Jr. wore a weathered, leather Naval aviator’s jacket, assumed a studied,

irreverent slouch and chain-smoked cigarettes in the boy's room with the likes of Marty Keegan and Billy Saul Sawyer, in open defiance of the school rules and the authority vested in Vice-Principal Snyder by the Board of Education.

Marty Keegan, Billy Saul Sawyer and Y.T., Jr. had been best friends since the fourth grade, long before Rebecca Sue Simmons or Barry Boswagger or William McBeezers, the Senior Class President, or Suzie Meanderdil, the *Eagletarian* Editor-in-Chief, or Mindy Covers, the Pep Club President, or any of the socially conscious others had come to the rolling farm country that would eventually become incorporated as Meadowlawns. In Rebecca Sue Simmons' eyes, a more unlikely trio could hardly be found. Y.T., Jr. was the handsome son of a wealthy businessman with the biggest house in Meadowlawns, who should have been one of *them*, but, inexplicably, was not. Marty Keegan's father was dead and he himself was a short, skinny loudmouth who was always getting into trouble. He did not look like a football player and did not act like a football player, but he was the leading receiver of Barry Boswagger passes, much to the dismay of Barry Boswagger and Head Coach Sox who both concurred that he was unfit to wear the uniform of the Truman *Fighting Eagles*. If a fight broke out on the football field, Marty Keegan was sure to be in the middle of it. He would have won a junior varsity letter, but he was caught bringing beer on the team bus heading home from the last game of the season. Marty Keegan made a poor representative of Harry S. Truman High School's best.

Billy Saul Sawyer was one of the few country hicks bussed in from his father's hog farm in some God-forsaken corner of the school district. He was big-boned with a broad, open face that Rebecca Sue Simmons thought looked moronic. His head was inevitably stuck under the hood of some car and his hands were always black and grimy. It was one thing to be a moron, but totally inexcusable to be a filthy moron. Billy Saul Sawyer was an untutored mechanical genius who kept Y.T., Jr.'s Harley Davidson running at peak performance. All too often, Rebecca Sue Simmons had noticed the three of them driving off in Billy Saul Sawyer's loud, growling, red Chevy pick-up truck, leaving their assigned seats in Mrs. Newcomb's third hour English class empty. She just could not understand what Y.T., Jr. saw in those two when Harry S. Truman High School had so much more to offer.

The worst of all Y.T., Jr.'s transgressions was his outright betrayal of Harry S. Truman High School. Vague rumors circulated of some sort of scandalous affair between him and a girl from rival Valley View High School in the next district over, a decidedly middle class institution compared to Harry S. Truman High School. Y.T., Jr. made no effort whatsoever to even try to date any respectable girl of a recognized social standing even approaching Rebecca Sue Simmons' status as Head Cheerleader and odds-on favorite for Senior Homecoming Queen. In fact, until that Fourth of July in the Steak and Shake, she was not entirely sure that Y.T., Jr. knew just who and what she was, which left a painful wound to her own vanity. With a blindness akin to that of a fervent religious fanatic, Rebecca Sue Simmons could not understand nor openly tolerate Y.T., Jr.'s wholesale rejection of her values. Yet, this seeming societal prince of darkness secretly intrigued and infatuated her. Often, upon passing him in the hall between classes or spotting him across the crowded school cafeteria at lunch, she privately speculated and frequently fantasized on what might have happened to that girl from Valley View High School.

"Holy shit! I can't believe it!" Marty Keegan exclaimed as, dressed in gray sweats, he trotted around the running track that encircled the Harry S. Truman High School football field. Y.T., Jr., with Billy Saul Sawyer behind him, rode his Harley 74 motorcycle around the track, pacing Marty Keegan and keeping him company as he ran. It was the October after that momentous Fourth of July in 1964. The changing and falling autumn leaves were symbolic of other changes and falls. Barry Boswagger had fumbled four times and had thrown five interceptions in an embarrassing 49-3 loss to the Valley View *Stallions*. Rebecca Sue Simmons had been absent from school all week,

spoiling her perfect attendance record of the past three years and abdicating her homecoming crown. “So that’s why she kept puking at football games instead of leading cheers. Nobody could figure it out.”

“I think he’s yanking us, Keeg old buddy,” Billy Saul Sawyer drawled behind Y.T., Jr.’s back. “Ain’t nobody gonna mount the queen bee, ‘cepting that worthless drone Boswagger.”

Y.T., Jr. just smiled and stared at the front tire of his Harley as he made slow even S-turns on the cinders to stay abreast of Marty Keegan as he jogged.

“This is the biggest scandal to rock Harry S. High since old Coach Sox exposed himself to the fourth hour Home Ec class,” said Marty Keegan. “Come on Erp, spill your guts. Who-what-when-where-how?”

“Aw Keeg, why don’t you just put all that hot shot reporter shit out to pasture,” moaned Billy Saul Sawyer.

“When it’s in your blood, it’s in your blood, and I can smell a front page story brewing for the *Meadowlawns Citizen Journal!* Banner headlines, seven columns long! ‘SLEEPY SUBURB EXPLODES IN TURMOIL!’ ‘CHEERLEADER FUMBLES VIRGINITY!’ ‘EAGLE TEAM CAPTAIN LOSES WHAT LITTLE MIND HE HAD!’ ‘HEIR TO ERP EMPIRE KILLED IN CRIME OF PASSION!’”

“You couldn’t smell pussy if it was sitting on your face,” said Billy Saul Sawyer.

“Up yours, farm-boy. Forget him, Erp baby. Just tell me all about it.”

“Not much to tell, really,” said Y.T., Jr.

“He must have raped her,” Billy Saul Sawyer said to himself as if he were thinking out loud. “That’s it. That must be it.”

“No, she was what you might call a ‘Target of Opportunity’ at the Steak and Shake.” Y.T., Jr. smiled at his use of one of the ex-Commander’s favorite phrases. “And I had had enough of Orley Bovine’s best to decide, what the hell, so I engaged the enemy. A little white lightning, a little ride in the country on the old Harley D. and a little scrimmage out there at about the forty-five yard line.” He pointed to the middle of the football field. “Like I said, not much to tell.”

“Holy shit! Here? Right here on the very turf of Barry Boswagger’s greatest triumphs?” Marty Keegan cackled out loud. “You bastard! You son-of-a-bitch! You will go down in history! I can see the sports page headlines now! ‘BOSWAGGER BENCHED AS ERP GOES *IN* FOR THE SCORE!’ I can’t believe it! You of all people! That’s great! That’s positively great! I am in awe!”

“Some aspire to greatness. Other have it thrust upon them.” Y.T., Jr. shrugged his shoulders modestly.

“So, how was she?” asked Billy Saul Sawyer. “Better than self-abuse and farm animals?”

“I hate to say it, but—”

“Oh no! Don’t, please don’t!” Marty Keegan pleaded. “Don’t ruin the best fantasy I ever beheld in my wretched, miserable life!”

“Erp old buddy, we want the truth.” Billy Saul Sawyer patted Y.T., Jr. on the shoulder. “Give it to us straight. We’ll take it like men.”

“Eh, her body might be seventeen going on twenty-four, but her brain is seventeen going on twelve.” Y.T., Jr. watched Marty Keegan put his fingers in his ears and start singing the Harry S. Truman High School fight song. “She got a couple of shots of moonshine in her and she wouldn’t shut up. Her hips were on vacation, but her lips were working overtime. It was like screwing a ventriloquist dummy for Christ’s sake.”

“You ain’t gonna have to get hitched to her, are you?” asked Billy Saul Sawyer.

Y.T., Jr. turned around and looked back at Billy Saul Sawyer as if the farm boy had lost his mind. “Hell no! Barry can have her. They deserve one another.”

“No? Did I hear you say no?” Marty Keegan asked, taking his fingers out of his ears. “You

mean there's still a chance for me and her?"

"Well, I don't know about that. She's gone to live with an aunt and uncle in Chicago to finish school at some private institution that my dad's picking up the tab for."

"And Harry S. High loses a Homecoming Queen," sighed Billy Saul Sawyer, as if he were broken-hearted at that prospect.

"You know, I'll just bet that Barry Boswagger is one hurting turkey. He must be a completely broken man," said Marty Keegan. "Can you imagine? He's got three years invested in the biggest soc bitch in the whole school and Erp here comes along like some migrant farm worker and plucks the cherry right off his tree."

"What happens to you?" asked Billy Saul Sawyer. "Old man Simmons doesn't get your balls to mount in his trophy room, does he?"

"Nope." Y.T., Jr. smiled. "I just get to get out of this hole."

"How's that?"

"They're graduating me in December and shipping me off to college in the *promised land*."

"Holy shit! Not California!"

"The one and only."

"Do you think Becky Sue would let me get her pregnant so I could go to college, too?" asked Billy Saul Sawyer.

"God Damn you, Erp!" After running eleven laps, Marty Keegan broke into a sprint. Y.T., Jr. accelerated to keep up with him and called out how fast he was running from his speedometer. Marty Keegan sprinted two hundred twenty yards around to the back stretch, then veered onto the infield and collapsed on the grass. He rolled onto his back, panting heavily. Y.T., Jr. circled back on his Harley, pulled up next to Marty Keegan and shut down the engine. He lit a cigarette, then leaned over to put it into his friend's mouth. After the first drag, Marty Keegan began coughing and hacking. "Thanks, Erp."

"What in tarnation do you do this to yourself for?" asked Billy Saul Sawyer getting off Y.T., Jr.'s motorcycle.

"Got to keep in shape. Or he'll screw me over," said Marty Keegan breathlessly. "Coach Sox hates my guts. But he can't cut me. 'Cause I'm the fastest guy on the team. So I got to stay in shape."

"But why play at all? Or is it your secret ambition to be Barry Boswagger's best friend?"

"No, it is my secret ambition to see my by-line one day grace the pages of the *New York Times*," said Marty Keegan loftily. "Columbia University looks for that outgoing, extra-curricular bullshit and if that's what I gotta do to get in, then I'll play the game. Besides, it's more fun than fucking Spanish Club."

"Bullshit."

"Bullshit?"

"Yeah, bullshit."

"Well, also 'cause I like to hit people, see? There's nothing like getting up a full head of steam on a kick-off or a punt and then just plowing into somebody. That's really why Coach Chick won't let Coach Sox cut me. He thinks I'm pisser, 'cause I hit like a son-of-a-bitch."

"I say fuck all that Barry Boswagger country club bullshit."

"Yeah." Marty Keegan took a drag off the cigarette and exhaled loudly. "But I like to hit people."

"Do me a favor," said Y.T., Jr. "Hit Barry Boswagger a good one at practice for me."

"My pleasure, Mr. Erp."

Y.T., Jr. sat on the steps of Bashford Hall Dormitory, thinking how he owed it all to Rebecca Sue Simmons that just when he had finally found a truly worthy reason to go to work every day at Erp Industries, Inc.—*i.e.*, red-haired, gray-eyed Scarlett Angelina Brookings—there he was, two

thousand miles from home at the University of California in Berkeley. As Y.T., Jr. meditated on the capricious and willingly malicious nature of fate, he noticed a large irregular stain on the sidewalk where someone must have spilled a can of maroonish-brownish paint. Even though the spot had obviously dried long ago, students on their way to and from classes took great pains to avoid stepping on the spill. Y.T., Jr. spent the afternoon studying the splotch as one might lie on his back to stare at the billowing shapes of cumulus clouds float across the sky. He sat there until the sun set. The spill's shape became vague and tenuous as it merged with the darkness. Even in the dim of the campus street lights, people stepped around that spot. Y.T., Jr. got up and walked to downtown Berkeley where he caught the Bay Area Rapid Transit to San Francisco. From the downtown Transbay Terminal, he walked to Fu Loin's and asked for Penelope Xing.

The unexpected turn of events during the autumn of 1964 caused Rebecca Sue Simmons' scheme to use Y.T., Jr. against Barry Boswagger to backfire with tragic results for her. Y.T., Jr. improvised on the situation and from the ashes of her ruin, he intended to rise up and take control of his life. His enrollment at Berkeley was to be his ticket to freedom, freedom from the staid, stagnant world of Meadowlawn and escape from that factory known as Harry S. Truman High School that produced mindless cogs for society much like the Machine Shop in the basement of the Old O'Reilly Candy Factory Building spat out metal part after metal part for consumption by Erp Industries, Inc. Most of all, though, he wanted to derail the *Y.T., Jr. Career Express* that had seemed unstoppable as it whisked him through high school on his way to Harvard and, after Harvard, to a place beside his father at Erp Industries, Inc., where he would be groomed to become the Old Man one day himself. Y.T., Jr. won the battle to attend the University of California instead of Harvard with surprisingly little objection from his father, but his ascent soon encountered turbulence.

Y.T., Jr. began to sense trouble from the moment he first pushed open the door to his dorm room on the eighth floor of Bashford Hall. The right side of the double-sized room was a scene that might have been staged for the University of California college catalog photographs. The right side of the room was bright, cheerful, and impeccably neat, with the floor swept, the bureaus dusted and the bunk beds made up smartly with matching bedspreads. At each of the two desks was a neatly dressed student sitting erect with an open text, a pair of sharpened #2 pencils and a stack of 3 x 5 note cards in front of him. They studied intently, even though classes were not scheduled to begin until the next day. The left side of the room was cordoned off by a pair of blankets hung from the ceiling. A bedspread draped over the window, making the left half of the room dark. The Dark Side looked as if a Search and Seizure Warrant had been issued and executed by zealous Treasury Department Agents wielding axes and sledge hammers. On the bottom bunk, a sleeping bag undulated as the unseen occupant tossed and turned, even though it was almost eleven o'clock in the morning. On the top bunk sat a bare mattress that would be Y.T., Jr.'s. He would be an occupant of the Dark Side.

When Y.T., Jr. first came in, the two students at the desks on the right side ignored him, apparently too engrossed in their studies to be bothered with the stranger who entered into their room without knocking. But as Y.T., Jr. began bringing in his suitcases, wading through the papers, text books, record albums, Marvel comic books, and dirty laundry that littered the left side of the room, they stole glances up from their texts and secretly exchanged concerned looks over the blonde-haired stranger in the leather aviator's jacket. After communicating silently behind Y.T., Jr.'s back through subdued gestures, exaggerated facial expressions and mouthed words, they stood up simultaneously, as if on cue, and slowly approached the imaginary boundary between the left side and the right side of the room. They silently watched Y.T., Jr. unpack, as close to the precipice of the Dark Side as they dared to venture.

Y.T., Jr. heard someone clear his throat behind him. He looked over his shoulder at the two occupants of the right side of the room. They were a pair of average students of average height, of

average build with average looks. Since they did not dare to enter the forbidden zone of the Dark Side, Y.T., Jr. went over to meet them. For an awkward, silent minute, the two parties regarded one another. The two average students searched Y.T., Jr. for some sign or clue as to whether he might be friend or foe. Y.T., Jr. decided that these two were so horrendously average that they would not be able to pick themselves out of a group photograph.

“Ahem, we did not mean to disturb you, but we thought we would introduce ourselves. I am Nelson Fullman,” said average student number one. He reluctantly stretched out his hand across the boundary to the Dark Side. “From Eugene.”

Y.T., Jr. looked at Nelson Fullman’s outstretched hand for a moment, then shook it firmly. It was like grabbing a damp washcloth. “Y.T., Erp, Junior.”

“Erp?” Nelson Fullman asked himself as he withdrew his hand.

“I’m Fellows, Norman Fellows. From Eugene—Eugene, Oregon,” said Nelson Fullman’s companion. “Pleased to meet you. Pleased to meet you.”

“Right,” Y.T., Jr. said, wiping his hand dry on his pant leg after shaking hands with Norman Fellows. He pointed at the churning sleeping bag on the lower bunk on the Dark Side. “Who’s he?”

Nelson Fullman and Norman Fellows looked at each other. Nelson Fullman admitted sheepishly, “We, um, do not know.”

“Don’t know,” echoed Norman Fellows softly, shrugging his shoulders.

“Did he just get in, too?” asked Y.T., Jr.

“Well, no.” Nelson Fullman frowned. “Actually, he has been here since the very start of last semester.”

“Last semester,” Norman Fellows mumbled.

“He’s been here five months and you guys don’t know who he is?” Y.T., Jr. watched Nelson Fullman and Norman Fellows sheepishly shrug their shoulders and shuffle their feet uncomfortably.

“He’s always sleeping,” protested Norman Fellows. “He’s always sleeping during the day and stays out all night—if he even decides to come back to the room at all. And when he comes and goes, he sneaks in and out when we’re gone at classes or meals or when we’re sleeping.”

“I tried once to stay up all night to try to catch him when he came in,” Nelson Fullman sighed loudly, “but I guess I dozed off. We do not know, really, even what he looks like.”

“We’ve never seen him, except for his hair.” Norman Fellows pointed at the top of the sleeping bag where all that could be seen was a mass of matted, stringy brown hair. “Not terribly sociable. He’s just not terribly sociable.”

“A real mystery man, eh?” Y.T., Jr. asked with a measure of disbelief. He looked back at the bunk on the Dark Side and smiled to himself. He was already beginning to prefer the company of the roommate he had yet to meet.

“Yes, so it seems.”

“So it seems.”

“So, you would be from...” Nelson Fullman ventured tentatively.

“Kansas City.”

“We’re from Eugene—Eugene, Oregon,” said Norman Fellows.

“Yeah, you said.”

“Oh.”

“Oh.”

“I didn’t miss anything, did I?” Y.T., Jr. pointed to the desks where Nelson Fullman and Norman Fellows had been studying before he came in. “I thought classes didn’t start until tomorrow.”

“They do, but we registered early this morning and stopped at the bookstore on our way back, so we are all ready to go,” Nelson Fullman smiled proudly. “We are just getting a little head start on

everyone else. After all, it is a dog-eat-dog world out there.”

“A dog-eat-dog world,” echoed Norman Fellows.

“Out there?” Y.T., Jr. pointed out the window with his thumb.

“Well, you know, in the real world,” explained Nelson Fullman.

“What real world?”

“The competition is fierce, very fierce,” blurted out Norman Fellows impatiently. “If you want to succeed, you can’t let up for a minute—not for a minute.”

“Succeed? At what?”

Nelson Fullman and Norman Fellows looked at one another, perplexed at the sudden and unexpected breakdown in communications.

“Why, at life, of course,” Nelson Fullman said, astonished at Y.T., Jr.’s failure to grasp the obvious. “To get a job. To win promotions. To climb to the top.”

“To the top of what?”

“Well, you know, top, um, top management,” Nelson Fullman said.

“You know, top management. To become business leaders, the captains of industry, so to speak,” Norman Fellows said with enthusiasm. “Nelson here is good with people and I’ve got a knack for numbers and figures that—”

Y.T., Jr. suddenly burst out in a hearty laugh as if he had finally gotten the sense of the punch line that they were trying to explain to him. “You mean that you want to be an executive, like a Vice-President of Finance and that Nelson here wants to be a corporate Vice-President of, say, Marketing?”

“Exactly,” smiled Nelson Fullman, relieved that they spoke the same language after all. “Now you have got it.”

“Now you’ve got it.”

Y.T., Jr. doubled over with laughter at the two queer fellows from Oregon who actually aspired to become phlegm brains like Mort Mortenstein and Dirk Rangely and were apparently prepared to devote their lives to that end.

“And just what is it that you hope to become?” asked Nelson Fullman indignantly, perturbed at the impertinence of this person from Kansas City.

“Yeah, what do you want to be?”

“A nigger janitor.” Y.T., Jr. laughed.

With obvious horror in their eyes, Nelson Fullman and Norman Fellows backed away from Y.T., Jr. A madness inhabited the Dark Side and in the short time since their new roommate had entered, the darkness had already infected him. Y.T., Jr. was still laughing out loud as they sat back down at their desks, being careful not to turn their backs on the raving lunatic in the leather jacket. They pretended to study, but they really remained on guard for any violent outburst that might endanger their persons. Y.T., Jr. lit a cigarette and stared at the two tragically average students from Eugene, Oregon. Nelson Fullman and Norman Fellows really wanted to ask him to stop smoking, but they were simply too afraid.

As the days and weeks passed, Y.T., Jr. became convinced that Nelson Fullman and Norman Fellows were once Siamese twins that had been separated physically, but not spiritually or emotionally. From the moment their alarm clocks simultaneously went off at precisely seven AM, their lives were synchronized and they marched through the day with an excruciatingly annoying togetherness. They dressed alike, acted alike, spoke alike and even thought alike, as evidenced by their mindless propounding of veritable Xerox copies of each other’s opinions on world events as reported in *TIME Magazine* and the *Wall Street Journal*, the two journalistic beacons that guided their way. Worst of all was that every Friday evening after dinner, Nelson Fullman and Norman Fellows would spread out four Monopoly game boards on the floor and combine the pieces of four game

sets to engage in a ruthless marathon of buying, selling, and going directly to jail, do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars, until they would collapse from financial fatigue in the wee hours of Sunday morning.

After three months at Berkeley, Y.T., Jr. still had not met the mystery man who occupied the bunk below his. The only time anyone saw him, he was completely cocooned in his sleeping bag. He slept during the day while they were all at classes, slipping in and out when no one else was around or awake. Frequently he disappeared for two or three days at a time. All in all, though, Y.T., Jr. still preferred his company to the company of Nelson Fullman and Norman Fellows, so he spent as little time as possible in the dorm room. And since it seemed to Y.T., Jr. that his classes were populated by Barry Boswagger-types and Rebecca Sue Simmons-types, on weekends he spent as little time as possible on campus.

“What are you doing out there?” asked Penelope Xing. Y.T., Jr. answered, but due to the fact that he was outside the dingy little room on the fire escape, she could not hear what he said. Frik and Frak always preferred women of pure Asian extraction. Y.T., Jr. found their types more curious than attractive, though. Penelope Xing was Chinese-American. Y.T., Jr. found her oriental features overlaid on a Caucasian face beautifully erotic. Besides that, he could understand her when she spoke, since her accent was very slight. Penelope Xing wrapped the wool, U.S. Army surplus blanket from the bed around her slight, doll-like body and went over to the open window. She looked outside and saw Y.T., Jr.’s profile silhouetted against the glow of Saturday night in San Francisco. “Hey you.”

“Hey me what?”

“Hey you, what are you doing out there?”

“Nothing.” Y.T., Jr. flipped the butt of a cigarette out over the rail and watched it fall into the dark void of the alley five stories below.

“I don’t know if Fu likes people out back there like that.”

“Come on out.”

“Me? What for?” asked Penelope Xing.

“For a look-see.”

“To look and see what?”

“Come on out and see for yourself.”

“But Fu—”

“Hey, forget him. Just come on out and see.”

Penelope Xing could just barely see Y.T., Jr.’s boyish grin through the darkness. She climbed out through the window, trying not to fall and trying to keep the blanket wrapped around her naked body. Chilled by the cold April night air, she sat down close to Y.T., Jr. and pressed against his body. “Cold out here.”

“It’s not so bad.”

“Chilly.” Penelope Xing shivered.

“Look.” Y.T., Jr. pointed out to the east, towards the panoramic view of the Embarcadero, San Francisco Bay, and the lights of Oakland beyond, that could be seen from the fifth floor fire escape on the back of Fu Loin’s establishment.

“It’s a beautiful view,” Penelope Xing whispered. “I never noticed before.”

Y.T., Jr. lit a cigarette. He held it up to her lips so she could take a drag. “You fell asleep.”

“I’m sorry. I have mid-terms next week,” Penelope Xing said, looking down in shame.

“Mid-terms?”

“I go to San Francisco State College.”

“Oh yeah? What are you studying?”

“History.”

“History? Whatever for?”

“Because I like it.” Penelope Xing gazed out across San Francisco Bay. “Sometimes it’s nice to think about what it would be like to live in another place, in another time.”

“Instead of being who you are now?”

“Maybe.”

“Is it really so bad?”

“Sometimes.” Penelope Xing bit her lip and nodded slightly. She began to shiver visibly from the cold. Y.T., Jr. put his arm around her shoulders. “I’m sorry—you know, you should have woken me up.”

“That’s okay. I just came out for air.” Y.T., Jr. smiled at Penelope Xing.

“I’ll give you your money back.”

“No problem.” He offered her the last drag of the cigarette. “Don’t worry about it.”

“How come you always ask for me? I’m not very good.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“I know I’m not as good as the other girls. And most of Fu’s regulars don’t want me because I’m not Chinese enough if they’re American and I’m not American enough if they’re Chinese, so usually I only get walk-ins. You are the only one who ever asks for me.”

“I think you are just fine.”

“I thought maybe I should take up yoga. I think it helps some of the other girls. I just can’t figure out how, though.”

Y.T., Jr. laughed.

“Don’t laugh at me.” Penelope Xing pouted. “I’m serious.”

“Are you done for the night?” Y.T., Jr. asked.

“Well, business usually falls off after two-thirty or so, maybe because everyone is too drunk to get it up by then. If it’s slow, Fu lets me go home.”

“What time is it now?”

“About two.”

“Do you mind if I stay for a bit?”

“Go again?”

“No.” Y.T., Jr. smiled.

“On me? I feel bad that I fell asleep.”

“I have something for you.” Y.T., Jr. winked at Penelope Xing.

“What is it?”

“Close your eyes.”

“Why?”

“Come on, just close your eyes. And no peeking—get it?”

“Get what?” asked Penelope Xing.

“No peeking. You know, no Peking.”

“Very funny. You are a regular Bob Hope.”

“Just doing my bit to keep the troops happy. Now, close your eyes,” Y.T., Jr. ordered sternly. He waved his hand in front of Penelope Xing’s face to make sure she was not peeking. “Okay, now open your mouth.”

“Oh no. Oh no. I know what—”

“You are peeking.” Y.T., Jr. shook his finger at her.

“But—”

“Trust me.” Y.T., Jr. smiled the disarming smile that had been Rebecca Sue Simmons’ undoing. Infected, Penelope Xing smiled back. She closed her eyes and opened her mouth. “Come on, open up. Wider.”

“It’s not that big,” Penelope Xing chuckled without opening her eyes.

“Come on. Open up real big.” Y.T., Jr. rustled around in a large grocery sack that was beside him on the fire escape. He pulled something out of the bag and quickly pushed it into Penelope Xing’s mouth. “Bite down hard.”

“*Twinkies!*” Penelope Xing tried to say around a mouthful of cream-filled golden snacking cake. Y.T., Jr. picked up the grocery sack full of Twinkies and dumped it over her head. She giggled with glee as twin packs of the Hostess treats bounced all about her. A few fell from the fire escape to the dark alley below. “My favorite.”

“I know.”

“Thank you.” Penelope Xing kissed Y.T., Jr. on the cheek and wrapped her arms around his neck to hug him. From inside the room came a powerful pounding on the door and a shrill voice screaming in Chinese. Penelope Xing leaned over Y.T., Jr. to scream back into the room in Chinese. After a fierce sounding exchange, she sat down next to him again, adjusted the blanket around her body and reached for a twin pack of Twinkies.

“Trouble?”

“No, just Fu. A bunch of sailors came in, but I told him you go again.” She smiled and took a bite of Twinkie.

Y.T., Jr. got back to Berkeley from Fu Loin’s at about four-thirty Sunday morning. A heavy fog shrouded the campus. He decided to have one last cigarette before going up to his room, so he sat down on the steps of Bashford Hall to smoke by the maroonish-brownish splotch that everyone superstitiously avoided. Out of the mist along South Strawberry Creek, a tall, lanky figure appeared. Y.T., Jr. watched what appeared to be a skinny, unkempt co-ed come directly towards him. The figure jogged up the stairs past him without a word, look or a nod to acknowledge the presence of the only other human being awake on campus at that hour of the morning. Y.T., Jr. realized that this person was really a male with very long, brown hair. He was dressed in a suede, frontier-fringed jacket, blue jeans, bright red tennis shoes and—*bright red tennis shoes!*

“Hey you, hold it!” Y.T., Jr. exclaimed, recognizing the red Keds sneakers that, co-incidentally, always happened to be parked on the floor next to his bunk whenever the sleeping bag on the lower bed was occupied. He hopped up and pointed at what must have been his co-inhabitant on the Dark Side. “You’re Clinton Owsley, aren’t you?”

The tall, long-haired stranger in red sneakers froze and slowly turned around. “Who are you, man, a cop?”

“No. I’m your roommate.”

Clinton A. Owsley III stepped down three steps next to Y.T., Jr. so that the two roommates could scrutinize one another for the first time in almost four months. Clinton A. Owsley III had a lean, narrow face with tiny dark eyes, a large nose and thin drawn lips. His long, uncombed, brown hair parted in the middle and fell below his shoulders. Even on the same step as Y.T., Jr., he looked down at him. “You must be the new guy, huh?”

“Yeah, I—”

“Hey, man, how did you know who I was?”

“Those tennis shoes. They practically glow in the dark.”

“Hmmm. And how did you know my name?”

“From your mail. I read it off an envelope that was sitting out on the desk.”

“Wild, man, you are a cop aren’t you—a cop at heart.”

“What’s with you? You got your picture hanging in a post office somewhere? Is that what makes you the original phantom of Bashford Hall?”

Clinton A. Owsley III smiled a crooked smile. “Dig it. So, what’s your name, man?”

“Erp, Y.—”

“Erp? Far out. Are you one of the gun slinging Earps, like Wyatt Earp of Wild West fame? You know he lived in Frisco after he gave up his gun slinging ways, you know?”

“Different Erps.” Y.T., Jr. shook his head. “Spelled with an ‘A’.”

“Too bad, man, you got the cool eye of a slinger.” Clinton A. Owsley III grinned and sat down on the steps of Bashford Hall. “Step into my office and have a seat, Slinger. Tell me, what brings you out to roam our lovely campus in the early morning dew?”

“I was just getting back from Frisco,” Y.T., Jr. said as he sat down on the steps next to his roommate. He watched as Clinton A. Owsley III took out a thirty-five millimeter film canister filled with marijuana and a packet of Zig-Zag rolling papers and began to roll a joint.

“Far out. I don’t ever remember seeing you on Pine Street or down in the Haight,” Clinton A. Owsley III said as he worked quickly with practiced skill.

“I was down in Chinatown.”

“What were you doing down in Chinatown, man?”

“I know some people.”

“Heavy. That is a serious scene down there. Got some truly heavy hitters in that district.”

Clinton A. Owsley III sighted down the completed cigarette for straightness, rolled it between his thumb and forefinger to check the pack, wet the rolling paper by drawing it through his lips and finally lit it. He took a long draw and passed it to Y.T., Jr. “Toke up, Slinger, some of the best Gold on the Bay.”

Y.T., Jr. took the hand-rolled cigarette and did exactly as Clinton A. Owsley III had done. He had never smoked marijuana before, but he recognized the odor from Fu Loin’s where it often drifted out from the back rooms mixed with the smell of incense, cheap perfumes and hair spray. As he exhaled, Y.T., Jr. felt a dizzy, light-headedness begin to affect him that was better and quicker than Orley Bovine’s best.

“So, Erp, what brings a cool slinger like you to town?” Clinton A. Owsley III asked. They passed the joint back and forth as they spoke.

Y.T., Jr. laughed, thinking about Rebecca Sue Simmons. His thoughts suddenly shifted gears. He stopped laughing. “I fell for a fairy tale.”

“A fairy tale? I don’t dig, man.”

“The so-called promised land. All those stories in the papers and the magazines about the revolution taking place out here.”

“You mean the Free Speech Movement?”

“Yeah, I thought something was happening out here—something different, a revolution. Something new, not the same old thing that I left K.C. to get away from.”

“I’m hip.”

“So what happened? Was it all just hype? Nothing but headlines to sell papers?”

“I’ll tell you, man, those demonstrations were right on, man. It was the real thing. Like I was just standing there watching what was going on with like a thousand other dudes. And we were all just milling around like and all of the sudden everyone—all at once, all one thousand of us—everybody was on the same trip at exactly the same time, feeding off the same electricity with the same wavelength going through every one of us and it just, you know, happened. A real happening just spontaneously broke out, and I was a part of it. Like, I didn’t even know what it was all about until I read about it the next day. But it was real. And it was righteous. It was far out.”

“So what happened? Where’s the revolution?”

“Like I said, man, it was just one of those spontaneous things that just happened. I don’t have anything to do with any of those Free Speech Spooks or any of that other political bullshit, but I just got swept away with the whole thing, a thousand dudes standing up and saying fuck this shit all at once on the same wavelength, but I think that all those tedious motor mouths making speeches

and writing position papers and making demands just made the whole thing too tedious, if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Y.T., Jr. thoughtfully smoked the marijuana cigarette.

“So how do you get on with Mr. Dow and Mr. Jones?” Clinton A. Owsley III asked, pointing up to the eighth floor of Bashford Hall behind them.

“You mean Fullman and Fellows?” asked Y.T., Jr.

“Man, did you notice that in their closet they hang their shirts and jackets and even their pants with the flies facing east? They do it in reverence to the New York Stock Exchange and the Wall Street Financial District. That truly blew my mind, man.”

Y.T., Jr. laughed out loud. “They always struck me like a pair of phlegm-brained Siamese twins.”

“*Ex-actly*, man. You know, I had a Psyche class with them last semester and they didn’t even know I was in it. They defy classification as a human species, man.” Clinton A. Owsley III sucked on the joint. “Vicious, too. Those dudes are vicious, man.”

“Huh? They seem harmless enough.”

“Well dig it, there used to be another dude in the room, some kid from Ukiah, California, or some damn place, and they all used to be buddy-buddy—a regular Siamese trio, man. Only this dude from Ukiah didn’t know the score. He swallowed their dog-eat-dog Zen hook, line and sinker. By the end of October, he was a basket case, man, just asking to crack. He was positively hyperventilating about succeeding before he had ever even started. Then, he flunked some damn English Comp mid-term or something.”

“So what happened? Did he drop out?”

“Drop out?” Clinton A. Owsley III smiled wryly. “Yeah man, in a way he did. See, once Mr. Dow and Mr. Jones figured out that this dude had screwed up and flushed his future by flunking an English Comp mid-term, they started acting like he didn’t even exist. They didn’t talk to him, wouldn’t let him read their *TIME* magazines and their *Wall Street Journal*, man, and didn’t let him play in their Monopoly games every weekend. Mr. Dow and Mr. Jones came down hard on the kid, and the kid came down hard on himself and he jumped out the window and came down real hard on the sidewalk.”

“Come on. You are yanking me. He jumped out the window because he flunked a test? A stupid fucking test? Give me a break already.”

Clinton A. Owsley III crushed out the joint and put the butt into a second film canister full of roaches. “True, man. The gospel truth. The Wiz don’t lie, man.”

“Come on, that’s ridiculous.”

“See, I was grooving on back to hit the rack and I found him.” Clinton A. Owsley III pointed to the maroonish-brownish stain on the sidewalk. “Right there, man. A real bummer. What a bring down.”

“Shit.” Y.T., Jr. felt the good feeling generated by smoking the marijuana vanish, leaving a desolate aridity of thought within him. He stared at the splotch with new insight into why everyone took such pains not to step on it.

“I got to crash, man,” Clinton A. Owsley III stood up. “You’re alright, Erp. Next time you’re making tracks back from Chinatown in the wee small ones and are too wired to crash, just stop on by the chemistry lab in Latimer Hall. Just tell the guard the Wiz sent you.”

“The Wiz?”

“Of Oz—as in Owsley. We all need a stage name, Slinger.” Clinton A. Owsley III headed up the stairs. He called back over his shoulder, “You’re alright, Slinger. Just watch out for Mr. Dow and Mr. Jones, man.”

“Right.” Y.T., Jr. nodded slowly at the new portent of Clinton A. Owsley III’s warning. His mind laced with *delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol*, he stared at the stain left by the freshman from Ukiah,

California, as if it were a Rorschach Test. After thirty-five years, another maroonish-brownish stain had faded from another sidewalk square three thousand miles away on the other side of the country, but not from the collective psyche of the Erps. That stain was where Y.T., Jr.'s grandfather had landed when he went out the window of his Wall Street office building on that fateful day in October of 1929, when his margin calls came in.

Afterwards, Y.T., Jr.'s grandmother, Anna Elise, watched her entire life get dismantled by lawyers in the most meticulous and tedious manner under the auspices of the New York State Probate Court. The effect of all the legal proceedings, arguments, appeals, petitions, affidavits, testimonies, etc., was downright novacainic on Anna Elise's sensibilities. She shed tears over the loss of her jewels and furs. Later, she only winced when the furniture and art collection were lost. She was numb by the time the Packards and Deussenburgs had gone and was nearly comatose when the estate on Long Island, the apartment in Manhattan, and the summer house in Cape Cod were all neatly and legally disposed of. After justice had been served, the bulk of what remained of the estate paid for the lawyers and Anna Elise Erp was left with just enough money to return to her childhood home of Kansas City with her fourteen year old son, Y.T., Sr., who was the sole-surviving male Erp.

Anna Elise's maiden name was Cassidy. The Cassidy family lived in Kansas City since before there was a Kansas City. Fueled by tales of the 1848 California Gold Rush, Wesley Cassidy quit the Philadelphia butcher shop where he apprenticed to march west in 1854 in search of fame and fortune. Three years later, he had made it only as far as the juncture of the Kansas and Missouri Rivers where he traded his dreams of gold for two cows and a meat cleaver to begin a business supplying cured meats to pioneers traveling west on the Oregon and Santa Fe Trails.

Wesley begot Wilbert, who begot Willis, Wallace, Wiley and Anna Elise. All except Willis, who succumbed to mustard gas poisoning in the Argonne Forest during World War I, and Anna Elise, who was unfortunate enough to be born into the Cassidy Clan a female, joined Wesley Cassidy in the family business. Through hard work and good fortune, the business grew steadily. When cattle came to the end of the Chisholm Trail, Cassidy men were there waiting with sledge hammers and cleavers. The Cassidy Stockyards became the biggest in Kansas City, making the family one of the wealthiest of the growing frontier town. The business grew even more as they acquired great tracts of land in eastern Kansas for ranches and feedlots. Wallace Cassidy fathered no sons to get involved in the business. Wiley Cassidy had two sons, William and Wilson. William Cassidy opened a restaurant specializing in Kansas City Strip Steaks, further expanding and vertically integrating the family's beef monopoly. Wilson Cassidy took the reins of the family empire when his father Wiley Cassidy was ruled legally incompetent after a crippling stroke.

The Cassidy family business was death, and the Cassidies took their business quite seriously. Anna Elise wanted to live life to its fullest and to enjoy every moment without restraint. She was not interested in becoming a quiet, proper matriarch of the Cassidy Clan. She pursued fun in every manner and means available, often scandalizing the good Cassidy name in the process. In desperation, Wilbert Cassidy finally sent his wayward daughter to a finishing school in New York that had come highly recommended by concerned business associates back east. There, in short order, Anna Elise managed to lose her heart, her virginity and her hand in marriage to the dashing young heir of the Erp Fortune. She also lost the family of her birth, as her marriage to the son of a man who had amassed his fortune by rum-running and God-only-knew-what other illegal activities and immoral means was abhorrent to the stoic, mid-western values of the Cassidies. After much soul searching, Wilbert Cassidy finally decreed that his only daughter would be cut loose from the herd and left to find her own way in life. Anna Elise hardly even noticed, though. She was young, beautiful and, most important, finally free of the stench and death that was the Cassidy stock in trade—free to enjoy the wild society life of New York City in the decade known as the *Roaring*

Twenties.

In the eyes of her brother Wiley Cassidy, events had come full circle upon Anna Elise's return to Kansas City in 1931. She had forsaken the Cassidies for the Erps and now she was getting her just desserts. Wiley Cassidy saw to it that when the Last Will and Testament of their father was probated she remained exiled from the Cassidy family, the Cassidy estate, the Cassidy family business, the Cassidy fortune and the measured Cassidy charity. Nearly penniless at the depths of the Great Depression, Anna Elise was forced to look for work for the first time in her life. She finally found a job at the O'Reilly Candy Factory, boxing confections. It was hard work for anyone, but doubly hard for Anna Elise, who as a Cassidy and as an Erp had been immune from manual labors. Twelve-hour shifts of handling cardboard dried and split her hands. The smell of chocolate, which had once been such a delight, now turned her stomach. Anna Elise rented a cheap flat close to downtown Kansas City, downwind from the stench of the Cassidy Family Stockyards.

Anna Elise Erp bore up under her trials and travails. She found the strength to carry on by concentrating her love and attention on her son. She found joy and fulfillment in his life rather than her own. Together, they saw the Great Depression through, both working at the O'Reilly Candy Factory. She tutored him in school subjects and, though bereft of his natural father, saw him learn the ways of men and the world from the Negro janitor at the O'Reilly Candy Factory who was called the Sugarman. She saw Y.T., Sr. go off to attend Harvard University using the trust fund that his father had established, which had—miraculously—survived the liquidation of the Erp fortune. She watched him join the United States Navy and survive World War II, when so many others perished. She saw him go into business for himself and prosper, regaining some of the lost family wealth and enabling her to finally quit the O'Reilly Candy Factory and move from her tiny apartment into his huge, beautiful home in the suburbs. And though he never married, she saw him have a son to carry on the Erp family name. This pleased her most of all, in spite of the unsavory details of the entire affair.

"So, is this what you do here in the chemistry lab while the rest of the world sleeps?" Y.T., Jr. asked Clinton A. Owsley III. He had come to Latimer Hall at 1 AM Saturday morning after an uneventful Friday evening spent aimlessly roaming the Berkeley campus. Y.T., Jr. picked up a Pyrex beaker of blue liquid and a plastic laundry detergent bottle. "You spend your time searching for the secret formula for *New, Improved Whisk?*"

Clinton A. Owsley III shook his head and smiled a crooked smile. "Oh, man, I do not believe this."

"Believe what?"

"Believe you, man. *New, improved Whisk?*"

"What is it then?"

"Here, suck on this." Clinton A. Owsley III tossed a light blue sugar cube to Y.T., Jr.

"What for?" Y.T., Jr. caught the sugar cube and held it up between his thumb and forefinger to look at it.

"Try it, man, you'll like it. I guarantee it."

"How come it's blue?"

"Cause it's got *New Improved Whisk* on it, man. Now stop being a cop about all this and do what I say." Clinton A. Owsley III grinned from ear-to-ear when Y.T., Jr. popped the sugar cube into his mouth. "It will get rid of that ring around your mind, man, and you'll find out why they call me the Wizard of Oz."

"The *Wizard* of Oz? You know, I thought they called you the Wizzer of Oz, 'cause you're always pissing into the wind."

"I like you, Slinger, you're alright," Clinton A. Owsley III laughed. He lit a Bunsen burner and pulled a stool up next to the lab table. "Now, tell you what, man, you just sit here nice and quiet like

and watch this here Bunsen burner for a minute or two while I tidy up a few things around here.”

“What for?”

“Humor me, man. Just humor me.”

Y.T., Jr. shrugged his shoulders and sat down on the stool. He leaned on the table with his chin in his hands and stared at the sharp blue methane flame. Slowly the crystalline compound $C_{15}H_{15}N_2CON(C_2H_5)_2$ that Clinton A. Owsley III manufactured in the Latimer Hall chemistry labs in the middle of the night began to take effect. The LSD unraveled and rewove Y.T., Jr.’s thought patterns over and over with steadily increasing frequency. The Bunsen burner became a sensory anchor as the psychedelic drug unleashed a tempest of perceptions and hallucinations, until in his mind he felt the many-colored, wax-like impressions that life had deposited on his memory melt and run together in a swirling vortex, a kaleidoscopic tornado that cut a wide swath through his psyche.

From all outward appearances, Y.T., Jr. sat perfectly still on the lab stool, quietly concentrating on the Bunsen burner flame. Two and a half hours later, Clinton A. Owsley III awoke him as if from a state of suspended animation.

“Is this stuff illegal?” Y.T., Jr. asked, realizing that he was suddenly capable of such leaps of imagination and insight that they could only be accurately measured in light years.

“Always the cop,” Clinton A. Owsley III laughed. “No, man, not yet. But it will be one day.”

“How come?”

“Cause it’s too damn much fun.”

“Yeah...” Y.T., Jr., stoned out of his mind, slowly nodded his head. “Yeah, it is.”

“Well, Slinger, shall we be off?”

“Off? Off where?”

“On our trip.” Clinton A. Owsley III popped a blue sugar cube into his mouth.

With that, Y.T., Jr. and Clinton A. Owsley III began an odyssey that led them from Berkeley, across the dark, expansive void of the cold waters of San Francisco Bay, to the far galaxy of lights on the slender peninsula of California beyond. The drug-induced intensity of each moment made the most common events and objects—the whoosh of the rapid transit doors closing, the changing of traffic lights at a deserted downtown intersection at 4 am., a sunrise just like every other sunrise in Golden Gate Park, black coffee and glazed donuts at the House of Do-Nuts, the ornate and excessive lines of the Victorian architecture in the Haight-Ashbury District, lounging in the Panhandle reading comic books, riding cable cars up and down the hills, passing out blue sugar cubes Johnny Appleseed-style to the wildly dressed people on Pine Street—take on epic proportions. Their journey ended early Sunday morning when Y.T., Jr. went to Chinatown to seek out the embrace of Penelope Xing. Clinton A. Owsley III tagged along and was overwhelmed by the pleasures to be had at Fu Loin’s. It was there, that night, that he lost his virginity.

As the school semester wore on, Nelson Fullman and Norman Fellows noticed, with dismay and disgust, certain changes in Y.T., Jr. His hair began to get longer and his dress became more and more casual, bordering on the unorthodox in comparison to their average attire. He kept later and later hours, often disappearing altogether on the weekends. When he was in the room, he listened to loud, electric rock and roll music imported from England and seemed to take an inordinate interest in comic books. Through their average eyes, they saw only that the Dark Side corrupted another victim.

On January twenty-sixth, the day that Y.T., Jr. began classes at the University of California at Berkeley, Rebecca Sue Simmons miscarried at a suburban Chicago hospital. Upon hearing this news, Y.T., Sr. quietly abandoned his efforts to gain legal custody of the child.

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P.I. Parmakianski

“The right man in the right job,” was one of the guiding philosophies of Y.T., Sr. And in his own opinion, Y.T., Sr.’s ability to execute that philosophy was the principle factor contributing to his success.

It had not been so easy, though, for Y.T., Sr. to find a man quite the caliber of Private Investigator Parmakianski. A man was needed who was unwavering in his resolve and dogged in his determination; who was loyal, obedient and housebroken, knowing when he was wanted and when he should make himself scarce; who was blessed with a stunted ambition and a hormonally inactive initiative; and who, above all else, was pervasively inept and embraced a skewed set of moral sensibilities. Private Investigator Parmakianski was all of this, and more.

Private Investigator Parmakianski detested his own name. A private eye’s moniker should be hard-hitting like ‘Spade’ or ‘Hammer’ or ‘Gunn’. Instead, his name floundered aurally like a beached mackerel. To add insult to injury, his first name was not Sam or Mike, but Julius. There was simply no salvaging Julius in any way, shape or form to post on the frosted glass of an office door or to have emblazoned on a business card. But this handicap had not wavered his resolve. He simply answered only to Private Investigator Parmakianski, thus avoiding ridicule by giving clients, suspects and witnesses such a mouthful of syllables to spit out that they were usually left breathless.

Private Investigator Parmakianski had been treated like a pariah by the other boys in the upstate New York orphanage where he was raised. Much to the chagrin of the nuns, he filled the blank slate of his past with the stories and the stylings of Dashiell Hammett, Mickey Spillane, and the like. By the time he was fourteen, Private Investigator Parmakianski was sneaking away from the orphanage to New York City where he gawkily followed buxom, long-legged women and dapperly dressed men, pretending they were all suspects in the unsolved murder cases festering in his imagination, until the police collared him and sent him back to the stiff hickory switches and the stern chastenings of the nuns. Needless to say, there were no prospective foster parents for a gangly adolescent who acted like a hard-boiled, yet pint-sized, Mike Hammer. At eighteen, Private Investigator Parmakianski was discharged from the orphanage directly into the Army, where he was as unpopular with his G.I. barracks mates as he was with his orphan bunk mates. The sole saving grace of his tour of duty at Ft. Dix was that he at least got the chance to fire a pistol, making him somewhat less of a menace to himself and the general public once he found himself a civilian again, free to roam the streets of New York City with a large caliber semi-automatic pistol bulging beneath his left armpit.

The gangly-gawky orphan Parmakianski grew up into a gangly-gawky Private Investigator Parmakianski, who usually towered over the crowd by at least a head—a distinct advantage when tailing a suspect, but hard on the knees when trying to look inconspicuous. His greatest asset was his trench coat, which concealed a body upon which clothes absolutely refused to hang properly. Belts never lined up straight across his waist. Shirt buttons zig-zagged up his chest. Neck ties always slanted off at inappropriate angles, at times almost parallel to his ribs. His shoulders sloped

downhill, sometimes to the left, sometimes to the right, but always with the effect of causing one shirt sleeve to appear shorter than the other. If one sock stayed up on his leg, the other flopped pathetically about his ankle—and it was always the sock exposed by the pant leg which, co-incidentally, was that day shorter than the other. Private Investigator Parmakianski's second best asset was a gray felt hat, which covered a part that meandered across his scalp, at places running perpendicular to his ears, and a cowlick that stood at an aggravating attention.

After his discharge from the Army, Private Investigator Parmakianski fulfilled his ambitions by servicing lonely widows and desperate old maids on Social Security or modest pensions who beseeched him to retrieve their runaway pets and/or to track down long lost lovers. Most times, it did not matter if he succeeded, just so long as he would visit with his client once a week to have a cup of tea and report on the progress of the case. Such was not the life he had constantly read, dreamed and fantasized about as a youth in diametrical opposition to the prayers of the nuns for his soul, but it sufficed money-wise while he waited for that one day when a beautiful, blonde broad would chassé into his office with her heart on her sleeve, hurt in her eyes and hundreds in her fist.

Unfortunately, during a dog day afternoon, while hot on the trail of a missing beloved canine, Private Investigator Parmakianski accosted the French Ambassador to the United Nations and his miniature poodle. During the altercation, he discharged the entire magazine of his semi-automatic pistol, killing the Ambassador's dog and shooting out a display window at Bloomingdale's. The Ambassador lodged an official protest with the State Department. The dog was cremated. The beautiful, blonde broad never came. Bloomingdale's rejected his application for a charge account and Private Investigator Parmakianski found himself bounced out of New York City. He drifted west, through Albany, Buffalo, Cleveland, Gary and Chicago, until he was finally found in Milwaukee living out of a 1956 Rambler parked next to a pay phone—the number of which he had listed in the Yellow Pages under 'Detectives'—by the private investigators hired by Y.T., Sr.

"She's at it again, J.P.," Y.T., Sr. would whisper conspiratorially over lunch at the West Side Grill where they always held their clandestine meetings in full view of the Erp Industries, Inc., production line workers who crowded the bar on breaks, during lunch hours and after their shifts. If Y.T., Sr. really wanted to learn about the sexual exploits of any of his employees, he needed only to stop by the Sugarman's workshop, have a shot of white lightning and ask. The Sugarman knew everything that happened in his building. Usually, though, Y.T., Sr. would sic Private Investigator Parmakianski on the trail of some wayward middle manager to get blurry, grainy photographs and unintelligible tape recordings of telephone conversations, knowing full well that the middle manager would know full well he was being watched and followed, and would adjust his conduct accordingly. The real beauty of it, though, was that other employees, out of the fear of being watched and followed themselves, often toed the line without ever actually being watched and followed. When Y.T., Sr. had nothing for Private Investigator Parmakianski to do, he put him to the absurd task of discovering just who Wanda W. Willet's secret lover was.

"Don't worry, Mr. E. It'll be Jake," Private Investigator Parmakianski would answer in grand gumshoe fashion, taking the suspect cigarette butt or gum wrapper or handkerchief or telephone number or whatever piece of evidence Y.T., Sr. provided to keep him occupied while his services were not required. Only Y.T., Sr., who paid him a healthy retainer, was allowed to address him as anything other than Private Investigator Parmakianski.

"I knew I could count on you." Y.T., Sr. had to smile, for he found the antics of his personal private eye amusing and entertaining.

It was quite amazing, then, that Private Investigator Parmakianski ever learned certain secrets—secrets that would rock Erp Industries, Inc., to its very foundation. He wrote them all down in the greasy, grimy notebook that had become his most faithful companion ever since he was forced to begin stuffing his shoulder holster with tissue paper to make it bulge beneath his left armpit after

that unfortunate afternoon at Bloomingdale's.

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Character List

Y.T. Erp, Sr. — Harvard Graduate; ex-Navy Officer and Naval Aviator; Founder, Owner and President of Erp Industries, Inc. in Meadowlawns, Missouri, a Suburb of Kansas City

Y.T. Erp, Jr. — Part Time/Seasonal Employee at Erp Industries, Inc., and heir apparent to the “Big Office”; Graduate of Harry S. Truman High School; Full Time Student at the University of California at Berkeley; Founding Member of *The Triumvirate*

Anna Elise Erp — Daughter of Wiley Cassidy; Mother of Y.T. Erp, Sr.; Estranged Heir to the Cassidy Beef Packing Empire

Wilson Cassidy — Nephew of Anna Elise Erp; President & CEO of the Cassidy Beef Packing Company

Hector Troyer — Son of Thurmon Troyer; Chief of Staff for his Father’s Senate Office

Helen Troyer — Daughter of Thurmon Troyer, Wife of Y.T. Erp, Sr., Mother of Y.T. Erp, Jr.

Jefferson Davis Troyer — Father of Thurmon Troyer; Georgia Peanut Farmer; Unsuccessful candidate for Governor of Georgia

Thurmon Troyer — Father of Helen Troyer; U.S. Senator from Georgia

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Neil Armstrong — ex-Navy Commander and Naval Aviator; Civilian Test Pilot; NASA Astronaut; Commander of Apollo 11; First Man to Walk on the Moon

Hugh Betcha — Vice President/Materiel, Erp Industries, Inc.

Bill — Student at the University of Michigan; Member of the Students for a Democratic Society; Weather Underground founder; Boyfriend of Diana

Barry Boswagger — Harry S. Truman High School *Fighting Eagles* Quarterback; Deliveryman for Cassidy Beef Packing Company; Husband of Rebecca Sue Simmons

Orley Bovine — Shipping Supervisor at Erp Industries, Inc.; Self-employed Distributor for Independent Moonshine Distillers

Scarlett Angelina Brookings — Secretary to Vasili Ivanovich Dzhugashili at Erp Industries, Inc.

William Jefferson Clinton — Governor of Arkansas; Forty-Second President of the United States of America

Horace Cooley — Supervisor/Drafting Department, Erp Industries, Inc.

Leon Debs — Former Middleweight Boxer (0-32-2); Warehouse Supervisor, Erp Industries, Inc.

Diana — Student at Bryn Mawr College; Member of the Students for a Democratic Society; Weather Underground Member; Girlfriend of Bill

Doug — Warehouseman at Erp Industries, Inc.; Immigrant from Czechoslovakia

Vasili Ivanovich Dzhugashili — ex-Soviet Army Private; Vice-President/Research & Development, Erp Industries, Inc.; Officially, the First Employee Hired by Y.T., Sr.

Herman Eichmanhoff — Engineering Program Manager, Erp Industries, Inc.

Dahlia Feathers — Torch singer in Washington, D.C.; Mistress of Senator Thurman Troyer

Norman Fellows — Student at the University of California at Berkeley; Roommate of Y.T., Jr.

Frak — ex-Navy Commander and Naval Aviator; Erp Industries Corporate Pilot & Learjet First Officer

Frik — Retired Air Force Colonel; Co-pilot of the B-29 *Bockscar*, which dropped the plutonium bomb on Nagasaki; Erp Industries Corporate Pilot & Learjet Captain

Nelson Fullman — Student at the University of California at Berkeley; Roommate of Y.T., Jr.

Rolf Guderian — ex-Luftwaffe Corporal; Chief Engineer, Erp Industries, Inc.; Second Employee Hired by Y.T., Sr.

Admiral Hemmings (Ret.) — Former head of the Navy Bureau of Aeronautics; Y.T., Sr.'s Commanding Officer During World War II

Rear Admiral Hemmings — Former P.T. Boat Skipper; Son of Admiral Hemmings

Adolf Himmlerlicht — Engineering Program Manager, Erp Industries, Inc.

J. Edgar Hoover — Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation

Ike — Warehouseman at Erp Industries, Inc.; Immigrant from Czechoslovakia

Jo Ann — Secretary to Dirk Rangely at Erp Industries, Inc.

Marty Keegan — Harry S. Truman High School Graduate; Columbia University Student; Member of the Students for a Democratic Society and Weather Underground; Friend of Y.T., Jr.

Fu Loin — Former Buddhist Monk; Proprietor of Fu Loin's Curio Emporium in San Francisco

Travis Marbling — Assistant to Wilson Cassidy at the Cassidy Beef Packing Company

Mark — English Major at Columbia University; President of Columbia Chapter of the Students for a Democratic Society; Leader of the Revolutionary Youth Movement; Weather Underground Founder

Katherine "Cissy" McClean — Washington, D.C. Socialite during World War II

Arlotta McGurdy — Food Service Manager at the Erp Industries, Inc., Cafeteria

Homer McKinnley Morganfield ("The Sugarman") — ex-Army Air Corps Sergeant; Tenor Saxophonist; Maintenance Man at Erp Industries, Inc.

Mort Mortenstein — Vice-President/Accounting, Erp Industries, Inc.

Murph — Red Dog Ranch Leader; Founding Member of *The Triumvirate*; Bus Driver; Friend and Roommate of Y.T., Jr.

Arthur Needleman — M.I.T. Graduate; West Coast Regional Sales Manager for Erp Industries, Inc.

Clinton A. Owsley III — Chemistry Major at University of California at Berkeley; Founding Member of *The Triumvirate*; Friend and Roommate of Y.T., Jr.

Julius Parmakianski — Private Investigator

P. Peckerfelt — Vice President/Manufacturing, Erp Industries, Inc.

Dirk Rangly — Vice-President/Marketing, Erp Industries, Inc.

Simon Salisbury — Vice-President/Personnel, Erp Industries, Inc.

Billy Saul Sawyer — Harry S. Truman High School Graduate; U.S. Marine; Friend of Y.T., Erp, Jr.

Rebecca Sue Simmons — Head Cheerleader at Harry S. Truman High School; Wife of Barry Boswagger

Prunella Spoons — Assembly Line Worker at Erp Industries, Inc.

Wanda W. Willet — Former School Teacher; Secretary to Y.T. Erp, Sr. at Erp Industries, Inc.

Special Agents Williams & Walters — Field Agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation assigned to the *Triumverate* Case

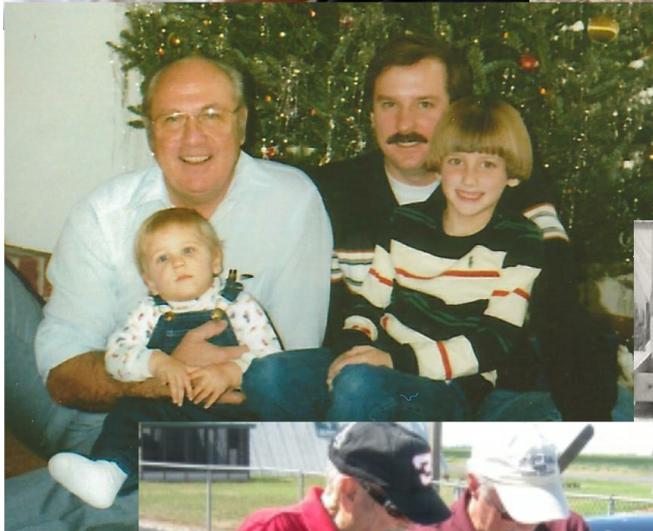
Melvin Vapors — Harvard Law School Graduate; Friend of Arthur Needleman; Attorney for Y.T.,

Sr.

Penelope Xing — Employee of Fu Loin's Curio Emporium; History Major at San Francisco State University

~::~

For my Dad



Thank you for reading my story.



~::~

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If I can answer any questions, please feel free to contact me:

mtb@owl-works.com

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Also by M.T. Bass



[Murder by Munchausen Page on Amazon](#)

Crime pays...Even in the future.

When androids are reprogrammed into hit men, detectives of the Artificial Crimes Unit repo the AnSub and track down the hackers. Partners Jake and EC's case of an "extra-judicial" divorce settlement takes a nasty turn with DNA from a hundred-year-old murder in Boston and a signature that harkens back to the very first serial killer ever in London.

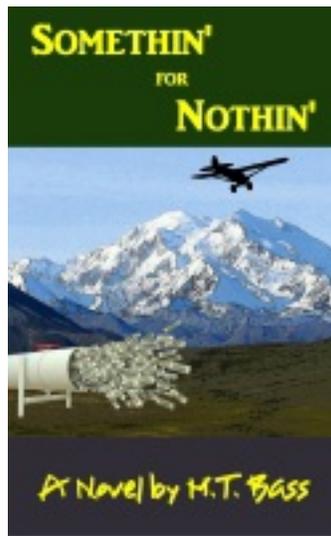
Also by M.T. Bass



[Untethered Page on Amazon.com](#)

At District High School #6241, Connor wants only to get close to Liz, the cheerleader whose locker is just across the hall, and forget the suicide of his father in jail, but his family's dark past and a rebellious nature force him to the fringes of student social circles and into an unlikely alliance to fight back against a tyranny of conformity.

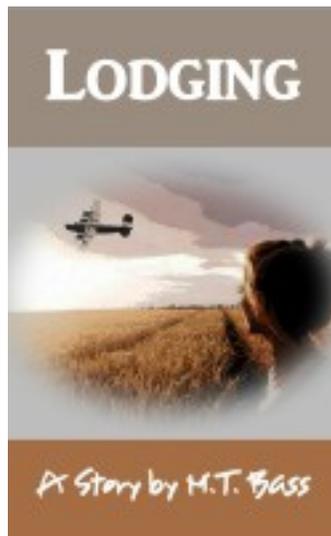
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[Somethin' for Nothin' Page on Amazon](#)

Anchorage, 1976 — Albert and Waxy flunk their Intro to Philosophy midterm and drunkenly decide to drop out of The Ohio State University and go to Alaska to "strike it rich" working on the Trans Alaska Pipeline. After Albert's father cuts off his credit card, they get bartending & dishwashing jobs at an Anchorage bar, where Albert becomes involved with the bar owner's girlfriend, CiCi, who is also the lead singer in the house band. Albert "acquires" a union card to get a pipeline job for himself, but then learns that Waxy has become part of a crazy scheme with Jimmi the Pilot, Beantown Bob and Moe the Eskimo to find and recover a long lost government payroll from an Air Force cargo plane that crashed in the Alaska Mountain Range decades ago.

Also by M.T. Bass



[Lodging Page on Amazon](#)

Lodging — bending of the stalk of a plant (stalk lodging) or the entire plant (root lodging)

While World War II engulfs every nation on the globe, Rebecca and her high school friend Sarah can only dream of escaping a dreary, wind-blown existence in western Kansas, until their boring, stodgy old hometown fills with handsome young men learning to fly Army Air Corps bombers known as Liberators, and their lives are suddenly filled with temptation and, perhaps, true love.

Also by M.T. Bass



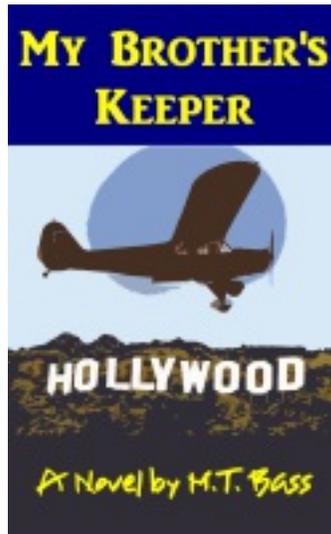
[Crossroads Page on Amazon](#)

Cleveland, 1977 — Grappling with a foreign policy crisis, the U.S. Government targets a hapless rock-'n'-roller as a Russian spy in a classic case of mistaken identity for an innocent, 'Wrong Man' hero...*or is he?*

Think of an unholy fictional union between the Rolling Stones and Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*.

Unlike any novel you have ever read, this one has a soundtrack. After all, a story whose characters are musicians should have...well...*music*. Right?

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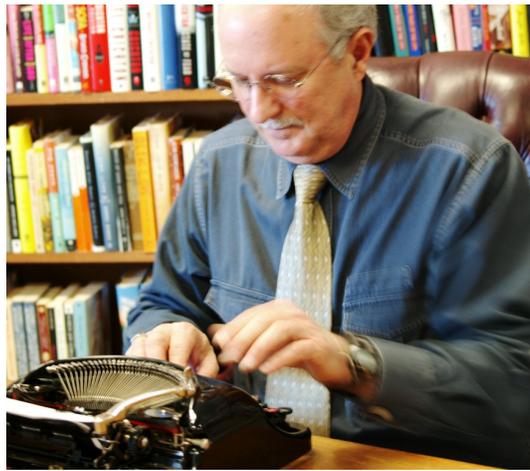


[My Brother's Keeper Page on Amazon](#)

Hollywood, 1950 — Former P-51 fighter pilot A. Gavin Byrd is on location for a movie shoot, when he gets a call from the police that his older brother, a prominent Beverly Hills plastic surgeon, has been found dead on his boat. The Lieutenant in charge of the investigation is ready to close the case as a suicide from the start, but “Hawk” doesn’t buy it and decides to find out what really happened for himself.

With help from a former starlet ex-girl friend, a friendly police sergeant whose life was saved in the war by his brother and a nosy Los Angeles Times reporter, Hawk’s search for the truth takes him through cross-fire, dog fights and mine fields in Hollywood, Beverly Hills, Burbank and Las Vegas, and leads him into some of the darker corners of his brother’s patient files and private life that he never knew existed.

About the Author

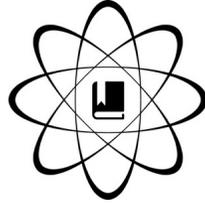


M.T. Bass escaped the Sixties with just a flesh wound and survived a career as a splotch of grease (not even a cog, a nut or a screw) in the Military-Industrial Complex. He lives, writes, flies and plays music in Mudcat Falls, USA.

www.MTBass.com

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