

"Gathering Moss"

Don't let it end like this. Tell them I said something

Pancho Villa's last words

The next Wednesday, Gib was thinking about the three Furies. Maynard, Reuben, and Haddal.

What to do, what to do. Fury Reuben was less and less satisfied with the reports, since there was no indication of when the FBI could move in with handcuffs and warrants. Fury Maynard would certainly come to regret any bargain making, Gib knew that for a fact. Fury Haddal was a wrench waiting for its chance to mess up the gears running Gib and Ruth's burgeoning relationship.

He went into Black Helicopter to drop off some Speiderman columns and a Dear Stanley when Pinkwater called him into his office. Sidney asked Gib what he thought about magazines.

"*Sports Illustrated* and *Playboy*. For the articles."

"Gibson, don't be difficult. I was curious if you had written for magazines before. Ruth had given me the impression you had."

"Sure!" Gib said instantly, then backtracked so quickly it sounded as if his words were overlapping themselves. "Well, no, not really."

"Perhaps this would be your chance. I have this ancient friend. I first met him during a Brontosaurus barbecue, if you follow. And this cretaceous companion of mine is currently:" Pinkwater ticked off each point on a thick finger. "A), an editor at *Rolling Stone*; and B), in town."

"*Rolling Stone*?"

"Yes, indeed. And he thinks J. Speiderman is a fresh, new, hip, hep, now, rad, groovy, etcetera young voice. Potentially," and Pinkwater took a long dramatic pause before finishing, "a voice for a new generation. Fully the equal of Mark Twain, Hunter Thompson, or even Elizabeth Wurtzel."

"Speiderman? *Speiderman*?"

"Enough japery."

"Japery? *Who's japing*?"

"Here's his number. If you want to pitch him a story, give him a call. He's staying at the Hotel Triton." Pinkwater waved Gib out of his office. "Remember: Voice of a Generation."

Gib took the piece of paper with the editor's number on it and folded and unfolded it nervously. Writing a story for *Rolling Stone* had a perverse attraction for him. But it was such a public thing. It couldn't be something that would make Jan Reuben happy, let alone Masturbatin' Bob.

But hell, *Rolling Stone*! That would be pretty neat.

And in any case, who said Reuben or Maynard would ever know? The editor wanted J. Speiderman, so why not let Speiderman take all the credit?

Gib asked OddGreg if he could use his phone.

An hour later, he was sitting down for food at an Italian restaurant in North Beach with Gerald Rutsey. From the faint smell of pot to the grey ponytail tied back with a

bandanna, a man who clearly still wished he were back in the ancient day, when he and Sidney Pinkwater had first met, fighting off the menace of the deadly saber-toothed tiger police and scoring cheap acid from the thundering woolly mammoth. Still, he was nice enough to Gib and spoke very highly of the Speiderman work. Figuring that liking Speiderman indicated Rutsey was a bit of an idiot, Gib relaxed completely.

"I'm doing an issue as a Guest Editor. So I want some fresh new voices. You have to write about the whole new media scene here in San Francisco. It's the new rock and roll."

The new rock and roll? "I never thought of it that way before."

"We'd commission maybe, I dunno, 1500 words? Would a grand be OK?"

"Wait, what do you want me to write?"

"Just a longer version of the Speiderman columns, taking the piss out of the whole scene."

"But I don't know shit about new media! I've only done this work for a month!"

Rutsey looked confused. "So?"

"Why don't you get someone who actually knows the scene to write about it?"

"Why would I do that? J. Speiderman is the name I want."

Gib tried to change the subject. "There was a story idea I had."

Rutsey leaned back, clearly willing to wait Gib out until he stopped with the crazy talk. "Fine, man, fine. Go ahead."

Gib explained The Space, and Green Rage and their media hacks. Rutsey liked the idea well enough. "Yeah, that'd be cool. Filler is fine. Fuck it, man. Let's do it. Same length, 1500 words."

"Great."

"Here's the thing: I need them both in two days. For next week's issue."

It took Gib an hour to crank out the Speiderman bullshit that Rutsey wanted to see, which was essentially a whine about how rough new media people had it. Every time Gib thought he was making sense, he backed up, erased the rationality and added more fuel to the bitching engine. Long hours! Repetitive stress injury! Not enough money! No respect! He threw in a couple of quotes from OddGreg, because he thought it would be cool to appear in a magazine.

He sent the copy in, got an approving email back from Rutsey, then set to work on the article about The Space. But he found himself in an awkward position. The Speiderman junk was easy to crank out. And e wrote like Speiderman, he could finish an article about Green Rage in record tie. For starters, getting embarrassing quotes out of Ethan Garrity would be easier than matching a black shirt with black pants.

But Gib didn't want to make fun of either Frank Marion or Ruth. Especially Ruth.

So he decided to cut back on the Speiderman attitude and write something nice. If he was capable, that was. Writing something honest would be all right, too, but he was afraid that if he did that, Garrity would *still* end up sounding like an idiot.

He went to The Space and explained what was going on to Ruth, who turned out to have mixed feelings.

"I don't want to be in any magazine, Hemingway" Ruth stated emphatically.

"But you've been making fun of me about this forever. I'm finally getting it done."

“Not interested. Ask me again and I’ll tell you the same.”

“But you don’t expect me to quote *Ethan*, do you? I’d sooner steal lines out of the pamphlets you give away at the shows.”

Ruth wiped sweat off her face. One of the beer taps had gotten shackwacky, so Ruth was taking the thing apart to see if she could clear the line. “Why don’t you go to the source? The guy who wrote the pamphlets.”

“I thought Garrity wrote them.”

“Nuh-uh.”

Campy turned out to be as resistant to the idea of publicity as Ruth. Ruth helped Gib talk to him. “Stanley,” Ruth said in a hectoring voice, “how do you expect to get your environmental message out if you don’t speak to the press?”

“It’s not under our control. The mainstream will fuck everything up.”

Ruth stared at the big man. He tried to avoid her stare for a long while. Then she started tapping her foot. Finally, he threw up his hands and yelled something that sounded like “blargh”. It appeared to translate to: “I’ll do it, but I still think it’s a bad idea.”

Campy waited until Ruth had left before he indicated Gib should pick up his pen and paper. Campy wiped off his sweaty face with a towel and started taking in a low and slow voice.

“Just listen, because I don’t want to repeat anything. Green Rage is about two things. It’s about using music to bring the environmental message to a public filled with sheep and drones. And it’s about direct action. Direct action in defense of nature.

“Our world is being killed by corporations and consumers. Green Rage trying to do anything to slow that process until the human race grows up and stops shitting where it lives. Frankly, I doubt we’ll do any good. In about a hundred years, everything will collapse into a sewer and drown in its own filth and waste.”

Campy looked to make sure Gib was getting everything.

“And I’m as guilty as anyone else. I drive the band around in a gas guzzling van while I’m passing out pamphlets about carpooling. I’m a fucking hypocrite just like all the rest. And I don’t even think my awareness of my hypocrisy makes me any better, either. I’m just an asshole with awareness, that’s all. Any questions?”

Gib looked down at his notes, and after thinking about it, asked, “Don’t you have any hope at all?”

Campy tightened in his lips. “Sure. I have hope. I hope that in the next ten years every single corporate polluter will suddenly wise up. I hope that America will start investing in useful public transportation that doesn’t break down every third mile and actually takes people where they want to go. I hope the first world will start working with the third world to stop the destruction of the rain forests and the oceans. Do you see that happening? Hope? More like I have fantasies.”

These were the most words Gib had ever heard Campy string together, and every sentence was more depressing than the one before it. On the other hand, Gib thought he was finally getting a real glimpse at the linebacker who had started a holy war during a Big Ten football game. Or maybe it was just the first time Gib had heard Campy like this while Gib was sober.

“Why do you even bother?”

Campy didn’t seem surprised to hear the question. “You played baseball, didn’t

you? Ruth told me that.”

“Yeah, I played college ball.”

“Pretend you’re playing for the Brewers. That’s my team, the Brewers. And in July, you’re 20 games out of first place. You lose one more game and you get mathematically eliminated from the race.”

“Sounds like the Brewers,” Gib said.

“So you’re a guy who gets called up from the minors. You really can’t handle major league pitching, so you’re a .180 batter. And suddenly you’re facing Randy Johnson or Tom Glavine or Greg Maddux in the bottom of the ninth, two outs, and the Brewers are down by three runs. No one on base. Pretty hopeless, right?”

“Right.”

“So, at that point, knowing that there’s almost no chance you can win, do you give up?”

“I take my swings,” Gib said. “You always take your swings.”

“Of course you do,” Campy said. “That’s what I’m doing. I’m taking my swings.

“One more obvious question.”

Campy waited.

“How far are you willing to go? What are you willing to do?”

Campy paused. Then, grudgingly: “Whatever it takes.”

Gib thanked the big man and left him to his workout. For good measure, Gib talked with Garrity, but he could have written down Garrity’s quotes without even talking to him. Frank Marion was kind of tongue-tied at the idea, and asked Gib not to quote him. But he gave Gib copies of some of his photos of Green Rage in action at The Space.

Then Gib went back to the loft and locked himself in. He didn’t shave, didn’t shower, didn’t brush his hair or teeth, slept only in quick naps. He probably wrote over ten thousand words in the marathon session, but threw out draft after draft. Using his borrowed laptop, he used the Web to research other environmental groups from the Sierra Club to Earth First!, making sure that every word in the article was exactly perfect and correct. The morning, he cleaned up, and went down to Black Helicopter to email the article to Rutsey in New York.

When the next issue arrived, the cover read “San Francisco Reborn! The New Spirit in the City by the Bay.” The Spiderman piece was passed around the Black Helicopter office proudly, but Gib was only interested in the Green Rage piece.

Gib spotted a picture of Garrity on page 30. The original photo was a shot of all of Green Rage playing during a charity show in August, raising money to save a breeding ground for abalone. Here, the picture was heavily cropped and enlarged. The article was one of two on the page, but the Garrity photo dominated the page, sweat flying from his hair as he leaned into a microphone. Half of Campy’s face was barely visible in the background, and Marion was nowhere to be seen. The article that accompanied the picture had hacked Gib’s original draft down from 1500 word to about 100.

The entire article:

‘We’re all about direct action,’ says Ethan Garrity, lead singer of the San Francisco punk band Green Rage. ‘We want to show the world that rock and roll can still make a difference.’ Garrity and his bandmates bass player Stanley Campanella and drummer Frank Marion are putting their instruments where their mouths are, performing

songs with a radical environmental edge at a club owned by Garrity himself, where a big part of all profits go to environmental causes. 'It's the bottom of the ninth for the earth, man, but Green Rage is still in there swinging,' Garrity declares.

And that was it.

Gib got on the phone to New York. After twenty minutes of arguing and yelling, he found himself talking to woman with the title of assistant associate managing editor. As soon as Gib started in on his tale of woe, she interrupted, "This is about Gerry Rutsey, right?"

"Right."

"He no longer has any affiliation with *Rolling Stone*." The editor's voice was like a hammer left out in a snowstorm. "No affiliation of any kind. If I can get your name, I'll make sure you get paid promptly for your article, however."

"Wait, what happened?"

The editor took a deep, frustrated breath. "There were major changes to your article, correct? Quotes that were altered. misattributed or made up outright?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Let me ask you, does it sound like you're the first call I've gotten about this?"

"Uh, no."

"Fine. Give me your name, and I'll get your payment right out to you. I want to assure you this was a bizarre aberration at this magazine. Gerry Rutsey was only a guest editor for that special issue."

Gib hung up the phone without giving his name or particulars. He knew he was going to take some serious shit about this whole fiasco from Campy. And blaming an editor who had gone over the edge wasn't going to do any good. He printed out a copy of his original article and went down to The Space, and of course, everyone had already seen the article. And no one was really interested in reading the abused original.

After erupting at Gib, Campy's nicest response was to Ruth. "I'm *really* pleased the way the media got our message out there, Ruth. It's really *wonderful*. Thanks for talking me into it!" Then he went to his gym, while Ruth gave him the finger behind his back.

Garrity, by contrast, was enthusiastic. "Hey, it's not your fault there was a nut editing you! And I think Frank took a really great picture!"

"Thanks, Ethan," Marion said.

"It's not all about you, Ethan," Gib said morosely.

Garrity turned on the serious face. "No, of course it's not. And if you think I'm happy with how moronic I sound here, then you're very much mistaken. But you know what? I don't care what Campy says, I agree Barnum with Barnum. Any publicity as long as the names get spelled right. Sure, most people look at this and think, 'Idiots.' But maybe some people come down to The Space. Maybe they pick up a brochure. Maybe they learn something. Maybe they get involved."

Even though he knew how badly his original intent had been fucked up, even though he knew Garrity was just turning on the charm, Gib was still cheered up by what Garrity said. Gib still didn't feel like hanging out at The Space, though, so he went home.

When he got there, the phone was ringing. He let the machine pick up, convinced it was Campy calling to yell at him some more. It turned out to be Bob Maynard.

“Pick up the phone! Pick up the phone! Pick up the phone! Pick up the phone!”

Gib decided he didn't want whatever had heated Maynard up to start burning out of control. So he picked up.

“Hi, Bob. I just got in the front door. What do you need?”

“Some kid in the office showed me a copy of a magazine, some hippie rag,” Bob screamed. It sounded like he'd been drinking. Gib wondered if this were the anniversary of some other major injury.

“Would that be *Rolling Stone*, Bob?”

“Yeah! Do you know what's there? An article about Green Rage! These fucking bastards are stating to reach out to a *national audience* with their rabble rousing! National! Audience! Listen to this: ‘We're all about direct action.’ Do you know what *that* mean?”

“No, Bob,” Gib said wearily.

“It's a call for armed insurrection!”

“Oh. If you say so.”

“I do say so! Mark my words, these people are getting ready to kick their activities up to another level! Dangerous! I need you to keep a real close eye on these people.”

“I've been doing that, haven't I?”

At that, Maynard's voice turned oddly silky, as if he wanted to have a heart to heart. “It's very funny you should say that. I've been reading your reports, and they sound real good. But I was thinking maybe you're not cut out for this. About replacing you. Cause you don't seem to be able to find anything we can bust these scumbags on. But now, seeing these snakes in the American grass leering out at me in a national magazine, even this junkie rag, convinced me we don't have that kind of time.”

“I appreciate the vote of confidence, Bob.”

“Reuben really fought for you, by the way.” Now Maynard showed off his best insinuating tone. “That rug muncher sounds like she's really got the hots for you. Who knows? You might change her back to liking men, if she ever did.”

Gib rubbed his forehead. “I'll take that as a compliment, Bob.”

“Anyways, put some elbow grease into this! Double your effort! I want something we can prosecute real soon. And then we send all four of them away.”

“Four?” Gib asked, confused.

“Sure. The three guys and the bitch who runs the place.”

“Ruth?” Gib said, his throat suddenly constricting. “What does Ruth have to do with anything?”

“That broad is hip deep in the green crap, is what it looks like to me. She goes down with the rest.”

“Ruth's not involved with anything!”

Maynard didn't respond for a while.

“Kid, not to sound suspicious, but I'm maybe hearing more personal involvement than good cop work. I'm thinking I got all these reports saying how dangerous everything is, but you ain't too good at finding stuff. But now I'm thinking maybe you didn't *want* to find stuff. So how about it, kid? You found anything? Was it moist?”

Gib thought about what he could sacrifice. And it came to him easily, as easy as

boiling water. "What about Norman Haddal?"

"Haddal?"

"Right, Bob. The drug dealer you got into a fight with at a party. You do remember that, don't you?"

"I remember," Maynard grumbled out. "The DEA wants him, so does the SFPD. They can't find it."

"Didn't Reuben tell you? I found the lab."

"Ohhhhhh," Maynard moaned happily. "That's something."

"So get off my ass. We all know I'm doing a good job. Just read the reports. And you know there's no time to replace me. And I know Ruth's not involved."

"Fine, kid. That's fine for now."

Ten minutes later, they had a temporary understanding.

As soon as Gib hung up, the phone rang again. Gib let the machine pick up. This time, he *hoped* it was Campy calling to yell at him.

"Gib," Ruth said from the machine's speaker, "are you screening? I guess you must not be home yet. Anyway, I was just calling to tell you I read your article. The original one, I mean. And I thought it was good. Really good. That's all I wanted you to know. Bye, Gib."

Days later, on the first of October, the DEA raided Norman Haddal's houseboat.

PART THREE

OCTOBER, 1996

*In which Gib roadtrips with Ruth to places of nature,
nudity and imagination;
Then he and she meet Green Rage in a place of excitement
and embarrassment, threats and suggestions...*

"Jesus Jumped Over the Moon"

Religion, oh, just another of those numerous failures resulting from an attempt to popularize art.

Ezra Pound

Two days after Haddal was arrested and held under a million dollars bail, Gib woke up with Ruth crushing his ribcage.

"Wake up! It's Disneyland time!" she yelled.

Instead of answering, Gib rolled her off and staggered to the kitchen to make coffee.

"Did you say Disneyland?" Gib asked after the first cup had been poured.

"Yep!" Ruth said. "The Ragers decided to media hack it."

"What don't they like about Disneyland?"

Ruth stared at Gib's forehead until he realized she was looking for where the word "retard" had been tattooed.

"Corporate predators, squeaky-clean image? What's not to mock?"

"I still don't get it. Who doesn't like Mickey Mouse?"

"Any sane person! He's *creepy*. The whole Disney bunch is creepy."

"What about Bugs Bunny or Daffy Duck?"

"Those are *Warner* cartoons," Ruth said in exasperation. "Bugs Bunny may be emasculated *now*, but at least he started out with some anarchy in his soul. Mickey Mouse is a castrated corporate shill -- just listen to the voice -- and always has been."

Gib shook his head to clear it, then went back in the bathroom to splash some water on his face. When he came back out, Ruth was in her bedroom packing a black backpack with her name spraypainted on it in hot neon pink.

"As much fun as this sounds -- making fun of animated characters and all -- I don't think I can spare the time," Gib said. "I have a lot of work to get done for Sidney."

Ruth picked up the phone from the bookcase and dialed.

"Sidney? It's Ruth. I'm taking Gib away for a few days. Cool?" Ruth nodded her head at the response, said, "Thanks", and hung up.

"Any other ineffective gambits you want to try?"

Gib thought about it.

Ruth added, "You don't have to go if you don't want to, but I thought we would take a long drive south and spend some time together. Campy is pretty mad about Norman, so the Ragers decided they needed a vacation. They'll meet us down in southern Cal. Come on, it'll be fun. When was the last time you had a vacation?"

There was no good answer for that, since Gib had thought of all of his time in San Francisco as one big vacation. But then he added up all the time spent on his fake and real professions, and he started to wonder how he ever found time to sleep.

"You know, I not only need a vacation, I *deserve* one," Gib said.

In a short while, Gib's backpack and camping equipment were added to Ruth's bag in the trunk and they were accelerating south on Highway 1. They stopped for an early lunch at a seaside seafood shack.

Ruth said, "I'm not sure I can take much more of this gorgeous scenery."

"Correct me if I'm wrong -- and I'm sure I am," Gib said, spearing a piece of fish

with his fork, “but isn’t that an odd thing for an environmental chick to say?”

Ruth smiled as she smashed open a lobster claw and sent juice flying all over the table. “It’s not about scenic vistas, you know. This environmental chick is looking for something different.”

“Like what?”

“Like desert. I want to look at a long stretch of nothing for hours and hours. Maybe there can be a cactus or a shitty diner every once in a while just to break the monotony.” Ruth popped a pale chunk of lobster meat into her mouth and grinned as she chewed.

Back in the car, Gib checked out his atlas.

“Let me see the map,” Ruth said. She looked at it and stabbed down at a blue spot east of Yosemite National Park. “There. Mono Lake. I’ve never been there. That’s where we’ll sleep tonight. And I don’t want to take a single major highway.”

Gib figured out a vague around-the-mulberry-bush-and-into-Yosemite-National-Parks route that he wasn’t sure would work, but he decided to leave it up to chance. As it turned out, chance turned out to be Ruth with the atlas. She kept the atlas in her hands and would call out a new route to turn onto every once in a while.

They drove south ten miles, then cut east. East soon turned north, and then east again, with Ruth calling out the turns and connections as they appeared. After a few hours of driving, Gib felt like he was using his tire rubber and gas fumes to write some secret message on the twisting roads that only astronauts and CIA satellite researchers would ever be able to read. During most of this, the landscape had very little variation – only from strip mall to strip mining, it seemed – and Ruth fell into a half drowse. She’d respond when Gib said something to her, but mainly with non-sequiturs and satisfied murmurs.

Gib fiddled with the radio, discarding tape after tape from the deck, filling a big chunk of time with REO Speedwagon, the Stones and Metallica on stations that seemed to have as their slogan: “It Don’t Got To Be Good To Be A Classic”. Shortly after the third time he ran across “Take It Easy” by The Eagles, he started trying anything different. He finally settled on a shit-crazy preacher and listened to that for a passel of miles.

Gib found listening to the preacher comforting, because he liked listening to truly accomplished bullshit artists. Life after death, healing the sick, angels and devils. The only thing missing from Bible stories was a good fire-breathing dragon and a decent plot. He wondered if that was how L. Ron Hubbard had gotten started.

Maybe it was a poor attitude, but Gibson Senior had not been a good religious role model. The Gibsons had attended St. Paul’s, an Episcopalian church in Virginia, along with many of Gibson Senior’s peers in law and politics. The Arlens also went to St. Paul’s, even though Gib knew that Uncle Joseph was actually Catholic. But you could meet a better connected class of people at St. Paul’s.

When Gib was eleven, the longtime pastor at St. Paul’s had been put out to pasture, and Reverend Petersen, a new, easily excitable young man of God, had been recommended to the congregation. Gibson Senior had been part of the interview committee that had approved the new pastor as acceptable to the St. Paul’s. But six months later, Reverend Petersen was gone. Too many morals, as it turned out.

Gib heard about it driving home from Church with both Gibson Senior and Uncle

Joseph one rainy Sunday. Gib's mother had been feeling "too sickly" to get out of bed, and the Arlen kids were being taken to tennis lessons. So Gib sat quietly in the back seat, watching the scenery in vague focus through the driving rain. Reverend Petersen's sermon had been about the cleansing nature of forgiveness, and for a change, Gib hadn't fallen asleep. So as he watched the landscape roll past, he thought about what it would be like to be able to reveal his deepest, darkest thoughts and secrets in the realization that there would be no repercussions. That would be interesting.

As Gib's mind wandered, he heard Uncle Joseph say to Gibson Senior, "So Petersen is gone, right? That was his last sermon?"

Gibson Senior nodded.

Gib asked from the backseat, "Something's wrong with Reverend Petersen?"

Both men in the front seat looked back, as if they had forgotten Gib was there.

"Yeah," his father finally answered.

"Why?"

"Because he didn't fit in," Uncle Joseph said. "He didn't understand the way the church works. Unforgiving little bastard."

"I don't understand," Gib said.

The two men exchanged looks, and Gibson Senior finally shrugged his shoulders.

Uncle Joseph nodded. "Gib, priests are just guys, okay? They say one thing on the job, but they still live in the real world. Priest Prick Petersen talked about forgiveness today, but it doesn't mean he practices. You know Charlie Marsters at the church?"

"Sure. He drives that big Mercedes."

"Well, he and Mrs. Marsters don't want to be married anymore. So they're getting divorced. Happens all the time. Couple of rubber stamps and some legal work. No big deal. You know kids at school with parents who're split up?"

"Sure," Gib said.

"Thought so. The Marsters are about to sign all the papers, make everything finished. Then all of a sudden Pastor Petersen calls Charlie. And do you know what he tells him? Tells him if he gets a divorce, he's not welcome at St. Paul's anymore. He can't get communion, he can't sit in the pews, he can't hear his kids sing in the choir. The whole shooting match. That sound forgiving to you?"

"Um, no. I guess not."

"No, I guess not, too. He even told Charlie that as far as the Church was concerned, Charlie was going to go to Hell! You just don't say that to someone like Charlie. Charlie's a big shot at the State Department! So a few of us got together and called the Bishop. Told him Petersen wasn't working out."

"But he's the pastor. Isn't he in charge? Because he talks for God?"

The two older men laughed.

"Kid, I got no problem with God," Uncle Joseph said, "but if you ever hear someone say they talk for him, that guy's full of shit."

Gibson Senior added, "Edward, there is a difference between God and the Church. You might have noticed that our religion is not the only one in the world."

"Sure. There's Catholics, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Lutherans."

"And Jews and Muslims and Hindus and all the rest. Quick now, who's right?"

"What?"

“If we have one Almighty God, but the Lutherans and the Catholics think we’re wrong, let alone the Hindus and the Muslims, who is right? And what makes Jesus any more believable than Thor?”

“Public relations,” Gibson Senior snorted. “And if all these people through history believe very different things, the most likely answer is that they’re all wrong.”

Even Uncle Joseph looked troubled at that. “Yeah, but you gotta go to church anyway. You know why, Eddie? Just in case.”

Gib saw the look on his father’s face and realized with a surprise how relaxed the man looked. “Joseph, please do not fill Edward’s head with nonsense,” Gibson Senior said.

“Dad, are you saying that God doesn’t exist?” Gib interrupted.

“Nothing so grand. The Bible is a lot of nonsense, of course. There may be some true stories in it. But certainly the idea of some sky god who has *any* effect here on Earth is a load of garbage.”

Uncle Joseph turned around to look at Gib. “Your father read too much Nietzsche in college.”

When Gib just gave Uncle Joseph a blank look, the older man sighed and said, “You’ll get that joke when you’re older.”

Gibson Senior looked annoyed. “This has nothing to do with Nietzsche.”

After that, Gib had made a regular habit of watching shows like the *700 Club*, seeing if they knew something Gibson Senior didn’t. And after watching them, he hadn’t learned anything about god, but he did identify a big part of the magic. A sincere face.

Sally Field would have made a wonderful Messiah, Gib thought.

So as he drove along, he listened to the shit-crazy radio preacher talk to his invisible congregation. The preacher was one of the familiar types; the “Jihad” Christian, as opposed to the “Hate the Sin, Love the Sinner” strain. Gays were a problem, along with drugs, feminists, and Democrats. And send all possible cash, because Hamilton, Franklin and Grant couldn’t save you from burning in the steaming magma of eternal damnation. Gib thought that the preacher mentioning Franklin was a case of wishful thinking, but nothing ventured, nothing gained.

As the Goat climbed into the mountains, up and up toward Yosemite National Park, it didn’t seem like they’d make the park before nightfall.

After a time, he stopped trying to find a decent radio in the middle of all the titanic interference from the mountains around him. Turning down the volume, he loudly cleared his throat while looking over at Ruth, who eventually dragged her attention away from the rocky landscape speeding past them and waited for his question.

“I’ve been listening to hours of crazy-ass preachers, and we’re ascending into the sky, so I figured it was time for deep thoughts. Do you believe in God?”

Ruth said, “I’ve got more important things to worry about.”

“Like what?”

“Like my friends. Clean water and air. Saving the environment. Racism, sexism, ism, ism, ism. How to lose the extra five pounds I’ve gained over the last month.”

“You don’t need to lose weight,” Gib said automatically, then said, “Sorry, habit.”

Ruth smiled, “Anyway, I guess what I’m saying is that God is just a distraction from important things. Like what’s going on with us.”

"Us?" Gib asked cautiously.

"Oh, don't be an asshole. Why do you have to talk in codes and whispers all the time?"

After waiting a long while for Gib to answer, Ruth continued. "The time has come," she intoned, "when there is more than just "you" and "I". We are pushing on into the uncharted territory of Us. Close to Iowa, Ohio and Oz, and other vowel-y lands, the land of Us is full of frightening and dangerous creatures like the Crazy Beast of Commitment, and the Ravening Horde of Shared Closet and Dresser Space."

"Terrifying," Gib said neutrally. "But I don't think I talk in codes and whispers."

Ruth leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes. "Really? Tell me about your parents."

"What?"

"Tell me their names, even. Name me three of your best friends from college."

"Wait--"

"Tell me the name of the first girl you ever kissed. How about your first lay?"

"What?"

"My point, Mr. Gibson Edwards, is that when it comes to talking about yourself, you wouldn't say shit if you had a mouthful."

"Maybe I don't talk about myself that much. But it's because I'm interested in the here and now. And here and now, *I'm* the one who's been left hanging out on a limb. I believe your exact response to me saying 'I love you' was: 'Oh, shit.'"

Ruth smiled. "I just needed some time to think."

Gib waited about a mile and a half before finally asking, "And...?"

"Hold on, I need to see something." Ruth turned sideways so she could put one hand on Gib's thigh and one on his chest.

"What are you measuring?"

"I just want to see your reaction."

Ruth paused, and leaned close to Gib's ear before she whispered, "I think we should get married."

Involuntarily, every muscle in Gib's body tensed as he whipped his heads around to stare at her.

Ruth laughed. "Was that a seizure? I'm glad the car didn't spin out of control." She leaned back onto her side of the front seat. It wasn't quite a smile she built on her lips, but it had the shape of one. "So you can say 'I love you'. That's wonderful. I notice you don't seem to react very well to the natural consequence of that."

Eventually, Gib turned off the radio and let the silence take over.

After some time, Gib noticed dusk sneaking up on his left. He turned on his headlights, amused as always to picture the headlights flipping over like James Bond rocket launchers.

"OK," Gib said, "Are you serious, or are you just fucking with me?"

"Oh, I'm completely serious," Ruth answered. "I figure we should try it out during the vacation, and see how it feels."

"Try it out? Marriage isn't a car. You can't test drive it."

"You can in Nevada. It's been a while since I've done this, but I'll check the details again. A license costs under ten bucks. I was thinking about finding a nice Elvis to

do the ceremony. Then before we go back home, we get the thing annulled. Actually, we don't even have to mail the marriage certificate in. Until we do, the marriage doesn't count."

"You want to get married for the weekend? Why?"

"Trust me. It has a way of focusing the attention. Hey, turn here!"

Startled, Gib looked for the turn.

"Right, right, turn right!" Ruth shouted.

Gib had been abusing the GTO's speedometer, so they fishtailed a bit as he slammed on the brakes. Gib saw that Ruth was pointing at a pulloff where there seemed to be some major construction going on. Every piece of metal inside the car moaned and shuddered, but Gib got the GTO to a full stop without any real mishap. They were about thirty feet off the road, with a large river on the other side of the road. Mountains loomed to either side of them, and the sun was behind them and to the left.

"What are we looking for?" Gib asked.

"You'll see," Ruth answered. "You're not in a hurry, are you?"

After a few minutes, Ruth stood up in her seat and leaned out over the windshield. The wind blew the t-shirt up from her stomach and Gib caught a glimpse of Ruth's muscular belly. As usual, he found himself fascinated.

Ruth shielded her eyes, watching the setting sun. "Look at that purple. Have you ever seen a purple like that?"

Gib looked where she was pointing. It was purple, all right. Nice enough. "No, not one like that."

Ruth took his hand and squeezed it in excitement. "There it goes. Wait for it, wait for it."

The final ray of the sunset flashed over the mountain behind them, and then disappeared..

"Yes! Perfect!" Ruth grabbed Gib by his hair, pulled him up to stand in the car and kissed him. Then she gave him a high five.

"That was a *great* sunset!" Ruth yelled, then sat back down, chortling. She looked up at Gib and said, "OK, you can keep on driving."

Vacation Ruth was a whole new experience, Gib finally understood.

The entrance to Yosemite National Park came upon Gib suddenly in the gathering gloom. The guardhouse was empty except for a sign saying, "Drive on in." For a mile or so, the road was a tight two-way, and the two or three trucks that passed Gib going the other way made him extremely nervous. Luckily, there wasn't much traffic.

Ruth kept calling out for a stop in many of the pulloff areas, to look at a particularly nice view, or a river rock. Gib expressed a vague appreciation for the scenery, but he was mainly happy to have the chance to stretch his legs.

When the road turned into a one way, Ruth casually said, "Boy, I hope the road going east isn't closed."

Gib goggled at her. "Closed?" he asked in disbelief.

"They close these roads during the winter. Too much black ice. If you hit a patch of that stuff, you could skid off the side of a mountain like *that*." Ruth snapped her fingers.

Involuntarily, Gib slowed down and started looking around nervously in the dark.

Then, far behind him, he saw the headlights. The idea of driving all the way to Yosemite Village with headlights shining in his eyes was an unpleasant one, so he sped up to 40 or so, feeling his buttocks clench with the effort of holding the car on the road.

The headlights never caught up, and he got to Yosemite Village without mishap. Ruth got out of the car and stared at the stars for a long while.

"It's really beautiful out here," she said, as Gib raised the roof of the convertible. "You never see this many stars in San Francisco, because of all the city lights. Even on the beach, you don't see this much."

Gib got tired of waiting for her and walked into the gift/grocery store and studied the coffee mugs. Then he was struck by a perverse urge while looking at the postcards. He bought a scene of a Yosemite waterfall at night, got directions to a stamp machine a short walk away, bought some stamps, and scribbled on the card in the dim light.

"Dear Bob: Investigation going smoothly. Wish you were here. Love, Mr. X."

The he wrote Bob Maynard's name and the Golden Gate Avenue Address of the FBI in the address space and slipped the postcard into the nearby mail drop.

As it turned out, the road to the east, 120, was open. When they passed a sign listing all roads as open, Ruth laughed. "Got you!" she said. "It's still too early in the season for the roads to be closed."

"You were just fucking with me?"

"Sure. Don't get me wrong, sometimes a cold front whips through here and they do have to close the roads, but it isn't real common until later. Boy, I had you going!" Ruth proceeded to lean back in her seat and fall back asleep.

Gib was annoyed until he backtracked to the turn onto 120 going east (which also appeared to be Tioga Road). The traffic didn't get any thicker – in fact, Gib saw only one car between the time he got on 120 and the time he emerged on the east side of Yosemite – but the drive itself was much more nerve wracking. The 40 mile ride took nearly two hours, because he kept driving slower and slower. Ruth's joke aside, the regular warning signs for snow and ice disturbed Gib. And the road wandered. It wandered left, turned sharply back right, then back right, went up, went down, went all the way around, and it drove Gib crazy. The GTO was a car best suited for straightway roads the length of Kansas, and the tires squealed even going as slow as 30 during a sharp turn.

The dark didn't help, because Gib couldn't see what lurked past the edge of the road. His imagination told him it was a swift drop into oblivion. One jerk of the Goat's wheel, and he and Ruth would Thelma and Louise out into a bottomless valley. The GTO would hit the side of the mountain, roll for a million feet, then explode into a trillion pieces. And then even the pieces would continue to fall for a century and a third before hitting the bottom. The regular signs announcing what height he'd achieved only added fuel to the fantasy, culminating at the sign that said 10000 feet. *10,000 feet.*

Yup, that was sure was a long (*way to fall*) way up. He thought they got even higher later on in the drive, but by that time Gib was doing his best to ignore every sign on the road.

Descending was even worse, because the car wanted to go faster and faster, so Gib was riding the brakes constantly. Plus, "going down" was too close to "falling" for Gib's comfort.

It was probably weariness that caused the most insane moment during the trip.

One sign he didn't ignore indicated that the town of Lee Vining wasn't many more miles away, which gave him a small weave of peace. So he looked over his shoulder in a quick glance, wanting to bid farewell to Yosemite.

Even the brief glance over his shoulder showed the silhouette of a huge mountain looming back in the distance. Then Gib made the mistake of looking again, and the mountain (which he discovered later was Mount Conness) appeared to be closer.

As if it were moving. Chasing him.

Chills ran through him. A long turn to the right put the mountain squarely behind him, so he couldn't look, but when the road turned back right, the mountain jumped out at him the instant he looked, as if it were waiting for him.

You're spooking yourself, Gib told himself. He turned on the radio to dispel the weird fear the mountain had put into him. But a quick search through the radio dial produced only static, and the added sound was extremely distracting. *Especially if a mountain is stalking you*, he heard himself think, and it caused him to clench the wheel and throw himself back in his seat.

Stop thinking like that! Gib admonished himself. Carefully staring only at the road ahead of him, he found the next spot to pull over and stopped the GTO. He even turned off the engine, so the only sound was the wind blowing outside the window and the ticking of the engine.

Gib opened his door and stepped outside, his eyes on his feet.

Then he looked up.

This time, the mountain didn't seem so bad. It loomed far above him, sure, but it was just a lump of inanimate rock. That's what Gib told himself, anyway, but the eight year old kid inside him was telling a different story. The kid was saying, "What if?", two of the most dangerous words in any language. "What if the Norse myths were right? What if that isn't a mountain out there, but a crouching rock giant, his arms wrapped around his knees?" As he looked, Gib could almost make out the curve of the giant's elbows. And was that a gleam of light? The kind you would see indicating a slitted, staring eye?

Gib jumped back into the GTO, started it back up and raced down the mountain. He risked glances back over his shoulder only during the occasional straightaway, and the mountain always seemed to be looming higher and higher, getting closer and closer. He knew the mountain was watching him, waiting for a moment to hurl a thunderbolt, or just lift one huge foot and crush the GTO beneath it. Gib's breath came in short gulps of air and his heart raced in a mild panic. It was almost like hallucinating, but not once did Gib entertain the notion of stopping the car and getting himself back together.

When he hit the ranger station at Tioga Pass, the panic went away. Somehow he the Tioga Pass was the barrier that monsters, mountain-sized or not, couldn't cross. It made no more sense than keeping your feet tucked under the covers so the monster under the bed couldn't grab them. But it had the same logical illogic.

The road got wider, and the rest of the ride to Lee Vining went without any problems or panics. When Ruth woke up, Gib never even thought about telling her about his mountain panic.

"Let's get to the lake and set up camp," Ruth said after Gib got gas in Lee Vining. "Isn't the area closed at night?"

“It’s a big lake. Campy’s been here before, and he told me where to go set up camp where we won’t be hassled.”

With Ruth giving directions, they eventually parked and then hiked to an empty picnic area near the lake, where Gib set up his tent. They thought about going to see the lake first, but food was required. Ruth made a reasonable effort with the portable stove, but they both agreed that the result was not much better than a TV dinner. And then they decided it had been a long day of driving, and it would be better to go to sleep, and see the lake bright and early the next day. In the tent, Gib found himself noticing how the taste of the food stayed in their mouths as they kissed. And while the inflatable mattress was decent enough to sleep on, once thrusting motions were added to the mix, Gib found himself more concerned with his back interacting with the stony ground than with his genitals intercouraging with Ruth’s.

Still, he told himself, it was sex in a tent, and he could add that to his checklist of places he’d done it.

Some time later, he rolled over and realized Ruth was gone from the tent. Strangely, Gib was convinced she was gone for good, that she’d ditched him. He pictured her crawling cautiously, cautiously out of her sleeping bag, slipping into her clothes and walking off into the night, never to be heard from again by man or beast.

Then he noticed her clothes were still heaped up near the entrance flap to the tent.

So – cautiously, cautiously – he crept to the front of the tent. Through the mosquito netting, he saw Ruth laying naked – except for her tennis shoes – on a blanket she had draped over a nearby picnic bench. Her hands were curled behind her head like a pillow.

He wondered what she was looking at, and curled his head up to try and see the same sky she was staring at, but it was an impossibility. His twisting made the air mattress squeak unexpectedly, and Ruth’s head spun around to look at the tent. Gib froze, half upside down.

“Gib? You awake?” Ruth asked curiously.

Gib considered producing a fake snore, but knew it would *sound* fake, so he just breathed steadily and quietly.

After trying to peer into the dark interior of the tent for what seemed an eternity, Ruth turned her sights back to the stars. After a short time, during which Gib had untwisted himself, Ruth rubbed her hands across her arms in a warming gesture and pushed herself off the picnic table. Wrapping the blanket across her shoulders, she walked toward the lake. Once she was out of the line of sight of the front of the tent, Gib poked his head out and looked up at the sky.

It was drenched in pinpoints of light, as if a crazed offspring of Georges Seurat and Jackson Pollock had decided to work in silver and black. The picnic area was steeped in starlight, with hints and pockets of light amidst the shadow. But there was no moon that Gib could see, and when he waved his hand close in front of his eyes he could barely make it out. Yet Ruth had been clearly visible laying on the table.

It seemed like a dream, but Gib had never had a dream which he didn’t instantly recognize as one – a three dimensional movie where he was both actor and audience. So he knew he wasn’t dreaming. The uncomfortable grit underneath his knees proved it. But he had never seen a night or a light like this before. The stars looked bright enough to

read the classifieds, but that sense of clarity vanished when he tried to focus on something in particular. He grabbed the zipper on the front of the tent with his fingers, but was unable to see it with his eyes only inches away.

Clarity in the distance, murkiness up close. A metaphor for something or other, Gib thought.

Gib pulled himself fully out of the tent without taking the time to dress, except for his shoes. He was able to pick Ruth out only because she was the only moving over the landscape. Because the further away she got, the more silvery her skin and hair looked, and the blanket was a shadowy black.

The night was warm for the beginning of October. Still, he would have liked to have had a blanket to match Ruth's. In a crouch, he trailed her for quite a while until she stopped at what looked to be the edge of the lake and dropped the blanket from around her shoulders. She looked up at the sky for minutes, then began to slowly turn around, as if imprinting the entire area on her consciousness. Gib had no choice to freeze in place and hope she didn't pick him out from the rest of what she was seeing. When her face turned toward him, he knew that on this odd night, he was just far enough away to be seen, not close enough to be invisible.

"Gib? Is that you?" Ruth asked.

For a brief second, Gib thought about staying silent, but quickly realized Ruth would see him trying to sneak back to the tent before her. So he stood up out of his crouch.

"Yeah, I'm here," he said.

"Always the voyeur," Ruth said, but Gib could hear the amusement in her voice.

"What are you doing out here?" Gib asked.

"Just looking," Ruth said. "Come here. Let me show you."

Gib walked over and Ruth took his hand. The merest brush of the back of her hand against his thigh excited him, but now he knew he was close enough to hide his arousal. Though he wondered why he would want to.

Ruth pointed at the stars out over the strange growths that seemed to be coming out of the lake.

"What the hell are those?" Gib asked, pointing at the surface of the water.

"You don't know about Mono Lake? This place got screwed in the early forties when Los Angeles needed more and more water. The main streams that feed into this lake were diverted so they went to water LA lawns instead of fill the lake basin."

"Isn't that *Chinatown*? 'Mymothermysistermymothermysister'?"

"The movie is totally mixed up about what went on. I don't know *what* that incest thing was all about. But yeah, when the streams got diverted, the level of the lake went down, and all those things you see sticking up were suddenly visible. They're called tufas."

"What are they?"

"Some kind of limestone development."

"Huh." Gib stared out at the tufas. They looked like mountains created by a giant child dribbling limestone through his hand like sand. Not quite castles, more than mounds, they glistened in the starlight like an aquatic lifeform. Gib found them creepy.

Ruth dropped the blanket, walked ahead into the water, swam out into the lake.

“Come on and try it, voyeur,” she said, as she floated. Gib could see intriguing body parts sticking above the surface, so he walked out into the water and dove in.

The water was about as cold as he had expected, but he was so surprised by the huge amount of salt in the water that he swallowed a whole mouthful and thrashed around until he stopped coughing. His eyes stung from the salinity.

“What’s all this salt doing here? This is worse than the ocean!” Gib yelled.

“Keep your voice down,” Ruth said, “and float your ass over here.”

Gib found it hard to adjust to floating in the lake. It was much more buoyant than anything he was used to, and his excitement at being naked around Ruth kept poking out into the air. He felt vulnerable. He eventually got close enough to grab Ruth’s hand.

They floated for a while. Then Ruth hesitantly pointed out constellations, until Gib said, “I know the stars.” He corrected her mistakes and pointed out the other major constellations she had missed.

“I didn’t know you stargazed,” Ruth said

“I did during college,” Gib said. For a moment, he thought about undercover tradecraft, then decided to forget all about that for a night, or an hour, for at least a few minutes. “University of Virginia. That’s where I went to college. Since you asked before.”

Ruth squeezed his hand.

“We used to go into the hills, some of my friends. I went to high school with one of them, Joe Meeker. He was my catcher, both in high school and college. I always liked Joe, but I don’t think he ever liked me. But we’d hung out together for so many years, you could call it friendship.

“Anyway, Joe majored in astronomy. When a group of us would go out to the hills to get high or drunk or something, there would be a bunch of us laying on our backs, looking at the stars. Joe would name all the constellations, over and over. So that’s why I know them.”

They floated quietly for awhile. Then Gib said, “Is that the kind of thing you wanted to hear?”

Ruth squeezed his hand again. “You don’t have to tell me all at once, or tell me everything, but yes, I’d like to know a few more things like that. Joe Meeker. What happened to Joe Meeker?”

“No idea. He ripped up a ligament in his knee his junior year. I don’t even know if he graduated. He could be anywhere right now.”

“He could be sitting in an observatory right now, watching this same sky.”

“Sure. But I’ll bet he’s not as cold as I am.”

Ruth glanced over at Gib, then started kicking into shore while still floating on her back. Once they were there, Gib picked up the blanket and wrapped it around them both.

Ruth said, “Beautiful.”

“What?”

“The tufas. The stars. The lake. The whole thing. If god exists, she’s a hell of an artist.”

"King and Country"

To be an American (unlike being English or French or whatever) is precisely to *imagine* a destiny rather than to inherit one; since we have always been, insofar as we are Americans at all, inhabitants of myth rather than history.

Leslie Fiedler

The next morning, they went for another swim. In the daylight, the tufas looked much less creepy. They were just rocks with their camouflage stripped away. Ruth was full of information about them, until Gib finally had to tell her to stop lecturing.

That morning, Gib got to the atlas before Ruth had a chance, and he saw that I-395 was close by. It looked like he had three choices. He could follow 395 south through California and then cut back east on I-15. Go south on 395, then north on 6 into Nevada to reach I-95. Or he could cut across on state road 120 which would cut into Route 6. The only problem was it looked like 120 wandered around just as much outside Yosemite as it did inside Yosemite. After fleeing Mount Conness at 25 MPH the night before, Gib had had a bellyful of wandering around. He wanted to get the Goat up on some federal tarmac and let the engine wail.

Ruth thought it would be more interesting to take 120, of course. But she didn't argue very hard, which was good, because Gib was reticent to explain a mountain scaring him stupid the night before. She seemed content to get in the GTO and sleep after their active night.

Gib drove down 395 for about twenty miles before he hit the traffic. He kept getting stuck behind a group of cars going 50. Or 45. In all the lanes. He had to struggle and wiggle his way through each group, weaving back and forth between lanes. Then he hit the back of a funeral party. Then a wedding party.

At that point, he was pissed. After eight miles of wedding party fumes, his temper blew. Which must mean, he realized, that Ruth has got me freaked out with this wedding talk. Even a wedding that only lasts a weekend.

With judicious honking and shouting and gesturing, he got past the wedding party and raced away from it at 95 miles an hour. By that time, though, he was near Bishop, California, and an Indian Reservation. Which meant the speed limit dropped, and Gib found his anger evolving into rage. Speed was the need, and some goddamn government highway engineers had designed a highway where he was trapped behind jerkoff after asshole after moron, trundling along at tortoise speeds. And now the town of Bishop spawned shitty pickup after pickup with speedometers stuck at 45 mph.

His muttering woke Ruth up, and she sleepily asked, "Where are we?"

"Bishop."

"California or Nevada?"

"California."

"Oh," Ruth said. As she drifted back to sleep, she murmured, "I guess we should have taken the scenic road. I'm sure we'll make better time once we get into Nevada."

There were very few things worse than sleeping passengers who criticized your ability to put the miles behind you.

He took the turn onto Route 6 going north, and the road opened up. His fury

faded into the zen of driving. He blew past the state line, passing Boundary Peak, in a quarter the time it had taken him to drive from Mono Lake to Bishop.

After about twenty miles, he grabbed for a random tape from the backseat. Without looking, he shoved it into the tape deck. Once he heard it, he instantly turned it up.

Once Ruth heard it, she instantly woke up.

“What in the hell are you doing with a Rush tape?”

“Beats me. I don’t think I’ve listened to this for years. Every guy I knew who started college listening to Rush ended up listening to Frank Fucking Sinatra.”

“Can we turn this down?” Ruth asked.

“No. I’m finally going a decent speed. I want good driving music.”

“Good? *You’re listening to Rush!*”

Gib did his best to imitate a Sunday Speedway announcer. “You wanted to learn more about me, baby. Welcome to the abyss-iss-iss-iss.”

Ruth tried to ignore the tape and fall back asleep. Gib turned it up some more and decided to see how well-tuned he’d kept the engine. He cheered when he hit 110.

With a snarl, Ruth turned the volume down.

“What are you doing?” she demanded.

“Speeding.” He turned the volume back up.

“Very fucking funny. Do you know how much gas this cranks into the air?”

Gib didn’t say anything for a second. “Don’t start in on the Goat.”

“Cars are the single most destructive thing for the atmosphere.”

“Sometimes there’s beauty in destruction.”

“What?”

“Take yesterday. It’s shame LA had to grab water from Northern California, but if they hadn’t, those tufas would still be hidden, wouldn’t they? And you loved that sunset yesterday, didn’t you?”

“The most beautiful sunset I’ve ever seen was in Gary, Indiana. It was the most amazing fire of purple and orange. You know why? All the crap spewed into the air from the steel mills.”

“That’s your story? Sunsets in exchange for emphysema?”

“I guess that’s it.”

Ruth snorted.

“All I’m saying is, I love this car. We don’t have to listen to Rush, though.” Gib turned the volume down and drove for a while.

“You know,” Ruth said after a while, “this music is kind of hypnotizing, once you get used to the voice.”

“Sure.”

She turned the volume back up, just tiny bit. “So, what crawled up your ass and started decomposing back there?”

Gib smirked, tilted his head at her, and said, “Would you like to get married for the weekend?”

“Oh,” Ruth said. “That.”

Soon, it was time for lunch. “Grease! We need grease!” Ruth decided as they saw a diner in the distance.

The diner was named “Phil’s”, and looked constructed out of sand bricks, dried grease for mortar. Ruth declared it perfect.

Before they walked in, Gib asked, “Are we going to keep fighting? Because we can get the food to go.”

“I’m perfectly happy,” Ruth said. “I’ll prove it!”

There were a couple of empty booths, but Ruth led them to two empty seats at the counter. The plump, red-haired waitress wandered over and pulled a pencil out of her curly hair. She had a name patch that said “Harriet” on her light-blue blouse.

“What can I get you?” she asked cheerfully.

“I want a big greasy double cheeseburger with a strawberry shake,” Ruth said. “And fries!”

“Sure, honey.” She took Gib’s order for a grilled cheese sandwich, and yelled back into the kitchen.

“Watch me spread the love,” Ruth whispered to Gib.

When Harriet turned back to Ruth and Gib, she saw Ruth looking excitedly around at every part of the diner. Harriet looked amused as she crossed her big arms.

“Whatcha looking at, honey?”

“This place is great!” Ruth pointed at a wall covered with old and new license plates from various states. “How old are those license plates?”

“Well, the original Phil – that’s the current Phil’s granddaddy – put the first plate up back in the 20s, after he got his first Model T. Since then, we get people coming through here from out of town, we ask some of them to send their plates, and sometimes they do.” The waitress looked them up and down. “You two look like you’re from out of town yourselves. What kind of plates do you have?”

“California,” Ruth said.

“We got a ton of those already.”

Then Ruth noticed the polaroids on the wall near the cash register, and she asked about them. Harriet brought them both over to look at pictures of celebrities and visitors who had stopped at Phil’s for a burger or a cup of coffee. The only person Gib recognized was an extremely bleary-eyed Hunter Thompson, who had a cup of take-out coffee in one hand and his other hand hidden in a large jacket pocket that bulged suspiciously. Harriet, a big smile on her face, had her arm around Thompson. The other celebrities were primarily Vegas “superstars”, according to Harriet.

Back in their seats, Ruth and Harriet made small talk while they waited for their food. Gib kept his mouth shut and listened to various stories about the perfidy of the male gender, even when Ruth described his own failings, from dirty socks to falling asleep right after sex.

Ruth and Harriet would often look over at him and, in unison, say, “Hmmpf.”
Maybe he twitched a little.

Gib breathed a sigh of relief when the burgers were finally laid in front of them, and the conversation trickled off. Harriet went over to kick the jukebox into playing a few songs and to see to the customers in the booths. While she was gone, Ruth dug into the dripping mass of meat, cheese, and bread on her plate. The jukebox started playing Elvis, and Ruth suddenly stopped chewing, her mouth hanging open while her eyes gleamed. Gib nudged her shoulder curiously, but she shrugged him off.

When Harriet wandered back behind the counter, Ruth had already finished the burger and was picking at the fries while she sipped her shake. Harriet observed that Gib was only half done with his food and shook her head in disappointment.

"So," Harriet said, putting the coffeepot back on the burner, "where are you two kids going? Vegas, I'll bet."

Ruth smiled winningly. "Well, that's just part of it. I'm not sure I'm supposed to talk about the rest."

Gib looked at Ruth with wide eyes, but Harriet missed his disbelieving look as she leaned forward, almost involuntarily. "It's some kind of secret, is it?"

"Yeah. Also, I don't know if anyone will believe the whole story." Ruth looked innocently frustrated. "But it's the truth!" she almost wailed.

Gib was amazed to see tears forming in the corners of Ruth's eyes.

Harriet considered. "Why don't you tell me, honey? I got a pretty good experience listening to bullshit – you can ask my first ex-husband. So if I believe it, other people probably will."

Ruth looked at Gib for reassurance. In a monotone, he said, "Why don't you tell her, hon? She looks really sympathetic." He even put his hand on her back in a way he hoped looked supportive.

Harriet barely noticed him, except to nod her head. He only had a bit part in this drama, so if he was badly cast, it wasn't going to bother her.

"Well, me and Tony," -- here, Ruth nodded at Gib -- "we're going down to Vegas to get married."

"Married!" Harriet whooped. "That's fine! I married my first two husbands in Las Vegas. The first one at the Flamingo, and the second one at that nice Debbie Reynolds's place."

"Really?" Ruth semi-squealed. "Is it wonderful? Is it everything people say?"

Harriet spent the next few minutes educating Ruth as to how perfect a place Vegas was to get hitched. Easy licenses, fun chapels, room service -- and slots!

Eventually the drama got back on track. Ruth said, "When I told my Momma, me and Tony were getting married, she forbid it. 'Tonya, I absolutely *forbid* it', is what she said."

Harriet clucked. "Honey, your Momma just wants what's best for you."

"That's what I thought! But Tony's got a good job. He works on cars!"

Harriet clicked her teeth and looked at Gib with grudging respect. "Mechanic, huh?"

"But when I argued with her, Momma told me why I couldn't get married. It was legal stuff about my Daddy. Momma finally told me who he was."

Ruth leaned over the counter, and Harriet bent down to meet her. Ruth looked around, then nodded her head toward the jukebox, from which Elvis was currently stating he had a hunka-hunka burning love (a flammable piece, a slice, a chunk). He hankered for a hunk of love, he did.

Harriet gasped and stepped back from the counter, her hand grasping at her heart. She looked closely at Ruth, studying her features.

"You mean..." Harriet trailed off.

Ruth said, with the widest, most guileless eyes, "Ma'am, you must know that the

devil sometimes got into the King. I don't want to speak ill of my Daddy, but it seems he strayed from his marriage once or two times. Once with my Momma."

"I surely know that. A beautiful man like him, how could he resist all the temptations people put in front of him?" Harriet said. Then she blanched. "I don't mean no disrespect to your Momma."

"That's all right," Ruth said. "Momma didn't want me to marry Tony because of some kind of legal paternity thing."

"Her Mommas shouldn't stand in the way," Gib chipped in, pretty sure Ruth needed a second to keep her story straight. "It just ain't right."

Harriet looked at him sympathy and patted his hand. "Of course it isn't, honey. But that's the way love is sometimes. A crooked path and no one's got a map to what's right or true."

"And that's the worst thing, ma'am," Ruth continued. "I know my Momma believes what she told me, but I don't know if I do. I don't think I look too much like the King, do I?"

From his own experience as an accomplished bullshit artist, Gib was impressed at Ruth's ability to let Harriet take over the tale.

"Are you crazy? You're the spitting likeness!" Harriet said. "Phil! *Phil!*"

The cook stuck his head out the opening to the kitchen.

"What's that, Harriet?" he asked.

"Don't this little girl here look like The King?"

"Like who?"

"Like E? Like Elvis!" Harriet said, impatiently. Then she waved her hand in the air, as if to grab some of the music that was playing and throw it at the cook.

The cook looked at Ruth dully for a minute, then shrugged his shoulders. "Sure. I guess."

Phil exchanged a "these women are nuts" look with Gib, then vanished back into the kitchen. Harriet didn't notice, as she stormed out from behind the counter and pulled friends and customers up to their feet to look at The King's Secret Love Child.

Quickly, Ruth was posing for pictures that Harriet took with her Polaroid. Gib volunteered to take a group shot of the whole diner population, as they circled around Ruth in one huge group pose. Everyone was smiling and laughing.

As they were getting ready to leave, Gib pulled out his wallet to pay, and Harriet waved him off.

Ruth said, "Ma'am, I appreciate it, but I know my Daddy would pay all his bills. Whoever my Daddy is."

Harriet argued, but Gib ended up paying. He also left a big tip at Ruth's urging.

When they got back in the car and pulled out of the parking lot, Gib turned to Ruth and said, "Tony and Tonya?"

"It was improv."

"Oh."

Gib pulled out onto the highway, then asked, "What the *hell* was that all about?"

Ruth leaned back in the passenger seat. "We're on vacation, baby. Did you see what a good time everyone was having? And at least you weren't thinking about getting married for a while. Don't you feel better?"

“Don’t you want to get away from yourself sometimes? To be a different person? Someone better, or nicer, or hell, just someone *simpler*?”
Gib just drove.

"Titans in the Sand"

Someone once asked me why women don't gamble as much as men do, and I gave the common-sensical reply that we don't have as much money. That was a true but incomplete answer. In fact, women's total instinct for gambling is satisfied by marriage.

Gloria Steinem.

They arrived in Vegas a few hours later. Stopping in North Las Vegas, they pulled into the parking lot of an ice cream stand where Ruth spotted a pay phone. While Gib was getting two cones, Ruth arranged for a room at Caesar's Palace. When they got to Caesar's, Gib gave the car to valet parking, grabbed their two backpacks out of the trunk, and followed Ruth into the lobby, where he was amazed and annoyed to see a long line of people waiting to check in.

"It's *Wednesday*," Gib said, amazed.

Ruth shrugged. "It's Vegas. We were lucky to get a room."

As Ruth was about to join one of the long check-in lines, Gib had a thought and drifted away to find a pay phone. When he came back, he stoically refused to answer Ruth's questions about who his call. After a few minutes, a woman walked out from behind the check-in counter and called out, "Is there a Gibson Edwards here, please?"

Gib waved, and the woman motioned for him to come to a separate check-in station reserved for VIPs. Everyone in the reg'lar folks lines stared at Gib and Ruth with naked hostility and bitter envy, which suited Gib just fine.

The woman at the VIP counter had them registered in their rooms in under a minute, handed them their card keys, and asked if they wanted their bags taken up to their rooms. Gib shook his head, hefted both bags, and thanked the woman.

In their room, Gib threw the backpacks on one double bed and laid down on the other.

"So how did we earn the VIP treatment?" Ruth asked.

"I called Sidney. Frank Marion told me Sidney's blown through bushels of money at most of the finer casinos in Vegas."

"Well, thank you, Sidney!" Ruth said, jumping on the bed, her feet straddling Gib. "Let's hit the streets."

For the next few hours, they wandered down one side of the South Strip and up another, in the process seeing Vegas versions of Rome, Camelot, Egypt, and – oddly – an older Las Vegas. On one of the garden paths at the Flamingo Hotel, Gib found a historic marker for Bugsy Siegel.

"Pretty daring for a Hilton Hotel," Ruth said.

Then they spent time:

Checking out the rest of the casinos and hotels on the Strip; Losing about a hundred bucks on blackjack; Taking a cab to Fremont Street to see the neon there; Winning about eighty bucks at the craps table; Fending off aggressive suggestions for strip clubs while cabbing back to the Strip; *Experiencing an interactive ride* (which, after they walked out of the place, Ruth summed up by grabbing Gib by his shoulders, shaking him back and forth and shouting in his face, "Look! It's an *interactive ride!*"); Witnessing hookers being tossed out of a mini-mall parking lot; Watching with pleasure a live fake

pirate show as well as a live fake exploding volcano; Listening to a neo-swing band maul Louis Prima's "Jump Jive and Wail" until it cried Uncle and agreed to pretend to be the Blues Brothers' version of Big Joe Turner's "Flip Flop and Fly"; Settling down for a big prime rib (Gib) and a huge fresh lobster (Ruth); Losing fifty bucks playing more blackjack; Scoring tickets for a Vegas revue, complete with showgirls; Winning thirty dollars in quarters at a slot machine while killing time waiting for the revue to start; Realizing neither of them wanted to carry thirty dollars in quarters and so feeding every single quarter back into the machine; laughing and enjoying the revue – especially the costumes (said costumes being the highlight of the show, since the show itself seemed to be about large disasters from history, and the costumes were nothing if not the Hindenburg-ian fashion); And finally watching white tigers prowl around a styrofoam-looking landscape.

As the tigers stared back at them and the other tourists going past on the walkway, Gib and Ruth compared notes and realized they were bored.

Less than twelve hours in Sin City, and they were already bored.

"Well," Gib said as Ruth announced her ennui in a surprised tone, "how much do you like gambling?"

"Not very much," Ruth admitted. "It feels like math class with money."

"Yeah. Me, I started to get a little bored about the time we had to watch that idiot magician between the fall of Babylon and the sinking of the Titanic."

"But it's Vegas! How can we be *bored*?"

Gib shrugged. "I don't like being the guy who gets clipped in the clip joint. And that's 99 percent of what Vegas is about. Separating the suckers from their coin. You know why I don't like gambling?"

"Math is hard," Ruth said in her best squeaky barbie voice.

"Because even if you put down a hundred bucks and win the bet, what have you got? Just more money. I mean, who cares? I don't get that thrilled about money."

"I feel the same way, I guess. But I knew Vegas would be like this before we got here."

"Knowing isn't the same as experiencing. Look, at The Space, you're the heart and soul. You know everything about everything and everyone; you know all the secrets and the tricks and the sleight of hand. Here, you're the audience. You just don't like not being in charge."

Ruth colored. "Fuck that!" she said heatedly. "I can be as good an audience as anyone."

Gib shrugged, condescension masquerading as agreement –effectively rediscovering two thousand years of French civilization in a gesture.

Ruth grabbed Gib's hand. "I *refuse* to be bored in Vegas. If gambling won't do the trick, what else has this place got?"

"Um, desert scenery?"

"That's right! Sex!"

Visions of Ruth asking for directions to the Mustang Ranch trudged horribly through Gib's head. So when they got into a cab and Ruth asked the cabbie to recommend a strip club, he actually felt relieved.

He paid the cover for both he and Ruth as they walked into the Paradise Cabaret. He had lied to Ruth in the cab when she had asked if he'd ever been to a strip club before.

Now, as he walked into his first one, he felt on edge. What do you do in a strip joint with your girlfriend?

The club was lit blood red and velvety. Basically, it looked like the Marquis De Sade's rumpus room. There was one long stage dominating the large room, with chairs all around it. Ringing the stage were semi-circular booths with small round tables.

They spotted an empty booth and sat down. Ruth started pointing out various women and asking Gib what he thought of them. They ordered a couple of drinks from one of the waitresses. After she left, Ruth stood up.

"Where are you going?" Gib asked nervously.

"I have to go to the bathroom."

"You went in the casino before we got here."

"No, I mean I *have* to see the bathroom in a place like this. I wish I'd brought a tape recorder."

Ruth walked away, and Gib tried to figure out the best way to remain unnoticed. He leaned forward on the table and studied the drink specials at length.

The question was, how did you remain cool at a strip club? Gib looked around and checked off the various facial expressions that seemed to be his only choices. Slack-faced lust was the most popular. Other choices were:

"Too Cool for Titties"

A thin grin lingering under hooded eyes. Besides their expressions, the one uniting characteristic of these guys was t-shirts under suit jackets. Most of them affected a casual lean, way back in their chairs, one hand stroking a chin speculatively, while the other occasionally reached out to stroke a bare thigh or to offer some kind of denomination.

"On Leave from the Seminary"

Rigid posture, hands clenched on a table top or in their laps, while the face was static except for the flickering of the eyes. When a dancer would offer a dance, denial was conveyed with a short, sharp shake of the head. Whenever companions would browbeat the seminarian into a dance, he would grip the sides of his chair like vice grips grabbing a drain pipe as the dancer polished his lap to no avail.

"Laughing Through the Lust"

This guy had a drink because it was required, watched the dancers because it was the purpose, and every once in a while let out a pleased whoop, surprised to find something entertaining going on.

"Dumbstruck Drunk"

They peered through their drunken haze and would occasionally smile at a stretch of bare flesh or a pleasant smell.

"Married Khakis" / "Too Old for the Frat House"

Basically, this was the only way to tell the difference between married and single guys in khaki shorts. The married khakis were afraid that if they grabbed, groped or giggled too much, word would get back to the little women in Iowa, Indiana or Idaho.

The single khakis had no such worry. Half of them seemed more anxious to get naked themselves than have the dancers do it. All around the club, drunk khakis were howling, tying their t-shirts around their heads and shrieking for the DJ to play "Cherry Pie" just *one more time*.

Next to Gib's table, a group of five guys laughed as two dancers grinded the sixth guy in the group like a sharpener grinds a pencil. The redhaired guy who was the object of attention was obviously a Married Khaki, but he did his best to present himself like a Too Cool for Titties.

After the song was over, one of the dancers grabbed one of the group and led him off to a back room, while the others turned their attention elsewhere. The one dancer left on top of the redhead sat on his lap and Gib heard her say, "You know, if you take me into the VIP Room, I can make you come."

The redhead gave the dancer a cynical look, and said, "Ma'am, that's a nice offer, but there are two things I have promised never to do in a strip club. Never have lunch, and never come."

The dancer looked puzzled. She was young and overly thin, and her heavy black eyeshadow gave her face a particularly dim look. "But I can do it really fast."

The redhead laughed. "*Really fast?* Wow! Great!" He continued to laugh until the dancer, still giving him a puzzled look, excused herself and looked for another patron.

Thankfully, that was when Ruth came back. "So, point out the ones you got a dance from," she said.

"What? None of them."

Ruth sighed. "Gib, come on. You're in a strip club. You have to get some dances."

"Why?" Gib asked. "Don't you think this place is just a little bit creepy? And don't you think it would be creepy for you to be sitting there while some naked chick is sitting on my lap?"

Ruth considered it. "I don't know. Why don't we find out?"

She waved at a dancer who happened to be looking at them.

"Hi," Ruth said to the dancer. "I'm Sandy. My boyfriend here doesn't talk, but he'd like a dance."

Gib looked over. Ruth smiled and put one finger over his lips. "It's OK, Duncan. I'll handle everything. You just sit back and relax."

The dancer, who was dressed in a neon pink bikini with the requisite four inch lucite heels, introduced herself as Barbie. Ruth asked her for the name again, looking the dancer up and down. Barbie had jutting fingernails painted a pink to match her bikini. Her blonde hair – an obvious wig – fell down to the middle of her shoulders, the bangs covering her entire forehead down to just above her (carefully plucked) eyebrows. Barbie's false eyelashes were so long and so heavily overlaid with black that her eyes were almost completely shrouded, though they appeared to be either a dark blue or a dark brown. The lights made it hard to tell. Even with the bikini top camouflage, her breasts were clearly the result of NASA technology, levitating out from her ribcage like two small soccer balls.

Ruth congratulated Barbie on an excellent choice of names, and discovered that the scent was a cheap knock-off of Poison. The two women made small talk while Barbie

sat on Gib's lap until the current song ended, at which point Barbie stood up, leaned her forearms on Gib's shoulders, stared him in the eyes, and asked, "You ready, honey?" Gib nodded, his face as blank as he could make it. *Too Cool for Titties*, he told himself. Barbie unhooked her bikini top and showed her bizarrely large nipples (so large that Gib made a note to ask Ruth if there were such a thing as nipple enhancement surgery).

For the next four minutes or so, Barbie, with half-closed eyes, shook her ass in Gib's face, ground it across his lap, brushed her tits across his face, overwhelmed his nose with the smell of cheap perfume, and generally simulated sex in a way that Gib found vaguely ridiculous. He was almost embarrassed to realize the dance actually half-aroused him. Not hard enough to make him think he was actually turned on, but hard enough to show he was enjoying himself.

After the dance, Ruth handed Barbie a twenty, and thanked her. When Barbie asked if Gib would like another dance, Ruth took one look at Gib's blushing face and politely sent Barbie packing.

"What was wrong with Barbie?" Ruth asked. "She did all the things you guys like."

Gib sputtered before he realized Ruth was kidding.

"God, she was terrible, wasn't she?" Ruth asked. "*Perfectly* terrible! Fake tits, fake hair, fake height, fake eyelashes, fake fingernails, and topping it all off, the totally fake name Barbie. How could you be any happier than being able to say you got a bad lap dance from Barbie, the Bionic Stripper?"

Gib thought about it. "Well, when you put it that way, it is pretty cool."

At that point, a bodybuilder dressed in a tuxedo politely stepped up to their table and asked, "Pardon me, but we have a large party of VIPs coming in. Would you mind if I relocated you to a smaller table in back so we can use this one?"

Ruth looked annoyed.

The bodybuilder quickly said, "I can offer you some free drink tickets."

"Oh, in that case," Ruth said. The bodybuilder led Ruth and Gib to a table in the back room.

Ruth started questioning Gib about the various dancers as they walked past.

How about that one? No.

What about the blonde? No.

The tall one? No.

The skinny one over there? No.

What about the one on stage? No.

How about the one in the green spandex? No.

The evening gown? No.

Finally, Ruth said, "Gib, you're not gay, are you?"

Annoyed, Gib said, "Look, I just don't want to pay for it."

"It? What it?"

"A woman. Sex. Simulated sex. It doesn't really turn me on, and I feel like a sucker."

"But you like porn, don't you?"

"No, not really."

Ruth waited.

“OK, yes,” Gib said. “I can’t explain it, but porn is different.”

The both of them sat in silence for awhile, drinking their drinks and idly watching the flesh game.

“Well, hell,” Ruth finally said. “At least we’re not bored.”

A dishwasher blonde just coming out of the VIP room heard Ruth, stopped still. Leaning over the table, she asked, “Did I just hear you say you’re bored?”

“Well, we’re working on it,” Ruth said.

Scooching Gib over so she could sit down, the dancer said, “It’s against the law to be bored in Vegas. What can I do to help?”

“I don’t know,” Ruth said. “He’s the one that’s bored.”

The dancer glanced at Gib, then looked back at Ruth, drooped her eyelids and said in a deep voice that would have been seductive, but for the Elmer Fudd accent: “I bet you I can waise his intewest .”

Ruth laughed, then reached over to shake the dancer’s hand. “Hi, I’m Ruth. Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Joanie. Is this your boyfriend?”

While Ruth and Joanie compared notes, Gib took a long, if surreptitious, look at the dancer. Without the heels, Gib thought she was probably a bit short, but she was built strongly for her size. Where Ruth was lean and muscular, Joanie had her muscles hidden away. The word voluptuous came to mind. Her hair looked natural enough, falling below her shoulders, and she was only wearing just a touch of makeup on her eyelids. And with her short nose, and normal-looking eyebrows, she gave off a girl-next-door impression, all except for the slinky black gown she had on. The girl next door at her prom.

Suddenly, Gib realized both two women were looking at him.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t paying attention.”

They burst out laughing.

“We’re telling jokes,” Joanie said. “What did the one lesbian frog say to the other one?”

“I don’t know.”

“Hey, we really *do* taste like chicken!”

A short time later, Gib found himself getting another lap dance. And while Joanie wasn’t a Bionic Stripper, she had a skill Barbie would never approach. Gib was careful not to paw at the dancer, but even so, at the end of the dance, he felt like he’d been immersed in her. When she rested her arms on his shoulders for balance, her breasts would come as close to his face as he could imagine without actually touching, and Gib could smell the faintest scent of flowers and sweat. Then when she would twist away, her nipples grazing the tip of his nose. When she turned around again, he could tell by her faint grin that the touch had been deliberate. It wasn’t sensuality so much as comedy, a sense of both of them, lap dancer and lap, being in on the joke.

Somehow, Gib didn’t feel like a sucker.

When it was over, Joanie calmly slipped back into her dress, put the money Ruth handed her into her purse, and sipped at the chilled tequila that Ruth had ordered for her.

“Still bored?” Joanie asked Gib. He shook his head.

Gib got up to go to the bathroom. As he walked through the club, he realized that the three rounds of Jack Daniels with a beer chaser, had delivered him to the outer borders

of groggy.

He took a long, slow time to piss, trying to clear his head. While he was there, two khakis came in and took the two free urinals, laughing loudly. One of the khakis was actually wearing a pair of jeans, and his friend said to him, "I been meaning to ask, why the hell are you wearing pants?"

"What do you mean?"

"Dude, it's Vegas, not fucking Phoenix. The strippers here get really physical. If you're wearing shorts and boxers, they can tickle your balls, man."

Gib looked down at his black t-shirt and his faded green army pants cutoffs. He looked like one paycheck away from homeless, but maybe wearing shorts made him look like an experienced club goer.

He shook the last drops of piss onto the porcelain and zipped up. The attendant at the sinks asked him if he wanted a mint, or a pack of cigarettes, or anything else from the tray in front of him. Gib thought about it, decided that if he was going to be debauched, he might as well get a pack of Marlboros to go along with it. He took the cigarettes and the matches out of the bathroom to light up.

Gib turned around to head back to Ruth and Joanie. As he did, he bumped into a short, older man, spilling the man's drink. Gib murmured an apology for bumping the man, and handed him a drink ticket to replace the spilled drink. The man looked at the ticket in amusement, which was when Gib realized who he had just handed a drink ticket.

Gib gaped at the wavy, greased hair, streaked with grey, the tanned skin of the short man's face that looked as if it had happily earned every wrinkle, the black shirt with the loosened collar, and all Gib could think was *I always thought he was a lot taller*. But then again, whenever Gib had read the man's magazine, he had always paid more attention to the women in the centerfold.

Gib stared while the magazine publisher looked around without a sign of apprehension of self-consciousness. In fact, the publisher had a look of total confidence that something interesting was about to happen to him. When one of the thick men arrived and gave Gib a baleful look before he hustled his charge away, the aging Playboy seemed to accept this pedestrian payoff to his expectation with cheerful aplomb – just one more timewaste on the road to fascination.

When Gib got back to his table and told the two women about who he'd seen, they asked him what the publisher had looked like.

"Like a cheery little porn gnome," Gib said.

A few minutes later, Gib was sitting at a corner booth in the VIP Room, his wallet lighter by two hundred dollars. This appeared to guarantee him three dances – "They let a lot more go on here," Joanie avowed – and a hundred dollars worth of drinks – which was about three rounds, Gib realized, for all three of them.

Joanie was clearly feeling the effects of the tequila, so she excused herself to go to the bathroom and make some song requests for the VIP room.

"What the hell is going on?" Gib asked Ruth. "What are we doing?"

"I wanted to see everything," Ruth answered. "Including how VIPs get treated."

Interestingly, Ruth wasn't the only woman in the large room. Two booths away, a skinny couple dressed all in black spoke in French to each other while a large-breasted woman danced for the man. Both of the French speakers appeared to be aroused, but

trying to be sophisticated about it.

"I haven't been making faces that dumb, have I?" Gib asked Ruth.

Ruth considered the question for so long, Gib finally said, "Never mind, I don't want to know."

Gib ended up shelling another two hundred over the next few hours. While he moved on to coffee, Ruth joined Joanie in drinking tequila. Even so, the evening took on that random diassociative quality that any really good night out takes on, when the evening jumps around, seems thick with communication, changes tense.

"Joanie, are there such things as nipple implants?"

"God damn, I hated *Showgirls*. First of all, cocktail waitresses make good money. They don't live in *trailers*."

While giving Joanie a backrub, Gib notices she has a mole just to the left of her spine right below her neck. Even after five lap dances (Ruth takes one just out of curiosity, and she and Joanie collapse laughing after it's over), he knows that more than breasts or lips or buttocks, he will remember the small brown mole. It will be his secret, something that will cement the experience in his memory.

Joanie hums along with the music during one dance to an Aerosmith song.

"I thought you were supposed to make fake orgasm moans."

"Oh, I never fake moans." Joanie pauses and thinks about it. "Well, *sometimes*."

All three of them crack up.

Gib looks down as Joanie has her head lowered between his legs and is rubbing her skull into his groin. Her hand sneaks up the left leg of his shorts and tickles his testicles. Gib remembers the khaki talk in the bathroom and breaks into a wide smile. *It's not Phoenix, dude.*

During one dance Gib looks over at Ruth and finds her resting her head on her hand, studying him up close. When he looks at her, she closes her eyes and kisses him. For Gib, it is the most unbelievably erotic moment of the entire evening. It takes them a long while to finish kissing, and when Gib looks back at Joanie sitting on his lap, he is expecting to see a smirk, and is surprised to see a happy smile.

Joanie: "All topless dancers I've ever met are crazy."

Joanie: "Including me."

Ruth: "So if all topless dancers are crazy, what kind of crazy are you?"

Pause.

Joanie: "You don't want to know. I'll maybe tell you later."

Ruth is in the bathroom, and Joanie is drinking her tequila.

"I hate to say this, but you're really a nice guy."

"Normally, I'd take that as an insult. But not here."

Joanie smiles.

“But what makes for a nice guy in a strip club?”

Joanie thinks about it. “You came in here with no expectations. Once you relaxed, anyway.”

“I’m always tense before I get on a roller coaster. But once the coaster’s going, I don’t demand to go on my own special track.”

“Yeah, but at this place, there’s a lot of different tracks.”

Ruth: “You know what I like about Joanie? She’s *real*.”

Joanie: “No, I’m not!”

“What time is it?” Gib asks, always the wrong question to ask when you’re having a good time.

“4:30,” Joanie says. “Actually, I was going to leave at 5.”

Ruth and Gib look at each other.

“Wow,” Gib says.

“Yeah. *Much* better than Siegfried and Roy.”

“All right, we should settle up,” he says.

“The tab’s all covered. And you gave all your money to Joanie,” Ruth says.

Gib raises his eyebrows. “All of it? No, I don’t think so. I should end tonight flat broke on the Vegas Strip.” Gib pulls out his pockets and empties a five, three ones onto the table onto the table. Ruth gives him a warning look, but Joanie laughs and grabs up the bills. But even she shakes her head when Gib pulls all his change out and dumps it on the table.

“Hell, I don’t want to carry change.” Then she reconsiders. “Well, I can always use the quarters for laundry.”

Tense Sense Restoration

Near the exit, Gib stood and waited for Ruth to get out of the bathroom. Joanie said to him, “Was that really all your cash?”

“Yup.”

“Can you get something out of the ATM?”

“Nope, already withdrew the limit today.”

“So you can’t even pay for a cab home?”

Gib thinks about it. “Nope. I thought I’d walk.”

“Walk? Where are you staying?”

“Caesar’s.”

“That’s miles from here! Just wait here, and I’ll give you a ride home.”

Joanie walked up the nearby stairs and left Gib to ponder. It was awfully kind of her to offer, but he thought it would kind of destroy the image. Flat busted in Vegas, hoofing it. And he wanted to see if there was a part of the clock that was even too late for the Strip.

So he took off walking. He figured Ruth would get the ride from Joanie. One of the guys at the front door asked him if he wanted a cab. Gib shook his head and asked the guy which direction was south.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m a little turned around, is all. Which way is Caesar’s?”

The guy pointed, then looked confused. “Are you walking?”

“Sure.” Gib gave a salute and turned south on the Strip.

The first thing he noticed was how far away all the lights seemed. He could see Circus Circus, Treasure Island, the Stardust, and a bit of the Caesar’s Palace sign, but they finally were a manageable size. Scenic strip malls advertised gourmet chocolate and check cashing. Mini-mall security guards in yellow jackets shooed hookers and their potential customers out of the parking lots. He studied sexual impotence clinics, bar after bar after bar, and then stopped at a donut shop where he tried to get a jelly donut and a large cup of coffee before he remembered his pockets were empty. He went back outside and lit up a cigarette to smoke while he walked. Soon, he found a rhythm that ate up the yards.

After about ten minutes, he hit the first big landmark, the Stratosphere, a neon palace with a tower attached. The building looked like a abandoned toy for Titan children, who forgot to turn off the lights in their toy when they left.

A picture formed in Gib’s mind of the ultimate Vegas casino, a mammoth project that would overwhelm the landscape, even dwarfing the nearby mountains. The lights from such a mammoth building would, on a clear night, be visible in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The hotel would be able to host the entire House of Representatives and the Senate in the pool area alone, with room for every player and coach in the NBA, and fifteen randomly selected baseball and football teams. It would have two huge towers, the shortest of which would be twice the size of the Sears Tower. The larger one would be used to launch satellites and shuttles.

The theme of the hotel would be reminiscent of Italy, or Greece, Or Ireland or Arabia, or some other damn place half-remembered from travel magazines and childhood stories. But where any of the source material was close to human size, for human needs, the Vegas descendant would be smooth where life was ragged, bright where the world was shadowy.

Dragging on his smoke, Gib realized how oddly safe he felt. The ravenous Vegas Beast had been fed enough cash during the day and was half-asleep, taking a couple of calm hours. Gib stopped, and smelled the desert air, reveling in how pleasant the fall night was.

As he got closer and closer to Caesar’s Palace (passing the “Check Casher to the Stars” on his way), he noticed the street names for the first time and was amazed at how prosaic they were. In Vegas, it seemed if a street was named Church Street, all you had to do was look and there would be a cathedral waiting for your worship. And most casinos had their own streets. Sahara Avenue, Circus Circus Drive, Desert Inn Road.

Though the streets were relatively empty, the people who were out and about were a bit more intriguing than the khakis. Aside from the people just getting off shifts from the hotels, standing at bus stops, there were characters. Like the guy with a metal detector who Gib first saw covering the lawn at the Sahara. Later, the guy, having donned a surplus army jacket and a leather bomber helmet, sped past Gib on a beat down bicycle, his metal detector held out in front of him like a lance. Don Quixote de la Spare Change.

One of the wonderful things about walking along Las Vegas Boulevard is that he never had to search very far to find a bathroom. Gib happily got rid of some beer at the

Sahara, pissed away some more at the Desert Inn, and he took a crap at Harrah's.

When he finally arrived at Caesar's, dawn was struggling its way over the horizon, though from the middle of the strip, it was hard to tell. The act of walking into his own hotel made him realize how tired he was. At the front door of his room, he could hear laughter from inside. When he opened the door, Joanie was just handing a fresh bottle of tequila back to Ruth.

"Hey, walker! You ditched us!" Joanie called out. She and Ruth both fell out laughing.

"Hey, Gib! You know Kathryn, don't you?" Ruth yelled.

"Kathryn?" Gib asked.

"My real name is Kathryn," Joanie said, carefully enunciating her words, but even so, she slurred quite a bit. "My parents live in Vegas, so just to be careful, I use a stage name. It's no big deal. Joanie stands out because it's so normal. Especially surrounded Emerald, Ruby, Diamond, Sapphire, Topaz, Candi, Barbi, Cyndi, Mindy, Mandy, Mustang – hell, there was even one girl who changed her name to match every time she traded in her car, so she's been Chrysler, Dodge, Cadillac, and Cherokee."

"Come on, Gib, have a shot!" Ruth yelled.

"No, thanks. I'm really beat."

"Well, we girls have got some partying left to do, so either you have a drink or you go sleep in the bathroom."

With a blanket stuffed under him, and two pillows, the bathtub wasn't so bad. With the door closed, he only heard the women when the laughter got really loud. So he tried to relax in the tub and stared at the orange night light.

As his mind drifted away, he thought about fake names. He was a little disappointed to hear Joanie was a stage name. It didn't seem like the kind of name you could build some elaborate and mythical tale behind. Breathy voice: "Oh, no, mister, I'm dancing to pay for my degree in meteorology. You can call me Cirrus."

And of course, thinking about fake names got Gib to thinking about his own fake name. Like a rock star or a film star whose fake life was bigger than the real one, Gib was becoming a bigger success in his fake life than in his real one. Friends, a good job, a woman like Ruth who wanted to spend time with him. If you looked at it objectively, the only thing getting in the way of a perfect life was the FBI.

Luckily, before that conclusion could penetrate deep enough into his consciousness to really depress him, Gib fell asleep.

"Imperfect Permanence"

People are always blaming their circumstances for what they are. I don't believe in circumstances. The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and, if they can't find them, make them.

George Bernard Shaw

Gib woke up, tossed the sheets and pillows out of the tub, and turned on the shower. The instant spray of cold woke him up better than a pot of coffee. As the water got hot, he let it spray down onto his head, pleased at the lack of hangover.

When he emerged into the main room, a towel wrapped around his waist, it was clear Ruth couldn't say the same. As Gib pulled his backpack out of the closet and found a clean shirt, he saw Ruth only as a shapeless lump under her blankets. Only a few strands of blond hair poking out from under the covers gave any indication the lump was human.

Deciding that it wasn't safe to try to wake her up, Gib went downstairs to scare up some food. After scrambled eggs, a bagel, some sausage, and cup after cup of coffee, he picked up two muffins (one blueberry and one corn), two cups of coffee to go, and headed back up to the room. He set the muffins and the coffee down on the table between the two beds, taking the lids off the coffee and waving some of the steam toward the lump of Ruth. Then Gib stripped all the blankets and sheets off his bed, threw them in the corner, and stretched out to watch TV.

Flipping around, he finally found an old Walter Matthau movie, *Hopscotch*, about a disgruntled CIA agent. He vaguely remembered when the movie first came out on cable, in the early eighties. One night, he and Uncle Joseph had watched Matthau outwit the CIA while Gibson Senior had been meeting in his home office, browbeating a Midwestern Senator about a desired chunk of pork. During the movie, Uncle Joseph had analyzed the plausibility from the perspective of a lifelong member of the American security establishment. After it was over, Uncle Joseph had declared, "What a great piece of junk!"

"I thought you liked it."

"Loved it! Plot would never happen, though. In real life? That guy would have a bullet in his head in about a day. Still, that was fun. Got the characters just right, especially how the idiots are in charge."

"But aren't you in charge?"

Uncle Joseph looked over sharply, before he realized Gib was asking an honest question, not taking a cheap shot. "When everyone else is an idiot, it makes it easier for smart guys like me and your Dad to run things. *Actually* run things, not just make speeches about it."

Watching the movie on TV now, years later, Gib was amazed to see Walter Matthau playing not just the lead, but the *romantic* lead, with Glenda Jackson apparently lusting after Matthau's wrinkled face, with its hound dog eyes, jowls, and potato nose. Just another example of how weird the early 80s were, Gib thought. Or maybe all those polls were right when women claimed to value a sense of humor most.

Gib heard a stirring to his right, and looked over to see Ruth's bloodshot eyes staring at him just over the edge of the blanket.

"Mm mell mofffy," Ruth's muffled voice said through the covers.

“What?”

Ruth carefully peeled the blanket down the necessary amount. “I smell coffee.”

Gib pointed to the bedside table. He watched Ruth’s eyes slowly roll over to look at the by-now barely steaming cup of coffee. The they shifted, diamond cutter careful, to the two muffins, corn and blueberry, sitting next to the coffee. Her eyelids slowly closed.

Seconds passed.

Then Ruth exploded out of the morass of bedclothes and ran to the bathroom, moments before her stomach began to expel its unruly contents.

Gib listened for a bit before he went into the bathroom, ran some cool water over a washcloth and handed it to Ruth. He walked back out of the bathroom. After about ten minutes, he asked if she needed anything.

“Just go away,” Ruth gurgled.

Gib killed a few hours in the casinos, losing money.

When he got back, Ruth was gone, and, blessedly, the room had been cleaned. After playing with the TV for a while, Gib got some ice, stuck some of it in a fresh cup, and poured a couple fingers of leftover tequila after it. It wasn’t sipping whiskey, but it was that or water.

While Gib had been gambling, Ruth had gotten in touch with the Green Ragers and had left Gib a note. The Ragers were at a campground in Pomona, just off the 10. After looking at a map, Gib figured it would be about a four hour drive, depending on how fast he wanted to drive. Since the plan was to get into Disneyland the minute it opened at 9 AM, Garrity wanted to be in the parking lot around 8 AM. Calculating packing up time, breakfast, and the drive from the campground to the amusement park, Garrity thought Gib and Ruth should get to the campground around 6 AM. Which meant they should leave Vegas around 2 AM.

After planning the drive, Gib dozed off in the chair for an vague period of time until he heard Ruth come back. Without opening his eyes, he could tell she felt better. Her walk had its usual energy, and he could hear her vaguely humming to herself as she went into the bathroom. He dozed back off again.

“Open your eyes,” Ruth said, waking him. “I have something to show you.”

When Gib opened up, Ruth slid a piece of official-looking paper across the table at him. He only had to read “Clark County Marriage Bureau” to know what the paper was.

“So you got a marriage license, huh?”

“Well, it’s not official. Here’s my idea. Tonight, we go through the ceremony. I found an Elvis who’s a pastor at a chapel over near Fremont. Then we see how it takes. Being hitched, I mean. If we decide we like it, we can always fill out the paperwork later.”

“You really want to see how far I’ll take this, don’t you?”

Ruth smiled. “I *triple* dare you.”

In three hours, Ruth moved like a wedding-planning demon.

The Preacher

Pastor Elvis agreed to schedule the ceremony at midnight on the dot.

Guests of Honor

Ruth got a hold of Joanie, convincing her not only to be the Maid of Honor, but to bring along a Best Man for good measure.

Wardrobe

Ruth got the hotel staff to recommended a dress shop. It took Ruth fifteen minutes to emerge from said shop with a box under her arm, the contents of which she refused to let Gib see. Shoes took a bit more time, but a shop in North Las Vegas provided a pair of platform tennis shoes that made Ruth bounce around as if she were spring loaded.

It cost an extra twenty to convince the guy running the tuxedo rental place to let Gib drop the tux off at 2 AM.. But he walked out with monkey suit in hand, along with a pink and black polka dot bowtie-and-cummerbund combination.

Catering

Hand rolled cigars were found at a small store along the Strip with pictures of boxers and entertainers along the walls. In a Vons supermarket, Gib found two round white cakes of different sizes. Then, as directed, he went to the baking aisle and grabbed a can of white frosting. More importantly, he found a cheap "bride and groom" cake candle. It looked waxy and unpleasant, but it was also recognizably a bride and groom, so Gib snatched it up and brought it back to Ruth and the shopping cart. She had found four bottles of Moët champagne in the liquor section.

"All right, we're ready," Ruth decided. On their way out of the store, Gib remembered to get shoe polish and a couple of dish rags.

Back in the room, Ruth took over the bathroom while Gib climbed into his tux in the main room. As it turned out the cummerbund was too tight and the pants were too loose, but a shoelace extender fixed the first problem, and Gib decided he'd just have to live with second one.

He took off his clothes back off to put the wedding cake together, slathering on huge gobs of frosting to glue the two cakes into one two-layered whole. When he finally stopped, the cake looked a lot like Richard Dreyfus had sculpted it out of mashed potatoes. But with the Bride and Groom candle on top, at least the idea got across.

Then Gib polished his combat boots up to a decent gleam. After lacing the boots up, Gib put the shirt, tie and jacket back on, slicking down his hair with some melted ice. He looked at himself in the mirror. *Pretty slick*, he decided. *But who doesn't look good in a tux?*

When Ruth reappeared, Gib's jaw went slack. After a few seconds of staring, he felt drool starting to run over his bottom lip, so he pushed his mouth closed.

Ruth had applied some fake tan lotion, so her legs, face and arms were a light brown. She had done her blonde hair up in a twisted cruller spiral that would have made Marie Antoinette's hairdresser curse in bitter envy. Perched on the top of her platform tennis shoes, she equaled or surpassed Gib's six foot of height.

And the dress.

The only way to describe the dress was by where it ended. The neck ended just above the line of Ruth's breasts, showing off her cleavage to great effect. The sleeves ended just past the distinct muscles of her shoulders, calling attention to her biceps. The bottom of the dress ended just inches below the curve of her ass. And the white spandex material of the dress ended just millimeters past the surface of Ruth's skin.

Ruth looked as if she were wearing a solid sheath of water that had been magically dyed to look like a dress. Gib could see the curve of Ruth's belly button (an outie), count the muscles of her abdomen, and gape at where her pectoral muscles flowed down from her arms and became the swell of her breasts.

The white fishnet stockings weren't half-bad, either.

"I guess," Ruth said, as Gib continued to stare silently, "I don't have to ask how I look."

"No. But I'll tell you anyway. You look mythical. I didn't think actual human beings ever looked that good outside of a movie screen or a magazine."

"That's good, then," Ruth said. She looked Gib over. "You look okay, too."

"Standing next to you, I could have the crown jewels of England and the Hope Diamond on my head and still look like a bucket of shit."

For a few minutes, they just stood around and looked at each other.

Eventually, Ruth said, "I hate to ruin all this, but it's 10:30 already. We've got to take all these clothes off and do one last thing before the wedding."

"Do what?"

"I'm not about to consummate this marriage in the back of your damn car. SO we're taking care of it now."

In seconds, Gib discovered the ragged lines where Ruth hadn't bothered to apply the fake tan.

The wedding went off without a hitch. Joanie/Kathryn, the Maid of Honor, came in black leather, while the Larry, the Best Man was a glorious sight, in between sets where he performed as Joan Crawford.

They all had cake and talked while Pastor Elvis got ready. The smell of cheap bourbon wafting off Pastor E's black wig and sparkling clothes notwithstanding, he performed the ceremony without a hitch. At the stroke of midnight, he pronounced them man and wife. While bride kissing was happening, Pastor E pulled out a guitar and sang "I Can't Help Falling in Love with You", followed by "All Shook Up". Larry the Best Man knew the songs well enough to sing harmonies, which pleased Pastor E so much he played "Burning Love" (which wasn't part of the standard fee).

Joanie/Kathryn kept crying, and saying, "This is just *beautiful*."

Ruth handed out cake as Gib and Larry popped the bottles of champagne, at which point Gib realized they'd forgotten to buy glasses. So they just handed the bottles around instead. Pastor Elvis complimented on their choice of bubbly.

At 12:30, Ruth and Gib ran out to the car, with Pastor Elvis, Joanie and Larry throwing rice after them. Gib started up the car, but then heard Joanie shout.

"Can you give me and Larry rides?" she asked.

After driving the Maid of Honor and the Best Man to their jobs, Gib and Ruth

went back to the hotel. They had already checked out, but they had to pick up their bags. As they walked through the lobby, members of the hotel staff clapped and cheered.

“You’re making quite an impression,” Gib said to Ruth, who just smiled.

Gib changed back into a black t-shirt and army shorts in the bathroom, but Ruth stayed dressed in the spandex. “I want to savor the moment a while longer,” she said.

At the tux shop, the clerk was sleepy and prepared to be surly, but he took one look at Ruth, and all thoughts vanished from his head long enough for Gib to get his deposit back.

By quarter to two, Gib was pulling onto I-15 heading toward Los Angeles. It was a cool night, but he kept the top down while Ruth drank champagne out of the bottle and looked up at the stars.

For a long time, Ruth made no sound except for an occasional contented sigh. But when they crossed the state line into California, she turned to Gib and said, “Thank you. Best wedding I ever had.”