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HUMAN SECRETS

(Book Two)

Stories by

CRAD KILODNEY

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CHARNEL HOUSE

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Also by Crad Kilodney

Mental Cases (Lowlands Review, 1978)

World Under Anaesthesia (Charnel House, 1979)

Gainfully Employed In Limbo (Charnel House, 1980)

Lightning Struck My Dick (Virgo Press, 1980)

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QUESTIONED W.M.'S CLOSEST FRIEND - A DEAD
RESURRECTIONIST.



HE TOYED WITH ME.

HE SAID THAT
SOME BODIES NEVER
SHOW UP.

WEST QUACO

I was in the company of my old friend Strauss, a Viennese engineer, whom I had not seen for many years. I had proposed to him that we take a motor trip across the eastern part of the country -- something I had wanted to do for a long time -- and enjoy ourselves for three or four weeks before he set to work overseeing the refitting of the plant his company had just purchased here. Accordingly, Strauss had arranged to take his vacation leave early, and I, for my part, had just delivered a new manuscript to my publisher and cleared my desk of all other obligations.

Our plan was to rent a car and drive to the east coast by one route and back by another. Everything went well for two weeks. The weather was fine, the countryside was at its most beautiful, we ate well, we slept well, and I, for one, was having the best vacation of my life.

It was on the way back that our trip took an unexpected turn. Foolishly, I had allowed us to run low on gas on a stretch of road that had no service stations, and our map indicated we had a fair way to go until the next town. Suddenly, Strauss said, "Turn there," as we came upon a sign with fading letters that read, "West Quaco," with an arrow pointing to the right. Underneath, the word "gas" had been nailed on crookedly. Strauss checked the map. "It's not on the map."

"Probably too small," I said.

I turned onto the narrow road, which we followed for five or six kilometers until we reached a small town. It seemed very quiet, almost deserted. The first thing that caught our attention was a gleaming red Texaco sign on a pole beside a partially-built station. There was a large hole in the ground with a tank in it and a heap of dirt beside it. New pumps stood on their concrete islands with their insides exposed.

As we parked the car and got out, a boy in a clean Texaco uniform came out of the station to meet us. The name "Herman" was stitched on his uniform. "You want a gas, sir?" he asked.

"Do you have gas?" asked Strauss.

"A gas?" asked Herman.

"Gas," said Strauss emphatically. "We'd like some gas, if you have any."

I wondered whether the boy was retarded, for he seemed to gaze at Strauss uncomprehendingly. "You want a gas, right?"

"Not a gas," said Strauss, slightly annoyed. "Gas. Gasoline. We want gasoline."

"Yes, sir, a gasoline."

"Okay, have it your way. Do you have any?"

The boy seemed to become nervous. "M-m-m-maybe in a little while. The delivery truck is coming."

Strauss frowned as he gave the station the once-over. "Is there another gas station anywhere around here?"

"No, sir, nowhere."

Strauss considered the situation. I decided to let him figure it out for us since his was the scientific mind, not mine. "Where's your boss?"

"Across the street," Herman said, pointing with a hand that had too many fingers, it seemed to me. "Ray's Sporting Goods."

"Is that your boss -- Ray?"

"Yes, speak to Ray."

"Okay to leave the car here?"

"Yes, sir. If you will let me have the keys, I will take it out back and give it a nice wash. No charge." He smiled.

Strauss handed him the keys. "Okay. Thanks."

We headed across the street to Ray's. The store looked pretty shabby from the outside. Inside, it looked even worse. The entire store was a mess. What's more, it seemed to contain only three kinds of merchandise -- skis, golf balls, and athletic socks. Oh, yes, there was one other thing -- a bowling ball, set like some valuable necklace on a blue velvet pillow in the display case beside the cash register. It had a sign on it: "My Championship Ball -- Not For Sale." After these words the words "AT ANY PRICE!!" had been added as an angry afterthought. Next to the ball was a framed picture. It showed a smiling man receiving a trophy. The caption typed on an index card under the photo said: "Ray Bluth, St. Louis, Mo. -- Leading PBA Average 1964 -- 210.512."

An old man was holding a pair of socks in a corner of the store. He was absolutely rigid as he examined them up

close, as if looking at the individual threads of the fabric. There was something strange about his head: the back of it seemed virtually as flat as a board.

Ray, a middle-aged man, came out from behind the filthy, cluttered counter. "Yes, can I help you?"

"We wanted some gas," said Strauss. "We're stuck, I'm afraid. We're down to practically nothing."

Ray sighed genially, his hands in his pockets. "We will have gas -- eventually."

At this point I piped in, "The sign on the main highway said 'gas.'"

"Yes," said Ray, "but it didn't say when." He smiled apologetically. "Are you fellows in a hurry?"

"No, not really," said Strauss. "But how long will we have to wait?"

"A couple of hours maybe."

Strauss looked at me, and I gave him a look that said, 'What can you do?' I cast a sideways glance at the old man. He was still engrossed with the pair of socks.

"Tell you what," said Ray. "Why don't I take you fellows over to the cafe and treat you to a coffee and a bite to eat? I don't get a chance to speak to outsiders much. Not that I miss the outside."

"You're not from around here?" asked Strauss.

"No, from St. Louis." He started herding us toward the door.

"What about your customer?" I asked.

"He's not a customer. He lives here, sort of."

As we exited I gave the old man another look. He was drooling on the socks.

Outside, I saw that our car had already disappeared. A brief feeling of foreboding hit me, but I dismissed it.

Strauss remarked to Ray, "You don't seem to be doing much business."

"*Much* business? Hell, I don't do *any* practically."

"Then why do you stay here?"

At this, Ray's expression became sadly intense. "There are things in life that are more important than money. There's *appreciation*, for instance. These people appreciate my championship form." And so saying, he made a motion with an imaginary bowling ball to demonstrate it, ending with a triumphant little punch to indicate a perfect strike.

We walked down the middle of the main street. The town

consisted of this main street plus a few short alleys or side-streets. There were perhaps a few dozen run-down buildings in all. The town seemed abnormally quiet. Strauss and I had passed through scores of small towns, yet this one struck me as somehow different, in a way that was hard to put my finger on. Aside from the new Texaco station, it seemed so *unconnected* to the rest of the world. I think it was the absence of traffic that gave me this feeling. A lady passed us whose nose appeared to be way off centre. She was carrying what appeared to be a dead cat. She and Ray exchanged nods of recognition.

On the side of a building I saw a sign: "*Hezekiah Says: Persistence of obsession to dominate is as instinctive as a calf looking for its dam to suckle.*" I was about to ask our host the meaning of this saying when he began to speak again, this time with a lump in his throat. I thought he was holding back tears. "You see, I'm washed up in bowling. Washed up. Completely. All because of a little misunderstanding." He paused, perhaps unsure whether to take us into his confidence. "I was out for a walk late one night, and somebody in a gorilla suit beat me up and stole my pants. I was arrested for indecent exposure. Of course, nobody believed me." He looked at us to gauge our reactions. I tried to look sympathetic. Strauss seemed mildly amused. "You believe me, don't you?"

"Of course," said Strauss.

"And afterwards, well..." A long pause. "My game went all to hell. I couldn't concentrate."

"I understand," said Strauss. "By the way, were you convicted, if you don't mind my asking?"

"No, the charge was dropped for insufficient evidence. But my reputation was still ruined. And then..." He sighed. "I ended up here, pretty much by chance. It's a long story, not worth going into. Anyway, I bought the store to have something to do. Got it for next to nothing. Same with the gas station. Just got that recently."

The cafe he took us to was called The Skinned Woman Cafe, a name that struck me as macabre. Inside, the place was gloomy and dirty. Four or five patrons sat in booths or at the counter. Strauss nudged me. "Look at that." I looked and beheld the very thing that had given the cafe its name. Reader, believe me when I tell you that displayed prominently on the wall was the complete skin of a white

adult woman. The sight of it sent a shudder through me. Strauss, undaunted, stepped right up to it to get a good look. My friend had always had a keen scientific curiosity about anything unusual.

"That's the skinned woman," Ray explained to me matter-of-factly, leading me to a booth. "Or rather, it's the skinned woman's skin. Where the skinned woman herself is, I don't know."

The proprietor came over and set paper place mats and glasses of water before us. I was fascinated by the man's face. His eyes were abnormally far apart, and one ear was far larger than the other. "Howdy," he said.

"Hello," I answered. "Set a place for my friend too," I said, indicating Strauss. I looked around at the other patrons. They all seemed physically abnormal. One man looked as though a wedge-shaped object had been imbedded in his skull. He appeared to be eating a piece of raw liver. A lady of indeterminate age had a sort of hairy, bulbous growth under her neck. A boy reading a comic book had hideous eruptions or sores on one arm. Our host, Ray, was quite normal. But then, like us, he came from the "outside."

Strauss sat down beside me. "Extraordinary," he said to me. Then he asked the proprietor, "Where on earth did you get that skin?"

"She was here before I was," the man replied. "My grandfather got her from an old gun collector in nineteen-fourteen, and he kept her in his shop as a conversation piece. He was a taxidermist. Then my father inherited her and put her here in the cafe when he opened it." He handed us a menu. "She's a beauty, ain't she?"

"Yes," agreed Strauss.

"Who was she?" I asked kiddingly.

"I don't see that that's any of *your* business," he said.

I looked at my place mat. It contained these words, set against a poor water color of a beach scene: *"Hezekiah Says: If we want protection from the oceans of evil storms, we must instigate the cultivation and growth of good trees."*

Ray ordered pie and coffee for the three of us. It was brought to us by a waitress who had incredibly huge, sharp teeth. I excused myself to go to the toilet. Inadvertently, I barged in on the proprietor, who was peeing into a tin

cup. I said excuse me and backed out. I waited. He came out, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. I reentered and saw the tin cup on a shelf beside the sink. It smelled of urine. My feeling of foreboding came back. I didn't like this West Quaco, and the sooner we got out the better.

I returned to the table, unable to eat my pie. I gave it to Strauss. I refused to drink the coffee and would only sip a bit of water after discreetly smelling it.

Ray did indeed treat us. As he was paying the cheque, I pulled Strauss aside and said to him, "The owner drinks his own urine. I saw him."

"You don't say!"

"And have you noticed these people? They're all deformed."

"Mmm." He nodded.

"I want to get out of this place now. Before dark." It was late afternoon.

Strauss reminded Ray politely of our need for gas. Ray replied, "The truck's coming. And anyway, if need be, we can put you up for the night." Alarm bells went off in my head.

Strauss forced a smile. "Fine. Well, while we're waiting, what else is there to see in this town?"

"I'll take you to see our shrine, if you like."

"A shrine! Splendid!" Strauss had a great interest in church architecture.

We stepped out onto the street. I could have sworn a man with three arms passed us, but I didn't have the courage to turn around for a second look. Strauss was smiling. A sign in a window said, "*Hezekiah Says: In the old days men could fly by singing a song and striking a plate.*"

The shrine Ray spoke of did indeed look like a church, albeit one of modest size. Over the door was the name 'The Shrine of Mussolini's Shorts.'

"I have to warn you about the Cardinal," said Ray.

"He's, well, let's say a bit temperamental. He can't stand skeptics or intellectuals, so don't disagree with him or act too smart. Um...I'll tell you, he *can* be violent at times, but otherwise he's a regular guy."

Ray ushered us inside, where we found a ceremony taking place. The Cardinal, dressed in a beautiful scarlet robe and wearing a splendid mitre, had his back to us and was kneeling before an altar with a glass case containing an

item of underwear. A ring of candles surrounded the altar. Eight or ten parishioners knelt in their pews. The wall ahead of us was dominated by a huge portrait of Mussolini in military uniform. Lugubrious organ music was coming in faintly from somewhere. The Cardinal was saying, "Oh, Benito Mussolini, Our Light of Lights, Our Hope of Hopes, you founded the Italian Fascist Party to restore the Glory that was Rome. After your election to Parliament in nineteen-twenty-one, you attracted ever-increasing rightist support, culminating in your March on Rome in October of nineteen-twenty-two and the subsequent resignation of the government..."

Ray whispered to me, "This brings tears to my eyes." Indeed, several of the other parishioners seemed to be crying. Ray led us into a pew and motioned to us to kneel.

"...King Victor Emmanuel the Third called upon you, Il Duce, to form a cabinet. You made Italy a corporate state. You made the trains and rivers run on time. You signed the Lateran Treaty in nineteen-twenty-nine, resolving the old conflicts with the Church caused by the annexation of the Papal States in eighteen-seventy, and thus enjoyed the Church's increased support. You invaded Ethiopia in nineteen-thirty-five. Oh, what a glorious moment it was! You annexed Albania in nineteen-thirty-nine and formed a military alliance with Nazi Germany. But then, after the Allies landed in Italy in nineteen-forty-three, you were forced to resign..." Ray was weeping into his hanky. "...And Marshal Badoglio sued for peace. You were rescued by the Germans and later attempted to regain power, but it was too late. Germany fell, and you were shot while trying to escape to Switzerland. Now we have only your shorts to remember you by, this holiest of holy garments. Through your shorts you are still with us, Benito, inspiring us upward into Infinite Glory. Amen." He stood up and faced his parishioners. "Go now in peace, my children." The organ music was suddenly replaced by a lively polka. (The significance of this escapes me to this day.)

We stood up. Ray led us forward through the exiting parishioners and introduced us to His Eminence, Cardinal Ratnozo, who seemed delighted to have visitors from the outside. He was also flattered by our interest and encouraged us to look at Mussolini's shorts up close. I could see that they were white boxer-type shorts and that they bore the

monogram 'B.M.' I was about to ask a question, but I remembered Ray's warning. Strauss, however, boldly asked the Cardinal, "Your Eminence, what possible spiritual significance can Mussolini's underwear have?"

Cardinal Ratnozo gave him a stern look. "This is a matter of faith. I can see that you have had your faith poisoned by too much education. Without faith we are nothing. We must believe and accept. This is also a matter of local tradition."

Strauss said he understood and hoped His Eminence would forgive him. The latter smiled. A possible altercation had been averted. "Perhaps you'd like to see faith at work. There is a sick man I must see. His suffering is great. I must go to comfort him."

Naturally, Strauss was all too eager to go along. As we walked a few paces behind Ray and the Cardinal, I said to him in a low voice, "This place scares me. I want to get out."

"Not just yet. It's just getting interesting. I want to see everything."

Outside, I spied yet another of Hezekiah's sayings, painted on the side of a junked car: "*Hezekiah Says: Sometimes the best way out of a wilderness is on a cow.*"

I ventured to ask His Eminence, "Who is this Hezekiah anyway?"

"A great and mysterious man. He lives right here in town."

"I think I'd like to pay him a visit just for the hell of it."

"NO!" The Cardinal stopped and glared at me. "It is not permitted for outsiders to meet Hezekiah! This is a great sin! Do not speak of it again!"

"Gee, I'm sorry."

He gave me a faint smile to reassure me. We continued walking. He touched the back of his neck. "Boy, my hair's getting good in the back." And then, dear reader, he lifted his mitre, and I saw to my shock that his head was cone-shaped like the mitre itself! He felt his hair up and down the back of his head, then put his mitre back on. I looked at Strauss. He looked positively thrilled.

Ray left us at this point, saying he had to get back to his store and "rub the old man's feet." What he meant by that, I don't know. He said he hoped to see us later and

went off in the other direction, making bowling motions down the middle of the street.

I expected Cardinal Ratnozo to lead us to a hospital, but I should not have been surprised to learn there was no hospital in a town as small as West Quaco. We were led instead into the basement of a nondescript vacant building, where a room had been fitted out as a sort of ward. "Stay here. It is not permitted for you to enter the Room of Salvation," he said at the threshold.

Reader, I am a sensitive man, and it pains me to set down in writing the scene that took place. To begin with, the suffering man's bed was partly surrounded by a screen; thus my friend and I could not actually see him. But his groans of agony convinced me that he was in such a terrible condition that I could not likely have stood the sight of him. Most assuredly, he was gasping his last breaths. Several old ladies in white (they may have been nuns, but I'm not sure) crowded around the bed. They would administer dressings which left my view in a clean white condition and, after a short interval, came into sight again as sopping red cloths. A pile of these bloody dressings was building in a basin on the floor.

The Cardinal, his back to us, was leaning over the man, and it seemed to me that he took some sort of implement from inside his robe. Immediately as the Cardinal leaned over the man, a heart-rending scream filled the air.

"AAAGGHHHH! OOOHH! EEEGGHH!"

"There now, Brother, be calm."

"AAAGGHHHH! NO! NO! STOP! UNNGGHH!"

"Hush, Brother, you are offending the Lord."

"NO! NO! OW! OW! UNNGH!"

I gripped Strauss's arm. "We have to do something. He's killing him."

"No, we can't interfere," he replied, his brow creased with tension.

"NO! AAAGHH! AAGH! OW! OW!"

"Stop screaming, Brother. Don't you know you are going to Heaven?"

"UUNNGH! UNGH! HELP! OH, HELP!"

"Yes, Brother, Heaven. How lucky you are. I wish I could be in your place."

A yelp escaped the man's lips that seemed like that of a castrated horse.

"How I envy you your pain, Brother. Your heavenly reward awaits."

We heard a faint groan and then nothing. Had the man died, or had he merely passed out? My face was wet with tears. I felt nauseous.

The Cardinal wiped his hands first on a cloth towel. Then one of the women handed him a little foil packet. The logo on the outside caught my eye: it was a pre-moistened towelette from Kentucky Fried Chicken! The Cardinal unfolded the wet paper towel and cleaned his bloody hands thoroughly.

I said to Strauss in a low voice, "This is the last straw. We have to get out of here."

"All right, all right."

"Promise me. Don't let the sun go down on us in this town."

"We have to see about the car."

"I have a feeling they're going to keep us here."

"Don't be silly. Your imagination's running away with you."

I put my faith at last in Strauss's sang-froid. Had I been with anyone else, I would have been beside myself with fear.

Cardinal Ratnozo came out of the room, beaming with satisfaction.

"Is he dead?" I asked.

"Almost, thank God. His body cannot be saved, but his soul can." He sniffed his fingers. "Ahhh...But I sure hate it when they scream like that, the bloody cowards."

At this, a look of outrage crossed Strauss's face, but he held himself back.

I was glad to get out of that torture chamber and back onto the street. A moment after we stepped outdoors, a bee whizzed past Ratnozo's face. "OH, NO! HELP! GET IT AWAY FROM ME!" He fell to the ground, terror-stricken. The bee buzzed around him a few times and then flew away. He was shaking. "God, a bee, there's nothing worse!" We helped him up and brushed the dirt off his robe. Oddly, his mitre had remained firmly in place. After a few deep breaths to regain his composure, he was soon smiling again. "What do you say we go hoist a few?"

"I beg your pardon?" asked Strauss.

"He means, let's have a few drinks," I explained.

"Good idea!" said Strauss. I couldn't tell whether he really wanted to drink or whether he merely wanted an opportunity to observe Cardinal Ratnozo further. Probably both.

"We need gas for our car," I blurted out. "Have you got any?"

His Eminence frowned at me. "Brother, where is your faith?"

He took us to his house, a large, dilapidated structure whose grounds were choked with weeds. A housekeeper opened the door. She was a hunchbacked dwarf whom the Cardinal addressed as "my dear Carlotta." We were seated in the living room, where we found ourselves surrounded by ancient devices of torture, including a rack, an Iron Maiden, a table of some sort equipped with straps and sharp metal spikes, and a framework of wooden beams with several sets of manacles hanging over them. There were stacks of magazines all over the place that appeared to deal with sadism.

The Cardinal's "dear Carlotta" brought us some cold beer -- *Miller High Life*, no less.

"Pretty grim place you have here," I said.

"One might see it that way," the Cardinal replied.

A second look at the table of torture revealed what I took to be blood stains. "I don't suppose you actually still use these devices?"

"Oh, no, of course not." He chuckled. "This is a sort of museum. But my assistant and I do conduct various researches, as it happens."

"Your assistant?"

"Yes. He has a laboratory in the basement. Perhaps you'd like to meet him."

"Yes!" said Strauss at once.

"Good. Let's peek in on him. His name is Innocent, and he was once the head of a vice squad in a big city many years ago."

"A police officer? How interesting!" said Strauss.

"What did you say his name was?" I asked.

"Innocent, like that of fourteen of the Popes."

"Thirteen," corrected Strauss.

The Cardinal gave him a brief look of hostility, then smiled again. "Of course, I meant thirteen." He opened the basement door and led us down the stairs.

"Harr! Harr! Harr!" we heard a voice say. Innocent was naked, sitting on a stool by a workbench, looking

into a microscope. He made a note on a pad. "Another sodomist! Good!"

I expected to see some physical abnormality, but then I remembered that he was not a native-born West Quaonian. He was, however, a singularly ugly man. As we approached him, I saw that he had a prodigious erection, which he made not the slightest effort to hide.

"Innocent," said the Cardinal, "two visitors from the outside would like to know what you're working on."

"Ants!" he said, turning a fierce face toward us. His eyes were wide and maniacal.

"Ants?" I asked. "Why ants?"

Innocent explained: "All my life I have been interested in all forms of sexual degeneracy and perversion. Many years ago I came to the conclusion that it was an innate biological trait, common not only to Man but to all animal life. I asked myself, 'What is the true source of these sins? When did they begin?' This led me to pursue Sin throughout the animal kingdom, starting with Man and working backward to more primitive forms of life. And now..." He paused, sitting up straight with a triumphant look. "...I believe I have discovered the true source of Sin! I call them...*the Pervert Ants!*"

I could see several ants on the microscope slide. He beckoned me to look for myself. As I put my eye to the eyepiece, he said, "Here is the full panorama of sexual deviancy -- oral sex, sodomy, sadism, masochism, fetishism, homosexuality, bestiality, troilism, urolagnia, coprolagnia, rape, sexual murder, and even indecent exposure!" I couldn't see anything except magnified ants.

"May I see?" asked Strauss.

I made room for him. He looked carefully for a full minute while Innocent prattled on: "The Pervert Ants are the true source of Original Sin, which means that Man is not responsible. So until God punishes the ants, Man is free to act as he pleases -- sex-wise, at least." He went on in this vein while walking around in a circle excitedly, his erection dangling like a billy club. Then he broke out into a little song:

*"Oh, my Pervert Ants,
Pervert, Pervert, Pervert Ants,
Me and my Pervert Ants,
Cocka wocka focka."*

"Astonishing. Truly astonishing," said Strauss at last. I knew he hadn't seen anything either. Innocent and the Cardinal looked very pleased.

We begged leave of our host at this point. Strauss said we had to go to the gas station to see about our car. The Cardinal bade us farewell and presented us with an autographed copy of his pamphlet, *The Significance of Mussolini's Shorts for Human Salvation*. Before the door closed behind us, we heard his dear Carlotta say to him, "The donkey is ready, Sire."

As we hastened back to the other end of town, I said to Strauss, "Maybe the gas truck has arrived. Then we can fill up and get out of here."

"There's no gas truck."

"What? What do you mean?"

"There's no gas truck coming. There can't possibly be."

"Why not?"

"Because that station isn't ready to pump gas. I could tell in an instant."

"Hell, why didn't you tell me this right away?"

"Their little lie aroused my curiosity. Then that Ray fellow and his store. Very odd, very odd. I wanted to scout around, but if I'd told you, you'd have gotten scared."

"I'm scared now. We're prisoners, don't you see? God, what'll we do?"

"Don't panic. I'll get us out of here. It's time to be a little more aggressive, that's all."

The look of determination on his face gave me hope. I saw that the sun was getting low. If we were not out of there before dark, who knew what might happen to us?

I was hoping to see our car in front of the gas station, but it wasn't there. And a quick look showed us that it wasn't out back either. Herman, the attendant, saw us. He looked frightened. He stepped out of the office with a small basket of fruit in his hand. "I have a fruits for you, sir," he said.

"Never mind that!" Strauss growled. "We want our car now, and we want gas too!"

"Y-y-your c-c-car?"

"We want our car now! Or else!"

The terrified boy dropped the basket of fruit and

seemed to go into a kind of fit. His head rotated back and forth like a radar antenna. "Brrrrp brrrrp brrrrp...potato warning," he said in a robot-like voice. "Brrrrp brrrrp brrrrp...potato warning...brrrrp brrrrp brrrrp...potato warning...brrrrp brrrrp brrrrp...potato warning..."

"Enough of this bullshit," said Strauss to me. "Let's go to the sheriff's office."

We had noticed a building marked 'Sheriff' on our way back. We retraced our steps quickly and went in the front door. We found ourselves in a sort of anteroom or vestibule containing a coat rack (nothing on it), a little table with a dead plant in a pot, and a switchboard that was literally covered with dust and cobwebs. It looked as though someone had taken a dozen whacks at it with an axe. We opened the next door and saw a man sitting behind a huge wooden desk, writing or doodling on a pad. The room seemed like a combination office and living quarters, with file cabinets and shelves alternating with chests, wardrobes, and a bed. Clothes were scattered everywhere.

The sheriff was a huge hulk of a man with a shock of white hair that stuck out all over. Behind him in a large cage suspended from the ceiling were two monkeys. "Yes?" he said.

"Are you the sheriff?" asked Strauss.

"Yes, I'm Sheriff Filbert. Forgive me for not rising. I have a medical condition that is unpleasant to look at. It also hampers my mobility. Please sit down." He indicated two chairs before his desk. We sat down. The monkeys made little chattering noises and seemed to smile at us.

"Your badge says 'Fireman,'" Strauss observed.

"I can be a fireman if I want to be," said Sheriff Filbert rather defensively. "I'm also known as the Super Detective. In Spanish that would be El Super Detective, although nobody around here speaks Spanish."

Good grief, I thought.

"Indeed," said Strauss. "Well, if you're a super detective, you ought to be able to help us. It seems we arrived almost out of gas and left our car -- "

"Hold it, hold it," said the sheriff, picking up a fresh legal-size pad and a purple crayon. "We must start at the very beginning. I must know who you are, where you come from, all the relevant background."

"But really -- "

"No but's. We do things by the book around here. If there is a mystery to be solved, it will require the highest faculties of the rational mind and all available data." The monkeys got more excited and jumped from perch to perch in their cage.

Strauss gave the sheriff a full chronological report of our situation, beginning with his arrival in the country for the purpose of supervising the refitting of his company's new plant. It was marvellous to listen to the clarity and conciseness with which he expressed himself, sparing no detail, yet never repeating himself. The sheriff scribbled furiously with his purple crayon, but it seemed to me that he was just making meaningless marks on paper. At one point when Strauss paused to allow the sheriff to catch up to him, I asked, "What kind of writing is that?"

"It's shorthand," replied the sheriff with a hint of anger. At that moment the monkeys began making hissing noises and glaring at me. "It's called Filbert Shorthand. I invented it myself," he added, his tone calm again. The monkeys became calm again too.

"Oh, I see. By the way, what kind of monkeys are those?"

"They're indicator monkeys. They help put you in touch with your inner feelings. They help you to know yourself." Strauss and I exchanged significant looks.

Strauss continued his narrative, this time more slowly, as if studying each individual mark made by the sheriff in response to his words. I was now convinced the marks were meaningless. Strauss explained about our car and then briefly recounted all that had happened to us in town.

"Okay, now let me see if I have this all right," the sheriff said, flipping back to the first page. *"Ahem...The double standard system in everyone's mind are old ideology development gained in Moses' days that have never been out-grown into the true meaning of Our Lord's knowledge --"*

"I never said that," said Strauss.

"Quiet! Let me finish!" the sheriff snapped, as the monkeys jabbered and hooted angrily, jumping about so that the cage swung back and forth. *"Today mankind's mind is becoming destroyed through self-indignation that flounders the minds with emotional disabilities, to react their anxieties of insecurities, to be spoken for mistaken knowledge, in open communications to one another, to form poor communica-*

tion blocks to one another -- "

"This is ridiculous!" I protested.

"Don't interrupt!" the sheriff said, flipping the page, as the monkeys bared their teeth and hissed at us ferociously. *"Our Lord unlocked the strait method of using one's mind whole in true self-directed thinking, right through the motor system controlled in the genes and chromosomes, which is the producing machine, when mankind learns to think accurately -- "*

Strauss stood up and said to me, "This man is insane. Let's get out of here." We got up and started to leave.

"...Indignation is the floundering system -- STOP! I'M NOT FINISHED!" He rose from his seat, and we saw that he was naked below the waist and that he possessed a hard scrotal tumor the size of a basketball. *"...TO KEEP THE MIND IN AN IMBALANCE SYSTEM OF THOUGHTS THAT CAUSES ANYONE TO PRESSURE THEIR EMOTIONAL FEELINGS..."*

We got out of there as fast as we could, with the sheriff's voice mingling with the wild hooting of the monkeys and the desperate swinging of their cage.

"What do we do now?" I asked.

"Let's go back and see Ray. He's the least crazy of any of them. He may be our last hope."

We headed back to Ray's store. As we walked in, a sudden inspiration hit me. "Ray," I said, "I think you're the best damn bowler who ever lived! Would you show us your championship form again?"

His face lit up. "Why...why, sure!" And he picked up an imaginary ball and went through his motion.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" exclaimed Strauss, following my cue. "If only my friends in Vienna could see such beauty!"

"Oh, my! Oh, my!" said Ray, close to tears.

"Say, Ray," I went on, "could you settle a bet for us? Strauss says you have six sanctioned three-hundred games to your credit, and I say seven. Which is it?"

"I have twelve!"

"Twelve! Wow!" I said.

"Oh, my! Oh, my! You boys are too wonderful!"

I knew that one of us had to broach the crucial question. I decided to. "Ray, look, we want to go home. Can you get us our car back with a little gas, whatever you can scrape up?"

"Heh, heh, well..." He looked down at his shoes. I felt an awful moment of tension until he looked up at us and smiled. "Well, sure, sure, I reckon we can work something out. But you've got to be prepared to do us a little favor."

"Okay, you name it."

"Let's go over to the general store," he said.

Ray took us down the street to the general store. Underneath an old Coke logo, a sign had been hung: *"Hezekiah Says: The surge of parrot psychology comes on strong, like a persistent potato."*

After all that had happened, I was not the least surprised to see that the storekeeper, named Clem, had a six-inch horn projecting out of his forehead that curved down in front of his nose. Ray introduced us and then went into the back room with Clem for a little conference while we waited.

"We should buy some groceries to take with us on the road," I said.

"Hmm. I wonder," said Strauss, looking around.

Looking more closely, I saw the most improbable sorts of products. Almost an entire wall was filled with row after row of packages of a kind of sausage. I picked one up. It was called *Beefalooka*. The slogan on the package said, *"The beef jerky Joe Palooka would eat if he were a real person."* It looked extremely dry. The expiry date on the package had passed more than two years before.

My attention was also caught by a hideous black breakfast cereal called *Coalies*, a peculiar rubber implement called *Popeil's Pocket Woman*, *Bulgarian Revenge Cologne*, *City Slicker Dehydrated Squid Soup*, *Valley of Despair Cat Food*, *Redundant Power Moose Deodorant*, *President Millard Fillmore Pig Brain Jelly*, *Armageddon Edible Suspenders*, *Angry Buttocks Laxative*, something called *Mixed Molluscs* in a cellophane bag, *Borx Horse Mouthwash*, *Zorro Condoms*, *Morose Earwig Tuna*, *Old Turkish Pajamas Chewing Tobacco*, *Witch Whey*, *Pakistan Power Sponges*, and a barrel full of grey granules without any sort of label. I decided I could go hungry for another couple of hours.

"Look at this," said Strauss, handing me a pack of trading cards like the ones kids collect. There was a box of them on the counter. The pop-up display board read: *"MICRO-COON -- The Three-Inch-Tall Negro Who Can Fly And Solve World Problems."* The packs cost twenty-five cents apiece.

"I can't resist," I said to Strauss as I put a quarter on the counter. I opened the pack and found a nice pink square of bubble gum, which I popped in my mouth. It was watermelon-flavored.

There were five *Micro-Coon* cards in the pack. The first one was captioned: "*Micro-Coon brings Menachem Begin and Yasser Arafat together.*" The cartoon showed Begin and Arafat shaking hands and clapping each other on the back as Micro-Coon hovered above them. In the background on the desert, bearded sheiks and Orthodox rabbis were cheering and dancing with each other. On the back of the card it said: "*Card no. 25 -- Collect the Whole Set of 100! Since the creation of the Jewish state of Israel in 1948, many Arabs have fought for the return of the ancient land of Palestine. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and its leader, Yasser Arafat, were the sworn enemies of Israel and its leader, Menachem Begin. But one day Micro-Coon went to each of them and spoke to them of love, friendship, and peace. The boyish twinkle in his eye softened the hearts of these hard-liners. The next day he brought them together over lunch, where they talked over their differences and became friends. Copyright 1980, Tasteful Gum Company, Hicksville, New York.*"

The other cards were captioned: "*Micro-Coon reasons with a hijacker,*" "*Micro-Coon relieves drought victims in Chad,*" "*Micro-Coon brings about nuclear disarmament,*" and "*Micro-Coon addresses the International Conference on the Ozone Layer.*"

My reading was interrupted by the return of Ray. "Okay, fellows, listen, here's the deal. You get your car and some gas, but you have to take Clem's daughter off his hands."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Clem's daughter is, how shall I put it, *abnormal*. He'd like you to take her to a hospital in the big city and get her fixed up. Then you can send her back. We'll pay the bills, don't worry."

"Right! Agreed!" Strauss jumped in.

"Good. Don't go away." Ray disappeared into the back of the store again.

I said to Strauss, "If she's too abnormal for this place, can you imagine what she looks like? Do you want to travel with a severely handicapped girl? What if she's a monster?"

"Listen, the important thing is to get out of here. Then we can dump the girl at the first hospital or police station we come to. We'll tell them we found her wandering on the highway. They'll have to take care of her."

"Right. Good thinking."

We heard footsteps coming up from what had to be a cellar. *My God! The girl must be so abominable she has to be locked away!* I thought. I prepared myself for a shock. The curtain parted and Clem appeared. Behind him came a girl of about sixteen. There was only one word to describe her -- *beautiful!* She had an angelic face, blond hair, blue eyes, and a lovely figure.

"This is my daughter, Clementine," said Clem. We shook hands with the girl. She had a small suitcase with her. Just then we heard the sound of our car. I looked out the window and saw Herman parking it out front. I noticed it hadn't been washed, but I didn't care.

Strauss took Clementine's suitcase for her and led the way. I trailed behind. Clem detained me at the door and said, "She's an ugly critter, ain't she?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Been that way since birth."

"Too bad."

"You think some, whatchamacallit, plastic surgery would do her any good?"

"Oh, they're working wonders these days."

"I'm sorry, I hope this isn't asking too much of you."

"Oh, no, don't worry. We'll work it out just fine."

We packed into the car, with Strauss driving and the girl between us. I was relieved to see that our belongings had been left untouched. Most important, we now had almost a half tank of gas. We gave Clem a friendly wave, made a U-turn, and headed back down the road by which we had come.

"Boy, what a relief to get out of that nut house," said Clementine.

Strauss patted her bare knee, and I put my arm around her. "For us too," I said. Just touching her made my head swim. "When we get home, you can settle in with me -- uh, temporarily, of course."

"And I'll get you a job," said Strauss. "You can work for me, in fact."

In the light of the setting sun we spied yet another of Hezekiah's sayings on a billboard: *"Hezekiah Says: Green*

cheese is to black eye, as silvery moon is to starry-eyed, as honeymoon is to moon-eyed, as man in the moon is to private eye."

"My dear, I have a thousand questions to ask you," said Strauss.

"I have one myself," I said. "What's the low-down on this guy Hezekiah? I mean, what's his game anyway?"

Clementine laughed. "It's a long story, and you probably won't believe it."

"Oh, yeah? Let's have it."

And in the course of the next hour Clementine revealed the utterly astounding, utterly shocking mystery of Hezekiah, a mystery -- forgive me, dear reader -- that the civilized world is not yet prepared to know.

THE DOBBINS FILE (#31001)

Rte 2 box 160A
Kilgore, Texas

July 12, 1972

Mr. Tom Nelson
Exposition Press Inc.
50 Jericho N.Y. 11753

Dear Mr. Nelson,

I would like to publish a one-hundred page book with your company, The printing would include both sides of the sheet. How much would the cost of printing be if the book is worth printing to your company.

On January 17, 1964, I wrote a book. I tried to publish it and never had enough money. In the contents, I had the exact dates of the Watts Riot to occur in 1965, Jhonsons speech of the Great Society in 1968, and the day the Lights would go out in New York City on November 5, 1965.

At the time, I was teaching school, there was a spacecraft came down and I was programed by the space people with the information. In 1964, after not having enough money to publish this book I made the mistake of writing to my congressman in Kilgore, Texas and stating the Lights would go out in New York City. I was told that if I proved out accurate in three days with a psychiatrist I would be given government money to carry on a project. Instead I was locked up for five months, then turned loose. During this time, my wife was not informed to my whereabouts and I never got to see her nor my four sons untill 1966 and then it was to late.

In 1967, I was teaching school and I knew that Arthur King and Robert Kennedy would be killed on the exact dates they were. Instead of trying to write a book and send to them, I quite my position seven months a head of time to avert the situation with out getting locked up and I failed for Lack of funds.

Since then I have done nothing but ware my body out

working cheap and telling fortunes.

In 1964, I was teaching school in Louisiana. I mentioned and memographed a test sheet to four-hundred students that the Lights would go out in New York City on November 5, 1965. Over this I was called into the office and fired with out pay.

Trying to warn the people of New York City before the Lights went out, I never got a good citizen award, I got locked up and lost my family and twenty-thousand dollars. After I got out and the Lights went out. All those said that I told was; you were Right or anyone who could predict the Lights would go out in New York City a year and one half before they went out should be locked up.

When I got out, I had no friends or money and I could not get welfare and I sold exactly forty gallons of blood, not pints. I thought that was selling a lot of blood until I found people who sold four times more than I. I hate to say it, but after all of that I am in better health than I was before I started.

Since 1964, I have not lived in my own home nor a house. In 1967, I lived in a different Room or Hotel every night because I never trusted people after my bad experience of 1964.

I am going to telephone you collect on August 1, 1972. I am going to publish a book with your company if you see fit for the book will be funny to most people. If there is nothing in it that will get you in trouble NOR me and have the potentiality of being a well written book with good reading and interesting stories. How much will it take for 10,000 copies? I am going to telephone you at 2:p.m. your time, August 1st.

Sincerely
R. L. Dobbins

DATE 8/1/72

NAME Robert Dobbins

ADDRESS 1221 S. 19th Chickasha, Okla. 73018

HOME PHONE _____ BUS. PHONE _____

BEST TIME TO REACH YOU _____

KIND OF BOOK New concepts of space stories
(fiction, nonfiction, poetry, textbook, other)

IS YOUR MANUSCRIPT COMPLETE _____ IF NOT, WHEN _____

WHERE DID YOU SEE OUR AD YellPgs

(The publisher will be getting in touch with you soon.)

100 pp.

\$2600-2800

E-363-101-1000

*

August 1, 1972

Mr. Robert Dobbins
1221 South 19th
Chickasha, Oklahoma 73018

Dear Mr. Dobbins:

We didn't get a chance to discuss your manuscript in any detail, but your brief indication of its subject matter interests me. I'm pleased to enclose the literature I promised, and under separate cover, I'm sending you a complimentary copy of Mr. Uhlan's book, THE ROGUE OF PUBLISHERS' ROW.

Should a reading of all our material rouse any questions, feel free to call on me for the necessary answers.

For the record, let me repeat my invitation to submit your manuscript for editorial reading and appraisal. You'll have my candid opinion of its publishing possibilities within a couple of weeks of its arrival on my desk. Naturally, there's no obligation for this service.

I'd like to emphasize that we are unique among book publishers in that we have a complete graphic arts manufacturing plant under our own roof. As a result, I can publish the average book in three to four months from date of contract, and still maintain the highest standards of quality control.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Cordially,
BEN PASKOFF
Executive Vice President

BP:ap
enc.

*

Memo to file: FU THREE WEEKS ROGUE+ 31001

*

Memo to file: "Altho" form letter 8/25/72 31001

*

R. L. Dobbins

*1221 S. 19th
Chickasha, Oklahoma
73018*

August 30, 1972

Mr. Ben Paskoff
Executive Vice President
50 Jericho Turnpike
Jericho
New York 11753

Dear Mr. Paskoff,

I have read "The Rogue of Publishers' Row" and the other information you sent. Since you are unable to publish science material, I will rewrite the book; and then send the book. There will be a few terms and names which you will not find in the dictionary. I can name people who are not born yet. Ten years from now they will exist and I can tell in the book what corner and what town those people will be located at the exact time and their exact words. These people will not be planted and it will be the exact future of important events to occur in the United States to 1987. The use of sentence structure and vocabulary will be simple. I wrote one book and after thinking about some-one reading it that I kept to myself for with a few thousand dollars at the right time, the wrong type of person could control the United States or kill the entire population in a matter of hours.

October 2, 1971, marks an important date in our life's history. The story behind the present war I know. Many do not.

An incomplete story can do more harm than good. The object of the book if done exact will save a few million people's lives in the future. There are several people today who would hate to see those people live. I am going to Texas and rewrite the book. It will be on your desk before October 2, 1972. In the event I predict that the Chinese will attack the United States then, you will find me in Australia during that week. In the event the attack does not come about, then I will send the money for publication.

The book is to sell for not less than ten-dollars per copy. I will sell the first ten-thousand and I will not be long about it, once it is published and the information is what is valuable for it is the one thing which will have the New's paper headlines two years in advance for a sixty-day period. We sell it as a book which parts are true and parts

are not. The most unbelievable parts will be in future and past predictions.

To make the book sell in the Dallas and Fort Worth region, we would need a cover on the book and have a picture of Mr. Uhlan, you, myself, a coloured and white lady in the nude, and present it as a health book. The cover can be thrown away for the few people who buy books to read.

In Oklahoma, a picture of a flying saucer on the cover would do well and if you are a good photographer, I might be able to arrange the location where we can obtain one. It will not be faked. That is for the cover.

Most people are very robotic in nature because they are afraid to do anything out of the normal. To keep out of trouble, if they work as a labor, carpentor, operator, they use about four curse words which is the limits of thier vocabulary, however, there is allways the extremes in any case.

The point which I am making is that the book to the average mind will find something in the book which the average mind will enjoy reading.

The story of how I stated on a examination paper on October 2, November 5, 1964 that the lights would go out in New York City on November 5, 1965, and President Jhonsons speech of the Great Society for those are fact. In April 1965, I wrote to a Congress man Lindley Beckworth at Kilgore, Texas stating the lights would go out on the exact date they did, plus the reason the vietnam War should end then and to help me obtain a small government loan to produce the bacterial bomb to do it. My rewards for that was locked up for five months in which case I lost my house, my familly and during that time one of my dead children was dug up from his grave. In 1967 I stopped teaching school and tried to just keep quite and so save a few important peoples lives and during that course I got beat up and kicked by six hoods and before I could obtain a sub-machinungun, they were gone. The next six weeks, I healed up. However, it put me to late to save Robert Kennedy and Arthur Kings life but I was trying. Now, if you mentioned something like you were going to save President Nixons life or the next door nieghbor life to the

F.B.I. or police, it would only run you into a lot of trouble and they are getting paid five or ten dollars per hour to waste your time and really not get anything accomplished.

None of the above would make a good story in a book for it happened and so that I will keep shut up on since I tried.

I mentioned that story because, in this book, I want to publish the book from 1972 to 1987 and in this I would like to achieve one main purpose. That will come about when you read the book I send. In the event it does not show a good prospect for profit for me and you, as well as save a few peoples lives and have the exact future in it. Then, it can be simplified to farm stories and it will sell. On the 25th of September, I will send the book to be published and on October 3, 1972 the money for it to be published with.

I will telephone you on Friday September 29th at One-PM your time. Do not use the mail from this time forward untill I speech with you on the twenty-nineth and by that time you shall have read the book.

Enclosed is \$5 for the expence of sending the "Rogue".
Thank you!sincerely!

R. L. Dobbins

P.S. The object of the past story I wrote in regards to the rewards I recieved in trying to do something about the lights going out in New York City and the thing reversed on me. I could stand nothing like that again. The point, is that if there is anything which might get us in trouble over this book when you read it and evaluate it then we forget it. However, if it seems profitable then we go ahead with it.

I will base in Kilgore, Texas on a science project for the winter. I hope to make enough money on the book to carry out a worthwhile creative project.

There are 64 R.L. Dobbins in the United States. This one is me.

How many Ben Paskoff are there that you know of. I would appreciate an inexpensive picture if you have one from a brochure. You sent one of Mr. Uhlan but known

of you.

Again best of wishes. again.

*

Memo to file: Kill after 30 days. Mark file "NUT" 31001
Rec'd \$5.00 cash.
(Josephine, save file for Lou)

*

R. L. Dobbins
1221 S. 19th
Chickasha, Ok.
73018

September 25, 1972

Mr. Ben Paskoff
Expostion Press Inc.
50 Jericho turnpike
Jericho, New York 11753

Dear Mr. Paskoff,

The manuscript I am sending to you is yet incomplete. I do not have evidence of an extra-terrestrial spacecraft to go with it. I will wait a few more days on this. On the twenty-ninth of September at one-P.M. I will telephone you. The manuscript will be sent and definately, in the event it does not justify the demands of a book, then for a percentage, I want you to help me to promote it. This might justify a book and it might not. I yet want to have one book completed and published with your company before the end of this year.

Best of wishes,

Sincerely,
R. L. Dobbins

*

10/5/72 Killed (per B.P.)

31001

RAINY NIGHT

It was around nine o'clock on a Sunday night that my phone rang. I expected it to be my grandmother. Instead, I was jolted to hear the voice of my ex-girlfriend Kit, whom I hadn't heard from for nearly two years. "I need to ask a big favor of you," she said with a slightly quavering voice. "My car's not running and I need some help." No preliminaries. No how-are-you or how's-it-going. "It's a last-minute thing. There's nobody else around," she added.

"Okay, sure. What's the matter?"

"I have to clear Zoltan's things out of a room he was living in. It has to be done tonight, and I need somebody with a car."

After a moment of reflection I said, "Well, it appears I'm finally good for something."

"Look, it was hard enough for me to call you. You don't have to rake me over the coals." I was silent. "I can't call a taxi," she went on. "You know how these things can be."

"All right, I'll come right over."

"Do you have a couple of cardboard cartons?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Bring them, just in case."

"Okay...well...so I'll be right over. I'll leave now."

"I'll be waiting. Just honk."

Just honk. Meaning don't come inside. That's all over with.

Zoltan was Kit's husband -- legally, at least. For the past five or six years he'd been a patient at the psychiatric hospital at W____. He was a manic-depressive and considered incurable. The heavy doses of drugs they pumped into him made him more or less manageable, but he still went through his phases. He had "eloped" on numerous occasions during his more extreme highs. He just walked out the door. W____ is not a very secure institution. It doesn't have to be. Its patients are not considered dangerous.

Zoltan's impromptu sprees might last anywhere from a few hours to several weeks, and he might end up anywhere. He had once made it as far as Philadelphia in a stolen car. In the trunk of the car they found all sorts of scrap metal

and wood, as if he'd stopped off at a junkyard or picked up refuse or debris strewn along the road. On another occasion he showed up at the front door of an old schoolmate at three in the morning, still dressed in his hospital robe. And one time he even went to a chemical company and applied for a job. (He had been a chemical engineer.)

But most of the time Zoltan would just go home, break in, and pace around the apartment, throwing things and shouting semi-coherent complaints and demands at Kit. She would sit up with him for hours until he calmed down. There was nothing else she could do. It was pretty horrible for her. Then the police would come and take him away -- ever so gently. The Toronto police had encountered him so often that he was familiar to them. They always took control of the situation in a calm, professional manner. Kit always said so. Same thing in most of the municipalities between Toronto and W__. However, if he happened to venture much farther, where he wasn't known, he was likely to be handled pretty roughly. The Philadelphia police had handcuffed him, and Kit swore they'd beaten him as well.

It was a strange feeling to drive down Kit's street again. I never thought I would. In fact, I'd sworn I never would. It looked the same. And Kit, too, looked much the same as when I'd last seen her. Even her expression was the same -- that somber, intense look that suggested a veritable ocean of feeling under rigid control.

"Thanks," she said, getting into the car. I waited for her to say something else. I watched her grope for the loose ends of the seatbelts as though she'd never been in my car before.

"How've you been?" I asked.

"Okay. And you?"

"Okay." I wanted to reach over and touch her, but I was afraid to. I thought I might do it later, depending on how things went. "Where are we going?" I asked.

"It's on Avenue Road, just above St. Clair."

On the way I got what little information I could out of her. Apparently, Zoltan had rented a furnished room. Where he'd gotten the money, nobody knew. He'd lived there almost a month. Then one night when he felt high, he went into a milk store and caused a bit of a scene. The police came by and recognized him and took him straight back to W__. The hospital officials found a rent receipt in his

pocket and called both the landlady and Kit.

"You spoke to the landlady?" I asked.

"Yes. She wanted me to clear the place out tonight."

"Was she angry?"

"No."

"Did she say if there was any...*problem*?"

"She didn't say."

The rest of the conversation must have been pretty banal because I have forgotten it. We just talked to avoid an awkward silence. I didn't listen too carefully to what she said. I was mostly inside of myself, feeling very sad. I knew I shouldn't lead myself on with false hopes.

We arrived at last at a large, beautiful old house, whose windows gave off the subtlest light. (This house no longer stands. An apartment building has taken its place.)

I drove slowly along a long, narrow driveway to the back, the sound of crisp autumn leaves beneath us. We parked between two other cars. We each took one of my cardboard cartons.

Kit led the way to the side door of the house. I wanted to hold her arm because it was so dark, but she was a full stride ahead of me. The side door was opened by a middle-aged lady with grey hair. I didn't really get a good look at her in the dim light of the entrance. She just seemed like an old-fashioned European lady. She smiled politely, invited us in, and led us down a little hallway. The house seemed tomb-like in its silence. I used to have dreams about houses like that when I was little. There were always closed doors that threatened to open to reveal the unspeakable.

"In here," she said, indicating Zoltan's room. "I'll leave you now." Then she went away.

It was a very nice room. The furniture was old and well-polished. It looked not just comfortable but comforting as well. Even the innocuous little oil paintings and the rather feminine lamps gave the room a feeling of stability and security. I could have lived in such a room myself. The only thing I didn't care for was the powerful smell of air freshener. Somebody had really overdone it.

A suitcase peeked out from under the bed. Some clothing was draped over a chair. A pile of laundry could be seen in the closet, along with an overcoat. A few personal effects lay upon the dresser.

"Just shove as much of the clothing as you can into the suitcase," said Kit. "Start with the closet."

As I did so, I heard the opening and closing of drawers behind my back. There was a clink of glass. After several clinks I turned to find Kit placing what looked like a pickle jar into one of the cardboard cartons. "What's that stuff?" I asked.

"Please don't look, okay?" She closed the top of the carton.

"What do you mean?"

"Just let me take care of it. It's none of your business."

I felt hurt and annoyed by her tone, but also alarmed. "Okay, suit yourself." I continued stuffing the suitcase. When I turned around again, Kit was trying to lift the carton, which appeared too laden to hold together. "That's going to break," I said.

"I can manage."

"The bottom's going to fall out, for chrissake! What the hell have you got in there?"

"Please! I just want to dump this in a trash can."

Now thoroughly piqued, I grabbed the carton and wrestled it away from her. "Look, you dragged me out here, and I'm going to see what's what! If Zoltan committed some crime, I have a right to know!" I put the carton down, opened the flaps and looked. There were jars of various sizes -- mostly pickle jars. I picked one up.

Kit sighed and covered her face with her hand. "Go ahead, look. What's the difference? I only wanted to spare you some unpleasantness."

At first I wasn't sure of what I was looking at. But when I held the jar up to the light the realization hit me. "Jesus Christ!" I gasped. The jar contained excrement floating in what could have been either water or urine. I picked up another one. The excrement was very soft and loose, making a sort of brown sludge.

"You don't have to look at all of them!" said Kit angrily, taking the jar from me and replacing it in the carton. "Look, just take this out to a trash can and dump it! And don't break any, for God's sake!"

I was about to suggest something else, but I realized it wouldn't be sensible. Kit seemed to know what to do. I figured that it had happened before, but I didn't have the

nerve to ask. Anyway, not at that moment.

The carton was unwieldy. I had to hold the bottom firmly to make sure it didn't break through. As I went out the side door I saw that it had begun to rain -- one of those autumn rains that make the leaves smell sour.

I went out to the sidewalk and headed south toward St. Clair. I was grateful that there was nobody else around because I must have looked a little strange carrying this heavy carton that clinked with every step I took. If the bottom had fallen out and spilled a month's worth of Zoltan's excretions all over the sidewalk, I don't know what I would have done. The rain intensified, soaking my uncovered head and giving me a chill.

As I approached the corner I was relieved to see a blue trash receptacle. Then I saw that a lady was standing in the bus shelter a few feet away. What was I to do, start unloading the jars with her watching? I stood there for a few seconds, undecided. She was looking at me. Suppose she thought I was carrying off some stolen property? Not knowing what else to do, I crossed the street when the light changed. I looked for another receptacle, but I couldn't see one in any direction.

Standing in front of the Bank of Nova Scotia at Avenue Road and St. Clair, with a driving rain soaking me and my arms ready to fall off from lugging a cargo of pee and shit, the utter ludicrousness of the situation struck me all at once. I thought surely I was experiencing an unusually vivid daydream as I sat home in my living room, smoking my pipe, looking out the window at the rain, and listening to Varese or Bartok.

Normality is an illusion just waiting to be shattered. One moment you are sitting at home spending Sunday night as you always do. Then comes a phone call, and as a result you find yourself thrust into, shall we say, another world. Although physically in the same world as the drivers who went by me, casting brief, quizzical looks at me, in truth I was in another reality altogether. Those bland faces could never have imagined the secret drama that had taken hold of me. And I, in turn, could never have known if one among them were caught up in a circumstance as painfully absurd as my own.

A despair began to invade me. Kit must already be wondering where I was. I couldn't very well just set off down

the street not knowing how far I'd have to go. For a moment I considered just hiding the carton in some dark spot, but I knew I would feel guilty about causing a shock to whoever found it. Besides, Kit had said specifically what to do.

At that moment the lady's bus arrived. When the light changed, I headed back to that corner and the receptacle. No one else was around. The slot was too narrow for the jars to fit through, so I lifted the entire lid back. Had the inner basket already been full, I would have been in trouble. Fortunately, it was almost empty. I removed a couple of newspapers from the bottom, then carefully transferred the jars. When this was done, I covered them over with a few sheets of newspaper. When I put the lid back down, I noticed the words on the slot: "*Ricky Receptacle Says Thank You.*"

When I got back to the house, Kit was at the side entrance. "What took you so long?" she asked with alarm.

"Sorry. Somebody was standing by the waste basket and I had to wait for them to leave."

"Why?"

"Why? I didn't want to look suspicious, that's why."

"Oh, hell, you think anybody pays attention these days?"

"Well, you don't have to snap at me, for chrissake." I followed her back inside.

"There's one more carton. I'll put the rest of the things in the car."

The second carton was just as heavy as the first. As I took it out, I thought, *Oh, Zoltan, you poor, crazy bastard, why couldn't you have collected buttons or string or lint or bus transfers? Whatever possessed you, Zoltan?* I had never met the man, but my heart went out to him.

When I returned, Kit was in the doorway with the old lady. The old lady asked her, "Are you sure you have everything?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Thank you. Good night."

The old lady closed the door.

Kit and I got into the car. I started the engine. I was so cold I was shaking. All my clothing was drenched. "Put on the heater," she said.

"It's not warm enough yet."

I sat staring at the wooden fence, everything inside me coming undone. My mind was full of the beating of the rain,

the sour smell of leaves, the wetness of my clothes, the ache in my arms, the image of myself hauling about thirty jars full of a crazy man's excrement...and Kit sitting beside me. Suddenly, she reached over and held my hand and said, "Thank you," and her touch was so warm that I felt electrified, just as I did the very first time she touched me. I could only nod my head to acknowledge her thanks, for any words would have caught in my throat. I couldn't bear to cry in front of her again.

I finally turned the car around, and we drove slowly down the driveway. It seemed to me that a curtain parted in one of the front windows and the old lady was watching us. Did she know what we had taken out of her house? What did we look like from her vantage point -- this couple now leaving her driveway, the woman at least ten years older than the man? What did she think of us? We would henceforth be a mystery to each other.

I stopped at the curb to let the heater heat up, the fog on the windshield yielding grudgingly to the not-yet-warm air. The touch of Kit's hand was fading from me as I realized what must happen next. I believe we both realized. We would drive back to Kit's. I would want her to ask me inside, but she wouldn't. One of us would have to be the first to say it, but either way it could only end sadly. We would say goodbye, and surely this time it would be forever. We would be relegated once again to the limbo of each other's past tense. What an awful, miserable moment for us both -- as inevitable as death itself. Oh, Humanity! Why must we suffer?

As the sound of the rain and the wipers filled my ears, I wished that I could somehow melt away in the rain and be washed into the sewers, washed away into oblivion as simple atoms that could not feel pain! Would that there were such a Mercy looking over us! I would have paid any price to have some miracle of Fate spare me that moment that lay ahead. I would gladly have changed places with anyone else for a little while, even the lowliest being on earth. I would even have been far away, tucked safely into a hospital bed, dreaming the blissful dreams of a lunatic.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Crad Kilodney was born in New York City in 1948 and grew up on Long Island. He graduated from the University of Michigan in 1968 with a degree in astronomy but then abandoned his scientific career to become a writer. His stories and other writings have appeared in dozens of publications in the U.S., Canada, and Great Britain. He moved to Canada in 1973. In 1978 he began selling his own short story collections on the streets of Toronto. The following year he founded his own imprint, Charnel House. He also writes the advice column for *Rustler Magazine*.

Once again Toronto's most notorious street author opens his secret files for another volume of HUMAN SECRETS. The three stories in this collection represent Crad Kilodney at his satiric, serious, and surprising best.

"West Quaco," "The Dobbins File (#31001)," and "Rainy Night" are appearing in print for the first time. What they are about will not be mentioned here. It suffices to say that Kilodney's vision is that of a world gone mad, a world whose facade of normality belies an ocean of human secrets, both comic and tragic.

"Kilodney's well worth reading." -- Morris Wolfe, *Books in Canada*

"A wonderfully funny, supple writer." -- Bill Cameron, CITY-TV, Toronto

"Kilodney has acquired a widespread (and well-deserved) reputation as a first-rate underground writer." -- Lloyd Wasser, York University *Excalibur*

"Kilodney is a mad scientist/sociologist working with the world as his laboratory and using prose as his tool to fuse the sane with the insane, to obliterate that fine line." -- Ken Fernstrom, *Small Press Review*

"His stories brim with rage, hyperbole, silliness, and originality." -- Paul Hornbeck, *Quill & Quire*

"With Kilodney you are in for a head-on collision with the real world." -- Robert Hay, *Prime Times* (Albuquerque, N.M.)