

"Choose Your Own Adventure"

The transition had been so sudden and so unexpected that it left me for a moment forgetful of aught else than my strange metamorphosis. My first thought was, is this then death! Have I indeed passed over forever into that other life! But I could not well believe this, as I could feel my heart pounding against my ribs from the exertion of my efforts to release myself from the anaesthesia which had held me. My breath was coming in quick, short gasps, cold sweat stood out from every pore of my body, and the ancient experiment of pinching revealed the fact that I was anything other than a wraith.

E.R. Burroughs

A day later, Gib got a party invite from The Space, which struck him as odd, since he was there every day. The invitation read:

Be Your Best Burroughs
You are cordially invited to a costume party
@
The Space
All proceeds to go to save the earth.

Gib loved the idea, because Burroughs was one of his favorite writers. He had read many paperback copies of his novels to painful deaths. So he found a costume shop in the Haight where he could get a Confederate cavalry hat, a fake moustache, thick leather musketeer boots, a brace of fake revolvers, and a realistic-looking stage saber. But when he arrived at The Space the night of the party, he found a room full of people wearing slouch-brimmed fedoras, carrying typewriters and plastic syringes, or made up as hallucinogenic insects of varying sorts. Gib couldn't figure out what books the costumes were supposed to be from.

Over at the bar, he found Frank Marion dressed up in a futuristic-looking uniform, complete with what looked like an admiral's cap.

Marion looked morose. "God damn that Campy. He should have been more clear on the invitation." He angrily finished his beer.

At that point, Campy, Ruth and Garrity walked up to the bar, and Gib felt a pang of envy run through him when he saw their costumes. While he himself had not had the guts to wear a costume that made him half-bare, showing off all his developing beer muscles, the other three looked stunning in their minimalist costumes.

Ruth was wearing a pink bikini top with translucent, billowy pants tucked into black leather pirate boots. Garrity was wearing a kilt made out of strips of leather that came to triangular points at their lowest ends. Adorning his body were three wide belts, two over his shoulders and one around his waist, a real-looking saber hanging from it. He wasn't particularly muscular, but the getup favored his lean build. Campy was dressed exactly the same as Garrity, but with his lineman shoulders and chest, he looked massive and intimidating where Garrity looked sleek; it was an effect heightened by the differences between costumes. In addition to the bondage warrior clothes, Campy had a set of huge fangs jutting down from his mouth. He had two fake sets of arms strapped to the sides of his torso. And his entire body, including the four extra arms, was painted the color of a

cocktail olive, his red contact lenses serving as dual olive pits.

"Hail, Tars Tarkas, warrior of Mars," Gib said.

Marion pointed at each of them in turn, . "Campy is Tars Tarkas, you're John Carter, Ethan. I guess Ruth is Dejah Thoris, Princess of Mars. I'm Lieutenant Turck from *The Lost Continent*, but I'm not sure who Gib is supposed to be."

Campy said something completely unintelligible.

"Take out the fangs, Campy," Ruth said.

After Campy did, he said again, "Gib is John Carter, not of Mars. John Carter, the confederate captain, hiding out from Apaches in a cave in Arizona. Pre-Mars."

Gib cursed. "I didn't think it was that obvious."

Campy shrugged. "I know Burroughs very well. Both of them."

"Both Burroughs?" Gib said, before he finally got it. While the five of them had gone for the Burroughs of Tarzan and John Carter, most of the other people in the room had expressed their admiration for the Burroughs of Interzone.

"It's nice to see," Garrity said, "that so many people appreciate Burroughs. Either one. Anyway, let's go. Time to put on a show. Hey, Gib you think you can pretend to be a giant spider?"

"Uh, sure."

"Come on, then."

They all walked up on to the stage and Marion turned on the sound system. Ruth walked over to the light panel behind the bar and flipped on a spotlight.

"Hey, everyone! Welcome to our Burroughs party!" Garrity announced.

Cheers rang out.

"As you can see, the three of us were thinking of a different Burroughs than most of you. But, in a way, aren't both William and Edgar Rice more alike than not? Remember, both Interzone and Tarzan are from Africa. So in that spirit, we'd like to put on a little skit for you. We call it 'Scoring Junk on the Red Planet.'"

Campy produced a rubber tube that he proceeded to wrap around one of his bulging green (real) biceps. Norman Haddal appeared from backstage undressed as Tarzan (a bizarre choice given Haddal's bare skull and almost albino skin). Haddal walked across the stage and handed Campy an oversized syringe. Campy proceeded to mime shooting up smack while Haddal moved to the front of the stage and announced, "Because the Martian physiology is so drastically powerful, the amount of pure smack that would kill you or me, for them is like drinking a watered-down Zima. Our heroic protagonist here just shot up the last of his stash. The play begins."

Haddal bowed and moved to the back of the stage, sitting down in a chair next to Marion and Gib. Campy simulated a heroin high, announcing to the crowd, "The last time I felt this good was when I ripped out the throat of the Jeddak of Helium to escape from his nefarious pit o' doom."

"What's that you said?" Marion yelled out.

"Doom!"

"Whaaaat?"

This time the crowd joined in, "*Doom!*"

Suddenly, Campy started pacing back and forth. "No fair! No fair! It's wearing off! Now I gotta score! I gotta score!" He grabbed the mic and tapped it like a phone

pad. "Ring, ring," he said.

Garrity moved closer to his mic. "Hello?"

"Hey, John Carter! Dude! I gotta score some stuff. I'm coming down, and I'm gonna crash hard, I know it. I know it!" Campy's head twitched around, as if being stung. "The giant spider creatures are breaking down the door!"

Behind him, Haddal, Marion and Gib mimed the antics of giant hostile spider creatures.

"Tars Tarkas!" Garrity yelled. "It's just in your head, man! We killed all the spider creatures."

Campy looked around his feet. "Spiders lay eggs, dude. I'll bet there's eggs all over this place."

"Hey, man, why don't you let me call the clinic..."

"No way, dude! All I need is some of that black tar you got from the weapon makers of Ishkandar. Gimme some black tar for Tars Tarkas."

"That stuff is dangerous, man. Your arms could fall off."

"I don't care, dude! Just gimme a hit! One hit, that's all I'm asking for!"

"Oh, all right, man." Garrity walked off stage while Haddal and Marion chased Campy around the stage, Campy crying out helplessly, "Dude! Duuuuuuuuuude!", until Garrity came back on stage and walked over to Campy.

"Here you go, oh mighty Martian warrior." Garrity held out his hand. But before he dropped anything into Campy's waiting palm, Garrity asked, "Hey, man, wait a minute! I thought you were broke. How are you gonna pay for this?"

Campy tried to look crafty. "I figure the spider's gotta some stash I can rip off."

Garrity groaned. "Dude, first of all, you're Tars Tarkas, the most feared fighter on the whole Red Planet. So you don't rip anything off. It's not your style. Second, no cash, no carry." Garrity turned to walk away, at which point Campy tackled him, which the extra olive arms made look all the more impressive. Garrity and Campy pretended to fight for a little bit until finally one of the fake arms connected and Garrity went down.

Campy instantly sucked down the junk that Garrity had been carrying, at which point the big man screamed and his four fake arms fell off. Tubes hidden behind the belts started spraying gouts of scarlet fluid onto the stage. Campy did a death scene that made Jimmy Cagney in *White Heat* look like a restrained performance of *Waiting for Godot*, with limbs and screams flying everywhere. Haddal and Marion danced around his spasming body, making giant spider noises and miming big fangs.

After Campy's chest heaved its last breath, the crowd broke into raucous applause, at which point Campy and Garrity got up, and all four men walked over to the two mikes.

"This skit has been sponsored by Mothers Against Drunk Driving," Garrity said. "Remember kids:"

The other men yelled out, "Say No to drugs!"

The crowd laughed and clapped, and Haddal began to throw plastic bottles into the audience, yelling out "Free samples! Special Red Planet mix! Try some! Free samples!"

Gib said to Ruth as she shut off the stage lights and the DJ started the first record, "Well, that was educational."

"Stupidity in defense of the earth is no vice," Ruth said.

"The Path to Redemption"

The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Near the end of the Burroughs party, Gib staggered around The Space -- drunk beyond the point of speech. He had reached that special level of drunkenness where he thought everyone was watching him, making notes about his behavior. So he pretended to himself that he was just wandering around, even though he was looking for Ruth. He had worked out a idiotically clever routine for when he finally found her. "Wow! Imagine seeing you here!" After that, the plan sort of fell apart, but he figured he could easily improvise from such a stellar intro.

After ten minutes or seventeen days of searching -- his sense of time had already packed it in for the night, throwing up its hands in disgust -- he found himself sitting on one of the upstairs couches, a fresh beer in one hand, a bottle of Jack Daniels in the other. As he stared at them, trying to decide which one to drink from, the two bottles faded in and out of focus. Finally, the word "Tennessee" came into clarity, and he used that as the deciding factor. Something from Tennessee could be trusted. The Volunteer state. The white type on black background got closer and larger, until he finally bonked himself in the forehead with the lip of the bottle, spilling whiskey down his face. He licked the streams that made it all the way to his mouth, tasting his sweat as well. With his forehead as a reference point, he dragged the mouth of the bottle across his brow and nose until he got his lips around and tilted his head back.

The first couple of gulps didn't even faze him. Then the full taste of it burned into his sinuses, and he pulled the bottle away, coughing, tears filling his eyes. When he got rid of the tears, rubbing most of them away with his arm, blinking away the rest, he was startled to realize that Campy was sitting on the couch next to him. The big man had reattached his extra four arms, but his green body paint had streaked with his sweat.

"Redemption. That's the word!" Campy confided in a carrying voice.

Hearing Campy talk was surprising enough, but as Gib tried to pay attention, he realized that Campy was talking to *him*, and had been for a while. Gib repeated the name "Gibson Edwards" a few times to himself, trying to make sure he was in character, but then he broke out into giggles thinking about Campy talking to him and not even realizing that Gib wasn't his real name, even though it also was. Replaying that last sentence in head a few times, Gib concluded that Campy must be very drunk. Drunker than he thought. Very, *very* drunk.

Maybe Gib had had a few too many drinks himself, but at least he wasn't breaking character. Campy was the strong, silent type -- John Wayne or John Wayne Gacy, depending on the moment. So hearing Campy break into a talking jag was like hearing the Pope fart during a baptism.

"What did you say?" Gib slurred. He felt a collection of drool slide out of his mouth, but when he tried to wipe it away, his lips were perfectly dry.

"I was talking about America, and I couldn't think of a word, and you said the word was redemption. That's the word!"

"Oh. Great. Glad to be helpful." Gib closed one eye so he could focus more

clearly on Campy. The big man looked jittery. As Gib watched, Campy's right leg started to twitch to an unheard beat, until Campy clamped down on it with his right hand, the two fake right arms shaking in a supportive way.

"That's why this country is going to shit. It's not capitalism or communism or anything so simple."

"Simple?"

"It's God."

"Uh..." Gib felt the whiskey roiling around inside him. So he took a long drink from the cold beer, hoping that would settle his stomach. As he felt the last taste of barley trickle down his throat, he backed up a couple of thoughts. *Wait a second. Drink some beer to calm down an upset stomach?*

Uh-oh.

This was probably going to end badly.

Campy grabbed Gib's shoulder to get his attention. "I mean, I don't believe in god, or at least not in some fucking guy with a beard and an unreasonable set of rules farting around up in the clouds and debating whether or not the duck-billed platypus would do a better job with the planet than humans have. You see my point."

"Sure. Campy, can you tell me --"

"I'm telling you right now! It's not the fucking environment. Fuck that! That's just the front!" It's slavery and Jim Crow! That's our sin! The environment is just our sin coming to light!"

Now, Campy was unable to contain himself, and he started punctuating every other word with a wave of his various hands or an emphatic chop.

"Are you drunk or something?" Gib asked, in spite of himself. Impeding sickness put aside for the moment, Gib realized he had never seen a drunk like this before. Campy obviously thought he had solved the great problem of the age, but whenever Gib had seen that before at a party, it was quickly followed by vomiting and then a blessed passing-out. And Gib couldn't understand Campy's weird shaking. Both legs had started to jump around now, as if invisible doctors were testing his reflexes. Campy stared at his dancing legs for a second, then jumped to his feet. He looked down at Gib, then grabbed his free hand (the bottle of beer seemed to have vanished) and roughly pulled him to his feet.

Even standing, though, Campy's legs continued to tap around on their own, so finally, rather than fight his own legs, he started walking around. His bellows carried over the music (the Mighty Mighty Bosstones at that particular moment) and some of the remaining dregs of the party that were lingering in the balcony area began to drift over.

"What is poisoning the root of us? What is this goddamn curse that rots every one of our blessings?"

Campy grabbed Gib by the shoulders and started shaking him.

"Do you understand? Am I getting through?"

This sudden transformation of a man who wouldn't say shit if he had a mouthful into a raving street preacher was a new one. Maybe it was one of Haddal's special creations that had Campy burning with the flame of missionary zeal.

"The *problem* is, we fucking Americans can't ever admit we're wrong! Motes in other eyes are as large as I-beams in ours! Thomas Jefferson could write the Declaration of Independence, but he couldn't free his slaves! Slavery! That's the lingering curse!"

Campy put one of his arms around Gib's shoulders and started to pace back and forth with him. The crowd, by this time stretching out into the hallway, leaned back to form a path for the two men. Dozens of goateed hipsters drinking smart drinks mixed with vodka cheered like football fans, while many of the rest started agreeing with every high point of Campy's rant, in a deliberately ironic imitation of a black church congregation.

"We paid the price of our sins once, in blood, at Chickamauga and Antietam. At Gettysburg and Bull Run. And at the end of it, Abraham Lincoln was ready to lead us to redemption. 'With malice toward none.' We could have finally paid off the blood debt. It would have been an apology that wasn't just lip service! But what did we do?"

Campy's shout got a dozen responses from the crowd.

"What?" "What did we do?" "Say it, man!"

"*We did it all over again!* We stepped right over the mounds of hundreds of thousands of corpses littered all over the countryside and put Americans right back into chains. Invisible chains! Chains of the soul!"

The crowd cheered, and a group of guys near the back tried to start a Wave.

"I think we *cursed* ourselves, just like some city in a Greek myth. We were given a chance to repent the sins of our fathers, but we carried the stain forward instead! And now the earth is bleeding for our sins!"

So much spittle was flying out of Campy's mouth that the front of the crowd backed up to get away. The guy who had assumed it was meth causing the preaching both agreed that Campy was about to lose it. "The crash is coming. He'll either be unconscious or punching walls in the next two minutes," the first guy said.

"Maybe both," corrected the other one.

Campy spun around and pinpointed the two speakers.

"Don't you hear what I'm saying?"

The two guys, spindly specimens, backed away from the rage of the big six-armed green man.

"I am saying that God, or whatever karmic bullshit passes for a higher spirit power is *not satisfied* with our pathetic excuses and justifications! He will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream! Until we repent, all of us, we are doomed to this slow rot of ideals, and the degradation of the natural world.

"Do you think it's a just a *coincidence* that the biggest, most dangerous nuclear power plant in the world is called *Devil's Arroyo*? *Of course not!*

"Either we save the earth from our sins, or we will *burn!* Burn in fire!"

That was when Gib's stomach finally said to hell with it. It was time to make amends for all he'd been drinking. The sound of Campy's mad ranting faded away in the background as Gib moved quickly away. Too drunk to remember where the bathrooms were, he started running in what he thought was the right direction. He wouldn't have made it, except that he finally found Ruth. She was coming up the stairs as he was running down them.

"Gib! I've been looking for you," she said happily, before she noticed his sheet-white face. "Is something wrong?"

"Wow! Imagine seeing you here!" Gib yelled. Then he clutched his stomach.

"Where's the nearest bathroom? I'm lost."

"Bottom of the stairs!" she yelled, shoving him along. "Turn right and ignore the line!"

When staggered into the bathroom, one guy tried to argue. "Hey, buddy, there's a line here!"

Gib turned around, and said, with desperate finality, "Okay by me. Who should I puke on?" The arguer blanched, then spun Gib around and shoved him toward the sinks. And then came the first wave of vomit. Gib was still a few steps away from porcelain, so he tried to arch his head and hope his aim was better than his vision. With one step to go, Gib let fly. The first stream of bile hit one of the mirrors and splattered all around. After that Gib was lucky enough to trip and fall with his head in the middle of one of the sinks.

The rest of the evening went about as you might expect.

"Moving Party"

San Francisco isn't what it used to be, and never was.

Herb Caen

A couple of days later, the Alcatraz video hit the airwaves. It was an instant hit, being played all over the local TV stations for three solid days. "Green Rage Strikes Again!" was the headline on the Chronicle. After that kind of success, there was nothing to do but to throw another party. Gib volunteered.

The first party for any apartment is a very important thing, like the dress a debutante wears to the ball. It shows off the quality of the apartment, certainly, but also says volumes about the sense and taste of the apartment dweller. People check out the decorations, the music collection, the furniture, the whole megillah. Gib had a vague sense this was what people talked about when they used the term *feng shui*: record collections and couches.

After a three second internal debate ("Should I go for classy? Shit, I barely have furniture; fuck classy."), Gib opted for kegs of beer and salty treats. Gib had a nice Visa in his fake name, so he decided to see if he could get the Federal Bureau of Investigation to pay for kegs of Rolling Rock. Gib went on shopping spree that would have felled nine out of ten recovering alcoholics. The purchases included the afore-mentioned kegs of Rolling Rock (4), bottles of various clear and not-so-clear booze, liter and two-liter bottles of tonic, juice, and pop for mixers, bags of ice, and pounds of chips. Then he bought four bags of plastic cups, the big kind.

After he got everything into the car, he went back and bought more cups. If there was one rule Gib had learned in years of throwing and attending parties, you could never have too many big plastic cups. They were the duct tape of keg parties, serving as beverage holders, ashtrays, and many, many other purposes. Once people got more drunk, the poor cups got abandoned quicker than a litter of retarded kittens. Gib knew the next-morning cleanup would primarily consist of dumping hundreds of cups half-full of beer and cigarette butts.

When he finally got all the party fixin's up to his barren apartment, he arranged the first keg in a garbage can full of ice, opened up a bag of cups, and poured himself the first beer of his first party in his first apartment in San Francisco. A big moment.

Ahhhh. Frosty.

If he had one worry, it was that the Ragers and the people he had called at Black Helicopter hadn't told anyone about the party, that he would end up in the humiliating situation of having all this party preparation with no actual party to go along with it. So when his buzzer rang promptly at ten minutes after nine, he hoped it wouldn't be just one person, half-stoned already, who had heard about the party from a friend of a friend of a friend. When Ruth led fifteen people through the front door, Gib's relief and elation tasted as good as the beer. Then Sidney Pinkwater arrived with an entourage. OddGreg and Taylor Jackson both brought crowds, as did Garrity and Marion. Campy showed up by himself, unless the bottle of Jack Daniels counted.

One distressing thing: Taylor Jackson showed up with ten people who claimed to be a ukulele band named Humuhumunukunua'ia, and they whipped out the

instruments to prove it. Luckily, the loft was big enough to give the uke band a corner all their own, though (frighteningly), their arrangement of Led Zeppelin's "Over the Hills and Far Away" turned out to be a huge crowd pleaser.

Hours later, there were probably over a hundred and fifty people packed into the loft. Every window in the place was wide open, and people were strewn on the fire escape. Smoke hung in the air like a woolen blanket, faintly reflecting the glowing of the minimal light. The stereo was cranked up as loud as it could go and was still barely audible above the sound of conversation. Gib had long ago lost control over what was being played, but he didn't much care.

The biggest surprise was the large group of people actually dancing, something not incredibly common at your average keg party. At one point, Gib was shouting small talk to Norman Haddal, who had shown up with a large contingent of his own, and Haddal answered, "There's a lot of queers here. Queers always dance."

Since Gib had assumed Haddal was gay up until that point, he wasn't sure how to react to the epithet. Gib wasn't sure he shouldn't show a negative reaction, just to prove his sensitivity to such issues.

I'm using the word 'issues', Gib thought. I must be fucking hammered.

In the end, all he said to Haddal was "Oh. That makes sense."

Soon afterward, Ruth pulled him into the mass of dancers, and he shambled along in his best nondescript style. Garrity was also part of the group, and he actually seemed to know what he was doing. Much like his guitar playing, Garrity had ability as long as he concentrated. But whenever he made eye contact with someone, he would automatically smile, and try to make some gesture of acknowledgment, at which point he lost all awareness of the beat and started flailing around like a striped bass on the hook.

At one point, Haddal and Frank Marion congratulated Gib on his luck to live in such a nice apartment, but they followed it up by getting technical about San Francisco apartment minutiae. Which meant Gib ignored them in favor of tapping the third keg. He had done his fair share of emptying the first two, so he was officially and with no argument drunk off his ass.

"See, originally these kind of lofts were for artists," Haddal shouted. "They were supposed to be affordable housing for painters and writers. Then the fucking stock brokers and bankers got involved."

"It's always the goddamn bankers!" Marion added.

That was when Ruth grabbed his shoulder and yelled into his ear: "Gib, there's some guy at the front door, he says he's your uncle."

What would Uncle Joseph be doing here? Gib asked himself.

When he got to the door, he saw the "uncle" in question was Masturbatin' Bob Maynard. Maynard dragged Gib out into the hall and tried to shut the door, but a group of people spilled out after Gib, and enjoyed the coolness of the hallway.

Maynard tried to keep his conversation quiet. "You stupid son of a bitch, the *cops* were about to break this thing up, before they saw this address is on the FBI contact list. What were you thinking? What the hell kind of investigation is this?"

Maynard screamed for a while, but all Gib was able to do was stare at the broken veins in the agent's bulbous nose. When Bob screamed, the veins turned alternately bright red and blue, like the lights on a cop car.

When Bob paused to take a breath, Gib suddenly realized he need more beer, so he abruptly turned away from Bob and walked back into the apartment where he topped off his cup. Seeing that Bob had followed him, Gib filled another cup and handed it to his Supervisory Agent. Haddal spotted the both of them and the drug dealer walked over, joined by the two beautiful women who had been conversing with him.

"Gib, is this the uncle Ruth was talking about?"

Gib looked around in confusion, then understood Haddal meant Maynard. "Yeah, sure, this is Uncle Bob. Uncle Bob, say hello to Norman Haddal."

Maynard, who was dripping lust as he looked at Haddal's two well-rounded companions, distractedly shook the drug dealer's hand. The two women, who must have been taking some special concoction of Haddal's, reacted positively to Maynard's stare, and complimented him on his "cool vintage clothes".

"Gib, can I have a word with you?" Haddal asked as Maynard tried to carry on a conversation with the two women, one of them saying, "That's really great polyester!"

"What do you need, Norman?" Gib asked, as he bent down and moved a guy who had passed out in the open refrigerator.

"I think you've got a great place here. Very industrial. I wonder if I could shoot some photos here?"

Gib was caught off guard, so he just nodded his head.

The party started to break up around four, approximately six seconds after the final keg gasped out its last stream of beer. The exodus was interrupted by angry shouting.

Of the fifteen or twenty people left, two of them were unfortunately Norman Haddal and Bob Maynard. When Gib got to the door, Campy was holding Haddal by the biceps and Garrity had his arms wrapped around Maynard. Maynard was shouting incoherent epithets at Haddal, and Haddal's lips were peeled back from his teeth in a snarl. The two women who had been admiring Maynard's polyester were standing behind Haddal, eyes wide.

Angrily, Gib grabbed Maynard and dragged him to the elevator.

"You crazy bastard," Gib said. "What do you think you're doing?"

"That blonde wanted to go home with me. And then that bald fuck started dragging her away." Maynard tried to push his way past Gib, so Gib grabbed the older man by the shoulders and shoved him back against the wall hard enough to rattle his teeth.

"Bob, look" Gib said in a low voice, "You're a Supervisory Agent with the FBI. How do you think it's going to look if you get into a brawl with a known drug dealer?"

Maynard raged, but Gib kept talking to him, smelling the beer on the man's breath, and finally bundled him into the elevator and sent him down. He walked back to the other group of people. Haddal looked completely calm by this point, as he lit a cigarette and rubbed his hands across his hairless scalp.

"Gibson, I apologize for causing a scene, but your Uncle was frightening Tina."

"It's all right."

A few minutes later, Campy was the last one out the door, just behind Garrity and Ruth.

"Nice party," the big man said.

"It really was," Ruth added over his shoulder.

Ethan Garrity pushed past Campy so he could shake Gib's hand. "Great party. I

wanted to tell you how happy I am you're working at The Space. You've been a real addition." Garrity would have rambled on, but both Campy and Ruth grabbed him and led him out of the building.

Gib went over to the window and watched Campy pull the Green Rage van around so Ruth and Garrity could climb in.

Look up, look up, look up, look up, look up, look up, look up, Gib urged Ruth. When she got into the back seat of the cab, Ruth snuck a quick peek up at his window, and flashed a wave at him. After that, he happily passed out on the couch.

"Aftermath Arrangements"

Life could be worse. You could be on the street drinking Woolite.

Bruce Campbell

The next morning, Gib woke up early, against his will. When the sound of the door buzzer first drilled into his hangover, he desperately tried to wish it away. Half-consciously, he worked it into his dreamscape. The noise transmogrified into a fire alarm coming from a plane flying above a raging forest fire. When the alarm stopped, Gib found himself running along the forest floor, surrounded by a stampede of rabbits, deer and other animals fleeing the fire.

Suddenly, he came across a lumberjack chopping uselessly at a tree. When Gib looked closer, he realized the lumberjack was made of metal, was some kind of robot. Gib, heedless of the fire racing to catch him, walked closer to the woodsman. The panel over the chest cavity swung open on its hinges to reveal not, as Gib expected, an empty space, but a bright red Valentine's Day candy heart with the words "Help Me" written on it in blue letters.

The woodsman turned to Gib and begged, "We need a firebreak, or we shall be overcome!"

"There's no time," Gib explained in his most reasonable voice.

"There's time if you *help*," the woodsman screamed.

Instead of answering, Gib turned and ran after the last of the fleeing animals of the forest. Even so, he could hear the woodsman pick up his ax and return to his task.

CHOK! CHOK! CHOK!

The sound of the ax blows chased Gib along until he entered a clearing and found a faucet sticking out of the ground with a green gardening hose coiled around it. Gib grabbed the end of the hose and turned the spigot, but no water came out of the hose. He could feel the pressure inside the green rubber, but in spite of all his cursing, not a single drop sprayed out.

Gib looked up just as the fire crested the ridge in front of him.

He woke up on his broken couch. His bladder was screaming for his attention and someone was knocking on his front door. The remains of the party were still strewn about, and the place looked like the basement of a Berlin building, circa 1945. Gib's clothes stank of cigarettes and beer.

Great party.

The knocking at his door continued.

"Cut out that fucking knocking!" he yelled.

"Then answer your door!" came the reply.

Pissed, Gib walked to the door and swung it open, ready to slowly murder whoever was waking him up at such an obscene hour. It was Norman Haddal and two of the most beautiful women Gib had ever seen in person. Norman was dressed as usual: black pants and a skintight white t-shirt. His sunglasses were mirrored, and Gib could see in them how awful and hungover he looked. The two women were dressed in loose-fitting jeans and tight t-shirts.

"Aren't you going to invite us in, Gibson?" Haddal asked with a smile.

Gib moved out of the way and invited them inside.

"We discussed a photo shoot last night at the party. All this empty space was a perfect place to try out some new ideas I had."

"Now?"

"It will only take a few hours."

"Well, the place is a mess."

"Great party. Don't worry about the mess." Haddal continued, "You have the look of a man in dire need of a shit, shower, and shave, Gibson. Why don't you hit the head for as long as you need. I'll just clean up a bit and get set up. What do you say?"

Gib wanted to say no, but he didn't want to alienate Haddal. The Alcatraz trip had made it clear Haddal knew more about Green Rage than Gib had thought. Anyway, Gib was about ready to start hopping up and down he had to piss so bad. He didn't have time for an argument.

"Yeah, all right, fine."

Haddal grinned happily. "Thanks. I appreciate this."

Gib walked off to the bathroom, finally moaning in relief when he stripped off his jeans and let loose with a stream of piss that felt like it could drive rivets into girders.

45 minutes, a shit, and a long hot shower later, Gib finally felt like he was approaching the borders of humanity. A towel wrapped around his waist, he walked into the bedroom and began to kick around the various piles for a clean set of clothes. The best he could do was a pair of jeans that were only somewhat foul, and a black t-shirt that was only marginally less disgusting than the pants. Sighing, he collected all his clothes into one large laundry pile.

Gib found his laundry bag and was about to stuff all the clothes in when he realized there were people in his bed, hiding under his blankets.

"Who's there?" Gib demanded.

In response, a pair of feet emerged from underneath his blanket. Then some calves and thighs. They spun around on the bed and lowered to the floor before the naked woman who was attached to them sat up in the bed. She stood up, stretched so hard Gib could hear her back crackle, then brushed past him to unconcernedly search through his pile of clothes until she found her own and got dressed.

Gib vaguely recognized her from the party the night before. When she stood up and got dressed, he actually remembered her ankles better than her face. Her face was thin and drawn, but interesting. Her ankles, however, were thick and somewhat fleshy. Gib wasn't a fan of thick ankles.

"Hi," Gib said. "Hope you had a good time last night. You need anything?"

The woman smiled quickly and shook her head.

"Can you get home all right? You don't need a cab?"

"No, my car should still be out front," she said in a husky voice. "Thanks, though. *Great party.*" Then she walked out.

Gib walked over and nudged the now unmoving pile with his bare foot.

"Hey, buddy, time to go, okay?"

Supervisory Agent Bob Maynard, toupee still perched on top of his head, peeked out from underneath the clothes and blearily stared at Gib.

"Don't just stand there gawking, you idiot," Maynard complained. "Give me some

clothes or a towel or something."

Stunned, Gib pawed through the pile of clothes until he found polyester. He carefully avoided anything that looked like it might even consider being Maynard's underwear. He tossed the collection of flammable clothes to Maynard.

As the older man dressed, Gib saw the scars that criss-crossed the agent's back. They were clearly ancient, but still inflamed looking. Gib turned his head and put on a pair of tennis shoes so he wouldn't have to watch any more of Maynard getting dressed. When he heard the older man clear his throat, he assumed it was safe to turn around and ask questions.

"Bob, how the hell did you get back in here?"

Maynard looked shamefaced. "Look, I shouldn't drink like I did last night, but yesterday is the anniversary of a bad day for me. It happened back during Nam."

"I didn't know you were in Viet Nam."

"I wasn't in Nam. I was right here investigating all the hippies running around the place. In September of '71, I got a phone call from this informant, right? He tells me there's this bomb planted in a dorm at the U of San Francisco. I got my ass over there. Toot sweet, like the Frenchies say. Anyway, I clear the dorm, and while I'm waiting for the bomb squad, I go to the door of the dorm room the bomb's supposed to be in, and I think, what if it's bullshit? A snipe hunt. That'd be a black eye, wouldn't it? So I open the door, toss the room. There's nothing there. I get back out in the hall, and when I'm closing the door, there's this sudden heat behind me.

"I wake up in the burn ward. You saw my back, right?"

Gib nodded.

"Thought so. Anyway, we never caught the fuck who left the bomb. And I started drinking pretty heavy after I got out of the hospital. I mostly quit the sauce a bunch of years back. But yesterday was the anniversary of me getting blown up." To his credit, Maynard wasn't looking for sympathy, which contradictorily made Gib somewhat sympathetic toward the greasy old man with the foul mouth.

"Sometimes it just gets to me. After you booted me out of the place, I was fuming down on the sidewalk. I run into this woman you just saw, because she's just come out of your place, too. So we hit it off, she says she likes my clothes, and I ask her if she wants to go somewhere, and she says yes. My apartment is all the way out in Oakland, and that little honey was ready to go. So the only place I can think of is here. You were sacked out on the couch when we snuck past. Hell, you should thank me for locking your doors for you."

That was the point when the Sympathy for the Maynard went away.

"Anyway, kid, I don't see we should make a big deal out of this, right? Seems to me we can benefit by a mutual bout of forgetfulness."

Music to Gib's ears. "Forget what?"

"Forget what? Forget all *this* --" Maynard started to yell before he got it. "Oh. Right."

"Exactly. But you'd better forget *after* you make sure sign off on expenses for the beer and booze."

Maynard thought, then nodded. "Fine." Maynard was almost to the bedroom door when Gib grabbed his arm.

“The guy you almost got into a fight with last night is out there. I don’t want him seeing you.”

Maynard paled. “What the hell do we do?”

“The only way out here besides the front door is through the living room window to the fire escape. It’s either that or you wait here with my dirty laundry until the guy leaves.”

Maynard grimaced. “You go distract him. I’ll sneak out.”

Before leaving the room, Gib filled up his laundry bag and found his detergent.

Haddal had been as good as his word. The loft was spotless, with full bags of garbage piled near the door. He had set up blazing lights, and was shooting pictures of the blonde and the brunette who had walked in with him. They were sitting on a wooden bench, taking turns painting each other with bright primary colors, and they were both completely naked. Haddal had even spread out a huge plastic tarp, so the paint didn’t spatter the floor.

Ah, hell, Gib thought to himself. I should have guessed. What kind of pictures would you expect a drug dealer to take?

The thin-faced woman who had slept with Maynard was standing next to Haddal and whispering into his ear. The bald man shrugged his shoulders and smiled. The thin-faced woman began to strip as well.

Gib slowly walked over to Haddal and said “This isn’t what I expected.” Grabbing the man’s attention turned his head away from the bedroom. Over Haddal’s shoulder, through one of the windows, he saw Bob Maynard sneak out of his bedroom, gape unbelievably at the display of flesh, then go out the window to the fire escape.

Haddal asked, “Does it bother you?”

Gib thought about it. "Nah. I'm gonna go do some laundry."

"Mock Mau-Mauing"

Painting and fucking a lot are not compatible; it weakens the brain.

Vincent Van Gogh

When Gib got back to his loft, his warm, clean clothes soothing his back, Haddal had turned off the lights, but hadn't put away the cameras. He was on the phone, and the three women were trying to stifle laughter.

Haddal waved good-naturedly at Gib and the women made gestures that he should keep quiet. So he walked to the bedroom, dropped off the clean clothes, put some of them on, then walked back out.

"Hi, yes, I'm still on hold," he heard Haddal say. Gib padded over to the refrigerator and was surprised to see that there was still some beer left. Gib pulled a beer out, then scoured through the kitchen cabinets for some more aspirin. When he found the aspirin, he sat down next to the three women. He chased the aspirin with the beer and listened to Haddal talk.

"Yes, I'm still on hold. Are you the person in charge of marketing or public relations? Maybe I can speak to you about this situation, then."

Gib tapped the blonde woman on the shoulder and motioned for her to lean down.

"Who's he talking to?" Gib whispered in her ear.

"The Council for a Drug Free America, I think," she whispered back. "He already called the local DEA office." Then she signaled he should just sit back and listen.

Haddal said, "First of all, let me just start by telling you that I'm a drug dealer."

Noises exploded from the receiver.

"Yes, that's right, a drug dealer. And I find all these stereotypes about my profession in your TV and radio spots extremely offensive."

Haddal let the other person speak for a moment, then broke in.

"But that's simply not the case. I'm providing a public service for discerning adults, and I don't see why that's any of your business."

Silence.

"Oh, well, certainly children are something else altogether. But I only serve adults."

Silence, then: "Excuse me, I don't see the need for you to be rude."

Then: "I suppose we shall have to agree to disagree. However, would you be interested in seeing some of the pamphlets I've prepared on this issue? Hello?"

Haddal, looking vaguely satisfied, hung up the phone.

"Haddal, she," Gib pointed at the blonde, "tells me you already called the DEA?"

"That's right. I just like to engage some of the people in charge of the so-called 'war on drugs' in a vigorous debate."

"Haddal, you're a drug dealer. What you do is illegal. And that leaves out the fact you're apparently a pornographer, too. What in hell makes you think anyone is interested in your opinion?"

Haddal looked both offended and amused. "You certainly say exactly what you think, don't you?"

Gib realized honesty might not have been the best policy here, but he was too tired

to care. "Right now, anyway," he said.

"What you don't realize is that those two activities are by far the most important professions in America right now. Politicians, lawyers, doctors, scientists, artists, writers - none of them hold any power to rebel anymore. The only true rebels left in our society are drug dealers and pornographers."

"Um."

"The nature of a rebel in any society is to point out what essential elements that society is missing, destroying or abusing. A rebel holds up a mirror to society and says, 'There, there! Don't you see?'"

Gib had thought just one or two aspirins would be enough, but now he was reconsidering. "Okay, fine. What does any of that have to do with drugs and porno?"

Haddal laughed. "Well, nothing is being destroyed or denied faster in modern America than sex and imagination. Drugs can jump start one, and pornography the other."

Gib considered his response very carefully, and finally said, "Well, it's very nice that you have a philosophy about the whole thing." Then he ate some more aspirin.

Haddal shrugged and called for the women to come back so he could take more pictures in the light of early afternoon. Haddal asked Gib to turn on some music, and they all finally agreed on Beck's *Odelay*.

Gib found some magazines and sat down on the currently unused couch. After a while, he dropped off into a sort of half doze. When he woke up, he realized someone was sitting next to him. He drowsily assumed it was part of a dream, but when he looked over and saw bare legs, it brought him back to full wakefulness. He looked up and breathed a sigh of relief that the blonde standing in front of him was wearing a bathrobe. Even though the robe was tiny. And made out of some sheer, shimmery material. But at least it covered the important parts. Mostly.

"Do you mind if I ask a question?" Gib finally asked.

The blonde's smile was guarded. "You want to know how I got into this line of work?"

"No, not really. I was just wondering where Norman sells the pictures."

"Oh." The blonde thought about it. "Europe, mainly. Europe tends to pay better for this stuff."

Then they just sat for awhile, quietly.

After a while, Gib fell asleep for real, and only woke up when Haddal and the now-dressed models wondered if he wanted to join them for dinner. They all ordered takeout from a local Chinese restaurant. Haddal paid for everything, telling Gib that he should consider it a payment for use of the space. Over hot and sour soup and steamed dumplings, Gib asked Haddal why he shaved his head.

Haddal looked surprised by the question. "Why? Does it make you nervous?"

"No, I've just seen a lot of shaved heads around recently at The Space. I figured it was just a hip way to avoid comb overs."

Haddal laughed. "I'm sure that's true. But my hairline, when I have one, is fine. My shaved head is more by way of a professional requirement. Your hair can be tested for drugs. It's one of the most common ways, besides urine. And while both generally require a warrant, it's very easy to get hair, while piss is a bit more difficult. And ignoring the authorities, I have a lot of competitors. Some of my designs stay around in dead tissue

like hair, and it's possible to analyze their recipes."

"You're afraid a competitor is going to steal your design? Like industrial espionage?"

"Certainly," Haddal said. "Call it superstition, but I haven't had a design stolen since I started shaving my head."

The meal moved on to General Tso's Chicken, moo shu pork and other delicacies while the conversation moved on to sex industry anecdotes. Carol, the brunette, and the thin-faced woman (whose name turned out to be Dianne) had stories involving their work as dominatrixes. As far as Gib could tell, the punchlines to dominatrix stories involved shoes, pee, or in a most cases, making a guy drink pee out of a shoe.

After all the Chinese food was gone, Haddal set up for a few more shots, but called it off fairly quickly, as he wasn't satisfied with any of the ideas he wanted to try. So Carol, Betty and Dianne took off. Dianne gave Haddal her card, and told him to send her a check if he sold any of the photos involving her.

"Normally, I'd ask for cash up front, but Carol says you're good for it."

As Gib was helping Haddal pack up his equipment, he asked if it wasn't unusual for someone in the sex industry to trust him about a payment.

"Probably," Haddal answered. "But I'm not really in the sex industry. The drugs are my day job. I'm just sort of an amateur photographer. Besides, if the photos don't sell, I'll still send all the women a check, and they know it."

"Really?"

"Certainly. I make an extremely good living, and I'm not doing these photos to make money. But the models are, so why not send them a check? I can afford it."

Gib thought about that while they finished packing up. When they were done, Haddal helped Gib clean up the residue from the takeout meal, and told him to keep all the leftovers. Then, with Gib's permission, he quietly smoked a cigarette while sitting next to a window while Gib had a beer.

"Gib, I have to say, you've been a very good sport about this."

"Oh, sure. Some of it was even interesting. And I learned a few things."

"So did I."

"Oh? Like what?"

Haddal hesitated. "Let me see. I suppose it won't harm anything to tell you that the photos were something of a Judas Goat today."

"Oh?"

"I wanted to check you out," Haddal said.

"Norman, I hope you know I like girls," Gib said.

Haddal broke into laughter. "Ha! That's why I'm checking you out. Because of one girl in particular."

"Ruth."

"Don't be offended. Because you give me the impression of someone who is not particularly good to women."

"What?" Gib asked, incredulously. "You're a *pornographer*!"

"Yes, I am. And I treat everyone I photograph with a great deal of respect and professionalism. Surely you don't think women like Carol, Dianne, and Betty would work with someone who cheated them or treated them like garbage. Did they appear to you to

be weak-willed?"

"No."

"No, of course not. And I must say that even after today, that while I feel much more positive about you, I still have some causes of worry."

"Like what?" Gib asked. Haddal was getting to be a real pain in the ass. "It wasn't like I was leering over your shoulder or anything."

"No, and that's to your credit. Though Carol thought it was odd that you didn't."

"Fine, whatever. If my manners check out, then what's got you nervous?"

"While Ruth is a very smart person, she is not very good with liars. She recognizes obvious deceptions, but I'm not sure she understands how truly deceptive people can be."

"Norman, why is this any of your business?"

"Because Ruth is my friend. I just want to make it clear that if you *do* continue to court Ruth, and you end up treating her badly, things will not go well for you. Do you understand me?"

"Is that a threat?"

"Make of it what you like. Do you understand me?"

"Yes."

"Fine. Then I don't see any reason to speak of it after this."

That, Gib thought, is a guy I need to get rid of.