

The Random Jottings of John Riggs

My bloodline is an uneasy amalgam of the Riggs and Taylor tribes, two surly and paranoid lineages which stumbled from the mists of primordial time into the present, angry and confused, convinced that the entire rest of the world was stacked up on the other side of the fence plotting their extermination. This genetic tendency toward paranoia was good preparation for show business, which I've learned, unfortunately, is a cutthroat affair.

Not bothering to trouble themselves with actual knowledge, my family tended to make up facts to suit their delusional fancies, citing the Bible or other fictional sources when challenged on their more outrageous claims. Cracking an actual book never seemed to occur to them. My mom and dad spent long hours trying to out-BS each other. Their arguments were legendary; spinning off into complicated constructions rivaling Faulkner and Joyce on a good day. My mom always emerged victorious from these battles. Dad retreated into his bottle and his television sporting events; mom sought refuge in her romantic world of imagination, where our family was the center of the universe; the focus of conspiracies and envy. In reality, of course, we were nobodies. Nobody cared what we said, did or thought.

In retrospect, I guess that illusion was always a way of life for me. Eventually I created an on-stage character that was everything my mother wanted our family to be: all-knowing, all powerful, on top of things. I didn't realize this until I was forty five years old – that my performing career was the apotheosis of my mother's vision of what we could have been if the fates were kinder to our clan. In light of the constant, lifelong struggle to make it as a performer, I've always been puzzled why I keep going. I think this is what has been burning in the secret furnace of my mind, the fuel that has driven me on since I was a small child: the determination to vindicate my mother's belief that we were something special, even if only through the make-believe magic of the theater.

As crazy and delusional as my parents were, I miss them. I think I prefer their imaginary world to the one I actually live in today. It seems that all the magic is gone, replaced by a dry technocratic cynicism. Maybe they had it right: perhaps being crazy IS the secret of happiness.

I remember the very moment I decided to become a full-time performer. I was around six years old. People used to ask me what I

wanted to be when I grew up and I responded that I wanted to be a Wizard. In East Tennessee, in the early 1960's this was tantamount to saying "Gee, I want to worship Satan and all his Imps. Thanks for asking." Since my family dabbled in fortune-telling, it was expected that I was to follow the Highway to Hell. To understand what a bold career decision this was you have to understand the religious and intellectual climate of East Tennessee in the 1960s. One anecdote will suffice:

In the fourth grade, I did a book report on *The Origin of Species*. I had recently read it, found it fascinating and wanted to share it with my classmates. I also knew a good controversy when I saw it, and I wanted to see the reaction I got when I dropped this intellectual cluster-bomb on my Southern-fried contemporaries. Bear in mind that I come from the part of the country that outlawed Evolution. Even though the ruling was overturned, it didn't matter. Along with the outcome of the Civil War, East Tennesseans never accepted evolution as a proven fact. We're still Rebels, and we stopped Evolving. Free spirits all, we yield not to the laws of government, man nor nature.

I never got to deliver my report. Unfortunately for my attempt to elevate the minds of my contemporaries, we had a Bible-Thumping substitute teacher that day who was so appalled at hearing the name "Darwin" that she dropped her coffee cup, which dashed into fragments on the tile floor.

The Substitute Teacher, Bible in one hand and my ear in the other, hoisted me to the principal's office by that convenient jug-handle (in the mid-sixties teachers could still do that) whereupon the principle, a scary, iron-tough woman named Mrs. Gray, lectured me on God and Satan, demanding to know "What kind of family do you come from that allows you to read this kind of trash?" Well, actually I got Darwin's heretical opus from the public library and my family would have no clue what it was about. And it just so happened that my family liked trash. The only books I remember seeing around the house involved racy cartoons and jokes I didn't understand until I was seventeen, in bed with my first female, when a light went on in my head and I said "Oh, NOW I get it!"

However, Mrs. Gray soon learned what kind of family I came from – the dangerous kind to mess with. My mother answered Principal Gray's stern phone call in a manner I'm sure the woman hadn't anticipated. If the principal had been hoping for a kindred spirit, a partner in her determination

to make me get with the program, her hopes were soon shattered into more fragments than Substitute Teacher's coffee cup. My mom burst into the office, eyes flashing fire, screamed over the principal's stuttering remonstrations, and threatened to run her over in the parking lot after school for daring to question the family integrity. Iron had met fire, and was rendered shapeless in the forge of my mother's fury. For two weeks, I am told, a fearful Mrs. Gray checked the parking lot for signs of my mother's Chevrolet before fleeing to the modest haven of her Ford Sedan.

My family fought like cats and dogs amongst ourselves, but if an outsider so much as glared at any one of us, we banded together, sharpened our knives with gleeful passion, and took a break from our squabbling long enough to reduce the interloper to quivering rags. It's a Southern thing. I knew many things about my family. We were not normal, not sociable, perhaps not even sane – but I knew that if I got into trouble they would watch my back.

I Hate East Tennessee

If you like country music, UT Football, hypocritical religious systems built on racism and hypocrisy, and killing things for sport, it's paradise. But if you're a professional entertainer, especially a good one, you might as well cut your own throat and get your suffering over with. Some cultures celebrate mediocrity, and think ignorance is a virtue. This is never more clear than when trying to perform magic for a Knoxvilleian. Knoxvilleians hate anyone who can do anything they can't, and the better you are the more they try to get a leg up over you. The entertainment scene in Knoxville hasn't changed since I was a kid: A drunken gigantic block party with loud rock bands playing pop music at volumes calculated to reduce your eardrums to dust. There's an excellent art museum, kept barely afloat as a tax writeoff for some businessmen, and an Opera where Rich Rednecks, who refer to the artform as "Opry," like to go to catch up on their sleep and be seen by other rich rednecks.

Since my first professional performance at age fifteen, for over thirty years I put up with the snide, ignorant, redneck mentality of Knoxville, Tennessee. You see, everyone in Knoxville and surrounding areas likes to try to convince you that they know everything, even about your field of expertise -- and in the process, try to convince YOU that you're the idiot. When I earned good grades in school, other students beat me up for being intelligent. Even my parents weren't exempt from this *Fear of Real Knowledge*; they used to make facts up rather than refer to actual sources. So I learned to be a "B" and "C" student, for my own survival. When I see successful young people who talk about their supportive families and communities, I feel like crying. Instead, I go to the zoo, shake my fist angrily at the storks and yell "You dropped me off at the wrong house, Goddamn you!"

During my performing career in Knoxville, I've had things happen to me that other magicians think I've made up for dramatic purposes. I've been threatened twice with guns, three times with knives, once with nunchucks, had food, drink and dog feces thrown on me, been told constantly that I'm a Tool of Satan, and in one notable adventure, had my expensive tuxedo jacket literally ripped in half by a drunk woman trying to see what was in my pocket.

Did I mention that I hate Knoxville?

Why Knoxville is the Armpit of the Country.

I've travelled internationally with my act, and I know I'm really good. No egotism there -- I've trained for over forty years, so I ought to be good. But whenever I returned home to Knoxville and did a gig, the same old know-nothing redneck attitude was flung at me.

After I moved here, I did one last high-school lock-in at my alma mater, and two Christmas shows in Knoxville, my final commitments. This was after an extremely successful coast-to-coast run, where I received standing ovations for audiences of up to 1200 people. My own home town? The high school kids tried to ruin EVERY routine in my act that required audience volunteers, deliberately refused to follow instructions, while the rest chattered constantly -- some on cell phones -- during my act. It was obvious that they couldn't care less that I was there. I ain't going to beg anyone to watch my act, so I cut it fifteen minutes short and left the venue. I lost no time driving back home where people have some sense. The message was clear: I no longer thought of Tennessee as my home.

As for the Christmas shows, it was worse. One audience physically manhandled me, after I was securely blindfolded and couldn't see to defend myself; the other sat with their backs to me for most of my show, making twelve trips to the buffet and cash bar to stuff as much free food and drink down their gullets as possible on the boss's ticket. I told myself that this was the last time I would ever perform in Knoxville, ever. I was just too old to deal with this mixture of arrogance and ignorance. Plus, I had had a taste of what it was like to perform for people who understood my jokes, appreciated my skills, and had read something other than the sports page in the past fifty years. I was tired of hearing people respond with a Jethro-Bodine drawl, "Speak English."

So when I moved to Indiana, I was depressed and anxious about performing here. After all, this was the dreaded "up North" that rednecks like to think they're above, in between enjoying erotic encounters with their livestock, cousins, and assorted fruits and vegetables. For several months after leaving Knoxville, I was so beaten that I considered quitting show business and going back to engineering. Fortunately, as soon as I began making appearances, I began booking a lot of dates. However, I had a panic attack before each one of them, knowing that if it were like a Knoxville experience, I would probably have some kind of brain meltdown.

So what have I found, almost a hundred shows later, and after two years? What insights have I gleaned from this experience?

I have not had a single bad reaction. Not one. The most I've had was a polite "No thank you." If you're amazed, think of me. I was expecting the typical sneering condescendence, and instead received enthusiastic interest!

So a week ago I was in Knoxville, visiting my son and brother. As a favor, I did some tricks for a person, against my better judgment. I suppose that since I hadn't heard anything stupid about my magic for two years, it took me a little aback when the person receiving this FREE show said ignorant things like "Well, I didn't really see that card before you put it down," and -- in what has to be the most bizarre thing I've ever heard, after a terrific bit of business with these CUTE little toy bunnies -- "I don't really like rabbits, you should do dogs." All the typical, I'm-in-control, ignorant-but-don't-want-anyone-to-know, BS that the average Knoxvillean uses as a defense against a NEW EXPERIENCE.

Oy, man, what can I say? If you're in Knoxville and reading this, you have my sympathies. Get out. Get out NOW, while you can. The rest of the world has culture, friendliness, minds open to new experiences that do not necessarily involve guns, running a leather ball from one end of a field to the next, and insatiable curiosity about the results of mixing a twelve-pack of beer with overpowered bass boats.

If what I've written makes you angry, all I'm doing is telling the truth based on my own experience as an educated, accomplished successful example of my profession. If it makes you angry, examine those feelings and consider that maybe, just maybe, I have a point.

I urge you, get out. Let nature reclaim Knoxville, allow it go wild. Give it back to the animals that are only seen by most native Knoxvillean children as rugs and wall decorations. It is a dismal and cursed place. It's like a dark cloud settled over the town in answer to a curse placed by the murdered Cherokees. Wipe the mud from your shoes and never, ever look back.

Just Before My Divorce

I've given up on love.

Oh, I'm sure that people are attracted to each other, and that sometimes two people can tolerate each other for periods of time, but that special kind of love, where two people breath and live for each other, where mere touch is beautiful agony, a million pinpricks of electric passion, only exists in art.

In a painting, an embrace is a forever moment. In opera, love is big and grand. It kills people with its power and beauty. In the world, in real life, it's already dead. A corpse in gaudy makeup and party clothes. Lovely deception, you bite into the meat, and it's rotten inside.

Art is a lie. In art, love burns. Passions roil like waves on the sun's surface, lovers are helpless, swept away, desperate for each other's hands, lips, breath. He sings; she counters. The music embraces them. They make love as the gods do. For them, death has no power – what is death compared to their love? There is no tomorrow, no accountability. This isn't just two people passing in the night; no fleeting lustful attraction. Here, ladies and gentlemen, we see two souls woven from the same fabric, whispering in the night like fine silk.

It's love, masterfully crafted by master artisans. But it's still a lie.

It's okay that it's a lie. I'm okay with that.

But tonight I'm weak. I am a coward. I think it would be nice if, late at night while I'm sitting at my desk working (perhaps, even, as I write this), there were a light touch at a certain spot on the back of my neck and a soft voice (her voice) asks, "Is there anything you need? Is there something I can do for you?"

My art is not great art; my lie is just a little lie, but it's mine. In my lie, I lean my head back into her warmth. Her smell. Yes, I think I love her smell more than anything else.

"Just put your hand on my forehead for a moment, it's so hot in here tonight;" and just like that, there's her hand. The room is hot, but her hand is paradoxically cool and soft, and time freezes. It's a forever moment, like that painting.

"I love you."

"I love you too."

I think this would be nice.

The lies (the art) tell of a special person with whom you share your life, your favorite music, your laughter, she is yours and you are hers. Her eyes? Oh my God, you can't get them out of your mind; magic eyes, green one moment and hazel the next. You think about them all day. Go on, give her a flower that you found growing near the sidewalk and she gives you her smile, and you consider yourself infinitely the winner in the deal.

This, for your entertainment pleasure, is love.

But I don't think love like this exists outside of art.

* * *

Looking back on it, I could have been more concise:

"Screw it, I'll never date again."

In Praise of Cats

Some people are dog people; I've always been a cat person. I've lived with dogs as pets and loved them, but for me cats seem the ideal companion. Probably because of our shared contempt for humanity's shortcomings. Some would say this makes me a snob, but I include myself in my searing indictment, so I can honestly say I'm an equal opportunity curmudgeon.

Being a curmudgeon is an art; one must carefully balance cynicism with humor lest one topple over into alcoholic despair. No one likes a hateful drunk, even other drunks, and I don't drink anyway, though I do love Popsicles. I can't see a future in myself slumped in a doorway, mumbling to myself, a disreputable heap of rags, trying to cadge pocket change from passers-by while sucking on a banana Popsicle and hurling rapier-sharp insults at them. No future in this at all.

I'm not even a good curmudgeon; my curmudgeonliness only occurs during the rare celestial combination of Retrograde Mercury and the Full Moon, a cosmic flare-up which stirs my bipolar mood shift into the necessary crucible of touchy egocentrism, gloomy negativity, and feverish Popsicle lust. The rest of the time I'm a cheerful, friend-to-all annoyingly optimistic son of a bitch with seemingly endless enthusiasm. I hate myself right now when I'm the way I used to be most of the time before I was the way I am previously. That last statement is a lexiconographic temporal monstrosity that Steven Hawking couldn't unravel, and believe me, he tried. That's what put him in his wheelchair. I warned him.

This started out as a paean to cats and their superior ways, and I'll try to bring it back on topic before I tear into a lusty box of Popsicles whose Siren song is warbling from my freezer. Some of the best people I've ever known are cats. They have been my friends and companions since my youth. I wish I could save them all from homelessness and treat them as they deserve. Several years ago, it occurred to me that animals have treated me far better than most people, and here I have been eating them. So I became a vegetarian. Cows, chickens, fish and pigs thanked me by refraining from eating me. I've found this arrangement quite satisfactory. I haven't tested my Magna Charta with crocodiles, sharks or anacondas, but the day might come. Who knows? Life is a whirlwind adventure.

Goodbye, Friend

I heard today that Luciano Pavarotti, the great tenor, has died, and I feel that I've lost a close friend. Opera is something that you either love or hate, and my love affair with the greatest of arts goes back to my childhood, believe it or not. In high school it was all Wagner and Puccini, and man, could Pavarotti do Puccini.

One of the truly special moments of my life occurred in 1984, when my then-girlfriend and her mother bought me a very cool birthday present: Pavarotti was giving a concert in Knoxville Tennessee, and these two had obtained a ticket for me. I had a fairly good seat, mid-balcony, and I can say it was truly one of the highlights of my life. The Maestro's voice, so beautiful and powerful in recordings, in real life defied description. Emerging seemingly without effort, amplification was superfluous. His music rose above mere acoustic limitations. We could hear him without the interference of microphones or circuitry. We heard him with our hearts and souls. Those of us who gathered in that auditorium that day learned to believe in magic.

Being Knoxville, the only venue large enough to contain this magnificent virtuoso was the basketball stadium, and true to form, the proprietors sold popcorn. Rather than being offended by this display of typical Knoxville-ness, The Maestro called for a bag, pronouncing, "Never have I performed for a more gracious audience, in a more beautiful venue, and with a more wonderful smell of popcorn." It was a beautiful moment. We felt that he loved us. He performed not one, but twelve encores. For the remainder of that day I was silent. I couldn't speak. I was changed forever; something inside of me, something that had, up to that day, been angry and hurt -- smiled.

More than twenty years later I recall that connection as I sit here listening to a recording of Puccini's Tosca. Pavarotti's voice, that magnificent voice, singing of love and loss; of passion, betrayal, redemption and forgiveness -- everything it means to be a human being. It's the voice of the human heart, given expression by a man whose gift comes into this world once in a lifetime.

Will our hearts ever have such a voice again?

*È luna piena
e il notturno effluvio floreal
inebria il cor!
Non sei contento?*

Rest in peace friend.

Breaking the Rules

I've never felt the THE RULES were meant for people like me. Rules were meant for people who couldn't think on their feet; who lacked a sense of freedom; who needed someone else to tell them how to do things. I've always done things the way I felt they should be done, not the way I've been TOLD to do them. I guess the reason I've always done this is because when I've done things the RIGHT way, the results are crappy. When I do things MY way (not necessarily the right way) I get rewarded. Like Pavlov's Dog, I salivate at the clanging sound of a rule being broken. In my case, crime -- or at least non-conformity -- definitely pays. Here's an example:

Bloomington Indiana is the wackiest damn town I have ever seen. The local University is the most enigmatic client I have ever had to work with. For example, I've tried unsuccessfully for three years to sell them on a Mind-reading or Hyp show. For the past three years, the psychology dept has brought me into the lecture hall to DEMONSTRATE hypnotism because the students have never seen a hypnotist at campus. When I used to do marketing at colleges, I learned that some campuses had a policy not to use hyp or mentalist acts for one reason or another. I've begun to suspect that the local campus is one of these. I think some mysterious SOMETHING must have happened in the past.

However, I do a bit of work in the dorms, doing parties and such, usually palmistry and the occasional Hyp show. The University Student Union contacted me about performing at a certain event, known as Culturefest, for several days last week. My ears perked up -- AT LAST, I thought -- recognition.

Now listen to this. Here is what they wanted me to do, out of all my stunning repertoire of college-tested programs, the committee selected (after much deliberation, I assume) the one thing they determined their incoming freshmen would enjoy most. Are you ready:

BALLOON ANIMALS.

I am not kidding. My first impulse was to hang up the phone. However, an evil light went off in my head. You see, I had worked the event before, performing magic per their request, and I had noticed that the event was unchaperoned. I took advantage last year to segue into a group

palmistry and light mentalism session. Another idea bloomed into my head, fully formed, so in my most unctuous voice I agreed to perform a program that I ASSURED them would please the students. At no time did the words Balloon, Animal, or Idiot pass my lips.

I got to the venue, checked in, then the promoters left to arrange another event. There was me, the caricaturist, and three big stages at various ends of the quad, with a horny-ass Ancient Native American MC going from stage to stage talking about the beautiful young ladies performing and wishing he were ten years younger (fifty would have been closer to the mark, and even then it would have still been lecherous). His attitude was so lascivious I thought the old perv needed to be arrested. Then he introduced a "Bluegrass" band who roared out onto the stage and proceeded to play Aerosmith, Def Leopard and Metallica, which for some reason I thought was so funny I couldn't talk. I imagined the band backstage looking at each other during the intro shrugging and saying "Bluegrass? WTF?"

This quad was huge and had a couple of thousand students milling around. I found a sheltered spot under some trees, where I wouldn't burst into flames from the incandescent Indiana heat, and blew up ONE balloon that I had previously excavated from the lowermost bowels of one of my bags. I wasn't even sure it had enough elasticity remaining in its ancient molecules to expand without rupturing, but it creaked into a warped, semi-erect position. This ritual completed, I tossed it aside, my moral duty to my employers resolved. I HAD blown up a balloon, and its shape, however grotesque, could in the most abstract sense be called "sculpture."

What did I do then? You ask.

I did hypnotism for two hours. I began by doing quick induction bits with various kids, then built a small group, did more, and did this sort of thing for about half an hour. I drew a huge crowd. I did about an hour of standard scenarios. I passed my cards out and promoted frat and dorm parties. I figured what the hell? What's the worst that would happen? Fire me and tell me I would never be hired to twist balloons again?

I drew a big crowd -- the lady who booked me said they could see my crowd from the other event! Funny how popular balloon animals were.

Was it moral? Was it ethical? I dunno. Sometimes is it necessary to save your clients from their own bad judgment? DEFINITELY.

Now if I had been busted and soundly reprimanded for this, I might ruminate on the sins of doing the bait-and-switch on my contractors. but wait (as they say on late night cable) there's more.

Yesterday I got a call from a member of IU Memorial Union, the folks who hired me for Culturefest and the following Orientation. Believe it or not, his name was Franc, pronounced FRONK. He said he caught my hypnotism act during Culturefest. I thought "Hmmm -- busted," and prepared to take my medicine.

But I was once again delighted to find that my lifelong rule of disobeying rules had paid off. He had been enchanted. He apparently strolled by after the inductions because he said it was "stunning" how all I had to do was point my finger at people and they were out like a light. So rather than calling me up to launch a well-deserved tongue-lashing in my direction, instead he wanted price lists and info about my act.

So once again, rather than being punished, rebelliousness and failure to follow the rules of society have been rewarded and further reinforced. Is it any wonder that I'm a forty-seven year old reprobate, delinquent, anarchist, libertarian and libertine? It's not my fault, lay the blame at the door of a society that rewards, no, ENCOURAGES such unspeakable behavior. As William B. Yeats observed:

*"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world ."*

It is indeed, when a person hired to do balloon doggies can hold a crowd of a couple of hundred under His Satanic Hypnotic sway and get away with it. I'm afraid it's too late for me. Save yourselves, my darlings, before it's too late.

The Abyss

An oft-repeated quote from Nietzsche is "Beware looking long into the Abyss, for the Abyss also looks into you." I think that the reason this phrase is so compelling is that the Abyss represents so many things: Mystery. Night. The unknown. The soul.

Death.

Once when I was about three or four, I stepped on a jagged piece of broken bottle. It went completely through my foot. My grandfather, a tough old mountain man, bandaged my foot while I wailed. He asked me, in a rough/gentle way, "What are you carrying on about?"

"It hurts!" I remember yelling.

"So?" He said. "Pain is a small thing. Life is a big thing. You ain't dead yet. Remember that."

Time passed. Time is an Abyss too; a bottomless one. It swallows your life. Your experiences, your youth, your hopes and dreams, your loved ones drop into it and are whisked from sight like withered leaves. Twenty-two years after my grandfather bandaged my foot (shortly thereafter he dropped into his own Abyss of cancer and painkillers), with a shattered marriage, homeless, nothing but a bottle of Mescal and four grams of coke to my name, I was camped out on the edge of the Abyss, and my campfire had long gone to ashes. My heart racing so fast that I knew that one more drink, and one more line and I would tumble over the edge and never stop falling, the memory of those words kept me from taking the dive.

My Grandfather, though born and bred a Baptist, had the insight of a Buddha when he intuited the mystery of life down to a simple paradigm. "You're going to hurt, but Life is bigger than pain."

Outside, in the wind the leafless trees dance a Pagan dance to their Goddess Moon. It is going to be a cold winter. Yesterday, a friend of mine stood on the lip of the Abyss and almost dove headlong into It. Suicide is a dark, bottomless Abyss. When you look into that particular Abyss, the face you see looking back is your own, and it takes rare courage to face the truth that you see there. He stood on the lip, but he turned and walked away. I

bow my head to his courage. Those of you who believe in such things, think well of him.

Life is an Abyss too, and not every Abyss is a dark one.

The Society of Frogs

When I first moved to Indiana, my son and his girlfriend bought me a small two-gallon tank in which I placed a Betta and two small African Dwarf Frogs, **Thing One** and **Thing Two**. Despite popular mythology, Bettas can live harmoniously with other aquatic creatures, including aquatic frogs. After about a year and a half of happy living, **Betta** contracted dropsy and despite all the antibiotics I could throw at him, floated belly up one day. Thing One, the female frog, held the body protectively for a long time. Thing One and Betta were friends who used to hang out together in the tank. After a while I couldn't stand to watch her grieve any longer. I took the body away from her and put it to rest.

Thing Two, a male, lived about three years before contracting a wasting disease -- possibly just old age -- and finally dying. During the final days of his illness, Thing One took care of him (I know it sounds like anthropomorphizing, but I know what I saw) and even brought him bubbles of air when he was too weak to rise to the surface on his own. Thing Two died while I was out of town, and my wife, ever practical, gave him a watery burial via the oubliette.

After a couple of days I went to Wal-Mart and bought the smallest, most frightened young male frog cowering in the corner of the tank. He was pitiful. I named him Endicott. Endicott flowered under a regimen of good food and a nurturing environment. His physique filled out, his confidence improved and his sexual appetite proved prodigious. I should have named him Ron Jeremy. It was a common spectacle to see Thing One, whom I renamed Ms. Thing after the death of her tankmate Thing Two, going casually about her business around the tank with Endicott, who was about half her size, clinging with vice-grip tenacity to her flanks. If frogs didn't eat their own eggs, we would be up to our eyeballs in Endicott's offspring.

One morning I came downstairs and, as these frogs usually do, they stood up on the side of the tank to look at me. These frogs are very reactive to movement and recognize their people. Ms. Thing looked at me while in the funny upright standing position they often assume, and then slowly fell backward and lay on her back. African Dwarf frogs occasionally stand up and go into trance states -- I'm not kidding; look it up -- which worries their

keepers who think they have died. When the worried keepers poke the frog, they are rewarded with an angry look as the frog jerks awake and swims away. You can almost hear the frog thinking, "Thanks, Schmuck – I was in a HAPPY place."

Ms. Thing never awoke. By late afternoon it was apparent she had passed beyond this world. Endicott nudged her and jumped around, trying to make her move. I removed her from the tank and lifted her small hand with my finger. Limp and stiff, her tiny black eyes gazed at things it wasn't my time yet to see. My wife wanted to flush her; but it didn't feel right to me. For three and a half years she had been part of my family, so I took her to the river and let the stream take her away. I don't know if it made any difference if she had been carried away by my wife's expedient method or my more traditional one. By now, she's somewhere else and could care less about the fragment she's left behind.

After a couple of days, I went off to Wal-Mart again to find Endicott a young female to keep him company. I considered getting him two young females. He's the horniest frog I've ever seen.

Society of Frogs II: Penelope

So I went to Wal-Mart and picked out what I believed to be a female frog. They're hard to tell apart, but I believed I detected the subtle differences. All the frogs at the local Super Wal-Mart were tiny things, about as big as the first joint of your thumb. Of course, being Bloomington, the young lady, most likely a student, who scooped out my selection didn't know anything about what she was doing. She scared hell out of the little thing, then finally swooped it up and put it in the bag. At this point another, slightly more experienced child appeared, and the comedy began in full Shakespearean splendor. The following scenario played out.

Wal-Martie 2: "You did it all wrong. Here, I'll show you." She took the bagged frog over to the sink, tore the bag open and transferred the contents into another bag, during which she dropped my frog into the sink. I saw them both frantically trying to catch it.

Me: "If you hurt my frog I'm going to be really upset."

Wal-Martie 2: "If it dies, you can return it and we'll replace it."

Me: "I don't think you understand. As soon as I selected her, she became mine, and I'm responsible for her. Please be careful."

The lesson continued. Martie 2 Added more water to my frog's bag, added some antibiotic and some Stress-Kote (unnecessary for a frog; they don't produce a coat of slime like fish do.) Then she capped the bag off and sealed it.

Me: "Uh, miss; those frogs are air-breathers."

Martie 2: "Yes." With complete blank-faced incomprehension.

Me: "They breathe AIR."

Martie 2: "They can live in these bags for an hour."

Me: "Not like that they can't, you filled the bag to the top. It can't surface for air. It will DROWN."

Martie 2: Puzzled frown. I took the bag, opened it and poured half the water out. Little frog, who I now thought of as Penelope, popped to the surface

and gulped air. I told Martie 1 (since Martie 2 seemed possessed of a Teflon Brain to which nothing I said adhered), "For future reference, do the frogs a favor and leave them some airspace. They don't breathe water, they breathe air. Thanks for the frog; I think she'll be very happy."

And she is. Poor little scrawny thing. I fed her a rich diet of bloodworms and she fattened up quite a bit.

It turned out she *was* a female. The name Penelope stuck. Endicott eyed her for a couple of days from his castle at the bottom of the tank, not sure if he liked her or not. Penelope is a fearless girl; she explored the tank and followed me around without a bit of shyness. Yesterday I saw her and Endicott locked in amplexus, the froggy version of page 87 from the Kama Sutra, so I guess she was a female after all. I hope like heck she is, otherwise it's a prison romance.

The Spider in My Mailbox

One summer while checking my mail, I noticed that a tiny mother spider had built a web and had laid her eggs in the top of the mail box. I wished her luck, as I receive a lot of mail and figured her nest would get disturbed by all the comings and goings. When I reached in to get my mail, she assumed a defensive position, rearing up and challenging me. I was touched; this tiny spider was defending her babies against a huge and hairy beast like me. What courage!

Over the next several days I got used to seeing the mother spider. More than that, I developed a great admiration for her. She attended her brood with great courage against a twice-a-day disturbance. I'd open the box; she'd assume her "come-and-get-it" position. I was careful when I got my mail out not to disturb her, and to tell her I wouldn't hurt her or her babies. I know that sounds strange, but I lived in the foothills and I loved all the animals and wildlife out here. Stranger still, over time she seemed to accept my presence. I don't know if she got used to my mail carrier or not.

It became a daily ritual. "Hi, Mrs. Spider. How are the babies?" And I'd get my mail.

One day I opened the box and got my mail. I began to greet the little spider but the words stopped in my mouth. She was dead, hanging from her web. The babies had hatched, and in the remorseless way of nature's design, the mother had died to provide nourishment for her children.

They had eaten, and they had gone.

I know it sounds foolish, but when I saw her tiny, desiccated body dangling from the remains of her nest, a tear ran down my face. I'm crying as I write this now. In my mind, I wished her well in whatever afterlife a little spider may go to. She had done her job diligently and with great courage, under difficult conditions. She protected her unborn children from all manner of dangers and then gave her life to provide them nourishment. Her last thoughts -- if spiders have thoughts, her last and final duty, was of their welfare. All you have to do is glance at the daily news to see that this kind of selflessness is beyond a large number of the human race.

Her courage was greater than mine would have been under similar circumstances. She deserves to be rewarded, I think, and remembered.

You might think me foolish to make so much of a little spider. I know she was just an insignificant speck of life, one of billions, hanging from a slender thread in a dark, lonely pocket of the world.

But aren't we all?

Moving

Moving is a hellish activity in which I've engaged all too frequently in my life. Although it is an adventure of discovery to go through all your belongings and come across old treasures that you've long forgotten. After all, even the most capacious of mental inventories can tot up only so many tchotchkes. The hard part is deciding which of these cherished possession to keep and which to toss into the Goodwill bin for some other sucker to take up caretaking duties for a while.

Although we're not moving for several weeks, my wife, always trying to be at least three steps ahead, has started packing. This means that for the past week, I have been living like a refugee in my own home. As a self-employed entertainer, I already live on the precarious edge of ruin, but added to this hand-to-mouth existence the contingencies imposed by a frenetically-housepacking wife -- well, it's sort of like living on a cliff that's quickly being eroded away by a tsunami. There's nothing solid to cling to.

I sat down my coffee cup to pick up a book I was reading, some research into a current project. I reached for my cup --gone! Packed in a twinkle, wrapped in newspaper and entombed like Nephertiri in a cardboard sarcophagus. When I tried to reclaim my book, it too had vanished, whisked away to endure a hideous *victus sepulcrum*. Today I've sipped my morning brew from, respectively, a pencil cup, a hubcap, my cat's water dish, the pocket of a pair of old swim trunks, and the skull of a muskrat I found out back.

As my tangible world diminishes into a bleak wasteland of towering beige cubism, I've sought solace by turning inward, toward things of the spirit. I seek the truly precious commodities of the human conglomeration, those qualities and attributes that console us and bring us respite during our darkest hours. Deprived of my toys and shiny baubles, inspiration and light is just an introspective glimmer away ... If I can find the box where she packed those too. Dammit.

The Spider

Bloomington Indiana in the summer is a hot and viscous soup seasoned with peppy college kids on bicycles and jogging nonagenarians, their brown and desiccated bodies jaunting along the downtown streets like ancient, ambulatory pemmican. The sight of all this healthy activity arouses a mixture of emotions that I've identified as lazy guilt and vague alarm over the complacency I feel toward the moldering of my own carcass as it sloughs into an amorphous sludge not unlike a congealed salad in the hot sun at a church picnic.

Middle age stalks me as a spider stalks a ladybug, and like that unsuspecting Coccinellidae, I'm distracted by something shiny while my doom creeps upon me from the sinister shadows. I guess the problem is that I feel younger every year, despite external appearances. Perhaps this is the secret of the freeze-dried running mummies of downtown Bloomington; by the time you reach the age of ninety you have so much excess energy you have to trot it off.

My days are busy and my nights piqued with insomnia as my brain spins its turbines. I'm driven by an insatiable engine I've labeled work ethic, but which I really suspect is desperation, for I'm approaching fifty and have made very little progress toward fulfilling my dreams. Friends my age who have paid their dues and deserve every success, are catching their breaks and riding their rising star. I delight in their success; they worked hard and earned it. I know I've the potential to be a good performer, possibly a very good performer, but every five years or so my life explodes into ruins and I have to rebuild from ground zero. My last personal 911 was a real whopper, combining the betrayal of friends, a divorce, relocation to a different part of the country, collapse of my business, and the psychological equivalent of a high colonic. Three years ago I rebooted my entire life at the age of 45 and rebuilt, this time, I hope for good. I have a lot of flaws, but one thing I can honestly say about myself -- I never, ever quit. I just complain a lot, and make a nuisance of myself.

Bloomington never moves, it never changes. Entertaining no conflict spiritual nor political, it basks in the benign, flower-child aura of Mellencamp. Since I've moved here three and one-half years ago, I've seen very little

construction; no major demolition; no expansion of texture or borders. People move slowly and are friendly, good-natured and kind. There is a stuck-in-the-seventies atmosphere, especially in the entertainment scene. Not stagnant, no, more like the frozen, on-the-verge vitality of a snow globe. The idea of using magic as a form of entertainment is a novelty; the idea of PAYING for entertainment more novel still. Yet, it's home. And due to my feverish work ethic -- or desperate marketing -- I do a lot of shows, mostly in Indianapolis and Louisville.

My favorite radio station has a four-block broadcasting radius, which is sufficient for this small town. Half its population is students, and when they leave in the summer the town seems deserted. I go to the parks a lot, read a lot of books, spend a lot of time with my wife and my cats. There's something comfortable in a town that refuses to move, solid in its bedrock self-image as those old television shows where you know all the actors are long dead of cirrhotic livers yet they live on, reanimated via the cathode ray to walk in cold eerie light in your living room.

Gotta run -- the spider approaches. But as I avoid my spindly-legged adversary I have to laugh, because in the end a spider is always devoured by her young. All I gotta do is stay a few steps ahead. Dreams are not a bad thing to have until it gets to a point where they begin to dream you. Bloomington, I think, is a town that dreams itself. I hope it never wakes up.

Attacked from Above

Today I decided to begin the process of becoming one of the running mummies of Bloomington, so I strapped my MP3 player to my arm (and it still amazes me that you can carry 2 Gigabytes of music on something two inches long) and wandered around in the woods near my apartments for a while. There are some nice trails winding through the woods, cool and quiet. You can see rabbits, deer, beer cans and condom wrappers. A feast for the senses.

Inspired by the celebration of nature, I decided to walk the mile or so toward the main road to a small corner store and buy a bottle of water. Nothing in my morning Horoscope warned me that I would have to fight for my life to earn this refreshing drink, though it did say travel would have complications and I should use tact in business matters.

As I walked past a clump of bushes, I felt a thump between my shoulder blades. I turned around; nothing there. I thought I'd intercepted the path of a large beetle or carpenter bee. Or maybe I'd been shot by some drive-by home boys, but since I didn't hear the characteristic BOOM BOOM GRUNT GRUNT gangsta theme music, I had apparently not.

I felt the thump again, this time near my elbow.

I turned around in time to catch a blue jay in mid-dive on a collision course for my shoulder. He hit me a good one, veered off, and disappeared into the bushes.

Oddly enough, at the moment I was listening to Meatloaf's *Life is a Lemon and I Want my Money Back*, a song about the unsatisfactoriness of life, a message that parallels the First Noble Truth of the Buddha. The cherubic but hard-ridden Meat, however, being a follower of the Christian faith, doesn't follow this revelation with the optimistic Second through Fourth Truths, which reassure us that bliss can be acquired through setting aside attachment to all the impermanent and unsatisfactory crap of corporeal existence. So the song embraces cynicism without redemption; a joke about existence with no punchline. Too bad. But back to this feathery assassin, whose motives I decided were both complex and sinister. Maybe it was protecting its nest, or maybe -- just maybe it was the avian equivalent

of those homeless schizophrenics, eyes rolling in different directions, who shake their fists at you when you walk by screaming, "Get away! When I was in Germany I'd kill a punk like you and leave you in a ditch!" I couldn't see if this bird's eyes were copacetic or all a-widdershins, so I couldn't diagnose its motives with certainty, but I knew it was peppering me with determined fury. Since anyone can tell at a glance that I'm as harmless as the babe unborn, I decided it was a psychopath, bent on my annihilation.

I had to admire the courage of something willing to all-out attack something about 100 times its size. Or maybe this was just more evidence of its madness. I reasoned thusly: If I had come across a strolling T Rex, especially one listening to Meatloaf on an MP3 player, I wouldn't greet it with a series of head-butts to the spine; I would run like hell for the horizon. This seems to me a sane and democratic course of action. At any rate, I moved from its turf and made it to the store unmaimed, bought my water, and started back on the leg home. I took the precaution to put on sunglasses, so I wouldn't wind up like that poor guy in Hitchcock's *The Birds*. After all, this crazy specimen was the Jack the Ripper of its kind, and I had to cross the warzone again before returning to my safe home. I didn't want him wearing my eyeballs like a pair of fuzzy dice around his neck bragging to his friends, "Eh, homies, check dese here out."

I was on edge. I jumped when a large butterfly flew out in front of me. I scanned the skies, I saw no sign of aerial menace. I relaxed and walked on.

Thump! A blur of feathers and a wild, gleaming eye announced the return of my assailant. Content with showing me that I was not safe, that I would never be safe, that potential evisceration would always be just a wingtip away, the bird lit atop a tree and gazed at me with one mad, dancing eye. For one moment our minds connected with the clear telepathy of hunter and prey. *You are mine*, it said. *I'll be waiting ...*

And next time, I'm bringing friends.

The Dark Side of Bloomington

In a previous entry I rhapsodized about the delights of living in Bloomington. Some of my friends remarked that it sounded too good to be true. Well, I did gloss over some of the town's darker aspects, most of which can be chalked up to a town whose population is, for the most part, mostly students. Let me say this -- if you're looking for a nice place to rest, a peaceful parklike town, this is the spot. But if you're in a hurry to find the fast track, you'll chew your own arm off in frustration. Nothing happens in a hurry here.

Bloomington has a population of around 20,000 permanent residents, and I believe half of them are retired or otherwise citizens of leisure. When the students are here, the population more than doubles. The entire economic structure is therefore geared toward the transient student population, and if you're a permanent resident, well, too bad for you. What this means, for example, if you're standing in line at one of Bloomington's TWO (I'm not kidding) post offices, a line, mind you, that often stretches from the lobby, through the doors to the pavement, sweeps by the rolling refreshment stand on 4th Street and disappears toward the bountiful horizon, you know to bring a book or an MP3 player with something delightfully amusing, because you will be there for nearly an hour waiting for one of the three postal workers to assist you. This scenario is repeated in virtually every service industry. Why? Because students work cheap, and there's no reason to change as long as the system creaks along and everyone makes money.

The local businesses benefit from the revolving student population by forever ladling willing volunteers from the cheap labor pool. However, the poor consumer -- me -- suffers from the usually poorly-trained, frequently hung-over, and often confused clerks who try to wing their way through the procedure of checking me through the line. Today I was charged \$165.32 for a ream of paper at Office Depot. The doe-eyed young woman blinked at me and asked "Does that sound right?" Well, yes, if the direst predictions of Nostradamus have come true, society lies in ruins and common paper has suddenly become as rare as hen incisors, I suppose it would sound about right. Something similar happened at Michael's Arts and Crafts when I asked for a cutting board and was told by two different clerks (students, of course)

that they didn't have such an arcane object. As I walked out, I passed a display of Martha Stewart cutting boards in the sewing section, of all sizes, shapes, and colors. For crying out loud, if it hadn't been for that happy coincidence, Martha would have lost a \$19.99 sale, the bottom would have fallen out of her financial empire and she would be in the same state of ruin that I am -- but more on that later.

It's also very difficult to obtain anything that isn't student-oriented (or NASCAR oriented, but don't get me started -- the other local magician looks like he was pulled from the front row of the Dale Earnhardt Fan Club). When I wanted to upgrade my computer for video editing, I couldn't make anyone understand that I wasn't a student doing student things. Everyone in town kept trying to sell me components for Gaming. When I finally got the phrase VIDEO EDITING to sink in, they looked at me with that flat, blank Midwestern stare I've come to recognize as that-does-not-compute dismissal and said "Wal, you can't do that with this stuff." No kidding. Now, everyone is quick to offer to order what you need online -- at a slight markup. Well, that's what I've been doing since I've got here -- ordering online, that is, but without the markup. The UPS man and I are on a first name basis. We show each other pictures of our families.

Another small anecdote: The other day my printer made a noise like a squealing pig and died. I called three places to get it fixed; two said they would come right over. Days passed; neither showed up. After I called them both several times and received repeated reassurances that they were on their way -- and I never saw them -- I called a fourth place. She said I could bring my printer right over.

Thinking I was finally getting somewhere, I drove my printer over and tugged on the doorknob. Hey, guess what? Her office was closed. I called the proprietress and engaged in a conversation that went something like this:

Me: "I came by your office and you weren't there."

Her: "Yes, I'm usually out on calls, if you saw my office you would understand. It's really small."

Me: "Well I would like to see your office so I could get my printer fixed. When you will be in?"

Her: "I can't say, I'm in and out. My office isn't very big; if you saw it you would see what I mean. I'm usually out on calls. But if you want to keep coming by you might catch me in."

So basically she wanted me to keep driving around the block all day clinging to the web of hope that I might catch a fleeting glimpse of her. I wish I could tell you this is an isolated example, but it isn't. It's the way many people seem to do business in Bloomington. If I ran my business this way it would be like this: When you book my show, I might show up if I happen to be in the neighborhood on the night of the show, unless someone else books a show the same week, in which case I might show up to do the show some other time or place than we agreed upon – if I happen to be in town. Is that okay with you?

But all of this is minor annoyance compared to what I am about to unleash upon your unbelieving brain. Now I will tell you how Bloomington's policy of designing itself to accommodate a transient population of students has ruined me.

As I reported, I've moved to a new apartment in the same management umbrella as my old place. I asked if I could keep my old telephone number. This is important, as I'm a professional entertainer, and have thousands of pieces of advertising circulating plus -- and this is the key point -- Yellow Pages advertising. I learned that I could not keep my old number, as each apartment complex has a "Bank" of numbers that cannot be transferred. Okay, inconvenient, but not insurmountable. In the past when I dealt with this, I put a call forwarding on my old number to automatically transfer to my new number. It costs fifty cents a call, but until the new directory comes out, it can save your business. Nope, can't do that either. Furthermore, and this is the part that will melt your brain and which led to my complete and utter ruination, unlike civilized countries, where someone calls your old number and hears a recording telling them your new number, in Bloomington they do not get even that common courtesy! What? I hear you asking. How can that be? Here's the deal:

Old numbers are "recycled" which means they go back into the bank of numbers until they are randomly reassigned to someone. So some poor schmuck (probably a student) will be heir to the rather unusual calls a Psychic Entertainer is prone to receive at all hours of the day and night. Drunken carloads of people who MUST have their palms read at 3 AM,

whispery voices wanting to be hypnotized so they can speak to their dead cat; can you come out tomorrow to do a show for three thousand people for fifty bucks? Can we get a seventy-year-old stripper for my husband's retirement party? Oh dear God, if there is any justice in the universe, please let that young lady who tried to charge me \$165.32 for a ream of recycled paper inherit my old number from Bloomington's infernal "Bank!"

Hilarity aside, the bottom line is that I'm ruined. No Halloween business. No Holiday business. People who try to find me from now until the new directories come out at the end of the year will dial my old number and get a dead line. Thanks guys for making a newcomer welcome to your lovely town by making it impossible to do business.

Bloomington has been my home for almost three years. I've found peace here; the love of my life, a terrific family. But trying to make a living as an entertainer here is slow death because of stuff like this. The bottom line is that when our lease runs out, we're moving to the Johnson City Tennessee or Ashville, NC area. There is an old saying, trite but true: "It's better to don slippers than to try to recarpet the world." I've just about worn all the tread from my rear end and need to quit spinning my tires.

Thanks for listening.

Buddhist Nursery Rhymes

"Don't get mad," the Buddha said
 "It sets a fire inside your head."
 "I hate this! I'm mad at that!"
 "I'll whip the dog and kick the cat!"
 Like taking poison, hoping someone else will die,
 Anger makes us weep and cry.
 It's never good, always ill,
 And through kamma we pay the bill.
 That dog, that cat, the hated OTHER
 Was, in bygone times, your mother.
 Above all else, be kind
 Let love, not anger, rule the mind.

Jack and Jill
 Went up the Hill
 To listen to some Dhamma.
 Jack came back
 As a boy named Zach
 And Jill came back as his mama.

There was an old man
 Who lived in a shoe
 He studied Lord Buddha
 Confucius and Lao Tsu.
 He saw it was fruitless
 To chase after riches
 He learned how to live
 Life free from most glitches.
 Most people said "He's just an old fool,"
 But personally, I thought he was cool.
 That man was me, in a former existence
 So now today, I meditate with persistence.

It's raining, it's pouring --
 Isn't Samsara boring?
 Impermanent, inconstant and stressful
 Seldom blissful, at peace or restful.
 So spend much time on the mat, dear friend
 And you'll reach Nibbanna in the end.
 May we find, as others found
 The perfect Mind like fire unbound.

The Fresh Nest

We're in the new digs, courtesy of some very efficient movers (two offshoots of Indiana's informal version of the Human Genome Project) who kept me entertained with a charming rumination over the various fleshpots in which they intended to squander their wages when they finished relocating our stuff. These two backwoods *Beau Vivants* compared the piquant allure and subtle delicacies of every honky-tonk and strip joint in Monroe County. I found it both edifying and enlightening. If I ever need to know where to find a friendly place to sink into warm inebriation while gazing upon the undulating flesh of pubescent trailer-park temptresses sporting prison tats, I now have the inside dope. Anyway, I had made a vow not to do any lifting at all, but to sit and sip tea, with pinkie at full extension, while hired beasts of burden grunted and perspired up and down the STEEP STAIRS leading to and from my second story apartment. You see, I decided to work smarter, not harder.

However, the day before the movers arrived, my Father-in-law, whom I love dearly, arrived with positive attitude beaming and Midwestern work ethic stoutly percolating, and we moved about a third of our boxed items to the new *Chateau De'ef*. By the end of the day, I was an aching lump of flesh and my wife had completely installed both bathrooms and much of the kitchen. Women, like cats, have their own priorities.

The next day, the two Herculean hayseeds, who I now noticed between them had three and a half different eye colors, moved the remainder of our worldly items in just under four hours, but due to the strange temporal twilight zone in which South Central Indiana exists (remember, for several decades we defied the Laws of Time and Space by refusing to recognize Daylight Savings Time) our Heroes had calculated four hours and forty-five minutes. Understandable; the time differential from Indiana's Sixth Dimension into normal time is a difficult calculation to do on nine fingers (the leader of the team was missing his distal digit, I noticed). Base-ten mathematics is hard enough. Base-nine must require the reasoning acumen of Pythagoras. After we straightened out that small item, I tipped him twenty dollars --in singles -- so he could delight the rippling strippers at Hoosier Daddy's by festooning their G-strings with greenbacks. As I watched the two merry libertines roar away into the rain, into who knew what

licentious debauchery, I considered the fresh perspective a new home provides. New space, a clean environment. Room to spread out. More places for my junk. If I can find it.

Wal-Mart -- The Nightmare Continues:

So as I reassemble my life, it's inevitable that I've had to make several trips to Wal-Mart for necessities, and it's my misfortune that these events with which I regale you transpired on Saturday night, aka Family Night at Wal-Mart. As I attempted to gather a few simple items to embetter my existence, my every move was blocked by the kinfolk of my friends the Philosophizing movers; huge tribes of related villagers, from doddering septuagenarians to babes-in-arms, who had come to the BIG STORE to wander the aisles in troves for the SOLE PURPOSE of PISSING ME OFF.

Okay, I've had it. For all of you refuges from a Fellini film, who think Wal-Mart is your own private Disneyland, here it is. I'm getting it off my chest. Prepare to be peppered with the fusillade of my unfettered wrath.

Do ALL of you need to come to buy a set of wrenches? Do you know that if you stand six abreast in a two-foot aisle, no one else can get through? By the way, the term "Pardon me," is a polite way of saying MOVE, you inbred IDIOT." I am a two-hundred pound man in a bright red shirt, grandma -- don't try to tell me you didn't see me when you ran your cart into my spine as hard as you could, you malicious old clam.

Why bring the kids to the store just to yell at them? You know they're going to ask for toys and candy. They're kids, aren't they? If you yell at them, they will cry, and if you yell at them to shut up, they will cry louder. This is why I'm looking at you like you're three hairs away from a baboon. Why can't one of you stay at home with them where they're happy? I sure would be happy If you all stayed at home. I'm tired, dammit. My feet hurt. I want to buy toilet paper and go home, and your whole damn family since Columbus is standing in the aisle gawking at a lava lamp like it's the Second Coming.

I think that I may start giving you people my free advice. You could obviously benefit from my wisdom and sage observations. I'm sure you'll be grateful to me for telling you how to raise your kids. Furthermore, my insights on family dynamics and reasonable shopping etiquette will also delight you. My pointers on personal hygiene, which is the only aisle which

you do not clog, will also come as a refreshing addition to your personal arsenal of information. Are you armed sir? Oh good. I'm positive you'll appreciate my thoughts on that TOO.

Whew, I feel better now. Perhaps I should shop more at K-Mart. Wal-Mart is an evil empire that exploits its workers and patronizes the even eviler (is that a word?) empire of China, and as a Buddhist I really should boycott it, but like most human beings my higher functions tend to slip at 3 AM when I need computer components or personal hygiene products or headache remedies or an inspirational spiritual lift or political insight from the graffiti in the men's room.

Plus, there's an unholy fascination in trying to guess the gender of the head cashier of the local Wal-Mart, and I ain't kiddin.' Are those hairy, tattooed arms male, or that heavily-cosmeticized face female? The amorphously-flabby body could be either. Back in my drinking days I would just sleep with the endrochinological nightmare and eliminate all guesswork. At 2-3 AM, the wandering dead do resemble a Fellini movie without the shrouded reapers and the juggling clowns (except for Holidays), and where else can you experience this vicarious thrill?

It's true - Wal-Mart has it all.

Jesus Loves Me

Several years ago I had a regular gig performing palm readings for an annual event called **Destination Imagination**, a science-fair like competition for grades 6-10 which attracts schools from across the nation. This is a four-day outdoor event, very pleasant, and I always worked all four days. The year the following episode occurred was my third year at this event. One hour into the first day, a woman stopped, appalled, and blocked my line of kids and parents. She screamed, "Keep away from him! He's evil!" I asked her "What exactly are you doing?" She said she was protecting the children from me.

I said "Let me guess. You object to me being here." Well, of course. Before she could enter her tirade (she took a deeeeeeeep breath) I explained that I was an entertainer hired by the university and if she had an objection, she needed to take it up with them. But in the meantime, I was doing nothing more than what I was hired to do, so would she please move aside and let me do my job. She informed me that she WAS NOT going anywhere. She was going to protect the children. She told all the kids to keep away, "This man is evil! Run!" The kids were scared to death at this point. I could tell that short of me physically throwing her over my shoulder and walking her away, she wasn't going to budge.

So I budged. I walked away, fetched the organizer of the event and brought her over. I politely introduced her to the woman and explained the situation. By now, sensing a drama about to unfold, a crowd of parents, teachers and kids had gathered. The organizer, a large, forceful party, gripped the religious woman by the arm and walked her away. The woman's loud protests about having an Imp of Satan turned loose on innocent children receded into the distance, and I resumed my job.

Everyone came back, but I noticed that from that point, parents listened very carefully to what I told their kids. That's okay, I have some good approaches for doing readings for children that parents really like.

This incident led to some fringe benefits that I hadn't anticipated. I had feared that the organizers would consider me too controversial and let me go, even though I had done this event for several years without incident. However, by the next day word had spread throughout the convention of the

attempt by the religious fanatic to suppress the nice, soft-spoken palm reader. It created quite a buzz.

I had become legend. People swarmed my table, including teachers and staff. The story had grown to the point where I had been picketed by religious zealots, who had tried to interfere with people's freedom of speech and God-given right to have their palms read. They were BY GOD going to come to me, and woe unto anyone who tried to deny them. Even the organizers had to get in on it. People even apologized to me for my "persecution," explaining that not all Christians were that close-minded.

I learned something about human nature. I knew it intellectually, but had never seen it demonstrated so dramatically: the evocative allure of something with a hint of the forbidden.

Did this turn me off against Christians? No. Sometimes it's easy to generalize about people and forget that the label isn't the person. It would be very easy to distill an extremely negative generalization based on the (admittedly numerous) unpleasant experiences we psychic entertainers seem to attract. I know in my more angry moments I'm as bad about this as anyone. But I also know that it's wiser to throw out the labels and take a closer look at the contents. I've been thinking a lot about this lately. Underneath the mask we show the world, no matter how tough and aggressive, is someone who is in pain on some level. How we deal with that pain is part of how we define ourselves. How sensitive we are to the pain of others is the rest of that definition.

Roadside Attractions

People who know me for even the briefest time come to the realization that I'm not quite sane. I can see this dawning comprehension in their eyes after a period of unconstrained conversation with me, especially if I've had several cups of coffee and my stream of consciousnesses kicks in. I can almost read their thoughts: This guy is not wired like the rest of us. I can tell they find this revelation delightful, fascinating, scary, provocative. I'm not dangerous; no Hannibal Lecter I, but the things of this mortal coil that attract my attention are not the stuff you find in most people's toolbox. I came to terms with this years ago and am okay with it, and my cats don't mind as long as I feed them on time.

I become obsessed with curiosities that most people never think of. Normal people focus on normal things: sports, hobbies, celebrities, guns. I have a friend, for example, who dreams of Pamela Andersen's Brobdingnagian bosom, picturing her pulchritude from every possible angle and in every imaginable scenario. For me, nothing so curvaceously commonplace holds my attention for long. For me, nothing holds more fascination than the urban phenomenon of the pee bottle. These are soda bottles -- and sometimes gallon milk jugs -- that you frequently find discarded alongside the road, filled with pee. When I first broke my wall of silence about my fixation and began talking about it to other people, I was amazed to discover that most people have never noticed these! I think they filter them from their conscious awareness. As H.P. Lovecraft pointed out, it's a blessing that man cannot comprehend the dark forces that exist around him, for to do so would be to go mad. I, however, welcome madness as an old friend, and go where others fear. I relish the sight of the pee bottle, and fully appreciate the perverse circumstances that spawn them into being.

You see, sometimes on long road trips (or even short ones, if you experience frequent and persistent urges) you simply have no time to find a haven of sweet refreshment, so you reach onto your conveniently cluttered floorboard -- and God help the compulsively neat who find themselves in this predicament -- clutch the nearest empty soda bottle, pull over to roadside, and relief is just a few well-aimed seconds away. Now, I hear legends of experienced pee-bottle senseis who can make them on the fly, so to speak, one hand on the wheel, one hand performing the necessary manipulations.

In my mind's eye I see these Masters of micturition driving the highways of America, their faces a mask of casualness as, out of the line of sight of unsuspecting fellow motorists, they fill bottle after bottle with amber fluid and, deftly recapping them, deposit them along the gutters of the world like a lion marking its territory. I imagine they sneer contemptuously at their two-handed inferiors. Why shouldn't they? They are Gods among men.

Pee bottles made it into Urban Legend in the 1976 movie Carwash when Professor Irwin Corey portrayed the Pee-Bottle Bomber. Perhaps this was what planted the seed in my sixteen year old brain that was to blossom into full-blown obsession into my adulthood. Blame the media; I was probably a sweet, innocent child before the advent of television destroyed my mind.

I spend a lot of time on the road, traveling from gig to gig, and several years ago I began counting pee bottles to pass the time. I soon developed a deadly eye for spotting them. I classified them according to color, size and density. You had confirmed pee bottle sightings and suspected pee-bottle sightings, which were in green or otherwise tinted containers such as Mountain Dew or Beer bottles. To determine if these were actual pee bottles or decoys planted by my enemies would require a more in-depth investigation involving senses other than mere sight, and I'm pleased to report that my obsession never ran to the extreme of introducing my other sensory apparatus into that dark world of unsavoury addiction. I settled for marking them in my journal as "suspect" and moved on.

The area between Knoxville and Asheville, NC was an especially rich area for PB sightings. You often found as many as 30-40 of them, many of them one-gallon milk jugs. I deduced these were deposited by truckers. See, you can learn a lot about people from pee bottles: their road habits, their dietary preferences, how well they're hydrated, how far they've traveled, if they need more fiber in their diet, age, gender, ethnic origin, how many sexual partners -- but I've said too much already. I have to keep some of my methods secret.

My obsession finally culminated in something productive. I wrote a bizarre little short story called Adoration, about a wandering homeless man who collected pee bottles and roadkill. What he did with them became the climax of the story. it's the best thing I ever wrote, in my opinion. I may

post it here if there's any interest. Finally, the government took notice of the pee bottle problem. Here is Big Brother's response:

**Okay, one last time:
This is not a urinal.**



Get caught tossing a bottle of urine and you'll pay \$95.
Fines for littering range from \$95 to \$1,000. Remember, Washington
State Patrol has eyes out for violators. (Not to mention their noses).

**Litter and
it will hurt.** **REPORT VIOLATORS
866-LITTER-1**

So beware. Pee bottles contain your DNA, and do we really want to leave our DNA scattered around the world for anybody to gather up? Do we?

DO WE?

Adoration by Jon Saint-Germain

We buried Ol' Pete today at noon. It was a nice funeral, well attended. The Baptist choir sang and the high school band played 70's top ten hits. The mayor even said a few words. We're really going to miss Ol' Pete around here. He was one of Adoration's true characters.

As Sheriff and Justice of the Peace I officiated at the service. There wasn't much to tell that nobody didn't already know. Pete used to be a research chemist in one of those labs over the hill in Oak Ridge. Never talked much about what he did there. I guess it was classified. At any rate, the work seemed to get to him eventually, because they retired him out early on a disability pension. It was an open secret in Adoration that the disability was of the mental kind. Between his pension and some family money he made out all right, though. He bought the old Sheldon place, the fourteen-acre farm out along the river that looks out toward the old Saint Lucius Mental Asylum, and spent the rest of his life there until he died at the age of seventy-five.

For twenty-five years, Ol' Pete spent his days walking up and down the highways of Adoration collecting roadkill (it hurt his heart to see all those little creatures laying there, he said). He gathered them up in a cart that he pushed around all day long, up and down, back and forth. He was a punctual character, Ol' Pete was. He never missed a day. He became somewhat of an institution, I guess. At the end of the day he took all the dead animals home with him. Nobody knew what he did with them, and nobody cared enough to find out.

As he walked his beat, Ol' Pete also collected what he called "pee-bottles." These were bottles of urine left on the side of the road by drivers who were too busy to stop and let loose in a service station restroom. Just pull over, let go in an empty soda bottle, put the cap on and leave it by the roadside. Hell, I've done it myself, now and then. You probably have too. Ol' Pete took those home with him also. I never asked what he did with them. Curiosity only goes so far.

Pete told me one day, kinda private-like, that he couldn't believe people left their body fluids out in the open like that for just anybody to stumble upon. When I asked him who'd want a buncha bottles of piss, he just placed his finger alongside his nose and winked. "The government," he whispered. Pete was a little odd. Most people knew that he wore a layer of aluminum foil under his baseball cap to prevent "the government" from reading his mind with their thought-beams. Yes, Pete was odd, but nobody minded. He was always polite and gentle, never hurt a fly, and he did a great public service by cleaning up the roads of Adoration.

He did us another public service, too, one we didn't find out about until after he died. The day after Ol' Pete passed away, me and my deputy went out to his place to look around. He didn't have any family, so we were making a list of his assets for the county office. I was perusing Pete's bookshelf – you can tell a lot about a person by what they read – when my deputy, Willis, called me out back. "Come out here Merle," he says, "Come look at this."

I followed Willis to the backyard, and I could see why he was so astonished. Rows and rows of tiny graves almost completely filled the yard. And this was a fourteen-acre lot, remember. The little graves were laid out in rows, like farm crops. There were thousands of them. We'd found the final resting-place of Pete's roadkill animals. "My God," Willis said.

I could only nod my head. Squirrels were in one section, skunks in another; cats and dogs and other pets over there. There were even a couple of horses and a few cows. Every creature lay with its own kind. Now we knew what Pete did with the animals he scraped up off the highway. All the little animals that died on the roads of Adoration had received a Christian burial, courtesy of Ol' Pete. Each grave was marked with a little silver cross stuck in the ground. I couldn't imagine the amount of work it must of took to bury all those creatures. I wondered if Ol' Pete ever slept.

The animal graveyard was amazing, but it was in the cellar that we found Ol' Pete's treasure trove, filling dozens of heavy wooden shelves. Willis put a hand over his mouth. "Are those what I think they are," he asked me. He looked like he was close to tossing up his lunch.

"Yep," I said. The floor-to-ceiling bookshelves were stocked with old coke bottles, juice bottles and more than a few gallon-jugs full of yellowish brown fluid: bottles of urine. Pee-bottles, Pete use to call them.

The pee-bottles were organized according to color and texture, and some of them had notes and even names – as though Pete had some secret classification system that allowed him to identify a person by their water-waste. Which, come to think of it, he may have. After all, he'd been a chemist in that spook-lab in Oak Ridge before they put him out to pasture. Who knows what he'd learned to do there?

The pee-bottles continued in the next room, and we followed the shelves down to the end of the basement. And there we found something we never told anyone about. There were more pee-bottles all right, thousands of them safely stored away from Russian spies or space aliens (or "the government"), and we also found Mitch Foreman, who used to get drunk and beat on his wife and children, standing at attention against the cellar wall, naked, eviscerated and mummified like an Egyptian. Mitch had disappeared one night after practically killing his youngest daughter with a beer bottle, and we just assumed he'd headed over the hills and good riddance. Next to him was Kitty Pace, who poisoned her own two kids and vanished without a trace, and Willy Jonas the child molester, and about two dozen others of the worst samples of humanity Adoration had to offer.

All were reported missing. Kitty Pace, the child-killer, we had down as a suicide. Each had been autopsied and cleaned out just as pretty as you please – a much better job than our own coroner could have done – and neatly sewn back together. Mitch Foreman had a carefully-stitched incision from ear to ear. I reckon it was Pete who cut his throat. No mean feat, as Mitch was a big bully; he must've weighed over three hundred pounds with his guts intact. I guess all that midnight digging could make a man powerful strong.

It seemed that Ol' Pete had been cleaning up the streets of Adoration in more ways than one.

"How long, Merle?" Willis whispered. "How far back do they go?"

I shook my head. Some of those mummies looked old, like varnished antique furniture. "Twenty-five years or more," I said.

"What do we do now?" Willis asked me.

I thought about it. Here in Pete's cellar were the mortal remains of child molesters, rapists, murderers. Dozens of unsolved crimes, the perpetrators never found. I thought about Ol' Pete, a man so tender-hearted he couldn't stand to see a wild animal lying unmourned in the street, stalking around at night, hunting down the scum of Adoration, killing them, and bringing them to his cellar to preserve them like museum exhibits.

I turned to Willis. "If anyone finds out about this, they'll think Pete was crazy."

Willis laughed sickly. "Hell Merle – he was crazy."

I took him by the arm. "Yeah, but he was good crazy. We can't let anyone else see this."

"So what do we do?" Willis repeated.

There was only one thing for it. It wasn't legal – but it was right. "Grab a shovel."

It took a long time, but we buried them all.

For more than twenty-five years, Adoration had its own guardian angel, a little man who used to work for "the government," who could be seen every day pushing his cart up and down the streets, muttering and laughing to himself, seeing to it that our children, dead animals and even our pee were safe from whatever threatened them. An angel who was a strange mixture of Saint Francis and Ted Kaczynski.

But now he's gone.

As I drove home from the funeral down Highway 411, I noticed three roadkill possums. Two raccoons. Three dogs. Six pee-bottles.

I sighed. We're really going to miss Ol' Pete around here.

A Routine Procedure My Ass

A few days ago I went in for what I was assured was a "routine" procedure; one which I've been assured by many friends who have had it is "no big deal." This procedure is called a bilateral vasectomy. If you are male, whenever you hear these words, be afraid -- VERY afraid. After this procedure, which was the physical equivalent of having my male fragments stretched and torqued on a medieval rack, I swore to look up everyone who said it was no big deal and kick them in the groin. Vengeance, to usurp the Deity's prerogative, will be mine.

Unfortunately there were anatomical COMPLICATIONS, which occur when your parents are more nearly related than Donny and Marie Osmond and your gene pool looks like the latest model of Chaos theory. Because of these sub-or-semi-human anomalies, which haven't been seen in the human race since Cro-Magnon wiped out the Neanderthals, I had what the doc said was an undescended testicle. This meant that when he had to go for the little tube that leads to the old fellow, he had to DIG for it and YANK it into the light for the old snip-snip. This felt like having your testicle caught in an oarlock while sliding off a boat, inebriated, on your way into the water.

Swelling? You bet. Bruising? Oh yes ma'am, and pass the taters. Bleeding? Bless you, both blood and a weird discharge resembling what you would get by putting a garden slug in a food processor with a clove of garlic. Sympathy from my wife? Fuggeddaboutit, she's a surgical nurse, she sees people with their entire inner workings hanging out before her morning coffee. Compared to this parade of human tragedy, what's the big deal about a little thing the size of a walnut -- excuse me, the size of an ORANGE. Pain killers? Haw haw, it is to larf. Might as well be Reeces Pieces. Add to this insanity the fact that I tried to get in my usual workout at the gym a couple of day later and apparent tore something ELSE loose and my misery ascended into what Rod Serling would have described as "a sixth dimension hitherto unknown by man." Pictures of this event are probably circulating the Internet with a caption: *"Health Club membership: \$300. Vasectomy: \$800. Pain-free existence: PRICELESS."*

I had to go to the emergency room for professional help, though the kind of professional help I really need is not available anywhere other than Arkham Asylum. No permanent damage, but a new painkiller and even

MORE inactivity. Expect new heights of wackiness as boredom and painkiller, easily one of nature's most volatile mixtures, takes its toll.

So brothers, if your lady friend mentions the 'V' world, go softly into that good night. Step away and find out where the wild goose goes. Become a wandering vagrant on the skin of the earth. But never, never be fooled by two words, two tiny, hideously deceptive tidbits doctors flippantly toss out:

SLIGHT DISCOMFORT.

The Great Debunkerman

I've hung around with psychics all my life. The real deal, not the gypsies and frauds. When I tooled around with psychic fairs, they were all puzzled by The Amazing Debunkerman (name changed to protect me from lawsuits) and his bogus Million dollar challenge. They said that he doesn't even test psychics for what they really DO, a statement I found both funny and well -- true.

Now in 1980ish I had a friend in East Tennessee who was on the Sally J Raphael show doing psychometric readings, and doing them very well. Psychometry, if you don't know, consists of touching an object and obtaining impressions from the energy the object absorbs from its owner. I'm not half bad at it myself but my friend -- who we will call Patsy -- was extraordinary. A, ahem, FAMOUS self-described skeptic came out to debunk her: the Amazing Debunkerman. He had made a list of her readings, and said they were universal generalities that applied to almost everyone. Audience made sounds of both interest and skepticism. Debunkerman read the items on the list one by one and asked, by applause, if the statements applied to them. A patter here and there, it was obvious these readings were too specific to fit very many people. He became angrier and angrier as it became obvious the audience wasn't buying it. He told the audience, in effect, that they were protecting this fraud and should be ashamed of themselves. The audience began to boo him; Sally J was getting peed off herself. Sneering, he pulled out his big gun. He flung down his challenge, which at that time was not a million, but was sizable. After the commercial, not only was Debunkerman gone, but magically, so was his chair.

My friend decided to try for it. It seemed easy money.

She entered a nightmare straight out of the Inquisition. Debunkerman and his committee subjected her to psychological harassment and intimidation. They told her they knew she was a fraud, they knew exactly how her tricks worked, and that they were going to ruin her. They would destroy her reputation, make her family a laughing stock, and her children would suffer the shame for the rest of their lives. They told her -- and I think this is an important detail -- that since they were on to her anyway, she might as well spare herself the humiliation, confess and admit how she does

it. In other words, let them in on the "trick." If you've ever read the *Malleus Malificarum* (the "Witches Hammer") you probably recognize this psychological tactic.

The agreement that they wanted her to sign -- which her lawyer, after reading it, forbade her to do -- basically said that if she passed the first round of tests, they could keep testing her again and again until they were satisfied. In other words, forever. After ten days of trying to make sense of this hostile madness, she and her husband came home. Debunkerman & company claimed a victory.

Patsy was physically ill and collapsed for several days. She cried a lot and I remember her asking me why someone would want to be this way? I think this was the beginning of my disillusionment with Debunkerman; up to that time I had no real opinion of him one way or the other. This was a sweet woman with no harm in her, torn apart by monsters who wanted nothing more than to further their own agenda.

Sheesh, does this bring back bad memories.

I don't usually talk about this side of my life with people because frankly I don't want to listen to the usual crap from the closed-minded, but now that I've started there's more to this story.

Patsy was fairly well known in East TN and worked with the police a bit. In 1978 she helped find a little girl who was lost by providing the police with several leads which they hadn't considered. The sheriff admitted in a television interview that if it hadn't been for Patsy, the girl would have died. This was the account I fictionalized in *The Wizard's Legacy* when Doc came out of the woods carrying the little girl on his shoulders, singing Over the Rainbow. It was actually a sheriff's deputy who had gone into a rock overhang that Patsy described, one barely big enough for an adult to squeeze under, and pulled the girl out by her foot. The television crew was lucky enough to get a great shot of the young deputy, barely out of his teens, coming out of the woods carrying the little girl, tears running down his filthy face. He was singing to her, but she wasn't on his shoulders because she was unconscious from exposure and hunger. She had been missing for three days.

The sheriff said in the interview that the girl was about six hours away from death by exposure. If it hadn't been for Patsy, she would be dead, her

bones never found, her parents forever asking what happened to their little girl. This was the woman that Debunkerman and his crew wanted to harass and ruin over an *ideology*. Think about this.

I gave this anecdote to my friend Marcello Truzzi when he was working on a follow-up to his book, ***THE BLUE SENSE***, a terrific book that pretty much debunks the rhetoric that psychics never help police solve crimes. He found one of the deputies, the sheriff had died, the one who had actually pulled the girl out of the rock moved away, and Patsy had moved somewhere and we couldn't find her. He couldn't get enough of the anecdote to verify the whole story, and he was a bear for full verification.

As it turned out, I met up with her a few years ago and she had been in Japan for several years. I also saw a dramatization of a case on which she worked on a series on Crime TV a couple of years ago. She described a pickup truck abandoned by a guy who kidnapped and murdered a woman. One of the identifying details she described was that the interior of the truck was filthy and littered with cigar butts.

Debunkerman wanted to ruin her and harass her kids. Let that sink in, along with the image of a five year old girl, wedged in a rock with a broken arm, crying for her mother.

You Think Your Job is Dangerous?

When I was nineteen in 1979, I landed a gig twisting balloon animals at the state fair in Tennessee. I thought it was a pretty good gig; I was a recent father and could use the money. The hours were grueling; twelve hours a day in the September sun. People waited in line forever to get their kids one of these balloon creatures. The state fair draws out the lowest forms of human pestilence from the hills and caves of East Tennessee too, and I saw the cream of this crop shambling toward me in my line. The heat drove people crazy. I was threatened more times than I could count. The smell of unwashed bodies, foul breath, vomit and greasy carnival food was nauseating. This, then, was the glamorous world of show-biz I had dreamed of as a tyke.

One guy, who was about three hairs away from baboon, screamed at me that he had been in line for an hour. When I told him it had been more like fifteen minutes, he let out this high pitched shriek and ran at me. I had had enough; between the sun and the rude people I snapped. I grabbed up the top of my table and smacked him across the head with it as hard as I could. He fell back into the arms of two grinning paramedics who had rushed forward to help me. I guess they were enjoying the show. They hustled him away and that was the last I saw of Baboon & Son.

A couple of days later, a group of people demanded several balloons each. I declined, insisting on compliance with the ancient Laws of Balloonology that permits a maximum of one balloon per customer. They became argumentative, then aggressive; I wasn't about to yield. One of these citizens drew a knife. Apparently, these people took their balloons seriously. I reached for my trusty table top when I heard a click.

Standing before me was a large biker type gentleman, in full leather, with a long white beard and hair, who had been off to the side watching me with great enjoyment. Now he had stepped in and was holding the biggest, shiniest gun I ever saw in my life right in front of my face aimed at my would-be assailants. He said "You people git back in line, git yer bay-loon and move on." Only he didn't say "People," he used the "N" word, the word that today has gotten celebrities fired and media personalities roasted alive. The group politely got back in line, and in dead silence, I crafted and gave

them cute little balloon critters while my guardian kept an unwavering bead on them. They took their treasures and ran away into the night like the very wind. Sometimes I wonder if in the seamier alleys of East Tennessee there is told a legend about a balloon twister who had his own Hell's Angel enforcer like the Rolling Stones did at Berkley.

Later, I told him it was nice of him to let them get their balloons. He said that he felt that "Ever'one should git ther' fair share, but not an inch more." In a society where everyone seems to be out to grab as much as he or she can get for themselves, I found his expansive philosophy of life refreshing. I bought him a Sno-cone in appreciation.

The Dog who Humped God's Leg

There is a peaceful park where I sometimes go to read when the world gets to be too much for my tired brain. There, the autumn air blows tranquil, sweet, and cool. It's on the campus, and the students have honored the space with their creative efforts. Scattered throughout the quad are various works of sculpture, some surprisingly good; some simple but oddly moving. You will find twisted abstract representations of post-adolescent angst; intricately carved pieces of found materials arranged in cunning combinations and some anomalous creations that beggar description.

Near the bench where I like to sit is a fairly good representation of Michelangelo's *Jehovah Giving Life to Adam*, carved from what appears to be a piece of driftwood, undoubtedly scavenged from one of Indiana's bountiful lakes. If you want artistic junk, our lakes are a treasure trove. Once I found a piece of Styrofoam that looked like Liberace in profile. My wife found a geode that, if you squint at it just right, looks like an out-of-focus television playing a Bon Ami commercial.

This particular statue is not a bad reproduction of the Italian masterpiece Buonarotti so eloquently conjured from his magnificent brush, though Old Jehovah's carved expression, rather than radiating equal measure of wisdom and compassion, seems more like the cynical leer of a grifter about to pull one over on the doe-eyed, innocent Adam -- which, upon reflection on the whole Garden of Eden affair, with the Churchez-le-femme scam involving the woman, the infamous fruit, and, of all things, a smooth-talking serpent, may not be all that far from the reality of the situation. Talk about the original Sting.

Cynicism aside, it's October, and the air smells of cinnamon, wood smoke and dried leaves. I have a book of short stories and a warm drink, so not much can go wrong on a day like this. As I settle into the comfortable complacency that comes easier the further I advance into middle age, a small dog, a Welsh terrier I believe, wobbles into my range of vision.

I say he wobbles, because he's missing his left hind leg. This subtraction doesn't seem to have diminished his self-esteem a single jot; he struts about with all the confidence of a senator. I know the dog is a "he" because the missing hindlimb provides an unobstructed view of his

undercarriage, and his credentials as a male canine are both impressive and completely intact. Although missing a leg, this dog is complete in a manner his other doggy comrades might envy.

As this abridged but confident rake surveyed his domain, his eye lit upon the sculpture of Jehovah and His young protégé. The impudent cur lurched over and sniffed Jehovah's sandal, circumambulated the base of the monument, and studied the situation with a keen, practiced eye. I watched transfixed; was this saucy cockerel going to desecrate our most sacred metaphor? Was the divine spark of life passed to us by our creator about to be doused with a spray of urine?

Oh no, it was worse -- much worse. That wretched creature worked his way onto the sculpture and began wriggling his hips in an unmistakably erotic manner. His lip curled in an expression of lust or scorn, the randy devil looked in my direction as though daring me --me, who was shaped in God's own image, to try to stop him from humping Our Father's Heavenly Calf.

But I couldn't move, nor could I speak. I was nailed to the spot. The philosophical implications of this tableau set off neuronal firings in my brain of such scope and magnitude that I was for the moment paralytic. But in contrast to my physical paralysis my mind was a beehive of convoluted activity. I imagined with perfect clarity the sniggering specters of Sartre, Nietzsche, Freud, and Voltaire sitting on the bench with me, nudging each other and passing a bottle of schnapps. Even Nature Herself seemed shocked to silence by this outrage. I swear I could hear the sound of a single leaf whispering through the air in slow motion: shoof, shoof, shoof.

Within my very essence, gears turned, pieces meshed together. All of this meant something, something--big. I was on the verge of a titanic, cosmic revelation, something that would change the course of human destiny, possibly the enlightenment of the entire human race. I was almost there; it was just within my grasp, when an earsplitting shriek split the air.

The moment was gone. My grasp on the infinite secret slipped away. The leaf's graceful dance ended as a chill wind spun it aside. A tiny, gnarled elderly woman staggered onto the scene, leaning on a cane:

"Willis! Wi-i-i-i--lis! What are you doing? OH DEAR GOD THAT'S GOD! You Ba-a-a-a-ad dog!"

She waved her walking-stick, a bright, neon-green tennis ball on the tip describing figure-eights in Willis's direction, breaking the blasphemous spell. Willis, his lust for Divine carnal relations at least temporarily sated, slid down and oscillated over to his mistress, tongue lolling. She cast an apologetic and somehow scandalized look in my direction, as though I were somehow responsible for urging her dog to such unspeakable irreverence. Willis turned his head toward me and sneered.

To this day I'm puzzled by Willis's motives. Was it simple leg-lust? If so, why go for the cold statue when there was a warm, vibrant leg attached to me, not ten feet away? Was it my breath? I've faced sexual rejection before, but can my self esteem hold up under being turned away by a dog? Or was Willis making a defiant statement, humping the leg of the God who cruelly deprived him, an innocent if excitable little doggie, of one of his limbs?

Who knows?

All I know is that if it ever becomes my good fortune to visit Italy, as I've always dreamed, and if I stand in the Sistine Chapel and gaze up at Michelangelo's most splendid masterpiece, what should be the finest and best moment of my life will be diluted by the memory of a shrill, Midwestern voice shrieking, "Willis! OH DEAR GOD THAT'S GOD! you Ba-a-a-a-ad dog!"

Thanks, you horny little SOB.

An Eyefull

I admire people who have the courage to walk up to stranger's doors to discuss religion with them. It takes great conviction to have that many doors slammed in your face and still keep trying to harvest souls for your cause.

Once many years ago, (sometime in the early eighties, I think) when I was still drinking, I had returned from an all-nighter with a friend of mine, who lived in the apartment next door. I staggered inside, struggled out of my clothes and headed for the shower, as drunk as a lord, when there was a knock on my door. Thinking it was my friend, who was so inebriated it was quite possible he couldn't manage the simple task of entering his own apartment, I opened the door. But instead of my besotted friend, there were two Jehovah's Witnesses, both women, one around seventy years old and the other in her late teens.

My alcohol-soaked brain couldn't process the transformation of what I had expected to be my large, African-American friend into two wide-eyed females. To me, it seemed like witchcraft. I stood there staring at them, and they returned the favor. I suspect the sight of a 250 pound, extremely hairy naked sasquatch looking creature was the last thing they expected. Well, two women in gray frocks clutching Bibles and Watchtowers was the last thing I expected, so we were even. The older woman's eyes were glazed and staring at a spot over my left shoulder, but the younger woman's round eyes stared with near-hypnotic fascination at the part that separated my gender from hers.

This unholy deadlock was broken when the older woman took the younger one by the elbow and slowly backed away. I shut the door and only later did it occur to me that the polite thing to do was to invite them inside. It was pretty cold outside that day.

I wonder if this particular episode ever made it into their report at the Elders Meeting, and if so, in what form.

Uncle John's Guide to Wagnerian Opera

I grew up in East Tennessee in the mid-to late 1960's. Knoxville at that time was a cultural *mélange* of various tastes ranging from country music to rock n' roll, with a smattering of more classical vintage due to the presence of the University of Tennessee. Not that I was exposed to this influence growing up: my mother was convinced that all UT students were drug-crazed pot-heads who molested children on the side. So most of the music I was exposed to was my uncle's hardcore rock and the pop-music of contemporary radio stations.

In the ninth grade, my ears were opened to something new. Our music teacher, Miss Lovelace, felt it was her duty to expose us young heathens to something other than the pap we were spoon-fed by WNOX and other commercial radio stations. I should take a moment to talk about Miss Lovelace. She was a beautiful young teacher, with wavy black hair, green eyes, long legs and a curvy figure that enraptured adolescent males in a hypnotic fashion. My contemporaries entertained many an erotic scenario involving Miss Lovelace involving flimsy excuses for them tarrying after school to be alone with her. I admit I never indulged in these fantasies. I was crushing hard on a girl named Rhonda and my fantasy life remained faithful to her. However, Miss Lovelace did introduce me to what became one of my lifelong loves. One day, she placed on the turntable a vinyl record. Some of you may not remember these, but this is what music was recorded on before CDs. She played it, and something in me woke up and paid attention. She said it was Johann Sebastian Bach's Second Brandenburg Concerto, which still remains one of my favorite pieces of music.

I think I may have been alone in that gaggle of heathens to appreciate that piece of music. Most of my contemporaries were saying things like "Turn that shit off;" or, "Play soma that good rockin roll;" but I knew that I was hearing something extraordinary. I asked if there were any more records by this performer. I was immediately pronounced Gay by friends and foes alike.

Eventually, I discovered NPR and widened my knowledge of Classical music. I also discovered that the local bookstore had Budget Classics:

records that cost one dollar per LP. I had something to spend my allowance on other than comic books. I still have those records, by the way.



One of those budget classics was Richard Wagner's *Die Walkure*, featuring Kirstin Flagstad as the Valkyrie Brunnhilda. I will tell you this: I had no idea what those people were singing about, but I knew that what I heard was the best and finest music I had ever heard in my life.

I was hooked. I was not only an opera buff, but the most insidious sort: A Wagnerian. It's probably no coincidence that my wife, whom I'm crazy in love with, is a tall, blonde, blue-eyed Nordic sort of woman. I think for Valentine's day I'll get her a horned helmet and a spear. Yo-ho-to-ho!

I soon learned something about opera. You either love it or you don't. I discovered the futility of trying to share my love with my friends. If they thought I was gay before, now they were sure of it. Not only gay, but brain damaged as well. They went back to listening to that good old rockin roll; I delved deeper into the world of classical music and opera. Bear in mind that in Tennessee, Grand Opera is most often spelled "Grand Ol' Opry" and featured Minnie Pearl, Mearl Haggard and Grandpaw Jones.

For those of you who may have wondered what it was all about but didn't want to sit through four hours of people in funny costumes screaming at each other, here is my guide to Wagnerian Opera.

The Ring of the Nibelung:

This opera CYCLE consists of four operas, *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walkure*, *Siegfried*, and *Gotterdammerung*. The entire cycle lasts approximately 17 hours. I have actually watched them all back to back, and have listened to them several times continuously. This explains why I talk to myself a lot.

Here is the synopsis:

The Ring operas revolve around the Norse god Wotan and a scheme he concocts to escape the destruction of the gods foretold by the Earth Goddess. He tricks two giants, Fafnir and Fasolt, into building a huge stronghold called Valhalla. To pay for it he must obtain some gold guarded by mermaids called the Rheingold, among which is a magic ring. He steals

the gold from Alberich, an evil dwarf, who stole it from the Rheinmaidens, three very foxy mermaids who live in the river Rhein. The castle paid for, the gods enter it, but Wotan is uneasy, since he knows that due to the treachery, the gods are eventually doomed. This is explained in ***Das Rheingold***, which is considered a Prequel. It's a prequel because it's only 2 ½ hours long, about half the length of the other three operas in the cycle. Think I'm kidding? Go listen to them and see for yourself.

In ***Die Walkure***, we learn Wotan fathered a race of heroes, the Volsungs, to retrieve the magic ring he obtained by treachery to pay for the castle built by giants. However, since the ring has the power to destroy the gods, he wants it back from the giant Fafnir who killed his brother Fasolt and now owns it. Wotan can't retrieve it himself due to the contract he has with the giant, so he sires the *Volsungs* in order for them to do it. We also learn that the Volsungs consists of two twins, Siegmund and Sieglinde, who are separated at an early age.

Sieglinde is kidnapped and married to an oaf named Hunding. Siegmund wanders around from place to place, thinking his entire family is dead, until he stumbles across Sieglinde. He has no idea this is his sister, but he likes what he sees, so they run off together. They soon figure out that they're brother and sister, but this doesn't stop them from deciding to hook up anyway in order to perpetuate the Volsung race.

In the meantime, Wotan's wife Fricka is outraged at this breach of common decency. What really burns her up is that Siegmund and Sieglinde are products of one of Wotan's many infidelities, so she demands he punishes them for breaking the holy bonds of marriage and committing incest in the bargain. Wotan was sort of the Captain Kirk of his time: he travelled all over the various worlds of Norse Mythology and enjoyed relations with females of every species. Wotan, bound by sacred oaths, must do as she demands. He sends his daughter, Brunhilda, one of the Valkyries, to see to it that Siegmund dies in combat with Hunding, who is tracking him down for running off with his wife. Brunhilda, however, knows that Wotan doesn't really want Siegmund to die, so she protects him. But Wotan, bound by oath, breaks Siegmund's sword, so Siegmund eats dust, and Brunhilda flees with Sieglinde, who is carrying Siegmund's child.

In Act Three, which begins with the famous *Ride of the Valkyries*, Brunhilda hides Sieglinde from Wotan's wrath. Wotan catches up with her and in a heartbreaking and beautiful scene (Wotan's Farewell) makes Brunhilda a mortal woman, no longer a goddess, puts her in a deep sleep and surrounds her with a ring of magic fire. Only a great hero – as it turns out, Siegmund's child, the fruit of incest, whose name will be Siegfried, still

cooking away in Sieglinde's womb – can cross that ring and claim Brunhilda as his bride. Siegfried is still just an embryo in this scene or he would be singing too, and I'm sure that Wagner probably considered it. In fact, maybe he is and if we just listened harder we could hear his muffled voice emerging from Seiglinda's tummy.

After condemning his daughter to mortal womanhood, Wotan walks away, heartbroken, as flames rise up around his favorite daughter, whom he will never see again.

In ***Siegfried***, the child is now a man. He fixes the broken pieces of his father's sword, and runs off from his guardian, the dwarf Mime, who had hoped to obtain the ring through Siegfried's help. Siegfried finds the dragon Fafnir, and after singing back and forth for several minutes, man and dragon engage in combat. With the aid of his father's sword, he slays the giant dragon Fafnir, and also kills Mime. Siegfried, in true heroic fashion, goes on to obtain the Rheingold, defeats his grandfather Wotan by breaking his spear, and wins Brunhilda. The opera ends with the two lovers consummating their relationship on the rock. A happy ending, but wait -- we're not through yet.

In the final chapter ***Gotterdammerung***, everything falls apart. Here's something to bear in mind when watching a Wagnerian opera: If you fall in love in Act One, by Act Three you're going to be dead.

After leaving Brunhilda on her rock with promises to return to her loving arms, Siegfried falls into fast company who gives him a magic potion which gives him amnesia. He forgets Brunhilda, marries another woman, and gets killed.

Brunhilda, who in the interim has been forced to marry Siegfried's murderer, gets her revenge by riding into Siegfried's funeral pyre on her horse Grane, summoning Loge the Fire God in the process and burning everything, including Valhalla and much of the Earth, into ashes. The Rheinmaidens reclaim the ring that started all the fuss, drown Alberich who stole it from them way back in ***Das Rheingold***, and the remaining survivors get on with their lives without the interference of the Norse Gods, who have been immolated in the raging fire.

The end.

This cycle of operas is justifiably considered one of the most magnificent creations in music. The opening of Act Three of ***Die Walkure***, known as The Ride of the Valkyries, has come to define opera. The Lord of

the Rings was inspired by the legend of the Ring of the Nibelungs, and Gollum was very likely based on Albrecht the dwarf. It does take a great deal of stamina to listen through any one of them at a sitting unless you're a hardcore Wagner fan.

Other Wagnerian operas where people fall in love and die include *Tannhäuser* and *Tristan und Isolde*. I'll write about these later.

The Shambling Buttcrack of Bloomington:

A Lovecraftian Nightmare

I would like to announce that every sin I've ever committed, every black mark against my cosmic ledger; each dark episode of karmic intention committed by me in this and countless other past existences has been obliterated, expunged, absolved and wiped clean in one consciousness-searing blast of terror that will haunt me for the rest of my life. Follow me:

I was out three days ago with my wife on an errand of good cheer, shopping for Valentine's Day cards. Here's how Fate set me up and subsequently blasted me off my feet: I was lulled into a false sense of cheerfulness by reading a series of cards that were heart-warming, humorous, maudlin, hilarious, inspired, and with my mind so beguiled into soporific receptivity, I turned the corner to the counter and beheld the spectacle that in one bright flash of blistering repulsiveness, made up for any offense I could have possibly committed against God, man or nature.

Leaning against the counter -- I should say SPRAWLING -- was a gargantuan, bloated hairless pale specimen of humanity wearing an IU hooded sweatshirt and a pair of much-too-small jeans. His lascivious posture had caused the sweatshirt to ride up a good two feet over the expanse of his unnaturally white back, and his jeans, needless to say, were inadequate to the task of containing the sepulchral half-moons of his loathsome ass. Fully eighteen inches of bulbous belt-cleavage leered boldly at the universe, simultaneously enticing and repulsive. I could not look away; like a mongoose enamoured by the cobra whose intention it is to devour him, my eyes were locked onto that deadly crevasse and I yearned for some token of obeisance -- a gold doubloon or similar offering -- to drop within to appease the dark gods that dwelt inside that dimension of outrageous hideousness so they would release me from thrall and not draw me into that abyss where I would howl out my anguish for eternities.

Did I escape? Yes. My good wife, sensing my dilemma, rescued me. As for the shambling, necrophagous horror that haunts Bloomington, who knows where he will strike next? Beware, beware.

On Middle-Age and Target Shooting

I've been escalating my fitness program, probably spurred by the alarming realization that I'm not far away from turning fifty years old. That's half a century. Wow. Dig it.

When I was in High School in the seventies, most of us believed that our existences were measured in teaspoons. This was the age of the Cold War and Mutual Assured Destruction, and my friends and I were sure we'd end up--at any second--reduced to radioactive ash. I don't know if I can communicate just how strongly we believed this. It wasn't one of those things you toss out in conversation as a "might-be," we were SURE of it, in our hearts and all the way to our bones.

We were living on borrowed time.

None of us thought we'd ever see twenty-five, much less fifty. Plan for the future? Geddoudahere. Our plan was to live what life we had to the fullest before the big flash of light came from Oak Ridge and cut our strings. I can best describe my generation as cautiously cynical libertines.

So now at my age, which by today's standards isn't even properly middle age, I find comfort in the activities of my youth. One summer in 1981 or so I took up archery. I wasn't very good at it but enjoyed it. I recently picked it up again and invested in some bows, arrows and ancillary accouterments. I also joined Bloomington Archery Club, so I'd have a place to shoot. The law and society in general takes a dim view of firing arrows at the local park or on your apartment balcony, or at the neighbor's car whose alarm goes off every hour on the hour in the middle of the night.

The members of Bloomington Archery Club welcomed me as a brother. A shared interest in ancient martial arts bonds men together as few other things can. For twenty -five bucks I received a year's membership and a key to the front gate. I also broke bread with my new friends, sealing our communion as Men with Bows.

I'm a little out of place. The members of the club seem to be mostly bow-hunters. Grisly stories involving eviscerating deer and other beasts are exchanged and relished. I have no desire to shoot at any living thing, except maybe a couple of schmucks out there (and you know who you are)

but love to shoot at targets. I suspect there are some target-shooters in the club, but I haven't met them yet.

The range is set in a large tract of woods, and all the standing targets have deer painted on them. As I walked around the camp, I almost jumped through my skin. There was a damned LION lurking in the woods. Bloomington is home to coyotes, wildcats, wolves, rumors of a black panther and famous Bigfoot sightings, but a lion?

I soon ascertained (after I coughed up my heart) that this was no real king of the beasts but a true-to-life simulacrum made from dense foam. It's what's called a 3-D target. As I walked along the path, I saw faux deer, wolves, turkeys and other critters, every one riddled with arrow holes. Would-be hunters practice their killing shots on these uncomplaining maquettes before unleashing razor-tipped death on the area wildlife.

I work out an hour a day, five to six days a week. I usually swim after my workout. I've managed to maintain much of my youthful exuberance (read: I'm immature and irresponsible) and as long as I don't think about it I don't FEEL middle-aged. Now I can go fire salvos of arrows at fake animals and targets attached to haystacks.

For a man who was sure he'd be a smoldering cinder long before middle-age, it ain't a bad way to pass the time. BEATS THE LIVING HELL out of sitting in front of a television or cruising the internet.

The Adventures of Tony Jones

Way back in a mythical age known to folklorists as the Eighties, I had a friend named Anthony Jones, a very large African-American who for a while was my best friend. Our adventures were many, and the full extent of our malfeasances may perhaps be related once the statute of limitations has expired and the world is ready for full disclosure, but for now I'll limit myself to the following anecdote.

One day Tony and I were discussing sex. This is a favorite topic of males of all ages, but for males in their early twenties the subject holds a particular glamour. Tony brought up the subject of oral sex, particularly the performance of same by men for the pleasure of their lady partners. He maintained that it was a "white-boy" habit; that black men didn't do it very much. "It's just part of y'all's repertoire," he said, "You'll do it on anyone. We're more particular."

Tony's sexual exploits were prodigious; at one time he had five women on the string: some of them knew that he had other women, some did not, but I doubt that any of them knew the fullest extent of his hound-dogging. I couldn't believe that he had never engaged in the lingual arts. I pressed, him, and he admitted that he had, on occasion, so participated. But with one caveat. "Not just on anyone," he said. "She gotta be clean."

He went on to explain to me exactly how he determined a woman's cleanliness, and this is where my friend Tony differed from other, more gullible men. Most of us would consider a person who smelled good, was well-groomed, and had a clean house, a person diligent in his or her hygiene. But Tony would not be taken in by these shallow deceptions. You see, he had penetrated to the very kernel of cleanliness. "A woman can fool you by cleaning her house and taking a shower, Riggs," he confided in me. "But if you want to know if she's really clean, you have to check out her refrigerator."

At first I thought this was some hip metaphor for something other than a food receptacle, but no -- he was serious. Before bestowing that most intimate expression of physical affection, Tony would first examine a woman's refrigerator for signs of lax personal hygiene.

My curse is that I have a vividly visual imagination. I imagined my large, dusky friend, at the point of a relationship where they've retired to the boudoir (and in Tony's case, that was usually around ninety minutes),

divested of clothing, passions aroused, and she whispers, "Oh Tony, Tony ... you know what I want."

Tony: "Ah, just a minute baby, I'm gonna get me a drink."

Tony goes into the kitchen, opens the refrigerator, peers within. "Ah HELL nah."

Tony gets hastily dressed, gets in his car, drives off.

From the bedroom: "Tony ... Tony? Baby, are you there?"

What can I say? If you're serious about romance, always obey Jones's Law: Keep that refrigerator clean enough to eat out of.

The Power of Negative Thinking and Other Curmudgeonly Thoughts

Anytime someone sends me a Youtube link I'm inevitably drawn to the comments section. I can't help it. It's like evil hypnotism. I get sucked in and spend literally hours reading the idiotic, hostile, often psychotic interchanges that go on there. I've decided that Youtube, along with most of the internet video forums, is the cybernetic equivalent of a rubber tire and a banana.

Not that I have anything against negativity. When it's properly presented it is a delight to be savored. But malice and stupidity are just sad.

People sometimes accuse me of negative thinking. I wholeheartedly accept the mantle of curmudgeondom. It would be foolish to deny it; after all I gleefully spatter the internet with the steaming offal my mind spews forth so regularly you would think I stuff prunes in my ears with a civil-war era ramrod. So I have to get this off my chest: perennially optimistic people irritate me. The technical term for this is stating the obvious, by the way.

The stock in trade of everyone from motivational snake-oil salesmen to the latest incarnation promoted by Rhonda Byrnes "The Secret," which is the old Law of Attraction repackaged is this: if you think positively all the time, you'll attract positive things into your life. You'll also irritate your friends and family to distraction, but who the hell cares? Your life will sprout daisies.

I'll tell you my secret: I've booked more shows, and made more money, with negative thinking than with positive. How so, you ask? Well you see, Ms. Byrnes opines there is a universal intelligence that responds to our desires. Basically, if you wish for something the universe gives it to you.

This may work for some people, but my experience has been just the opposite. The universe, if it has an intelligence, which I strongly doubt, has a malicious and idiotic one (not unlike those who post comments on Youtube) and would like nothing better than to see you fall on your derriere while it drools with demented glee.

Proof? You got it: I burned out on performing a couple of years ago and turned my attention to writing. I began working on a series of novels. The work went well; I churned out the prose. But the damned phone wouldn't quit ringing! I had quit marketing ENTIRELY, yet people kept calling me for shows. Now, when I did all the Napoleon Hill stuff, thought positively

and marketed, I did all right, but as soon as I DIDN'T want to be disturbed by commercial success, it wouldn't leave me alone. Success chased ME. The idiot universe laughed and cackled; there was no way I was getting what I wanted! You were going to do shows, by god, whether you wanted to or not. No writing for you, my little monkey! Get out there and dance for the crowds!

However, the subconscious mind works in twisted ways. I know deep down I'm smarter than the Youtube fan running the Universe. I began to see a more subtle level to success. The most desirable woman, to a man, isn't the one easiest to conquer but the one difficult to obtain. The ones with a hint of danger--the femme fatales, can drive a man insane with desire. The ones who post comments on Youtube make you want to go out and blow up the nearest public schools.

Gather round, for I am about to drop into your ears a maggot of wisdom that will eat its way into your brains and change you forever. To court success isn't as simple as thinking positive thoughts all the time: this simply makes you a show-business whore, and God knows the world is full of those. On the other hand, defeatist thinking gets you nowhere and is not the same as negative thinking; oh no--never confuse defeatist thinking with the wonderful dynamic power of a good screw-you-world mindset. No, the secret (the TRUE Secret) is to flirt with success and make it chase you, but never surrender to it.

In other words, keep your stuff sacred, Honey.

Aunt Eliza on Reincarnation and Hitler

As you may know if you've read my previous book *Runic Palmistry*, I learned a great deal of my craft from my grandmother and her sister, great-aunt Eliza. Both my grandmother and Aunt Eliza believed in reincarnation. Oddly enough, a lot of rural and mountain people of the Southeast believe in reincarnation in some form or other. In the summer of 1972 I was about twelve years old and my family and I were visiting Aunt Eliza and her husband, Uncle Vondous, on their little farm in Bull's Gap Tennessee. We didn't know it at the time, but Vondous had a time bomb ticking away in his head that would explode into a sudden, fatal stroke in less than a year. At the moment however, he was sitting on the porch with my dad swapping laughter and drinks from a brown bottle.

The momentum of the sixties still swept through the country, bringing with it an interest in Eastern philosophies. My brother and I had received a boxed gift set of *I Ching* the previous Christmas, and we struggled through it for hours, trying to figure out what flying dragons and lotus blossoms had to do with whether or not we'd pass our exams.

I had been reading a bit about reincarnation and had quite a few questions about the process, especially the concept of karma. Naturally I sought the advice of the family know-it-all, Aunt Eliza. She was more than willing to talk at length about the subject. During our conversation I asked her about people who caused a great deal of suffering during their life, like Adolph Hitler. It didn't seem to me that he paid adequately for his actions. People were always saying "What goes around comes around," but what price did he pay? Oh sure, he had to commit suicide, I said, but he was responsible for the deaths of millions. How come he didn't have to pay? Why didn't something horrible happen to him?

Aunt Eliza looked stern. "Who are you to say whether Hitler paid or not? Are you privy to his private thoughts? Do you have any way of knowing what kind of spiritual suffering he may have gone through before his death?"

No, I admitted, but dying once didn't seem like a fair trade for the slaughter of millions.

Aunt Eliza nodded. "Nor does it to me, either. He was a son-of-a-bitch for sure. But as I say, we don't know everything."

I guess I had to be content with that. Changing the subject, I asked her if she believed we came back in non-human forms, as animals or insects.

Aunt Eliza replied, "I think we do. A soul is a soul, it doesn't have a body. It depends on how we behave in this life whether or not we come back as people, or as something else." I told her that, judging from the carefree life of the animals on the farm, it seemed easier on us if we came back as animals. Or even as a bug. No school, no chicken-pox, all your food for free. She smiled. "You think so, Jonny? You really think so?" Seeing that smile, I knew I was in for a wake-up call. "Let's go for a walk. I want to show you something."

We walked across the backyard and through the rose arbors. The speckled shade was a welcome relief from the blistering heat of mid-afternoon. We emerged on the other side of the cool arbor back into the full blast of the summer sun.

Aunt Eliza stopped and pointed to a small lump on the hot paved driveway. "Looky here," she said.

I knelt down and saw that the lump was a dead baby bird that had fallen from its nest and died on the hot pavement. The sight of the pitiful thing hurt my heart. "This is nature, Jonny," she said. "Some live, some die. Some die bad. That little feller fell from his nest and died of hunger and thirst on this hot pavement, all alone. What did he do to deserve it, while his brothers and sisters ate fat worms just a few feet away?"

I shook my head. I had no answer. We kept walking until we came to the small pear and apple orchard where Aunt Eliza harvested the makings of her spectacular cobbles. She showed me a spider web. "Look at the spider," she said. "Look closely."

I did. The spider had an ugly growth on it almost as big as its body. "What's wrong with his back?" I asked.

Aunt Eliza pointed into the woods. "There's a nest of wasps back there," she said, "that paralyze its prey -- like that little spider -- lay its eggs into the bug's body, and let it go on its way. The bug lives its life normally, like this spider has, spinning its web, eating flies and Daddy Long-legs. Until one day the wasp's eggs hatch inside its body and the baby wasps eat the spider alive from the inside out." She pointed to the little spider. "That little feller has only a few days to go before he's in for a big surprise."

I looked at her in shock and distress. After all I was twelve years old, raised with Disney movies and a year away from reading *The Origin of Species*, and this lesson in the relentless ways of nature was a bit unsettling. Eliza sat on a rock and looked at me solemnly, and I'll never forget what she said that day. "You asked me earlier today about Hitler. Now mind you, it's not my place to say I understand the will of God. But if I were God, maybe, just maybe, Hitler would come back as that baby bird, dying helplessly in the sun. And as that spider, eaten alive by another bug's children and not understanding why. And I would make him do it again and again, until his debt was paid, one life for every one he took. Hell, I'd settle for one in ten."

She stood up and stretched. "But I suspect I'm a little bit meaner than God, and a lot less patient with human error. Just remember to be a good boy and you won't have to worry about coming back as someone else's dinner." She smiled at me. "Believe me, coming back as people is far better, and that's all you need to know about reincarnation."

This was my first exposure to the idea that reincarnation was nature's way of evening the score. I looked around at the quiet woods and the still surface of the lake and realized that just beneath the surface of all that quiet beauty a million horror stories played out every moment.

Whether you believe in the points made by my old aunt or not, you have to admit it was an unforgettable lesson. Later that afternoon I watched my uncle and my grandfather castrate a pig. To this day I try my damndest to be a good boy.

The Shadow over Knoxpathch

My Lovecraftian Childhood

I grew up in the shadow-haunted squalls of East Tennessee, amidst shambling, necrophagous horrors that were the inbred children of Hastur and Ithiqua...or at least each other's cousins. Howling creatures spawned of Stygian blackness swam the murky waters of the Tennessee River (some called them carp), while frenzied natives shrieked blasphemous paeon to Elder star-begotten Gods:

"Ia! Ia! Go Vols! Verily the South Will Rise Again!"

Our own local Mad Arab, Abdulla Challongg, wrote in the Rednekomicon:

*"That cannot die which flatulates internally;
Yet all creation suffers eternally."*

Near the wharf, Elvinia Whately cherishes a strange demonic son, obscene hybrid of unholy union between Elvinia and a cursed subhuman creature--a New Yorker. Locals mutter and curse at Elvinia's brat but do nothing, as it mutters with strange accent and has hair on the back of its neck. It feasts on hellish foods from the realm of Zabars. The town knows fear.

In sunken R'lyeh, rumored to be somewhere near Dollywood, dead Cthulhu lies dreaming of the day when dark stars align in mad congruence and He emerges from His stagnant tomb. Little does He know in East Tennessee a secret cult of rednecks plan the biggest fish-fry in Southern History. *"IA IA! Yee- Haa! MMM---MMM Batter-dipped Elder God with cornbread! Cthulhu ftagn, y'all!"*

Mad, bubbling Chaos gibbers in the center of fathomless dimensions. Man's time in the sphere is short, yet blind idiot pipers play on. The tune is "Dixie," and the leader of the hideous quartet is branded with the Unspeakable Tetragrammaton: G-W-B. May Hastur help us all. Ug! IA! Shub-Niggurath! The black goat of the woods tastes great with a side order of fried taters...

Of Sinister Restrooms

One of the gritty realities of life on the road is the ongoing game of Russian roulette the traveling performer plays every time he stops to use a public restroom. You simply have no idea what to expect when nature, whose whims and timing are both capricious and malicious, calls, and the stories I could tell you of what I've found festering across the thresholds of some of those sewers would boggle your mind.

I think the time has come to lift the veil of silence that has long masked this aspect of the performer's life, and that I am the man best qualified to perform this unmasking.

A thing I learned early in my performing career is you don't drive to a show in your work clothes. The seat of your pants wrinkle and the knees sag. One time I had a show in Johnson City, a three hour drive. It was August, a blistering month, so I dressed for a long drive in humid weather: shorts, tank top, sandals. My tux was in a suit bag. I planned to stop near the country club, change into the tux and stride into the venue in glorious splendor. I found a place to make my change, MAMAW'S QUIK STOP, a small filth-encrusted store and gas station. I got the key to the restroom (connected to a hockey puck by a bicycle chain) and walked around back. Three disreputable homeless chaps loafed near the restroom; passing a bottle of what was clearly homemade lightning. They nodded and offered southern pleasantries; "Huh;" "Hey buddy;" "Howdy thar;" I nodded back. One toothless fellow, custodian of the jug, offered me a drink. I waved it away. "No thanks."

I entered the tiny building wearing cutoff denim shorts and a tank top. Ignoring the mingled odors of ancient urine, stale tobacco, staler beer, and the yeasty byproducts of various erotic adventures, five minutes later I emerged in a tuxedo, freshly shaved, hair slicked with gel. The old parties stopped their boozing in mid-swig, frozen in tableau like the three magi from a Christmas display. They gazed in goggle-eyed wonderment at this splendid vision of elegance that had so casually appeared amidst their squalid lot, as though conjured from the very bottle they passed between them. One of them found his voice. He asked, "Are yew James Bond?"

Of all the dank, fetid, putrescent, cankerous, foul pestholes in which I've been forced to seek refuge on my various travels, one in particular festers with particular virulence in my mind. I'll share it with you.

My son and I were en route from Tennessee to Indiana when sheer hydraulic pressure forced us off the road. We stopped in Jellico in search of a restroom. We pulled into a gas station and my son braved the unknown frontier first. He almost immediately burst forth, gasping for air, face a pale green. "Don't go in there," he wheezed. "It's appalling."

Shrugging, I entered the cinderblock enclosure. After all, biological imperatives cannot be ignored, and I was the battle-scarred veteran of far worse hellholes than this. Or so I thought.

It was bad. At first I thought a possum had exploded. Then I speculated perhaps some local had curbed his mule. The floor, rear wall, and yes—even the ceiling were spattered with stinking liquid, solids and some other writhing, seemingly semi-sentient material the constitution of which is still under debate by scientists from Oak Ridge. I didn't succumb to the venomous fumes because I was veteran of the road long enough to have mastered the yogic skill of holding my breath for the twelve and a half minutes necessary to complete my business, wash my hands and check my grooming in the mirror.

It occurred to me that if a person—a human being—had been responsible for this anomaly, then the following scenario must have played out. The hapless participant would have had to begin the procedure in the usual position. Then the inexorable reaction of Newtonian Law would have forced him first into a horizontal attitude and then, as the Vesuvius-like eruption continued, pressed his head to the floor until his, ah nether parts pointed straight toward the ceiling! I calculated the necessary vector equations in the grime-smearred mirror, and it was at this point I realized no natural process could have generated sufficient force, and supernatural agencies had to be at work. As calmly as I could I backed from the mausoleum and shut the door before I fell victim to a similar fate at the hands of demonic assailants.

I found my son wandering around outside, apparently still in shock. I helped him to the car, where he recovered slowly from his toxic experience with the harsher realities of life on the road. In his own words, "I lost feeling in my extremities. I grew cold all over, like I was dying. My legs shook. I almost didn't make it out the door." These are common symptoms experienced by novices when entering southern rest stops. The merest whiff of that air is more debilitating than serin. The trick to ensure survival is to take a deep breath before entering, hold it until you're finished, TOUCH NOTHING with your skin, and try not to look at anything, lest your psyche be scarred forever. Some things the mind of man was never meant to contemplate, and the feculent contents of southern public restrooms fall into

that category along with the secrets of sausage factories and the inner workings of sunken R'lyeh.

Just Read the Introduction Please

You would think if you hand someone a nice, printed introduction to read your problems are solved. Nope. Setting aside for the moment mispronounced names, people who think alcohol-fueled stream-of-consciousness badinage is a reasonable substitute for spontaneous wit, and the functionally illiterate who stumble through a written intro like a nonagenarian through a field of discarded tires, there are the incidents that burn themselves into your memory like a firebrand.

Of course, if you do a Hypnosis show the person impressed to perform the introductory chore seems to think he's the first person to tell the suffering audience what I think must be the only hypnotist joke in existence--you know, the one about the hypnotist who entrances the entire audience, drops his watch--which shatters--he yells "crap!" (Or a variation thereof, depending on how much the MC has had to drink) and it takes two weeks to clean up the hall. Yawn. Oh well, at least my show can only go uphill from there.

I've also in the past been victimized as follows: At a college, the campus activities person informed me and Sam the students were told only of a "surprise guest." We were told to hide in the wings until introduced. I gave this twit our intro, which she glanced at and ignored. I should have suspected trouble. So this young lady comes out and says, "Ladies and gentlemen, I told you we have a surprise for you. Please welcome two members of NSYNC: Justin Timberlake and Cris Kirkpatrick."

I didn't even know who these people were. Sam, who had a teenage son, apparently did. He looked at me with wide eyes. "We're f--ked."

Apparently the campus people thought introducing two relatively unknown, middle-aged entertainers as popular boy-band idols was a really funny joke. The crowd erupted into loud yells and applause. The applause died abruptly when we walked out--obviously we two aging, paunchy southerners weren't the promised surprise guests. We were the SURPRISED guests.

We did pull this one off by making some jokes and the kids were delighted to hear a hypnotist was in the house. Since these benighted children had no idea what a mind reader was or did, I was an unknown, but they got into it and we saved what could have been a disaster. But what a stupid joke.

I did a show Sunday for a group for whom I've performed many times. This was a smaller group and I know them very well, a local branch of a major pharmacy company. The organizer got up and made a few announcements. She began reading my intro. I took position near the performing area ready to walk on. She read my intro to the end where it says, "Please join me in welcoming Jon Saint Germain." Everyone applauded. I walked on. Then she went into the awards / door prize presentation. She had a thick stack of envelopes to hand out, so I edged off the scene as unobtrusively as possible. About forty minutes later I began my part of the program. Must I add that alcohol had played its part in this particular faux pas, as it does in oh-so-many similar scenarios?

I remember another episode a long time ago, shortly after I adopted the Saint Germain role. Of course for accounting purposes I have to give my real name to the book keeper, so I arrived at the event and she runs up to perform the ceremonial preshow handing over of the check. "Jon Saint Germain isn't your real name!" she informs me. "No," I agree, unsurprised. This was old news to me. "It's my professional name."

It turns out she couldn't wait to tell anyone who would listen that "Saint Germain" wasn't my real name. Why this factoid delighted her so much I couldn't figure. Apparently she'd never met anyone with an alias, and her life lacked drama. She thought I was a spy or some other type of exciting character.

She introduced me to the company's president. "This is our entertainer, Jon Saint Germain--but that isn't his real name. Tell him your real name." I didn't; I just said Saint Germain is a family name I took professionally, and changed the subject. The boss, of course, couldn't have cared less what my name was. He gave the bookkeeper a sidelong look and crept away.

The bad news was she had been assigned the role of introducing me. In Olympus, the Gods watched all this while chewing popcorn and laughing. So when she did, of course she said, "Our entertainer tonight is Jon Saint Germain. But that isn't his real name. He'll tell you his real name when he

comes out." And she didn't read the rest of the intro at all. So now everyone thinks this is some gag which is part of my show, and they have no ideas what it is I do, why I'm there or why they should care.

I totally ignored it, strode out to center stage, and said, "My name is Jon Saint Germain. I'm a mind reader. Tonight I'm going to read your minds;" hoping this bald announcement would take their minds off of this idiot's preoccupation with my nom-du-platform. It did, I got the usual mélange of responses I receive when I'm introduced as a mind reader and continued on with the show.

I haven't had any trouble with the pseudonym at all since, which had been a concern. Well, once an OCD bank manager gave me a hard time about putting a stage name on a business account without the proper paperwork (and he couldn't tell me what exactly this paperwork consisted of)--but I went across the street and got an account with another bank who actually wanted my money.

Why I miss the Eighties

In the mid-eighties, due to an unfortunate series of circumstances -- mainly poverty--I performed at a biker bar in East Tennessee. After my show (which went surprisingly well) I sat at the bar decompressing and this huge biker woman eyed me up and said, "I bet I can drink more tequila than you can."

I replied, "Lady, I have no doubt. From the looks of things, you've already drank more tequila than I can."

She eyed me some more, grinned and said, "You're cute."

Cold shivers ran up my back. This woman was immense. She wore a tank-top and her unrestrained breasts literally lay in her lap like twin Rottweilers waiting for the order to attack.

I said, "Umm."

She threw back a shot of tequila. "I'm going to take you home and eat you up."

I wasn't confident this was entirely a sexual come-on, but something akin perhaps to the witch's sinister intentions toward Hansel and Gretel. Assuming I acquiesced to her advances, after we mated, would she, in the manner of some spiders, devour me? The relentless ways of nature are wonderful and rare, but I wasn't ready to lay down my life in devotion to the ecosystem.

When cornered, the fight-or-flight instinct overrides an organism's higher reasoning. Fight was out of the question, she could unstrap those deadly mammalian claymores and dash me to paste in an instant. Flight was my only hope. "Let me go visit the men's room and I'll be right back. Don't go anywhere."

"Don't you worry baby. I got plans for you."

"I can hardly wait."

I passed the gentleman's facilities at a dead trot, exited the fire exit, ran to my car, and was over the county line in less than six minutes.

I suppose she had to obtain her sustenance-sexual or gastronomic--from some other male of the species. But she left her mark. Every time I hear the song *She's a Man-eater*, I flash back to that incident and cower in the corner, whimpering.

Epitaph

When we write our obituaries/under screaming chartreuse skies/a sense of vile indifference/like a cotton ball pulled from the arm after a doctor's visit/ and tossed in the trash.

Of Creative and Other Processes

It's no secret that much of man's most profound thinking is performed in the restroom. Nobody knows why. Perhaps stimulating the circulatory system of the lowest parts creates a sympathetic excitement in the opposite regions, sending the consciousness into heights of creative delirium. I don't know. But I have powerful suspicion that the theory of relativity was hatched immediately after a large meal, that Newton's stupendous Laws of Motion came into being after an equally stupendous movement of another nature, and that beatific smile of the Mona Lisa, captured for eternity by the genius of Da Vinci, was the aftermath of a particularly satisfying session in a Byzantine Bath-house.

I'm not the first to notice the correlation between invention and excretion, no, by no means. Nor am I the first with the poor etiquette to inquire into the subject and to subject others to my thoughts about it. It was recently discovered the oracular visions of the Oracle of Delphi were inspired by noxious fumes rising from a cleft in the earth, and further the deponent sayeth not. Freud plumbed the darkest depths of this mystery, saying the excretory process was the ultimate act of creation. Even the most granite-headed can easily picture the room of Freud's Vienna villa where this epiphany struck home.

It's a humbling thought, isn't it, that we might owe civilization's intellectual infrastructure to an act most people only speak of in veiled allusion. "I'm going to the powder room;" "Time to see a man about a dog;" "Whoo, I need to go lose about ten pounds."

Yet perhaps we recognize the importance of this small retreat from the outside world's gaudiness and racy sensuality. We decorate our restrooms in soothing hues and floral designs, hinting at nature and refuge. Perhaps even of a simpler, humbler time. Alone with our thoughts and bodily processes, no wonder we fall into reverie and nostalgia. It's a place to slow down and smell, if not roses, rose-scented deodorant disks.

What odd evolutionary twist of fate permanently wove together man's basest processes with his most exalted aspirations--or is it proof that the universe has a low, debased sense of humor on the "pull my finger" level?

Life's Imponderables.

Some mysteries may never be solved. As I ponder these riddles my own time in the meditation chamber draws to a close and I feel the Muse of

inspiration abandon me. It is time to leave this quiet and serene asylum and return to the sharp world of sensory overload and bright distraction.

Why can't the whole world be like a bathroom?

Lessons from The Great Buck Howard

Not only is Malkovich a fine actor, but the writer of this fictionalized biopic truly absorbed the essence of the phenom that is the Amazing Kreskin. Kreskin is unstoppable; neither time nor fashion diminishes him. He remains unchanged in a world where fads and trends come and go as fast as one changes socks. And yet people love him, love him as they would a favorite old movie or book they read in their childhood.

One of the points that struck home with me was when the GREAT Buck Howard, finally at the apogee of his career, performing in Vegas, having made several compromises to both act and persona, failed to find his money (an incident metaphorical on many levels). Did he do this intentionally, or did he finally lose his mojo?

The answer comes at the end of the movie, when he tells his young ex-road manager that Vegas was not for him. He knew who his audience was. His audience was not in Vegas but in Akron Ohio; Fairbanks Nebraska; Ontario, Wisconsin; the corners and byways of the world. He was a road warrior; a Mentalist of the People. Elvis was for Vegas. The GREAT Buck Howard was for Willow falls, Wyoming.

Many of us as young stallions dream of conquering the world. We dream of television exposure; the talk shows, Vegas, the Big Swag. Me, I always sensed I was cut out for something less dramatic. I've always been a slow-and steady sort of guy. My bread and butter has always been the smaller companies and more personal venues. I've been offered television spots. I backed away. I've performed in casinos; but in places like French Lick and Louisville. Like Buck Howard, Vegas isn't for me. I would be destroyed within a fortnight. I've been told I lack ambition. I've been told I lack self-confidence. Possible. I've been called worse things.

But when the big economic downturns hit and the monolithic companies suffer, I still have work. Smaller companies, the economic buffer-zone, tend to move in and pick up the business that big companies leave behind when they crash. So far I've seen three of these recessions; the one that happened in the mid-eighties; the one from the nineties that led to me going full-time, and this one. I've performed this year for three companies who said they have enjoyed a dramatic increase in business and hired a significant number of new people. Thank goodness. Thank goodness for the small companies. They are the backbone of the country and have always been the backbone of my business. They've always been there for me.

There have been times in my past where I have lacked self-confidence and made the mistake of listening to other people rather than my own inner voice. Once was when I tried working for a living. That was a complete disaster. Thank goodness for the economic downturn that edged me toward doing what I was supposed to do: work for myself. Another time was when I thought perhaps I did lack ambition and reached for the bigger ring. I began working for bigger companies and lost sight of my roots. I really didn't like the people and didn't speak the language. I could fake it but it wasn't, as Buck Howard would say, "my audience." There was no heart in it.

I really don't think you become an entertainer because you want to. You do it because you have to. If you had any other choice you would do that instead. The engine that drives you is fueled by an audience, and not just any audience--it has to be your audience.

Clown Love

When I was in my mid-20s I was performing at a street carnival in what's known as the old city. There was this lady clown who had the nicest legs and derriere I've seen in years. I couldn't keep my eyes off her. Those striped hose they like to wear only made those long, slender legs sexier. Of course, in those days when the wind blew, I got aroused. She noticed me watching her--I grinned and winked. I've never been shy about this sort of thing. She flirted back.

One thing led to another and we had coffee after the event. We went to her apartment in Fort Sanders area--she was a UT student and had one of those three room flats. I had those striped stockings off in record time and before long we were making beautiful music together.

Here's the thing: she was still in clowny makeup.

This was loong before Insane Clown Posse. It was so sexy I thought I would lose my damned mind. She offered to take the makeup off but I told her to leave it on; she was into the idea as much as I was so she did. Afterward I had as much on me as she did; red, white and blue smears ran from my head to about knee level. It looked like I'd been in a washing machine with a runny American flag.

I told this to a friend of mine who said he wouldn't have been able to maintain his concentration. I just pretended I was in a Fellinni movie. As a rule I hate clowns but on this one occasion I was a fan.

Karma WAS a Bitch

Back in the late 80's I was engaged in walk around bedazzlement at a dance club. One guy decided to hassle me, I responded good-naturedly, he accelerated, I kept my cool; his partner screamed "Take a goddamn walk-- can't you take a hint." I was taken aback. I wasn't quite sure for a moment what had just happened. He screamed again "F-You, go away pal." He and his buddy laughed and thought they were quite cool.

I walked over to the bouncers at the door--two semi-pro wrestlers who loved me, since I hypnotized them to increase their weight-lifting performance, and I said we had some disruptive drunks at table such -and-so. Five minutes later these two were given the bum's rush. I waved at them while they sailed past me.

That was one of the best gigs I ever had. The management and staff loved me.

Karma was the tranny go-go-dancer who worked the club Saturday nights. Though s/he could kick ass too--about 6' 2", black belt in Tae Kwon Do and mean as a snake when pissed off. His or her full performance name: Karma Delight. The joke was: Karma is a Bitch. I once tempted the Fates by saying within earshot, "That Karma Apple has nuts;" (for you slow ones, Karma Apple= Caramel apple). She overheard me and I thought I was dead. Then she swayed over, kissed me on the cheek and said I was cute.

One of the bouncers was a guy with whom I went to high school, who everyone called Porker. This was his nick-name of course, left over from high school days. If you saw his face--or saw him eat--you'd see how apt this name was. Whenever Porker tore into his luncheon, it was a spectacle grown men wept to see. Porker was an excellent bouncer, a middlin' wrestler, and a complete pinhead. He never got it in his mind that Karma (whose real name was Walter Phillips) was a guy. A transitional guy, granted, with a very nice rack, but the, eh-- *toolbox* at that time was still quite intact. Porker tried his questionable, backwood east Tennessee charms on Karma quite aggressively. The rest of us watched, fascinated to see how it would turn out.

It turned out as follows. Karma, as I said, was mean as a snake. She agreed to go on a date with Porker.

I found out about this horror as follows. Chuck, the other bouncer, was a former UT football player who'd been cut from the team for a drug charge. We used to hang out and do various recreational pharmaceuticals, enhanced with 151 Puerto Rican rum. He called me one day to inform me Porker had a Date with Karma.

I said, "Does Porker not understand Karma is a guy?"

"No. He's an idiot, you know that."

Since we both were about as mature as twelve year olds, we thought this was the funniest thing imaginable. We couldn't wait to hear the outcome of this mismatch.

A couple of days later, Porker came into the club and took his post. Chuck looked like it was all he could do to keep from exploding with evil hilarity. Porker glared at him like he'd kill him if he uttered a syllable.

With my most innocent expression, which years of marriage had honed to perfection, I asked Porker how his date went. Understand we were old classmates who had played football together. I'd also helped him refine his wrestling skills with hypnotism. He trusted me. He pulled me aside. "Did you know Karma has a dick?"

The look on my face must have telegraphed my thoughts, because Chuck, whose impulse-control at its best was feeble, began howling. Porker screamed, "You fucking prick!" and went for him. They both tumbled through the double-doors into the parking lot, Chuck still howling with laughter, Porker squealing and grunting, incoherent with rage, and I lost it. I completely lost it; I had to collapse on a barstool, unmanned by uncontrollable laughter.

Mike, the urban-cowboy manager (this was the 80's, remember) came over to see what the ruckus was all about. "What the hell's going on? Are you all drunk?"

I eventually filled him in. He stroked his Magnum P.I. mustache and said, "This goddamn place beats all."

Almost thirty years later, the life lesson I've carried away from this is whenever someone says "Karma is a Bitch," I respond, "No. Karma has a dick."