

Diary of the Coolville Killer:
Reflections on the Bush Years, Rendered in Fictional Prose

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation consists of an allegorical novel, written in the form of a diary, set mostly in southeastern Ohio. The critical introduction explores the effect of temporal perspective on first-person interpolated stories such as diaries and epistolary narratives. Based on the work of narratologists such as Gerard Genette and Gerald Prince, the introduction discusses the need for thoughtful consideration of temporal position and distance in the composition of first-person interpolated narratives.

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I Need to Know When I Am Before I Tell You What I Did:

Temporal Perspective in First-Person Narratives

One aim of realistic fiction is to create the illusion that the text represents a portrayal of life as it actually happened. One of my goals when writing my novel *Diary of the Coolville Killer* was to produce just such a realistic text. This wasn't as easy as I imagined it would be. I was eventually able to trace my difficulties to the dual issues of temporal position and temporal distance—the position in time of my first-person narrator. To solve these problems, I first had to determine the different temporal positions that a writer has at his disposal when writing a first-person narrative. I soon realized that, to comprehend temporal position fully, I needed to look at the subject with narrative occasion in mind; this allowed me to understand the source of scholarly disagreement regarding temporal position in first-person narratives, most notably with respect to simultaneity. I discovered then that temporal position and temporal distance affected other aspects of narrative such as voice, structure, intellectual distance and physical distance. In short, I found that a writer's choice of temporal position and temporal distance influenced nearly all aspects of a first-person narrative; indeed, they are crucial threads through which the entire web of fiction is interwoven in a first-person piece.

In this essay, I will explore the issue of temporal perspective in first-person narratives. I will, first, briefly explain how I came to be interested in the subject before clarifying what writers mean when they discuss temporal distance and temporal position. Then I will examine how other scholars have contended with the topic and how their work has helped me to grasp more thoroughly the subject and to integrate that knowledge

into my own writing and into my teaching. I will then look at four specific issues that seem to be particularly problematic with regard to temporal position and temporal distance—voice, structure, intellectual distance and physical distance—and how these are either dependent upon or affected by an author’s choice of temporal position and distance. Essentially, I hope to make clear the need for thoughtful consideration of temporal position and distance when writing a first-person narrative.

Temporal Position and Temporal Distance

My students’ first-person stories were structurally sound—they had character, setting and conflict, and their stories progressed well from conflict to crisis to resolution—but, for reasons I couldn’t at first ascertain, their fiction wasn’t quite ringing true. Eventually it occurred to me that the writers weren’t fully cognizant of the temporal position of their narrators or of the temporal distance between their narrators and the stories their narrators were telling. It wasn’t long before I was able to connect my students’ problems to the problems I had experienced in making my own first-person narrative seem as realistic as possible.

Two factors control the amount and type of information imparted to the reader in a fictional text: distance and focalization. Focalization, simply put, refers to who sees or who perceives the story events of a narrative; it is the “point of view” from which a story is told (Gerard Genette 188). Since my own novel, *Coolville*, is a first-person narrative, I will focus primarily on first-person narration in this introduction. Distance, the other regulative factor of narratorial information, refers to the figurative space between the

narrator and the story events being narrated (Genette 165). This distance, according to Gerald Prince, may be measured in any number of ways, such as physical distance, intellectual distance, or the distance we are mainly concerned with here, temporal distance (47). Temporal distance is the relationship in time between the narrator and the narrated; it is the amount of time between the fictional events of a narrative and the fictional narrator's retelling of those events.

In a text, according to Genette, the author can situate his narrator in one of four temporal positions relative to the story's events (217). The narrator could tell his tale after, or subsequent to, the events of the story. This is the most familiar position, characteristic of what readers commonly think of as the traditional approach, in which the narrator recounts events that have already happened. The narrator might also relate the story simultaneously, while the story's events are taking place, or, in the case of predictive narration, the narrator could be temporally positioned prior to any story events that will happen, as in prophecies or premonitory dreams. The narrator could also tell an interpolated narrative between story events, as is the case in epistolary narratives or diary narratives such as in *Coolville*. Gerald Prince uses the terms "posterior," "simultaneous," "anterior" and "intercalated," to describe these same narrative positions, respectively (49). It's important to note that a narrative need not conform to only one temporal position throughout the course of the story (an interpolated narrative might utilize simultaneous narration or a simultaneous narrative might employ subsequent and predictive narration) while maintaining the narrator's overall temporal position.

While the choice of one of these four temporal positions may influence the temporal distance, it will not necessarily determine it. A narrator could, for example,

leave a gap of several years between letters or diary entries while another narrator might write a subsequent narration shortly after his own narrated events have unfolded. That said, the temporal distance between story events and the act of narration is usually smaller in an interpolated narrative than in a posterior narrative. In a predictive narration, there could quite literally be any span of time between the story and the narration while, in a simultaneous narration, the narrator is relating events as they happen.

Temporal Position in First-Person Narration

Though Genette's categorization of temporal positions is generally accepted with regard to third-person narratives, there has been some disagreement when those same categories are applied to first-person pieces. According to Genette, a first-person simultaneous narration is characterized by the fact that the narrator narrates his story at the same time that the story events are taking place (218). Gerald Prince defines it similarly (28). Seymour Chatman, though, in his *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, argues that true simultaneous narration, as described by Genette and Prince, is a logical impossibility in any first-person narration. According to Chatman, "an interval must elapse between the events recounted and the appearance of the letter or entry in the diary [. . .]. Moments of composition appear as lulls amidst the storms of the story" (171).

Jean Rousset takes the opposite approach to Chatman and argues that all first-person interpolated narration is inevitably simultaneous. To Rousset, the very nature of an interpolated narrative makes the act of living "contemporaneous" with the act of

writing (67). Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, without explaining the reason she distinguishes between the two, prefers a position between Rousset and Chatman and ascribes to the category of simultaneous narration all diary narratives, while claiming that no epistolary narrative can be narrated simultaneously (91). Rimmon-Kenan acknowledges, and perhaps it should go without saying, that simultaneous narration—just like interpolated and predictive narration—is an artistic illusion rendered by the writer (157). In reality, of course, there would always be a gap in time—however miniscule—between the brain’s recognition of a story event that is happening now and the fingers’ transcription of that event onto the page. Chatman, however, is not referring to this temporal gap between brain and page when describing his “delay.” He goes on to say that

it is incorrect or at least oversimplified to argue, as Jean Rousset does, that characters in epistolary narratives “tell the story of their lives at the same time that they live them,” that the reader [. . .] sees the character’s life “at the very moment when it is lived and written by the character.” The moment of writing, yes, but the moment of living, no. Just after it. The act of writing is always distanced from the correspondent’s life, be it ever so minimally. [. . .] Even if the delay between the event and its transcription is very brief [. . .] it is still a delay. It is precisely this delay that separates epistolary and diary narratives from true story-contemporaneous forms like the interior monologue (171).

We can surmise that Chatman dismisses the possibility of first-person simultaneous narration for a reason other than the gap between thought and transcription because, logically, there would be a similar, though infinitesimal, gap between an emotion and the

brain's expression of that emotion in a third-person interior monologue. Simultaneity—in both first- and third-person narration—is, after all, a fictional construct. What Chatman is suggesting, then, is that even the fictional illusion of simultaneity is impossible in a first-person narration.

While the temptation may be to ascribe this disagreement among Chatman, Rousset, Rimmon-Kenan, Genette and Prince to a simple matter of semantics, I would argue that there is more to the issue than a question of how one defines simultaneity. I would argue, indeed, that there are subtle distinctions between each scholar's position and it is important for us to determine a first-person narrator's occasion of narration before this question may be resolved satisfactorily.

Narrative Occasion

The concept of a narrative occasion comes from the creative nonfiction idea that a familiar essay begins with a germinating inspiration or occasion that triggers the narration of those events. The narrative occasion causes the essayist to first ponder, then ruminate, then write about the topic at hand. In other words, the narrative occasion impels the essayist or the narrator to write about this particular topic at this particular time. Grace Paley calls it “the storyteller's pain,” the idea that the writer begins with a story that he absolutely has to tell before it explodes out of his chest. Paley describes it with a personal anecdote:

in 1954 or '55 I needed to speak in some inventive way about our [. . .]

lives in those years. Some knowledge was creating a real physical pressure,

probably in the middle of my chest—maybe just to the right of the heart. I was beginning to suffer the storyteller’s pain: Listen! I *have* to tell you something! (ix)

A specific narrative occasion is not a prerequisite for a first-person narration, as many fine first-person pieces illustrate. However, it’s been my experience that, when a first-person narrative is unsuccessful, whether it is mine or one of my students’, the problem can often be traced back to a nonspecific or nonexistent narrative occasion. A narrative occasion can keep a story focused by reminding the writer and the reader what the story is about and why it is significant. Chuck Palahniuk’s *Survivor* begins with the narrative occasion of Tender Branson in the process of hijacking a passenger plane and needing to tell the world his story—into the plane’s black box—before he dies (288); Palahniuk’s narrator in *Diary*, Misty Marie Wilmot, begins by writing a journal to her comatose husband in the event that he wakes up and needs to know what he has missed (5); Ivan Turgenev’s narrator in *Diary of a Superfluous Man*, Tchulkaturin, has just learned he has barely two weeks to live (1); Charlie Gordon, the narrator of *Flowers for Algernon*, writes progress reports to document his cognitive development after brain surgery (Keyes 7). Similar examples abound in first-person narratives.

It should not be difficult to understand how a first-person story’s narrative occasion would be linked to the narrator’s temporal position. We could reasonably assume that the impetus behind a narrator’s act of narration would change if the narrator were to narrate his tale at a different time. Palahniuk’s Tender Branson would not feel the need to tell the world the same story of his troubles if he was already living his life of secluded anonymity in the eastern hemisphere—if, in other words, he was telling his tale

from a subsequent temporal position after all of the events of his story have already taken place. Tender Branson's very act of narration, after all, is part of a ruse to convince the world he has died so that he might evade capture by the police (Palahniuk, "Ending"); if he were to narrate his story after he has parachuted to safety, that would defeat the original purpose of his narration. Misty Wilmot wouldn't want to begin a diary for her husband after the culmination of her story's events because, by then, she would know that her own narration was part of a murderous plot by her in-laws to take advantage of her and the Waytansea Island tourists. And Tchulkaturin, of course, couldn't realistically begin narrating his story after he has died.

In an earlier draft of my *Coolville*, I began with an evidence sheet from a murder trial which identified the accompanying narrative as an evidence item from that trial, and then I had another narrative within this framed narration to show that the narrator originally began typing in the computer journal because he had been bored and because he had a new laptop computer. When I changed the detail of the narrator typing in a computer to writing by hand in a spiral notebook, I found it necessary to have a new narrative occasion that explained why he was writing in a notebook:

Every time I start writing in a new notebook, I think, *Okay, this is going to be the one that people look back on when I'm rich and famous and they say to each other, "See? He was destined for greatness even then. The only thing I remember about myself at that age was how cool it was to finally not need a fake I.D., and here he was, well on his way to being the great (fill in the blank)."* (5)

I admit that I have a tendency, when working in first-person, to sometimes focus on the narrative occasion to an almost obsessive fault. For myself, in fact, a narrative occasion is essential when using a first-person narrator. I concede that this may merely be a crutch that I rely upon, perhaps because I began my writing career as an essayist and I was taught to start each familiar essay with just such a narrative occasion. As I grow as a writer, I hope eventually to outgrow my dependence upon an occasion of narration. My own obsession with narrative occasion, though, has perhaps provided me with a unique perspective from which to understand how and why Chatman's view of first-person temporal position is at odds with the views of Genette and Rousset.

Simultaneity in First-Person Narration

Chatman's argument against simultaneous first-person narration begins with the supposition that the narrator of a diary or correspondence always writes about events from his past, however recent that past may be, while Rousset suggests that it is always the writer's present that is foregrounded in any letter or diary entry. Chatman, in other words, sees the narrative occasion in any first-person interpolated narrative as always set in motion by some past story event, even if that event has just recently happened ("here is what just happened"), whereas Rousset sees the narrative occasion of any first-person interpolated story as based upon some present story event ("here is what's happening now"; "this is how I feel now"). Chatman's first-person interpolated narrator, in other words, always remains focused on the past while Rousset's narrator focuses forever on himself and his current situation. Further, for Chatman, no first-person narration can ever

be simultaneous because, he believes, the narrative occasion must always be what the narrator is writing *about*; it could never be the act of writing itself. For Rousset, just the opposite is true. Rousset's argument is that it is the narrator's act of writing the letter or the act of writing in his diary that must be the occasion which sets the story in motion and that this is why the events of an interpolated narrative feel as if they are "seized while [they are still] hot" (66). Rousset believes that the act of writing *is* the story.

Genette provides a bridge, of sorts, between Chatman and Rousset. Genette differentiates between a subsequent diary entry that describes a past action—"('Here is what happened to me today')"—and a simultaneous diary entry that can report "thoughts and feelings ('Here is what I think about it this evening')" (217). To further illustrate, he provides an example from *Les Liaisons dangereuses*; Genette notes that

Cecile Volanges writes to Mme. de Merteuil to tell her how she was seduced, last night, by Valmont, and to confide to her her remorse; the seduction scene is past, and with it the confusion that Cecile no longer feels, and can no longer even imagine; what remains is the shame, and a sort of stupor which is both incomprehension and discovery of oneself. (218)

For Genette, a first-person narration can occur simultaneous to the emotional turmoil of the narrator, but it would still be subsequent to the physical action of that story.

While I disagree with Rousset's suggestion that all interpolated narration must be simultaneous, I would argue that simultaneous narration—or the fictional illusion thereof—can be used to record not only a first-person narrator's current emotional state, as Genette suggests, but also to record the current action of the story that the narrator is

telling. In *Coolville*, in fact, I have one scene where my narrator, George, is in his bathtub writing in his journal while he hears what he assumes is an intruder in his kitchen. In this case, the “intruder” drops things in the kitchen (the physical story action) while the narrator details this action in his journal. Palahniuk, in his first-person novel *Survivor*, has a narrator who also assumes a temporal position simultaneous to the action of his story. Palahniuk begins his story with Tender Branson speaking into the flight data recorder of the airplane he is in the process of hijacking:

Testing, testing. One, two, three.

Testing, testing. One, two, three.

Maybe this is working. I don’t know. If you can even hear me, I don’t know.

But if you can hear me, listen. And if you’re listening, then what you’ve found is the story of everything that went wrong. This is what you’d call the flight recorder of Flight 2039. (289)

Well before either I or Palahniuk created narration that was simultaneous to our stories’ action, Samuel Richardson utilized the same effect in *Pamela*:

I can hardly write; yet, as I can do nothing else, I know not how to forbear!—Yet I cannot hold my Pen!—How crooked and trembling the Lines!—I must leave off, till I can get quieter Fingers!—Why should the Guiltless tremble so, when the Guilty can possess their Minds in Peace! (182)

Here, a first-person narrator transcribes story events as they happen: Pamela’s hands tremble (the story event) *as she writes* (the transcription).

Simultaneous narration should not, however, be confused with a simple application of present-tense verbs. In this case, I argue for a more strict interpretation of simultaneity than does Prince. According to Prince, the sentence “John is now walking down the street and he sees Joan” is always simultaneously narrated (95). I would suggest that this narration may or may not be simultaneous to the action it describes, depending upon how the narrator manages verb tenses in the sentences preceding and subsequent to Prince’s example. Prince himself notes that “the tenses used in narrating a series of events do not necessarily correspond to the time of the narrated in relation to that of the narration,” and he uses as an example the subsequently narrated passage: “I was on Chestnut Street. Suddenly, I see a man keel over and I hear a shout. I rush towards him. It was too late, unfortunately: he was already dead” (28). One sentence alone cannot determine temporal position.

We can note the distinction if we compare the simultaneously narrated passages quoted above with a present-tense passage from Henry Fielding’s *Shamela*, the satiric and bawdy response to Richardson’s novel:

Mrs. Jervis and I are just in Bed, and the Door unlocked; if my Master should come—Odsbobs! I hear him just coming in at the Door. You see I write in the present Tense, as Parson Williams says. Well, he is in Bed between us, we both shamming a Sleep, he steals his Hand into my Bosom, which I, as if in my Sleep, press close to me with mine, and then pretend to awake.—I no sooner see him, but I scream out to Mrs. Jervis, she feigns likewise but just to come to herself; we both begin, she to becall, and I to bescratch very liberally. After having made a pretty free Use of

my Fingers, without and great Regard to the Parts I attack'd, I counterfeit a Swoon. Mrs. Jervis then cries out, O, Sir, what have you done, you have murdered poor Pamela: she is gone, she is gone. (18)

It is clear that, in contrast to Richardson's *Pamela*, Fielding's narrator—within the fictional world of the story—is not narrating simultaneously (nor is she making any attempt to give that impression) but, instead, merely using present-tense verb forms to narrate past events; logically, how could someone successfully feign sleep while at the same time handwriting a letter—especially if the person being deceived is close enough to “[steal] his hand into [her] bosom”? One could argue, of course, that Fielding is merely attempting to mock Richardson's novel, but that doesn't change the fact that Fielding's narration here is subsequent to the action it describes. Richardson's *Pamela* could not compose simultaneously narrated letters within the confines of a posterior narration (except in the manner that Genette proposes—relating past events while also betraying her current emotions) (218) any more than Fielding's narrator would be able, realistically, to write while successfully pretending to sleep.

Rousset, though, would argue that Fielding's narrator presents the same type of simultaneous narration as the previous examples. For Rousset, again, it is only the act of writing that matters, even in the more clear-cut case of Turgenev's *Tchulkaturin* when he is obviously describing a past event in his diary:

A quarter of an hour later we were sitting in the carriage driving to the town. The horses flew along at an even trot; we were rapidly whirled along through the darkening, damp air. I suddenly began talking, more than once addressing first Bizmyonkov, and then Madame Ozhogin. I did

not look at Liza, but I could see that from her corner in the carriage her eyes did not once rest on me. (15)

I empathize with Rousset's argument because this is the same way I viewed diary narratives when I began composing *Coolville* and it was this belief that I had to struggle to overcome when writing my book. For some reason, I was stuck with the idea that it was necessary for any fully realistic first-person narrative to be rendered with simultaneous narration. After all, I stubbornly reasoned, the narrator is a character and he must exist somewhere in some fictional world to be able to tell his tale. He doesn't exist in a vacuum, in other words, and, therefore, while he is writing, he is also living and breathing and seeing and touching and experiencing the world around him while he relates his story. Would not the very act of narration have to be a part of the story? I have since come to realize that the act of narration need not be foregrounded in a first-person narrative any more than other story event, and I've tried to wean myself from the compulsion to look at first-person narratives in this way, but it was a view similar to Rousset's with which I undertook writing first-person fiction.

The reason it is important that we differentiate between the four temporal positions in a first-person narrative is that they all function very differently in a story. As we have noted, subsequent narration takes place after the events of the story have happened, predictive narration comes before the events of the story, interpolated narration takes place between story events and simultaneous narration records action as it happens. The significance of this is that subsequently-narrated action, whether it is within the confines of an interpolated, predictive, simultaneous or subsequent narration, gives the narrator at least a brief opportunity to consider the historical import of the events he is

describing: “here is what happened and this is how I feel about it.” The same could be said of a predictive narration: “here is what’s going to happen and this is how I feel about it.” A first-person narrator who simultaneously describes the action of a story, however, has no such luxury as he reports that action; a narrator so situated would be relegated to reporting: “here is what’s happening now, and here is what’s happening now, and here is what’s happening now.” Narration that is simultaneous to the action of the story, in other words, gives the narrator no time to pause and reflect.

This was vital for my novel as I had originally envisioned it. My initial goal was to present a political allegory with a narrator who made decisions without considering the consequences of his actions and without the luxury of reflection. Narration that was simultaneous to the action of the story made this possible. But I encountered a few problems as I tried to make this goal a reality. The first involved the progression of the story from beginning to end. Narratologists use the word *duration* to refer to the relationship between story time (the elapsed time of the events of a story) and discourse time (the time it takes to tell that story) (Genette 87). In a realistic simultaneous narration, story time and discourse time would have to be at least approximately equal to one another. This would have been a logical impossibility in my novel because *Coolville* takes place over the course of several months. I was able to overcome this problem by incorporating my simultaneous narration into the framework of an interpolated narration, having my narrator space his diary entries out over the several months that the story takes place.

Another problem I experienced was with characterization. One of the advantages of using a first-person narrator—indeed, my favorite aspect of first-person narration—is

that every word of the story is filtered through the perceptions of the narrator. The reader gets to learn about the narrator by the way he perceives the world and the way he comprehends the events he describes. If the narrator is relegated to merely reporting action as it happens, the writer misses out on a wonderful opportunity to utilize fully the strengths of his first-person narrator. I tried to get past this by concocting all the convoluted scenarios I could imagine where my narrator could feasibly and realistically report on the action around him while still being in a setting that could somehow develop his character. (One other drawback of simultaneous narration, as we will discuss later, is that it puts limits on a narrator's physical location; one conspicuous similarity of the above simultaneously narrated passages is that the narrator is not only positioned in a proximal location to his or her means of transcription, but to the action as well.) I had my narrator write while he watched television, I had him write while he ate, I had him write while he played cards, I had him write while he drove his car, several times I had him write while other characters talked to him. Many of these situations came across as too contrived and I had to cut them during the editing process.

I have found that simultaneous narration works best, at least for me, in those moments where the act of narration is overtly connected to the story events being narrated upon—when the narration becomes part of the action of the story, in other words. For example, I have one scene in which the narrator writes as a way to appear busy and thus avoid the conflict developing around him:

This is the fourth time that Chainsaw has gone through his list of food that's mysteriously missing from his and Carl's kitchen, and I'm trying to act busy as hell and completely oblivious, hoping that if I keep

typing he'll assume that I'm assuming that I've got nothing to do with whatever it is he's yelling about. I'm going for that vibe that says, *Hey, dude, I heard the word "food" and so of course I knew that whatever it is you're talking about had nothing to do with me because I haven't been anywhere near your kitchen tonight. Kitchen? You and Carl have a kitchen? See? I didn't even know. That's how oblivious I am.* (54)

The narrator then moves into a subsequent narrative position and details an earlier conversation with Chainsaw to illustrate why it is important that Chainsaw not suspect the narrator of eating his food. As the scene develops, the simultaneity of the narration is eventually implied, rather than explicitly stated. This grants the narrator more freedom to comment on things other than the specific action of the story. Soon, the Chainsaw character grows increasingly agitated upon discovering more and more of his food missing from his cupboard until, hopefully, the reader expects something horrible is about to happen. At that point, I end the entry in the middle of a sentence; the next entry begins with the narrator in a noticeably lighter mood, describing the young woman he has a crush on and completely ignoring, at first, any mention of the tension of the previous night.

My goal was to foreshadow the ending when the narrator is apprehended by the police in St. Louis. As I wrote closer and closer to the ending, I started to realize that simultaneous and interpolated narration left me few opportunities to describe my ending. After all, how could a diarist realistically represent such a situation? From a subsequent temporal position, the narrator could simply tell his story from a jail cell. But there is not such an easy solution when writing an interpolated or a simultaneous narrative. The

narrator would not be able to write in his journal while he was handcuffed in the back of the police car and it would not be realistic for him to write while he was trying to run away—“They’re chasing me. I’m so out of breath. I think they’re gaining on me. Odsbobs!”—so the best option I could find was to foreshadow the ending and try to give the reader as many hints as I could. The use of simultaneous narration required several considerations such as these throughout the composition of *Coolville*.

The Effect on Narrative

Narration does not have to be simultaneous to the action of the story, however, for the temporal distance to have an effect upon other elements of a story. Another reason we need to distinguish between the various temporal positions of a first-person narrator is that where a narrator is located temporally in relation to the story events he is narrating upon will logically affect his narration. Gerald Prince points out that

the variations in temporal distance between narration and narrated can very much influence the tone of the narrative, its development, its thrust. And eighty-year-old narrator recounting his life from infancy on is, in a way, much more distant from events that occurred when he was a baby than from incidents in his adolescence or mature adulthood, and this difference may be reflected in his narration. Similarly, the perspective of a narrator recounting the same events in three or four distinct temporal occasions may change, and this change may modify his narration. (30)

When a first-person narrator's temporal position is more proximally located to the story events being recounted, the detail imparted by that narrator would understandably be more specific unless there are other factors to account for a discrepancy. Any number of factors within the fictional world of the narrative might explain such a discrepancy (for example, a first-person narrator may be able to recall events from his distant past with precise clarity while being unable to recall what took place just hours or moments before his narration) but, in a realistic first-person story, such discrepancies should be acknowledged within the narration in order to render the illusion of realism.

Misty Wilmot, the first-person narrator (who often refers to herself in the third person) of Chuck Palahniuk's *Diary*, offers specific details when recounting events from earlier the same day when she and an acquaintance had discovered a kitchen that had been sealed off:

When she [Misty] puts her nose in the hole and sniffs, the wallpaper smells like a million cigarettes came here to die. Inside the hole, you can smell cinnamon and dust and paint. Somewhere inside the dark, you can hear a refrigerator hum. A clock ticks. [. . .]

He [Angel Delaporte] leans into the wall, his face twisting hard against the hole, and says, "This handwriting is so compelling. The way he writes the letter *f* in 'set foot' and 'fat fucking slob,' the top line is so long it overhangs the rest of the word. That means he's actually a very loving, protective man." He says, "See the *k* in 'kill you'? The way the front leg is extra long shows he's worried about something. (26)

As the temporal distance in a first-person narration increases, we would expect to find less specific detail from the narrator. That is the case in Palahniuk's story. When Misty describes the first time she met her husband fourteen years earlier, she says

For the record, the first time Misty met Peter was at a freshman art exhibit where some friends and her were looking at a painting of a craggy stone house. [. . .] Her friends were saying how nice it looked, the colors and everything, and then somebody said, "Don't turn around, but the walking peter is headed over here."

Misty said, "The what?"

And somebody said, "Peter Wilmot."

Someone else said, "Do not make eye contact."

All her girlfriends said, Misty, do not even encourage him.

Anytime Peter came into the room, every woman remembered a reason to leave. He didn't really stink, but you still tried to hide behind your hands. He didn't stare at your breasts, but most women still folded their arms. (44)

In the first example, the narrator provides the reader with specific sensory details: wallpaper that smells "like a million cigarettes came here to die," a closed off kitchen with the smell of "cinnamon and dust and paint," the hum of a refrigerator, the ticking of a clock, and the specific visual details of the letters *f* and *k*. In the second example, with a temporal distance of more than a decade, Misty doesn't recount details with the same specificity that she did with the events that were more recent. Her friends are nameless with no defining physical characteristics; indeed, the dialogue, except for the narrator's,

is always attributed to “somebody,” “somebody else” or “all her girlfriends.” The painting she describes is of a nonspecific “craggy stone house” that looked “nice [. . .] the colors and everything,” but she makes no mention of what those colors are.

Since my narrator is located temporally close to the action he describes, it seemed necessary, since I was writing a realistic novel, to include more sensory details than I otherwise might have if writing a posterior narrative from a much later point in time. Early in my novel, the narrator describes the buzzing of an orange streetlight and the sound of a moth tapping against his car window (23). Later, he describes a warm breeze tickling across his arm, sunshine reflecting off the grass and perspiration developing on his forehead (222). My goal was to make the action seem temporally adjacent to the narration by including specific sensory details that the narrator had only recently experienced. In another instance, my narrator writes in his journal while he is at work, describing specific moments of a conversation that had just recently taken place:

The guy on the phone just totally screamed at me—loud enough that Colin could hear him through my headset. The guy was like, “Are you listening to me, son? Are you listening to me?” I said, “Yeah, I was just trying to write down everything you said.” But he wouldn’t believe me at first because he could hear the phone whores moaning behind me and he thought I was having sex, so I said, “That’s my neighbor. Her husband just got back from Iraq,” and a bunch of crap like that, and then I was like, “What were those verses again?” and finally he said, “Ezekiel 13 and Deuteronomy 18,” I think, and a bunch of others, and I was like, “Mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm. I’m going to mark those in my bible as soon as we

hang up,” and he said, “Why don’t you do it now?” and I said, “It might take a while to find it,” and he said, “I can wait,” which is the absolute worst thing to say to somebody whose job is to keep you on the phone for as long as possible. But, like a dumbass, I said, “Really?” which is negative, instead of, “Okay,” which is affirmative, but he still said, “Of course, Walker. I’m tryin’ to save yer soul, son,” so now he thinks I’m in my apartment right now looking for my Bible, when I’m really just sitting in my cubicle with the *Jeopardy* theme in my head. (37)

In another moment, the narrator is more vague with his details because the temporal distance between the action and the narration is much greater:

I don’t remember if I gave her my phone number—I probably did—and then she left and I didn’t think any more about it because I had a lot going on last summer [. . .] I was passed out when my phone rang. It was Brenda. She was all like, “Do you want to go out tonight? I’ll pay for the beer and the gas, blah blah blah.” I don’t remember what all, but I remember she said she’d pay for the gas and the beer. I mean, what was I supposed to say to that? (98)

In a third-person narrative, it is unnecessary for the writer to concern himself with the relationship between distance and detail, but, in a realistic first-person piece, such considerations are a crucial step toward making the fiction seem as authentic as possible.

Other Considerations

Whereas I experience the most difficulty incorporating simultaneous narration into first-person narratives, my students seem to have more trouble establishing the right voice when writing their first-person pieces. It's easy for me to empathize. In *Coolville*, I struggled to create a voice for my twenty-one-year-old narrator that seemed realistic and was consistent throughout the novel. My narrator is situated temporally close to the action and it was essential for his voice to resonate with that temporal proximity. He needed to sound, in other words, like a naïve twenty-one-year-old kid who had been kicked out of college and was working at an unfulfilling dead-end job, as opposed to sounding like a mature man telling about when he was a twenty-one-year old kid just kicked out of college.

For me, the problem of matching the appropriate voice of a first-person narrator to a particular temporal position and distance becomes more pronounced as the temporal distance decreases between the narrator and the action he describes. A narrator who is temporally proximate to the story events he describes logically has to be more nearly identical to the character of himself that he presents in his narration. One notable exception to this might be a case where a character has recently experienced a traumatic or life-altering event. In such an example, the reader would naturally expect a change in voice and character. In a framed posterior narrative, an author could utilize such a change in voice to foreshadow for the reader significant events to come later in the narration. In an interpolated narrative, this change in voice might come about subtly as the character gradually changes or it could happen suddenly if the character has experienced a particularly harrowing event. I tried to use a change of voice in my own piece to indicate

a sudden, significant change in my narrator, George King, in *Coolville*. My goal was to show that something upsetting has happened by having George write with a much more tranquil tone than he had in his previous entries. I wasn't quite effective in my earlier drafts, according to my readers, but I hope it is clear now—through the voice alone—that something momentous has transpired in George's life.

As noted earlier, interpolated narratives like *Coolville*, in which the first-person narrator is situated between story events, often present a narrator closer in time to the action than in a subsequent narration, and the voice must reflect that in a realistic piece. Early in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, the young Celie prays to God: "My mama dead. She die screaming and cussing. She scream at me. She cuss at me. I'm big. I can't move fast enough. By time I get back from the well, the water be warm" (2). As the narrator ages and matures throughout the story, the voice of the Celie subtly reflects that: "Maybe if I had stayed in Memphis last summer it never would have happen. But I spent the summer fixing up the house. I thought if you come anytime soon, I want it to be ready. And it is real pretty, now, and comfortable" (247).

Nikolai Gogol gives his reader a very different type of speaker in his interpolated narrative, *Diary of a Madman*. Poprishchin, the narrator, gradually progresses further into insanity throughout the piece. In the beginning, Poprishchin seems—comparatively, at least—lucid and logical: "Something very peculiar happened today. I got up rather late, and when Mavra brought my clean shoes in I asked her what the time was. When she told me it was long past ten I rushed to get dressed" (17). He is mentally unbalanced even in the beginning, to be sure—in this same entry, he mentions that he heard and understood the conversation between the two dogs, Medji and Fidele (19)—but he is still able to

maintain a sane outward appearance to others. Later diary entries, though, highlight his descent toward madness. He reads the “letters” between Medji and Fidele in an effort to gain as much information as possible about Sophie, the woman he adores (26). He becomes convinced he is the King of Spain (33). He makes himself a kingly cloak out of his new work uniform (36). Eventually, he is institutionalized (37). By the end of the story, it is clear through his voice and action that he has become thoroughly insane: “Good God, what are they doing to me? They’re pouring cold water over my head! They won’t listen to me or come and see me. What have I done to them? Why do they torture me so?” (40). If Gogol’s narrator had told his tale from a subsequent temporal position several years after the story events transpire, the narrative voice throughout the piece would have to reflect that temporal change. Poprishchin, relating his story after all those years, might become sane again, in which case his voice would logically illustrate that change as he looks back on those events: “Good heavens, I certainly seemed to have lost my mind when I realized I could never marry Sophie.” Or, perhaps the narrator would still be insane or even more so. In that case, since Poprishchin would be narrating the entire story from the perspective of a (much older) madman, the voice of the entire piece would necessarily resemble the insanity of the narrative’s latter pages.

Walker’s and Gogol’s narratives remind us that temporal position and distance also influence the intellectual perspective of the characters. A character’s intellectual perspective can refer to more than just how intelligent or how sane a character is. Perhaps a character, in the end, has learned something about himself that he didn’t know in the beginning, or maybe he has gained some fundamental knowledge about the way the world works. Misty Wilmot, by the end of her narration in Palahniuk’s *Diary*, has

softened in her anger toward her husband and grown resigned to the part she has unwittingly played in the mass murder of the Waytansea Island tourists (while becoming resolute that it never happens again) (259). The intellectual perspective of Tender Branson in *Survivor* is poignant precisely because of his perceived *lack* of intellectual growth. Even though there are still parachutes on the plane and even though his omniscient girlfriend has told him he will figure out a way to survive, he still feigns ignorance to the end regarding how he could possibly escape his tragic fate. In fact, it is because of this ignorance that Tender Branson becomes an untrustworthy narrator and why his story seems so unbelievable—and rightfully so (Palahniuk, “Ending” par. 2).

A first-person narrator’s intellectual perspective becomes particularly conspicuous in interpolated narratives where the narrator’s temporal stance is situated between story events. An extreme example is Daniel Keyes’ *Flowers for Algernon* where the narrator-protagonist, Charlie, becomes more, then less, intellectually capable as the story progresses. While Walker’s and Gogol’s pieces would, at the least, be significantly altered by employing a posterior, rather than an interpolated, temporal position, Keyes’ novel could not exist at all if not for the temporal proximity provided by interpolated narration. After all, *Flowers for Algernon* is dependent upon the illustration of Charlie’s intellectual and emotional growth and decline as recorded in his “progris riport[s]” (1). We see Charlie’s innocence and ignorance not just in his spelling and grammar, but in the description of his interpersonal relationships. In the beginning, before his “operashun,” Charlie understands his coworkers to be friendly, protective father figures: “Gimpy hollers at me all the time when I do something rong but he reely likes me because hes my frend. Boy if I get smart wont he be serprised” (4). After his operation, Charlie is able to

perceive more clearly the truth he had been blind to all along: “I watched Gimpy more closely. Three times today, I saw him undercharging customers and pocketing his portion of the difference as the customers passed money back to him” (66). In the end, after the operation has backfired, the narrative’s close temporal distance allows the reader to see Charlie’s return to intellectual and emotional innocence: “Im going someplace where they are a lot of other pepul like me and nobody cares that Charlie Gordon was once a genius and now he cant even reed a book or rite good” (215). A more distant temporal position, subsequent to the story events, could only show the narrative through the eyes of the Charlie who has regressed to his original self.

In an interpolated narrative, intellectual perspective might also refer to a character’s inability to anticipate future story events. In Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, the narrator has no idea that the man whose advances she has been refusing throughout the narrative will eventually become her husband. In Georges Bernanos’ *The Diary of a Country Priest*, the narrator does not know what the future holds for him, and we can reasonably assume that Gogol’s Poprishchin does not expect to end up institutionalized. It is clear that Helen Fielding’s Bridget Jones expects to accomplish much more than she does in her year of diary keeping; Sartre’s Antoine Roquentin begins his journaling with every expectation of finishing his book about the Marquis de Rollebon. In Palahniuk’s *Diary*, the narrator does not recognize until the end that she has been an unwitting pawn in a convoluted, macabre ploy to rid her hometown of irritating tourists. In *Coolville*, I tried to present a first-person narrator-protagonist who has no idea that he will eventually commit murder. The benefit, intellectually speaking, of employing an interpolated

temporal position in my own story was that it allowed me to maintain in my narrator the same level of intellectual unpreparedness that these other narrators have.

But temporal distance is also inextricably linked to what Rimmon-Kenan refers to as a fictional narrative's surface structure (16). I noted that in *Coolville* I employed simultaneous narration with varying degrees of success. In an early draft, where my narrator-protagonist was writing his diary entries in a computer journal, I had an early moment where the narrator is typing in an effort to avoid the conflict brewing in front of him (58). In this case, I would like to think, the narration worked well. Later in the novel, though, I employ simultaneous narration again, having my narrator type while he is in the bathtub, hiding from what he believes is an intruder. Here the simultaneous narration did not quite work. As one of my readers asked, What if he drops the computer in the bathtub? Would he be electrocuted? And how can he type quietly enough that the intruder cannot hear the clicks of the keyboard? To fix this issue, if I wanted to maintain the same temporal distance, simultaneous with the action, I had to change this one detail of the narrative to have my narrator write in a quiet, non-electric spiral notebook. The problem with this approach was that, then, the earlier moment was affected; the narrator no longer had the flipped-up screen of the laptop's monitor to act as a buffer between himself and the angry character he is trying to avoid. Since it will now be more difficult for the narrator to avoid the conflict by pretending to be busy, this will limit the amount of narration covering this scene. (This may turn out to be a good thing; I had been worried that this scene was running much too long in the earlier drafts.) This seemingly minor change in detail from notebook computer to spiral notebook presented other problems as well. Some corrections were simple, such as removing references to the computer, but

others required more consideration: I had several instances in the computer-journal draft of the novel where the narrator was actively viewing web pages as he typed his narration; in other cases, he copied (fictional) excerpts from the internet and pasted them directly into his computer-journal narrative. Since my narrator is far too lazy to copy anything from the internet into his handwritten journal, such excerpts as these will also have to be cut or altered significantly. This is what Tom Wolfe describes when he compares a fictional narrative to a sweater: “when you start playing with your structure in fiction, it’s like pulling a thread in a sweater. Everything begins to go in ways you never dreamed of” (George Plimpton 245).

Which leads, finally, to the interrelationship between a narrative’s temporal position and the physical distance between the narrator and the story events that he is narrating. In a first-person simultaneous narration, as one might expect, the narrator must be physically located in a place proximal to the action he is simultaneously describing in his narrative. Whether that proximity is the result of an actual physical presence or through the use of any number of new technologies (such as a live video feed), the narrator must be in a position to witness the story events that he is narrating as they happen. In a subsequent, anterior, or intercalated narration, on the other hand, the first-person narrator could quite literally be anywhere in the world, provided that the temporal distance is ample enough to allow for that physical movement.

When an author manipulates the relationship between a narrative’s physical and temporal distance there are any number of permutations that are possible with character and story development. If the events of a narrative are temporally situated close enough to the narration, the narrator might still have access to the physical setting of those events.

In a detective story, for example, this might give the first-person narrator an opportunity to go back to the scene of the crime and search for clues—or silence the only witness before a trial. A narrator could come across as particularly troubled (or “creepy,” to use a favorite term of my students) if a narrator is still at the scene a significant time after the events of the story take place. A writer could also use such a situation to reveal implicitly the narrator’s great sense of loss, regret, helplessness, anger, or any number of other feelings, intensified by a significant span of time between the story events and the narration.

In *Coolville*, I tried to use physical distance in the end as a means to indicate something momentous has taken place. My unreliable narrator has not let on that anything is different—in fact, he behaves as if nothing has happened at all—yet he narrates into his journal from several disparate settings: he visits the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio; then he travels to New Orleans; and, finally, to the Gateway Arch in St. Louis, Missouri. All the while, he does not mention any reasons for his travels. My intention, here, was to indicate that he was fleeing from the murder he has just committed and is now aimlessly wandering across the country until he will finally be caught. In an early draft, I relied on nothing more than the relationship between temporal and physical distance to show these story events and to advance the plot. After getting a draft back from my readers, I realized that my foremost achievement was to prove, indisputably, that there is a limit to what distance can do. As I rewrite that section, I need to include other story elements in such a way that my manipulation of temporal and physical distance complements, rather than drives, the narrative.

As I have written my dissertation—this introduction and the accompanying novel—I have come to realize that the appropriate application of temporal distance cannot guarantee the success of any fictional work. But I have also come to understand that temporal distance is so intertwined with all aspects of a first-person narrative that it is one of the first things a writer should consider when conceiving a first-person piece. While every part of a narrative should be considered with thought and foresight, I would also argue that, in a first-person narrative, the author should give special consideration to temporal perspective. Without the correct utilization of temporal position and distance, a narrative could unravel toward incoherence. Because of this, at least for me and for many of my students, such issues must be worked out with deliberation and care.

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Diary of the Coolville Killer:

Reflections on the Bush Years, Rendered in Fictional Prose

Every time I start writing in a new notebook, I think, *Okay, this is going to be the one that people look back on when I'm rich and famous and they say to each other, "See? He was destined to make the world a better place even then. When I was that age, all I cared about was that I could finally get into the bars without a fake I.D. But Walker, man, you can tell just from reading this notebook that he was already well on his way to being the great (fill in the blank)."*

Yeah, maybe this'll be the one.

God, I totally wish I didn't have to go to work today. I don't know why, but I'm getting nauseous just thinking about it. Just the idea of being stuck in my random mini-cubicle, surrounded by all that motivational bullshit—"Together Everyone Achieves More!" "Smile! The caller can hear it!"—while I B.S. people for \$5.99 or \$Whatever-they-charge-in-Canada.99 a minute. "Oh, the Two of Cups! It looks like there's a new man in your future! Oh! The Falling Tower! It looks like big changes are coming your way!" Eight hours of that to look forward to. Twenty minutes, max, per call, means at least four calls an hour, times eight hours, minus lunch and two fifteen-minute breaks, equals at least twenty-six toolbags I'll have to talk to. I wish a major change was coming my way.

I wish I could call in sick. But it's like there's this little voice that keeps reminding me that, if I can just make it three more weeks without being absent or late, then I'll get that fifty-cents an hour perfect attendance bonus for the whole next ninety days, whether I miss work or not. But then there's this other voice that's all like, "Dude, you've got these eighteen attendance points that are just begging to be used up within the

next three weeks, and it'd be a shame to let them go to waste." I could call in sick four times and still have two points left to clock in late whenever I feel like it (I mean, I could only clock in late once, but I could do it whenever I felt like it). But then the other voice is like, "fifty cents an hour, fifty cents an hour, fifty cents an hour. Just three more weeks and you get an extra fifty cents an hour."

But this morning I did the math and I realized that fifty cents an hour, times thirty-five, only works out to an extra twenty-two dollars a week. Which is only sixty-six dollars a month, which sucks. That won't even buy a decent bag of weed. For the last three months almost, I've been rushing every day to get to work on time, all because I kept thinking *I'm going to make eleven dollars an hour, I'm going to make eleven dollars an hour*, like it was some big huge ginormous amount more than I'm making now. But now that I realize it's only sixty-six dollars a month, it hardly seems worth it. I mean, I'd probably save that much in gas money if I actually did call in sick four times. So I don't know why I don't call in sick today.

But I know I won't. I'll still go to work today after I convince myself that I didn't have anything better to do anyway. I'll tell myself that I've already rearranged all the songs on my iPod, so I've accomplished all my goals for the day. And then I'll walk in the door at work right at 2:59, which means I won't have time to go back to the break room and see if that hot little foreign chick is there, and I'll clock in with thirty seconds to spare and I'll find an open station and I'll take my seat and pretend to myself that I wouldn't rather be home watching Maury doing paternity tests on midgets. *sigh* And, who knows? Maybe today I'll get there early enough and maybe I'll finally have the

stones to talk to the HLFC in the break room before our shift starts. Maybe today, Walker. Maybe today.

God, I knew I shouldn't've gone to work last night. I just knew it. I don't know how intuition works, or whatever it's called. I don't know if the subatomic particles that are inside of us have some kind of faster-than-light connection to the future, or if we've got some kind of spirit guides around us all the time trying to tell us what to do, but there's something, I swear to God, because all day yesterday I was totally thinking *I shouldn't go to work. I shouldn't go to work.*

And then at work, wanna-be hippie asshat Carl was like, "Walker! Party at my place after work! Are you gonna be there? You've got to be there! Are you gonna come? You've got to come! It's time you saw how we party in Appalachia! Coolville, Ohio, baby! Beer! Drugs! It's gonna be miraculous—so much better than anything you ever experienced in the nasty 'Nati!" and I figured, you know, a tubby guy with long hair almost down to his ass probably knows how to party. Wrong. There was nobody there. And I don't mean nobody as in "hardly anybody" or "nobody cool." I mean nobody as in N-O-body. It was just me and him. If it'd been a movie, there would've been crickets chirping, that's how lame his after-work "party" was.

Hanging out in Carl's single-wide (is that what rednecks call a mobile home that's half the size of a double-wide?), watching *King of the Hill* reruns on channel 11. I looked at my watch at about 12:15 and I did one of those fake yawn things and said, "Man, I better get home."

Then he turned the volume way down on the TV and he said, real serious,
“Walker, we’ve got to talk.”

“Uhhh.”

“Even though you’ve only worked at ATS for three months, I feel like I’ve known you forever, like we were destined to meet.”

“Uhhh. I really need to get home.”

“Just stay here for ten more minutes. I’ve got a business proposition for you.”

“Dude, I’m not gay.”

Then he got all defensive—too defensive, if you ask me—and he kept saying,
“I’m not gay, either. I’m not gay. I am so-o-o-o not gay. I wanted to hire you to write my memoir. I need somebody to write my memoir.” On and on like that. It totally sounded like he was making the whole thing up.

Whatever. I just told him, straight up, “Dude, I’m not a writer.”

“I’ll pay you.”

“Carl. Seriously. I’m suspended from OU because I couldn’t even pass English comp. You want somebody else.”

“No, man. I want you. I need you.”

“I’m not a writer. Why would you even think that?”

Then he said, “Rich was QAing one of your calls when you told the caller you were a writer. And Sara said the reason you always carry a notebook is because you’re writing a book about ATS.”

I told him I didn’t even know who Sara was and then I said, “Carl, dude, I’ll tell a caller anything to keep them on the phone for as long as possible. That’s my job: ‘You

hate CornNuts? Me, too.’ ‘You fantasize about Jimmy Kimmel? Me, too.’ ‘You’re a writer? Me, too.’ I’ll tell anybody anything to keep them on the phone for the full twenty minutes.” And then I tried to explain how I have the notebook because I take notes on all my calls—people’s names, hair color, anything that I can use to keep them talking—that’s why my hold times are always so high.

But no matter what I said, he still wouldn’t believe me. “I’ll give you five hundred when you start and a thousand when you finish.”

“Dude, seriously, I’m not a writer.” I wish I was. That’d be sweet. Never have to work ever again. Live in a big mansion with a pool and hot chicks in bikinis running around all over the place. John Travolta and Samuel Jackson and all those guys would see my house on *Cribs* and they’d call me up to get my decorator’s phone number and me and Angelina Jolie would exchange recipes and Jessica Alba and Tera Patrick would come over every Tuesday afternoon to play strip Cribbage. It’d be totally awesome to be a writer. But I don’t have any of that.

“A thousand when you start.”

He was starting to piss me off. I mean, he invited me to a bogus party in his crappy trailer just to ask me to write his stupid book. That’s not cool. I asked him, “Why don’t you do it yourself? Isn’t that what a memoir is, anyway?”

“I can’t. I’ve tried. I can’t.” And then he gave me this big long sob story about how he’s lived this super-amazing life full of sorrow and heartache and all this other crap and now he’s some sort of a combination between Jesus and the Buddha and some other person I can’t remember who’s also super amazingly awesome. And now Carl owes it to the world to get his story out there, man, but he can’t do it himself. None of those other

guys wrote their own stories, either. He's twenty-nine now, the same age as the Buddha when he began his journey, and Carl needs me to document his progress toward nirvana so that others might learn from his quest or whatever.

"Sorry," I said, and I got up to leave.

"I'll give you fifteen hundred when you start and fifteen hundred when you finish."

"Dude."

"Two thousand when you finish."

"Dude, I seriously need to get home and feed my cat." Like my landlady would let me have a pet. She'd get pissed if I had a goldfish. A cat would just end up fighting with all the neighborhood raccoons anyway.

And then Carl was like "Hold on," and he went into a back room and came out with these two ginormous buds—all red hairs and white crystals—and he handed them to me and said, "Good faith gesture—keep these, whatever you decide, and tomorrow you can tell me either yes or no."

I looked at those huge beautiful freaks of nature, it was like I was holding two cucumbers—that you could smoke—and all I could say was, "Whatever I decide?"

"Whatever you decide."

Instead of saying "No" again, or "Dude, I'm seriously not a writer and I can't do this," the next words out of my mouth were, "Okay, I'll think about it." It was like Mary and Agnes (damn right, I named them) had me hypnotized.

Carl was all excited then and he handed me a Kroger's bag full of books, I think, or maybe some other stuff. All I cared about was getting home and getting schwasted and watching crappy TV until I passed out. Which I did.

But now I've got to get ready for work and practice how I'm going to tell Carl that I can't write the story of his amazing journey through life. "Thanks for the weed, though, buddy." I'll have to tell him that for sure.

I almost forgot to mention—the best TV line ever: "That's my purse!" Spoken by Bobby Hill last night every time he kicked another kid in the kiwis. I laughed so hard I thought I was going to cry. But then Carl slapped me on the leg, and that pretty much ruined the moment for me. He played it off like it was just a harmless, doesn't-mean-anything, guy-on-guy leg slap, and so I pretended it was nothing, too. But still. I don't know. He'd been holding up his hand for the eighteen millionth high-five of the night, and I pretended like I didn't see it—which was kind of hard, considering he kept waving it in front of my face—but then, just as I'd resigned myself to yet another high five with the increasingly-uncomfortable finger squeeze at the end, he went for my leg instead. I mean, granted, I was laughing almost hard enough to slap myself on the leg, but I've never laughed hard enough to slap someone else on the leg. Unless it'd be the hot little foreign chick from the 976-line. Pretty much anything would make me laugh hard enough to touch her on the leg. I could be watching *C.S.I. Miami* or some other super-unfunny show and I'd be like, "Ha-ha, Hot little foreign chick from the 976-line, isn't that some funny shit?" *slap, slap*.

Tickle, tickle. Rub, rub. Kiss, kiss. Squeeze, squeeze. Unsnap, unsnap. Lick, lick. Nibble, nibble. Pull, pull. Thrust, thrust. Yes. Nice image. But I didn't want Carl to be

thinking like that about me. The whole experience pretty much rendered Bobby Hill less funny than he otherwise could have been, which is why he gets bonus points and, consequently, edges out the *Simpsons* episode where Lisa drinks the water from the Tunnel of Love and starts tripping.

End of story.

Now I really do need to get in the shower and get ready for work.

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God, I feel good. I'm not exactly sure how I ended up here, wherever *here* is. Under the buzzing orange light in the last parking space at some rest area on I-77. In Virginia, I think. Maybe North Carolina.

I was totally planning to go to work tonight. Seriously. I was all dressed up in my business casual khakis with my blue polo shirt and my new-enough Chuck Taylor high-tops. I had Carl's books still packed up in his Kroger's bag, ready to give to him during lunch. But then I stepped outside this afternoon and I realized I didn't need my jacket. And then I smelled somebody's barbeque. When I unlocked my car door, the key didn't stick and the door didn't squeak when I opened it. And then I felt that warm vanilla air wash across my face and around my arms as I leaned in. And the car didn't make that all-too-familiar groaning sound when I sat down. And the door shut easy and the window rolled all the way down like it's supposed to and the engine started on the first try and the gearshift glided into reverse and I could hear the gravel crunching under my tires when I backed up and the first song that came on my iPod when I plugged it in was "Idiotique" and I couldn't help but think, *This is going to be a good day.*

But I was still planning to go to work. I was zipping and zigging and zagging through Athens like I always do and, once I got on Highway 50, I drove about eighty

pretty much all the way to that beat-up old *Chew Mail Pouch Tobacco* barn that the cops are always hiding behind. I remember when I crossed the Hocking River again and that stupid “Abortion Stops a Beating Heart” sign was staring down at me I was thinking, *God, I really don’t want to go to work today*, but I didn’t notice it being any different than my usual *God, I don’t want to go to work today* feeling. And I slowed down as I came over that last hill and I had my turn signal on to turn off toward Eighth Street and I looked at my watch and it said 3:26 and I was doing the math in my head: *3:16 minus thirty-four minutes means it’s actually 2:54, which means I have eight minutes to get from Eighth Street to Ervin Road to Dogwood and then sprint through the parking lot and up the stairs and I probably still won’t be able to clock in before the time clock clicks over to 15:00:01, which means I’m going to get two attendance points for being late, which means I’m not going to get my fifty-cents-an-hour perfect attendance bonus when my ninety-day attendance period rolls around, which means I’ve been rushing to work all this time for nothing.*

And then in my mind I had a flash of one of those, In-the-grand-scheme-of-things-does-it-really-matter-if-I-don’t-clock-in-on-time-on-this-particular-day-in-the-entire-history-of-the-world? thoughts and suddenly I was calm. I wasn’t thinking about kissing Lurch’s ass so he’d promote me to Floor Supervisor, and I wasn’t thinking about all my credit card bills or how many months or years quicker I could pay them off with an extra fifty cents an hour. All I was thinking was that it was a beautiful day and “Yellow Ledbetter” was playing on my iPod and there was still at least half of the song left and I wouldn’t be able to enjoy it if I was busy rushing to work, and I really really wanted to enjoy it. And then it occurred to me that I was going to get two attendance

points whether I clocked in at 15:00:01 or at 18:59:59, and I totally wasn't in the mood to sprint through the parking lot and up the stairs, anyway, and then I got up to Eighth Street and I kind of stared at the little green street sign and I just drove on past. It was like I was experiencing this whole Zen no-mind thing like Tom Cruise in *The Last Samurai*. Or maybe I was having an out of body experience, because it was almost like I watched myself pass the turn and keep going all the way to Belpre and Parkersburg and the I-77 onramp, and then head south to Who-cares-where-as-long-as-it-isn't-work-ville.

Before I even knew what was going on, I already drove past Ripley, and then through Charleston, and Beckley, and Bluefield, and then I went through this long tunnel and I came out the other side and there was a sign that said, "Welcome to Virginia," and another that said, "Buckle Up Virginia" and I was just like, *How did that happen?* I don't think I drove much farther after that before I stopped at this rest area and not much longer after that I looked up and realized it was dark outside and this orange light was buzzing and I'm still not sure how it all happened.

Maybe it all started this noon when Bob Nunnally, with his Doppler 4 radar and his Weather Plus forecast, predicted this might be the last of the beautiful weather until next March. Or maybe there's something to all that stuff Carl was saying last night about how it's possible that every single thing we do has already been predetermined since the big bang. That'd be weird. Or when I didn't turn off at Eighth Street in Coolville, another universe was created where I *did* turn off and I clocked in on time and I didn't get any attendance points. That'd be weirder. Or maybe all of this is a dream like whoever it was said about the butterfly and maybe I'm actually one of these moths who was knocked unconscious after bapping against my driver's side window, and instead of being me

having these deep or profound or whatever thoughts, maybe I'm just an unconscious moth who's dreaming that I'm a guy sitting in a 1990 Camry having these deep and profound or whatever thoughts. That'd be super-weird—like, *There-is-no-spoon* kind of weird, only more-so.

But I have this feeling like I'm supposed to be here for some reason. Or maybe I just want my life to be significant enough or relevant enough or whatever enough that I would have someplace where the universe wants me to be at some particular moment in time. Or maybe I just really didn't want to go to work tonight. Right now, I'd normally be back from my last fifteen-minute break, with my Sobe-Green-Tea-and-Ranch-CornNuts breath, and probably talking to that one guy who's been calling lately and repeats everything I say. "You've got the Eight of Wands here in your sixth position."

"You've got the Eight of Wands here in your sixth position."

"And the Eight of Wands here usually indicates that you'll have a lot of excitement to look forward to—maybe a promotion, maybe a move to a new city—but you won't have a lot of time to think about it."

"And the Eight of Wands here," blah, blah, blah.

Twenty minutes of that every night gets old fast.

I just wish I understood stuff. Like, I was reading about this guy who rattled off a bunch of numbers when he died and then his family used those numbers on a lottery ticket and won a big pile of money. How is stuff like that even possible? That's what I want to know.

Maybe I'm supposed to be here under this buzzing orange light, maybe I'm not. Maybe I'm an unconscious moth. Whatever the truth is, I'm pretty sure I'm not going to figure it out tonight.

"No snowflake ever falls in the wrong place"—Zen saying.

In the plastic grocery bag that Carl gave me, with the books, were all these torn-off pages from a *Wise Words of Asia* daily calendar. Yeah. End of story.

Except that I could totally use these on my callers and I'd have perfect 20-minute hold times every single night.

"I am everything I've ever come into contact with—everything I've ever seen is a part of me. Think about it, it's true."

There are a bunch of 3x5 cards in the bag, too, and they all have, as far as I can tell, the "wise" words of Carl. Which is fine, I guess. But, first of all, isn't this a song lyric from Pink Floyd or Pearl Jam or somebody? And, second—I thought I had a second, but maybe that was it.

Rules and Regulations of Waysides and Rest Areas that I either plan to, have to, or hope to break:

#3: When posted, parking shall be limited to the two-hour period specified.

#4: No overnight parking will be permitted.

#7: No vehicle shall be parked in such a manner as to occupy more than one marked parking space.

#9: No person shall pick any flowers, foliage or fruit; or cut, break, dig up, or in any way mutilate or injure any tree, shrub, plant, grass turf, railing, seat, fence, structure, or anything within this area or cut, carve, paint, mark or paste on any tree, stone, fence, wall, building, monument or other object therein any bill, advertisement or inscription whatsoever.

#12: No threatening, abusive, boisterous, insulting or indecent language, gesture or behavior shall be used or performed within this area. Nor shall any oration or other public demonstration be made, unless by special authority of the Commissioner.

#19: Any person violating any of the preceding Rules and Regulations shall be guilty of a misdemeanor and upon conviction, be fined not less than \$5.00 nor more than \$100.00 for each offense.

Overheard Behind Me at the Rocky Gap Safety Rest Area and Welcome Center:

Guy number one: "Who do we talk to when we talk to ourselves?"

Guy number two (with a British accent): "Yeah. Who are you talking to now?"

Guy number one: "To you. But if you were nobody, who would you be?"

Guy number two: "Your mom."

I'm back in my car now. Those two guys I was just eavesdropping on? Yeah. I kind of turned my head to see, I don't know, whatever it is people always turn to see when they hear somebody say "your mom." I turned to see what the guys looked like. I turned to see which one of them said "Your mom." I turned to see if the one guy was going to punch the other guy in the face. I turned to see—whatever. But, when I turned, I didn't expect to

see just one scary-looking guy, talking back and forth to himself. And then he looked at me like *What're you looking at?*

So I got up and got in my car. As I was walking over here, I could hear the first voice say, "See? You chased him away."

"It wasn't me, you wanker."

"Yeah it was."

"Kiss my arse."

"Blow me."

He's still over by my picnic table, trying to prove some important point to himself. According to Carl's *Wise Words of Asia* calendar pages, we should be like water and go with the flow and all that. Sometimes I feel like I'm in the middle of this river with a big inner tube around my waist, and I'm walking against the current. Maybe what I should do is just get on my inner tube and just let life tell me where it wants me to go. It seems like right now life is telling me to get away from Crazy Talking-to-Himself Guy before he turns into Crazy Going-Postal Guy. Which I guess means that I'm supposed to drive back home and go to work.

But first, four more wise words from Asia: "Act without doing; work without effort."

Crazy guy's pointing at me—can't tell if it's Guy number one or Guy number two.

God, I hate this job. Just abso-freaking-lutely hate it. I hate this tiny cubicle with not even enough room to turn sideways and stretch my legs. I hate these crappy uncomfortable chairs. I hate that we can't loosen the little screw in the back of these crappy

uncomfortable chairs to make them a little less uncomfortable and crappy because that's considered "Destruction of Appalachian TeleServices property," punishable by immediate termination and a \$500 fine. I hate this flickering fluorescent light. I hate sitting here in the back row because the whole night I'm going to have to listen to, "Ohhhh, good banana! Good banana!" from the row of chubby phone whores behind us. And I'm starting to hate this jacktard on the phone who won't stop talking about how I'm headed to hell.

I usually like it when I've got a talkative caller. All I have to do is say, "Mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm, yeah," every few minutes and they'll keep babbling and I'll go back to playing solitaire or reading *Sports Illustrated* or whatever. But this guy just keeps going on and on and on about how I'm an evil diviner and necromancer and the Bible says I'm going to burn in the fiery pits of the underworld. How should I respond to that? I want to say, "I'm already there, jacktard," but instead I just keep saying, "Mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm."

I should've known tonight was going to suck because, when I was driving back up to Coolville, the sky started getting dark at about Parkersburg. And it wasn't like it was even really cloudy, it was more like Coolville just sucked all the light out of the sky. But now I realize it wasn't Coolville; it was this hellhole. Appalachian TeleServices on South Dogwood Road is like a ginormous black hole that sucks all the hope and happiness and everything good out of the world within its thirty-mile radius.

I came in to work today with such a good attitude, too. Seriously. Well, I mean, I wasn't all like *Golly, gee, I can't wait to put on my headset and start dispensing my brilliant psychic wisdom* or anything like that, but I was in an okay mood, considering

where I was. I'd finally had enough time to stop by Tim Hortons before work, so I walked up the stairs and past the reception desk still savoring my Iced Cappuccino, drawing in just enough through my straw to get a full explosion of chocolaty icy cappuccino-y goodness, but not so much to give myself one of those Slurpee headaches. Life was grand. I was rehearsing in my head how I'd go into the break room and the hot little foreign chick from the 976-line would be sitting there reading whatever book she'd be reading and I'd drop my drink on the table, loud enough that she'd look up, and then she'd say, in her hot little foreign accent that I can't quite hear in my head, "You went to Tim Hortons? I love Tim Hortons!" And I'd pretend like I didn't already know that and I'd play it all cool and I'd say, "Really? Yeah, me too," and then she'd notice the Conor Oberst button I've had on my book bag for the last three weeks and she'd say, "I see we've got the same taste in music," and I'd be all like, "Yeah, even though I don't dress like an Emo retard, I'm totally like that inside," or whatever it is that Emo retards are supposed to say—I hadn't actually worked that part out yet—and then I'd finally be able to ask what her name is and then we'd get together after work and we'd talk and find out that we have all this other crazy stuff in common besides music and Tim Hortons and—that was pretty much all I'd had rehearsed.

But Lurch wheeled up to me in the hallway, just as I was turning left toward the break room, and he was all like, "George, may I speak with you in my office, please?" and I should've known something was wrong right then, because he usually calls me Walker, like everyone else, or sometimes G when he's been listening to his Wu-Tang Clan, but I figured he was just acting all professional because he was about to offer me the Floor Supervisor job. There was no other logical reason for him to talk to me. So

when Lurch came up to me, I acted all serious back and I said, “Certainly, Christopher. Would you prefer that I clock in first?”

And he was like, “No, we won’t be long.” And then, as if he was doing me some big huge favor, he said, “It’ll hurt your stats if you clock in and you’re not on the phone.” Like they didn’t drill that into our heads seventy-one billion times since our first day in OJT. And then he looked at the iced cappuccino in my hand and he was like, “Is that an approved spill-proof container?”

I figured he must have been joking because anybody could see it had a ginormous hole in the top with a big red straw sticking out of it, so I said, “Yeah. It’s brand new. Invented by NASA.” I still don’t know what that means, and he didn’t either. He just stared at me until I was like, “I’m done with it, anyway,” even though it still had at least five good slurps left. But I didn’t want to waste another ten dollars on an Appalachian TeleServices spill-proof water bottle that makes everything taste like plastic, so I dropped the Tim Hortons in the trash and followed Lurch back to his office without clocking in.

He started in with the small talk, like we’re all buddy-buddy. “Why does everyone call you Walker?”

“That’s my middle name,” I said.

“Not according to this.”

“No. That’s wrong,” I said. “It’s Walker.”

“This is a copy of your Social Security card.”

I was just like *Okay, Dwight Schrute, you got me. So I like Chuck Norris. What’s the big deal?* But I kept playing nice, because I still thought I was about to get a dollar an hour raise and better hours, so I was just like, “Uh, yeah. I don’t know.”

And then he asked me how I liked working here, and so of course I said I loved it and I thought that being a telephone psychic provided a unique opportunity to help people, and all that B.S. and then, just out of the blue, he was like, “The reason I called you in here is because of your performance on the call floor,” and I still thought everything was fine, but then he said, all professional like, “Your scores on your last two Quality Assurance evaluations have been well below the standard we expect from our TSRs.”

I was just like, “What?” For a second I totally thought I was getting Punk’d or something. But when I looked at him, he looked all serious, so I said, “But I always have good AHTs.”

“I believe your Average Hold Times have been more than adequate, but you scored below sixty on your last two QAs.”

Okay, first of all: “More than adequate”? I’ve had a top-five AHT every week since I’ve been here; out of two hundred-plus people, I’d say that’s way better than “more than adequate.” But I didn’t say anything. I just sat there wishing that I hadn’t thrown away my iced cappuccino and wishing even more that I would’ve clocked in. Because, I mean, if I would’ve known I was about to get PINed and then put on probation, I definitely would’ve wanted to be getting paid. I mean, if I’m not getting paid, that’s basically my free time, right? And about the last thing I want to be doing with my free time is sitting in Lurch’s office while he reads me my whole DAF all the way through. “George King, the purpose of this Disciplinary Action Form is to advise you, as a Telephone Sales Representative, that you have been assessed either four Step Two or two Step Three Professional Improvement Notifications within a consecutive ninety-day period,” blah blah blah. Like I wouldn’t be able to read the pink copy on my own time.

And then he made me initial the little line on my DAF every single time he finished a paragraph. We were in there for almost forty-five minutes, so it seems like I should've been getting paid. Isn't there a law about that or something? There should be, if there isn't. But it's not like I was in any position to complain.

Finally I was like, "I don't understand how I could've scored so low. I thought I was doing good."

So like a total dickwad, he started reading the whole paragraph about Sincerity again, and I was just like, "Okay, okay."

But why is Sincerity even one of the PIN options, anyway? That was my question. I mean, I read people their tarot cards over the phone for \$5.99 or \$Whatever-they-charge-in-Canada.99 a minute; there's not one single thing about this job that's sincere. They don't want me to be sincere. They don't want me to start telling callers that I'm in a big telemarketing building on the same floor as the fruit and vegetable phone whores and one floor above the people who sell the Ab Cruncher and the Showtime Rotisserie Grill and all that other crap. I can be sincere if they want me to be sincere. I can tell this butt monkey on the phone who's still reading me Bible passages that the only way he's going to get those five free minutes that he's counting on is if he talks for the full twenty minutes, and there's no way that's going to happen because, at nineteen minutes and five seconds, I'm going to beep my watch next to my microphone and say, "Okay, Mr. Redneck-who-refuses-to-tell-me-your-name-because-you-think-we-store-it-on-some-big-computer-in-North-Dakota, that beep you just heard is to advise us that this call is about to end. Company policy requires that these calls not last longer than twenty minutes and we're almost there."

“‘Sincerity,’” Lurch said, “refers to your tone of voice. According to your evaluations, you got your last three PINs for ‘sarcasm during your close.’”

Aaarrggghhh.

And tell me how Don still has a job. Right now he just said, and I quote, “You should hear this stupid bitch. She found a used condom and another chick’s panties in her husband’s car, and she wants to know if my cards say he’s cheating on her.”

“Is her name Brenda? Born on June 12, 1977?” Colin asked. “I just talked to her.”

“Son of a bitch!”

“Did she get to the part yet where her husband’s car is parked at the Motel Six next to his secretary’s?”

“Why the hell is this bitch wasting my time?”

It doesn’t make any sense. First of all, Don talks so loud that, even though he puts his thumb over his microphone, his callers can hear him. Everybody’s callers can hear him. And, second, it says right here on my pink DAF copy, in bold type and everything:

**Using vulgar or profane language while on the call floor
will result in immediate termination.**

This place pisses me off. I’m on the verge of getting fired because Chewbacca doesn’t think I sound sincere but Don can cuss on the call floor every single day and he doesn’t even get a warning. And Colin never deals his cards like we’re supposed to. They told us on the very first day of training that we absolutely have to deal our cards on every single call. And every time a woman calls he tells her that she’ll meet her one true love in Anchorage, Alaska, this winter—“Someplace with a bear. I don’t know if it’s the name of a bar, or maybe there’s a stuffed bear somewhere in the bar, but that’s where you’ll meet

him.” It seems like that’s got to be against some kind of rule, considering all the stupid rules they have in this place. And then Lewis does half his calls in his Cartman voice. Plus, he spends at least two hours in the restroom every single night. He’s not even subtle about it. He walks up past the front desk, buys a newspaper, and then comes back and walks straight to the restroom. He doesn’t even try to make it look like he’s going back to his phone. At least Colin fumbles around at the time clock first and pretends like he’s clocking out.

I don’t get it. At all. And I don’t understand why this guy on the phone thinks he needs to save me. “Are you ready to accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior?” What does that even mean? “Are you ready to give up your life of sin? Are you ready to change your life, Walker?”

“Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm,” I say. And now he’s back to the Bible verses.

The other thing that pisses me off is that nobody in the whole entire building does the greeting right, but I’m the only one who’s ever gotten PINed for it. That’s the biggest bunch of crap. We’re supposed to say, “Thanks for calling your psychic advisor. This is _____. May I have your first name and date of birth, please?” And then we’re supposed to ask their age. But, if you do it that way, when you get to their age part, they always—always—say, “You’re the psychic, you tell me,” like the ability to instantly subtract is the number one quality anybody should look for in their fake telephone psychic. And then you have to spend the next eight minutes just trying to convince them that you really are psychic. As opposed to when you ask for their age first, they’ll just give you their date of birth without hassling you and you can move right on into their reading, which is why everybody does it that way. Except for me. I’ve still got three

active Step Ones for that. I tried to explain to Lurch how it's better for hold times to do it the other way and "What difference does it make, anyhow?"

"Exactly," he said. "What difference, indeed?" like that was the end of the discussion. Aaarrrrrrrgggggghhhhhhhh! I swear, it's like, this company is just begging somebody to get pissed off enough to go postal all over the place. You'd think, with the relaxed gun laws they have in Ohio, that they'd treat people with a little more respect. I mean, I don't plan on shooting anybody or anything, but, I have to admit, after Lurch made me initial about paragraph five or six of my DAF, I started sort of fantasizing about rolling up that "Smile! The caller can see it!" banner from behind his brand-new desk and shoving it up his ass. Just yanking him out of his wheelchair and doing a reenactment of Iwo Jima in front of his short little filing cabinets. I felt bad thinking like that about some handicapped dude, but then I thought, I don't want to discriminate against anybody because they're in a wheelchair, so shouldn't I *want* to shove the Smile banner up his ass, especially since the guy's such a totally ginormous douchetard?

ATS Archie says, "People! Use Selective Sarcasm, Y'all!" ATS Archie says, "Together We Are Terrific!" ATS Archie says, "See you Next Tuesday!" ATS Archie says, "You can't spell SUCCESS without the SUC(K)!"

Oh, and the other thing that pissed me off was Lurch totally wouldn't believe me when I said I missed work yesterday because my grandma was in the hospital. I mean, yeah, I pretty much made it all up, but he didn't know that. It could've been true. And he was a total jerk about it. ATS Archie says, "There's no 'I' in 'Eat Me.'"

But the *other* other thing that really pissed me off: Lurch told me that I could either go back into OJT and have everybody think I'm a total retard while I sit next to a "more-qualified TSR," double-jacked into their phone and doing nothing but listening to all their calls for two weeks, or I can just make sure I don't get another Step Two or Step Three for ninety days, in which case I'd automatically be fired. If I go with the OJT option, I have to go back to OJT pay, which is a dollar less an hour. I wanted to tell him to shove his on-the-job training up his ass with the Smile banner and the stick that was apparently already there, but instead I was just like, "Can I have some time to think about it?"

And he said, "Just make sure you don't get a Step Two or Step Three in the meantime." What a fucktard.

But I found out while he was reading my DAF that we can get two Step Ones for each infraction before we get a Step Two. So I could, theoretically, have twenty-six more level-one infractions and still not get a Step Two—twenty-eight if "vulgar, abusive or offensive language in the break rooms" count as three separate things. That's a goal that might make this job moderately tolerable. I could start today. I think I'll make my inappropriate sexual advance toward the hot little foreign chick on the fruit and vegetable line.

Holy crap! The guy on the phone just totally screamed at me—loud enough that Colin could hear him through my headset. The guy was like, "Are you listening to me, son? Are you listening to me?" I said, "Yeah, I was just trying to write down everything you said." But he wouldn't believe me at first because he could hear the phone whores moaning behind me and he thought I was having sex, so I said, "That's my neighbor. Her

husband just got back from Iraq,” and a bunch of crap like that, and then I was like, “What were those verses again?” and finally he said, “Ezekiel 13 and Deuteronomy 18,” I think, and a bunch of others, and I was like, “Mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm. I’m going to mark those in my Bible as soon as we hang up,” and he said, “Why don’t you do it now?” and I said, “It might take a while to find it,” and he said, “I can wait,” which is the absolute worst thing to say to somebody whose job is to keep you on the phone for as long as possible. But, like a dumbass, I said, “Really?” which is negative, instead of, “Okay,” which is affirmative, but he still said, “Of course, Walker. I’m tryin’ to save your soul, son,” so now he thinks I’m in my apartment right now looking for my Bible, when I’m really just sitting in my cubicle with the *Jeopardy* theme in my head.

I mean, first of all, what does this guy expect? That I can just quit my job as a “diviner and enchanter” because he thinks it’s an abomination unto the Lord? Who else is going to pay me ten-fifty an hour to sit on my ass for eight straight hours? Who’s going to pay me that to do anything? I mean, he can talk all he wants about how I shouldn’t work here, or I shouldn’t work there, but it’s like *Don’t you think I’d be working at a better job if I could find one?*

Seriously, what am I going to do? get a job selling paw paws and gooseberry pies at The Cool Spot? A job there wouldn’t pay anything. And it’s not like people are pounding on my door every day, saying “Walker! I want you to come answer the phones for us at NASA.” I don’t have a whole lot of options. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I wish I had the kiwis to quit this stupid job. I wish I had the avocados to freak out and actually scream f-u at everybody right on the call floor. I wish I had the tomatoes to tell all the

callers to stop calling these numbers because it's a scam and a rip-off—*and never buy anything you see on TV*—but I haven't grown them yet.

Maybe if I didn't have any bills, it'd be different. But I'm barely making the minimum payments on my credit cards as it is. And that's with me buying the cheap, fake bags of cereal and the generic Toaster Pastries because the real Frosted Flakes and the real Pop Tarts are big-ticket items for me, so it's not like I can just quit my job because some religious doucheneck can't read the fine print at the bottom of the ad that says FOR ENTERTAINMENT PURPOSES ONLY.

And now he just said "Hello? Walker?" for the fifth time since I went to find my Bible. Pretty soon, I'm going to have to scrape my hand across my microphone and say, "Hello? Hello? Are you still there? Hello?" And then I'll say I still can't find my Bible or whatever I'm going to say and then he'll read me some more verses and hopefully the next three minutes will go by fast and then I'll sound sincere when I say I'm glad he called.

God, I hate this job.

Here I sit, feeling great, getting paid to defecate. For the first time in my life, I'm making money while backing the big brown Cadillac out of the garage and, I must say, it's one of the greatest things I've ever experienced in my life. And I know that, officially, it might not count as getting paid to ride the porcelain pony because it's not like Connie came up to me and said, "As your acting Floor Supervisor, I command you to go visit Mr. Hanky immediately." And it's not like anybody knows that right now I'm hanging out in Lurch's completely graffiti-free handicapped stall with its cuddly-soft toilet paper and its

magnetic *Wise Words of Asia* daily calendar, but I didn't clock out like I was supposed to so, technically, I think it still has to count. If I stay in here until my lunch break it'll work out to almost sixty dollars they'd be paying me. To take the Browns to the Super Bowl. God, I just love the whole idea of that; I don't know why. It's kind of like getting paid to have sex with a hot chick you wanted to have sex with anyway. And since that's probably never going to happen, I'll have to settle for this. And that's okay, because I'm getting paid to release the chocolate hostages. I don't think I'll ever get tired of writing that.

This night kept getting worse and worse until I came back here. First I threw away my iced cappuccino with five good slurps left, then Lurch gave me a PIN for some total bullcrap, then I talked to some crazy guy who spent all twenty minutes of his call telling me I'm going to burn in hell, then Connie came by my cubicle and started yelling at me: "I put you on MAKE BUSY twenty-five minutes ago. Don't you know that when a Supervisor puts you on MAKE BUSY you're supposed to go to the front desk immediately after your call?"

I was just like, "I didn't notice."

"How could you not notice that you're the only person in the whole building who's not taking any calls?" and on and on.

Eventually she pissed me off enough that I got the grapes to say, "Did you want something? Why did you put me on MAKE BUSY?"

"To give you this," and she handed me this pink Attendance Warning Notification and I was just like, "What the hell is this?" and I'm pretty sure I said "hell" right there on the call floor, but she didn't seem to notice, so maybe I didn't actually say it. I wanted to, though.

She answered all matter-of-factly. “You clocked in today at 3:49—that’s two attendance points. You no-call-no-showed yesterday, which is eight points. Once you get halfway to eighteen we’re supposed to give you this Attendance Warning,” she told me. “As a courtesy.”

“But I was in Lurch’s office,” I said. “He told me to not clock in.”

But she still wouldn’t change it. I showed her my pink DAF, with the date and time and Lurch’s signature on it and everything, and she was still like, “You’ll have to take that up with Chris when he gets back on Thursday.”

That’s when I was just like *Screw this* and I came back here where I wouldn’t have to deal with anybody. Plus, I have the added benefit of hearing the girls on the 976-line plain as day. I know they can’t say words like “me” or “you” or “I” or “my” or “yours” or “ours,” and they have to use fruits and vegetables when referring to body parts but, damn, they do just fine without any of that. I can see why they get three times as many calls as we do. I’m starting to get a sprout wood, to tell the truth.

“Oh, yesss. The melons are ripe. Thump them! Thump them! Yes! Yes!” I think that’s the hot little foreign chick. I’m not sure, but I’m going to pretend like it is. I can totally picture that thick, dark, long curly hair down to her ass, and those almost-too-big, sexy Angelina Jolie pillow lips that make me wish I was a drinking straw. “Squeeze that sausage. Massage those kiwis. Don’t stop. Harder. Harder. Harder. Yes!”

Here I sit, I want to jump and shout; I’m about to get paid to rub one out.

Oh. My. God.

If God or Tunkasila or whoever would've asked me, "Hey, Walker, what would you be willing to do for the chance to hang out after work with that chick you were tugging it to tonight at work?" I would've said, "Anything, man. Anything."

And if the Great Spirit or whoever wanted to totally punk me, he would've stuck me right here, right now, on this greasy couch in this ought-to-be condemned mobile home from hell, listening to Carl describe every single picture on his whole entire MySpace page while hot little Fatinah—who's not foreign, by the way, she's from Kentucky (which I guess is pretty much the same thing) is lying on the other couch, either asleep or doing a lot better job at ignoring Carl than I am.

"This is the writer's group I was telling you about. You probably recognize most of them from work. Here's another one of my ex. This was at Lake Hope. She looked hot in a bikini, didn't she? This one—I can't remember where this one's from. Maybe it's Lake Hope again."

The funny thing is he actually thinks I'm paying so much attention that I'm taking notes on everything he's saying. Get over yourself. I haven't looked at one picture since I saw the one on his profile. It's black and white; he's standing with his hands folded together like he's praying or meditating and being all spiritual with his long wanna-be hippie hair, and he's not wearing a shirt. *Wtf?* It's zoomed in enough that you don't have to see his tubby stomach, but you can see his tubby arms and his tubby man boobs behind all that super-long hippie wanna-be hair. Everything about the picture screams "douchetard!" in other words.

I want to tell him, "Hey, Carl, I've finished writing your book—it covers everything anybody needs to know about you: 'My name is Carl Rhodes and I'm a total

douche.’ Now where’s my money? Pay me—and don’t give me any excuses about how you have to wait until your ‘guy’ needs to pay you for all the plants in your back room.”

But that wouldn’t win me any points with Fatinah. She seems to think for some reason that Carl’s cool. Maybe not *cool*, but she doesn’t seem to realize what a total ginormous dillhole he is. I can’t hold that against her, though.

I almost forgot: every single screenshot in his list of favorite movies has either a goblin, a troll, or somebody wearing a pointy hat. Just an observation.

I almost forgot, part two: the newest candidate for Greatest Food in the World: a spoonful of marshmallow cream, perfectly toasted over Carl’s stove burner and then spread on top of a Frosted Blueberry Pop Tart and washed down with a Cherry-Vanilla Dr. Pepper. It was so good I thought I was going to cry—seriously—I felt my eyes welling up and everything. Now my stomach feels like it’s going to explode. End of story.

“This was at Burning Man—the beginning of my spiritual awakening. We had an improv theme camp. I’m playing Buddhaghosa, practicing my meditations on the foul, and he’s supposed to be Nietzsche and she’s Molly Bloom.”

“I made this one in Photoshop—the key symbolizes my search for ultimate truth, but I’m at the wrong door, see?”

No, I don’t. But I’ll grunt mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm anyway if it makes you feel better. “Mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm.”

I was totally planning to be home by now, quietly relaxing alone in front of my own TV, watching *South Park* and *Blind Date* and *Maury* and *King of the Hill*. I figured I'd come here, give him back his bag of books and crap—but not the weed, he said I could keep that, no matter what—and then I'd say, “Thanks, but no thanks,” and then he and I would smoke a couple bong hits (of his weed) to show there were no hard feelings and then I'd leave.

But then I pulled into his driveway just as he was getting out of his car and, getting out on his passenger's side was the girl I've wanted since my very first day at ATS. And she came up to me before I barely got out of my car and she was like, “Hi, Walker. I'm Fatinah,” and her voice wasn't at all like I'd thought it was—it was more of a deep, smooth, warm-cocoa kind of voice, with this insta-schwing Southern accent on top—so I don't know whose voice I was stroking it to tonight in the handicapped stall at work, but it definitely wasn't hers. And then she said, “Carl says you're a writer,” and, before I got a chance to correct her, Carl jumped in and said, “Not just any writer. Walker is *the* writer. He's helping me with my book. It's going to be a bestseller.”

And she said, “Wow, that's so cool.”

I wanted to say something like “No, it's just a big misunderstanding; I'm not a writer; I can't write his stupid book.” But, instead, like a total jacktard I said, “Yeah, well, I'm going to try.” It was totally like the truth was physically unable to escape from my mouth. I was standing there in the dark, in front of this girl I've had a crush on forever, and now, finally, she was standing right in front of me, giving me one of those super-long hand sandwich handshakes—the kind that'd feel completely uncomfortable if it was a guy doing it—and her hands were soft and warm and something about her face reminded

me of Jessica Alba, plus she was kind of glowing from the dome light of my car and I just could not tell the truth.

I forgot what I was going to say, but I'm pretty sure it was brilliant. I feel like I've got all these brilliant thoughts swirling around in my head, but they're like these slippery fish, and I don't have a net, and I'm trying to catch them like a grizzly catches salmon, only I don't have the claws or the sharp teeth, so I can't catch any of them and they just keep swirling, swirling, swirling.

"I took this picture right before I first kissed her. Valerie. When I sat down our foreheads snapped together like magnets like they always did but this time, I finally got up the nerve to ask her, 'What would you do if I kissed you?' and she said, 'Probably kiss you back,' and so I did and she did and we did. It was amazing. No matter how many women I've been with since, there's never been anyone who could compare to her. I haven't seen her forever. I think she still works at the Hirshhorn in D.C."

I was too curious not to look at that one, and then I had to give it a double-take because I thought for a second it looked like Fatinah. The eyes are all different, though, and Fatinah's lips are way bigger and sexier.

Why do I always laugh when Maury says, "You are not the father"? Even with the volume off, it's still funny. And it doesn't matter if it's the guy who runs backstage or the girl, I still want to laugh. This time it was the guy. "Oh, boo-hoo, Maury. When she said, 'Would you like to go on *Maury* so I can tell you a horrible secret,' I didn't know it'd be bad, boo hoo." That always cracks me up.

Now Maury's got his arm around the not-father, trying to act all like some cross between Dr. Phil and Snoop Dogg: "Yo, homes, I can izzle with your gizzle, but you gots to pizzle the bazizzle, you know what I'm sazizzling?" What a douchebag.

And now the not-father is shaking his head and Maury's still talking: "Yo, my homie. What's the pazizzle with the fazizzling shizzlenit?"

"Yo, Maury. When she said she knew Jacob is my son because we've got the same huge *beep*, I was believing it because, you know, I've got a monster in my pants. But now I know she's had sex with another guy with a big monster, and I don't think I can handle that."

"Gizzle bizzle fizzle wokajommyizzle-pazizzle."

"Maury, I may be nodding to everything you say, but that's because I'm thinking in my head: 'You're a dumbass. Yeah, you're a dumbass.'"

End of story.

And for God's sake: if you know your girlfriend doesn't trust you, and you get invited on *Maury*, and you're in Maury's Green Room (which you know, if you've ever seen a *Maury* episode, has about twenty million hidden cameras) and some super-hot, super-slutty, "I'm-going-on-*Maury*-to-break-up-with-my-boyfriend-because-I-need-sex-too-often" chick starts hitting on you, and you know she's twenty times too hot for you even on your best day, then you should probably think twice before dry humping her on Maury's couch. That's all I'm saying. (They just showed the preview for the next *Maury*.)

Four fucking slices of motherfucking pickle and pimento fucking loaf

all the motherfucking Blueberry fucking Pop Tarts
 a brand-fucking-new bag of motherfucking Cheetos
 three fucking cans of Cherry motherfucking Vanilla fucking Dr. cocksucking Pepper
 and all the ice cream bars. All the motherfucking, cocksucking, sonofabitching ice cream
 motherfucking bars.
 And the motherfucking leftovers from Long John Silver's? Muh-ther-fucker. There were
 three fucking hushpuppies in here.

This is the fourth time that Chainsaw has gone through his list of food that's
 mysteriously missing from his and Carl's kitchen, and I'm trying to act busy as hell and
 completely oblivious, hoping that if I keep writing he'll assume that I'm assuming that
 I've got nothing to do with whatever it is he's yelling about. I'm going for that vibe that
 says, *Hey, dude, I heard the word "food" and so of course I knew that whatever it is
 you're talking about had nothing to do with me because I haven't been anywhere near
 your kitchen tonight. Kitchen? You and Carl have a kitchen? See? I didn't even know.
 That's how oblivious I am. I don't know any more than Fatinah, passed out here on the
 couch. I'm minding my own business, trying to give you and Carl your privacy as you
 talk about whatever it is you're talking about.*

I hope I'm pulling it off, because I'm pretty sure this Chainsaw dude is
 completely psycho. Like Nick-Nolte-mug shot psycho. Like Britney-Spears-smashing-a-
 car-with-her-umbrella psycho. For the last I-don't-know-how-many minutes, he's been
 pacing faster and faster back and forth in a little figure-eight—fridge to stove, fridge to
 stove, fridge to stove—while he tears at his Nick-Nolte-mug shot hair and mumbles
 “blueberry Pop Tarts” and “motherfucking Cheetos” between louder and louder growling

noises and so I'm just writing writing writing. Busy busy busy. Oblivious oblivious oblivious. Huh? Huh? Huh?

This dude seemed so normal twenty minutes ago when he first got home. Well, I mean, he seemed more normal then than he seems now. Carl was like, "This is my roommate, Rich," and Chainsaw was like, "Walker—the writer, right? Call me 'Chainsaw'—C-h-E-n," and I was like, "Okay, *Chainsaw*," and everything seemed cool. He offered me a bong hit right away, even though I totally didn't need one, and then he complained about how much it sucked to be forty-some years old and still working at ATS plus cooking at Applebee's on weekends, stuff like that. And then he started in with the dead baby jokes, and the blonde jokes—What did the blonde call her pet zebra? Spot (that's the only one I remember)—and then he said his life was way more interesting than Carl's and I should be writing the Chainsaw memoir instead. I thought maybe he was right. But then, when Carl went into the kitchen, Chainsaw leaned over to me and, in his gravelly cigarette voice, he was like, "I meant that about my memoir, son. I could tell you stories. Good ones. You should work for me," and then he winked at me. I just kind of nodded without saying anything and then, totally out of the blue, he told me about this time he stalked some random dude for a whole year—"I knew everything about him, son. I knew his bank PIN numbers, I knew where he went to lunch on Wednesdays, I had a key to his apartment, had hidden cameras in his bedroom and kitchen." He went on and on. I was hoping for some punch line like "Since he was so homophobic, I had him convinced he was gay—har, har" or "Now, whenever he sees a Chevy ad on TV, he cries like a little girl—har, har." Something like that.

But, instead, Chainsaw told me how he turned the heat way up on the guy's fish tank, and then he took the guy's dog "for a permanent walk, if you know what I mean," and all this other stuff. Then he looked right at me and he said, "Then one day he came home early and I hid in his closet and *bam!* right in the face." He did the *bam* so loud, it made me jump out of this beanbag a little. Then I just looked at him like, *Wtf?* and then he winked at me again and he said, "You know what I'm talking about."

No, I don't know what you're talking about, Chainsaw. Seriously, *Wtf?* Why would he think that I would know what he's talking about? That's what I want to know. What kind of psychotic freak tells a story like that to somebody he just met? I mean, supposedly he knows me from work, but I'm pretty sure I've never talked to him before. How does he know I won't go to the police as soon as I get out of here? That's what scares me. I don't know if it's a true story or if he just made it up, but he looked completely serious when he told me. I didn't know what to say, so I just kind of did a fake chuckle and I was like, "Yeah, that's a pretty wild story."

And he said, "I've got hundreds of 'em."

That's why right now I'm pretending that I don't know anything about any food that anybody might have eaten in anybody's kitchen and that's why I'm pretending I don't hear him yelling "Motherfucker" this and "Motherfucker" that (here a fucker, there a fucker, everywhere a motherfucker), even though he's for sure woken up everybody in this whole, spread-out trailer park, plus the whole entire town of Coolville and probably most of Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Kentucky. If he does whatever "*bam!*" is to some random guy in Reno that he never met, I don't want to know what he does to somebody who ate all his motherfucking Blueberry fucking Pop Tarts.

“Motherfucker, motherfucker, motherfucker.”

Busy busy busy. *Don't mind me*, my obliviousness clearly says, *I'm just an innocent guest who is totally oblivious to what I can only assume must be a friendly conversation between you and Carl about whatever it is two roommates have friendly conversations about.*

“Ate all my Goddamned pickles.”

That wasn't me. I hate pickles. I always have. I like pickle loaf, but that's because I always thought that the little green specks in pickle loaf were olives. Until, like, two months ago. I don't know why, because I know the difference between olives and pickles, and I know it's called pickle loaf and not olive loaf, but I just always used to think that those were little green specks of olives. And now, even though I know they're pickles, I still like it. And I like relish, which I've always known was pickles. But I still hate pickles, so I know it wasn't me who ate his pickles. I don't think.

“What kind of sick motherfucking fuck eats all the motherfucking marshmallows out of another man's Lucky fucking Charms? Without the marshmallows, it's just a fucking box of Alphabits without the fucking alphabet.”

Okay, that was me. But I'm still pretty sure I—crap.

God, this has to be the greatest morning ever in the whole entire history of mornings throughout the whole entire history of the universe. Seriously. First of all, I've got Fatinah crashed out in my bed, lying on and under and in my sheets, hopefully drooling on my pillow. Which, alone, should put this in the top five of all-time great mornings,

even if she does still have all her clothes on. But then I also just took the absolute best-in-every-way-possible dump in my entire life, plus there's that whole glad-to-be-alive feeling, all of which adds up to the best morning ever. It's like those old beer ads they have on You-tube: "It don't get any better than this." Instead of a bunch of guys sitting around a campfire or whatever, they should have an ad with me, waiting for the incense smoke to clear out of the bathroom before I try to crawl back into bed as if I only just left for a quick sleepwalking pee.

"Hmm?" I'll say sleepily. "No, my breath always smells this minty fresh in the morning," and then I'll flop my arm back on top of her like I thought I was dreaming about polar bears or something. Which is why I have to wait for the smoke to clear. If there's incense smoke, then obviously I've been up long enough to burn incense, and if I've been up long enough to burn incense, then obviously I'm not as incoherently groggy as I'm pretending to be and, if I'm not as incoherently groggy as I'm pretending to be, then how the hell will I be able to explain why my hand happens to be right on top of her chest?

God, I'm not sure exactly what combination of charm and good luck and offerings to what supreme being it took to get her into my bed. I remember Chainsaw—C-h-E-n—freaking out about his food, and then me and Fatinah sneaked out of there as soon as we could, and then it was like, me and her were spooning in my bed and my hand was in her crotch and she was wearing these little tiny sexy bikini underwear (it was too dark to see, but they felt like they were white) and then she said, "What're you doing?" Only she didn't say it mad or anything. I don't know how she said it, but she didn't say it mad.

So I said, "Teasing you."

“Well, stop teasing me.” She didn’t say that mad, either. I’d already caressed her breasts until her nipples were hard, and she never grabbed my hand or tried to stop me, so I didn’t know if she wanted me to stop the teasing thing because she was on the verge of becoming uncontrollably horny, or if I was just pestering the hell out of her. But I stopped. And then, when I asked if she wanted to snuggle, she said Yes like she was glad I asked. I almost screwed up, though. We were all snuggled together and it felt really really nice and I screwed up and sighed all happy like, “This is nice,” and she kind of laughed like I was a total idiot.

The only thing that saved me was I put my hand in her hair right away and I was like “And you have such beautiful hair,” and she laughed because we were making fun of Carl earlier when he was hitting on her and telling her how beautiful her hair was.

I can smell her on my shirt. Kind of a combination of maraschino cherries and the color blue is the best way I can describe it. And I can’t stop thinking about her big wet silky soft pillow lips. It’s like, you can hear those lips getting in the way while she talks, like her sexy little southern accent trips over her lips when the words come out.

And her eyes are like a big warm vat of melted chocolate. The only way I can describe them would be to hold my arms way out, but I don’t know if that’s supposed to measure the distance between my hands and suggest “big,” or if I’m holding up this giant, imaginary sphere to indicate “all-encompassing,” or if it’s just a big, wide-armed shrug of “I’m completely clueless about what her eyes do to me.” There just seems to be something big and deep and warm and secure and sensuous and sexual and soft and loving and wise within her eyes and they do something to me, but I don’t know what. Plus there’s this whole warm electricity thing that I can feel when we hug.

Is it possible to fall in love with somebody after just one night like last night? That's what I want to know. I mean, even though we were just *sleeping* sleeping together, as opposed to *mattress-mambo* sleeping together, it was still the greatest thing ever. I swear to God, I don't know how anything could ever possibly be better. Unless it was me and Fatinah with the mattress mambo thing. That's the only thing that could even come close.

I think it's time to crawl back into bed.

Wise words of Carl vs. *Wise Words of Asia*

"Let us train our minds to desire what the situation demands"—Seneca.

"I hate it when you can never find the top of the dope bag to unroll it—it's like trying to find the end to a roll of Scotch tape when some asshole didn't stick it hard enough to that little serrated tape-cutting thing"—Carl the Dillwad.

Work tonight sucked. Sucked. Which is pretty much what I can expect for the next two weeks. Since I'm back in OJT, I had to spend all night double-jacked with that annoying Sara chick, listening to her calls *all-l-l-ll* night. And she was horrible. She didn't have one call that lasted more than fifteen minutes. She kept saying stuff like "I can't believe my calls are so short tonight," and stuff like that, but I couldn't believe that some of them lasted as long as they did. The whole night, she kept telling her callers how horrible her girlfriend is, and how her girlfriend tells her how to dress, and how her girlfriend gets mad whenever she talks to anybody, and how her girlfriend broke some guy's nose at some bar in Athens. I kept doodling on the "Listen first, talk second" sticker at our station,

but she never did get the hint. She should totally be listening to my calls for two weeks, not me listening to her. That's how screwed up they are at Appalachian TeleServices. Dicktards. I don't know how she can always get perfect QA evaluations, unless she was lying about that, but she must get pretty good scores otherwise I would've been double-jacked with someone else. That doesn't make sense to me at all.

Plus, she gave the most horrible advice in the whole entire history of horrible advice. No matter who called, she told them to break up with their boyfriend or their girlfriend or their husband or their wife—or at least start cheating on them. The could be calling to ask for their lucky numbers and Sara would say, “You don't need any lucky numbers; you need to find another man.”

“My husband was paralyzed by a drunk driver.”

“Have you ever heard of karma, Lucille? Haven't you ever seen *My Name is Earl* on TV?”

That's pretty much what every call sounded like. I was just trying to scoot as far away from her as possible, in case God or Tunkasila or Whoever decided the world would be better off without her. But she kept scooting back closer toward me. The whole night she acted like we've known each other forever and she kept touching my leg and talking about all kinds of sex stuff between practically every call. That made me nervous because she never once put her thumb over her microphone and Chewbacca was in the QA booth so she could've heard every single thing Sara said if she wanted to. I don't want Chewbacca coming after me and breaking my nose, I don't care how big Sara's fake boobs are or how much of a freak she might be.

And then, when I needed to borrow a pen so I could start doodling on the “Listen first, talk second” sticker, she went on and on and on forever about how she’s collected pens since her family went to Virginia Beach in first grade and she started showing me all the pens out of her purse. Pens from work, pens from pen pals. And on and on. All night she was digging new pens out of her purse. If she was on a call, she’d write on a piece of scratch paper, “I stole this one from the OU Credit Union,” or, “I stole this one from Chase Bank,” like I couldn’t read “Chase Bank” on the pen and figure that out myself.

“I stole this one from the BMV—the lady was a bitch.”

I tried to act interested at first but, after a while, it was too much.

So tonight totally sucked. And Fatinah had the night off, so I didn’t get to see her, which made everything suck even more.

There was one highlight, though: Colin quit. That wasn’t the cool part (although it’ll be nice to not have him call me Howdy Doody and Alfred E. Neuman every night). The cool part was that he was screaming, “Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck this place!” right in the middle of the call floor. The security guard was escorting him out and all the way down the aisle he kept yelling to everybody, “Get out while you can! This place will kill your soul!” After work, I asked Lewis why Colin freaked out like that and he said all that happened was one of the floor supervisors told him he couldn’t have his jacket draped over the back of his chair, that it had to be down under his desk, and then Colin snapped.

I don’t know if that’s true or not, but, apparently, that happens about every four months—somebody freaking out like that and quitting in a brief blaze of glory. I’d love to have the kiwis to do that.

Somebody else was saying that Colin was the Potato Guy that everybody's always talking about—that the reason he got sent upstairs from tech support in the first place was because he got caught telling callers to put a potato on their DirecTV receivers right as he'd send the TV signal from the satellite, and then he'd say, "Okay, the next time you get that snowy screen, just get another potato and put it on top of your receiver." I don't know if that's true either.

I can't stop thinking about Fatinah. When I dropped her off at her apartment before work I asked her (sort of out of the blue but not inappropriate) "Did you have fun last night?" and she said "Yeah," in a kind of *I definitely had fun* way. And at her door, I sort of stood there for a second and *she* reached out and gave *me* a hug. I still haven't technically kissed her yet, unless you count a little peck on her shoulder while we were spooning, but the hug was nice. But then she said she felt sick and she went inside real fast, so I've been thinking about that.

God, I hope she liked it as much as I did. Fatinah Fatinah Fatinah. It seemed like she did, but maybe I should've made more of a move on her—do chicks like that, or not? Or, if some chicks do like it and others don't, how are we supposed to know who to act like that to and who to not act like that to? I don't see how it'd be asking too much for some kind of sign. Unless we're just supposed to make the moves on everybody. Or maybe it never was any more than just this thing that happened after this crazy high-stress incident. If so, I should probably be thanking Chainsaw—c-h-E-n—instead of thinking he's a total psycho. Well, he is a total psycho, but if he's the reason I woke up next to Fatinah this

morning, I should be totally thanking him. *Hey, Chainsaw, dude, thanks for going all rock star on your kitchen and trashing the total crap out of your trailer. Well done!* That was insane. All I remember is I sneaked a look at him just as he put the box of Rice Krispies on the counter, and I had this feeling of hesitant relief—I don't know why I call it that, but that's exactly what it was—because I knew I didn't eat any Rice Krispies (I'd thought about it, but the box hadn't been opened yet) but I had this feeling that something bad was about to happen. And then he opened the door of their little pantry, where they kept the instant oatmeal and the cans of diced tomatoes and the Cheese Club brand macaroni and cheese and the McCormick Bac'n Pieces bacon flavored chips and the Jet-Puffed marshmallow cream (America's favorite, needs no refrigeration, forty-five calories per two-tablespoon serving) and then he said his loudest yet "Muh-ther-fucker," and threw the jar of marshmallow cream as hard as he could against the door. And the jar was glass and it smashed. And then he really started freaking. He yelled, "I can't even make Goddamned Rice Krispie Treats in my own Goddamned motherfucking home," and, "Motherfucker, Motherfucker, Motherfucker," and then he went through the whole list again of all the food I ate except, when he got to the end, he just kept screaming, "Fucking marshmallow cream! Marshmallow motherfucking cream! Motherfucking marshmallow fucking cream!" over and over and over and then he knocked over their pantry thing. I couldn't keep writing after that, because there was no way I could've not noticed that, no matter how focused I pretended to be. He knocked over their kitchen table, with all their stuff on it. He pulled out their silverware drawer and slammed it over and over against the table until the leg broke off. He took their dish drainer with all the clean dishes and threw it on the floor. Fatinah and I were just looking at each other like,

Wtf? Should we leave? Is it safe to leave? Is it safe to stay? I waved my cell phone around behind the beanbag, under the couch, trying to get a signal. Nothing. We started packing up our stuff as inconspicuously as possible, waiting for the right time to get out of there, but it was hard to know when that was—do we leave while he’s screaming, or do we wait until he calms down? Will he calm down? or will he go even more crazy first? I didn’t want to be all like, “Hey, Chainsaw, we’re just going to step through this ginormous cloud of flour and over all this broken crap and get out of here before you realize I’m the one who ate your food.” So, yeah, Fatinah and I were totally freaking out.

But then Chainsaw—c-h-E-n—stopped. He didn’t move. He didn’t say anything. For, like, I don’t know, it was probably only about ten seconds, but it seemed like forever, and then he just roared: “Muh-ther-fucker,” and went into his bedroom, and we could hear him rummaging around in there but, before we had a chance to leave, he came walking out with a big shotgun under his arm, looking straight down and loading it as he’s walking toward the door. And then he was outside and it was just like, *Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!*

People always say how gun shots sound like firecrackers, or a nail gun, or crap like that, but this thing was so loud that it rattled the windows and hurt my ears. I think my ears are still sort of ringing, actually. And then Chainsaw—c-h-E-n—came inside almost right after that and he tossed his shotgun on the floor and then he plopped down on the couch under the Jesus stain and he said, “God-damned motherfucking raccoon sons a’ bitches.”

So, yeah, maybe he did have something to do with me sleeping with Fatinah last night. I hope that doesn’t mean she won’t want to sleep with me again.

Wise words of Carl vs. *Wise Words of Asia*, the Rematch

“Hatred does not cease by hatred at any time. Hatred ceases by love; that is the eternal law”—Dhammapada.

“I love the person I tell myself I am; but the ‘real’ me—I don’t even like him”

Carl DaDicktard.

I didn’t think it was possible, but there’s actually something in the universe that’s more lame than one of Carl’s parties: Carl’s writing group. But we’re not supposed to call it a “writing group”—even though apparently it used to be called the Southeast Ohio Writer’s Cooperative or some such thing—now everybody has to refer to it as “Disciples of the Faith in the Glorious Trinity Church of Coolville, U.S.A.” Seriously.

I don’t even know what the worst part was. There was the part where all but one of the seven people there were from work, like we didn’t see each other enough already. And there was the part where it was just the weird people from work who I don’t like to talk to even when I am at work. (Talking about weird: When I came back from taking a dump, they were all like, “Congratulations! Congratulations!” like it was some great accomplishment that I made it to the bathroom by myself.) Chainsaw—c-h-E-n—and Chewbacca and Sara were the only people I knew, except for Carl, if that says anything. And there was the part where they spent the whole entire first hour, it seemed like, arguing about something to do with—something. Chewbacca kept going on about, “Why would we want 501c3 status when we’re here to talk about writing?”

And then Carl was like, “This will give us a chance to help people—to make a difference.”

And then somebody would say, “But now we’ve got to meet twice as often.”

“We don’t need to, but once a week would show that we’ve got an organized congregation. And we already pay the rent for every Tuesday, anyway.”

“We’ve already lost half of our group—and most of the town hates us now that we call ourselves a church.”

“Fuck them.”

Then Chewbacca said, “You just want to have fundraisers to pay for pizza.”

And then Sara, who I’ve had to sit next to all week, was like, “No, it sounds like a good idea,” and then Chewbacca stopped complaining and eventually everybody else did, too.

Then they sat around, sort of in a circle, and talked about stories they wrote. The first one was about a guy with a pet raccoon that could always get out of its cage, even when it was locked. The other one was about some telephone psychic chick who worked in a building almost exactly like ours and she got a call from the President—but he didn’t tell her he was the President, she figured that out because she’s psychic—and then she read his Tarot cards and she saw that he was in trouble so she lent her psychic abilities to help the President uncover the evil terrorist plot to destroy the western world with chemical and biological weapons, overcoming many evil obstacles and naysayers along the way. It was the best, but only because it had a super-hot blonde spy chick in it.

The rest of the night was just people asking me, “Hey, do you think this’d be a good story?” “Hey, what about this for a story—?” and I just kept saying, “I don’t know.

How should I know?” Apparently, Carl had told everybody that I’m some big fancy writer with a whole bunch of books published with a fake name—I can’t even remember what name it was supposed to be—and every time I tried to correct somebody, Carl stopped me. They were all a bunch of goobers anyway, so it’s not like I cared one way or the other.

It’s not like I had plans to do anything tonight after work—other than watch *Blind Date* and *Maury*, but I still feel like my night was completely ruined. What pissed me off was Carl knew the only reason I went was because he told me Fatinah would be there, which she wasn’t. Some of the people there didn’t even know who she was, meaning that she’d never been there before, so that pissed me off. End of story.

Oh, and also, I am apparently an ordained minister now, with the Universal Life Church. Supposedly all it takes is having Carl put his hand on my forehead and say whatever it was he said. I thought it was cool until I saw that Courtney Love and that dillhole from *Monster Garage* are already ordained ministers for the same church, which makes me just as big of a douche as them.

And I found out that the “Glorious Trinity” of the Disciples of the Faith in the Glorious Trinity Church of Coolville, U.S.A. refers to either the glorious trinity of Beer, Weed and Munchies, or the equally glorious trinity of Sex, Drugs and Rock & Roll. Seriously. That’s even worse than being associated with Courtney Love and the *Monster Garage* dillhole, as far as I’m concerned.

Wise words of Carl vs. *Wise Words of Asia*, This Time it's Personal

“When the student is ready the teacher will appear”—Buddhist proverb.

“If you store gasoline in your testicles for very long, it'll do damage to your body”—Carl LeAsshat.

God, I'm pretty sure I'm in love with Fatinah. I took my car to the shop today since yesterday was payday and I figured I'd finally get the muffler fixed since it had been making way more noise lately. I went to Monroe Muffler and he put my car up on the lift and me and the Monroe guy looked at it and then we just looked at each other and couldn't help but laugh because it was so clearly obvious that everything but the catalytic converter needed to be replaced. What little rusty metal was left just flaked off when you touched it. I don't know why that was funny, since it cost \$554.29 and I'll have to work extra hours every week for the next two months to pay it off. But at least I won't be setting off any more car alarms when I drive through the parking lot at work, so that'll be nice.

But since I came in on my day off, I got to see Fatinah, which was nice, since I still hadn't grown the avocados to call her, and I didn't have to double-jack with Sara because it was her day off, so that was nice too, but they stuck me with that crazy old Wanda lady who always wears the witchy clothes and that wasn't a whole lot better. All night she kept talking about my aura and how it was dark purple and dark red and dark pink—with black spots, I think—which apparently means that I don't belong in this place and I should get as far away from here as possible.

I said, “You need an aura to tell you that?”

“The cycle of despair has already begun. You should leave now—tonight—and never come back.”

Okay, Wanda.

But I can’t leave now. For two reasons. First: Fatinah. And, second: I’ve still got nine PINs to go before I have them all at the same time. I went to talk to Lurch tonight about those two bogus attendance points I got the other day—which he wouldn’t give me credit for, by the way. He kept saying, “Oh, uh, once they’re in the system, I can’t take them off. I don’t have the authorization. That’s takes special authorization. I don’t have the authorization.”

I was getting ready to make a scene until he said, “Does it really matter? It won’t affect your pay, either way, and your points roll over in two and a half weeks.”

I didn’t want to say, “But I was hoping to miss work twice more in that time and now I can only miss once,” so I just kind of stood there like an idiot.

Then Lurch said, “While I have you here, I want to discuss with you your Personal Infraction Notices.” And he wheeled over to his desk where he had my file sitting on the top like he’d just been looking at it. “According to this, you currently have seventeen active infractions: improperly disconnecting a caller while processing a call; failure to use the Twelve Questions to probe for caller information; displaying signs of frustration while processing a call; talking over or rushing the caller while processing the call; failure to follow call close procedures; noticeable lack of sincerity during the call; noticeable lack of sincerity during the close; making negative comments about other ATS departments, employees, systems, products, partners, suppliers or competitors; repeatedly ignoring the caller’s comments or questions.” Then he took a big huge breath, like

reading off so many PINs was such a ginormous strain on his cardiovascular system. He started again: “Failure to appropriately use the caller’s name during any portion of the call; failure to use appropriate call closing statement; visiting with neighbor during the call; failure to follow all standard procedures and guidelines for call handling; using incorrect procedure while processing a call; engaging in extraneous conversation while processing a call; failure to use Transitional Phrases when appropriate during the call; and, most recently, inappropriate use of the Internet and/or other tools.” I thought the last one would be the holy grail of PINs, since we don’t even have computers at our stations, but, the other day, I’d left my notebook in my car and so I was taking notes on the back of an old memo—“Kelly K; boyfriend Ryan; transferred/promoted; cheating?” that sort of thing—when Connie came up behind me and gave me the “inappropriate use” PIN.

I was just like *Wtf?* I told her, “This isn’t even our memo. It’s for the tech support people downstairs” and then I showed her right where it said in big bold letters on the top: “Correct Transfer Procedures for Customers Hoping to Upgrade their DirecTV Service Package.” I didn’t even realize she actually processed it and PINed me. Oh well. Score! I hope that doesn’t mean I’ll have an asterisk by my record.

And then Lurch asked, “Are you going for some kind of record here, George? You’re, let’s see, seven, eight, nine shy of having an active PIN for every non-termination infraction there is.”

I wanted to laugh so-o-o-o bad right then. So I changed the subject: “Hey Lur—Chris—I’ve been meaning to ask you about the Tuition Assistance Program. How does that work? Is that only if I take classes at OU?”

“No. That applies to any of the area colleges.”

“So I could take classes at Hocking and ATS would pay for it?”

“Yes, but, to qualify, your Average handle time would have to be in the top five for your department for the previous two-month-day period.”

“No matter how long I’ve worked here?”

“You need to have been here at least two-months, your AHT for the previous sixty days has to be in the top five for your department, and you need to maintain a GPA of 3.3, I believe.”

“What if I have a couple PINs?”

“The Tuition Assistance Program goes by hold times only. Personal Infraction Notices are a separate matter.”

So that’s totally sweet. You could totally tell Lurch was completely bummed out that I was one of the five people who were eligible. And even more bummed that I was actually going to do the TAP thing. Like the money comes out of his pocket. I’d bet anything that they’ll change the policy so that next time only people who’ve worked there a year will qualify. Or only people who don’t have any active PINs. Or only people who use tongue when they kiss Lurch’s ass. They’ll figure out some way so that nobody qualifies, but they’ll still write “Tuition Assistance” as one of the benefits in the Want Ads. Cheap bastards. I’m going to find the most expensive class Hocking offers and I’m going to enroll in it just so they have to pay for it. And I can still get a PIN for daily AHT just by working one hour on my day off and making sure my calls all last less than ten minutes. Win-win. I don’t know what Wanda was talking about. No way I’m quitting ATS now. I think I’m actually looking forward to go to work tomorrow.

And Fatinah: yeah, I totally think I'm in love with her. We went to Tony's after work tonight. It was me and Fatinah and Carl and Chainsaw—c-h-E-n—and Lewis (but Lewis and Chainsaw left after one beer) and somehow me and Fatinah and Carl started making fun of Carl's sister, saying she was a whore and stuff, and then Fatinah started getting all like, "Ooh, Carl's sister! Ooh, Carl's sister!" And she wasn't doing the 976-line stuff where they can't use any of the good words, she was doing the 800-number stuff where the callers pay with their credit card and anybody can say whatever they want. And she was saying all kinds of stuff that I'm almost too shy to write in my notebook, but, damn, it sounded good. "Ooh, Carl's sister! Ooh, Carl's sister! Lick my pussy, you nasty fucking whore!" And it just got worse—or, better, actually—after that. She was grinding her hips in our little wooden booth, gesturing with her hands like she was holding somebody's face down there. It was nice. I probably already mentioned that. It was nice, though. Carl looked like he was getting pissed, which made it funny, too, besides being sexy as hell. She's totally not like that normally; I think that's what made it so sexy. I mean, even though I've always known that she works the 976-line, I still could never actually really picture her saying stuff like that unless I saw it for myself. It was nice.

And then we went to Jimmy John's and I was outside smoking a cigarette while she and Carl were inside and she came busting out the door with our sandwiches and she was like, "I just told the Jimmy John's guy what's up!" acting all fake-tough. It was cute and charming and funny and sexy all at the same time. These guys were walking in as she came out and they laughed and they were like, "Thanks. Now he's going to be pissed and ruin our food," but they didn't know what she was talking about either.

And she fed me my sandwich as I was driving us home. I don't know what it was, but I think that was the best part of the whole night. I tried for the goodnight kiss when I got her home, but I couldn't close the deal. The first time I tried, I didn't think she wanted it, but just as I started pulling back, I noticed that she actually had wanted it, but I was already in pull-back mode, so it would've been weird to go back in then. The second time was pretty much the same thing. Actually, every time was pretty much the same thing. I kept trying to figure out how to move in for the forehead magnet maneuver that Carl was talking about, but it just wasn't happening. Plus, I didn't know what to do with my hands. I couldn't think of an excuse to put them on her hips, and I figured if I grabbed her face with both hands like they do in the movies—like I wanted to—maybe that'd scare her away. So I just kept kind of bobbing in and missing, bobbing in and missing, until it seemed like she figured I was too big of a wuss to kiss her. God, I suck.

It was nice when she fed me, though. I totally want her.

I wish it could just be okay for me to tell her how I really feel. I mean, why can't I just tell Fatinah that, hey, I've had a crush on you since my very first day of OJT. Lurch was giving us the first-day tour of the break room and you were bent over at the soda machine and I was just like, *damn*, and then I saw your face and it was like, *damn*, again, only more-so—it was your butt I saw first, but that still counts, doesn't it?

And I don't know why, but I love the way you're always talking about Atlantis and space aliens and Bigfoot and all that other weird ridiculous crap like it's real. I love the hippie hemp necklace and all those bracelets you wear. And when I spooned with you the other night—it already seems like forever ago—I mean, if we're being honest, I've

been tugging the toadstool constantly to that memory. I mean, if I could fill out one of those order forms with all the checkboxes and pick everything I could ever want in a woman, you would be exactly what I ordered, with a bunch of extra options thrown in, like that sexy way you smile with one side of your mouth or the way you can tie cherry stems in a knot with your tongue. I might ask for bigger boobs, but, I swear to God, that is the only thing.

But, more than that, I just want to get to know you. And, yeah, I totally want to get in your pants eventually, but the fact that I haven't tried anything yet has to mean something, doesn't it?

I guess when I write it like that it makes sense that people aren't completely honest. It's still a total drag, though.

Wise words of Carl vs. *Wise Words of Asia*, This Time it's Really Personal

"To know the road ahead, ask those coming back"—Chinese proverb.

"I'm jealous of the Heaven's Gate cult. I would love to believe in something so much that I'd happily cut off my own genitalia and wrap a plastic bag around my head while I wait for some comet to come and take me to the afterlife. That's all I want"—Dickless Carl.

Reasons to Keep Smoking:

I like it.

I'm addicted.

The nicotine buzz (there's probably some scientific stuff to explain what's going on in my brain).

Smoking's a lot easier to do than working out.

Wakes me up.

Relaxes me—kind of relaxing meditative exercise.

Smoking gives me something to do with my hands when I'm bored—keeps me from stuffing my face full of food all the time.

It fills a *need*.

Helps me be cool like the Marlboro Man.

It might actually save me money because it keeps me from throwing something at the TV when another advertisement comes on that heretically mocks another awesome-until-you-first-heard-it-in-this-context song (for some reason, the one I can't stop thinking about now is—or was—for some brand of cat food and, in the background, they play this crappy Muzak version of "Feelin' Alright" by Traffic. And they don't even try to be true to the song, they don't sing anything but "Feelin' alright. Feelin' alright. Feelin' alright" over and over and over in their annoying Muzak voices, like your cat—and thus, you—would feel all right if you just bought whatever cat food it was, except the song's supposed to be this sad story of unrequited love; it's not about feeling all right, it's about feeling completely miserable because the guy lost the love of his life and when he sings, "Feelin' alright," he's actually asking the woman, the object of his love, if she's feeling all right, because he's completely miserable; and they're using this beautiful, painful, heartfelt emotion to sell *cat food*; every time I hear that crappy version of that great song while I watch that little tabby trot into the screen to eat whatever brand of glop

he eats—I wish I knew, because I’d make a mental note to myself to never ever buy that brand of crap if I ever get a cat—I just want to throw something small and hard into the screen). It’d be a lot cheaper to just smoke a cigarette instead.

I’d turn into a fat cow if I ate something instead of smoked every time I wanted a cigarette—being a skinny smoker can’t be much worse than being an obese chocoholic. I swear to God, if I quit smoking, this is going to be my *News of the Weird* obituary: “An Ohio man died of what the coroner said could best be described as ‘an overdose of chocolate.’ He was found on the floor of his apartment with a spoonful of hot fudge sauce in one hand and a melted (98% fat free) ice cream sandwich in the other. Interestingly, police confirmed that, at the time of his death, he had been writing in his journal about his need to quit smoking to improve his health.”

Reasons to Quit Smoking:

Fatinah thinks it’s gross.

The molten ember glows orange under the majestic gray ash; the jagged ring moves closer toward your stained fingers as you inhale. Inhale. Yes. That refreshing blanket of hot comfort warms and caresses and soothes you from the inside. Like rummed cocoa on a cold snowy morning Yes You exhale the gray clouds of your stress yessss and then you have the taste in your mouth yes and it tastes bad at first yes like licking an ashtray but all you want to do is inhale again yes and take another drag yes and another yessss! And then you relax yes And Sigh And you get the kinks out of your neck and shoulders And you take another drag yes and it burns your throat this time and you can feel the

congestion growing in your nose and you tell yourself you really should quit yes you really have to quit yes you have to quit yes for good this time yes no more lame excuses yes you will quit this time Yes.

Greatest news headline ever: “Local Men Feel Pain, Anger, After Being Shot in Face.”
You’ve got to love the *Athens News* or *Post* or *Messenger* or whichever paper I saw it in.

Fatinah was standing in front of the candy machine today at work and I was like,
“What’re you getting?”

“I don’t know.”

“How about F5?” I said.

And she followed the letters and numbers down to the corner and saw that it was the Kotex something or other and she laughed and gently slapped my shoulder and said,
“You ree-tahd,” in her sexy southern accent. That was the highlight of my night.

Wise words of Carl vs. *Wise Words of Asia*, History in the Making

“The poorer we are inwardly, the more we try to enrich ourselves outwardly”—
Bruce Lee.

“There’s no cookie like a freshly baked cookie”—Tubby Carl who thinks he’s
better than me because he doesn’t smoke cigarettes.

Party, Appalachian style, part two or three or whatever it is: I just woke up in Carl's bathroom to the sound of Fatinah knocking on the door and asking, "Walker, are you okay?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'm just writing."

So now I actually am writing so that the relationship I hope to eventually have with Fatinah doesn't begin with a lie—or another lie, anyway. Plus, I need some time for this ginormous Fatinah-inspired unconscious emission to dry from my crotch. Plus my head is killing me and I'm sweating like a pig.

I used to see people sitting on the bathroom floor with their arms around the toilet, using the porcelain bowl for a pillow, and I always thought, *Wow, he's working hard to keep from falling over*. But I realize now that they weren't worried about falling, they had their arms around the toilet because the porcelain is so-o-o-o-o cool and refreshing. It's delightfully invigorating. That's what they ought to show in those Sierra Mist TV ads—me, enjoying the sweet, sweet relief of cool porcelain on my face—not some guy and his dog cooling off their balls in front of an air conditioner. Just my opinion.

Here I slouch all blurry-sighted, tried to puke but only wrote. I've still got that post-blackout sort of fuzziness going on inside my head. I can sit up now without leaning on the toilet, but that's about it (maybe there's some truth to that Holding-onto-the-toilet-to-keep-from-falling-over theory). That must've been good weed, because I only had two bong hits and one skunky-tasting beer. And we were in the living room and Fatinah was sitting next to me, and she had one leg under the other so her big toe was touching my thigh, and she kept moving her toe back and forth on my leg, and I don't know if she did

it on purpose or not, or if she even realized that she was doing it and that I could feel it, but I think the adrenaline I got from her touching me, plus the weed, plus the beer, plus the fact that I've hardly been sleeping lately, plus Carl talking to me and Fatinah about who would win in a fight between the Enterprise-D and an Imperial Star Destroyer or whatever—"the problem is that *Star Trek: The Next Generation* is based on real science, while *Star Wars* is based on pop-culture science with fake numbers"; that's pretty much all I remember—apparently the combination of everything just made me lightheaded and dizzy until I thought I was going to puke. And then I basically just instantly fell asleep as soon as I got in here.

Before the *Star Trek* vs. *Star Wars* thing, Carl kept going on and on about I don't even know what until finally I just had to say, "Do you believe even half the crap that comes out of your mouth?" There was something else, too, because I remember saying, "Just because your birthday happens to be December twenty-fifth, it doesn't mean you're just like Jesus."

He made this big show then of pretending to feel all sorry for me because I wasn't yet a disciple of the great guru Carl, and he loaded another bowl all ceremoniously like it was some Native American peace pipe, and he took a big hit and then he held the bong up in each of the four directions like he was offering the gods some great gift of weed, and then he handed it to me and he said, "Maybe this will help you understand," and I just wanted to smack him upside the head.

And, by the way, that was like an hour or two or three ago and the only thing I truly "understand" is that he's an even bigger douchetard than I ever before realized. The

other night, when it was just me and him, I swear he spent two whole hours talking about the Pizza Hut coupons on his fridge. “Who decided that the second pizza has to be ‘of equal or lesser value?’ Why can’t the first pizza be the cheapest one, so you’d get the more expensive one for half price? Buy a small one-topping pizza and get a large Supreme for half price. That’s a promotion. Where’s the challenge in taking half off the cheapest pizza? Instead of buy one, get one free, why not give me a free one and then let me decide whether or not I want to buy one?”

And earlier tonight, when Fatinah was in the bathroom, Carl asked me, “What do you think of her? She’s pretty hot, huh? I think she’s hot. I always figured she’d look fat when she wasn’t next to all those overweight heifers at work, but she’s not. She’s hot. I see that sexy little black whale tale thong she’s got sticking out under those jeans and I just want to crawl up in there and have a picnic.”

I said, “I thought you were still in love with some Valerie girl in D.C.” and that got him to shut up.

But now I can hear him out in the living room, trying to make Fatinah think he’s all super-cool: “I’m a Taoist and, as a Taoist, I believe that we all have an ideal station in life—a place, or a path, if you prefer—and, if we keep running into obstacles when we’re doing what comes naturally to us, I believe that’s the universe’s way of telling us that we’re not on our correct path; the bigger the obstacles, the further off our path we are,” which is pretty much exactly what I said to him during my last break tonight. And earlier he was talking all sensitive and philosophical about his ex-girlfriend. What a turd blossom. When he didn’t have Fatinah to impress, he was all like, “Duh, why me no can have free pizza?”

And he still hasn't given me the money he promised me to write his stupid book. That's what really pisses me off. Every day he has a different excuse. Tonight he said that I have to finish the book first, which is totally not what he said before. I just said, "Fine." I found this super-long biography of David Hasselhoff on the internet and I'm just going to copy and paste it and replace every "David Hasselhoff" with "Carl Rhodes" and call it done. God, my head hurts.

I just heard Fatinah ask Carl, "Don't you have anything else to drink? All your beer tastes like salty glue." So I guess he won't be getting her drunk tonight.

I kissed Fatinah tonight! I kissed Fatinah! I can't believe it! I finally kissed Fatinah! It was awesome. It wasn't any big, long, sloppy-wet thing, and there wasn't any tongue involved, but her lips were warmer and softer and more moist than I ever imagined, and I got to give her a nice warm long—but not long enough—goodnight hug afterward. God, it was awesome! There are about eighteen bazillion things I want to say about it, but my head is still throbbing like little elves are trying to crack open my skull with little elf jackhammers and every time I sit up I feel like I'm going to puke and I can't stop sweating so I think I'm going to have to pass out now instead.

The next time somebody from anywhere near southeastern Ohio says to me, "Hey, Walker, we're having a party. You should come," I'm going to—actually, I don't know what I'm going to do but, whatever I do, there's no way I'm going to go to their "party." I don't care how many times they tell me, "Oh, we've got so-o-o-o much weed," or, "Oh,

we're going to get so-o-o-o drunk," or, "Oh, there's going to be all these women who are s-o-o-o drunk and stoned."

Or, "Oh, we're going to party in the woods."

"Hell, no," I'm going to say. "Hell, no." I mean, Cincinnati's not that far from Athens, but it's like we're from two completely different countries—like England and Europe: we're both English-speaking countries, but a rubber here and a rubber there are completely different (or so everybody says). I'm going to start thinking that way about the word party here. It sounds the same and it's spelled the same as our word for "party" in Cincinnati, but here it's used to define a small, totally lame gathering where you may or may not end up running for your life. In Cincinnati, we'd get drunk, and baked, and we might roll; sometimes we'd trip, but that was about it. We never ended up in the middle of the woods, wondering if we would survive the night with all of our favorite appendages attached and orifices still intact.

All I'm saying is, when I picture myself in *Deliverance*, I like to imagine that I'm Burt Reynolds, or at least Jon Voight; the last person I want to be is Ned Beatty. I don't ever again want to hear "Dueling Banjos" strumming through my head, knowing that I'm the most likely candidate to be squealing like a pig before the sun goes down.

At work, Sara said, "We're having a party. You should come."

I still hadn't been to a decent party since I moved here, even though Athens county is supposed to be the party capitol of Ohio, and I was ready for a decent party, I needed a decent party, and I remember Sara once asked me, "You get high, don't you?" and she made it sound like Fatinah might be at the party, so I was like, "Yeah, I'll be

there,” and she wrote down the directions with one of the eighteen million pens in her purse and said, “We’ll see you then.”

Then this morning she called me and said, “It’s such a nice day so bring your hiking boots because we’re going to party in the woods,” and so right away I started imagining all these scenarios where I could finally be alone with Fatinah behind a tree somewhere, or maybe we’d be sitting on the edge of a chilly meandering stream with our feet dipping in and out of the water, playing footsie before we hopefully started playing Thumb War with our tongues.

But when I got to their house, hardly anybody was there. It was just me and Sara and Chewbacca and some so-so-looking big blonde chick and a Pat who I assumed was a chick, but I couldn’t tell for sure. I figured I’d start having flashbacks from one of Carl’s parties, but this wasn’t too bad. I was talking to Sara and So-So about work and talking to Chewbacca and the Pat about guns, because that’s what they were talking about. I remember saying something like, “There’s not much recoil in a nine-millimeter, so all you’re really doing is increasing the report with a ported one,” because I remember reading that online somewhere. So they assumed—or at least they pretended to assume—that I knew what I was talking about, and I pretended to know what they were talking about, but the conversation was way over my head long before that; they had me at “reload.” About the only thing I did know was that nobody would mess with us in the woods.

We were ready to leave after the Pat finished explaining to So-So how to lead a running target when you’re hunting terrorists (they have a significantly smaller profile than a deer, see, but they’re not as fast and they don’t bounce up and down as much. If

you can hit prairie dogs with a .22, you won't have any problems in Iraq). For some reason I said then, "What about hitting womp rats in your T-16?" As soon as I said it I realized I'd been hanging out with Carl too much, and I could tell right away that I'd just lost whatever credibility I'd gained with my "ported nine-millimeter" comment.

After an uncomfortable pause, Chewbacca said to me, "You won't be able to fit in our pickup unless you squeeze in, and I wouldn't want to squeeze in if I were you, so you can follow us," and I was like "Okay."

And then we were almost ready to go and Chewbacca said, "I'll ride with Walker." I didn't really think about why, I was just glad I wouldn't get lost because I didn't know where we were going.

So it was Chewbacca and me in my car and So-So and the Pat and Sara in their pickup. Everything seemed cool. But before we drove even a block, Chewbacca got all serious and said, "Walker, we need to talk."

"Okaay."

And then she was like, "I think it's great that Sara has you to talk to—"

"Yeah, she seems pretty cool." She's all right, I guess, but she's pretty much annoying as hell.

And Chewbacca kept talking, "Well, Sara hasn't had that in a while and it's good for her."

"Okay."

And she went on and on, talking about how Sara didn't have any friends the whole time that Chewbacca was in Iraq, and then she said, "The thing is, we don't even *know* you."

I was like *Okaaaaaaay*, wondering where this was going, and then Chewbacca told me how she's been having all these dreams lately about I-don't-even-remember what, but they supposedly all mean that Sara either has been or is going to cheat on her. I was just sitting there like, *Why are you telling me this?* making sure it was clear that I knew nothing about whatever it was she was talking about. But then Chewbacca said, "I don't want you at our house when I'm not there." Just out of the blue she said it, like she'd been thinking about it for a way long time, which totally surprised me, because it had never occurred to me, up to that point, to even think that she would ever be thinking about it.

After I sat there awhile, I was just like, "Yeah. Okay," because it wasn't like I'd ever planned to, anyway. Plus, their whole house smelled like cat pee and strawberry body oil so, yeah, it was no skin off my avocados. But then Chewbacca said, like I'd already done something which I hadn't even thought about doing, "Come *on*. We're married now; we're getting ready to adopt a kid." And then she just sat there and didn't say anything and I didn't say anything. I just kept thinking the whole time, *This Chewbacca chick is a freak and I'd be an idiot to stare at Sara's big fake boobs ever again.*

Finally I just stupidly said, "Yeah, she totally reminds me of my sister." I didn't know what else to say. And neither of us said anything the whole rest of the drive.

I felt guilty when we finally got to the trailhead because everybody was carrying more than I was. Chewbacca and So-So each had a huge backpack full of beer, apparently, and Sara had a big daypack full of food and water and whatever else, and the Pat had a beat-up leather backpack stuffed full of something. All I had was my small little

daypack with a bottle of water, some mints, a Pocket Rocket, a new box of condoms, and a little picnic-slash-love blanket (I was planning on Fatinah being there, after all, and I wanted to be prepared for any possible scenario).

And the trail sucked—if you’d call it a trail. We were in these deep woods where, even in October, the leaves are so thick that you can barely see the sky, and we were crunching through leaves and climbing over logs and ducking under branches, and walking for-freaking-ever. I ran out of water. Then I said, partly to find out how much longer we’d be walking and partly to break the ice, “This isn’t the part where you take the new guy and dump his body out in the woods, is it?” But, instead of laughing and chatting like any normal person who wasn’t about to sodomize you with strap-ons would do, these people just got completely, frighteningly silent.

That’s when it occurred to me that—*holy crap!*—I don’t know these people, either. They seemed nice and normal, but so did that lady serial killer, didn’t she? Eileen Wournous or something. I started remembering all the things we’d been talking about earlier—guns and hunting and how it’s fun to watch pumpkins explode from a twelve-gauge blast. *Did the Pat have a weird glint in his or her eye when he or she talked about eliminating terroristic threats with extreme prejudice?* And how many times did he or she mention that he or she can’t wait to see that movie *Monster* again? And I remembered that So-So and the Pat were pouring handfuls of .22 bullets into a little nylon pouch before we left, and I knew that, even though a .22 doesn’t have much stopping power, fifty of them in my ass would be enough to make me part of the Appalachian ecosystem. Even if the Pat didn’t have a .22 in with all those strap-ons in that big backpack of his or hers, he or she still had a huge knife on his or her belt.

So by then, “Dueling Banjos” was pounding in my head and I kept getting these images of Ned Beatty that I just didn’t want to think about, and we kept crunching and ducking, crunching and ducking deeper into the woods, and then So-So and the Pat would keep straggling way back behind us somewhere and I didn’t know if the Pat was loading his or her gun or if he or she and So-So were building some kind of—something, and nobody was talking and I didn’t know where I was and nobody else from work knew where I was and I’d left my cell phone in my car and, even though these seemed like okay people, if they were going to take me out into the woods to kill me, this’d be exactly how they’d do it, wouldn’t it? I tried to reassure myself, *We wouldn’t have had that talk in the car if they were going to do that, would we?* Maybe. Who knows what a psychotic murderer is thinking?

So I started looking all over the ground for anything to defend myself with—I figured the Pat was the one I’d have to take out first, since I could outrun the other three—but I couldn’t find anything. And, even if I did, I couldn’t start taking them out one by one, when they least expected it, because there was still the possibility that they didn’t bring me up here to sacrifice me, or pig rape me, or make me a part of their hillbilly coven. Acting too fast could be embarrassing. But I needed to be prepared. I kept asking myself, “What would Chuck Norris do?” My car keys were in my backpack, but that would be bad if I had to run without my bag. So I sneaked my keys into my pocket. Then I saw a big sturdy stick and I picked it up and pretended it was my walking stick and I tried to pay attention to where the hell I was on this sort-of trail (it didn’t work, except sometimes I could see through the trees and tell if I was going North or South). I kept asking questions like “Which way is the river?” because I figured I could float back

home if I had to. I might die of hypothermia, but at least I wouldn't get shot fifty times before I got Ned Beatty-ed with my own Pocket Rocket. And they'd answer questions like that, but we always just kept going deeper and deeper into the woods.

Finally, we stopped on this clearing. Sara said she had to pee and Chewbacca was like, "We'll go down into that ravine to give you some privacy."

I figured that was it; I'd be naked and tied to a tree in less than five minutes, squealing like a pig. About the last thing I really wanted to do was go down into a deep ravine in the middle of nowhere with three people I didn't know, but I couldn't think of any way out of it. I wanted to stay on top with Sara where I figured I'd be safe, but I didn't know how to do that after the talk I had with Chewbacca in the car. I didn't figure I could tell Chewbacca, "I used to watch my sister pee all the time."

I kept reminding myself that I hadn't had any weird dreams lately that warned me of anything, and the survival experts always say to trust your gut because you can usually sense approaching danger. So that was good. But then again, I was nervous as hell as I stood on top of that clearing, and I was about to go down into some remote ravine with a big chick who didn't seem to like me much and her Pat friend with a big knife and bullets and maybe a gun—so maybe it wasn't so good. I'd been trying for the last hour to ask the Pat slyly what he or she had in his or her bag, but he or she always pretended he or she didn't hear, and it wasn't one of those things you wanted to keep asking, because maybe he or she would snap and be like, "You want to know what's in my bag, motherfucker?" and then he or she would pull out a ginormous .22 with eighteen extra clips and that would be the end of it.

But I was out of ideas of escape, short of running aimlessly through the woods like a lost little schoolgirl. So I took a deep breath, held tight to my stick and, as I walked down the hill, rehearsed in my head my plan of attack: swing my stick into the Pat's crotch, in case he or she was a guy, then swing it across the Pat's face, poke it into Chewbacca's stomach, poke it into Chewbacca's eye or uppercut her in the chin, grab the Pat's bag, push So-So over and run like hell. As we hiked down, there weren't any tiki torches set up, or crude pentagrams made out of fallen logs. No coven of hillbilly witches. So that was good; there'd be only the three to fight off.

They gave me the pipe first, but there was no way I was going to get baked, so I pretended to take a hit, and another when it came back around, and then I faked a hacking cough and watched for any sudden movements. There weren't any. Until Sara yelled something and Chewbacca yelled back, "What?" and Sara didn't answer and Chewbacca and the Pat ran super-fast up that super-steep hill. So-So was running, too, and I was trying to keep up to show I cared as much about Sara's safety as they did. But I was too slow. Then it occurred to me that maybe I shouldn't show that I cared as much about Sara's safety as they did. So I slowed down. Then it occurred to me that maybe her yelling was the signal to start the sacrifice and/or the strap-on pig rape. So I stopped. Then I turned around. And then I sprinted faster than I ever thought I could possibly sprint over sticks and logs and moss-covered rocks and through thorny vines and prickly bushes and one spindly little tree-ish thing that gashed the shit out of my face.

I ran like that, in God-knows-what-direction, for at least five minutes. It would've been longer but I was holding my stick kind of too-horizontal when I tried to run between two trees. That hurt like hell. I don't know if it knocked the wind out of me when I

clotheslined myself or if it knocked the wind out of me when I fell backwards on my ass, but that hurt, too. But I had a chance then to hear between my gasps that there was nobody behind me, so at least I didn't have to worry about getting Ned Beatty-ed by a bunch of crazy war-vet witches with strap-ons.

But I didn't catch a buzz, either. And I didn't know where the hell I was or how far I was from my car. And I'm pretty sure I broke my ass-bone, and the whole front of my body looks like I got attacked by a weedeater. When I finally got home, it was after eight o'clock. I missed the Bengals game. I don't even care. They lost again anyway. I'm just happy I'm still alive and that my alimentary canal is still intact. I must've hiked fifteen freaking miles. It sucked. I just wanted to relieve some stress, maybe find a quiet spot to make out with Fatinah. It didn't happen. At least the night can only get better, so I have that to look forward to.

Wise words of Carl vs. *Wise Words of Asia*, Only One will Survive

“If you want one year of prosperity, plant corn. If you want ten years of prosperity, plant trees. If you want one hundred years of prosperity, educate people”—Chinese proverb.

“Old people think they know everything. They say, ‘When I was young I thought I knew everything’ but what they mean is, ‘When you get old, you’ll be obsessed with money like we are’ because they’re jealous of us and angry at themselves and they want us to be miserable, too”—Carl Carl Carl.

I just got off the phone with Fatinah. It was one of those six-hour-that-felt-like-twenty-minute-long conversations. It was awesome. It was so awesome that, no matter what anybody else did in the whole entire universe—somebody could've won the Super Bowl or the World Series or the World Series of Poker, or they could've had a quadruplesome with Jessica Alba and Brianna Frost and Jessica Simpson and Tera Patrick (which'd be five total people instead of four, whatever that'd be called), or they could've flown to the moon and back in a homemade rocket made of Shoe-Goo and popsicle sticks—it couldn't have possibly been as awesome as that conversation. That's how awesome it was.

According to my phone, we only talked for five hours and thirty-seven minutes (02:54:17 until her battery died and another 01:03:20 after she called back). Still, it only seemed like twenty minutes, except that my left ear is totally sore and numb and feels like it's about to fall off. We have so much in common, that's the cool thing. We talked about everything. We both want to make the world a better place, but neither of us know how to do it. Plus, we both think I'm awesome. Oh, and she told me that she can tell that Sara has a crush on me—which maybe she does, whatever—but then she said that Sara's crush on me has made her, Fatinah, jealous! How awesome is that? I'd tell you how awesome it is, but I can't even begin to describe how awesome it is because it's the most absolutely awesomest thing in the whole entire history of the universe. I want to jump up and down like I'm on a pogo stick, except I wouldn't be on a pogo stick, I'd just jumping that high because that's how I feel right now. Except for my ear. I wonder if she'd still want me if I got cauliflower ear like wrestlers have sometimes. She told me that she wanted to kiss me that first night and that, when we first hugged, she wanted to reach up and nibble on my earlobe.

And she told me that she masturbates. How cool is that? She doesn't do it as often as me, but she thinks she does, because I told her I only do it once or twice a week (instead of once or twice a day). And then I asked if she ever thought about me when she did it and she said, "Maybe." *Yeah.*

Fatinah Ornoir Tedetejas. Fatinah Ornoir Tedetejas. Fatinah Ornoir Tedetejas. She makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside—I don't know how else to explain it. I mean, before, I think I mostly wanted just to jump her bones. But now, I want to hold her and comb my fingers through her long curly hair and crawl inside of her through her eyes and experience the world the way she does and feel everything with her fingertips and taste with her tongue and step with her feet and jingle all the jangly bracelets on her wrists (except that sounds like *Being John Malkovich* and I don't mean it like that).

I still want to jump her bones, too.

Hocking College has aviation classes. When I found out I was just like *Hell yeah!* That's what I'm going to enroll in. It's going to be awesome. First, I'll get to learn how to fly, which will be awesome in itself. Plus, I'll be able to tell Dad that I'm back in college—it's not quite architecture, but at least it starts with an A—so that should hopefully get that stick out of his ass that's been there since I flunked out of OU. And, third, the fees for aviation classes are \$5230 and, even though ATS only pays half your fees they'd still have to pay half, so I'd get to stick it to the Man, even though I'd have to stick it to myself to do it. It'll be worth it, though. I'll probably definitely need Carl to pay me, though, so I'll have to pretend to write his book.

Oh, and fourth: Fatimah said that it's a turn-on for a guy to have direction in his life, so that gives me a better chance to get her all wild and crazy and hot and bothered. Sign me up for respectability.

Wise words of Carl vs. *Wise Words of Asia*, It's Going to be Ugly

"When you are deluded and full of doubt, even a thousand books of scripture are not enough. When you have realized understanding, even one word is too much"—Fen-yang.

"I want Scientology to work. I do. I want it to be the answer to everything I've ever wanted to know. But couldn't they call it anything else? Whenever I hear the word Scientology I picture a bunch of people wearing matching white jumpsuits, all quietly scurrying around inside some sterile donut shaped building where the only sound you hear is a low unidentifiable hum, and I know there's no way I'll ever join. It just seems wrong that I should take Mormonism more seriously than Scientology, but I do just because of the name"—Carl de Loozer.

Sara sent me this email, saying—I don't even remember what exactly, but there was something about Chewbacca's "rage" and jealousy of me (for reasons I still don't understand), and then some other crap which finally made it obvious to me that the whole foray into the woods—ostensibly to give me a buzz—was her using me to make her husband/wife/Chewbacca jealous. And then she had some other stuff, like wondering if I wanted to get together with her when Chewbacca was in Wisconsin and stuff, and I was just like, *Wtf?*

I was talking to nosey Lewis about it after he read the email (I wanted to make sure I was reading it correctly) and he asked why I wasn't going to even write Sara back or call her, and so I told him about Brenda.

I knew Brenda from when I was dating Jamie. After Jamie and I broke up, I never saw Brenda until one night last summer when I was working at the golf course; she pulled up, and she was all surprised that I happened to be working there and she just happened to come in because she needed to use the phone and I just happened to be working there, and what a coincidence.

We chatted a bit after she was done with her call and she told me that she and her psycho boyfriend had broken up and I was thinking *all right*, because this was a smoking-hot chick. *Smoking-hot*. I don't remember if I gave her my phone number—I probably did—and then she left and I didn't think any more about it because I had a lot going on last summer: golfing every day and repairing clubs and going to concerts and partying pretty much all the time, plus Alex was working for his uncle last summer and he got a huge box of Valium and another of Adderall. And one night, I didn't have anything going on, so I dosed up on the Valium early—we were doing a lot of Whip-its last summer, too—and I was passed out when my phone rang. It was Brenda. She was all like, “Do you want to go out tonight? I'll pay for the beer, and the gas,” blah blah blah. I don't remember what all, but I remember she said she'd pay for the gas and the beer. I mean, what was I supposed to say to that?

So I was at her place I don't know how much later—it was dark out, I remember that—and we were driving back home (she lived in Monroe, a block away from Jamie) and there was this car with its headlights just totally on my ass and I said, “There's a car

with its headlights just totally on my ass,” and she turned around and she said, all freaking, “Oh God! it’s Jeff!” How she knew that just from looking at his headlights, I don’t know.

“I thought you guys broke up,” I said.

“We did,” she said.

“Then everything’s fine,” I said, “because he doesn’t know you’re with me.” and she said, “Yes he does.” and I was like, “How?” and she said, “I told him.” and I was just like, *Wtf?*

After a while, he got off our ass, but there was no way I was taking her to my apartment, no matter *how* much I wanted to explore those big, beautiful breasts in the privacy of my own bedroom. So I took her to the golf course. It was closed; I had a key to the lounge; it was perfect.

So we were on the couch, getting hot and heavy then she’d go down to the restroom and come back and be completely out of the mood and so I’d do my magic and we’d get going hot and heavy again and then she’d go down to the restroom and be completely out of the mood again. We went through that one or two more times and I was ready to call it a night.

So I took her home without getting any skin-on-skin contact (not skin that mattered, anyway) and didn’t think much more about it.

A couple days later, I was at work. We used to have this little pouch of towel money—whenever somebody needed to borrow a towel, they’d give us a quarter and we’d give them a towel—and we used to dig into the towel money when we wanted some CornNuts or something from the vending machine. So I was sitting there, digging into the

towel money, and this car drove real slow by the big front window, and then I saw the driver pointing at me, so I was thinking, *Oh, crap! somebody just busted me digging into the towel money.* But then I heard the car squeal its tires (which nobody ever did there) as it turned around at the end of the parking lot, and then as he drove back around real slow again, that's when I realized it was Brenda's psycho boyfriend.

Or no, before that—I think it was before that—I was home and I was in one of those super-happy, we're-going-to-do-acid-tonight moods when the phone rang and I answered it all happy and the guy on the other end asked how I was and I remember I said, all happy, “I'm doing *great*,” because some lady gave me a lecture a couple days earlier because I always used to say, “Oh, I'm okay” when somebody asked how I was and, apparently, I was supposed to be more excited and say, “I'm great!” but I can't remember why. So I was excitedly happy this time when I answered the phone, like I'd just gotten laid or something, and eventually I realized that the guy on the other end didn't share my zest for life and he finally said, all serious, “Do you know who this is?” and I said I didn't and he said “This is Jeff,” and I didn't realize who Jeff was at first until he said that he wanted to get together and talk about why I'm fucking around with his girlfriend, etc., etc. What was I supposed to say to that?

It was a couple days later when he showed up at the golf course. And then he told this guy I knew from Middletown that he was going to “beat me over the head with a tire iron until they'd have to dig me out of a ditch with a spoon.” So that wasn't cool.

Then he showed up at the golf course again, only this time, he waited for me down at the bottom of our long driveway so he could—whatever. So I had somebody else give me a ride home that night, and I found out from my friend that he was still waiting

there at three in the morning. Freak. Then he started showing up more and more at the course—he'd never come in, he'd just yell and cuss at me from the parking lot: "come out here so I can kick your ass, motherfucker"—that sort of thing. He came one time while we were putting on one of our tournaments—all these upstanding golf parents watching while this freak was screaming and cussing at me. It was embarrassing.

I figured he'd just eventually cool off, but he never did, so finally I called Jamie and was just like, "Wtf?" and she started bitching me out, "You should've known better than to go out with her," blah blah blah; "you knew they were going out," blah blah; "she just does this every few months to piss him off, then he beats the shit out of the guy, and then they're fine again." She kept saying stuff like "You knew you shouldn't have gone out with her, You *knew* they were dating, You *knew* he'd beat the shit out of you." Completely unsympathetic. (Oh, and Brenda told me the night that we went out that she didn't really have to make a phone call, and that she knew I was at the golf course because she saw my car and she knew I worked there.)

I didn't know what to do, so I just started playing golf more and more—all the time, actually—with Galen, this big, bulky bodybuilder who had only golfed for about two years. I don't think he hit one fairway all summer and he couldn't hit an approach to save his life. So it sucked playing with him all the time, but it was better than trying to play golf in a body cast.

All I could do was just wait for Brenda to do that same crap with some other unsuspecting horny dude so her psycho boyfriend would have somebody else to be pissed at. Those were probably the longest three weeks of my life.

So nosey Lewis wants to know why I don't want to talk to Sara after she used me to make psycho Chewbacca jealous. He says it like I somehow owe her something or like it's the polite thing to do. Screw that. I'm going to avoid the hell out of her. I don't care if I never talk to her ever again.

Wise words of Carl vs. *Wise Words of Asia*, Cage Match

"In every instant, we are experiencing the results of our past actions, while our present words, thoughts and deeds are shaping our future"—Tibetan proverb.

"I pretend like I am sensitive and politically correct and that I care about women's feelings, but I really just want to get in their pants. Every one of them. And I'd stoop to almost anything to do it most of the time"—Carl.

I told Carl that I wasn't going to any more of his writer's group meetings and, after he corrected me and made me repeat, "Disciples of the Faith in the Glorious Trinity Church of Coolville, U.S.A.," he was like, "If you don't go then I won't pay you."

"Then I won't write your stupid book thing."

"But we have a contract."

"I didn't sign anything."

A verbal contract can be as legally binding as a written one. If you don't believe me, check out court cases like *Hepting v. AT&T*, *USA v. Libby*, *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld*, *Massachusetts vs. EPA*, *Conyers v. Bush* and *Morse v. Frederick*," and on and on.

That was pretty much how the conversation was going. I didn't want to tell him I've been trying to avoid Sara—I don't know how much Carl and Sara and Chewbacca all talk—so I just said again, "I'm not going."

"Look," he said, "for you to get paid, we need to be a non-profit organization so we can accept donations, and for us to be a non-profit, we need a certain number of people there every week."

"I'm still not going."

"Then give me my weed back."

"No."

"Yes."

"No. Your weed sucks, anyway. It's like smoking ditch weed."

"Then give it back."

"No."

The end.

I guess at least I won't have to waste my time copying and pasting some crap from the internet after all. It's going to be more difficult to pay for those flight lessons, though.

Well, so much for avoiding Sara. Tonight at work, Carl was all like "Hey, I've got a special lady who wants to get together with you tonight," and so of course I thought he meant Fatinah because why would he be talking about anybody else? So I said, "Why don't we meet at my place?" because, even though Chainsaw—C-h-E-n—has been acting okay toward me lately, I still didn't want to have the off chance of repeating that first

night from a couple weeks ago. But then, when Carl got here with the “special lady,” it was Sara, not Fatinah, and I just thought *Wtf?*

After that chat I had with Chewbacca in my car, Sara’s pretty much the last person on earth I want to be spending any more time with than I have to at work. And I know that, technically, what Chewbacca said was, “Don’t come to our apartment when I’m not there,” and that having Sara here at my apartment doesn’t technically violate any of that, I’m not sure that Chewbacca would recognize the distinction.

I told Carl a little bit of that and he said, “Don’t worry, dude. I brought her here for me.”

Okay. But I’ve been sitting here—I haven’t said a single word in at least thirty minutes—and Carl’s making me look smarter and more cool every time he opens his mouth. I mean, it seems like you’d have to be trying to do as bad with a woman as he’s doing with her. Like somebody offered him fifty dollars to make a complete fool of himself in front of a chick, that’s what it seems like.

First of all, somebody must’ve told him that Sara’s some kind of religious freak or something, because he hasn’t stopped talking about God since they got here. And then he asked me, all excited, “Hey, can I put this CD in? Can I put this CD in?” and he was like “This is some shit my boys made for me back in the ‘hood. This is how we roll back in the 775.”

And it was the most God-awful Christian rap music I’ve ever heard in my life. It was painfully bad. It was I’d-rather-listen-to-country-music bad. One song, I swear to God, was called “Bleep & Bleep Burger,” and it explored the conflict that all Christians must experience because In & Out is an evil name for a hamburger franchise, yet their

burgers are so heavenly good. When he told us that, Sara and I just looked at each other like *Wtf?*

I had to ask him, “Is this for real?” because I totally thought it must be some kind of Weird Al Yankovic-type thing where they’re mocking crappy Christian rap music. Apparently not.

I mean, if you hate rap music, fine. If you refuse to listen to decent music because you think it’s evil, that’s okay, too, I guess—it makes you an idiot, but that’s okay. But why, in the name of all that is holy, do you subject your ears to this garbage that purposely patterns itself after something you think is evil?

That’s like being one of those vegans who always eats stuff that’s made to look like hamburgers or hotdogs or chicken patties or whatever. If you hate eating meat products, then why do you always want to eat things that try to look and taste and feel like meat products? That’s my question.

So anyway, yeah, he’s not making any progress whatsoever with Sara.

But I am. Unfortunately.

Wise words of Carl vs. *Wise Words of Asia*, Grudge Match

“To know that which we do not know is the seed of understanding”—Tibetan proverb.

“Yo, yo, yo, your burgers are so fine. Your fries taste divine. It feels like sunshine when your shake becomes mine. Why you gotta be evil, bro? Yo”—Carl, who’s not getting laid tonight, for sure.

One good thing about tonight, though: I got another PIN—I only need seven more, I think, to have every single one—and this time I wasn't even trying. I wish I could accomplish all my goals this easily. I called a chick "Mimi" when I thought that was her name. I seriously thought her name was Mimi. I mean, I'd never heard Colin or Don or Lewis or anyone ever call her anything other than Mimi in all the time I've been working there—how was I supposed to know it's because she dresses like that ugly chick from *Drew Carey*? Don said tonight that she only dresses like that so, when people compare her to the *Drew Carey* chick, she can convince herself it's because of the makeup and not because she's a fat, hideous ho-bag. Whatever. All I know is, I was in the break room, trying to be polite, thinking, *Here's a chick who probably doesn't have a lot of guys talk to her, except the guys who call her on the phone, thinking she looks like Jessica Alba. I'll tell her Hi and make her day.* Plus, I had to say something, because she was standing right in front of both vending machines, basically blocking access to both my CornNuts and my Sobe Green Tea, and it didn't look like she was planning to move her ginormous ass any time soon. So I was just like, "Hi Mimi," all happy and polite, thinking I did my good deed for the day. But, before I could even follow that up with, "Do you mind if I squeeze in here real quick?" she turned around and called me an asshole and waddled out.

I was just like *Okay, whatever. That was weird, but whatever.*

But then Lurch came wheeling up to me before I was even done with my first bag of CornNuts and he was like, "Could you come with me, please?" and he gave me a PIN for trying to be polite to a fat ugly chick.

You could tell he was prepared for me to start complaining, but I was just like, *All right. One PIN closer to my goal.*

And the funny thing is, Lurch never would tell me what her name actually is. I asked him like three times, too. So I don't know what I'm supposed to call her the next time she's blocking my access to my CornNuts.

Tonight sucked. I had to listen to Wanda all night telling me about how my dark red and dark purple and muddy pink aura with its black spots is getting darker and muddier and spottier. It was like she just would not give it up. At least it was better than being double-jacked with Sara again (which is why I asked if I could switch), but it still sucked, and they're not going to let me switch again because then they'll just figure I'm a jacktard who can't work with anybody. So I've got that to look forward to for the next however-many days. Still, that's not what totally sucked about tonight.

What totally sucked about tonight was when I was in the break room and I heard Chainsaw—c-h-E-n—telling nosey Lewis that Carl was out on a date with Fatinah. *Wtf?* I didn't even know that he asked her out, or that he was going to ask her out, or that she'd say yes. And then I tried calling her when I got home and it just kept going to voicemail after about six rings. That sucked.

Plus the raccoons got into my garbage again, even though I had a bungee cord over the lid, and so I had all that mess to clean up.

Wise words of Carl vs. Wise Words of Walker

"I don't know anything; I don't believe in anything; I hate it. I want to believe in something—anything—but I can't. And I don't know what to do about it. I don't know what to do, period. I keep reading and reading and reading—books, old rock lyrics, etc.,

etc., ad nauseum—looking for answers, but I can’t find any, not for me anyway. I don’t even know the questions. People tell me they envy me, for whatever stupid reason they think they do, but it’s me who envies them: their sense of self-worth, their jobs that they think are important, their contentment”—Carl the Loser.

“Carl’s a total douche”—Walker.

And I’ve dreamed about washing my dishes three nights in a row. Wanda says a dream about cleaning is a warning from your subconscious to avoid any unethical activity. Or something. “You have to leave this place, Walker. You have to leave now.” Whatever Wanda. I still always have the same pile of dirty dishes in my sink when I wake up, that’s all I know.

Fatinah came up to me in the break room before work and I couldn’t tell if she was mad or just pretending to be mad but she was like, “Did you tell Carl that you and I made out?”

I still don’t know a good way I could’ve answered that. Because if I said, “Yes,” then she would’ve thought that I’m either some uncontrollable bigmouth who she won’t be able to one day have discreet sex with, or else I was so giddy after kissing her that I needed to tell someone, in which case she would’ve thought I was an emotional pussy who she wouldn’t want to deal with. Either way, I’d lose. Telling her “No” didn’t seem much better, because then it’d be my word against Carl’s, and I could totally picture the whole conversation in my head: “Why would Carl make that up?” she’d ask. And then she’d want to know, “How did he just happen to make up all those exact details?”

Still, with “No,” I figured I had an unlimited number of possible ways to explain what happened—maybe Carl was just guessing; maybe you heard him wrong; maybe he read my mind—whereas with “Yes,” there’s only one choice: Yes. I did it. Busted. And I wouldn’t know how to spin it to make me look good. With “No,” I had all these ways to make me look like the good guy (which I am, anyway). Like I could say, “No, I couldn’t have possibly told Carl anything about you, because during the time in question, I was busy rescuing puppies from—wherever” or “I don’t know when he would’ve seen me. I was mentoring all day at the local after-school program.”

Basically all I said, though, was, “No,” and then I just sat there with what I’m sure was a guilty as hell look on my face. She didn’t believe me. She didn’t say a whole lot, but she gave me one of those I-just-lost-all-respect-for-you-now-that-I-realize-you’re-stupid-enough-to-ruin-your-chance-to-experience-something-as-amazing-as-me looks, and all I could do was look back at her like, *You’re right; I know you’re right*. And then I never saw her during any of my breaks and then I got a call right at 10:55 and so I couldn’t clock out until 11:15 and she was already gone by then and now she’s not answering her phone and I don’t want to leave her another message so now I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.

What I want to do is kick Carl’s ass. I never told him we made out, anyway. All I told him was that we kissed.

And another thing that Carl did to piss me off: he stole my CornNuts. I’d finally found the last bag of CornNuts in the whole entire building, and I was standing right in front of the vending machine with four quarters in my hand, when Carl came all squinty-eyed out

of some closet or something and he was like “Walker! Just the guy I wanted to see! What’re you doing on the first floor?”

I said, “I came down to get some CornNuts.”

“Yeah. CornNuts. Awesome.” And he totally stepped right in front of me and put a dollar in the machine and pressed B5 and for a brief little second I was like, *Wow! Cool! He’s buying me CornNuts!* But then he opened the bag and started eating them right in front of me. I was just like, *Wtf?* I mean, who does that? From right out in front of me? Especially after I’d just told him that I specifically went downstairs for the sole purpose of buying those CornNuts. I wanted to grab him by his wanna-be hippie ponytail and bitch slap him until even Dwight from *The Office* could identify my pink fingerprints on his face. I was pissed.

But I just stood there and I was like “Dude!”

He kind of stood there for a second like I really did slap him and then he was like, “Yeah! You should’ve been with us last night, man. Fatinah and I got schwasted. I’m not sure what all happened, if you know what I mean.” And then he winked like he actually did know what all happened. I wanted to smack him so bad.

Now I just feel sick just thinking about it.

And then, during my last break, I was hanging out in the break room, eating these crappy Cheetos (which suck compared to CornNuts, by the way), minding my own business, when Sara came in and sat down at my table and she was all like, talking, “Blah, blah” this, and “blah blah” that, and “Why weren’t you at our writer’s group water balloon

fight?” crap like that, and I was trying to be polite but not really talking back, and then she was like, “What’s one place you want to visit before you die?”

“The Saint Louis Arch,” I said, just trying to talk to her as little as possible.

“Okay, good. And what do you think is the biggest problem in the world today?”

“Steroids in baseball.”

“Seriously?” she said. Like I really give a rat’s ass about the problems in the world. Then she grabbed the piece of paper I was doodling on and she read, “‘Fatinah Ornoir Tedetejas.’ She’s that phone whore, right?” but she said it totally bitchy and all superior, like being a telephone psychic who gives people crappy advice is so much more high status than working on the 976-line. I didn’t say anything, so then Sara was like “I’ve been working on web design. You should see the page I made” and she grabbed the pen out of my hand and wrote, “Sara Laliberté éclairant Lemonde” in big bold letters right by Fatinah’s name, and then Chewbacca came in to the break room as Sara was writing down the web address she was talking about and I just kind of shrugged when Chewbacca looked—glared?—at us and then Sara said, “You’ll have to check it out sometime.”

I was just like “Yeah, okay, whatever,” wanting Chewbacca to know that I wasn’t doing anything to encourage anything.

Everything was fine. But then I got home and I was online and I got bored so I went to the address she wrote down and, *Damn!* I don’t know what I was expecting, but I definitely wasn’t expecting a gazillion naked pictures of Sara all over the place. And they’re not classy, tastefully done naked pictures, either; they’re all like, This-is-way-more-than-a-gynecologist-sees naked pictures. I can’t even think what else to say except,

Holy crap! I mean, what am I supposed to do with this information? What does she expect me to say the next time I see her? “You’re—really—flexible”? “Nice wax job”? “Did you end up eating that hot dog?” What? I seriously have no idea how to even begin to handle this situation. I can’t ask Fatinah, but I don’t know who else I would ask.

What’re you supposed to do when the person who wants and desires you the way you want to be wanted and desired by the person you want and desire is some crazy psycho while the person you want to want and desire you thinks you’re just some crazy psycho who wants and desires her the way she wants to be wanted and desired by the person she wants and desires?

Wise words of Carl vs. *Wise Words of Asia*, Take No Prisoners

“Those who are infatuated with the fire of lust fall into the current, as the spider falls into its own web. The wise, having curtailed the current, go off, leaving all sorrow behind”—Dhammapada.

“Life’s too short to waste it with somebody who doesn’t like to suck dick”—Carl the Perv.

I still haven’t talked to Fatinah. I’ve gone to work early the last two days and I waited in the break room but she either never got there early or she didn’t want to go to the break room because she knew I was there, or something. I saw her working on the phone when I went back to take my daily dump, but that’s about it.

And speaking of my daily dump, I got another PIN either last night or tonight for having productivity stats that were too low. I didn't realize that one was even possible when I was double-jacked with someone but apparently Wanda reported me or something. I'm getting closer. I asked Don why he never got PINed for productivity and he said he never logs off his phone when he goes back to the back.

"But doesn't that kill your handle times?" I asked.

"You'd be surprised how long people will stay on the phone when nobody's talking on the other end." That's all he said before he got a call.

I'd be scared to do that, though, because I'm pretty sure that'd ruin my AHT—it'd at least knock me out of the top five, meaning ATS won't pay my tuition, meaning I won't be able to take classes, meaning that stick's going to be right back up Dad's ass.

What a shitty day. One of those days that just starts out bad because some bitchy chick calls your telephone by mistake at eight in the effing morning and the only way you know you're not dreaming is because even in your craziest dreams you couldn't think up somebody that bitchy, and then you can't get back to sleep and you don't know how you're going to stay awake all night at work and then you think, *Well, maybe I shouldn't go to work today*, and so you call in to see for sure when your attendance points roll over and whoever it is who answers the phone says that they roll over next week and that you have sixteen points left and so you ask again and again, "I have sixteen points *left*, meaning I can no-call-no-show twice and still not get fired?" and she says, "Yes," again and again. "Yes," she says. "You have accumulated two attendance points thus far this quarter," and she goes on to say that you clocked in forty-nine minutes late on such and

such day and those are your only two points and this is the official list that was updated at eight o'clock this morning, meaning that you really do have sixteen points to work, so you figure this must be the universe's way of telling you not to go to work tonight and so you drive down here like the last time you needed to get away from it all, but then your car made that clunk-clunk-clunk-clunk sound every time you turned right, so you stopped by the Charlie Smith Toyota dealership here in Princeton, West Virginia, because they had one of those cool billboards that looks all trippy when the wind blows and the guy at the service counter says that you need new front control arm bushings, whatever those are, and that he can do it first thing tomorrow morning and that next door there's a cheap motel—or is it hotel? I can never remember which is which, but I'm sure I knew at one time; I remember that “motel” is a motor-something, but that doesn't tell me which one this is, because you drive to both a motel and a hotel (whichever it is, I'm staying in the one that smells like a wet dog and has jiggly doorknobs and a shower that's even more gross than Carl's and Chainsaw's)—and, the only thing you can think is that, instead of worrying about how you're going to pay all your bills next month with \$350 more on your credit card with its \$39 over limit fee, maybe you should be preparing yourself to receive a message from God or Tunkasila or Whoever, because it just seems like if there was any day that you were going to get a message from God or Tunkasila or Whoever, this would be the day.

Maybe He or She or It will tell me what the hell I'm supposed to be doing with my life, because I don't have a stinking clue. And it's not like one of those things where I'm grunting and groaning and reaching and stretching and, if my fingertips could only grow just one tiny little bit more, then I could grab a clue; it's more like, I'm not even in

the same tri-state area as a clue. I could travel the distance of Barry Bonds' 762 home runs toward a clue and, assuming I somehow traveled in the right direction, I'd still be at least the head-to-toe-head-to-toe length of all the guys Paris Hilton's slept with away from that clue. And I don't have a clue what to do about the fact that I'm so far away from having a clue. So I would be totally psyched if God or Tunkasila or Whoever came down and told me "Do this" or "Do that" and I wouldn't even care if I looked like a total retard and everybody thought I was a douche for cutting off my genitals with a bean hook because I'd have a purpose and my life would actually mean something and I could make a difference without killing anybody and everything would finally make sense.

I guess I'll sit here and wait here for that.

I was just watching this old Robert Redford movie but I turned the channel when the commercial came on and now I can't find it again. That sucks. I was totally getting into it, too. Before the commercial, this old spy guy told this younger old spy guy that what he missed about the cold war was clarity of knowing exactly who the bad guys were and knowing exactly how to proceed from day to day. That's me, exactly, except for the cold war part and the bad guy part and the spy part. I totally don't know what I'm supposed to be doing from one day to the next. What I need is some kind of computer program or something where I could check a bunch of boxes and it'd print out some design on what to do to become the person I want to be. Something like:

(CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Airplane Pilot | <input type="checkbox"/> Automotive Technician |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bartender | <input type="checkbox"/> Park Ranger |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fishing Guide | <input type="checkbox"/> Telemarketer |

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Smuggler | <input type="checkbox"/> Farm Tractor Salesman |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Professional Golfer | <input type="checkbox"/> Telephone Psychic |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Fireman | <input type="checkbox"/> Rock Climbing Instructor |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dolphin Proctologist | <input type="checkbox"/> Stripper |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Good Cop | <input type="checkbox"/> Bad Cop |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Garbage Man | <input type="checkbox"/> All-Around Cool Dude |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Carpenter | <input type="checkbox"/> Pepsi Distributor |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Artist | <input type="checkbox"/> Welder |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sharpshooter | <input type="checkbox"/> Florist |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Indonesian Nike Factory Supervisor | <input type="checkbox"/> Movie/Rock Star |
| <input type="checkbox"/> President/Politician | <input type="checkbox"/> Vacuous Billionaire Debutante |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Movie Theater Ticket Guy | <input type="checkbox"/> Fearless Adventurer |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Smelly Biker | <input type="checkbox"/> Gigolo |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Masseuse/Masseur | <input type="checkbox"/> Columbian Drug Lord |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gymnast | <input type="checkbox"/> College Professor |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The Guy Who Puts the
Convenience-Store Sandwiches in
the Little Plastic Triangle Things | <input type="checkbox"/> Supervisor of the Guy Who Puts the
Convenience-Store Sandwiches in
the Little Plastic Triangle Things |

And then it'd have another section where I could check the boxes for how much money I want to make—\$0-\$150 a year or \$200 million-plus (“private jet with the solid-gold bathroom set”)—and whether or not I want to get married and have kids and what kind of people I want to hang out with and everything else I can think of.

Basically, I just want to be this guy with the charm of James Bond, the sheepish good looks of Matt Damon, the MacGyverishness of MacGyver, the inner peace of the Dalai Lama and the money of Warren Buffett. And I want a healthy, fit body and a ton of women who want me for my brain but desire me for my looks. And I want to be able to fly a plane and ride motorcycles everywhere. And I want to be hairier. I want to have facial hair and chest hair and back hair so I can grow a pony tail or shave my head and it would look cool either way because I'd have a kick-ass goatee to go with it. And I want

to be organized. And I want to be able to open up the calendar thing for right now at 1:30 in the morning and have it tell me exactly where I should be and what I should be doing and what I'll be doing tomorrow and next week and every single day for the next five years to get me to be exactly the guy I want to be. I wouldn't want to refer to it constantly, but it'd be comforting to know that it's there whenever I get off track (and it'd be fun to see how it's been recalibrated after I ease off my path). Somebody should totally invent such a program. I bet tons of people would buy it. I mean, right now it'd probably just tell me to get off my ass and stop fantasizing about some nonexistent computer program or whatever it is I'm fantasizing about. It would tell me to take action.

The gun I ordered came in today—or yesterday—I have a voicemail from the gun store. A Springfield XD-9, 9mm semiautomatic. They were backordered, whatever that means. I used to be one of those people who always said, “I don't like guns,” when really guns just always scared me. Bullets scared me. From watching movies, I always assumed that, if you dropped a bunch of bullets in a campfire, you'd better run for your life or else you'd get a bullet in the head. Or, if you dropped a bullet on the ground, I thought it'd shoot up and go through your head. Or poke your eye out. Dangerous stuff. And I always thought the recoil in a gun would be such that the gun would fly back and hit me in the head and knock me unconscious while my finger stayed pressed against the trigger of my semi-automatic, firing bullet after bullet into the sky until they all came falling back down toward my head until the gun was empty. But it doesn't work that way. Even with the weakest arm and the limpest wrist, a handgun's not going to recoil back against your head. And, even if it did, it wouldn't knock you out; and even if it did, you wouldn't keep

shooting unless you pressed the trigger again and again and again. But that's pretty much all I know about guns.

I don't know why I can't stop thinking about this, but I want to be that guy who everybody looks at and says to themselves, "That's the kind of manly man I want to be."

A couple months ago, I was talking to this annoying chick who shall remain nameless (it wasn't Fatinah, that's all that matters) and the annoying chick started talking about some guy who was really smart or something and I said, "I've never thought of myself as a smart man."

I'm not sure why, but I sort of expected her to roll toward me and gently squeeze my arm and say something like, "Oh, but you are. I can't believe you'd ever think that because you're the smartest man I've ever met," and then we'd start talking again about how awesome I am.

Instead, she said, "I don't think you've ever thought of yourself as a 'man,' period."

I just don't understand women, I think is the deal. I don't understand how someone can be totally super-sweet one day and then totally rude as hell the next, ever since we decided to be just casual sex partners. She'd give me some Hallmark card with a crappy poem on it one night, and the next day she'd just be—mean. And it was sneaky mean, too. Like, she'd say something like—I can't even think of an example, but she'd say something all nice or matter-of-factly, but she'd really be saying the same kind of insults as on *South Park*. Like, the first time she saw my tattoo she was like, instead of saying something like, "Oh, yeah, I can see it now, a squid smoking a fatty—yeah," like

everybody else always has, she was like, “No, it still looks like vomit.” And then she acted all surprised when I took it bad and she’d say, “Oh, no, I wasn’t trying to be mean; I just thought you wanted the truth.” That’s not a good example.

But I knew she was like that, and I knew that I shouldn’t pay attention to anything she ever said, and I usually didn’t, but for some reason I couldn’t ignore the not-a-man thing. And maybe that’s because there’s some truth to it. I mean, I don’t think of myself as a man—not a real man, anyway. I feel like I’m pretending to be a man and that everybody assumes I’m a man, but that I’m really just a little kid.

I still think about riding my bike home from a little league game in fourth grade when those three brothers stopped me on my bike. The oldest was in high school, then middle school, and the youngest was a year older than me. They were standing in the middle of the street and I was just cruising along—doh-dee-doh—everything was fine, heading home from practice, and I tried to steer around them but the oldest brother shuffled over and put his hands out and just—stopped me by grabbing my handlebars. They would’ve stolen my glove if Mom hadn’t made me put my name on it with a big Sharpie marker; they took my hat instead. The next game, I was pitching and the middle brother was standing behind the backstop, wearing my hat. I remember looking at him from the mound when we were ahead whatever to nothing, thinking, *You’re on my turf now, beeotch*. But he was smirking back at me like, *Yeah, but you have to ride home sometime*.

Those guys are probably investment bankers or something now who know exactly what they want out of life, while I still feel like that stupid fourth grader who has to just stand there while three guys circle around me and steal my hat. I don’t know, I guess I

just thought that things would be different after I turned twenty-one, but they're not. My dad took me to boxing lessons after that, but a few weeks later Elizabeth started taking them, too. It's embarrassing to get beat up by your sister in front of everybody, even if she is older. So I never learned to box. And I never learned kung fu and I don't know how to wrestle or how to use a gun or anything. I'm basically screwed.

I just always thought that, by now, I'd be one of those guys who drives around in a big, gas-guzzling, screw-the-environment pickup truck, tailgating the punks in their wimpy Toyota Camrys with their messed up front control-arm bushings that they can't fix themselves, and I'd pass those guys on the highway and splash hog mud on their windshields and then I'd pull over—without using my turn signal—to help some pretty young woman replace her timing belt on the side of the road and then I'd tell her, "No need to thank me, ma'am; you can put yer shirt back on," before I'd drive on to check up on whatever multi-billion-dollar business I owned on my way to whatever tropical island my government would need me to do my super-secret spy stuff. Or at least I'd be one of those cool drifter guys like Kwai Chang Caine, calmly drifting into new towns all across the world, trying to calmly teach the redneck locals about tolerance and, when talking didn't work, I'd kung-fu their asses and then drift off into the sunset with my tiny rucksack and my walking stick after saying to the grateful woman whose honor I'd just protected, "The Tao teaches that the softest of all things is water. Please replace the garment upon your shoulders before I learn otherwise." I totally figured that'd be me by now.

It's not.

God, I'm grumpy as hell and I'm pretty sure it's from that bitchy bitch who called me yesterday morning. It's weird something like that can totally ruin your day and then start on ruining the next one, but she totally did. I should've known it was going to be bad as soon as she asked, "Is this Walker King?" because she said it with that I'm-about-to-scream-at-you-voice, but I didn't really pay attention because I'd only had, like, two hours of sleep.

I was just like, "Yeah," thinking everything was cool.

But then she just started going off about stuff that I was way too tired to focus on that early in the morning. "I've been sending you emails for five days—our basement is flooded—Richard spent our whole budget on water balloons and beer and Super Soakers—you need to do something."

I was just like, "I don't know why you're telling me all this." I said it totally polite, too.

And then she said something about Disciples of the Faith in the Glorious Trinity Church of Coolville, U.S.A., which I remembered was the name of Carl's writing group and so I was like, "Oh, yeah," trying to be helpful, "I'm not sure who you should talk to, but I could give you Carl's number—"

"You're in charge, aren't you?"

"I've only been to one meeting," I said. "I'm not in charge."

"You've been to more than one meeting."

"If you say so. I'm still not in charge."

"Yes you are."

“No I’m not.” We went back and forth like that until finally I told her that the only thing I remembered from however-many meetings I’ve been to was bits and pieces of one conversation I had with one guy named McNamara or Macintosh or something. He said, “Walker, man, I’ve been hoping to talk to you—my dissertation’s due next January—*Animal Farm* with stoners instead of pigs—artistic representation of the inevitable result of indifference in our political process—trying to depict the mess we have now caused by the apathy we showed then—thanks for your help—nice talking to you.”

And I said, “No problem.”

That was our whole entire conversation. Other than that, I had a slice of pizza, I took a dump and I came home.

And then she asked me which bathroom I used. And did I flush? And did I realize that my cavalier attitude is what made this such a mess in the first place?

I just said, “Lady, I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I tried to tell her that the other guy was the person she needed to talk to, but she just kept yelling and yelling more and more, asking why I hated the Coolville Genealogical Society and all that. I was just like “I’ve never even heard of the Coolville Genealogical Society,” which apparently was the exact wrong thing to say.

She yelled at me some more, and somewhere in there she said, all bitchy, “I don’t know if you’re evil or just completely incompetent, and I don’t know which of the two would be worse.”

Bleh. The whole thing’s making me more grumpy the more I think about it.

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“Just as there are a lot of overweight girls in grade school who can’t fit into their uniforms, there are as many little girls who feel inadequate and are stuffing their bras”—Lara Flynn Boyle, interviewed in a five-year-old copy (July 2002—“the big fat weight issue”) of *Rosie*.

“Bag-bag, bag-bag-bag, bag-bag, bag-bag-bag, bag-bag, bag-bag-bag. Bag-*bag!*”—Tinky Winky, singing about the bag.

I wanted to get that bitchy bitch’s phone call out of my head, and thinking about Carl’s writing group got me in the mood to write an artsy-fartsy story of my own. It was going to be about sitting in the customer lounge of the Charlie Smith Toyota dealership in Princeton, WV, while they fixed the front control-arm bushings on my car. But I’ve got nothing. I wanted to write something witty and charming—like me—with a deeper symbolic meaning and a touch of self-deprecation and all that crap.

It was going to start with me reading the Lara Flynn Boyle interview in this old copy of *Rosie* magazine. I would've read something else, but some redneck was reading *Car & Driver*, and *Sports Illustrated* had the Patriots on the cover and I didn't want to read about how awesome they are this year and how they might be the first team to go undefeated since the Dolphins in '70-whatever.

In my story, I was going to read my magazine, relaxing beside the meditative hum of the Dr. Pepper machine, and then the old redneck dude with the *Car & Driver* would start arguing with this younger chick getting the 59-minute Express Lube got into it about the *Teletubbies* with the redneck dude reading the *Car & Driver*.

He'd say, "Tinky-Winky is gay."

And she'd say, "You're a pedophile."

And I'd say, to try to calm them down, "I thought *Teletubbies* went off the air."

And the girl would say to me, "They still show it on PBS," and then real loud she'd say, "because it's a happy, harmless show," and then she'd say to no one in particular, "Didn't they have this conversation ten years ago?"

And then the redneck would say something that she would ignore and then she'd ask me, all professionally—or-whatever-the-opposite-of-intimately-is-ly, "Do you smoke?"

And I'd say, "Yeah," and we'd end up in the bathroom, doing stuff I'd try to memorize for my letter to *Penthouse*.

But it didn't happen quite that way. Actually, what happened was more like, the redneck said, "Heh-heh, that little gay purple thing's singing about his purse."

And right then the mechanic stuck his head inside the door and said, “Shelby? Express Lube? You’re ready.”

And the girl got up and when she got to the door she said, “Asshole” loud enough for everyone to hear, and that was it. When I looked around the room, everybody—even the redneck—was pretending they didn’t hear it, but there was no way they could have not heard it. She didn’t scream it or anything, but it was loud enough for everybody in here to hear it. And when the redneck went to take a piss, this other lady came in and asked if she could change the channel because she hated Bill O’Reilly and she turned it to *Maury* and when the redneck got back, he assumed I did it, since I was reading the *Car & Driver* he left on his chair. So I finished thumbing through the magazine and I tossed it on the table and tried to start writing a story, and that was it.

I wanted my story to capture the experience of waiting for my car to be fixed. The smell of exhaust and grease and dirty oil and overheated transmission fluid. The *phrrrronk-onk-onk* of a pneumatic wrench. The sight of my car up on the hydraulic lift and one or two guys with grunge-blackened forearms underneath reaching up and pulling and tapping and squeezing and squinting. I wanted to write an essay that would remind me of all the time I’d spent in garages and repair shops watching and talking and—occasionally—working. But this customer lounge is clean and sterile and cut off from all the good stuff. All I have was this room: white tile floor with charcoal-grey grout, comfortable chairs with polished wooden arms; red upholstery, vertical window blinds, white walls with various notices and assorted Mountaineer memorabilia. I could just as well be waiting in a doctor’s office.

In my story, my car would symbolize myself—my body and the body of all sentient beings—the vehicle by which we find enlightenment. The mechanics, then, would be doctors, with equipment and machines that I didn’t currently have access to, demonstrating how healthy living contributes to a healthy mind. The fact that it was going to cost over \$400, with tax, to fix my car was the seed of the idea that we need to follow the middle path between wealth and asceticism. To reinforce that idea, I’d find somewhere to sneak in Pao Piao Tzu’s quote from Carl’s *Wise Words of Asia* calendar pages: “Preeminent scholars can obtain Tao in the battlefield; secondary scholars can obtain Tao in the city, but lower scholars can only obtain Tao in seclusion.” Tinky Winky, would represent the beginner’s mind that we must all attain during our journey toward inner peace. And my made-up argument about *Teletubbies* was going to exemplify some sort of huge societal message. A message large enough, perhaps, to bring cultures together, eliminate pollution and hunger, and put an end to war and hatred.

But I’ve still got nothing.

And I’m still thinking about that phone call. I’m starting to get all paranoid that Carl and everybody somehow got the IRS to think that it was my idea to turn their writing group into a church and start doing fundraisers and stuff. Or maybe they’re using the “church” to sell all those pot plants in their trailer and they’re setting me up in case they get caught. I’m just going to try not to think about it.

Rosie’s “Big Fat Weight Issue” has, interestingly enough, several advertisements for foods which I’d consider neither healthy nor low-fat: Keebler Sandies cookies, Stouffer’s

Cheesy Pizzatoni, Wendy's Super Value Meals, Kraft Cheese Nips ("the polite way to eat four Kraft cheeses at once"), New Oscar Mayer XXL Hot Dogs, Nestle Butterfinger Ice Cream Bars, Dean's French Onion Dip, Land 'O Lakes Butter, Kraft Singles. The featured recipe for the month was Emeril's breaded and deep-fried Crispy Shrimp Burger with a big glob of tartar sauce and a bigger glob of sour cream.

But then, that sort of makes sense when you see the "Big as Life" article which is subtitled, "Be Inspired by Women Who've Decided to Stop Feeling Bad About Their Weight." But then, if you flip through all the however-many ads for Thermasilk hair conditioner and Almay Hypo-Allergenic something or other and Dove Body Wash and Covergirl Outlast all-day lipcolor, you see that they all have skinny models in the pictures. Even the legs in the Lamisil ad. But then there's this "I'm Here, I'm a Sphere, I'm Fat, That's That: Three Cheers for Learning to Love Yourself Just the Way You Are" article. But right after that is a full-page sexy picture of Anna Kournikova in an ad for Lycos.com and right before it is the "We Took it Off!" article about six women who'd lost weight and kept it off for at least two years. Each of the women are posing with watermelons. I don't know why.

Holy crap! Another episode of Maury is on—I swear, this show must be on every single minute of every single day, somewhere in the world—and the topic this time is spousal abuse. Okay, no big deal. Maury's crew set up hidden cameras in these people's homes and the first one was kind of funny because it was this big chick just beating the holy hell out of her husband: "You call this plate clean? You call this plate clean?" *Crash! Shatter! Thunk-thunk-thunk!* (hitting him with a wine bottle). "No, baby, please! Stop! Don't,

baby!” I don’t know, that’s probably not funny, but I laughed, and so did the redneck guy waiting for his truck. But then the next pair of guests came out and it was Sara and Chewbacca and they showed the hidden camera footage and the crowd made those shocked, horrified, groaning noises, and the redneck guy is still laughing again and I am totally freaking out.

You couldn’t tell what they were saying in the interview because so many words got bleeped out, but you could tell Chewbacca was pissed. Even the redneck guy was like, “That is one ugly, angry guy.”

“I think it’s a woman,” I said.

“I wouldn’t want to meet her in a dark alley.”

Neither would I, redneck guy. Neither would I.

Instead of driving the two or so hours north to Coolville and to work yesterday after they fixed my car, I drove six or so hours east and now today I’m at the Hirshhorn Museum wondering what the hell I have to do to become an artist.

Some of the stuff here’s pretty cool, but some of it totally pisses me off. It pisses me off that people get paid more money than I make in a year, probably, to display this crap. I mean, I look at some of these pieces and I’m just like, *Come on; you’re not even trying*. I saw a couple little girls on *Trading Spaces* make more complicated art. And maybe that shouldn’t matter; maybe I should still be happy and buy tickets and cheer if LeBron started playing like he belonged in the WNBA, but I wouldn’t. There’s a quote on the wall from somebody (I’ll have to find it) about taking risks, and then you see a pair of old black chalkboards leaned against the wall with a pail of water and a rag

between them, and it's called "F.I.U. Blackboards" or some bullshit. Then there's a neon light in green, purple, red and blue that says "FOUR COLORS FOUR WORDS" and it's called "Four Colors Four Words." And then there's just some fluorescent lights that are just sitting there like nothing, but at least it's called "'monument'" for V. Tatlin" instead of, "Just Some Lame-Ass Fluorescent Lights." And then there's "Untitled No. 3" that's just a blue stripe across the blank canvas. And then on the plaque where it tells what it's made of, it says, "Acrylic and graphite on linen" but, as far as I can tell, the only graphite in the whole picture are two pencil lines that she didn't bother erasing. How does that count as art?

But the one that really pissed me off—offended me that anyone would ever call it art—was this one called "Hazelnut Pollen" or "Pollen from Hazelnut" and it was just a big square—eight by twelve feet—of hazelnut pollen in the middle of the floor. What risks is this taking? What message is this trying to tell the viewer? That hazelnut pollen—though not really bright yellow—is a lot more yellow than I would've guessed if someone had asked me what color hazelnut pollen was? Or is it saying, "I, Wolfgang Laib, am not only an artist, but I am working to rid the world of hazelnuts by collecting all of their pollen."

I remember reading about some town in Montana that's named after a guy who tried to single handedly rid the world of buffalo, thinking it would kill off all the Sioux. Maybe Wolfgang dreams every night about the future town of Laib, Maine. Or Laibia, Indiana. "And after hazelnuts are extinct," he tells himself, "I'll go after alfalfa, because that shit just pisses me off."

I found the taking-risks quote(s): “To the artist the workings of the critical mind are one of life’s mysteries. That is why, we suppose, the artist’s complaint that he is misunderstood, especially by the critic, has become a noisy commonplace.

“The world of the imagination is fancy free and violently opposed to common sense.

“To us, art is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take the risks.

“It is our function as artists to make the spectator see the world our way—not his way.”—Excerpts from Adolph Gottlieb’s and Mark Rothko’s response to a critic, 1943.

I mean, it seems like “artists” pass off totally worthless crap as art and, when normal people call it totally worthless crap, people like Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko defend the “artist” by saying we common people just don’t understand the risks these “artists” are taking. I’m still waiting to see a canvas on the wall that somebody has just taken a big dump on, and it’ll be called “Big Dump,” or maybe “Morning Dump,” or, if the artist is a *real* risk taker, he’ll have a whole series: “After the Corn Harvest,” and “Apres Croissant,” and “Lactose Intolerant Ice Cream Eater.” Maybe it’s already here—I’ve still got a couple floors left. But when I see it, I won’t be able to call it shit; I’ll have to call it art. Nobody will be allowed to call it shit, lest we’ll be considered mental midgets by some douchetard with a stick—or a paintbrush—up his ass. Maybe I’m just bitter because no one wants to pay \$5000 for the photocopy I made of my ass last week.

Oh well, back to all the crap.

I found Carl's old girlfriend that he's always talking about—I recognized her picture from his MySpace page (plus she was wearing a nametag that said Valerie, plus he's mentioned about a million times that she worked at the Hirshhorn Museum)—and, damn, she does not like Carl. At all.

I said, "Yeah, I don't like him so much lately, either."

And she said, "Why? Did he slip GHB into your beer, too, and then plaster naked pictures of you all over the internet?"

I was just like "Huh?" and I saw how pissed she was and I said, "Seriously?"

She looked at me for a second and she asked, "Do you smoke?"

"Cigarettes?"

"I'm not asking if you want to spark up a joint back behind the Maillol sculpture, you jackass. Of course I mean cigarettes."

Before I could tell her I was trying to quit, she said, "Debbie, I'll be back in five minutes" and she and I went outside.

The first thing she asked me was, "Where is he?"

"Who?"

"Are you seriously this stupid? Why are you here? Why did you come to see me? Who do you think I'm talking about?"

"Carl. Yeah," I said. "He's in Ohio. He lives in a trailer."

"A trailer in Ohio. That helps. Thanks."

"Coolville, Ohio. I don't know the address." She was kind of giving me the Clint Eastwood squinty stare. I couldn't tell if it was because of the sun. "He works at a place

called Appalachian TeleServices,” I said. She kept staring. “I don’t know the address there, either, but I’m sure it’s in the phonebook.”

“Phonebook, right. Coolville, Ohio,” she said, and she scrunched out her cigarette on the bricks and walked inside. She didn’t say thanks or anything, so I didn’t know if I was supposed to follow her, but she never looked back so I figured I wasn’t.

Oh well. I’d seen enough art for one day, anyway.

Wise words of Carl vs. *Wise Words of Asia*, Fighting for Respect

“Let everything be allowed to do what it naturally does, so that its nature will be satisfied”—Chuang Tzu.

“Yoda sought the power to control his own mind, his inner space; Darth Vader sought the power to control outer space. Focus on yourself. Like Yoda be”—Carl.

I’ve been getting more and more emails from Sara every day since we went hiking in the woods. I usually just delete them without even opening them, but she sent me this one with a subject line that said, “break room fantasy,” so I opened it and it started out like, “I’m sitting in my bedroom wishing I had to work tonight because then I would be closer to you.” So right there I should’ve known something was wrong. I mean because, how crazy would somebody have to be to actually want to be at work? If they worked at ATS, anyway. No matter how much I like Fatinah, for example, there’s never been a moment where I ever thought to myself, *You know, I’d happily give up a day off to see Fatinah.*

The email:

I'm sitting in my bedroom wishing I had to work tonight because then I could be closer to you. Right about now, I imagine you are taking your first break, two small bags of Ranch CornNuts in front of you, slightly to the right, a bottle of Sobe Green Tea to the left, and *The Amazing Race* on television. The first thing you will do when you open your tea is read the inside of the cap, then arch your eyebrows as if to say, "Hmmm, interesting," even when you don't think anybody can see you.

In my bedroom I can imagine being closer to you than I would ever actually dare in the break room. In my bedroom I can imagine sneaking up behind you right now, putting my hands over your eyes and saying, "Guess who!" as you fumble to place your CornNuts on the table so you can feel my hands. Would you be able to identify me? Would you recognize my fingernails? What if I sneaked under the table? Would you know me then? Would you want to?

In my bedroom I can imagine what would happen next. On top of the table. Your CornNuts would drop, plink plink plink, on the seat of the metal chair and your bottle of tea would shatter on the floor. "I'll buy you a new one," I would promise.

"Don't worry about it," you will say, breathlessly, as the table rocks violently back and forth, thud thud thudding against the wall.

I know this can only happen in my bedroom, in my mind. Yet I still long to be with you at work. Closer, yet farther away.

L8r—

S.

(By the way, I hate the L8r for “later.” I don’t know why.) So anyway, I’m thinking, I don’t know. I mean, I definitely want to avoid her, especially after that talk Chewbacca and I had in my car on the way to our hike, but it still seemed like no big deal.

The next ones she sent were just kind of blah-blah, and blah-blah. In one, she described (in excruciating detail) some dream she had about going to Wal-Mart and I was there in the pet section giving a snake charming demonstration, crap like that.

Another one had this quiz where I could answer the questions and tell her how I felt about her:

- a) You’re cool and I’d like to hang out with you.
- b) You’re warm and caring and I’d like to talk with you.
- c) You’re hot and I want to rub baby oil all over you.
- d) You’re kind of annoying; that’s why I avoid you and never answer your emails.
- e) All of the above.

Okay, so they still seemed fairly normal—completely normal if you don’t consider the Chewbacca situation—I was kind of flattered or whatever. But still I figured, you know, no big deal. I’ll just keep making sure we don’t end up alone anywhere; make sure I don’t do anything to give her the wrong impression, stuff like that until, eventually,

she'll get interested in someone else. Just wait for the problem to go away, I guess. But then tonight, I was getting in my car to come home from work, and there was this note on my windshield and it was from Sara and it's totally psycho. Just a bunch of stuff like,

You need to tell me what's going on so I'll know what you want from me. Why won't you talk to me? We can't keep avoiding each other forever. What have I done to deserve this? I thought maybe I came on too strong there for a while, so I backed off and gave you some space, but you still have done nothing to bridge the gap between us. And now you act like whatever I do is wrong. Maybe we've miscommunicated. Maybe you sent me an email that I didn't get.

Or are you avoiding me now because you're scared I'll be mad at you for avoiding me before? I'm not mad. What kind of bitch do you think I am? And you don't need to worry about my ex, I would never tell her anything about us. That's none of her business, and she knows it. She respects my privacy now and she's promised to let me live my life. As for our marriage, it was never recognized in Ohio, anyway, so there's no need for her or me to do anything in that regard.

Those are the highlights. It was six pages, front and back.

I read it and I was just like *Wtf?* I mean, seriously, *Wtf?* I mean, she's obviously crazy, but I don't know how I'm supposed deal with that or do about that. And I know it's her handwriting because I recognize the same jagged t's and h's and k's, so it's not like tomorrow she'll be able to say, "Oh, somebody else must've written it and put my name on it as a joke" or something. I know it's from her. And she's always talking about how we're soul mates because we like the same bands, but I keep telling her over and

over that I hate Dashboard and Conor Oberst and all emo music in general and it's like she won't even believe me. I don't have a clue what I'm supposed to do. I mean, I've been trying to be gentle and let her down easy without ever giving her the impression that I would ever want to be more than friends, but it's like I have to keep being less and less subtle and more and more rude and I'm not sure what it's going to take unless I totally just scream at her in front of everybody at work or something.

I don't want to be mean or anything but, *damn*. I don't have a clue what I'm supposed to do so, right now, I'm going to smoke a bowl and try to forget about it.

If you wanted a video game to simulate an acid trip, according to Carl, you'd start with a little old-time Donkey Kong and then have Mario chasing after the Princess and then you'd have to go one-on-one with LeBron James and then a swordfight with some super-ninja sword fighting dude—only you wouldn't kill him, you'd have to make him submit so he would tell you how to get down to the next level—there'd be a whole, karmic bonus thing going on, too, and you'd keep going deeper and deeper and there'd be this whirlpool and you'd have to hit the red button at exactly the right time, otherwise you'd just end up in some dead end that goes down a couple more levels and then goes backwards up to the top, or maybe if you win a couple, it'll take you back to the whirlpool to choose again. Or maybe if you successfully go backwards on a couple, then you can go to a new place that'll take you back to the whirlpool, to choose again.

So he says.

Wise words of Carl vs. *Wise Words of Asia*, This Time it's for Keeps

“He who grasps loses”—Lao Tzu.

“I feel like I’m on the tip of grasping some magnificent, philosophical thing (the answer to: What’s it all mean?) and I keep thinking that the next big weed binge will give me all the answers—to that question and more”—Carl.

I saw Sara in the hallway at work—it was unavoidable, otherwise I would’ve avoided her—and so, since I didn’t know what the hell else to do, and since there were other people around, I asked her if she wanted to go outside and have a smoke. She did. And we had a nice—I thought—conversation, about just little small-talky stuff. I acted like everything was normal, like we were just friends and like we were never any more than friends, etc., etc. and she seemed to be going along with it, talking herself about lighthearted inconsequential shit. Okay. So I assume everything’s fine and cool and dandy. But then, I come into the break room with Lewis and Sara’s standing there at the vending machine and she just looks at me all pissed. *All* pissed. I mean, I smile at her. As I’m walking by, I try to make some sort of eye contact so I can say Hi or something, and she doesn’t even look at me. After she left, I was like to Lewis, “What the hell was that?” I mean, now she hates me again? I guess, as long as she stays the hell away from me—and keeps me the hell out of her life—we’re cool. But still, I’m tired of people being pissed at me for crap that no normal person would ever be pissed at anybody for.

Runner-up for greatest headline ever (or at least understated headline of the year): “Local Officials Hope They Aren’t Witnessing a Trend”

The headline itself doesn't seem so bad until you read the article and realize it's about somebody else getting shot in the face.

Wise words of Carl vs. *Wise Words of Asia*, Don't You Talk About My Mama

"To win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the highest skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the highest skill"—Sun Tzu.

"It's like, this one bubble is it's own universe, or our universe is like this bubble, and the shit just happens a lot faster in the bubble. All the while, little negative pi-mesons are ramming into protons and expanding into tiny new particles, and it seems to be happening fastest around my ass."—Apparently-just-watched-*Men-in-Black* Carl.

Tonight was the worst night of work in the entire history of work. I don't even know where to start—unless it's the part where I got glued to Lurch's toilet seat, thanks to Carl. Or maybe after that, while I was still glued to the toilet seat, when Chewbacca barged into the men's restroom hoping to kick my ass. Or maybe at the end of that, when Lewis was supposedly helping me and he told Chewbacca that he just saw me out in the parking lot with her girlfriend/wife/partner/whatever. Or maybe right after that, when Chewbacca told Lewis, "When you see him, tell him I'm going to shove his balls down his throat." (All that stuff Sara was telling me about how Chewbacca was more like a sister than a girlfriend, and how she kicked Chewbacca out of her apartment, apparently that was all a bunch of crap.)

And now that I have red letters on my ass that say either KCUS YOU or UOY SUCK depending on if I use one or two mirrors.

And every time I say something to Carl about what a dick he is, he keeps laughing like, “Heh-heh, I thought I was doing you a favor.”

I was like, “How would it help me for you to glue Lurch to his toilet seat?”

And he just sat there like, “Heh-heh, I thought you’d think it was funny, heh-heh.”

I just want to bitch slap him so bad. Douchetard. And my ass itches so much my brain thinks it hurts.

Another reason to bitch slap him: the other day, he asked me to burn him a CD with a bunch of beginner Grateful Dead songs on it and so, okay, I did. But then tonight Fatinah was like, “Can we listen to this CD that Carl made for me?” and it was a different CD than the one I burned for him, but then she put it in and, so far, it’s all the exact same songs (I gave him “Fire on the Mountain” and “Touch of Grey,” then the whole *American Beauty* CD and a couple live songs and so far we’re up to “‘Til the Morning Comes,” so I’m thinking he didn’t even make the effort to change the order of the songs). When “Ripple” started, I was like, “Is this the CD that I gave you?” hoping that Fatinah would notice it was actually my music that she was falling in love with, not his. But she didn’t. Okay. I mean, that sucks, but okay. But then, Carl had the nerve to say, “No, I’ve had these songs forever.”

So I said, “What about that crappy Christian rap crap you were listening to when you were hitting on Sara?”

And he was just totally acting like I lost my mind. I hate when people do that. It was like talking to Sara, so when Carl tried talking to me like that, I probably sounded more pissed than I really was. I was like “Why did you want me to make you a CD?”

“Uh, I couldn’t find my copy,” and then he went into this whole long story about how he and his ex-girlfriend went straight to the record stores to look for old Dead tapes every Thursday at exactly 4:30 when she’d get off work.

So I asked, “Why didn’t you just download a copy?”

And he acted all morally superior: “Oh, I couldn’t do that. I try to support the artists whenever I can. I’d never download illegal music.”

“Having somebody burn you a CD is just as bad—it’s worse, actually, because mp3 quality sucks compared to CDs.”

Plus, he needed me to tell him the title of every single song and to repeat the name of the album, “*American Beauty, American Beauty, American Beauty*,” about eighteen quadrillion times. So I said, “Why didn’t you know the names of the songs then?”

“What’re you talking about, dude? I know the song names.”

“What’s the name of the song playing now?” which was a stupid question, because they sing “‘Til the morning comes, ‘Til the morning comes” about eighty million times in three minutes.

So of course he was like, “‘Til the Morning Comes,” and then he got all, like, “What? Are you testing my knowledge of the Dead? Is this some sort of contest?” and on and on with this laughing-mock-outrage he had going on and then Fatinah started laughing, too, so now Fatinah thinks I’m the asstard even though Carl’s the one who stole my music and lied about it just to get into her pants. And I know that’s kind of what I’ve been doing, too, but at least I haven’t been totally slimy about it.

And he glued me to the toilet seat! That alone should be worth a ginormous bitch slap. Just wait until I start flying planes and become a pilot. Then she’ll know how cool I

am and he'll be sad that he was acting all lovey-dovey with her tonight and bragging about how cool he is. This guy from Hocking College said he'll take me up for a ride tomorrow if I pay half his gas. And if the weather's clear. And if I'm out at the OU airport at 0800 or 08:00 or oh-eight hundred hours.

I'm sitting here and I'm trying to pretend that everything's cool because I don't want Fatinah to think I'm the kind of guy who gets upset about anything but, at the same time, everything's not cool. I mean, Carl is just fucking up everything and for some reason I keep letting him come over to my apartment (like I had a choice if I wanted to see Fatinah tonight). But I just want to scream at him while I totally bitch slap him over and over. "You glued my ass to the toilet seat"—slap—"You totally weaseled Fatinah out from under me"—slap—"and now you have the nerve to be all touchy-flirty-grope-y with her in my apartment"—slap, slap, slap, slap. Punch, punch, kick, kick, stomp, stomp. "Yeah, beeotch."

I honestly think I hate him.

Our hero discovers yet another reason to bitch slap his new romantic rival.

Carl gave me all these books to read, right? I don't even remember what all they were except for the Motley Crue biography. And then tonight he told me that he only wanted me to read the Motley Crue book so I'd start his chapters the same way they do in that book, with the epigraphs or whatever they're called, where it says something like, "The part wherein Tommy Lee does something crazy to prove to himself that he's not some pathetic wrinkled has-been-slash-never-was douche," or "More proof that one

doesn't need talent, brains, or socially-acceptable hygiene habits to make mindless pre-pubescent girls swoon," or "The time when our heroes were so busy thinking they were cool that they didn't realize they'd fallen off the relevant wagon forty years ago."

I was like, "Carl, dude, why did you tell me to read the whole thing?" and he just kind of shrugged like a jacktard. I would've been pissed if I'd actually wasted any time reading it. I so-o-o wanted to slap him, though.

Wise words of Carl vs. *Wise Words of Asia*, The Final Chapter

"Before enlightenment I chopped wood and carried water. After enlightenment I chopped wood and carried water"—Zen saying.

"Q: What's the difference between a biker chick and a bowl of ice cream?

"A: The ice cream doesn't fart when you eat it"—Zen Carl.

I got another email from Sara today. In this one, she acknowledged that she has multiple personalities, but she assured me that it's not a "disorder" because there isn't one that's more dominant than the others. That's reassuring. The freak. It just amazes me how complete are her delusions of sanity. I mean, she thinks she's normal and not at all crazy but she's by far the craziest chick I've even known. Depressed chicks I can sort of deal with, but this psychotic stuff is total bullcrap.

Wise words of Carl vs. *Wise Words of Asia*, It's An All-New Showdown

"If that which is within is not right, it is futile to pray for that which is without"—Japanese proverb.

“What’s the deal with mountain climbing? Even if all of our goals weren’t arbitrary and certain stuff actually did matter even though we’re all going to be dead one day, mountain climbing still seems like the most arbitrary goal of all arbitrary goals in the entire world. It’s cold, it’s windy, and you don’t have time to look around and enjoy the scenery. Plus your Sherpas do all the hard work, anyway, so what do you really accomplish? Mountain climbing is stupid.”—Couch-potato Carl.

My career as a pilot ended before it ever took off. I was weaving back and forth on the runway like a drunk Shriner heading home for a late dinner (not sure what that means). I was weaving back and forth because, when the plane’s on the ground, you steer with the rudder, which you control with your feet. To go left, I think, you push with your left foot—or maybe it’s the right foot—whichever one it was, it was the exact opposite of whatever my brain kept thinking it should be. And I don’t even have the rudder figured out before he’s got me either pulling out or pushing in this knob (the throttle—I know that) to give it more gas until we get up to however-many knots and he was saying something about something and my radio was cutting in and out the whole flight but I don’t know if I would’ve known what he was saying anyway because I was so focused on trying to stay on the cement part of the five hundred (I think)-foot-wide runway (though at the time it seemed like it was only ten or twenty feet) and I hear him say something about getting up to a certain airspeed and I glance too quick at the airspeed indicator to know how fast we’re going and when I look out I realize we’re off the ground and we may have been for a while.

And somewhere in there he said something into the radio like, “Ohio University traffic, this is Cessna 0230 Uniform, we are departing traffic to the southwest” and then he told me, “Okay, do you remember when they talked about left-turning tendency in an airplane? Remember, it’s even greater at takeoff because you have a slower airspeed and a higher angle of attack. So you want to compensate for that by giving it some right aileron.” Then he said, “No, that’s left. Here, I’ll take it for a minute.”

“You have the controls.” The whole flight, that’s the only thing I could remember to say properly, and I was a stickler for that. I didn’t remember what the airspeed indicator was supposed to say and I couldn’t remember what the attitude indicator is even for, but I remembered the correct procedure for passing over the controls. The pilot who is getting the controls says, “I have the controls,” and then the person handing them over says, “You have the controls,” and the person getting them confirms again, “I have the controls.” In our plane, it was more like, “Here, I’ve got it.”

“You have the controls.”

“Uh, yeah. I’ve got it.”

“You’ve got the controls.”

And then there’d be a huge exhale into the mic.

I realize now that when he said, “Give it some right aileron,” he wanted me to turn toward the right. For some reason, I kept turning left—but never more than fifteen degrees; more than that made me feel like I was going to slide right out my door.

Pitch, trim and power, I think is what he said controls altitude. Or determines altitude. Or maybe it’s trim and power that determine pitch. I was so tense the whole

entire thirty or forty minutes we were up there that I don't remember much of anything except bits of what I heard through my headphones.

"Okay, see how now we're at 3,500 when we wanted to hold steady at three thousand?—that's one of the main things we try to teach our new pilots, is how to maintain straight and level, unaccelerated flight.

"If you put your four fingers on the top of the dash here, the horizon should be at the top of your index finger.

"Remember, if you have your trim properly adjusted, you should be able to maintain straight and level flight without using your elevators.

"Remember, on this turn we want to angle about thirty degrees. Here, you're between five and ten.

"Okay, see how your heading—this arrow—isn't in the orange bracket anymore? Let's see if we can just keep going south.

"Okay, now remember how we said we didn't want to descend faster than five hundred feet per minute? Your vertical speed indicator shows we're descending a little faster than that."

I thought it was going to be awesome, but it sucked. For the last couple days, I'd been working it all out in my head how I was going to casually mention—without bragging—that, oh, yeah, I have a pilot's license; I'm not just a lame telephone psychic like the rest of you losers. And then eventually Fatinah would hear that I'm a pilot and she'd have some emergency and she'd need me to fly her—somewhere, for something, and then she'd be eternally grateful. But today, every time I looked down, it was like, *The only thing separating me from a three thousand-foot fall to certain death in a dried up*

cornfield is this flimsy 1960's-era safety belt that may or may not be properly buckled and this more-rickety-than-a-Yugo door that took three rattle-y slams to close. I mean, I'm sitting here, trying to rationalize why I'm not going to take any more flying lessons—ATS will only pay half my fees and I'm already seriously in debt, and when you figure all the time it takes to reserve the plane, and inspect the plane, and do your flight plan, and all that stuff, it's actually quicker to just drive to Cincinnati—I had some others, too, but I know that the real reason I'm not going to do it any more is because it pretty much scared the holy crap out of me.

A douchetard's ex-girlfriend comes for a visit. Hilarity ensues.

I was just sitting here, chilling out with a little Battlefield Vietnam after work, when somebody knocks on the door and I go to answer it and it's Carl and he's all like "Somehow my ex-girlfriend got my address and she came by when I brought Fatinah over after work, and now Fatinah won't answer her phone and I don't know where she lives." boo hoo hoo. He wouldn't say exactly what the ex said or did but, apparently, it was enough to make Fatinah leave and say she's never going to see him again.

Ha!

He looked like he'd been crying or something. His face was all red and it looked like his lip was swollen. I asked him what happened but he wouldn't really say much more than that.

When I first went to see that Valerie chick, I seriously planned on them getting back together, figuring that'd leave the door open for Fatinah and me to start hanging out again and doing—whatever. I didn't know she'd be so pissed, but I guess that's what

happens when you start slipping people GHB and taking naked pictures of them. I sort of felt bad, because I'm pretty sure he's the one who fixed my attendance points at work.

But at the same time it's like *Of course she'd be pissed*.

He asked me, "You don't know anything about this, do you?"

"No," I said. "I remember you talking about an ex-girlfriend from somewhere, but I forgot a lot of the details. Sorry." And then I told him, "Hey, I should have most of your book finished next week." I don't even know why I said that, because it wasn't like it was true or anything.

But he said, "I don't care anymore." And he left.

"I'll let you know if I hear anything," I said. That was probably a lie, too.

Wise words of Carl vs. *Wise Words of Asia*, There Are No Words . . .

"Few among men are they who cross over to the other shore. Most simply run up and down the bank on this side"—Dhammapada.

"If we're all going to die anyway, what is the point?"—sad Carl.

I just had another super-long telephone conversation with Fatinah—not so long that my ear hurts now, but it was long enough. We're going to hang out here after work and play Cribbage. I'm totally psyched!

Eventually she told me about Carl. I pretended like I didn't already see Carl tonight. Apparently, Valerie knows karate or kung fu or something and she totally kicked his ass. Ha! Then she told Fatinah about the GHB thing and so now Fatinah thinks maybe he did that to her, too. She was like "Remember that first night we were at his place?"

She said the next morning she was all bloody and thought her period started but then it didn't, so I don't know if that means she's a virgin—or she was a virgin—or what. All I know is, I'm hanging out with Fatinah tomorrow night after work and I'm totally psyched. And I know I said that already, but I am totally psyched!

Hopefully this is the last email I'll ever get from Sara. She pissed me off enough the other day that I finally sent her my own angry email back which, hopefully, did the trick (but, like I told Lewis, this is like the third time she's sent me an email that says, pretty much, "Oh, I get it, there was never anything between us and I just completely misinterpreted everything," so we'll see). In this last one, all she wrote was:

Okay. I got it. Loud and clear. Thanks for finally explaining things. It hurts, but at least now I know.

be well—

(Come to think of it, I'm not exactly sure what this email means. What did I say in the last email that I didn't say before that made the last message "loud and clear?" God, I just want her to please go away so I don't have to deal with her any more. Please.)

Eggo Blueberry Waffles with Parkay lite margarine and 1/2 the calorie maple syrup—has to rank up there with A&W Creme Soda and Breyers—you have to eat them (the waffles) by hand, and then the syrup starts dripping all over your fingers, more and more with each bite, and then you resort to squirting a dab of syrup on and eating that part really quick before the blob spreads out. And then after the waffles are gone you realize that you still didn't get enough syrup and so you just squirt a squirt into your mouth.

A restaurant called: Just Syrup.

Wise words of Carl vs. *Wise Words of Asia*, This Time it Really is for Keeps

“The sage knows without going, sees without looking, and accomplishes without doing”—Lao-tzu.

“My face is being crushed by a steamroller—swear to God”—Carl.

Fatinah’s asleep—cuddled up against me—and I can’t reach the TV remote without getting up and I don’t want to get up because I’m scared it might wake her up so I’m stuck watching this Time Life Music infomercial with Wayne Newton singing “Danke Sch—” (however you spell it). He looks like this thirteen-year-old Italian Opie.

Tonight, they sent a bunch of us downstairs to take phone orders because a bunch of people were sick or else they decided that ATS sucks and they quit. We didn’t have to take a pay cut, which was cool, but it sucked when people called in to order these stupid Time Life Music collections. Everything would be fine; you’d get all the way through the sale—you’d have their address and their credit card information and then you’d have to read the part about how they just unwittingly signed up for every stinking CD in the whole entire Time Life collection—once a month until they die—“Oh, No, ma’am,” we’d have to say, “all you need to do is call and cancel as soon as you get that first one, okay?”

Then they’d say they don’t want it because they’ll forget to cancel and we’d have to say, “Yeah, I used to worry about that, too, but I just put a note on my calendar, so let’s go ahead and send this out to you today, okay?”

But I had this lady tonight who was like “I don’t have a calendar.”

So I said, “My parents don’t use a calendar either; they tape notes to their telephone—”

“I don’t have tape.”

“You don’t have any tape, in the whole house?”

“Nope.”

“No Scotch tape?”

“No.”

“Masking tape?”

“No.”

“Duct tape?”

“I said I don’t have any tape. So I’ll have to cancel my order.”

“What about bubblegum? Hot wax?”

“No. No.”

“How do you write notes to yourself?”

“I just remember everything.”

“Well, if you can remember that, you don’t need to worry, so we can just go ahead and complete your order, okay?” No wonder everybody quits that job. It sucks worse than the psychic line.

“After the Lovin,’” I don’t know who Englebert Humperdink is or was—I’ve heard the name; I don’t know why—but he’s got a look to him that makes you think he used to get a lot of lovin’.

End of story.

Fuck. About five minutes later—not even five minutes; it was as long as it took her to walk down to her car and drive off and then for her (the other her—the wrong her) to walk up here from wherever she was parked; before I even got the chain on the door latched—there’s a knock on the door and so I answer it, assuming it’s Fatinah, but it’s Sara, and the first thing she says to me is, “Happy to see me?” and I don’t know if she says it because I probably looked all happy when I opened the door, thinking it’s Fatinah coming back to wryly say, “You know, I really don’t feel comfortable leaving when I’ve lost so many games of Cribbage; maybe you’d let me have a rematch—in bed,” so I was probably—at least at first—looking all like I’ve got this scenario in my head of strip Cribbage with the shy, teasing compliments flowing into the gentle poking and tickling and those unrehearsed “I’ve-always-wondered-what-you-look-like-naked” compliments that’d get her thinking about being naked except, in my case, they’d be rehearsed as hell because I’ve been trying for three months to figure out the best way to phrase it to get her naked without sounding pervy and thus ruining whatever shot I may have had, so I’d probably just say something more about her eyes, if that’s not too lame, or maybe something about how I love the way her hair’s got that soothing fresh laundry smell, but I’d probably just suggest that the loser of the next Cribbage game gives the winner a backrub and then I’d lose on purpose and then I’d give a little platonic tug on her shirt and say, “Ooh, you should take this off so we don’t get any oil on it,” like I’m so concerned about the welfare of her clothes that any other advantages of her toplessness don’t even occur to me, and then I’d gesture to her jeans and say something like, “If you take these off, I can massage your legs, too,” or “Maybe you should take these off, too, in case I get sloppy with the oil” and then, after I work my magic, I’d slide up and whisper

in her ear, “How am I doing so far?” and she’d make that “Mmmm” purring sound and then I’d move in for the friendly kiss that’d work its way into actual kissing that’d eventually flow into the caressing and stroking and nibbling and rubbing and licking and sucking thing and pretty soon she’d be holding my face between her warm wet hands and she’d look into my eyes and sigh, “Tell me you’ve got some condoms.” Yes. Nice image. But when I realized it was Sara at the door, I don’t know what my face might’ve looked like. Confused, probably. And I couldn’t tell from looking at her if she was pissed, or drunk, or horny, or what. And I didn’t know if she had just been outside telling Fatinah about what an asshole I am or if she had just hacked Fatinah into little bits and tossed her into the Hocking River. She didn’t have blood on her sweater, so that was good. (Her sweater looked kind of nice, actually, the way she was all poking out without a bra or anything.) And then she says, “Take a picture, it’ll last longer,” as she walks in past me, and I can tell now that she’s pissed and also, somehow—maybe she said something now that I think about it—that’s she’s been waiting in her car for the last however-many hours for Fatinah to drive home. And then she plops down on my couch like she owns the place, even though she’s only been here, like, once before, and she just blurts out, “I’m pregnant” and I totally feel like I just got the wind knocked out of me, without the falling flat on my back part. All I could do was sit down on my milk crate-slash-bookshelf in my living room-slash-dining room-slash-gym-slash-library and think about how totally screwed-slash-scuh-rewed I was. Her big mean psychotic lesbian wife-slash-girlfriend-slash-whatever is going to know the baby isn’t hers—she’s not that stupid—and she’s going to want to kill me for sure. If she was ready to shove my balls down my throat

when she thought me and Sara just kissed, she's totally going to want to kill me now. I am so-o-o screwed. Fuck.

None of this is my fault. That's what sucks. I mean, I keep thinking how stupid stupid stupid I am but then I wonder how anything could've turned out any different. I mean, Sara just showed up at my door three months ago and all she was wearing was that long jacket with nothing on underneath but that little white silky thing. And she had one of those thin gold chains around her waist, which pretty much sealed the deal for me. I mean, this was when I just started working there, before I'd ever even got up the nerve to say "Hi" to Fatinah and it was wa-ay before I knew who Chewbacca was or that she and Sara had a thing. Plus, Sara's got that pierced tongue, which I figured at the time would be awesome, even though it actually just feels like a ginormous wart, precisely where you don't want to feel a ginormous wart. But I didn't know that at the time. And she had her hair up in that sexy little red-headed librarian bun. I mean, I honestly can't imagine that there's some guy somewhere who could say No to that. Because I'm so far from even comprehending how somebody might say No; I don't even know how I could've gone about that. What would've I done different? I'd still answer the door, because I used to always answer the door before I had Chewbacca to worry about, and I'd open it and it'd be Sara in that long jacket, and she'd say, "Hey, I know you! You work at ATS—you're still in OJT, right? You're the guy who helped me with my car and gave me a ride. What're you doing here?"

"I live here," I'd still say, even if I was the kind of guy that things'd somehow turn out different for, and then she'd still say, "Do you know So and So?" or whoever she

asked for, and I'd say No again, because I still wouldn't, and then she'd still say that whatever friend of hers was hosting their group's monthly lingerie slumber party, or whatever she called it—some officialish-sounding name—but she couldn't find her friend's new house or something (she admitted, like, two days later that she made all that crap up, but how could I have known that?). So that would've gone about the same.

The me who could somehow say No would've probably been less interested in the whole Tupperware-party-except-with-lingerie-and-a-sleepover idea than I had been (or maybe he'd be imagining lingerie pillow fights with those hideous phone whores from work, instead of the frolicking *Playboy*-pajama-party-turned-*Hustler*-ish-pajamaless-party thing that I had in my head), but the me who could say No probably still would've let her borrow my phone, because the me who could say No would still be polite and helpful or whatever. And then, when she couldn't get her friends on the phone, the better me probably still would've let her take her coat off. It's not like I had a choice, anyway; she pretty much just said, "It must be eighty degrees in here," and then her coat was on the nail by the door before I could say anything and then she was standing there in that little white thing that was barely long enough to cover any of her important parts and, besides that, went all the way down to her two little dimples in the back and almost down to her pierced little almost-outtie bellybutton in the front and I know the better me wouldn't have stared—or maybe he would've stared long enough to notice that she's got those mammongous bazoombas that I'd never really paid attention to before then, and he would've noticed that she's nowhere near as chubby as I'd always thought she was, but he probably somehow wouldn't have stared as long as I did. And I don't know what the better me would've said when she spun around and asked if I liked her outfit, because I

thought I did this kind of nonchalant “Um-hmm.” And I thought I still played it cool when she was all like “Do you think it’s too short in back? I want to show off my butt without looking slutty,” and I just said, “No, no. It’s fine. It’s not slutty.” What else could I say? I mean, I guess I could’ve been all like Flanders on *The Simpsons* and kicked her out while I was quoting Bible verses, but that would’ve been rude, and the better me is definitely not rude. Maybe I could’ve somehow stopped her before she took off those high-heeled shoes, but she kind of just put her hand on my shoulder and said, “I need to get these off,” as she bent over. I did say, “What’re you doing?” actually, before she said she needed to take them off, but I didn’t know what else to say. She was just bent over and those little spaghetti straps weren’t doing much because I could see all the way down to her piercing and I was just like *Damn*.

I don’t know about the better me, but all I could keep thinking was, *What would that be like?* To touch those big, perfect, D-cups. Just to feel them. Kind of like the way everybody wants to drive a real nice car like a Corvette or one of those new Mustangs just to be able to experience it just once. Like, what does it feel like to be inside, and to see everything up close? What would it smell like? Would the carpet be softer under my feet? Would I have to shift into fourth, then second, then fourth again before it would maybe go into reverse? I bet it wouldn’t grind going into third; what would that be like? How loud would I be able to crank up the sound system? How fast would it go? How would it handle going real slow? I’d want to press all the buttons and slide my hands over everything. Just to know what it feels like to be surround myself with something so perfect-looking. What would they feel like? Would they be as soft as they look? What would happen if I traced my fingertips all the way around? Would she squirm if I blew a

circle around her nipple? What if I blew through a straw so it'd feel like real soft fingertips? These are the things I always wanted to know.

It turns out that they were fake—the boobs, not the nipples—which was a drag, because they felt sort of like normal breasts, except with a way-overfull water balloon inside. Plus, she said that, in about ten percent of the cases, the chick loses all feeling in her nipples, and she was one of those ten percent, which makes you wonder why anyone would do that. But, damn, they look nice. I mean, real nice. Seriously. Even if they do feel weird.

According to Chainsaw—c-h-E-n—fake boobs are bad because they give a chick a knowledge about men that no other woman can possibly understand. A chick with big boobs simply assumes that all guys are that nice to all women, because she's had big boobs her whole adult life. A chick with small boobs has a sense that maybe we treat women with big boobs differently but, in the back of her mind, there's always that voice that hints that maybe it's because of her personality, or maybe her face isn't pretty enough. A chick with real boobs can't possibly have any real concept of the notion that it truly is all about the boobs. A chick with fake boobs, though, has been stopped for speeding when she had small boobs and then when she had big boobs. She knows that boobs, and boobs alone, get her out of speeding tickets and get guys to always carry her groceries out to her car and get guys to open every single door in the whole entire world. “And that's a knowledge that nobody should have,” he said. He explained it a lot better than me, but I think I got the main points.

Maybe the better me wouldn't have been thinking any of that. He probably definitely wouldn't have said, “I like your bellybutton piercing,” or whatever exactly it

was I said, which led to the closer examination, which led to everything else which led to me gradually freaking out more and more as I'm starting to realize how totally screwed I am.

And now I don't know what I'm going to do at work; I'm sure I won't be able to completely ignore her like I have been. But if I act too friendly, then Fatinah might wonder what's up. Either that, or Sara will start blabbing to everybody and then Fatinah will find out anyway. That'd suck; I don't know how I'd be able to explain that one.

Seriously, I just opened the door and she was standing there in a negligee and an overcoat and she had a pierced tongue and a gold chain around her waist. I have no idea how I could make any of that sound good. I should probably move my dartboard so it doesn't cover up my peephole, but that's really the best place for it, feng shui-wise. At least, that's what Carl told me.

I don't know. I think part of me is actually sort of relieved that it's all finally out in the open. I've been so freaked out about the whole thing ever since it first happened that I was too paranoid to even admit it in my notebook—and there's no way I ever would've told Lewis or Don—I just didn't want there to be any possible way in the whole entire universe for Chewbacca to find out and then I was even more worried that Fatinah might find out, too, and that would totally make me not want to live anymore, I think. Crap, crap, crapity-crap-crap.

The second time we did it was probably definitely the one I shouldn't've done. It was after Carl's stupid writer/church group meeting. I overheard Sara say something to Chewbacca about getting a ride back to Athens and waiting for Chewbacca to pick her up

at the Union. So I was trying to leave as soon as possible before she got a chance to ask me (this was back when Chewbacca still thought I was an okay guy) but this Macintosh douchetard totally blocked my way to get my jacket and book bag and he was like, “Hey, Walker. Carl said I could talk to you about allegory.”

I was like “Huh?”

And then he said, “Do you know the Dutch word for ‘constitution?’”

“Sorry,” I said, thinking that would be the end of it.

But he kept talking and talking and talking as if I had a clue what he was talking about.

Finally I just said, “Put it in a scene,” because that seemed to be everybody’s answer for everything. “Put it in a scene, put it in a scene,” was pretty much the only thing I remembered anybody saying that whole entire night.

But the dude grabbed my arm as I tried to pass and he was like, “But I don’t want it to be some contrived scene where one character tells another, ‘This story is an abstract representation of our political leadership.’ I want it to actually affect the plot.”

The whole time he was talking I just kept thinking as loud as possible, *Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Let me go!* Finally I shook my arm loose and I was just like, “I don’t know, dude,” but by then Sara and Chewbacca were already close enough that Sara could ask me, “Walker, could you give me a ride back to Athens?”

I couldn’t say No because then Chewbacca would wonder why and then I’d have to tell her, “Because I had sex with your girlfriend/wife/whatever when I first started working at ATS,” because then she’d be pissed, so I said, “Okay.”

But I knew even when we were walking out to my car, talking about the weather, that we'd end up going to my place first. All because that Macintosh asshole wouldn't let me go. At least I tried.

Our hero discovers a solution.

Now that I've gotten a little baked I realize that all I need to do is convince Sara to have an abortion and Chewbacca never has to find out that we ever had sex—problem solved.

Our hero makes his message clear.

Sara admitted tonight at work that she's not pregnant and that she never was pregnant and that she just made the whole thing up last night so that I'd quit ignoring her. I was pissed. I told her I never wanted to see her ever again. I didn't want her to call, I didn't want her to email me, I didn't want her to send a note by carrier pigeon, and I definitely didn't want her to say Hi to me at work in the break room or in the hallway or on the call floor or out in the parking lot. And I might've mentioned something in there about dying and going to hell.

I'm pretty sure she got the message.

Well, apparently Sara didn't get the message. She called me today before work like absolutely nothing happened and somewhere in there she said something—I can't remember exactly how she put it, but somehow she made it sound like if I "broke up" with her, even though we were never dating in the first place, that she'd tell Chewbacca

that we had sex. But then when I was like, “Are you threatening me?” she acted all like I completely misunderstood her or something. So now I don’t know what to think. Is she crazy? Am I crazy? *Wtf?*

Wise words of Carl vs. *Wise Words of Asia*, This Really is An All-New Showdown

“The superior man seeks what is right, the inferior man seeks what is profitable”—Confucius.

“I figured out how karma works last night: say the universe consisted of just the people in this trailer park. The way it is now, if a new guy forgets a box of fabric softener sheets in the laundry room, somebody else will take them, and then the new guy with the fabric softener sheets will assume that’s the way the universe works, so he’ll keep somebody else’s roll of quarters and then the quarters guy will steal my brand-new jug of Mountain Fresh Tide and the first thing I’ll think is, *Oh, that’s what I get for leaving a brand-new jug of Mountain Fresh Tide in the laundry room where anybody can steal it.*

“My question is, Why can’t it go the other way? Why can’t we get positive karma to go around? What if nobody stole the new guy’s box of Bounce? And then he’d leave the quarters and the quarters guy would think, *Hey, somebody left my quarters, so I’m not going to steal this brand-new jug of Mountain Fresh Tide.* And then eventually people would expect to find their stuff where they left it and they could throw away the ‘Not responsible for lost or stolen articles’ sign and everybody would help everybody else find their stuff because that’s what we’d want somebody else to do. And I could do laundry a week later and my Mountain Fresh Tide would still be there.

“All we need is one person who doesn’t steal everybody else’s stuff when they leave it in the laundry room. I’m going to start as soon as I make up for my Mountain Fresh Tide”—Karmatose Carl.

Tonight totally sucked.

Fatinah wanted to go to the bar, so we went to The Union in Athens and Chewbacca was there and she was not happy to see me.

I had to pee. I tried to hold it as long as I could, but I’d needed to pee even before we got there and so finally when I did go back to the restroom, Chewbacca just stood there for a while all mean and ugly before she let me pass. While I was peeing, I was working out my plan where I’d sneak out the back door when I was done and then sneak back in through the front door so I could hook back up with Fatinah without having to deal with Chewbacca. It was the perfect plan. Except Chewbacca was waiting for me right outside restroom.

Before I could even say, “Excuse me,” she was like, “C’mon, let’s step outside.”

“Nah, that’s okay.” I didn’t know what else to say.

But she kept saying, “Let’s go outside. Let’s go outside.”

People started gathering around. I was freaking out. First of all, I was scared, because she looked pissed. Plus, it’s embarrassing to have an ugly girl want to kick your ass in front of a bunch of people. (If she would’ve been hot, it would’ve been a totally different story—if a totally hot chick wants to throw down with you in public, most people are going to figure you had sex with her, and, if she’s that mad, they’ll naturally assume that she must’ve let you fuck her in the ass. So guys think you’re cool if a hot

chick wants to kick your ass. Girls are intrigued; they wonder what it is about you that could make a beautiful woman like that feel such fiery passion, even if right now it's anger. It's a win-win (unless it's a case like Carl's—but if that Valerie chick would've kicked his ass in a crowded bar where nobody would've known the story, he would've gotten laid while he was still gushing blood). But when it's a big, ugly, Wookiee-looking chick who wants to kick your ass. Everybody, first of all, just pities you for getting your ass kicked by a chick, but they're also disgusted to think that you might have been hitting that. Plus, I was also worried that Fatinah might see what was going on and eventually she'd figure out that Sara and I accidentally slept together a couple times.

So I was trying to get around Chewbacca, but she kept blocking my way. Eventually she pushed me when I totally wasn't expecting it and my head hit right on the corner of that brick wall. It still hurts. Itches, actually, now. Either way, I was freaking. But then Lewis and Don came in the back door and they were like, "Hey, Walker!" all wasted and happy because they didn't know what was going on, and Lewis was like, "Is this the line to take a piss?" and when I said it wasn't, he was like, "Well, get the fuck out of the way, then. My teeth are floating."

It was only then that Chewbacca started to move, but she did one of those long slow index-finger-pointing-in-my-face things first.

By then I figured it'd be nice to have Lewis and Don around while we were at the bar, in case Chewbacca got drunk and crazy, so I invited them over to our table. But that turned out to be a bad idea. When we left, Chewbacca yelled at me from across the street, laughing about how she was going to kick my ass.

Tom was like, "What'd you do?"

I kept saying, “Nothing, nothing,” but they kept saying, “You must’ve done something.”

And then Don was like, “I bet he fucked that Sara chick. Didn’t you?”

I said, “No,” right away, but they both got really close and concentrated on my face and, I don’t know if they could tell or not, but they were both like, “Yeahhhhh! You did!” pointing at me and laughing and smiling and high-fiving each other. And then Lewis, I think, said, “I knew it! No wonder she always gives you bad QA scores!” and on and on. I looked over at Fatinah by the parking meter and she was looking at me sort of like Lewis and Don had been. I was just like, “Lewis, man, give me some credit. I’ve got better taste than that.”

Don said, “I don’t know, dude. I would totally hit that. She’s got the most perfect tits” and on and on.

I was just like, “I’ve always been more of an ass man, myself.”

I’m pretty sure Fatinah believed me, because she didn’t act weird at all or anything when I dropped her off at her apartment, so that was good, but I still felt like a total asstard. I just don’t want to do anything to screw anything up with her. She’s so beautiful. God, she’s gorgeous! I know I could never find another girl as beautiful as her or as smart as her or as cool as her. I love her. No other girl in the whole entire universe could ever possibly come even remotely close to comparing with her, no matter who it’d be. I don’t care if it’d be Jessica Alba on top of Christina Aguilera with some Tera Patrick thrown in, there’s no way any girl, ever, can be as purely perfect as Fatinah. That’s why I don’t want to screw this up.

God, I so totally make myself sick. I suck and I feel dirty.

I'm screwed.

Wanda wasn't at work tonight, so I had to double-jack with Sara again, which was bad enough, just from a listening-to-her-crappy-advice-all-night standpoint. But she was going on more and more with her subtle little threats that she was going to tell Chewbacca that we did more than just kissed, and she never put her thumb over her microphone, so I was totally freaking that Chewbacca was going to hear her from the QA booth. But I kept trying to pretend like I didn't care. I figured that'd be the only way to get both of those freak chicks out of my life forever.

And it seemed to be working. But then later in the night Fatinah walked down the aisle and the way I was looking at her must've somehow made it obvious how much I like her because right then Sara said, "*Ohhh*, you don't care about my partner finding out—you just don't want your precious little slut from the 976-line to know about us. What would she think if she knew what a naughty naughty little boy you were."

I'm sure she could tell I was thinking, *Shut the hell up, you freakbitch*, because then she started saying stuff like, "Does your little slut like to swallow? Does your little slut like to take it in the ass?" On and on. Saying all this right in the middle of the call floor. And she wouldn't shut up. All the people on the phones all around us turned around with their Tarot cards still in their hands, looking to see what was going on. I just shrugged my shoulders, which made Sara talk even louder. Thank God she finally got a call, so the last thing everybody heard was, "Does she like it when you spread your— Thanks for calling your psychic advisor. This is Sara. May I have your first name and age, please?"

Thank God it got busy after that; she didn't have any more time the rest of the night to start ranting between calls. The whole thing's just totally stressing me out.

Our hero welcomes an old friend into a turbulent time.

I think this is what whoever it was meant when he said that "if you're too excited by joy, one day you'll have to cry" because and I can't even begin to explain how much everything sucks right now. But, on the other hand, I found the one greatest thing ever: The Happy Sack! I thought somebody stole it from me before I moved here. I still can't believe I found it. I found the Happy Sack! I found the Happy Sack! It's like, I can feel that I've got these Ding! Ding! Ding! and Vrrrrr-roooooop! Vrrrrr-roooooop! Vrrrrr-roooooop! sound effects crowded into a back closet of my brain, wanting to come out and yell, "Can I get a w00t w00t?" Somebody from the back closet of my brain actually just whispered that: "Can I get a w00t w00t?" "W00t w00t," the sound effects all whispered back. They want to yell, but they can't; they know it wouldn't be appropriate. But the Happy Sack is barely, borderline, almost awesome enough that a screaming-loud w00t w00t would be appropriate right now, that's how awesome the Happy Sack is.

It's wa-a-ay better than taking a dump at work, that's for sure. And not just because I no longer experience the novelty and newness of taking a dump at work since I've been doing that every single day now. Finding the Happy Sack has to be the most awesome thing ever. It's like, I-can't-think-what-could-possibly-be-better awesome. I can still hear Chad's voice in my head when he sold it to me. "This is more than just a Crown Royal bag stuffed full of over thirty different kinds of weed; this is the Hall of Fame of weed; the best weed to pass through Cincinnati since 1969, each bag individually labeled

and handed down through generations—my uncle, to my brother, to me and, maybe, to you—”

I was just like “Dude, I already said I wanted to buy it.”

It’s times like these that I think there must be a God because, seriously, I totally need this Happy Sack like nobody has ever needed the Happy Sack in the whole entire history of the Happy Sack—or the world. And then, Poof! there it was, tucked away in a shoebox with my Mr. Bubble. And I still wouldn’t have found it if I hadn’t decided to take a bath, and I wouldn’t have decided to take a bath if Fatinah didn’t always tell me, “If I had that big claw foot bathtub, I’d take a bath every single night.” There was more that I forgot, but the point is, it seems like everything that happened led me directly to finding the Happy Sack. I needed to take a bath and I can’t take a bath without Mr. Bubble, right? (Whispered w00t w00t in my head.) So it seems like it was meant to be.

Enough talking. I’m going to fill up the tub and I’m going to get an Aquafina bottle and a hollow Bic pen and a bowl from one of my pipes and my Swiss Army knife and some bubble gum and some crushed ice cubes and I’m going to make an ice water bong and I’m going to get baked as hell with:

#9—4/3/70—Dead Show—UC Field House—

guy in Woody Woodpecker hat—\$10—9-8-7-8

(I used to know what the last four numbers mean—something on a 1-10 scale, but I forgot what.)

Whoever said “An object in possession seldom retains the same charms that in had in pursuit” never possessed the Happy Sack. That’s all I’m saying.

Ahhh.

“No suffering befalls the man who calls nothing his own”? Yeah, I can pretty much guarantee that Mr. Dhammapada never experienced the Happy Sack, either.

I’ve got all these things in my head that just need to bust out. It’s like my head is this tea kettle and the steam has just been building up inside.

But then it’s like, the spout just becomes unstuck and the steam can start getting out and I can start to think again. It’s like, something in my head just snapped, and I don’t mean in an I’m-about-to-go-postal way, but in an I’m-incapable-of-rational-thought way. Up until five minutes ago, I don’t know how I was even able to function.

But now it’s like I see that all I need to do is somehow get Sara fired and all my problems will be solved. I don’t know how I could get her fired, though, since Chewbacca works in QA.

If anybody ever dies from eating too many Cheetos, tonight will be the night. My *News of the Weird* obituary will say, “An Athens, Ohio, man died of a heart attack after eating every last Cheeto he had in his apartment. Allegedly his last words were, ““I was in the mood for something cheesy.””

If anybody ever dies from smoking too much weed, tonight will be the night. I am baked.

Vanilla and boysenberry candles mixed with patchouli incense and the Happy Sack smells—wrong, yet right. I should totally take baths more often. Warm. Relaxing. The sides of the tub are cool on my arms. Mr. Bubble kicks ass, but there is such a thing as too many bubbles.

Is this moldy black crap on the shower curtain bad?

Railroad crossing without any cars—can you spell that without any Rs?

T-h-a-t.

It's so quiet that I can hear the tiny wonk-wonk when I slide my heel across the tub floor. And the crackling of the little bubbles popping. It's so quiet I can hear the wick from one of the candles sizzling.

Damn, just now, I thought I heard a mouse or a raccoon or something digging around in my little bathroom trashcan. That's how loud it sounded. I was kind of scared to look, actually, because I didn't want some rabid mouse or raccoon jumping up out of the garbage and latching onto the first dangling thing it saw. But when I finally looked, it was just a little cockroach trying to crawl up out of the plastic garbage bag. I dumped him in the toilet and now it's quiet again and I'm just going to close my eyes and kick back and enjoy it.

Carl's always talking about how we're living on this tiny mole in the armpit of God, waiting for all the pure energy, of which everything is made, of all infinity to get simultaneously in synch and make this beautiful white implosion and then explosion and then we start all over again.

I think I'm ready.

God, I love the Happy Sack.

Holy crap. I was just making a bubble snowman—a bubbleman?—when this loud crashing thump about gave him a heart attack. It sounded like the landlady upstairs dropped a bowling ball on the ceiling (her floor, my ceiling).

Now it's quiet enough again that I can hear my ink pen scratching across the paper.

Damn! Another big crash. *Wtf?* That definitely wasn't a bowling ball. I about dropped a log in the tub.

Whoa! Another one. Even louder. It sounded like it was right outside. I'm trying to listen, but it's hard to focus; the Happy Sack kind of hits you all at once.

It sounds like somebody is in my apartment. But that sounded the last time like broken glass. Or maybe now it sounds like broken glass. Like somebody walking on and smashing glass.

Crap crap crapity crap. There's definitely somebody in here.

There's definitely somebody in my apartment. At first I thought it might be the cops—I figured the landlady called and said the guy downstairs had a big skunk in his apartment—so I sort of hid my bong (did somebody say bong? it's not a bong; it's a

water pipe, for smoking tobacco, nothing else). Whatever it is, it's behind the trashcan now and it's all gross and covered with lint and cobwebs and dust and tiny bug guts.

But nobody is talking. It's like, whoever it is, they've been planning this for a while and so now they can just communicate with hand signals. It sounds like they're just walking around, grinding glass shards into my carpet and tripping over piles of clothes.

Does Chewbacca know where I live? Crap. She could if she really wanted to. It'd only take about two seconds online probably. She'd maybe really want to. She'd definitely really want to if Sara told her that we had sex. Would Sara do that? Probably. Crap.

Crap crap crapity crapity crapity crap crap.

I'm scared to move because I know she'd be able to hear me sloshing around in the water. I'm trying to write as quietly as possible.

Crap crap crap crap.

I just threw the towel against the door, just in case she could see any candlelight from outside. She hasn't gone through my bead curtain yet, so she's still out in the living room, so it's possible that she doesn't even know I'm in here. She might not have seen my car, since I park down kind of behind everything. Once she's through the bead curtain, though, it'll probably be forty-five seconds before she notices these other rooms back here, and then another forty-five seconds before she opens this door, which means three minutes

until she finds me and then maybe—what? five minutes? two minutes?—before she’s cut off my balls and shoved them down my throat. That sucks.

It’s not like I have anything to defend myself with in here. I don’t think a bubble sword would be very effective.

And all my clothes are outside. Just because Sara used to pretend like I knocked her unconscious when I slapped it across her forehead, I’m pretty sure my penis can’t protect me from the machete or whatever Chewbacca’s about to come after me with.

It sounds like she’s in the kitchen now. It sounds like she’s wearing cowboy boots.

Crap. This totally sucks.

And talk about a buzzkill.

What the hell’s she doing? Washing my dishes? But I don’t hear the water running.

Chewbacca. I still don’t know what her real name is; I’m guessing it’s not actually Chewbacca. I want to say Sally or Samantha, but she’s so far from looking like a Sally or a Samantha that I’m positive her name must be something else. She looks like a Bruce. Or an angry Bubba—as opposed to a happy-go-lucky, doh-dee-doh Bubba—actually she looks more like one of those flat-faced puppies with a Jay Leno chin and Michael Jackson nose and crazy Britney Spears eyes. Just wrong on so many levels. She definitely doesn’t look like a Sally or Samantha. Just go to ATS in Coolville and look for a big ugly chick who looks like a Wookie—that’s her.

They live just south of Athens, I don't know the address. And I'm sure I threw away the directions. Township Road 57, I think. Turn right just past the bridge. Drive until you see my decapitated head stuck on a stick in the front yard.

Sara—I don't know her last name, either, or I can't think of it—is Chewbacca's crazy psycho girlfriend/wife/whatever and she's been stalking me forever and I've been trying to avoid her while still trying to pretend like everything's cool, but Chewbacca still always looks pissed but I always figured her face was just ugly that way. But apparently it's not if she's breaking into my apartment.

If you find me mutilated in the tub, you'll know she's the one who did it:
Chewbacca Somebody, from Athens, Ohio. Twp. Rd. 57. First right past the bridge.

Now I just have to figure out where to hide this notebook where the CSI guys will find it but Chewbacca won't.

Crap, what is she looking for out there? She's been in here for twenty minutes (maybe not that long) and she still hasn't come through the bead curtain to the back.

I guess I could spray her with this boysenberry gel candle.

I've got my fingernail clippers up in the medicine cabinet.

On the internet, I listened to this 911 call from Denver or somewhere and you could hear this crazy jealous ex-boyfriend shooting all these people because they gave his ex-girlfriend a ride home. I could totally see Chewbacca being like that. The people on the tape were freaking out, like "Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh my God!" That's totally going

to be me. What's to stop that from being me? Except that nobody will hear it because I left my phone in the car. That sucks.

She's still in the kitchen.

They wouldn't be able to arrest Chewbacca because I haven't technically seen her yet. I'd just be a dead guy in the bathtub with his balls shoved down his throat. But I guess they'd find her DNA somewhere in the apartment. But this is Athens, Ohio, where the CSI budget probably pays for a Swiss Army knife, a used magnifying glass and a bunch of those paper strips they use to test the chlorine in a swimming pool. I'm screwed.

Should I get out? She'd hear me then, for sure. And she doesn't seem to know I'm in here now. She still hasn't gone through my beaded curtain to get back here; I guess that's when I'll know I'm a dead man. She'll probably want to pig rape me with a broom handle before she brutally murders me. That'll suck.

It occurred to me for a brief little instant that I could cut off my own balls and shove them in my mouth before Chewbacca came in here and maybe that way she'd feel sorry for me—or at least would no longer feel the need to kill me. I wouldn't have my balls but I'd still have my life. I don't know if I could do it. I don't have anything in the bathroom I could do it with, anyway. Otherwise I might. I don't know. Maybe. If it could help me live, probably definitely.

She'd probably want my penis too, though, for sure. In that case, it wouldn't even matter if she killed me.

New plan: I just cut my finger. I used the jagged rusty part on the tub spout—it was the only sharp thing I could find—and now I'm going to let the tub get all bloody and then I can pretend like I'm already dead when Chewbacca comes in here. Like in that movie.

Except my finger stings like a motherfucker and it's bleeding way more than I hoped or expected it would.

And I'll probably need a tetanus shot.

Still in the kitchen.

Maybe it's Chainsaw breaking into my apartment to make up for all that food of his I ate. That would be cool.

Or maybe Chewbacca hired Chainsaw to break into my apartment to cut off my balls and shove them down my throat. That would suck.

It could be Sara, too. But if she's breaking into my apartment, that wouldn't be good, either.

Whoever it is, I hope they hurry up. This water's getting cold. And it's plenty bloody-looking.

Crapity crapity crap crap.

My feet are totally pruney and this water's getting cold as hell.

It'd suck if I died of hypothermia while I waited to pretend to be dead so I wouldn't get killed.

"An Athens, Ohio, man died of hypothermia in his bathtub." That'd suck.

What is the proper amount of time one should stay in his bathtub after somebody breaks into your house? Because I'm fucking freezing my ass off. Seriously.

Now she's moving again.

Fuck. Bead curtain. Three minutes before she finds me. Time to play dead.

Stupid raccoon. The thing about gave me a heart attack. The loud crashes earlier were him somehow smashing the garbage can outside against the window and then the cement block I had on top of the garbage can to keep him out fell in through the window, and then later he knocked over all my dishes in the sink. It was loud.

And then I couldn't get him out of the apartment. He wouldn't go back out the window. He just kept hiding in the back closet. I finally had to make a trail of CornNuts out the front door.

Wise words of Carl vs. *Wise Words of Asia*, There Really Are No Words . . .

“The angry man will defeat himself in battle as well as in life”—Samurai maxim.

“The thing I realized is, there aren’t any answers. Or are there? If there are, where the hell are they?”—Confused Carl.

God, I just spent one of the most paranoid nights of my life last night. I unscrewed all the light bulbs in my apartment. I didn’t have any aluminum cans to stack in front of my door, so I used a half-full two-liter bottle and a loud metal pie pan. I was so tired, though, that I was scared the noise might not wake me up in enough time to dig for and load my gun, so I slept in the little space between the bed and the wall with ten bullets in the whatever-thing—but none loaded in the chamber (I’d never slept with a loaded firearm before; I was afraid I might somehow bump the trigger with my toe while I slept and shoot myself in the head).

And then I was even more paranoid this morning taking a shower. *How can I hear Chewbacca if she comes in? What if Sara calls to warn me that Chewbacca’s coming over? My cell phone’s still down in my car; I wouldn’t be able to hear it up here. And why would Sara call to warn me, anyway?*

I couldn’t shower with my gun, so I was pretty nervous. And thinking about it now, it seems like I’m overly paranoid. But I mean, what am I supposed to do? If she’s that crazy, and if she’s that cranked up, what’s to keep her from looking for my address on the internet? And if she gets “impulsive” when she’s drunk, and she’s as mean as everybody including Maury Povich thinks, what’s to keep her from drunkenly impulsively finding my place? And if she finds my place, what’s to keep her from

breaking in? And if she breaks in, how the hell else am I supposed to protect myself?
Crap.

So I didn't sleep very well last night, which is why I brought my gun and my bandaged hand down here to the Beckley, West Virginia, Ramada Limited, 108.9 plus however-many miles I drove after the gas station before I remembered to reset the odometer away from Athens. Room 311. Third floor, so I figure she at least can't break in through the window. Not that she'd know to find me here anyway. So I should be able to relax for now, though somebody just dropped something out in the hall, which gave me a little start, but I guess that's better than being at home and freaking out every time the fridge kicked on or the lady upstairs walked around.

Carl's always talking about the "many worlds" theory of quantum theory, where a new universe is supposedly created every time you choose one thing over another—there's another universe created where you chose the other. I'm not really sure how it's supposed to work, but it sounds cool until you hear the voiceover describing the "multiverse" in that crappy Jet Li movie, but, still, I can't help imagining that there's another universe out there someplace where there really is a me who doesn't keep fucking up and then gets all paranoid and unscrews all his light bulbs—including the ones in the stove and the fridge—and spends the night cradling his barely-used Springfield XD-9. And then the next day splurging on this Ramada Limited room with its Café Valet French Roast coffee and everything that smells like "citrus ginger" because (what the hell?) he might be dead soon so he might as well live it up while he can.

I don't know how many times Sara told me I didn't have anything to worry about, that Chewbacca was never going to find out because Sara's loyalty wasn't to Chewbacca (though she never specifically said it was to me, either) and, even if Chewbacca did find out, she wasn't going to do anything because she doesn't care. Why do chicks always say that? That's the exact same thing that Brenda told me before Jeff said he was going to hit me over the head with a tire iron until they had to dig me out of the ditch with a spoon. And, even if Sara is "loyal" to me now, I'm guessing that's only going to last as long as I show the same level of interest in her that I've been pretending to show lately and I don't know how much longer I can do that because she's annoying as hell.

I had a million things I wanted to say when I went down for Cheetos and a Country Time Lemonade—which I already drank but I still have over a bag of Cheetos left and I wanted a Pepsi, but I got all paranoid on the way up here: *what if Chewbacca's waiting for me when I get off the elevator? What if she gets on at the next floor?* But then I think it'd be worse if she saw me in the stairs because, at least in the elevator, you're going to go up to a floor and the doors are going to open and there's kind of a finality to an elevator ass whupping, like, *Okay, this is my floor, I guess I'm done beating you now*, as opposed to the stairs, where it'd just keep going and going until, hopefully, the police show up. But then it occurred to me that Chewbacca could stop the elevator and keep pummeling me—which occurred to me before, of course, but when it first occurred to me, I figured that an alarm would go off and security personnel would be right there, but then I realized that, even if there was an alarm, and even if the security guy did get right there and, even if he wasn't a donut-eating moron, nobody would be able to get in and help me for probably a half hour, at least, and by then I'd be a lifeless mass clumped in the corner,

and Chewbacca'd be wondering if she'd have a better chance to get away if she just finished me off and climbed out the top of the elevator like in *Matrix* or if she'd hold what was left of my body in front of her to shield her from the police bullets. That whole scenario was still playing out in my head as I nervously fumbled—like a scary movie asstard (totally like that)—to get the little credit card key thing to open the door.

And now that I'm back inside and there's no Chewbacca in the Ramada Limited closet or under the Ramada Limited bed or behind the Ramada Limited curtain or the Ramada Limited chair or in the Ramada Limited bathroom door or the Ramada Limited shower, I'm thinking that I don't really need a Pepsi—or a Diet Pepsi, after I heard on the radio how they made Splenda and it sounded unnatural and unhealthy as hell. So I don't drink Diet Pepsi anymore. Or Diet Coke or Diet Sprite. But I guess, if I'm going to get killed soon, I don't need to worry about what kind of crap I put into my stomach, except it'd probably be more important now to watch my karma and avoid animal products as much as possible. Plus, my horoscope this week said I should concentrate on doing unto all others as I would want them to do unto me, and I can't imagine it saying that unless it meant something. I'm pretty sure Cheetos don't have any animal products.

I don't want to end up losing my chance with Fatinah because I run to the Ramada Limited every time a raccoon squeezes in through a hole in my apartment window and starts knocking over my stuff. That's not the kind of man I want to be. I want to be a guy who faces his fears, head on, and who accepts his challenges. I don't want to live scared. I want Fatinah, and she's worth facing my fears for. We made plans to get together tomorrow night after work and I don't want to screw that up. She's worth doing anything

for. I'm not going to let anything ever again come between her and me. That's my vow or conviction or whatever. Tomorrow I'm going to go to Chewbacca's place and I'm going to talk to her man to man. I'm going to be like "Look, Chewbacca. I had sex with your girlfriend or your ex-girlfriend or your wife or your ex-wife or whatever you want to call her. I didn't really mean to the first time. After that, I only did it because she threatened to tell you. I didn't really like it and I want it to stop because I want to devote my time to Fatinah, who isn't a psychotic freakbitch like you and Sara. Thanks."

Maybe after I get some sleep I'll think of a better way to say all that.

In the movie of my life, it feels like this'd be the part toward the end where the birds are chirping and the camera zooms slowly out from a close-up shot of a daisy to a guy (me) sitting there in the middle of this big field of daisies with a gentle breeze blowing through my hair staring at who knows what. Except I'm inside the Waffle House in Canton, Ohio, watching the cars swish swish swishing by on the rainy road—Cleveland Avenue, maybe?—while I sip my vanilla cherry Diet Coke and wait for my Grilled Texas Bacon Chicken Melt Plate with my smothered, covered, chunked, and capped double hashbrowns, side of sausage and a waffle (because it doesn't seem right to not order a waffle at Waffle House, no matter how much other food you ordered). The movie version of me thinks to himself that, even though he knows it's a cliché, it totally does feel like a huge ginormous weight has been lifted off his shoulders. I feel like the guy in *Office Space* after he gets hypnotized. Seriously.

Here comes Becky with my food.

False alarm. I was here first, but this other guy got his food before me. That's okay. It gives me more of a chance to enjoy the ambience that is the Canton, Ohio, Waffle House. And today is all about enjoying everything. The rain outside. The yellow and red and the brown inside. It's all good.

I finally made it to the Pro Football Hall of Fame today. I've been wanting to go since third grade but, every single time we had a field trip up here—all the way through grade school and summer camp and middle school and high school—something always happened that I couldn't go. One time I had chicken pox. One time I forgot to have Dad sign my permission slip. One time Amie Anderson couldn't go, so I pretended like I couldn't go either because I hoped that'd give me a chance to bond with her (“You can't go, either? That sucks. Let's go make out on the pole vault pit.” It didn't work.) But now I finally made it and it was awesome.

Well, it was okay. I was kind of hoping for or expecting more stuff from the Bengals. I mean, except for Anthony Munoz and a Boomer Esiason jersey, we don't have hardly any more stuff there than the Houston Texans. Plus they've got a shitpile of Cleveland and Pittsburgh crap, which sucked. Other than that it wasn't bad. It hardly took any time at all to get through the whole museum, which surprised me. When we went to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame a couple years ago, we pretty much spent the whole day there and it was like we could've spent another whole day there and still not seen everything. Today, I didn't get here until after four and so I figured I'd better hurry since I had less than an hour but, by closing time, I felt like there was nothing else to see unless I wanted to watch one of the movies about how awesome the Steelers or the Browns used to be. No thanks.

And the gift shop was okay. I wanted to buy a Chad Johnson bobblehead doll but it was, like, thirty bucks and, besides, where am I going to keep it? So I bought a little square refrigerator magnet that says Pro Football Hall of Fame. I don't know where to put it either, though, because it's not like it'll stick to my dashboard. Oh well, I guess I've got the rest of my newly unencumbered life to figure that out.

Here comes Becky—this has to be for me this time. Yes!

Kroger
When you want the best

Knight Transportation

Moonlight Mushrooms
Grown like no other mushroom

J.B. Hunt

Crete Carrier Corp.

Covenant Transport

SAIA

Bud Light

EPES

HeartLand Express

Schneider National

Air Ride Equipped

I'm convinced that birds who get hit by cars are adrenaline junkies with poor depth perception.

Our hero drafts his first ever fan letter.

Dear Sobe Green Tea™ (the original flavor, not the Sobe® Lean® Diet Green Tea™ version because Sobe® Lean® Diet Green Tea™ is too sweet and it tastes like crap and none of the following could possibly apply to it):

How did you get to be so awesome, Sobe Green Tea™? You're like a little slice of heaven in a clunky, inconvenient, environmentally unfriendly glass bottle. You may not be a significant source of saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, dietary fiber, vitamin A, calcium or iron, but you're a significant source of joy for every fiber of my being.

It seems as if you've constantly been on my mind these last three days—I think about you far more than any person should ever think about a beverage—I can't help it. I can't help but daydream about that playful way you hide from me in the refrigerated beverage section, often, but not always, on the bottom shelf, never out of reach. Calling to me with your clear caramel color. "Walker," you say. "I'm here for you." Tempting me with your sweet minty goodness. And then, once I have you, enticing and tickling and tantalizing my taste buds until I'm unable to do anything but drink all of you in, body and soul, while with my heart I sing, "You make me so wholly happy; I'm so glad I've got you in my car."

I love your invigorating aftertaste. It's way better than Sprite or 7Up or Sierra Mist, and especially that total crap Arizona Iced Tea (no matter what total crap flavor of total crap Arizona Iced Tea it is)—and don't get me started on Wild Cherry Pepsi, Cherry Vanilla

Dr. Pepper or Diet Pepsi with lime—they all have an aftertaste of ass compared to yours. If I ate a pile of dried horse poo and washed it down with a glass of turkey piss, I'd swear I must've drank a Wild Cherry Pepsi a half hour ago. But it's not like that with you, Sobe Green Tea™. With you, I always feel like I just orally pleased Jessica Alba with a mouthful of Altoids. That's how invigoratingly fresh you are.

And what is that magical ingredient that keeps me nice and steadily awake without the rollercoaster highs and lows of caffeine? Whatever it is, it's what makes you the perfect drink for driving. I'm guessing it's not ginseng, because that total crap Arizona Green Tea with Ginseng and Honey has ginseng, and it sucks at keeping me awake. Is it your guarana (paullinia cupana) seed extract? But doesn't Red Bull have something like that? and Red Bull doesn't make me feel anything but unfathomable shame for putting something so horribly revolting into my mouth. Maybe it's your rose hips extract. What is rose hips extract? Does it cause some ghastly disfiguring disease? I don't care. You're worth it to me, because I love you, Sobe Green Tea™. I love you so much. Don't you know that?

I can't bear to imagine a life without you, Sobe Green Tea™. You've helped me to see the world as it really is. For the past I-don't-even-know-how-many months, it's like there'd been this ginormous rubber band stuck up my ass that would only let me get so far away from my crappy job before it would pull me back to work. But now it's like the rubber band has snapped except, the thing is, I never had a rubber band stuck up my ass to begin with. I was always free to leave and to go whenever I wanted. And, even though

I probably for sure should've left a lot sooner, I'm finally gone now and I owe that all to you, Sobe Green Tea™. You keep me refreshed and alive. You make me forget the pain of the driving calluses on my left hand and my right heel. You help me forget everything I'm driving away from. You make 328.7 miles since my last tank of gas feel like a drive to the grocery store and you turn my every pee into a foamy work of art.

But oh, Sobe Green Tea™, why do you play so hard to get? Why do you always give me nothing but a feeling of impending dread, rather than hopeful expectation, as I search the refrigerated beverage section of every gas station and truck stop to find you? Why can't you always be there beside the Sobe Elixir, or the Sobe Energy, or the Lizard Lightning (all of which taste even worse than that total crap Arizona Green Tea with Ginseng and Honey, by the way)? Why can't you always be there beside the Lizard Lava (which isn't bad, but it's still got the same dirty aftertaste as all the others). Why can't you just always be there when I need you, wherever I can find Pepsi, or Red Bull, or that total crap Arizona Iced Tea? Why do you make me drive from the Speedway, to that other place, to the Love's Travel Stop, before I can have you, and again feel your cool caramel wetness against my lips?

But I suppose, if not for your tendency to sometimes be physically and emotionally unavailable, I wouldn't have met that classy blonde chick wearing the businessy-looking tight black dress in Tennessee, walking into the Love's—far enough behind me that I could go in first, but not so far that I looked desperate or like a too-nice guy for holding the door open for her. And then she smiled at me and kept smiling even after she took off

her businessy sunglasses and I gave her one of those I'm-the-kind-of-guy-your-mommy-warned-you-about, bad-boy looks that I'm pretty sure came out exactly perfect. Will I ever be the kind of guy who can ask a girl like her out on a date, or get her phone number, in a situation such as that? What do you think, Sobe Green Tea™? Or will my love for you forever overwhelm my heart and leave no room for another?

You're the first thing I look for whenever I go into a convenience store, do you know that? If I can't find you, I don't even bother buying CornNuts because I know I'm going to keep stopping at more and more gas stations until I have you by my side. I know I can buy my CornNuts—or my Ho-Hos (which should be called Ding-Dongs, by the way) or my Grandma's Chocolate Chip or Oatmeal Raisin cookies or my T.G.I. Fridays Quesadilla Chips—wherever I can find you. You're the most important thing for me.

Just please don't play so hard to get, Sobe Green Tea™. Do you really expect me to call my favorite retailer and ask him to stock you? Just please be there for me when I need you. That's all I ask. Please give me the same commitment that I'm willing to give you. I promise that I'll love you forever.

Sincerely,

Walker King

One of the TVs at the last Love's Travel Stop had CNN on and the big CNN story was: "Attack in Appalachia" or something like that. The newscaster lady was like "A seventh victim has now died after two days in intensive care" or whatever. I don't know how I feel about that because they never said who it was. They never said anything else about him or her so why would anybody care?

And then kept talking about the "deranged gunman, deranged gunman, deranged gunman," on and on about how Athens County authorities and Ohio State Police say he should be considered "armed and dangerous." Armed and dangerous. Only bad-ass motherfuckers are considered armed and dangerous. It sounds way more hardcore than "Howdy Doody" or "Alfred E. Neuman."

Too bad Colin wasn't there when it all went down. Lurch, Chewbacca, Sara, Carl, Chainsaw. Maybe that's enough to make the world a better place.

Our hero reflects on a warm, gentle breeze; PMS; and a \$95 bottle of beer on the wall.

Ahh. Outside. Warm. Thick breeze. Fresh air. Bright sun. After being inside and walking through the perfumed(?) smoky air in the—what was the name of that strip club?—what was that smell? First, some flowery perfumy thing then, past the plywood walls, to the private dance room, more of a warm, freshly-dead-animal stench—but only briefly, until there was the noxious perfume again. But outside, twenty or forty or a hundred or more miles away, where the tip of my fake pen draws a shadow on my fake paper and makes kind of a little rainbow, the air is fresh and I am relieved. I'm not all that excited to go back.

Everybody kept telling me for eighteen million years, it seemed like: “You’ve got to go to New Orleans. You’ve got to go to New Orleans. It’s a crazy place, man,” like, no matter where I’d look, there was going to be big beautiful boobies all around me. So I’ve always wanted to go, but Dad and Mom never took us there on vacation. I’ve been there now, though. I didn’t see as many boobies as I’d hoped. And everybody always said, “Be careful, the place is a wreck,” but it seemed fine to me, so I don’t know what they were talking about. I mean, I pretty much didn’t really go anywhere but the French Quarter—le Vieux Carre—but I’m sure everything else is fine, too.

I mean, it wasn’t bad. I spent a lot more money than I ever meant to. Not enough of it was at that strip club with the legs swinging out the wall. Before that, I had a little PMS (Potential Mugging Situation): I was down by Jackson Square and this guy with a shoeshine box and a bunch of his friends came up to me and he was all like, “I bet I can tell you where you got your shoes,” and I was just like, “Huh?” and he said, “I can tell you where you got ‘em, what day and what time you got ‘em there—” and something else, I already can’t remember what the other one was, and I was just like, “Huh?” and he held out his hand and he was like, “Will you shake me on it?” and I was like, “Huh?” and I shook his hand because it seemed like the polite thing to do, and then he got all excited, like, “You got your shoes in New Orleans on Jackson Square at 2:15 p.m.,” and whatever else he said, and then he started shining my shoes, which was weird since I was wearing my Chuck Taylors and, as far as I know, you can’t really shine a dirty pair of canvas sneakers, but oh well. While he was shining my shoes, he was talking about I-don’t-even-know-what and then, when he was done, I didn’t know if I was supposed to owe him twenty dollars, or twenty dollars for each of my shoes, which would’ve been sixty dollars,

or twenty dollars for each of the guys that were there, which would've been \$150, which was way more money than I had, so I just kind of said, "Thanks."

And the shoeshine guy asked his friends, "Do you see any cops around?"

Then somebody somewhere said, "Cops!" kind of loud.

And then the shoeshine guy said, "Lucky motherfucker," and they all walked quickly and nonchalantly away.

And then this guy I'd been talking to for about an hour earlier came up behind me and he was like, "Dude, I specifically told you not to make bets with anybody on the street."

I was just like, "Oh, that's what that was." I somehow felt obligated then and so I gave that guy five bucks. Then I went into a strip club as soon as possible where hopefully the shoeshine guys wouldn't find me.

And in there I thought a big black dude was going to kick my ass. I was in the strip club, whatever it was called—not the one with the swinging legs, that one was later, after I was almost all out of cash—and I was just walking back to my seat at the bar after taking a piss, and I had to walk right past this super-hot stripper talking to this huge guy that I couldn't really see because he was standing between me and the bright sunshine coming in through the propped-open door. And, right as I walked past, the stripper put her arm around me and she told the big huge guy, "I'm with him," meaning me, and that's when I noticed he had this huge roll of bills in his hand that he was trying to give her and I could tell that he was totally pissed, even though it was too bright behind him to see his face, so I just kind of shrugged innocently—or what I hoped was innocent-looking—and then the stripper wrapped her arms around me and stuck her tongue in my

mouth and it was really super soft and it tasted like a margarita and cigarettes, and then when I opened my eyes again, he was turned around and walking out the door. So maybe he wasn't about to kick my ass, but it was still pretty crazy.

And I-don't-know-how-many-hours after that I bought a bottle of Miller Lite for \$95 and didn't get nearly what I thought I paid for. When I ordered my first beer, the bartender asked me, "Do you want a bottle, or a can?" and I was like, "What's the difference?" and he was like, "If you order a can, it's seven dollars and you drink it right here. If you order a bottle, it's \$95 and you and the lady can drink it together back in the back," and so of course I asked for a can right away because I knew there was no way I could afford a bottle. I probably should've left right after that first beer. That was New Orleans. I could pretty much take it or leave it.

I wish I knew what kind of birds those were. Twit-twit. Then something else doing a long whistling thing—wheee-wheee wheee wheee wheee. And one now that sounds like a squirrel doing what squirrels do this time of year.

I love the sun on my head, opening up the pores, but just as tiny beads of perspiration feel like they're about to ease out, the breeze comes and either dries them out or sends them back inside.

The sun reflects off the grass. This barn-red picnic table is worn rough from, maybe, four years of sun and rain. Maybe that's a robin I hear. I don't think it's a prairie dog with monkeypox. The breeze rustles the leaves of the trees. A blue car just went the wrong way down the one-way drive. A guy clops by in his flip-flops. Cl-op, cl-op, cl-op, cl-op. Now the chick from his car, only her flip-flops are the quiet rubberized kind.

Somebody is smoking a cigarette. And there's that barbeque again. The coals-still-black lighter fluid smell of the burning . . . coals.

Now flip-flop guy is carrying a yellow mountain bike in his left hand and the front wheel in his right. Out to his car. Too casual to be stealing it. Or is he? Hmmm.

Drywall joint compound—that's what that smell was—mixed with armpits.

Shit blowing

in my eye.

Time to go.

Shit blowing in my eye.

Time to go.

Shit blowing in my eye.

Have to pee.

Time to go.

Ahhh—yes—Waffle House in Whatever-city-I'm-in, Whatever-state-I'm-in, U.S.A.

Warm. Sunny. Just the day I needed, I think. Andi is new to her job; the older lady just told her that it's jalapeno peppers on the menu and that if he (meaning me) wants green peppers on my hashbrowns, then she has to specify. And just now she brought my food and said, "It smells good," kind of surprised, like.

New guy comes in—everybody knows him, like Norm from *Cheers*.

"Tell her what I want," he yells to the older lady.

“A single over medium, hold the lump,” older lady tells Andi.

“What?” Andi asks.

“He wants the grits, he just don’t want the lump,” older lady says.

I wonder if there’s some version of the universe where I know what the hell that means.

I always go too crazy with the syrup. I saw this old Dennis the Menace cartoon online and it had Dennis’ mom pouring syrup on his waffle and Dennis said, “You missed a hole,” and, ever since then, I’ve been obsessive compulsive about filling in all the holes with syrup.

This is a damned good hashbrown. Smothered with green peppers (if it was “peppered,” of course, they’d be jalapenos).

Oooh—girls pulling up in a piece-of-crap Chevy Nova. And they’re staring at me staring at them. Okay, they came to pick up one of the waitresses—their mom, probably.

I’m hoping for some tiny bit of deja-vu—something that reminds me of something happy. But I look out these big windows and I see all these trees and I know this is a beautiful part of the country, but it just totally reminds me of Appalachia and Coolville and so I just want to get as far away from here as possible. Away from waitress Andi and the older lady and all these other people who seem so friendly. Some guy just played what sounds like an Oak Ridge Boys (Sad that I know that) version of “Dixieland” on the jukebox—“look away, look away, look away, Dixieland”—but it sounds more like Elvis now.

A guy and a girl drove up in a VW Rabbit about a half-hour ago and went—I thought—into the restroom. So, either they work here, and they're in the back chopping onions or something, or they're just passing through and they're bumping uglies in the Waffle House restroom. Or—they work here and they're bumping uglies in the Waffle House restroom.

Time to leave, especially now that there's another redneck song on the jukebox.

The guy and the chick in the VW Rabbit just pulled into the Flying J just as I was walking out. They were in the Waffle House bathroom at least forty-five minutes. And they couldn't have eaten in the short time it took me to buy gas and find someplace that sells Sobe Green Tea. Everybody is having sex.

The Gateway Arch at Jefferson National Expansion Memorial is 630 feet tall.

The distance at ground level from the Arch's outer north leg to the outer south leg is also 630 feet.

It is our country's tallest national monument.

It is designed in the shape of a catenary curve—the same shape a chain takes when dangled loose from both ends.

Construction was begun on February 12, 1963 and completed on October 28, 1965.

The Arch weighs 17,246 tons and consists of nine hundred tons of stainless steel, the most of any project in history.

The Arch can safely sway as much as 18 inches and it can withstand an earthquake, and lightning strikes.

It would take fifty-mile-per hour winds to move the Arch just one and one-half inches to either side.

Visibility from the top of the Arch can extend thirty miles in either direction.

In the summer, as many as 6400 people ride the trams to the top of the Arch each day.

The lines are shortest at the Arch before 10:00 a.m.

You have the option to purchase your tickets online at www.gatewayarch.com to avoid the lines and ensure yourself a space on the tram.

I bought my tram ticket online—\$16—and I’m totally psyched. Now all I have to do is wait and stare at people for the next hour.

Parking fee at the Gateway Arch Parking Garage: \$6

Tram ticket to the Gateway Arch: \$10

Processing fee for purchasing tickets online: \$3

Gateway Arch refrigerator magnet from the Gateway Arch gift shop: \$7.99.

Being able to still use your credit card when it should’ve been maxed out or canceled at least two days ago: Really really cool.

Finally being able to ride to the top of the Arch like you’ve wanted to since you were a little kid and your dad said, “We don’t have time, Georgie; we’ll do it next time” even though there never was a next time: Priceless.

There’s a guy by the vending machines in a too-tight red T-shirt who looks like the *Smallville* Lex Luther after he overdosed on Rogaine. He just bought a Snickers. “Hey, buddy,” I want to tell him. “Your little sister wants her T-shirt back before you stretch it.”

A hot brunette is wearing an American flag dress that she somehow makes look classy. I love the way classy chicks eat Doritos—shoving them all the way in to keep from messing up the lipstick. Lick that finger, baby. Stare at the Coke machine. Watch the college girl clink in her money. Watch the college girl press the Diet Coke button. Watch the college girl press the Diet Coke button harder. And harder. And harder, harder, harder. Consider telling her that, no matter how many times she presses the button, it's not going to make the SOLD OUT Diet Coke come out any faster. Eat another Dorito.

Hairy Lex Luther says something that I can't hear to the college girl.

"But I just got one earlier," the college girl says to him. She puts two more coins in the machine, even though it says SOLD OUT next to every single selection. It makes me laugh how brainless some people are—they don't recognize the obvious that's right in front of their faces.

There are about eighteen gazillion cops milling around, and they're all carrying the same piece of paper (they each have their own piece of paper, I mean, but every cop's piece of paper seems to be the same as everybody else's). And they all follow the same routine: look at the paper, look around, look at their watch. Paper, around, watch. Paper, around, watch.

It's 2:10—almost time for me to stand in line.

One of the cops showed his paper to the classy Doritos-eating chick just as she was about to bend over and give me a view down the flag. She looks up at him and shakes her head. No, she won't or she doesn't or she didn't. Whatever you're asking, the answer is No. Now go away so she can bend over for her purse. That's it. Good.

God bless America.