

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The coffin looked like a piano crate designed by Liberace. Caitlin peered in apprehensively: J. Danforth had been hard to take when he was alive. Actually he looked better in death. Seemed to have lost weight. Better color.

The morticians earned every penny of their exorbitant bill. The removal of the corpse from the bedroom had been no picnic, one of them had confided to a circle of colleagues at a popular funeral director hangout. The deceased had been on his knees on the floor, ass end up with his face pressed into the carpet. He'd looked like a wad of snot-colored Play Doh and engineering him out had required enlarging three doors. But the real challenge had been getting the smile off his face.

An autopsy had revealed multiple entry wounds, but only in places they were to be expected, if not precisely normal. A cop at the scene had commented: "I'd guess Mrs. Scarlett in the Bedroom with Obscene Gizmos." His partner thought there must be some kind of law against what he termed, "cruel and unusual pleasurement".

Caitlin hurried back to her seat and watched the collection of millionaires, media moguls, civic corruptees, and the usual ghouls parade by the coffin and offer condolences of various natures to the stunning young widow. Who looked like, *If Morticia Adams Had Been A Streetwalker*.

As one executive turned away from her, Jammi called out for the entire "chapel" to hear, definitely including his wife, "Wait, you dropped this. In my hand. Oh, wait, it's a phone number." He might have had better sense if Caitlin or Rollie had told him that J. Danforth the Fourth had survived less than forty-eight hours after Jammi had hit upon the idea that his existence clashed with her agenda.

Yao wasn't looking forward to dealing with Jammi. He had always realized that she would be jacklighted meat for him or anybody else with the power to advance her naked, throbbing yen to become. Unattractive men with money, influence and libido learn to gauge these things the way a hawk interprets movement in a wheatfield below.

But Jammi, though certainly the toasted muffin of many a masculine urge, was not his cup of chai latte. He worshipped clean, smooth and serene: she evoked muscle,

sweat, odorous fluids, hair, unrest. The girl was plainly all about pounding. Did not further to cross. To tell the truth, he was a little afraid of her.

But not in the sense of financial ledgermain. He was a black belt in fiscal skullduggery and she was, let's face it, a twit. Brainless breasts on wheels. So he sauntered into her presence at ease, figuring a half hour, tops, to line her out on the Week stock and other items of interest to his employers.

One omen that it wasn't going to work out quite like that was the room in which Jammi received him, her spanking new home gym. It had previously been a home library, one of the finest in the state, though seldom perused by The Fourth. However non-intellectual he was, however, he had never had the books carted out and stacked in the garages. Which Jammi decided to do in a hot minute in order to accommodate her exercise equipment, another taste the late Danforth had never cultivated.

Yao was wowed by the gym. It was lavish and complete, an indoor forest of shining chrome bars, burdensome black weights, oiled steel cables, businesslike molded seats and grips. Some of the machines seemed softer and more feminine with functions that were not quickly interpreted. Jammi stroked one of these affectionately as she ushered Yao to a seat on a bench. As in "bench press". She faced him in the seat of some sort of abdominal curl apparatus.

Though Yao didn't recognize it, he was seeing not only Jammi's favored environment, but evidence of a heads-up investment strategy. She'd been told by her financial adviser (a high-priced call girl she met during her three semesters at junior college and kept bugging her to get into the game, claiming that not to was a waste of resources verging on criminal) that contesting her entitlement to the estate could lead to accounts being frozen and assets commandeered. Her best bet was pouring cash into high ticket items she could take with her if it came to that. She'd become a popular fixture in the tonier La Jolla jewelers and carried a secret stash container with her wherever she went. She had paid cash for the gym stuff and figured there was nobody to ever say it wasn't hers all along. It was a hedge against future downturns, and a great fit for Jammi's interests. And not the only advice she'd picked up for the price of a meal at a ludicrously

over-priced Del Mar restaurant where her advisor had never been previously escorted by a female.

"Yes, I have the certificates," she informed Yao. "They were in a little vault in Danforth's den, along with a lot of other interesting things. I moved them to a safe place." Meaning a place where somebody couldn't pay almost a thousand dollars for a pair of barely-English-speaking locksmiths to take damn near all day to drill the tumblers out of, like Jammi had been forced to do.

"Oh, wondahfuh. So now you bling them to me."

"Why?"

Ah so. More resistance than Yao had expected, and a tough question at that.

"Stocks ploperty of Danfought's cleditors. They own station, own stocks. He just keep safe. Now he gone, not so safe." I can say that again, Yao thought, sizing Jammi up with fresh eyes. How'd she get into that vault? Was Scorment stupid enough to give her the combination? However she did it, she'd also gained access to a lot of very, extremely potent information. Good thing she's too feather-headed to use it. He hoped.

"Well if they left it with Danforth, they must have had their reasons." She let that hang, but Yao didn't rise to snap it up. "But one thing I noticed about them was that they all had his name on him. Not some 'cleditor'. So I guess they're mine now."

Yao was seldom speechless in any language, even the ones he invented himself. But this wasn't working out and he didn't have a quick answer for it.

"So," Jammi said with wide-eyed innocence, "Did you come to buy them or something?"

"Not work rike that. You have name on car legistlation, but bank own car. Same, same. You see?"

"Oh, I get it. They actually own the stock because it's like loan collateral?"

Yao's head bobbed happily. Finally got through to this airhead bitch.

"No problem, then. I always like to co-operate."

I'll bet you do, you little hooker, Yao thought. Now get off your hot ass and go get those stocks. He decided to confer, make a list of the other information in her hands and come back for it better prepared.

"Ah, velly nice. I wait."

"You have the loan agreement, contract, whatever you call it, right?"

Ah, shit. Well, "I no understand."

"Yeah, you do. You say these aren't my stocks, prove it. That simple enough?"

"Not that simple."

"Well this is. No tickee, no stockee. Unless you want to ask me for them in good English? I know you speak decent English. You went to college, right? You've lived here for twelve years and they speak English in Hong Kong, too. Especially in Empress College prep school."

Yao's poleaxed look was worth every penny she'd paid the cybersnoop to turn him over for her. Another good tip from her on-call chum.

"So come on, say it right," Jammi wheedled, "Or the stocks stay right where you aren't going to find them in a zillion years."

"I no see what you..."

Jammi came off the padded vinyl seat like a striking snake. She loomed over Yao on the low bench, broadcasting anger and a terse, muscular vibe. Involuntarily, he leaned back. "Cut the crap, you two-bit Hop Sing!" she yelled in his face. "Fess up or piss off!"

Yao, leaning back and feeling completely threatened, adjusted his glasses, then took them off. He regarded Jammi's hard, demanding face for a minute and thought about not being able to get the stocks in time for the board meeting in September. He cleared his throat and said, "Okay, look. We want the stocks and sooner or later we're going to get them. Why don't you just do it the easy way?"

Laughing heartily, Jammi morphed back to Playmate and grabbed Yao by the armpit. With a lovely flex she effortlessly curled him up to his feet. She patted his back in a hale, friendly way, the last "pat" driving him a step forward. Towards, he figured out, the door. She walked alongside as he retreated in humiliation. At the door she faced him,

smiling gently. With sparkling eyes and a girlish lilt she said, "Fuck the hell off, you Buddha-assed banana."

Yao was still in shock from that one when she grabbed his shoulder and rushed him out the door. "Benny will show you out," she said graciously. Yao noticed a very competent, muscular young man in a crested blazer standing by. He looked at Jammi, but she closed the door in his face. Benny motioned a willingness to show, toss or punch him out, whichever. He turned tail and slunk out, not a happy camper. "Clazy Amelican cunt," he thought. The first time he'd pulled that accent jive on himself.

Yao's sensibilities were smarting smartly upon escaping from Castle Greyskull, and he had no appetite for calling anybody connected with his task. He couldn't believe he'd gotten handled by that aerobics twit. She was haywire, somehow. What did she *do* with all that equipment, anyway? Some of that stuff looked like it had been built for Auschwitz or Abu Ghraib.

He knew he has just been through exactly the sort of reversal that could deflate a man's self-confidence, soft-boil his hard-on, shunt him off the varsity hardball team to the noballs scrub lineup. He was risking a major setback to the minors if he didn't find a way to take hold of the situation and turn it around, humiliate that twat and come out on top.

But he never did.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Once a spiritual quest is established, the seeker needs absolutely evidence to reinforce the certainty that there is actually something out there to be sought. This is commonly observed in mystics and cultists, reformists and world-savers, scientific explorers, stalkers of grails and proofs and continents. So naturally Casey wasn't giving up on Wiley. It only required her finding the proper motivation.

And April's shewres did show her a bonanza: Earth Day. A celebration as recent, contrived, and flaky as Kwanzaa, it nevertheless stood for something monumental. Surely even someone as sunk in cynicism and self-immolation as Wiley could grasp the concept that the environment needed coddling. Confident that concern for the planet itself would inspire insight where motherhood, children, patriotism, love, God, safety, romance, and the sanctity of life itself had failed, Casey buttonholed Wiley through one of his misaligned buttonholes and pitched the Earth to him. Did she perceive a certain inner light flickering into life deep within those murky eyes? She thought it was just possible. So she waited.

### 50 WAYS YOU CAN SAVE THE EARTH

By THE WEEKEND WARRIOR

If you've got absolutely nothing better to do this weekend, maybe you should try ganging along with the latest craze--Saving The Earth. *Or should you???*

The unasked question (asked here for the very first time in another of the daring journalistic arabesques that distinguish this column from those who have to live with their mistakes) is: Save it for what? Undoubtedly unasked because the only possible answer would be: Save it for Later. You don't need to be a two-year-old with a cupcake to see the fallacy in that proposition. Now is "Sure thing", Later is "*Quien sabe?*". They'll try to reassure you that saving is a wiser strategy than enjoying on the spot, of course. Right. Remember "Savings and Loans"? Remember "save yourself for marriage"? If the long-term prospects of the planet are so bullish, why the big panic about saving it? You're probably already starting to appreciate the advantages of having the ol' Warrior around to put you wise.

Hey, if petroleum products are so awful for the environment, what's the big objection to getting rid of them as quick as possible? Use the crud up, make it easier for the younger generation to live in harmony with nature. It's just like

AIDS, one of those problems that would solve itself if the alarmists would keep their hysterical little mitts off it.

That same toddler trying to keep his cupcake from being gobbled up in a blue sky investment scheme could probably articulate another squirmy little objection to saving. Namely, the suspicion that Some Other Time might involve Somebody Else. Even if you accept the idea that momma plans to return your cupcake Later (in which case I'd like your name and address for my investment counseling newsletter), who's to say that Somebody Else might not grab the cupcake while it's sitting around gathering the obscure virtue of getting older uneaten?

It's obviously a plot. And it's obvious who benefits. Who is so concerned about the ozone thing? You got it: Kids. Who else runs around naked in the sun all day? I'm supposed to crimp my lifestyle so they can save money on sunscreen? All these EcoSaviors want you to do is give up your claim to the Earth itself so there'll be more left for them. Not a new story: we've been brainwashed for years on the virtues of sacrificing for children. A perversion of tried, traditional sacrifice techniques, in which sacrificees have always been young. Or virgins, even, who must be sought out younger every year.

Best bet is to remember a memorable **WEEKEND WARRIOR**® proverb. Or motto, if you will. Or even bumper sticker, T-shirt or anodized keychain medallion if you will send \$19.95 to Warrior Enterprises, care of Southcoast Week Please include size. (Of the T-shirt, idiot.) The proverb, in case you've already forgotten, is: Never trust anybody under 30. In fact, it's not that great an idea to trust anyone except your periodical pal, The **WEEKEND WARRIOR**.™ And even that should only be done under adult supervision.

And why do you think it's only kids sporting those "Save the Planet" stickers? The stickers usually have photographs of ol' Mother Earth on them; heavily retouched but still obviously taken when Mom E. was much younger and a lot more salvageable. Just this planet, you'll notice: nothing said about the erosion on Mars, smog on Venus, methane atmosphere on Neptune, Klingons on Uranus, and no ozone layer at all on Jupiter. Conditions as inhospitable for human life as any found around here. But do these creped crusaders care? Noooooo. Me first, as always. And why bumper stickers? Notice that? These earth saviors always have cars to use as billboards for their crackpot ideas. Maybe this makes sense to them. And maybe they're all missing a few bricks in their toilets, if you catch my drip.

So what can you, personally, do to Use Up the Earth and Get It Over With? Just cut out the handy little list below and staple to your nasal septum or whatever the current fashion might dictate. For that matter, you can take it and roll it up and stick it up into a moist, dark place to save for later.

1. Just be yourself. Any half-assed neo-eco-freako-geek will take about thirty seconds to accuse you of dozens of selfish, genocidal, geophobic behaviors no matter what you do.
2. Keep reading. There are scads of books, articles, periodicals, flyers, handouts, calendars, note pads, hang tags, and cereal boxes with valuable ecological information. All of it on paper made from acres of trees that manifested a desire to be ground to pulp in order to beg off from the boring chore of converting carbon dioxide to oxygen, then slathered with extremely toxic synthetic inks that seep from landfills into the water table, in order to provide an income for effete dorks in New York to spend on imported cheese and water that presumably crossed the ocean by windjammer.
3. Recycle Metal. For instance, have the next car you see with any of those "Fellate the Planet" stickers towed off and scrapped. One less to pollute, one less to commute, and a few extra bucks to boot.
4. Organize. We need an ecophagic movement with concerts by dozens of washed-up musicians selling out to their own egotism, a lobby in congress, some tribute albums, and "Eat the Earth" bumper--stickers. Maybe some good recipes.
5. Put bricks in cars. Just one brick through the windshield of a BMW or Hummer can save a lot of noise, pollution, and ignorant self-satisfaction. A few yards of brickbats and voila, another one rides the bus. Get rid of enough of them and there'll be more lanes free for you and, more importantly, me.
6. Pig Out. Do it now. Eat it all. Take seconds, take thirds, take cuts, take out, take home: but above all take. If you're gluttonous enough, you probably won't even live to regret it.
7. Burn Rubber, Bitch.
8. Support toxic wastes. You can't get wasted without intoxicants.
9. Don't come crying to me. I'm doing my damndest to run this planet so that nobody gets hurt or loses what's left of their mind. Okay, maybe I'm not doing the greatest job in the world. But I'm not getting much co-operation, am I?

Okay, so that's only nine. I'll give you the other forty one when I see you. If we're still around after the earth-savers have their way.

Casey's disappointment in the Earth Day column was manifest. It was a week or two before she dropped by the Mimosa, a chill that Wiley affected not to notice despite inquiries from the Mimosans, who were starting to feel that Casey was a sort of mascot, a goodwill ambassador from a Real World that had otherwise shown them little goodwill.

But towards the end of the month she put in an appearance, though much cooler to Wiley and his utterances than formerly. She brought up the environmental question, eliciting the commentary of the Mimosa Mob. Their comments brought home to her that their idea of "the environment" was the environs of the Mimosa and adjacent grubby streets. They saw little need to improve or preserve. Alcohol, in fact, *is* a preservative.

Before giving up on the discussion entirely, Casey fired one last reproach across Wiley's yawning bow. "The Earth is a heritage and we are the stewards. You'd feel different if you had children." She looked at Wiley, lolling on the bar punting olives with along the rail with his fingers and knew the full folly of her concept. With the bitterness of the barren, she told him, "Maybe you'd be a better person if you did have kids."

"Good idea," Wiley rejoined. "Let's see... they come in boys, who can't wait to get old enough to carve a piece out of your butt just to feel like men. Or girls, who turn into psychotic trouble machines at the age of thirteen, and/or get knocked up by surly dickheads. And any other possibilities are worse."

Cathilda caught some of the freight behind Casey's tone, but missed the main point. All she could see was that Casey was the only one at the bar even distantly qualified to be a parent. "So how about you, Casey? How'd yours turn out?"

Sparkling, of course, her secretest sorrow. Being against population growth on the intellectual level was one thing, but not having no legitimate outlet for her brood mother instincts was crushing. But this was not a place where flimsy press-release answers would work. She simply said, "I can't have them."

Cathilda cackled, "And you bummed out? Know what having brats is like? Like shitting a bowling ball, that's what."

Nobody touched that line. So Cathilda continued, "Then they run off with your best clothes and worst boyfriend."

Casey tried to imagine somebody running off with an underage girl who could wear Cathilda's clothes, but was mercifully spared a cohesive image. She barely heard Wiley say, "I can't either." She turned to him, on the scent of soul kinship.

"It's made a vas deferens in my life," Wiley went on, in a flat tone. "I realized, somewhere along the line, that I just sort of shouldn't have kids."

Casey looked it over a moment and saw that "shouldn't" have kids was a much wider psychic disability than "can't". Softened, she told him, "Well, we're past that worrying about that stuff now."

"It's all ass backwards," Jerome suddenly tossed out. "Ya should be sterilized when you're young and dum and full of cum, then be able to have kids later when you're wise enough to deal with the little fuckers."

"Yeah," Jasper chipped in, "And you should have lots of money and shit when you're young and can do something about it. Then be broke when you get old."

After a long pause, Goody clackered, "That's about how I did it." There followed a round of "amens", clinking glasses and orders for more.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Jammi thought it best to interview her sorely missed husband's children (she just couldn't think of them as stepkids) in the formal parlor of the mansion. She'd purchased clothing especially for the occasion. Dark and bereaved looking, she'd told the shopgirls. And modest enough not to shock the daughter. But she spent an hour looking for something that would also be sexy enough to impress the son towards her camp. Was there some Freudian word for wanting to make it with your stepmother? She bet it was a pretty common obsession. And bankable.

Jammi worried about a lot of things, but getting tired of being right all the time was never one of them. The male heir of her departed hubby preferred being called simply Jay. His willowy frame didn't even hint at his father's hulking bulk, while his sinuous movements and flowing silk outfit suggested that if he shared the paternal lust it was certainly directed towards other areas and genders. Worse, his waspy mannerisms made it pretty clear that he would not be moved by arguments, pity, or belligerence.

When Jammi, more out of reflex than desperation, moved up into vamping range he laughed like a brass wind chime.

"That stuff doesn't cut any ice with me, Ms. Thingies. To say the very, very least. But my sister's here, too." He turned and yelled at the door, "Daniella! Are you lurking?" He stepped back, smirked campily and told Jammi, "Try your luck with her."

A stocky woman around Jammi's age stalked in, motorcycle boots slamming the parquet. She wore jeans and a steerhide bomber jacket. Her wide leather belt had a saucer-sized belt buckle and her wrist bands glittered with studs like a Doberman collar. She had a bulge in her pants and a silicon Adam's Apple. She stopped beside Jay and cruised Jammi shamelessly. "Sure thing, Sugartits. Try me. You might get lucky."

"Well, okay, look," she dithered to the two cross-wired offspring. "Maybe we can work something out. You know." She met blank stares, one reminiscent of a spoiled Afghan bitch, the other recalling somebody who might be called upon to "lean on" the uncooperative. She flopped her last card. "Money?"

Daniella hooted like the pressure release on a steamroller. Jay clapped his hands and simply *shrieked*, dearie. "What, our money, honey? We're going to have that anyway. And all the stuff *and* your tight little ass." Daniella flashed a smile like a roadgrader grill. Hard to say which she'd enjoy most. Jammi was on the phone telling Rollie about her "step-tiles" before they were out of the house.

"I'm just not sure you being there will work for us," Rollie said, standing beside of his Baja-ready Voyager and not offering to open the door for Caitlin, who looked smashing in a simple white summer dress and broad straw hat. "She obviously doesn't like you."

"I don't think men should be around that woman alone."

"Your lack of trust in male fortitude hurts you more than it does me, Blondie. You think I need a chaperone?"

"I think you need back-up. Should I bring a gun, or do you think the pepper spray would stop a charge?"

Rollie thought it over, opened the door. "How big a gun can you conceal?"

The meeting took place in the suncourt at Chez Jammi. Quaint rattan seats with green bamboo slipcovers, glass teacarts with refreshments, soft music, plants in huge Zapotec pots. Caitlin liked the looks of it. She didn't much like the looks of J. Danforth Scorment The Fifth. And presumably The Last from the look of him. Or his sister Daniella, for that matter, sulking around the perimeter like Marlon Brando just off the waterfront. She sat close to Rollie on the sofa, dipping Milano cookies in her Lopsang Soochong tea. She had a feeling she'd ranged out of her depth. She hoped Rollie was up to it: table stakes loomed large in this one.

Rollie wasn't at all sure of that. Jammi was adamant that the world owed her big, big bucks for her marital cession, suffering and mental anguish: Jay Scorment was no

slouch at pettiness and greed, either. It was going nowhere and starting to get nasty. And there was no doubt in Rollie's mind that though Jammi was a talented amateur, Jay could be nasty at a professionally ranked level. And if not, his sister could always stomp over and start tearing new apertures. What was really frustrating was that the gender-switched-at-birth siblings, probably with an eye to legal costs and time factors, were making her a pretty generous offer. Generosity wasted as usual on Jammi, who was willing to shake 'em up and roll 'em for the whole pile. Trouble was, if the judge instructed the jury to Google "gold digger" it would probably find 187,945 images that looked an awful lot like Jammi. He really wanted to head off a major conflagration at least long enough to pull the Week stock out of the fire. He tapped his Frappuchino cup with an ornate Italian silver spoon.

"Jammi. Excuse me, Jammi. Can I point something out here?"

She threw him a look like a cornered badger, but nodded. Barely.

"Listen, do you know what a million dollars is? Way more than all the money you've ever had in your life added up."

That was a curveball to the Jamster. She mulled it a moment: Rollie pressed on, catching a glance of bitchy approval from the laxly lounging form of Jay. "You could just put it in a CD or offshore account and draw three thousand a month forever."

Her reach continued to exceed her grasping. Rollie did dumbdown. "A hundred dollars a day. For life."

That started to get there. Rollie switched to the slider. "Ten million and you'd be taking in a thousand dollars a day. A thousand a *day*. Sock away half in your Christmas Club and you'd have a million bucks in six years. Before you're even thirty." Well, you never go wrong underestimating a woman's age a little. And she was vague on math.

"I'd grab it and run, Jam. I'll bet they'd throw in a Mercedes to run with."

Jay's laconic nod and subtle smile endorsed that bet. He was starting to look at Jammi like she was a Mormon missionary boy who'd agreed to come in the door and expressed polite interest in the collection of prints he kept upstairs.

"I'll have to think about that," Jammi pouted. You could tell she'd already done some thinking and was already sick of it.

"Certainly," Jay crooned, suddenly the soul of effete charm. "Get advice, use your head. We're willing to work with you."

You sure are, Rollie thought. Like you'd be willing to work with a bunch of underprivileged Boy Scouts. But there it was, the opening he'd thought would never come.

"And while she's thinking and you're working with her, I'd love to discuss something here that's of interest to a lot of us, and even the community at large."

Jay's take on that indicated that he didn't owe the large community a lot of favors, but he maintained his reasonable air.

"The estate includes shares in Southcoast Week. Probably around a quarter of the outstanding stock. We were hoping you'd allow Jammi to vote that stock at the board meeting in June."

"Which we'd be glad to do," Jay purred, "If you could just give us a plausible reason why we should."

"I think I can do that," Rollie said, earning a look of surprise and admiration from Caitlin. Well hello Rollie, she thought. I knew that guy when he was sleeping on the beach in a sombrero.

"First let me lay out what I have in mind. You cede voting control of those stocks to Jammi. I've got a document that's sort of a provisional proxy. Essentially it says that you don't know whether you or she owns the stock, but you don't care if she votes them."

"Interesting," Jay said in a much less fruity voice you kind of suspected was how he normally talked. "But what do I get? We get, that is."

"I have another document here by which she cedes the stock to you at the end of a period of time to be filled in on the contract, but not to exceed one year. So you get the shares without let or litigation. Just so she can vote them in a meeting I'll just bet you don't give a damn about."

"Clever solution," Jay admitted. "To *your* dilemma. But in a year we'd own the stocks anyway."

"Would you?" Rollie asked bluntly. "I've covered a few little parties like this over the years. They buy yachts for attorneys, but I don't remember one ever getting

completely hashed out in less than five years or so." It was an exaggeration, and he knew Jay knew it, but it invoked an undeniable reality. And... "You could also lose."

"You're damn right they'll lose," Jammi yelled. "What's in this plan for me? You're just milking me so you can get your stupid jobs back. What about me?"

Caitlin stuck her finger in the pie for the first time. "The stock isn't worth all that much, Jammi. Not money. But you'd have clout. As soon as Yao's Mao Maos hear about the proxy they'll be kissing your butt. You could play this up to a lot more than weather girl. You could be the anchor."

Jammi gleamed at that, then jittered. Rollie instantly saw that the goal Caitlin saw as a living dream was something Jammi knew she wasn't up to, but wouldn't admit it. He blurted: "But you know what else you could do? That would work much better for you?"

That was the sort of thing that grabbed Jammi's interest, but she waited him out, non-committed. Rollie wound up and floated it right across her letters, her own personal creampuff. Three little words that mean so much to a girl.

"An exercise show."

Jammi was smitten into open-mouthed silence. Caitlin stared at Rollie in awe. Jay gave him a nod, and swishy hand salute. Even Daniella, sitting backwards in a chair by the door, couldn't resist curling a lip. Nailed ya, huh, cutie?

Caitlin mentally tacked an additional ten percent on Rollie's IQ score, as he followed his shot like a classy point guard. "Your Personal Trainer, with Jammi Jamison. The Week would push the show, promote it and you. You'd have your face on billboards and buses. Doing what you're best at."

Jammi's lips moved but nothing happened. She seemed to be experiencing a semi-religious phenomenon known to theologians as "The Adoration."

Caitlin tagged in for the knockdown punch, "That's a great idea, Jammi. You'd have a shot at a national show. DVD sales."

Relaxed, effortlessly, Rollie drilled in the KO. "Maybe even your own gym." Caitlin thought it possible that Jammi was suppressing the visible symptoms of a spontaneous orgasm. One symptom was nodding. Beginning slowly and progressing to an impression of a bobblehead doll on the dashboard of a pickup with shot suspension.

Jay applauded Rollie silently and somewhat mockingly. "Inspirational. But you're forgetting the main factor again. *Moi*." A warning grumble made him flip a hand in Daniella's direction. "*Et elle*." He sat up to confront Rollie. "Why should we?"

Rollie stood and walked over to the divan, sat down by Jay and spoke to him in low tones. Not even Caitlin could hear him, though she was doing her best.

"I think I mentioned saving money, saving time, right?" Jay nodded provisionally. "And a nice step towards maybe settling things over coffee instead of in court. But think about this. When did Jammi first date your departed dad?"

Jay knew from rhetorical queries, waited him out. "Now he's dead and she's got the house, car, and bank accounts," Rollie pointed out. "In two months. Do you really want her pissed at you?"

Rollie let that sink in while he moved back to his seat. "Besides, we're lining up a buyer for the stock. You'll come out better than you'd get selling tomorrow. And if it's tied up and the paper goes to shit, what will you own?"

Jay glanced at Daniella and evidently read some message in the clinched beef of her face. He turned back to Jammi, beaming. "Let's do it. We'll sign off for six months. The rest of the estate is still up for grabs."

Rollie's heart plunged when Jammi zipped right back up to Red Alert.

"The hell it is, fudge-packer. Possession is nine points: how many points you have? It was a legal marriage. In California. Half of it's mine right now and there's nothing you can do about it. And I want the house."

That rolled off Jay in a tinkle of girlesque laughter. "The *house*? This dire old dungeon? Look, take it. But what do I get?"

Rollie dared to hope. Jammi studied Jay a bit. Hmm. He was an interesting guy. Give a little here to get a little there. Might be a workable concept. She glanced at Rollie, who waved his hands toward Jay in a "go for it" gesture. She looked back at Jay, who seemed amenable.

"Do you know what these "debenture" things are?" she blurted.

"I surely do. Why, they don't grab your interest? Little pieces of funny paper?"

"Okay, you have them."

Caitlin glanced at Rollie, whose teeth clenched like the first twenty feet of a roller coaster drop. Whew. And she had a clubhouse seat for this thing.

"The cars, no problem," Jay said. "The horses, too. What the hell?"

"There's horses?" Jammi gaped. "You mean like real horses? How many?"

"A dozen or so, last I looked. Not like, race horses, you understand. Except old Jalapeño. He broke a leg and got put out to pasture."

"Where do they sleep?" Jammi asked. It wasn't unreasonable to think the mansion had a wing of suites for the equine set.

"Out on the ranch," Jay said, "But that's a separate transaction. Daniella is quite fond of it." Assenting rumble from the wings.

"Do they eat much?"

"Well, it's not chicken feed," Jay said straight-faced. Then he laughed and Jammi joined him.

"This is great," Rollie stuck in, like tossing a life ring to somebody caught in hopeless currents. "Co-operation beats slugging it out every time. But maybe you should do this with lawyers and financial advisers around."

"Oh, I think we're getting on just fine, aren't we Jammi?" Jay flashed warning looks at Rollie and Caitlin.

"Jammi..."

"No, he's right, guys. We can save a lot of money and trouble this way."

"You can also lose your butt because you don't know the color of the chips."

Caitlin nodded her agreement with Rollie on that point.

"It's okay. Look, we're going to be doing this for awhile, I think." She looked at Jay, who nodded. "Why don't we catch up later?"

"Leave me your documents and we'll get them to you all signed and sealed." Jay stretched a condescending hand for Rollie's sheaf of legal-sized papers.

Rollie and Caitlin walked to the door, glancing back at Jay and Jammi's potlatch. "He's pitching her bright pennies and grabbing the greenbacks," Caitlin whispered.

"She's better off right now than when she started. This house must be sitting on ten million in real estate. Not bad for two months work."

Caitlin looked back once more before casting Jammi to her own devices. Jay had moved over on the sofa beside Jammi and was examining her face.

"Say," he said, "Would you be offended by a few cosmetic tips?"

"Well, I guess not."

"Look, honey, you've got good skin and don't need this much help. But if you do, you have to start at the base and work up, so to speak. You have a blusher? Let me show you. We'll talk clothes later."

Jammi took a closer look at Jay's clothes. Hmm. She said, "Okay, sure. Where'd you get that blouse?"

Taking the little foam brush in hand, Jay leaned in to begin delicately sketching something entirely less trashy. "This old thing? I'll show you some time. But I understand we share an interest in, what should I say, wind-up toys?"

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Caitlin shook her head all the way to Rollie's heavily modified minivan. As he unlocked it, their eyes met over the roof. Both started laughing uncontrollably.

"The Billion Dollar Slumber Party," Rollie intoned in thirty point type. "By Dennis Schumann."

"I can't run it," Caitlin hooted, "The real Dennis Schumann would die because he wasn't there."

They got in, the doors closed on their laughter.

They relapsed into laugh spasms as Rollie drove Caitlin home, replaying highlights of the Shootout At Castle Numbskull; soundtrack provided by a stereo she figured cost more than the van. Some anthology of R&B or Gospel. She couldn't tell which. She recognized Ray Charles, but not many of the others. It was growing on her.

"The thing is," she told him, "What you bought her in with is all true. That could all work out for her. Well, if she can step up and handle it."

Rollie gave her an odd look. "Of course it's true. You think I'd lie to manipulate her into something just for our program?"

Caitlin stared at his profile for a long time as he drove and punctuated Aretha's "Oh, Happy Day" with finger moves and background vocals. Wait, that sounded like James Brown on there, too.

But what he'd just said was obviously the unfeigned truth. That was the sort of thing, right there. Any man who wouldn't lie to manipulate a girl like Jammi just wasn't from any planet she recognized. She fully realized what she'd known when she first met him: that he wasn't like anybody she knew. He was finer, truer. Hairier. She leaned over, brushed her lips on his ear. "Let's make love."

Once the van was back under control and Rollie's emotional airbags had undeployed, he dared to look at her, a vision of all-American gorgeousness gazing at him raptly. Jesus. "That's an easy one," he said. "Marilyn Monroe in the movie. Covered by Kim Bassinger in "Cool World". Now I'll do one. Ready?"

She nodded.

"Go ahead, make my day."

Another funny/warm feeling moved over Caitlin. What kind of guy is this? Amazing. Leaning back to his ear, the murmured, "I want to get you all over me, let you infect me. I just need to... eat you up and be like you."

"Well, they say you are what you eat."

"Then I think I'm about to become a total dick." She was shocked to hear herself giggle. Then delighted.

Later, lying in pleasant exhaustion on the meticulously thread-counted sheets of her Ikea sled, she figured she'd gone through some sort of looking glass into an alternative universe. No trophies awarded, no reasons to get back to work, no posturing. Plenty of eye contact and snuggle. She would have been content to lie there indefinitely, playing with Rollie's belly hair and talking the kind of vapid nonsense single people employ to learn who it is they've just been screwing the brains out of.

"No national roots, actually," Rollie was answering her. "My dad was a rock musician. About as rootless as it gets. I got the brand name of his synthesizer. His main ax. My middle name would have been Rock but Mom put her foot down."

"Rolland Rock?" Caitlin chuckled. "So what was her idea of a middle name? I didn't catch it when you applied. It better not be "Unit"."

"Mom was more into jazz. So it's Kirk. Which is why it didn't make the résumé."

That was over Caitlin's head. As was:

"My college band called me Rahsaan. Even though I played bass. But enough about me, let's talk about my prowess."

"Talk's cheap."

"Yeah, but if you write it down it can go for a dollar a word. But hey, Caitlin isn't exactly a normal name either. What is it? Dutch? Irish? CryptoJewish? Yuppish?"

Caitlin's glib answer stopped at her teeth. She put her head on Rollie's chest and listened to the slow, solid meter of his heartbeat. Then said:

"My name's Katherine."

"Ah. So you took on a pen name. Well, tube name."

I took on a hell of a lot more than that, Caitlin/Katherine thought. And I suddenly get the feeling it didn't do as much for me as I thought.

"My family back in Wisconsin call me Kate. When they call me."

"Kate's nice. Doesn't fit you as well, though. Get a little older and classier and you can drag Katherine out of the closet and get a Hepburn thing going."

"I've never told anybody out here on the Coast."

Rollie realized that the difference between Kate and Caitlin might only be a short syllable, certainly not as dramatic as the reinventions of Marion Morrison, Frances Gumm or Norma Jean Mortensen, but to her it was major and she'd entrusted him with it. He felt touched and oddly protective.

"And you'd better not, either," she growled. "I've got you by the balls."

"I've been told that before, but it was never literally true. Don't worry, I won't tell anybody about your *nom du pantage*. At least not until I get on at another paper. Ow! Owwww! Hmm. That actually hurts kind of nice."

Now he felt touched and totally unprotected. He kissed her gently, "Your wicked secret's safe with me."

Which just might, Caitlin thought, be close to the kernel of why she'd brought him to her bed. Anything she might have hidden, been ashamed of, sought to push down or lock away, were safe with Rollie. She was in good hands. She just hoped he was, too. He was giving her a glimmer of the idea that maybe she could be any good for somebody other than herself. For some reason, she reminded herself to call home. Then she rolled astraddle ol' Rahsaan to start cranking things back up. The hair felt better than it looked.

Casey returned from a daunting jaunt to the euphemistically termed "Ladies" room with a much warmer feeling for Wiley than she'd had an hour before. The man had his reasons, was what she was thinking. And would continue to exhibit completely different facets of his complex, if degenerate, makeup.

Thus her surprise at seeing Wiley leaning forward on his favorite stool, deep in a Spanish conversation with a weathered Latino gentleman, came as no surprise. She was pretty sure it was still correct to think "Latino". The Mexican was ageless, as gnarled as the flinty soil of the Sierra Madre, the stolid Mestizo face beneath his ancient white straw Stetson making him a good bet to portray the Grandfather of The Children of Valdez. He seemed very chummy with Wiley, in a depthless dignified way.

It was not without a certain pang that Casey, signaling Jerome for a beer and staying carefully aloof from the cross-national confab, watched Wiley's effortless command of colorful, colloquial Spanish. Like many a California liberal she thought of herself as an international, trans-frontier type of person. Her heart was certainly one with the struggles of immigrants, migrant workers, and Chiapas peasants. She bewailed the Minute Men, knew the exact death toll of women in Ciudad Juarez, the current number of crosses depicting deaths of incipient Americans in the deserts. She loved to spice her conversation at meetings of the like-minded with perfectly pronounced Spanish words. Though she wouldn't have put it quite this way, she'd have blown a musk ox to have her living room designated as a Movement sanctuary for refugees from Central American genocides and ineptitude.

But in fact, and also like so many of her ilk, she couldn't speak Spanish beyond inquiring for beers and bathrooms and felt chastised that Wiley, whose political attitude she so deplored, seemed comfortable with complex sentence structure and enjoyed an obvious rapport with this representative of *La Raza*. When Juan Valdez stood, held his fingers up in a pinching gesture indicating he'd return in "just a Mexican minute", and carried his worn old leather satchel into the men's room, she expressed something of this to Wiley. He wriggled his brows, made a very Mexican-looking deprecating gesture and said, "Well, you know what they say."

Of course had to tell her, "Never trust a White man who speaks good Spanish."

That one set her head spinning. She was working on a probable derivation in the Old West, where racist sheriffs had to worry about renegades and desperadoes. But before she could treat the Mimosa Rail Scum to the guffaws that observation would have produced, the *Indio* was back, satchel slung over his shoulder and an old book in one hand. He set the book on the bar, slapped Wiley's shoulder and winked salaciously at Casey. Wiley didn't introduce them (so as not to be embarrassed by her shameful lack of Spanish and proper sub-border etiquette, she assumed) but pulled a sheaf of bills from his pocket and handed them to old-timer. He fanned them, showing twenties and fifties, and tucked them away in a leather vest showing the dust of many dry trails.

He picked up the book with a gravity that was not lost on Casey, handed it ceremoniously to Wiley. She had no doubt she was watching the transfer of lore, if not some precious tribal artifact. She stared at Wiley: what more was this remarkable man capable of? She hoped she would be allowed to peruse this volume, perhaps with Wiley's translation and guidance. Wiley nodded solemnly, placed the book on the bar in front of him, and exchanged a three-course handshake with the old man, ending with their two fists knocking together. The Valdez patriarch then clasped Casey's hands in his own soulfully, turned his obsidian gaze on hers, and planted a wet kiss on her cheek. Then turned and walked out, a bow-legged strut into the rectangle of blazing white light that represented The Street. Casey felt a rush of inspiration.

"Wiley, it's so great you have that familiarity with *Español*," she gushed. "What a privilege to be able to penetrate our neighboring culture."

"Oh, he's no neighbor. He's up from Sonora."

Better yet. Don Juan's sacred book, lying right there. "I was just thinking," she hurried on, "*Cinco de Mayo* is coming up. You could take advantage of your... well, advantage... with language to write a column that expands people's awareness of the whole Latino/Chicano thing. You know, pointers, details, translations of items of Mexican culture. You could break down some fences, for sure."

"Cinco de Mayo?" Wiley quickly calculated. "Yeah, you're right. Coming right up on us like the sun from Mandalay. Might be a good idea for a column."

"I was thinking..." Casey said, but Wiley held up a hand, continuing the movement to lightly brush a finger across his lips. He turned his stool to face the door, taking on a smiling affability that caused Casey to swivel in search of what would make Wiley turn so amenable.

Anti-climatically, it was a heavy-set guy with long stringy hair and a facial resemblance to Tony Soprano, including a broad midsection that explained the long, untucked shirt. He looked around the bar, seemed reassured by its very sameness, headed over to Wiley, returning the cheesy smile.

"Right on time, Kenny," Wiley smiled.

"What up, Wilemeister?" he said quietly. You could tell he seldom said things quietly. "Everything on time, A-OK, green to go?"

"Hey, you know me," Wiley said, causing Casey to look at him, wondering if. "You show me yours, I show you mine." Casey had a momentary stricture, first suspecting some sort of horrid homosexual revelation, then flogging herself for thinking there was anything wrong with that.

Kenny nodded and pulled out another sheaf of twenties and fifties. He fanned it quickly, giving Casey the impression it was almost as large as the amount Wiley had just given to the old *vaquero*. The guy held the money hidden in his fist while Wiley turned and picked up the book. Casey felt somewhat disappointed that she had only witnessed some sort of go-between transaction.

Wiley opened the book, licked his fingers and thumbed back a page to reveal a hollowed out compartment full of plastic bags rolled up around reddish leaf mulch and brownish powder. Wiley stuffed a bag of herbs in his shirt pocket and held out three of the brown bags to Kenny. They exchanged money and bags simultaneously. Kenny saluted Wiley by tapping the baggies to his forehead, and walked out into the sunshine.

Wiley turned to Casey, exultant. "Talk about a quick break-even point? The rest is pure gravy. Party time."

Casey, once again bummed out to witness Wiley's purported qualities elude the both of them, tossed off her beer and headed for the door. Wiley called after her, "Hey, thanks for the Cinco de Mayo idea. I'm on it like water off a wet's back."

As she faded out into the doorway, she waved a hand in what could have been farewell, dismissal, disgust or just resignation.

"Gonna break some fences, you bet!" Wiley yelled at her back. Then turned to the denizens, who were closing in on the lid in his pocket like a wolfpack surrounding a tethered lamb. Three packets of ZigZag papers, two small pipes, and bong appeared magically on the bar in front of him. Wiley pulled the baggie from his pocket teasingly, passed it under his nose like a cigar aficionado, then let it roll open and sniffed deeply. "I can never decide," he said. "This... or strange pussy?"

As he rolled a couple of doobers and presented one to a ring of flaming Bics, he said, "Cinco de Mayo, man. I got it nailed."

## CINCO SWIM

By **THE WEEKEND WARRIOR**

Cinco de Mayo is one of those holidays like St. Patrick's day: folks back in the old country don't even get a day off, but their immigrant paisanos in the United States get to go out and get hammered. Cinco de Mayo is exactly the kind of holiday you'd expect to find located within four days of Mayday.

"Cinco" is a holiday whose origins are, perhaps deservedly, obscure. Originally the term meant exactly what it sounds like- and sink full of mayonnaise. How this would have happened and why it should be celebrated is mysterious, but just one more example of how little we gringos know about our amigos South of the Border. Those who have elected to remain south of the border, that is.

Why, for instance are so many Spanish love songs about cortisone? Why the big deal about La Bamba, but not the Samba, Mamba, or Caramba? Why do the license plates on the back of cars say "Front"? When the bull wins a bullfight, why don't they give him the matador's ears? It's all pretty perplexing, all right, so the **WEEKEND WARRIOR** © thoughtfully provides this little glossary to straighten out some of the terms you might come across at a Cinco de Mayo celebration.

Mariachis	Mexican equivalents of Pagliacci, but not as sad
Piñatas	a drink with pineapple juice and coconut milk
Cervesa	the cervix. Why this is mentioned so frequently at holidays is difficult to comprehend
Marimbas	maracas

Maracas	macarenas
Sombrero	literally "somber"...a poker-faced expression put on to confuse
Mantilla	diminutive of manta- a form of ray
Fiesta	an afternoon nap

Hope that helps. Of course San Diegans have the novel option of going over to Tijuana and celebrating the Mexican holiday in actual Mexico. In which case here are several phrases guaranteed to make your international visit a bit more memorable. Clip this out and staple it to your nasal septum or whatever fashionable location. *Hasta Lumbago*. Baby.

### THE WEEKEND WARRIOR'S™ TIJUANA PHRASEBOOK

Good morning	<i>Bogus Dias</i>
Good evening	<i>Bonus Nachos</i>
Thank you	<i>Muchas Garcias</i>
Please	<i>Poor Sabor</i>
Which bus to the border?	<i>Autobus por Guadalajara?</i>
Where are the mariachis?	<i>Me gusta maricóns.</i>
A lite beer, please.	<i>Doble tequila, por favor.</i>
I'm going to be sick.	<i>Mas tequila, con gusano.</i>
To the bullring, cabbie.	<i>Hasta un bordello, pronto.</i>
Buy you a drink, miss?	<i>Cuanto dinero, puta?</i>
What's wrong, officer?	<i>Chinga tu madre, cabrón.</i>
I'm an American citizen.	<i>Soy loco y con pistola.</i>
Call the American Consul.	<i>Soy traficante de drugos.</i>
Why am I in jail?	<i>Vender mi favores sexuales.</i>

Casey entered the column into the computer drives, read it over on the screen, then butted the monitor with her forehead. A couple of good, solid shots.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

When a suburban high school approached Casey about sending them a prominent journalist as commencement speaker, not a totally unusual request. Especially so late in the spring, when they were obviously having trouble lining up anybody else. Unfortunately, the secretary from the high school was a habitually supercilious, condescending snot. And displayed those characteristics to Casey, not one to suffer them gladly. Casey idly inquired if they were familiar with Wiley's column. When the snot said no, Casey poured on the oil. Not only would they provide a speaker bound to prove memorable, they would record his remarks for publication in the Week. She was as good as her word:

### GREETINGS TO THE GRADS By THE WEEKEND WARRIOR

Students, parents, distinguished old farts. It's a dubious pleasure to be here today at LaCagia Falls High School. As I look out on all these bright and dilated pupils, I can sense the high ideals of this generation. Namely, that it's ideal to be high. When the older generation looks at the history-making actions of the students in Mexico City and Tien An Men Square it's hard not to think to oneself, "Gee, those Chinese and Mexicans really know how to deal with students." Here, of course, we have no better solution than to let obnoxious students (if you'll pardon the redundancy) graduate and become as normal as the rest of us. This system, though less dramatic, is probably more fiendish in the long run.

Because, in many ways, the world today is tougher than the one we elders graduated into. For one thing, it's crammed full of increasingly moronic and ugly kids, all hustling to get theirs and screw the world. We know you look to us, if not for leadership, at least for a piece of the action. We know you want to take your places among us, standing strong and proud on our faces. What you don't know is that we wish we were back in high school screwing around, partying, knocking each other up, and doing long drugs. So let's trade. We'll wear those dumbass robes and you work these mindless jobs, slaving to pay taxes to support free education for the unable, unwilling, and unpalatable. Well, all in good time.

There might be those among you who think the older generation hasn't left you much of a world. But in time you'll learn the wisdom of the old saying, "Hey,

so sue us, kid." I know that each and every one of you wants to get the big picture. Or at least a piece of the big pie. To stand up and say for all the world to hear, "I'm all right Jack, get yer hands off my stack!" That's the spirit, but this focus on riches is not the whole story. More significant is debt. You probably think the world owes you a living. Well, speaking for the world, let me just say, "Har de har har". Fact is *you* owe the world billions and billions if Carl Sagan can be believed (or even understood). You were born with a price on your head and your rear in arrears, a squalling little deficit-spent unit. And you will quickly start piling up new debt, wrecking the universe to protect your credit rating. You're screwed before you even start.

They will tell you that the educational process has no finish line, that life is a never-ending schooling from birth to death. Forget it, they're just trying to bum you out, as usual. In fact you never learn anything worthwhile, ever. Now I know that we tend to think of schools as vast repositories of knowledge; and to an extent this is true. Each frosh brings some little dab of knowledge in with them and nobody ever takes any out, so it gradually accumulates.

You are about to step from this huge suppository of wisdom into what jokesters like to call "the real world". You will learn new lessons there. You'll learn the value of a job done well enough to look right. You'll learn the importance of having nice tits and a decent haircut. You'll learn the powerful aphorisms (and euphemisms) of success. Like: When the going gets tough, it's tough to get going. Or: Don't be afraid to make mistakes, only to admit them. Never put off until tomorrow what you can delegate to a chump. Neither a borrower nor a lender be: the future is in leveraged buyouts. Know thyself: who else matters?

Perhaps the most famous comment on education is a telling parable from the Chinese: If you give a man a fish you have fed him for a day; if you teach him to fish, you have fed him for life. And, the saying goes without saying, if you start selling him fish you have him right where you want him. There is more than one way to handle a hook, line, and sinker.

Forget that lifelong learning junk: education is the preoccupation of the uneducated. Suffice it to say that you are leaving behind the joys of school, but the crapola goes on forever. Especially if you're dumb enough to go to college. Even if you haven't had up your ying-yang with papers, books, and dirty looks, think about this: If you haven't learned whatever the hell you want to know by now, four more years aren't going to do it either. Especially since you'll be older, more debauched, a step slower. Face it kids, this is the peak. It's all downhill from here on out.

The one thing I most hate to hear (other than that trash-ass rap music) is the idea that today's graduates face diminishing opportunities. Sheer twaddle! There are a myriad of opportunities for people your age. You could star in a Rob Lowe video, for instance. Who cares if you can't spell MTV? You can still Serve Mankind. In fact, MacDonalds has served billions and billions (according to a census by Carl Sagan) and they don't even have numbers on their cash registers. I believe it was John Milton, the blind, arrogant, probably syphilitically demented English poet, who said, "They also serve who only stand and wait." And today, over 300 years after those words were minced, there is still demand for waiters.

Some of you will want to work in a field that has growth potential, to be picky, to get to the roots of things, to grab hold with both hands, and reap ripe results. And for you, there are hundreds of strawberry fields. Forever.

I'm sure there are those who will seek careers in the arts: future musicians, painters, authors, ballerinas, authors. Let me give you two heartfelt bits of advice: "Get real," and, "Don't make me laugh." Not everyone can be cowboys, astronauts, football stars, junkbond manipulators or porn actresses. Worse yet, almost nobody can be award-deserving weekend columnists: only a select few of the very cream of the gene pool. A state of affairs scientifically known as Tough Titty.

Some will tell you that your diploma is just a piece of paper, worthless in the real world. No big; when you go job-hunting, they won't look at your diploma or grades or your athletic letters, or your four color salt and flour tortilla map of the principal iron-producing areas of Europe. In fact, they won't even look at your application. Why should they, when they can get somebody with four years work experience instead of four years sitting around some jerky campus putting on airs and getting weird ideas? It's not too late too start working on your tits and hairstyle.

But in closing, I would like to remind you that life is more than money. The true value of education lies in learning that material things are immaterial; that what counts is having a hearty heart, a spirited spirit, some lovely love, sensible sense, and credible credit. So follow your dreams; the ones you've never dreamed of. Dare to be what you wouldn't be on a dare. Be compassionate and caring to those you don't give a damn about. Be practical and honest, or at least practically honest. Have a sense of fair play, even if you don't play fair. Above all, it is important to have something to believe in. I, for instance, believe your haircut sucks. The most important thing is to remind yourself that you shall pass this way but once. In fact, it's a miracle you passed at all. Don't be another cog in the machine: be unique. That's what everyone else is doing.

Be all you can be. Do all you can do. Eat all you can eat. Dream the impossible dream. Right the unrightable wrong. Believe the unbelievable bullshit. Like the unlikely event. Do the undoable dude. Go forth and multiply. If you didn't learn to multiply, learn to add fast. If you can't go forth, go for a fifth, young man. A fifth a day keeps life insurance agents away.

In closing, I'd just like to remind you that only an hour ago you were students, an hour from now you will be has-been students. You'll bop happily off to whatever kind of future starts out with rented robes and a dorky little board with dingleballs dangling off it. Well, you can't spell "diploma" without the d-i-p. Good luck. Congraduations. Welcome to a classless society. Pop a champagne cork. Pop several. Might as well graduate "Magnum Come Loudly".

In closing, I want you to remember three things as long as you live, or at least as long as your memories hold out. One, Get a job, twerps. Two, Do something with that damn hair. And last but not least on the list: Three, Shut the hell up and make yourselves scarce. Grads should aspire to being unheard, unseen and unsmelt.

So now, at long last, little Junior is a Senior. Ya freaking hoo. I can think of no finer closing words than to echo the sentiments I see reflected in your parents' misty eyes. And I'm sure they would join me in saying to you, "No more free ride, punks." In closing, I would like to leave that thought with you as a remembrance of this day, which I hope you will always think of as the last day of the best part of your life. Now, get the hell out of my face and take those stupid caps with you.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The congenial little get-together officially termed the Southcoast Publications Quarterly Shareholder's Meeting but which Rollie and Caitlin had come to think of as The Lowdown Showdown, was held in a large, nicely appointed conference room in what was nominally Yao's office. Independent accountants don't usually have big meeting rooms. Unless they are the *de facto* headquarters of a coalition of clients that brought Yao to bear on the Scorment accounts. In which case, it came in handy on occasions when high-tech virtual hookups just wouldn't replace actual butts in actual seats. Several butts were already parked when Caitlin walked in, her hand on Rollie's arm.

Yao, at the head of the table, and Hollis Ovarón at his right hand, registered astonishment at the sight of the new version of Caitlin. Her face no longer had the hard perfection of fine porcelain baked on stainless steel. Now there was a softer resilience to her, not hard but firm like a classy breast during its formative years. The tight, sculptured upsweep was also gone; her hair hung loose to her shoulders with a slight upturn at the ends. At the other ends were evidence that her dye jobs were lapsing: roots the color of milk chocolate. Her eyes were no longer contact emerald, but a warm brown. She showed signs of suntan. She wore flat shoes! Yao mourned the waste of such a close approximation to his visual ideals, but was consoled by the fact that it didn't really matter. He had her now. Forever.

Ovarón merely thought she looked more approachable. Which he didn't realize was his own internal screening code for "more fuckable."

"Good morning, Caitlin," he chirped, "You're looking wonderful."

"I feel wonderful, too, thank you Hollis." The unspoken content of her look at him said, Not that you'll ever know what I feel like. She nodded, "Mr. Yao."

"Prease," Yao remonstrated, "Call me Boo."

"And I think you know Mr. Moon."

Ovarón had clocked mild surprise at Rollie's presence at the meeting, but now that she mentioned it, it was a bit of a puzzle. So he puzzled.

Yao definitely thought Rollie being there was fishy, but couldn't see any reason why. He shrugged at an inquisitive glance from the man to his left, a slim gray guy who looked like he'd told a fairly expensive tailor that he wanted to look anonymous and soulless. Yao motioned towards the functionary. "And this Herr Ottmar Kunitz. He heah to lepresent..."

Kunitz, who found Yao's pidgin ploy tedious, cut in smoothly, "...voting representative of Timberlake Associates of Hong Kong, London and Berne, holding a major block of shares."

Then the whole introduction thing had to be repeated, including a few lawyers whose names nobody gave a damn about, because Jammi swept into the room.

The change in her appearance was as great as Caitlin's, and a lot more aggressive. The bouncy weathermap kid had been swallowed up from inside by a new organism, a slinking, feline creature whose lush promontories were no longer flaunted by her clothing, but hinted at maddeningly. She was a swirl of Autumn in gypsy silks and leather, from her knee length boots to a spiky tiara embedded in her newly springy cascade of curls. Elements of fortune teller, belly dancer, and hippie rock star swung around her as she glided to a seat without making eye contact with any of the servile drones who awaited her. Her face had an exotic hauteur, expert feathering bringing cheekbones forward from the babyfat, her eyebrows tilted as though deciding whether to pleasure herself or order a pogrom. Her uniformed chauffer... Bodyguard? Gigolo? Hitman? held her chair as she settled into it like a fall of October leaves. She barely acknowledged the introductions, including her own. He swept an icy gaze across the principles, bestowed a slight smile for Caitlin and Rollie to divide among themselves.

She looked around the silence of stares and made a duchess gesture. You may proceed. Her manservant, standing behind her with clasped hands, nodded. Yeah, so proceed, already.

"Gentlemen," Kunitz said softly. "Ladies," he nodded to both. "Our purpose here, as you know, is to ascertain if the majority of shareholders approve the current management philosophy or propose alternatives. This shouldn't take much of your valuable time: I'll require certain signatures after we confirm our agreement by a vote."

"Actuary, may be quickah than that," Yao chirped. The glory of his latest acquisition and his return to control after having his ears pulled by Jammi made him quite chipper. "Mistah Ovalón, you got forty-nine puh cent of stock, light?"

"Well, actually I don't," Ovarón said, still examining the canvas behind Yao. "I doubt it matters, but my partner holds half of my... well, half. You know."

"You never say this befoah!" Yao was running quick mental math and getting a little unsettled, especially when Kunitz turned to him with one eyebrow elevated a centimeter. But there should be no problem.

"Well, no," Ovarón stumbled on, "There's never been outside shareholders before."

Yao relaxed. "So you got ploxy, same-same."

"Well," Ovarón said, drawing it out, "Not really. I founded The Week with a partner, see."

Yao nodded snappily, trying to get on with it.

"And she had twenty-five percent and I guess that leaves me with let's see... twenty-four." The hairs on Yao's nape were starting to pop erect, one by one. Nothing else was even close to coming erect. He forced himself not to look at Kunitz. This wasn't going as smoothly as planned.

"You don't have that proxy at present, Mr. Ovarón?" Kunitz asked calmly.

"No, my partner came down from Santa Cruz to be here with us. She doesn't like meetings. But if it's time to vote, I suppose I should call her in?"

"Please do. She'll vote her own shares, then?"

"Of course. She's a very strong, independent woman."

Oh God, Yao thought, not that. He wanted to spin around and clutch his Goddess's knees in supplication. Ovarón was putting away his cell phone and the door opened. His secretary ushered in a chunky, beaming, post-menstrual woman wearing a

straw-colored hemp smock, surrounded by bands and bangles of metal and smiling under a bushy mustache. Yao stared at her. What was happening here? For some reason the line crossed his mind, "You're turning this courtroom into a circus."

"Eudora Ovarón," Ovarón announced, "I mean, Whitely, now. Eudora Whitely, my co-founder, friend, and loving family."

Caitlin looked at Rollie, who nodded. "The Walrus," he whispered.

"I thought the walrus was Paul?" she whispered back.

"No, John was just saying that to be nice." Rollie replied, leaning his chair back on two casters. He wished he had some popcorn.

"Hello, Mother." Ovarón rose to kiss her cheek and be engulfed in an Earth Mother hug. He seated her and sat beside her. He'd be happier sitting on her lap, Rollie observed, or even womb. Ovarón seemed more secure with her by his side. Still a nitwit, though.

Yao couldn't help it. He had to know. "How you vote? How you going vote?"

The Walrus ignored him, turned to face Ovarón with a motherly hand on his shoulder. He smiled at her sheepishly. "Hollis," she said gently, "How did you ever let these sorry pimps get their hooks into you?"

Ovarón fidgeted. You could almost see him scuffing his feet. "Well, it's all complicated, you know. Financial."

"Listen, Hollis." He was definitely listening. So was everybody else. "Do you ever actually read a copy of The Week?"

"Well, actually, my other duties..." he stopped dithering, touched his glasses. "Well, no, not really."

"Do you have any interest in it really, other than the money it brings into your ministries?"

"Not really. It's all so, so itsy. There's greater work to be done."

"Then why not just let someone else run it, take the money and forget about it?"

"That's what I was going to do, but you..." He saw the sorrow that crossed her face and backed up. "I mean, I appreciate it. But you said it was my paper and nobody should push me around."

"What do you think these jackals are doing?"

Ovarón looked at the table around him with a new perception. She was right, by God. But wait... "But if I'm not around, they'd be in charge."

"So? Delegating authority is what good executives do. Then it becomes *your* decision."

Caitlin frankly doubted Ovarón was qualified to decide what color socks to put on, but the Walrus's tune seemed to be working.

Kunitz cleared his throat discreetly. "Actually, Ms. Whitley, it is your decision that concerns us here today."

The Walrus squeezed Ovarón's hand and turned her attention to the table. The Whole Earth Mama thing fell away, leaving the stern visage of a tough old broad. "I will vote to support any motion that returns control of this paper to," she raked Caitlin with a dismissive glance, "Qualified hands and independent operation."

Caitlin stepped right up to that, speaking softly, but with the steel certainty Hard Copy viewers had come to know. "Since we're here to vote, I have a motion to propose." She drew looks ranging from curiosity to dread to cloaked interest in her blouse. "I submit that The Week needs the guidance of an experienced professional publisher, to exercise all day-to-day decisions of management, editorial content, and staffing."

Ovarón leaned over to The Walrus. "I thought I was the publisher?"

She patted his arm and shushed him with a finger. "Let's just see."

Kunitz, in a chilly tone, asked, "Do you propose any specific person?"

You bet, Herr Sauerkraut, Caitlin thought. My boyfriend. Don't you love it? She said, "As a matter of fact, I am putting forth the name of previous award-winning editor Roland Moon. Perhaps you'd like to say a few words on your plans, Rollie?"

"A campaign speech? You bet." Rollie stood up, fervent and fiery, spreading his arms with a finger "V" on each hand. "I am not a suit! Vote for me because I'm always right and I never lie," he rolled out in forty point Rally Stentor. "A Golden Retriever in every pot, a pot in every pipe. Anarchy is just around the corner, so let's have a bigger piece of pie." He started to sit, but Caitlin rabbit-punched him and he straightened back up, leaned forward on the table.

"My plans include returning to the editorial quality of the past, maintaining the new advertising base of the present, and expanding into new formats of the future."

"Very admirable, Mr. Moon," Kunitz clipped. "But perhaps something a little more specific. For instance, what do you mean about advertising base?"

"We should have been taking all those "vice" ads all along, and I see no reason to discontinue accepting them. Most weeklies have them. But there's only so much you can milk them for. There is more to be made as a legitimate source of local news, features and investigation. We can tip in stories the Union Tribune wouldn't notice for five years, as you've seen in the last few months. Build legitimate confidence and fulfill a genuine role in the development of this city. Which builds a readership that will attract ads for stock firms, financial advisors, high-end real estate and automobiles. That sort of stuff."

"And the future you mention?"

"Can you believe this paper has no web presence? I mean a real internet entity with features and news feeds and feedback forums. I've already identified two technicians who could implement that change and an addition to the sales staff with experience in selling online, click-pay ads. With that squared away and another hire-away I've been talking to, we can move into some truly innovative areas of untapped potential such as podcasting and segments for cell phones and satellite radio. We can chew ground right out from under the Union-Tribune and forge some new territory ourselves. Any further questions?"

"I think you have informed me, Mr. Moon," Kunitz said tonelessly. "Is there any suggested alternative to this motion?" Not a one. "And I would assume Ms. Whitley endorses this motion?"

Whitley gave her another glance, this one much warmer. "Well done, dear. I think this will work out wonderfully. I cast my shares for the proposal to create a position combining Publisher with CEO and installing Mr. Moon."

Yao's stomach fell out from under him. His temples throbbed in dark pain. His hands jerked violently. He couldn't lose like this. Three woman, and all three of them kicking his ass? No, no, no, no, no, no. And he hadn't even hit bottom yet.

Kunitz nodded at Jammi, "Ms. Jammison?"

"I'm going the straight reform ticket, Boo Baby." She laughed loud and harsh, "Your evil masters are going to have your heinie for this, Yao."

"Mr. Ovarón?" Kunitz asked blandly.

"Well," Ovarón dithered. He looked at Yao and Kunitz, avoided his mother's eyes. "Same as usual, I guess."

"Meaning that you oppose the motion?" Ovarón nodded at Kunitz unhappily. Yao unclenched. That was it, then. It was over.

"So we have Ms. Whitley's twenty-five percent and Ms. Jammison's twenty-four percent in support of this motion. Forty nine percent total. Is there more to add?"

Caitlin raised her hand demurely. "Just one thing." She looked at Kunitz.

"Yes, Ms. Vanderkeller?" he motioned with a Prussian gesture.

"May I ask about the new painting that Mr. Yao has behind those drapes. It must be quite impressive."

Kunitz stared at her as if he had been entirely remiss in his notions of her basic intelligence. He glanced at Yao, who immediately bailed out of his chair and stroked the drapes lovingly. His long-awaited moment was at hand. "Since ask, Caitrin," he said, took a deep breath, and tugged away the fabric.

Every eye in the room, once they'd finished devouring the oil on door-sized canvas, turned to Caitlin for dessert. She stared them all down, waved a hand at the picture, made a self-deprecating moue. The huge oil featured a full-frontal view of her in the nude.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The painting was either by Soroyama himself or an extremely good wannabe. It was Kuan Yin not just as Goddess of Mercy, but also as deity of Beauty, Order and Sexuality. She had pendulous earrings in extended lobes, an upswept hairdo, the traditional lotus and mudra. Other than that it was Caitlin Vanderkeller's spitting image, naked except for the kimono draped over her shoulders and falling open to encase her stunning breasts like a pod split to reveal its peas. Oh, except for from the waist down, where the smooth alabaster of her torso subtly changed to gleaming steel, giving way to articulated joints at the knees and a sort of robotic access slot in the domed mound at the crotch. It was not an apparition that invited a lot of idle comment. Yao accepted the strained silence as an accolade.

Rollie recovered first, because he was privy to certain knowledge indicating to him that this was not an artists conception. This was hyper-realism, based on discovery. He turned to her and said, louder than he meant to, "You posed for this?"

Yao was quick to be modest. "No, no... Master paint. I just take photoglaf."

"You posed nude for *Yao*?" That was exactly as loud as he meant to.

Caitlin smiled at him, laid a hand on his cheek. "Your lack of faith in my devotion hurts you more than it does me."

"Lucy, you got some 'splainin' to do."

"Do you trust me?"

"Yeah, okay. I do."

"Good. Because this thing isn't over by a long shot."

She leaned over, almost touching her lips to his ear. "He's been bugging me to pose for years. Always that same pose. So I took him up on it."

Rollie nodded with a total lack of expression, something more males should attempt in such situations.

Caitlin darted her tongue out to touch his earlobe, murmured, "For a nominal fee." Rollie smiled.

While they whispered and cooed Yao extolled the painting to Kunitz and Ovarón, who were pretty nonplussed. Ovarón finally ventured, "Nice. I wonder if I could get him to do one like that of Our Savior?" He had never, understandably, faced up to his attraction to Jesus being largely homoerotic. He had seven kids, but one of these days... just watch out, that's all. He stood up to better admire the seamless technique, shook his head in admiration. "So, what'd you give for that, anyway?"

"A very timely question," Caitlin announced briskly. As she pulled a multi-paged document out of her attaché case and plunked it on the table. "It's a proxy document. Allowing me to vote Mr. Yao's two percent of Southcoast Week stock."

Kunitz rapped the table once with his knuckles, a slight sound which instantly cornered all attention. He dropped the pretense that Yao was in any way in charge of anything. "Shall we proceed, here?" The attorneys all nodded. Some of them passed the proxy around, tisking at the inelegant language they could have done much better.

Rollie, this time, leaned to ear-licking distance. "You didn't have to do that for me, Darlin'. I was head over heels anyway." Caitlin smiled, moved her hand to his thigh.

Yao reacted to the situation as though electrified. He had discounted the proxy, sure of the Week's forty-nine percent and assuming that Jammi's shares would be held up by escrow or awarded to his heirs outright. Staring at Kunitz, he screamed, "Two puhcent! How I know? Two fucking percent!"

That last ejaculation, in pure Southern Cal English, surprised everybody but Jammi. Who yelped, "See, he speakee Engrish, numbah one."

Caitlin turned to Rollie, her brow creased. "Why do they always learn the potty words first?"

"I hope this means further conversations will be in standard English, Mr. Yao," was all Kunitz said.

"Good guys fifty-one, buttholes end up forty-niners, Stevenson," Jammi gloated. "Ya needledick."

Ovarón pulled at his mother's sleeve. "Don't they care how I vote? I'm the publisher."

"It doesn't matter now, Hollis. And you're not the publisher anymore. You're the beneficiary. And benefactor."

"Well that doesn't sound so bad."

"It's perfect. Shall we go to La Jolla for lunch?"

"Wow," Ovarón said as he held her chair. "Benefactor. Do you have to anything?"

"No. That's the best part."

"That's great, Mother. Should we go to the Top of the Cove?"

"An excellent, choice dear. I just wish this month had an 'R' in it."

Rollie, smiling through his thatch, whipped out his cell phone and made a quick, surreptitious call in the moment of embarrassment following Jammi's comment.

Yao was considering *seppuku* (forgetting that it was a Japanese thing, not Chinese) when Kunitz again rapped the table and announced, "For the record, then, Mr. Moon is now the publisher and sole executive officer of Southcoast Week. Any questions?" Oh, many of them, in several heads, but all held their peace.

"Are there any other matters to be tabled for vote?" He scanned the table with the precise rotation of a barcode reader. "No? Then we will await results until our next meeting in December? Date to be announced. Until then, gentlemen. Ladies."

"Just a minute, there, Mein Herr," Jammi called across the table. Kunitz looked at her blandly. "When's the little sitdown where we vote the Channel Nine stock?"

Yao looked at her in horror. He hadn't thought of that, he'd already been bummed enough. Of course, she'd have to have the majority of Week votes... He looked at Caitlin, Jammi, and Whitley bleakly. And Ovarón, for that matter. Shit. But could they put together enough station stock to control anything? He looked at them again. If they'd pulled this one off... *Fuck!* He wasn't paying attention as Kunitz calmly announced a date in September and returned to passing documents to Jammi, Caitlin, and the Walrus.

So for the second time in two weeks Stevenson Yao got fucked by a beautiful woman, and not in the nice way. His collapse was complete at that point. His Goddess would now forever be a rebuff to him, his penis would shrivel as he waited to see what they would do to him. And the worst part was, they really didn't all that much give a shit.

The "Mysterians" ended up with a quarter of the stock in a well-performing small company. And a legitimate newspaper, enabling them to belong to several interesting organizations, which was what they wanted all along. But the way Yao fell apart over the vote shook their confidence a little and his business dwindled as his self-possession imploded. He became involved with causes, went to marches and protests, sat on committees. He became a sort of "professional Chinaman" until even non-profit groups started avoiding him. He was reduced to pedaling a pedicab in the Gaslamp, wearing black pajamas and a coolie hat, finally collapsing into a paranoid recluse sleeping with a cheap knockoff samurai sword in case they came for him. His painting of Caitlin was auctioned and passed through several collectors before being enshrined in the "Peace Temple" of a cybernetic spiritualist cult of the sort obviously headed straight for communal suicide.

Rollie buttonholed Kunitz as he was snapping shut the ultra-slim attaché that had held the documents now being distributed for signature, notarizing and return. He felt this was a guy you could talk to. And who had made it clear to him from the start of the meeting that the whole schmeer had not been an earthshaking matter to him, just one small item to check off a long list of bigger ticket concerns. "Jeez, what a mess, huh?"

Kunitz regarded him with a flat stare. He said, "Congratulations on your new position, Mr. Moon."

"Thanks. It's kind of ironic." Rollie was every bit the rambling hippie now, just tripping away. "I was starting to wish I was still a reporter, watching all this. Great story. Big name firms, local kingpins, sex, death, big bucks. Photogenic chicks. And by the time it's over, wow man, I *am* a reporter again. Far out, huh?"

Kunitz carefully laid the case down and faced Rollie, his head cocked like the little Master's Voice dog. Rollie kept jamming, "I can see how it wouldn't make certain people look good, especially over on the TV side of the whole thing. But it's got some socko dirt and you know how inquiring those minds are."

Flat and colorless, Kunitz cut him off. "You sound as if you want something from me, Mr. Moon."

"Oh, no, nothing like that. It's more like I want to give you something. A suggestion, actually. Something that will do you more good than it would me.

"I'm always eager to hear things like that. But so often disappointed."

"This town is really tired of Barry. Really, really tired. And doesn't like that fake news show. You could use a new anchor and some grass roots guts over there."

"You may be right. A younger, classier person, perhaps?"

"Now that you put it that way, it might work."

"A woman, I think. To increase female viewership."

"But maybe attractive enough to keep men interested. Somebody of proven intelligence and resourcefulness. Previous local on-air exposure, of course."

Kunitz smiled. Rollie got the feeling he didn't do that as much as he'd like to. He said, "But where would we find such a person? You're describing, well, some sort of goddess."

Rollie smiled and stuck out his hand. Kunitz gave it two crisp shakes. Rollie held on for a moment, spoke to him in a level tone. "You didn't lose anything today. I'm going to get the paper moving again and increase revenue, the value of your shares. For one thing, I'm hiring back the old staff, which should save huge bucks in legal fees and probable payouts."

Kunitz liked the sound of that one. Rollie went on, "The Week won't take political sides, just try to promote solid, sensible leadership."

Kunitz actually laughed. "Good luck in finding such as that. Enjoyable to meet you." He turned on his heel and left. Rollie was almost knocked off his feet as Jammi slammed by him. She sprinted down the hall, her heels sounding like a teletype on the granite floor, and caught the elevator door just as it was closing. The door jerked back open and Jammi stepped in, already talking at Kunitz.

Caitlin had been straining to read what Rollie told Kunitz. She came up behind him and touched a breast to his upper arm. He turned to give her the smile she'd just known he had for her. "Great job today," he told her. "You're fired."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Caitlin and Rollie parked the minivan in a bus zone in front of the Week offices and ran to the door hand in hand. She felt they should be riding a chariot through a stone arch surrounded by dancing girls tossing rose petals. They had conquered a superior foe and were returning home trailing glory and joy to all people. The scene inside the office was not quite all that, but impressive. Rollie's call from the meeting had triggered a chain of calls to disgruntled ex-staffers, who had flooded into the office in anticipation of possible regrunting.

Rollie's appearance was greeted by cheers, applause, and a shower of copy paper. He held his hands up in the swirl of confetti and frivolity and proclaimed, "I'm back and I'm pissed." He grabbed Caitlin, reeled her in and slapped a power kiss on her. The applause swelled. Breaking the kiss, Rollie pointed at her and proclaimed, "She's fired."

Caitlin threw her hands over her head, exclaimed, "O thank you, massah!" The applause was heartfelt and uproarious.

The festive air broke into whistles and raspberries as Jammi swirled in. She had tailed along, ghosting behind them in a powerful black Mercedes roadster previously owned by an aging La Jolla mogul who only drove it on Sundays.

She did a haughty runway stalk right up to Rollie and Caitlin, gathered eyes and announced. "We had a deal."

And they did. And like most of Jammi's deals it benefited everybody more than her. Rollie had seen very clearly the flash factor that Caitlin had noticed in a vaguer way. He had already slotted Wiley, Savage, and some of the syndicated trashtalk columns to be dropped in favor of city hall voyeurism and solid ombudsmanship. Dennis Schumann would ride again.

"We do," he told Jammi. "You can count on it. First thing."

"Right now," Jammi snapped. "I want to be there when you fire him."

Newsy noses around the room sniffed spoor in the water and liked it. A re-instated political cartoonist slapped a mousy news editor on the back, yelling, "Sounds like somebody's getting their office back!"

"I want to see this, too," Caitlin told Rollie, "I've soooo earned it." She broke away from the crowd, plunging down a hall with Jammi right at her heels.

"Yes!" Jammi exulted. "I wouldn't miss this for a million more bucks."

"Okay," Caitlin cautioned her, "But no scissors or box knives or anything. Look, don't touch."

"Hoo hah," Jammi replied enigmatically.

Rollie caught up, half the staff trailing behind him out of affection, gossip-sniffing, curiosity, and bloodlust. Caitlin paused at the door to Wiley's office, looked back down the hall. Rollie shrugged. "Sorry, I couldn't line up a bunch of villagers with torches."

Caitlin reached for the door handle, but Jammi leaned into a sideways kick that blasted the door open.

There was nobody there. In fact, there were few objects there. The computer was gone, along with the wall art, chairs and file cabinets.

Casey Chones picked her way through the staff and looked around the room. In a sad, muffled voice, she said, "He's vanished."

She shuffled over to the stripped-down desk, and picked up a sheaf of paper laid in dead center, with a shotglass as a paperweight. She looked at the top sheet, stared around the circle of staffers, then motioned for Rollie to read with her.

## **GOING... GOING... GONZO**

By, Of and For **THE WEEKEND WARRIOR**

The time is upon us my friends, countrymen, amigos and tomadachis, for Famous Last Words. This will be my last column for Southcoast Week, a column richly in the tradition of fifth column thought as well as the spirit of Eisenhower's farewell to the troops, in which he warned of the military-industrial complex. For all the good it did: it's way more complex now.

Since then we've learned a lot more about nogoodnik govbiz conspiracies to lay waste to everything from helpless foreigners to our savings accounts. And they've learned a whole lot more about us. None of it good. And the worse thing is that it's largely your fault. Yeah, you. What you looking at?

You are scarier than the military, actually. Modern wars aren't fought for land or freedom or even money. They're about Life Style. We want them to govern the way we do. We want to keep enjoying our perks, toys and blissful ignorance. Armies are only one head of the complex. Much more complex, and deleterious than Armed Forces are Sales Forces. Critics of capitalism don't seem to get the connection that it's all about sales. Salesmen are the only ones who can increase revenue. Sales departments dictate product design and development. The military has the Stealth Bomber because the industrialists sold it to them.

The military doesn't really just take things without paying for them. Examine American history and you'll notice that when they decide to take Panama or Indian Territory or VietNam or Iraq, they end up paying for them afterwards, generally much more than they could have gotten them for up front. Then generally lose them or give them back. And why do they do these things? They get sold on the idea. Generally by, you guessed it, the media. Who do it so they can sell more advertising. Because you respond to it by buying more crap.

It's all a pernicious pyramid resting on a massive base known as The Consumer. Okay, now you're starting to see who I'm talking to, huh? You make the whole nightmare come true just by consuming. You are idiots told by a tale, apes that antic before the reflection the Great God Gotta holds up before you. If your lameness were known, you'd all be murdered in your beds, rounded up for monoxide trains to camps, made into soft soap for washing the skin off their ass.

You are gulls, marks, targets for cons bigger than I could ever pull. We grifters know our limitations, they apparently have none. If their swindles can be contained it is only by you, the sheepish fodder which feed the principalities of lies. You are not innocent victims. No mark is.

And honestly, why do you suckers suck? Why do you bite the lures dangled before your glazed eyes? Mere childish pleasure in bright sparklers and sweet nummies is one thing, but aren't these crazed purchases mostly about advantage? Isn't the real motivating factory all wrapped up in looking more employable than somebody else, providing better entertainment than your sexual rivals, packaging your goods to further impulse, sending forth your DNA to more fertile fields than Them Others?

It may take a breathless minute for you to fully conceptualize this, but nobody on the planet needs a BMW, much less a Lambourghini. Nobody needs a motorhome, except possibly the homeless, who can't afford them. Which is why they're homeless. Show me one person so sunk in silliness as to actually need a wine cellar or a face lift or sixpack abs or chocolate truffles or a stretch Hummer

or even a hummer from an "escort" over their cell phone. Your needs are simple and limited, but your desires are simple-minded and infinite. And more desire can be engineered in you by the experts, which is how the scam works.

Don't blame any of this on "capitalism", which is really nothing more than the mechanical physics of wealth. There's nothing wrong with the law of supply and demand. Until econo-lawbreakers figured out they could artificially pump up demand. By using your greed, your dishonesty, your genital stimuli, and your blatant obliviousness to the situation. You had me coming.

And now I'm going. This is the ultimate expression of Gonzo journalism: to be Gone. Doggone, long-gone and bygones be bygones.

I gratefully accept the little perks and gold watch. Not as such, of course: an office inventory will reveal the actual scope of my gratitude. Meanwhile, **THE WEEKEND WARRIOR**® will continue the struggle against Culpable Consumption from the field, on all fronts. Back into the woodwork, back under the rock. Back in the box until the next unexpected rube turns the crank and plays the tune. If skulls need duggering, I will not shy away from a dire digger or *deux*.

If you miss me (or even notice I'm not around every week to keep you together) do yourself the ultimate favor: Be your own Weekend Warrior. Here's a strategy for you: don't spend any money this weekend. Goof off, go to the beach, pick up chicks in the laundromat instead of someplace with two digit drink prices, walk on the beach with somebody you love. If you can't find anybody but yourself to walk with, trying loving yourself. It's a love you can't buy or wheedle into the backseat with promises of candy. If you can't actually love yourself, you can always just go screw yourself. In fact, I'd recommend it.

**FINIS**

## EPILOGUE

Casey picked her way carefully down the path to the beach. It was so steep she couldn't even see any sand, just the insistent glitter of turquoise sea laced with dark purple shadows of reef crossed by lacy lines of wave.

She had her suitcase with her and was sweating profusely in the clutching humid heat. A breeze teased her Hawaiian shirt, cooling her somewhat as she stopped for a breather and drank in the view. Then she saw the people standing out in the surf. Around Wiley. It had required pressure and money at the Mimosa and some heavy leaning on Rollie, not to mention a slice of vacation time and chunk of savings, but she was almost there.

She left her suitcase and camera with a darling little girl in one of the thatch restaurants at the base of the cliffs. She threaded past primitive fishing canoes adapted for battered Japanese outboard motors. She picked her way through the crowd of short, stocky Mixtecos in white cotton clothes standing waist-deep in the gentle surf. She stood watching as Wiley held a slim young girl underwater.

He raised the girl's head. She gasped air, rapturous as she floated on Wiley's hands in her thin, clinging shift. Wiley handled her familiarly as he set her feet on the sand. She joined her tearful parents and accepted the soulful hugs of a dozen other youngsters with soaked shifts sticking to their torsos. The adhesion looked best on her.

Wiley tossed his head back and spread his arms to heaven, intoning in Spanish as the flock murmured along with him. He then bowed his head and stepped deeper into the sea while they drifted away to shore, their attention focused on the newly baptized. When they were all out of earshot, Wiley turned to look at her.

His hair was longer, but better kept. His stubble had grown into a short beard, trimmed in a way that resembled artistic renditions of, well, you probably have the picture. In his white robe with rope belt he really claimed the role. All you need, Casey thought, is a crown of thorns. Maybe a little flogging and a handful of nails.

He smiled at her, and lo, his countenance did shine forth upon her and bring her peace. He said, "Come my daughter, let us break bread together."

Sitting in plastic *Toma Coca Cola* chairs that sank into the sand, Wiley broke up a nice crusty *bolillo* and handed her half, using the other half to mop up garlic butter from around his shrimp. Casey had tried to pay for the meal, but her money had been waved away by the *Señora*, who patted Wiley's shoulder and made the sign of a cross. Which explained a lot, Casey figured.

"So this is another scam, Wiley? Or whatever your name is." She'd done her best to find out, and she was damned good at research and fact-checking. She had turned up diddly-squat. The man was innocent of electronic footprints, if nothing else. "Another plunder job like getting Rollie and Caitlin their jobs back and that Jamison girl her show and all?"

"I took a couple hundred thou out of that caper, " he grinned. "And here in *no-extraditionlandia* I can discuss it."

"So you baptized those kids as part of a get-rich scheme?"

"Window dressing. The real con is up there in town. It's beautiful: straight to the heart of everything, past all the symbols and tokens and monetary resemblance to take total control."

"Wouldn't Catholic be better yet?"

"Maybe, but that takes longer. Besides, these hick Indians have acquired some resistance to that whole grift. The Born Again thing has more energy, and sinks a harder hook. Old wine in new bottles, is the theological expression."

"So you did read those tracts Ovarón sent you."

"You bet. That's where I came up with the fake orphanage. A real money mine."

"You mean the fake orphanage where they directed me down here? The one with all the kids mixing cement and the big stack of new metal windows?"

Wiley waved away her cynicism. "Of course you have to maintain a certain amount of layout for credibility. It's called "setting up the store" in the trade. I have a nice house up in the grove behind it. They bring me food, treat me like a king. Little girls worship at my knees."

Casey felt like slapping him over the head with a plate of *cameron*, but still had a little fact-checking to do.

"Ovarón's orphanage?"

"Well, it was being run by his church. You saw the pamphlets. Turned out to be a real pigsty. But it got purchased by some anonymous non-profit. I weaseled in and starting hooking it up to really soak up the alms amid the palms."

"A latter day non-profit?"

"God, no. I wouldn't come near a Mormon. It's one of those, you know, NGO's."

Called God's Coyotes, Casey thought. Linked to United Way, wholly owned by the First Church of the Later Revelation out of Belfair, Delaware. Founded fifteen years ago by the Reverend Will Bechamel Dunne. Another guy with no known details.

"Sounds like they could use some volunteer help."

Wiley eyed her closely, "You've got a suitcase, right?"

She nodded. "In that case," he said, "Suit yourself."

As they walked up the path to the orphanage, two barefoot tykes happily hauling her suitcase, Casey spotted the bungalow back in the trees. A bright yellow surfboard stood by the door, decorated with *Dia De Los Muertos* skulls. A stream of kids ran out of the buildings, mobbing Wiley.

Casey yelled over their delighted jabbering, "So it's just another con?"

"Yeah. I gotta million of 'em." Wiley hoisted two laughing *chamacos* and tussled them around. "Just waiting for somebody to pull them on."

"Like maybe even yourself?"

He turned, a squirming kid on each shoulder, and favored her with a blinding smile. "How the hell would I know?"