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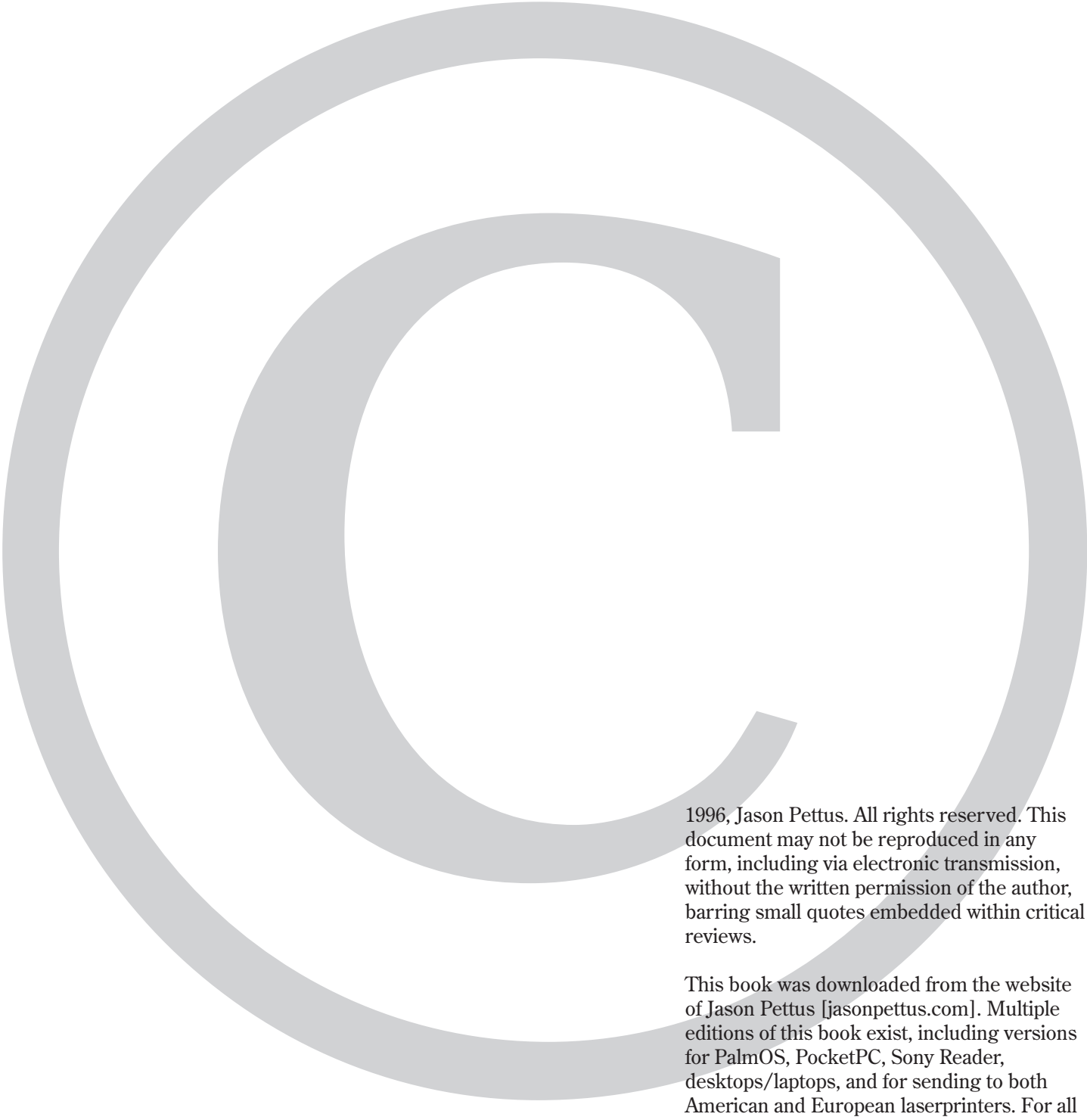
COMPLETE PERFORMANCE WORK 1996-2004

GAD Publishing Company Chicago USA

JASON PETTUS



CHICAGO STORIES 1996



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Since 1996 I have owned and operated a basement press in Chicago called GAD, dedicated mostly to the self-publishing of my own work (and with a brief detour in 2001, publishing a dozen books by my friends, before giving up the pursuit again for lack of community interest). As of 2004 GAD had ended up publishing over forty books, both full-length and miniature in nature, dealing with everything from poetry to prose, essays, interviews, science-fiction, erotica and travel. Being the sole employee of GAD, of course, especially while continuing to write new material on a regular basis, unfortunately meant that many of these books ended up being published on a less-than-professional basis, with dozens of typos and grammatical errors found in each. It was something that always slightly bothered me about the GAD catalog; as long as I was an active writer, though, this worry was always trumped by the stronger desire to keep writing new material, and to devote the majority of my energy to these new projects instead of cleaning up the old ones.

INTRODUCTION TO THE 2007 EDITION

In late 2004, however, I made the decision to put this literary career on indefinite hold, in order to open and operate an arts center here in Chicago instead. Given the chance for the first time to take a detailed look at the existing GAD catalog, I decided at that point to dedicate the next few years of my life to going through these old books, giving each of them the thorough editing they deserved, and republishing them in electronic form, standardizing not only the look of each publication but also the options for downloading and viewing them. This was complicated enough when it came to the nonfiction and prose projects, but especially tricky in the case of my performance poetry and monologues, of which I had never attempted to publish a pervasive, chronological record. Since the 2007 edition of these poetry/monologue books makes certain older titles now obsolete, as well as introduces several new titles, I thought I'd take a moment and explain the entire process, for committed readers who wish to own the complete, definitive collection.

Prior to 2002, the vast majority of GAD poetry/monologue books available were of special projects, including: *Psycho Poets* (1997), a collection of poems about women I slept with in 1997, when I was a member of the Chicago poetry-slam team; *Jasonettes* (1998), *The Heatseeker* (1999), *Notes From My Grandmother's Funeral* (2000) and *Celibate* (2001), all of them written transcripts of special half-hour themed performances I gave over the years, all of them for the old "Mental Graffiti" poetry show here in Chicago; *[Andi.]* (1999), a collection of poetry about a specific ex-girlfriend; and *The Tao of Now* (2000), a literary experiment of sorts, combining the length and structure of traditional short stories with the language and rhythm of slam poetry. The only exceptions were GAD's oldest two books, *The Sweet Alice Sessions* and *Kathie Lee Gifford Likes to Fuck!*, both from 1996, both collecting not special themed work but merely the general pieces I was writing and performing for the open mics that year. In addition there was a "greatest hits" collection also available, called *The Jason Pettus Portable Reader* (2001) and consisting of around twenty of my audience's absolute favorite pieces over the years, published exclusively to sell at live shows. These ten books reprinted approximately 100 of the poems and monologues I had written over the years; the vast majority of the 300 others I had written were simply unavailable in published form, save for those found on individual HTML pages at my website.

In 2002, the first year after "retiring" from the poetry community, I decided to make my first attempt at publishing a comprehensive series of these pieces; the result was the four-book series *Chicago Stories 1997-2000*, as well as a new "greatest hits" book, *More Poems about Blowjob*, collecting my favorite sexually-explicit poems and monologues from over the years. These five new books went a long way towards getting more of my old performance work out to the public, but with still a number of inconsistencies: for example, technically the contents of both *Sweet Alice* and *Kathie Lee Gifford* should've been included in the "Chicago Stories" series, not as their own stand-alone books; the series was still missing the poems I wrote in 2001 and 2002, important for posterity's sake but not a large enough collection to publish as their own book; and of course even the current "Chicago Stories" series was missing several pieces that had become audience favorites over the years.

For this 2007 edition, therefore, I have declared both *Sweet Alice* and *Kathie Lee Gifford* as "out-of-print" titles, neither of which will ever be printed in their original forms again; instead, they have been consolidated and are now known collectively as *Chicago Stories 1996*, fitting better into the overall theme of the entire series. I've also compiled a short *Chicago Stories 2001-2004* book, including the smattering of poems I wrote after retiring from the literary community. The new six-book "Chicago Stories" collection (including expanded edi-

tions of the four volumes that had previously existed) now reprints all of the general work from my years as an active performer; the seven special themed books already mentioned have also been reedited and republished, meaning that owning this thirteen-book series now gives you access to nearly every poem and monologue I wrote between 1996 and 2004. The two “greatest hits” compilations have also been republished, along with two new ones; one’s called *Love Blender*, a collection of pieces about relationships, compiled originally as a feature for the electronic magazine LoveBlender.com, and the other’s simply entitled *Personal Favorites*, along with a new introduction concerning why they are. And finally, a new omnibus edition has been published for 2007 as well, called *Complete Performance Work 1996-2004*, collecting the content of all thirteen previously-mentioned books into one volume (and in fact, owning that volume makes owning the thirteen individual books unnecessary).

Those who enjoyed this book may also want to check out the following related volumes, all currently available through GAD: *How to Win a Poetry Slam* (2000), a half-humorous, half-critical look at this unique literary genre; *Smells Like Sweat* (1997), a memoir of the 1997 National Poetry Slam, written entirely as a series of haikus (from an original concept by Jerry Quickley); and *The Tunnel Rat Sessions* (2002), a collection of long-form interviews with other slam poets that I originally conducted for the Chicago-based poetry newsletter *Tunnel Rat* in the mid-1990s. Of course, I also encourage you to check out the other books in the GAD catalog; as of this writing there are 55 books altogether, with more being added each year, covering almost every literary genre and style imaginable. As always, I urge you to drop me a line if you wish to discuss these pieces further; my latest contact information can always be found at my website, itself found at jasonpettus.com.

1984

So I have to come down to my grandparents' farm for this stupid family reunion which kinda sucks 'cause Tom got a new D&D campaign, dungeons D1, 2 and 3 which are supposed to kick ass and be really hard and we were going to play 'em this weekend, but since when has my life been fair, right? So we all drive downstate and my brother's got his Walkman on and he listens to all this heavy-metal shit and he's got it on really loud and the whole back seat goes "bzzz-bzzz-bzzz-bzzz" whenever there's a guitar solo and I go, "Will you turn it down!" and he goes, "What! I got my Walkman on!" so I go, "Mom!" and Mom goes (of course), "Well, he's got his earphones on, and that's the best we can do," and bzz-bzz-bzz it's driving me crazy!

And we finally get down there and it's all the usual nutcases, but Uncle Mike and Aunt Julie are down from Chicago this year, which doesn't happen very often, so that's kinda cool, and Mom goes, "Matt, you remember your cousin Rachel, don't you?" and uh, duh, yeah I remember Rachel. Rachel's cut her hair short and she's wearing a ratty t-shirt that says, 'God - Go For It! NICC Summer Conference 1983' and she's hanging out on the couch and I don't know what to say so I go, "Hey, how's it going?" and she goes, "Okay. How're you?" and I go, "I'm all right," and there you go. I'm so smooth, yeah, right. Then all the parents leave the room and Rachel and I are in there alone and it kinda freaks me out so I sit down across the room and get out my Rubik Supercube and start playing with it.

"Hey," Rachel says, "Is that the Supercube?"

"Yeah," I say, and Rachel goes, "Cool," and comes over. "I've got the regular Cube," she says, "but I've never tried the Supercube."

"Yeah, I figured out the Cube like, last year," I say. "I just got this for my birthday. It's got four rows on a side instead of three. It's pretty tough."

She goes, "Can I try it?" so I go "sure" so she starts playing with it and she's pretty good, she gets an entire side done. And then we start talking and pretty soon we're laughing and talking and it turns out we listen to a lot of the same bands except she said the best show she's seen yet was this summer she saw Amy Grant and Michael W. Smith play back-to-back and I'm like, hmm, but I don't say anything. Man, she's really into her church but I guess that's just how she is, you know?

So Rachel and I hang out with each other all day and that was cool, and then that night they have The Celebrated Family Reunion HayRide, whoo-hoo, you know, but I guess I shouldn't really say anything because I do end up having a pretty good time. Grandpa hooks up his tractor to like three full wagons full of hay and goes up through this path of his farmland and it's, like, the middle of the night and it's pitch-black and spooky and Uncle Steve keeps running around the side of the wagon and jumping up and yelling "Boo!" and doesn't he realize how annoying he is? But now he's got the kids started and now they keep jumping off the wagon and running around and throwing hay on everyone and stuffing it down people's shirts and rubbing it in their hair and all the moms are yelling, "Get back on the wagon! You're going to get left behind!" but it's pitch-black, so what do they know? And Rachel and I are sitting together and we're just laughing at everyone and how stupid they're acting but then we get into it and we're throwing hay on each other and we start laughing even more which makes us get hay in our mouths and we have to spit which makes me laugh so hard I think my side's going to split. And at some point when we're throwing hay on each other our hands touch and we slip them into each other and we sit there the whole rest of the hayride holding hands, down real low between us so no one else can see it and I keep digging and rubbing my thumb across the back of her hand and she keeps doing the same to me and we don't say anything about it but every so often we look at each other and it's like we're both saying the same thing to each other without actually saying it, you know?

And we get to the campfire at the top of this hill where you can see all the way down at all of Grandpa's farmland and his house way far away and all the Ozarks stretch out before you, and it's pretty cool, I gotta admit. So I grab a styrofoam cup full of warm soda and go down a little bit down the hill and just be by myself and think about my life and high school and the new Police album which I've been listening to like, constantly and I think it's kinda warping my mind but I think I kinda like that, you know?

And all the old-timers have gathered around the campfire at the top of the hill and they're all singing hymns and you know, whatever, and Rachel comes down the hill and stands next to me and says, "Hey" so I go "hey" and she goes "whatcha thinking about?" and I go, "I don't know. Life, I guess. High school," then I laugh 'cause it sounds really stupid, I mean, high school isn't life, you know, it just came out that way.

Rachel looks at the sky and says, "You can't see any stars in Wheaton. Chicago and all

the other cities are too close by. Too many lights.” She doesn’t say anything for awhile and then she says, “I’ve never seen so many stars.”

I point at the sky. “Orion. That means winter’s coming.” I point to the horizon. “That’s where you’d see Venus, but we missed it. It sinks early this time of year. Another sign of winter.” I point up. “Big dipper. Follow the line on the end of it –” and I do with my finger – “and that’s the North Star.”

She says, “How come you know so much about astronomy?”

“Oh...” and now I’m embarrassed because I’m looking like a nerd again and I’m working really hard this year not to look like one, but I keep slipping up – “Oh, I studied it. You know, when I was a kid.”

“Oh,” she says, looking into the sky again, and I want to grab her hand again but I’m feeling really nervous and self-conscious. Out of the blue she says, “You know, one day we’re going to be grown-up and bringing our kids down here and we’ll be the ones around the campfire and they’re going to be running around and throwing hay.”

“Yeah.” I pause. “Weird.”

“Yeah,” she says.

Right then my brother runs up. “Hey, we’re all gonna play hide-n-seek in the woods.”

“Oh, man...” I groan.

“Oh come on! We need all the people we can get!”

“I’m fifteen!” I say. “I’m not gonna play hide-n-seek!”

“Come on, it’ll be fun,” Rachel says, then grabs my hand and yells, “Come on!” and pulls me with her and what can I say, I’m a sucker.

So we’re all at the top of the hill and we’re making all these elaborate rules, as usual (“Okay, you can’t go past the big rock or no one will ever find you and this chair is base but you can’t move the chair or you’ll automatically be It”) and then we eeny-meeny for It and my brother gets It, ha-ha, serves him right. so he hides his eyes and starts counting down from a hundred really fast, and Rachel grabs me and whispers, “Come hide with me,” and we’re running through the woods and there’s branches and logs and shit everywhere and I can barely see where I’m going but Rachel’s running through it all breakneck like nothing can hurt her or ever will and she finds two big trees next to each other and she grabs me and pulls me into the little hiding space that they form where the trunks meet.

I’m standing next to her and she whispers, “Closer, he’ll see you,” so I scoot in and like, our whole bodies are touching each other, all the way up and down. And we’re both looking the same direction, back towards base so like, her back is to my front, that make sense? And my heart’s going “BOOM-BOOM-BOOM” from all the running and I’m trying to catch my breath and calm down but I can’t, you know, my breath is coming all shallow and my heart’s still going “BOOM-BOOM-BOOM” and Jesus I got a hard-on like you wouldn’t believe, like it’s harder than it’s ever been in my whole life, like it’s going to rip through my pants, and my face is like an inch away from Rachel’s head and all I can think about is how her short blonde hair is all wet and matted down from all the running and her neck is tan and naked, and I can smell her hair, I can actually smell her hair.

Rachel turns around quickly and she’s got this look on her face, this look like, well, I don’t know, just this weird look on her face, like she’s frowning but not really, her mouth is open and her lips are drooped just a little bit kinda like a frown but not really, and her eyes are half-closed and there’s little beads of sweat running down her face and before I even know what’s going on we’re kissing and all I can think, I swear to God all I can think is, “This isn’t nearly as hard to do as I thought it was going to be,” but I still don’t really know what I’m doing, our lips are sort of just mashed together and then Rachel opens her mouth really wide so I do too and now our tongues are touching each other and now they’re wrestling and everything in there is so hot and wet and weird I can feel myself getting weak in the knees.

Then my brother starts yelling, “Come out! Come on out! I got Nathan!” then I hear another voice, dejected, yelling, “Yeah, he got me! I’m It!” and we stop kissing and I look at Rachel and she looks at me, and we both got these looks of panic on our faces and then she grabs my hand and smiles and then pecks me on the lips again and runs off into the woods without saying a word.

And I just stand there for a minute, thinking, “So that was my first kiss” and I keep thinking I should memorize everything around me, all the details, for posterity’s sake, so when I’m an old man and someone asks me about my first kiss I can tell them the whole story but, I mean, it’s just some dark woods, it’s just some trees, and it just sorta happened, you know, no big story, nothing cool. And that’s that, I guess, so I start walking back to base ‘cause I’m fifteen, man, and when you’re fifteen you don’t run back to base, you walk.

THE ABSOLUTELY TRUE STORY OF MY TEN-YEAR HIGH-SCHOOL REUNION

It was probably that my dick was hanging out of my pants – that was probably the first thing that got everyone’s attention. That, and the fact that as I busted through the glass doors of the St. Charles Best Western on my Harley, I accidentally killed Rich Ledson, our class president. Ah, but he was an asshole, so no big loss

I jumped off my hog, grabbed the half-finished fifth of Jack straddling the handlebars, and sauntered over to the reception desk. Julie Albert... or whatever the fuck her name is now, was sitting there with a nervous smile on her face.

“Oh... ah... Jason... how... nice... you... could... make it. Ah... well, here’s a nametag, now if you could just write your name on...”

I clocked her one in the face and knocked her unconscious. “Hey!” I yelled. “I don’t need a fuckin’ nametag! I’m Jason fuckin’ PETTUS! Valet! Where’s the goddamned valet! You! You there! Go out there and park my sweet baby, The Martha Stewart III. And don’t

you dare get a scratch on ‘er, or I’m opening up a whole can of whupass on you tonight!”

“B-b-but...” the guy stammered. “I-I’m not the valet. I’m Chris Lantz! You remember me? I was captain of the wrestling team? I went to state in my weight division two years in a row?”

“You’re not the valet, huh?” I said. “Then why are you wearing the cheapest, ugliest, most god-awful fucking suit I have ever seen in my life?”

“Uh...”

“Oh, never mind. Go fetch me a drink.”

“B-b-but...” He pointed at my bottle. “B-but you already have a drink.”

“Oh, do I?” I looked down at the bottle, then before he knew what was happening, I smashed it across the bridge of his nose, instantly crumpling him to the carpet. “Well now I don’t fucking have a drink! So go get me one!” When he didn’t respond, I poked him in the ribs with my steel-tipped cowboy boots. “Chris? Oh Chris?” When he still didn’t respond, I walked away in disgust. “Pussy,” I muttered. “You want something done right around here, you gotta do it yourself.”

When I got to the bar, who should be tending but Michele Fallert, my ex-girlfriend. She was wearing a stained tuxedo shirt, black polyester miniskirt, and a pair of red six-inch “fuck me” pumps.

“Well, well, if it isn’t Jason Pettus!” she said excitedly, wiping down the bar.

“Hey, what’s shaking, Jiggles?” Jiggles, of course, being my pet name for her. It referred to no part of her anatomy – she just seemed to get a kick out of it when I called her that. Go figure.

“Oh, Jason,” she said, starting to make a triple Manhattan with double vermouth – hey, she remembered my favorite drink! “Oh, Jason,” she continued, “things have just gone from bad to worse since I broke up with you. First, my new boyfriend got me pregnant and I had to drop out of school. Then when the kid was four, he found my boyfriend’s gun and shot him dead. Now he wears a dress and plays drums for a Riot Grrrrl band called ‘Toxic Shock Syndrome.’ Fortunately, this event got me on The Jerry Springer Show... but my boyfriend’s parents sued me and took my appearance fees. So, broke and addicted to Doane’s Back Pills, I was forced to take this job at the Best Western lounge. Truth be told, the only reason I get to keep the job is ‘cause I’m taking it up the ass from the manager every night back in the walk-in freezer.”

“Well... that’s too bad, Jiggles,” I said, dropping six maraschino cherries into my drink. “But, if I do remember correctly, I did tell you when we were 16 that you’d regret breaking up with me.”

“You’re right, Jason – God, you’re so right! So...” she said, trying to change the subject, “How are you doing these days?”

“Oh, fine. I live in Chicago now. I’m living the life of a failed artist. The highlight of my week is going to this really shitty bar and reading my stories for a roomful of drunks and smackheads. Half the time they don’t even know I’m on stage, and the other half, they couldn’t care less what I’m saying unless I’m shouting ‘fuck’ at the top of my lungs.”

“Oh, how positively thrilling!” Michele squealed. “More! Tell me more!”

“Okay, Jiggles. I’m a temp who gets seven hours of work a week. My electricity’s been turned off twice in the last six months...”

“Oh, stop! You’re getting me all hot! I have to work for another five hours!”

“All right, Jiggles. I always forgot how much I turned you on.”

“Oh Jason!” she cried. “Take me with you! I’m sick of turning tricks at the Wal-Mart snack bar! Whisk me away to your crazy, artistic, bohemian lifestyle in Chicago!”

“You had your chance,” I said, taking my drink. “But... we’ll always have the back bleachers of Homecoming 1985, won’t we?” I slapped a hundred dollar bill down on the bar. “Have a good life, Jiggles.”

“God bless you, Jason Pettus!” Michele yelled, waving at me long after I was gone.

When I got across the room, I spied Amy Soos, a girl I had had a big crush on in high school who would have nothing to do with me. “Jason Pettus!” she said, clutching my arm. “Thank God you showed up!” It was obvious that she was already trashed, and if the blood trickling down her nose was any indication, she had already been paid a visit from ‘Dr. Tinkle,’ if you know what I mean.

“What are you talking about, Dingey?” I said, pulling my arm away. For some reason, women really love it when I use the vernacular made famous by Mel from the hit CBS sitcom “Alice.” I have no idea why... but then again, women have always been a mystery to me.

“Oh Jason, I had no idea what I was missing in high school! You see, I didn’t sexually blossom until I was 23, and it wasn’t until then that I could see what was right in front of me. If I had only known how romantic it was when you’d sit outside my house for hours on end in your ‘74 primer-gray Duster, staring into my bedroom window with a pair of binoculars! If I’d only known how wet I’d get from slightly geeky guys who drink too much and look vaguely like Mr. Bean! And...” she pointed to my still-exposed Johnson – “...if I’d only known that you possessed the most virile piece of manhood I have ever seen in my entire life!”

“Ah, stow it, Dingey! You know that I’ll only ask out women that will have nothing to do with me. And if I’ll turn down Madonna, you can bet your sweet ass I’m gonna turn you down! Now get your grubby mitts off me before I have my men do it for you.”

Amy fell to the ground, sobbing uncontrollably. “Oh, for God’s sake,” I said, “get up. Show a little self-respect. And one more thing...” I shouted over my shoulder as I walked away. “They call it dope for a reason!

“You!” I yelled at the D.J. as I walked up to the booth. “What the fuck is this shit you’re playing?”

“Why, it’s new wave hits from the ‘80s! It’s the music you grew up to!”

“New wave... hits? NEW WAVE HITS!? Buddy, I don’t know if anyone’s told you this yet or not, but you’re in the middle of rural St. Charles County fuckin’ Missouri! Only mamma’s boys listened to ‘new wave hits’ in my high school! Tito! Tito!” I called to my administrative assistant. “Tito, bring over my karaoke tape!” Tito swaggered his 400-pound Samoan frame over to the D.J. booth. “All right folks – here’s the St. Charles hits of the ‘80s!” I yelled at the crowd, grabbing the mike and punching the D.J. in the face, just for good measure.

“BANG YOUR HEAD
WE’RE NOT GONNA TAKE IT
ROUND AND ROUND
YOU SHOOK ME ALL NIGHT LONG
I - I - I - I
PA-NA-MA
SHE GOT THE LOOKS THAT KILL
TODAY’S TOM SAWYER GOT A MEAN MEAN STRIDE
I WANT YOU... TO WANT ME!
I WANT YOU TO SHOW ME THE WAY
ROCK OF AGES
AND EVERY ROSE HAS ITS THORN
GOOD NIGHT ST. LOUIS!”

The crowd broke into uproarious cheers and hoisted me onto their shoulders. Just then, my arch-enemy, Principal Dan Brown, showed up in the corner of the room.

“Hey... hey there,” he yelled. “Put that child down immediately!”

“Hey, Mr. Brown!” I yelled. “You got any nude pictures of yer wife?”

“Why... no, no I don’t.”

“You wanna buy some? Ha-ha-ha! GET ‘IM!” The crowd, already whipped into a frenzy, jumped on Mr. Brown and beat him to within an inch of his life.

“All right, jerkies, all right,” I said, climbing down from their shoulders. “My job here is done. I’m outta here.”

“But...” they cried, following me out to my sweet baby, The Martha Stewart III. “What

will you do? Where are you going?"

"Going?" I jumped on my hog and kick started 'er up – VROOOOM, VRROOOOM VRROOOM VRROOOOOOOOMMM oh what a sweet baby she is! "I'll tell you where I'm going! I'm going back to my parents' house! I'm gonna sit in my old bedroom and look through all my yearbooks! And I'm gonna masturbate about each and every one of ya!"

"YAY!" they yelled. "All hail Jason Pettus! All hail the King of the Class of 1986 – the Class with Class!"

As I started to pull away, dozens of naked children suddenly appeared, all holding baskets full of flower petals to throw in front of me, so that my sweet baby, The Martha Stewart III, would never have to touch the cursed ground of St. Charles, Missouri. When I got out of the parking lot, I lit a Molotov Cocktail and threw it in the Best Western, blowing the place up and killing every last one of the bastards. Ah, but they were a bunch of assholes, so no big loss.

Recently a friend of mine here in Chicago was trying to decide if he should go to his ten-year high-school reunion. He asked me if I had a fun time at mine.

"Ah... well, it was okay," I said. "But you should go. You never know... you may be surprised."

“Ladies and gentlemen, the host of *The Price is Right*, Bob Barker!”

Have you watched an episode of *The Price is Right* recently? I have. My temp agency hasn't been able to find me work this week, and I have spent each and every morning watching mindless television. I watched my very first episode of *Beverly Hills 90210* this week and discovered that Jennie Garth is hot. I watched an entire episode of *Jenny Jones* this week. It was entitled “I Have A Secret Crush on my Service Technician!” which teaches us two things – 1) *Jenny Jones* still hasn't learned her fuckin' lesson, and 2) I will watch anything if put in front of me. Oh sure, I learned some things, too. I learned how to make a portobello mushroom sandwich. I learned that when traveling in Greece, not to stay in Athens because everything's really overpriced. I learned that Barney really is as annoying as everyone says he is. Mostly, however, my mornings this week have consisted of Regis and Doogie Howser and Eagle Insurance.

BOB BARKER'S PUSSY WAGON

So. I was flipping channels and ran across the very beginning of *The Price is Right*. Now, understand that *The Price is Right* was my absolute favorite of the game shows in my preschool days. Something about those bright '70s colors, the purples and burnt siennas and mustards. Something about those long, slender microphones, like out of *Logan's Run* or something. Something

about that retro-futureshock font they used for everything from the show's logo to the giant pricetags. I hadn't watched the show in ten years! This was gonna be great.

Now, I won't insult your intelligence by assuming you've never watched *The Price is Right*. You are familiar with the blaring theme music. You are of course familiar with the diffusion-lensed camera that transforms the studio lights into a dazzling, wonderful fantasyland. You must be familiar with the nervous energy with which the camera jaggedly sweeps over the audience, until... “Billy Joe Bob, COME ON DOWN!” The oversize nametag that looks like it came from Goldblatt's circa 1957. The anger and frustration you would direct at that one asshole contestant, you know the one – “How much did she bid? 840? Um... I'll bid 841.” All this... all this is the same.

I'll tell you what's different. Back when I was a tot, when I was watching the show on a fairly regular basis, the emcee would end all the silliness with “And now the host of *The Price is Right*... Bob Barker!” Bob would step out from behind some hidden recess, *Logan's Run* microphone in hand, and the crowd would display the normal game-show sycophantic behavior that game-show crowds always do. If it was a particularly good day, Bob would take a small, humbling bow before calling for the first item up for bid.

Now, though, now... “And now the host of *The Price is Right*... Bob Barker!”

Have you ever seen the movie *Network*? The classic 1974 film about a television personality who is unwittingly turned into a messiah figure by a media-saturated, uneducated country? Well, ladies and gentlemen, we have our Howard Beale in 1996, and his name is Bob Barker.

The mere mention of his name gets the entire audience on their feet immediately, hooting and hollering and waving their fists in the air and barking, actually barking like the fucking *Arsenio Hall* show. Bob now comes out from the back audience exit and slowly makes his way down the aisle to the stage. The throngs, the awed throngs, gingerly reach out and touch him, as if to say, “Bob, Bob, cure me of my leprosy!” “Bob, Bob, drive the demon from my soul!” “Bob, oh Bob, save me from my bout of consumption!”

Bob, of course, takes it all in stride. He reaches out to touch his zealous followers. He wisely nods at them, back and forth, like the faithful idol that he is. Bob is happy. Bob has finally attained the status of sainthood that he so richly believes he's deserved his whole life. He climbs on stage now and blithely accepts the adoration without so much as a thank-you now.

This, in and of itself, was frightening enough to give me chills. But there's more. I started putting it all together, there in my bed, holding the remote control, and never mind that I had just woken up and never mind that I was still a little drunk from the night before. I had ol' Bob's number right there and then, all right.

Nothing else about the show has changed. It's still the same free-wheeling '70s logo and colors and sliding panel doors and even the *Logan's Run* microphones, for God's sake. The models, the “game show assistants,” are even younger and firmer than they've ever been. They all look like rejects from the *Baywatch* callbacks. They flirt with Bob constantly, throughout the entire hour, flirt in this very lecherous, very slimy, very “Come climb up on Uncle Bob's lap” kinda way. It occurs to me that there was some sort of ugly business a

coupla years back, something about a lawsuit against Bob Barker for sexual harassment or something.

Oh yeah, I'm putting it all together. Bob Barker... Bob Barker's running a sex club, right in the middle of CBS Television City, in the heart of sunny and sleepy Burbank, California! Unwitting tourists are being lured into an innocent taping of *The Price is Right*, but when the cameras turn off... that music starts up again, that glittery '70s disco ball is turned back on, and unspeakable horrors take place. "Now, who wants to guess where Uncle Bob wants to get a spanking? The winner gets all the money in Uncle Bob's pocket! Ooh, that's a good guess! Higher... higher... lower... lower... higher... LOWER... HIGHER! LOWER! Doris, spin the wheel! Spin that fucking wheel, Doris, for the love of God!"

Listen, Bob! I'm on to your sick little game! When those senators were all calling for ratings on TV shows, we all know who they were talking about, don't we! Well, forget it! I'm not joining your perverted little leather fetish club! I won't heed your oh-so-cleverly coded come-on line, "Please get your pets spayed and neutered!" You hear me, Bob Barker? I'm taking you down! Down, I say!

Jesus, I hope my agency finds me work soon.

BRANSON MISSOURI IS A REALLY BAD PLACE TO THROW UP

(Man and woman on stage, reading)

Woman: I said I don't want to talk about it anymore!

Man: Fine. Let's just go get some dinner.

Woman: Fine. Where do you want to go?

Man: You pick out the place.

Woman: Oh no. You're the guest, you pick out the place.

Man: Right. I'm the guest. I don't know what kinds of places there are to eat. You live here, you pick the place.

Woman: (Pause) This is so typical of you, you know that?

Man: What!

Woman: You always pass off the responsibility of choice to someone else so that you can pout and whine about whatever choice they made.

Man: What kind of new delusion is this?

Woman: It's true. You live to complain, and you can't do that if you're responsible for your choices in life. So you hand it off to dupes like me, like you did for three years of my life, and no matter what choice I'd make, you found something to whine about.

Man: Fine. Fine! Make any choice you want – any choice! I won't say a word about it.

Woman: (Sarcastically) Yeah.

Man: I promise. Not a word.

Woman: Fine. Let's go to this Thai place around the corner.

Man: (Long pause, then a sigh)

Woman: I knew it.

Man: You know I can't eat Thai food. When I said I wouldn't say anything, that was with the understanding that you would pick a place that has food that won't disagree with my system.

Woman: You psychosomatic prick.

Man: I'm not even going to get in a discussion about whether my dietary limitations are real or fake, because one, you'd lose, and two, what would be the fucking point? So just... pick...something...else.

Woman: Okay...

Man: I mean why does every restaurant you've picked all weekend have to be some crazy hippie food place anyway? All weekend long, it's 'humus' this and 'curry' that and 'blackened' this...

Woman: (interrupting) So where do you suggest?

Man: I don't know. Just some... American food, you know?

Woman: Define American food, please.

Man: You remember, food you used to eat when you were just a pathetic suburban teenager like the rest of us. Before you became Miss World Traveler.

Woman: You want to go to a fuckin' Denny's?

Man: No, I didn't say...

Woman: Fine, you want to go to a fuckin' Denny's and have your French fries and your patty melt, we'll go to a fuckin' Denny's.

Man: The only point I'm trying to make is that there exist decent restaurants that serve nice, plain fish and chicken and stuff like that, without the hot mustard sauce and without the sprouts...

Woman: Fine. I know this place across town. Let's go.

Man: (Turning to audience) Branson, Missouri, for those of you who don't know, is known in common circles as the "White Trash Las Vegas." Originally a sleepy tourist town picking up summer trade in the middle of Lake of the Ozarks, it was home for several decades only to go-cart tracks, waterslides, a Ripley's Believe it or Not! museum, several putt-putt miniature golf courses, a country-western themed amusement park called "Silver Dollar City," and several local "hillbilly" style dinner theatre places, entertainment provided by groups with names such as Baldknobbers, Foggy River Boys, and Boxcar Willie.

Woman: Oh, for God's sake, will you just eat it?

Man: (Back to woman) No. No, I'm not going to eat it, because I can't eat it. I can't eat it because it's inedible.

Woman: It is a restaurant. Restaurants do not make inedible dishes. Maybe dishes you

don't agree with or don't match the perfect taste you have in your mouth, but not inedible dishes.

Man: Well then, obviously you need to try this dish.

Woman: I said I don't want to try it. Get that fork out of my face.

Man: No, obviously you don't believe me, and I need to exonerate my good name, so here, eat it.

Woman: (in tense whisper) I said get that goddamn fork out of my mouth or so help me God I'm going to stand up and walk out of here and you can call a cab to get you home.

Man: Fine.

Woman: (pause, then in exasperated voice) Are you trying to get back at me? Is that what this is?

Man: Now what are you talking about.

Woman: Okay, I admit, our relationship had its problems. We both made a lot of mistakes, I know that. I'm not disputing that. But I thought you came down to visit this weekend to resolve some of these issues. I thought we were here to work some things out. But it feels like you've got some kind of hidden agenda whereby you're out to publicly humiliate me on every topic we can bring up over three days, to try to get back at me for our relationship...

Man: Jesus Christ...

Woman: No, I'm serious. You know, I don't have many friends in this town and there's not a lot of places I go to on a regular basis, but this place is one of them, and you know that, you knew that before we even got here. And now they're going to forever link my face with that night that smug little bastard sent his entire dinner back and said the whole thing was inedible.

Man: Listen to me. This is not about humiliating you. It is simply the fact that I am not going to pay for a meal that I cannot eat. If you don't believe me, really, try a bit of this...

Woman: Jesus Christ!

Man: What!

Woman: Come on. Let's just... (sighs) Let's just get out of here and go get drunk.

Man: (to audience) In the late 1970's, Roy Clark opened in his own dinner theatre in Branson, setting up a full schedule of nationally known touring country stars to stop by and play for a few nights. It quickly became the most popular attraction in the entire Springfield metropolitan area, even eclipsing the Bass Pro Shop World Headquarters up in the city proper. As these nationally known country stars would come into Branson and play, there were always two things that never failed to grab their attention: 1) that Branson is a picturesque small town situated in the middle of rolling hills and fresh water; and 2) Roy Clark's dinner theatre just grossed six million dollars in the last six months.

Woman: Sorry.

Man: (back to woman) It's fine.

Woman: I'm not used to drinking that much.

Man: You don't have to explain.

Woman: I mean, it's not like our undergraduate days...

Man: I said, you don't have to explain.

Woman: (pause) Are your shoes all right?

Man: Well...they'll wash off...I guess.

Woman: I don't know why I drank that much – I should've known better...

Man: I don't want to talk about it.

Woman: I guess I just wasn't watching myself...

Man: I said, I don't want to talk about it. (Long pause) Are you ready to go home?

Woman: (pause) Yeah. (Another pause) I guess.

Man: (To audience) The boom started with stuttering country legend Mel Tillis and novelty star Ray Stevens, creator of such unforgettable songs as "Guitarzan," "The Streak," and "Ahab...the Arab." Soon there was so much demand for construction crews to build new, shiny, multi-million dollar theatres in Branson, that workers had to be trucked in every day and put up in shantytowns, endless rows of mobile homes put up in haste on the edge of town.

The Osmond Family. Bobby Vinton's "Blue Velvet Theatre." Wayne Newton. Shoji Tabuchi, the nation's number one western-swing style violinist (or as they say in Branson, "fiddler"). Andy Williams' "Moon River Theatre." They built one for Johnny Cash, but he backed out. No doubt Liberace would have taken it if he was still alive.

You drive down the still-two-lane road that constitutes the Strip, and the soft fluorescence of the “Putt Putt A Go Go” has been replaced by dazzling computer-controlled sets of neon lights. The posters for the sincere yet idiotic hillbilly stylings of the Baldknobbers have been replaced with giant, glittering thirty foot high photographs of the Mandrell sisters. You drive down the Strip and you are mesmerized by the glow and the noise, and as your unblinking eyes take it all in, all you can say is (whispered) “Wow.” And you haven’t even gotten to the Judd’s theatre yet.

Woman: Well...it was a...good weekend.

Man: Uh...yeah. I guess.

Woman: I hope...ah...(with false cheeriness) Hope your plane ride’s okay!

Man: Oh, well...I’m sure it’ll be fine. I’m...uh...glad I came.

Woman: So am I, so am I. I think we really got some things worked out.

Man: So do I. It was very...productive.

Woman: Yeah. (Pause) I’m, uh, sorry I threw up on you.

Man: Yeah, well, that’s okay. I’m...uh...sorry I, uh, fell asleep with that cigarette and...uh, burned down your, uh, apartment.

Woman: Yeah...well, that’s what insurance is for, right?

Man: Yeah...yeah.

Woman: Well, I’ll see you soon.

Man: Yeah, okay. I’ll see you soon. (To audience) The township of Branson is now facing the first effects of its boom. Hundreds of construction workers are still living in those mobile homes, broke now that the construction is over and unable to scrape up enough money to escape. There was a small article in the paper recently about how a couple of the Osmond kids, currently enrolled in the public school, got beat up on the playground. My old connections from Columbia, Missouri, my college town, tell me that the Branson cocaine business is the briskest the state’s seen since St. Louis in the ‘70s.

Branson has a lot of issues, issues that need to be resolved. But I’m willing to bet that the city has a lot tougher time coming to a resolution than they originally imagined. They’re going to find a lot more pain, a lot more hate, a lot more repressed emotions than they ever thought existed. Frankly, I can’t offer any advice to the city, save one piece that I think I can safely give to everyone here, too: If you ever eat at the Papermoon Cafe, skip the roast beef.

CHICAGO

You... stand on the platform. You... watch the headlights approach. The doors open. You step on. The doors close.

(Drummer hits a hard note on the snare drum, then plays a pounding, rhythmical beat) And you are off with a lurch, a surge of energy that almost knocks you on your ass, makes you blindly grope for that pole, getting you dirty stares from your packed train companions, upright, uptight people who wear their sunglasses in the tunnels and poke you with their umbrella and their briefcase and their Wall Street Journal, as you rumble and jumble and jolt your way down the tracks, the stops and the starts upsetting your pretty little hungover stomach and wish for that orange juice the beautiful Lincoln Parker next to you is sipping. (Makes a sound like a train coming to a screeching halt) Fullerton! Whoa! (Makes a sound like a train coming to a screeching halt) North and Clybourne! Whoa! (Makes a sound like a train coming to a screeching halt) Clark and Division! (Makes a sound like a train coming to a screeching halt) Chicago! (Makes a sound like a train coming to a screeching halt) Grand! (Makes a sound like a train coming to a screeching halt)

(Drums stop, and a person from the audience yells out) Next stop, Washington! Washington will be the next stop.

(Drummer plays a straight-ahead rock beat) And you ride the escalator up and the panorama slowly fills your eyes like a slow tracking shot in a David Mamet movie. It is the City of the Century, the City on the Go, the City on the Make, the City that Works. And work it does, work, work, work, on every fucking streetcorner and down the middle of fucking State Street, fences and signs and cones and machines and jackhammers and hustlers, street hustlers on Wabash and Washington, "Sir, my car just broke down and I'm trying to get some money to get back home" but you are sidestepping them, gliding by them with the same ease you glide by the four hundred pound black women, waddling their way down Madison like they own the fucking road and you're weaving and bobbing, you're playing your Walkman as loud as it'll go, ignoring traffic cops like Michael Jordan ignoring opponents as he drives for the hoop...

(A person from the audience screams out) Hey, get outta the fucking street!

(Yelling back from the stage at the man) Hey, watch where the fuck you're driving!

(Back to microphone) And all you want to do is act like a tourist, stare straight up in the air and gape at the buildings that scrape the sky, marvel and be in awe and reach your hand out, try to grasp heaven and stick it in your pocket. But you've lived here just exactly long enough to know not to do that, so you trudge on at ground level, and you're hungry, and you're thirsty, and...

(Drums stop) It's time to go.

(Loud snare hit from the drums, then the "train" rhythm again) And the train smells like piss and a sullen Mexican killer sits across the aisle from you, a kid, a kid who's never had the luxury like you of living anywhere but smack dab in the middle of this meat-grinder we call a city. And as the train bumps and jumps and wiggles, this kid doesn't get to have a childhood because he's too busy assessing the situation, sizing you up and sizing him up, and him and him and him, rating the threat, rating the opportunity, the danger, the thrill.

(Drums stop, and a person from the audience yells out) Next stop, Damen! Damen will be the next stop.

(Drummer plays a funky ass beat) Bohemia with a Visa card as you step into the tricorner with the yuppies and the students, the artistic and the autistic, the shamen and the shysters and the poets and the posers and no one anywhere is over thirty except for the cops and this Rastafarian who's trying to sell you poems for two bucks apiece and you say, "Why would I want to buy bad poems, I get an evening of free ones every week," and you buy a Tribune from a newsstand and it feels good, it feels heavy in your hands in a way that it couldn't if it was wrapped up in a plastic bag and waiting in your front yard. And you stop in a diner, order a three dollar slop and read through Royko and Greene and all the other losers, scan the Tempo section for mention of your friend's play, your friend's band, your friend's exhibit and watch the girls, the beautiful girls, the beautiful funky slacker ass girls with the haircuts and the glasses and the platitudes, coming in and out of your sight like waves in a giant ecstatic beautiful sea.

And then you're on the move, strolling down Guyville, down Algrenland, past the Turkish baths that are still fucking here and you see the lead singer of Smashing Pumpkins buy a U-Hu at the convenience store and you think of a line from your friend's poem, "I'm an artist, man, I never look back" and you push your way into a bar, a dive, a hole, table lamps in the corners and nothing but rockabilly on the jukebox and the bathroom painted like a

Spanish bullfight black velvet painting. The bartenders act like they're doing you a favor by getting you a drink but you wouldn't have it any other way 'cause beers are a buck and if you can't have an attitude here, where can you? And this is the only place in the city where you can run into people you know on the sidewalk and you do and you have some drinks and they ask what time it is and you look and you go...

(Drums stop) Oh, shit. I gotta go.

(Loud snare hit from the drums, then the "train" rhythm again) Drunk frat boys on the train, with Cubs shirts and painted faces and backwards baseball caps, hootin' and hollerin' and you want to hate them and usually you do but tonight you can't, tonight your soul joins in the revelry and swells inside you and you desperately want to believe the rallying cry on the train- "Tonight we're not going to lose! I just know it!" and the Ravenswood pulls up next to you, tired junior executives clogging their way back to their mini-suburb and a woman with pantyhose and tennis shoes looks at you and you look back and you stare at each other, both wanting to swap lives with each other at that exact moment, and her train stops at Diversey and you rush on and for exactly the one millionth time since you moved here, you have fallen in love and then lost the girl.

(Drums stop, and a person from the audience yells out) Next stop, Belmont! Belmont will be the next stop.

(Drummer plays a country-swing waltz beat) Teenage punk rockers hustle you for change, homeless high schoolers with pink hair and baggy shorts down past their knees who have been in Lakeview so long they don't even know any more why their forefathers picked the corner of Belmont and Clark to hang out at, only that they did. You trudge your ass down the street, past the rollerbladers and the designer sunglasses and the corporate bagel shops and the used record stores and you look into the window of Scenes and all the hipsters stare back at you and you run past Wellington, scared that this is the day you finally get sideswiped but you live to tell the tale and you are at the coffeehouse now and there is your friend. And you smoke and you drink and you drink and you smoke and you talk about your latest book and talk about your apartments and talk about a party this weekend and talk turns, as it always, always does every time, with every friend you've ever had up here, to neighborhoods- "Jack's got a place in Edgewater and he likes it except for the gangsters of course," "Mary just moved into Ukrainian Village and her place is the size of a goddamned airplane hangar," "Well, I was just in Andersonville, in Chinatown, in Boystown, Bucktown, Old Towne, Uptown, Gold Coast, Wrigleyville, Wicker Park, Lincoln Park, Rogers Park, Irving Park, Jesus Christ I've had too much coffee, what should we go do?" "Let's go up to the Green Mill and get smashed."

(Drums stop) Hey, I'm there.

(Loud snare hit from the drums, then the "train" rhythm again) The train starts getting dark past Wilson, and you realize this ain't your father's CTA anymore. The shouting, singing, trash-talking brothers put you on edge, kick in a fear for your life that you learned when you were three and never quite got rid of. In this city, racism isn't just a slogan on a public service announcement on the side of a bus, it's a way of life, and as you stare at the ground and try not to call attention to yourself, you realize you cannot survive in the City of Big Shoulders without generalizing, stereotyping, rationalizing and justifying. This place is like a giant melting pot whose pilot light went out about 1890, letting the layers settle and coagulate, seek out their similar atoms and clump, never to break free, a place where getting lost can get you killed. You ingest this information, you process it, and you try not to let it get you down.

(Drums stop, and a person from the audience yells out) Next stop, Lawrence! Lawrence will be the next stop.

(Drummer plays a country-swing waltz beat) Teenage punk rockers hustle you for change, homeless high schoolers with pink hair and baggy shorts down past their knees

(Drummer plays an incredibly smooth jazz beat) A quick dash to the Green Mill and then you are in, hanging out in Al Capone's stomping grounds, the speakeasy, the jazz club, the poetry slaminator, the Green fucking Mill. You order a martini because, goddamnit, you can, and you sit back and look at the art deco buildings out the window, crumbling WPA projects patiently waiting for the day they'll get saved, you watch Patricia Barber sit in the middle of the circular bartop and tickle the keys, deliver the perfect combination of torch music and pop music and new age music and just damn good music, you watch the tough and beautiful dykes sitting in the corner, watching her in awe and each wishing to a fault that they were her girlfriend. You drink and relax, drink and relax, drink, drink, drink and

rrrrreeeeeellllllaaaaaaaaaaaaax and you're about to fall asleep on the padded leather and you look at your watch and it's two in the morning and shit, you gotta work at eight in the morning, and...

(Drums stop) I better call it a night.

(Loud snare hit from the drums, then the "train" rhythm again. Reader sits on stage and acts like he's asleep on the train, for about ten seconds)

(Drums stop, and a person from the audience yells out) Next stop, Bryn Mawr! Bryn Mawr will be the next stop.

(Drummer plays ethereal, moody sounds, brushes and mallets on cymbals) You slog your way past the derelict passed out on the sidewalk. You pass your grocery store, you currency exchange, your diner. The giant pink hotel doesn't even give you a second thought tonight. You unlock your door. You check your mail- flyer, flyer, flyer, the products of a thousand local mailing lists you keep seeming to end up on. You walk up the stairs, unlock the door again. Go down the hall, unlock the door again. Drop your bag. Drop your shoes. Drop your pants.

(Drums stop) You climb into bed. You smoke a cigarette. You fall asleep. And you dream. You dream that one day, the hand of God reached down from heaven and touched the southwest tip of Lake Michigan, and from the ground grew a flower, a big beautiful red rose with glorious petals, a pollen filled stem, and blood dripping off its thorns.

It was that last date that finally did it. A wonderful girl – smart, funny, attractive, outgoing. We went to a party... had a few drinks, laughed a lot... you know, it was nothing special, just a fun time. And we both agreed so and decided that another night on the same order would be enjoyable.

Exactly two days later, of course, she either changes her mind or finally has the courage to admit to herself that she just doesn't like me that much. In either case, she stated to me in no uncertain terms that a second date was no longer part of her life's plans. And as I went home that night and lit a candle, played Suzanne Vega's first album very softly and slipped into bed, I was struck with the following introspective and rather deep thought:

(Yells a long "SSHHHHIIIIIIITTT!!!" at top of lungs)

Then I got up and smoked a joint. And thirty minutes later, I was struck with the following thoughts:

"You know... fuck them. I'm through with their... pettiness, and their... indecision. I'm through with their whining and their constant yammering in my ear of "You know what's wrong with you men?"

THE DAY I TURNED GAY

Fear... of... commitment." I'm sick of them constantly passing over me and my friends in order to date some asshole, then two months later getting drunk with us and confessing, "God, why do I always seem to end up dating assholes?" I'm sick of it! (Steps to the side of microphone and points at the audience) Do you hear me, Chicago? I'm sick of it! (Points skyward) Do you hear me, God? (Long pause) I'm sick of it! (Back to audience) I pledge to you that from this day forward, I will do everything in my power to teach myself to become gay."

(Pause while walking back to mic) Yes, that's right, teach myself to be gay. Impossible, you say? Ha! I taught myself not to eat red meat anymore. I taught myself not to shit in my pants when I was a baby. Hell, I taught myself Microsoft Excel, and that's for Macintosh and Windows, mind you, and if I can teach myself Excel, you better be goddamned sure I can teach myself to get over this pesky little habit of wanting to have sex with women!

So... I got started. First – decisions, decisions. Do I want to be a Gap Gay or a Club Queer? Caesar cut or no Caesar cut? Pierce both ears, or stick with the one? Placement of rainbow accessory? In the end, I decided Gap, Caesar cut, one piercing, and ankle bracelet for rainbow.

Next, I did a little homework. I started hanging out at piano bars. I practiced having too much to drink and singing along with Barbara Streisand songs all weepy-eyed. Every time I went into Coffee Chicago, I would proudly and conspicuously pick up a copy of Gab magazine. I would sit in the corner, read it, laugh out loud, and say things like, "Oh, what a silly bitch that AstroBoy is!" I became a temp. I went to play auditions – and I'm not even an actor. I just went so I could rush back from lunch and breathlessly exclaim, "(In a breathless voice) Whew... sorry I'm late. ...My audition ran really long." I once waited down in the loop in the middle of the day for three hours, just so I could get half-price tickets to "Damn Yankees." Why, ladies and gentlemen, I even hung out at... (pauses while looking left and right nervously, then whispers into microphone) Hollywood Beach... (back to normal voice) where I would roll my eyes at the bikini-clad women and say to my friends, "Doesn't that breeder know where she is?"

And then... one day... it happened.

I woke up one morning, I yawned, I stretched, I kicked my new cat off my new Crate and Barrel comforter. I got up and took a shower, cleaned my face with some "Body Shop" cleansing gel, splashed on a little CK1, looked in the mirror and thought, "You know... I'm gay."

(Long pause as arms are slowly raised in victory and smile creeps across face) What a victorious feeling it was! I quickly got dressed and ran outside so the world could meet the new, woman-hating Jason Pettus!

(Arms slowly start to fall) And then, a funny thing started to happen. Very funny. Women... started hanging out with me.

(Talking like a woman) "Oh, Jason. You're so kind. And caring. And in touch with your emotions. Why can't I meet a man like you!"

"Oh, Jason... (crying) Why are the best ones always gay? It's such a crime!"

"Oh, Jason. If you were just straight... if you were just straight, I would date you in a second!"

Now that I was gay, I couldn't beat them off with a stick. They were constantly stopping

by my house and making me fix them my famous couscous and wild rice salad, while they sat in my living room and played Dee-Lite on my stereo and watched “Friends” on my big-screen television. They were constantly jumping in my shower after our workouts... (starting to sound more and more despondent and neurotic throughout this paragraph) ...and then coming into the kitchen topless and asking for another glass of wine, and saying things like, “Jason, I’m so glad I finally have a male friend I can feel this comfortable and non-competitive around!”

Frankly... (stares at audience distraught) ...just between you and me... (Pause) ...it was starting to wear me out!

Every time I was around one of these new, enlightened female species was another time I thought maybe... (gestures at random woman in audience, stage right) I’d made a mistake. Maybe... (gestures at random woman in audience, stage center) I’d acted a little too rash. Maybe... (gestures at random woman in audience, stage left) I should give them the benefit of a doubt.

And so... I did. I threw away my comforter. I put Pavement back on my stereo... (points at audience) ...where they belong! When I’d go to Coffee Chicago now, I’d go right past the copies of Gab and go pick up Barfly. I ran into one of my new-found friends, Nancy, and I said to her, “Hey, you remember that day that you said if I was straight you’d date me in a second? Well, I am now, so go get your shoes on ‘cause I’ve made dinner reservations and we’re running a little late.”

“(Acting like Nancy) Oh... ah, Jason... um... actually, I’m kinda busy tonight. But we could go out this Satur... no wait, I’m already busy, but Sun... no, wait a minute... I could do it next we... hmm... well, tell you what – I’ll call you, okay?”

(Nods head ‘yes’, then despondently smacks forehead against microphone, making large THUMP sound through speakers) So, what have we learned from our little story today? Well, hell if I know – I’m more fucking confused now than when I even started. I do know this, however. When I go out now, I go prepared – priest outfit, wedding ring, pink triangle in my ear, and a pair of red, six-inch pumps.

“(Acting like a third party, introducing Jason, gesturing off-stage) Mary, I’d like you to meet my friend Jason.”

“(Acts like Mary in mid-turn) Oh, uh... (Acts like Mary has just seen Jason) Oh... well... Jason... (acts very interested) It’s a... pleasure... to meet you.”

Dear Miss Manners:

I recently sent a gift to a friend as a housewarming present. I have yet to receive a thank-you note for the gift. Now I'm expected at another party that she is throwing this weekend. What does proper decorum dictate that I do, giftwise? –Generous in Geneva

Dear Generous in Geneva:

Well, well, well, you sent your friend a gift and you didn't get a card. Wait, wait, let me guess what kind of "housewarming gift" this was – an assortment of soap samples from The Body Shop? One of those little wooden boxes you take out every year to hold all the beautiful Christmas cards you get from your beautiful friends? Be lucky a thank-you note is all you didn't get, because what you really deserve is a good swift kick in the face, you bourgeois-perpetuating, neighborhood-gentrifying, wish-you-could-live-your-life-in-Pier-1 piece of shit.

Proper decorum for the party dictates that you bend down, pucker up and kiss your friend's rosy ass, because they're one more friend than you deserve, you suburban-wannabe-bastard.

DEAR MISS MANNERS

Dear Miss Manners:

After much shopping, I have finally found the perfect set of silverware. The only problem is that they're so expensive, I've only been buying them one utensil at a time – first, all the knives, then all the spoons. We are hosting a dinner party in the upcoming weeks, and I really want to show off the new silverware, even though I don't have the full set. Do you think it would be okay to mix in forks from another, similar set? –Curious in Cleveland

Dear Curious in Cleveland:

(Pause) Is this a fucking joke? Did you really send me this letter? Did you seriously sit down and spend thirty-two cents and twenty minutes of your life to write this fucking thing, fold it, put it in the fucking envelope and mail it to me? Is this your miserable excuse for having problems in your life? When your therapist charged you 150 bucks for the pleasure of telling you things like, "vent your anxieties more," do you really think this is what he had in mind?

Let me give you a problem you should really worry about. Like, how 'bout a guy who's got a college degree but is almost about to get kicked out of his apartment because he can't find anything but a lousy fucking \$10 an hour job? Or a guy that hasn't had sex in nine months 'cause every time he gets close to a woman he finds some arbitrary reason to reject her because the cumulative stress of ex-girlfriends is slowly moving him to a phobia of intimacy? Well? How you like them apples?

As for your culinary problems... I have no idea. Why don't you try plastic forks like the rest of us, you fuckin' loon?

Dear Miss Manners:

My son has come home from college for the summer, and it seems we have a problem. So far, he has spent almost every night out with his friends and often will not come home until two in the morning. He says that this is the schedule he keeps at school and he is old enough to be making his own curfew. I say as long as he's living under my roof, he lives by my rules. Help, Miss Manners! –Father in Florida

Dear Father in Florida:

(Long pause) Ah, just go fuck yourself.

Dear Miss Manners:

Well, it's that time of year where the spring wardrobes start coming out. With your many years of etiquette advice, I thought you could give me some historical background on what is proper attire for what times of year, along with what current fashion dictates for this year. –Style Aware in San Antonio

Dear Style Aware in San Antonio:

Jesus, has this entire country become like my parents, terminally addicted to Prozac? Wake up, people! Look, you all obviously don't have a fuckin' clue, and I'm currently pretty high on this speed I took earlier this afternoon, so let me now lay out the truth to all of my

miserable 644 syndicated outlets of losers nationwide:

Miss Manners smoked four packs of Virginia Slims a day and died about two years ago of black lung disease. Then the syndication boss got smart and finally realized that Miss Manners doesn't say a whole hell of a lot, and that they could probably hire a kid straight out of college for about half the salary.

Enter me, a 27 year old journalism student whose only reason he's not waiting tables is he can type eighty words a minute. They're paying me \$32,000 a year, which is more money than I've ever seen in my life, and all I have to do is, as my boss put it, "write some shit like 'put baking soda on that stain' and 'politeness requires abstaining from off-color jokes at the work place.'" Easy money, I thought.

But it's six months later, and you know what? Somebody at the syndication installed stirrups at my desk one day when I wasn't looking, and now every morning when I get into work I have to spread my legs and put my ankles in the stirrups all day. And every time my boss bitches at me that I'm not a "team player," then explains how he has the moral right to break all rules he expects me to follow; and every time my co-worker comes in on Monday and tells me all about how he and his old frat buddies from "U of I" went to some fuckin' sports bar on Division Friday night and (shouts) "Got WASTED!"; and every time one of you people send me one of your stupid fuckin' letters talking about your stupid fuckin' problems and I have to write some stupid fuckin' bullshit answer and we all have to pretend it's some brilliant masterpiece – well, frankly, every time it happens, it's one more giant unlubricated dick being shoved up my ass.

And every time I dare speak up, that I have the audacity to mention, "You know, what we do here is basically bullshit;" every time I mention that there's a better way of doing business than pandering to the lowest common denominator; every time my boss responds with, "Your job is not to think – your job is to execute;" and every time my co-workers say, "Look, you're not in art school anymore – this is the real world;" and every time I'm made to believe that only in a fantasy world can you pay your bills without completely whoring yourself – well, that's another day that I go home with blood running between my legs and I have to fashion a Band-Aid out of the wads of cash I originally accepted in the first place because they were supposed to free up my creative career.

So – no more. Today's the day I slip my column past my boss and out directly onto the wire and tell the world that I will no longer take this ass fucking. So... forgive me if I no longer feign an interest in your pathetic little life that I never cared about in the first place. Forgive me if I refuse to lie anymore at job interviews and pretend like I want to work a corporate job the rest of my life because I won't get hired any other way because you sold your soul to the devil twenty years ago and now won't hire anyone unless they make the same sacrifice. Forgive me if I slap you across the face as hard as I can every time you say, "Well, it sounds like you've pretty much got a creative job, so what's the problem?" I no longer have the strength to be Miss Manners. I can't do it, and I won't do it.

As far as your question goes, always remember the two golden rules: never wear white before Memorial Day; and only Eurotrash wear Speedos. Now get out of my face, you fuckin' momma's boy, before I kick your ass.

DESCRIBING SILENCE

It's when you're making out and you're on the bottom but you're getting all sweaty so you flip them over and now you're on the top but now your shoulders are getting sore so you flip them again and you keep flip, flip, flipping for an hour and a half.

It's when they get up right after sex and get a glass of water and come back to bed and take a drink and you take the glass from their hand, unasked, uninvited, and take a drink yourself and give it back to them.

It's when you're across the room, sitting in a chair, reading a book, and they're laying on the bed, working on something, and then they get up and walk over and kneel in front of your chair and wrap their arms around you and you put down your book and hug them back and you just both stay that way for five or ten minutes.

It's when you're riding on the el and you're looking at someone across the aisle and suddenly they catch you looking at them and you look away but when you look back you catch them looking at you and the two of you do this for ten minutes and then you finally lock eyes for two or three seconds and you both laugh because you both realize you're acting like junior high school students but love it anyway, and then they get off at their stop and they look over their shoulder and look at you one last time as they walk down the stairs. And if you're really lucky... they'll wave.

It's when you're getting ready to have sex for the first time and you wriggle their pants off and they suddenly get very quiet and they're in The Test, the test to see whether you find them disgusting or not naked. And then you jump on them and the little sigh and the little moan they give out lets you know how relieved they are that you like them even with their clothes off.

It's that magical gap in time between flirting and the first kiss, that moment where the conversation stops and a little voice finally screams, "Okay, now! No, wait a minute... okay, now!" and you sort of... and then you... and then you both laugh and you touch their cheek and lean their head the right direction and finally kiss and your little voice says, "What the hell were you so scared about, anyway?"

It's when you're spending the night in their apartment and they fall asleep before you and you just sit and listen to them breathe. And then you get up and go to the bathroom and then you sit at their table and smoke a cigarette and you realize you're walking around their apartment completely naked, right in front of them, and they don't even know.

It's waking up in the morning and having sex before looking to see what time it is.

It's when they wear one of your t-shirts.

It's when they cry.

It's when they laugh.

It's when they don't tell you they like you, because they don't have to.

EXORCISM

(Speaker holds out envelopes) These are her letters. These... (gestures) are from when we were dating, when youth was the Overlord of all and our idea of kinky sex was to write dirty notes to each other in Biology class. I've held them so that I can quote from them now and then and remind myself that at one point she really did love me. These... (gestures) are from when she was in the Peace Corps. I've held these so that when we got back together, as I always knew we would, we would be able to look back at them and laugh about how silly we both had been and how we would never make that kind of mistake again. And these... (gestures) are from her "Post Jason" phase. I've held on to these because... well, because they're from her.

(Throws letters on to stage) I HEREBY BANISH THEE FROM MY HOME! DO NOT DARKEN MY DOORWAY AGAIN, O VILE, FILTHY, EVIL LETTERS!

(Holds out CD case) This is the album that was playing the first time we had sex. It was a very popular album at the time, and every time we'd then hear it at a bar or on the radio or in someone's apartment at a party, we would giggle and titter at each other and usually end up going back home and having sex again.

(Throws CD case on to stage) I HEREBY TAKE BACK THE RIGHT TO LISTEN TO HARRY CONNICK, JR WITHOUT THINKING OF HER! I LIKE THIS ALBUM! I LIKED THIS ALBUM BEFORE I MET HER, GODDAMNIT! TAKE YOUR SINISTER THOUGHTS THAT CLOUD MENS' MINDS AND BEGONE! BEGONE, I SAY!

(Holds up book) And this, this is the book she bought me on one of my birthdays. This is the book I poured through, reading hidden meanings into random innocuous phrases that told me about our undying love for each other and how we were fated to be together!

(Throws book on to stage) LITERATURE OF THE DAMNED, GRACE MY PRESENCE NO MORE! YOU ARE NO LONGER WELCOME IN MY LIBRARY!

And this! (Holds up necklace) This is the necklace she brought back from Africa for me! It was meant as a peace offering, a formal announcement that she wanted to try to put everything behind us and start a new, civil, post-sex, post-intimacy, post-caring, post-hold-their-hand, post-call-them-out-of-the-blue-at-three-in-the-morning-'cause-you-just-happened-to-be-thinking-of-them relationship!

(Throws necklace on to stage) I WILL NO LONGER BELIEVE THAT YOUR BEADS ARE A SIGN THAT WE WILL GET BACK TOGETHER! GO BACK TO THE DARK, SWEATY, MYSTERIOUS JUNGLES OF AFRICA, FROM WHENCE YOU CAME!

And God, these! (Takes glasses off face, holds them out) These are the glasses I bought one day because I tried them on in a store and she laughed at me and slapped me on the arm and said, "God, you look like such a dork in those!" (Throws glasses on to stage) BEGONE! OUT OF MY LIFE!

And this! Shit! (Pulls ring off finger, holds it out) This is the ring I bought when I visited her in Baltimore last year, the one that she said made me look like Chaz Palmentari and I took as a compliment! (Throws ring on to stage) BEGONE!

And these! (Takes off shoes, holds them up) The shoes I bought because they reminded me of ones she used to own, and I felt it would make me feel somehow closer to her! (Throws shoes on to stage)

And this! (Starts taking off shirt while speaking) The shirt that I bought, the kind I always buy, because of an offhanded remark she made once in 1989 that open-collared shirts make me look sexy and grown up! (Throws shirt on to stage)

And these! (Starts taking off pants while speaking) The pants I bought, that are duplicates of the ones she bought me when we were twenty years old and she wanted to take me out one night and show me off! (Throws pants on to stage, now wearing nothing but underwear)

(Lifts arms into the air and yells) I HEREBY EXORCISE ANY AND ALL REMNANTS LEFT IN MY LIFE THAT HAVE ANY CONNECTION WITH THE UNSPEAKABLE ONE! WE HAVE NOW OFFICIALLY SPENT MORE TIME AS AN EX-COUPLE THAN WE DID AS A COUPLE, AND I AM SICK AND TIRED OF THE SMOKY TENDRAILS FROM THAT RELATIONSHIP COMING TO HAUNT ME!

I WILL NO LONGER COMPARE EVERY NEW WOMAN I MEET TO HER IN MY MIND! I WILL NO LONGER WRITE DRUNKEN LETTERS TO HER LATE AT NIGHT AND THEN RIP THEM UP THE NEXT DAY! I WILL NO LONGER CRY WHEN I RUN ACROSS AN OLD RE-RUN OF "NORTHERN EXPOSURE" ON CABLE!

DEAR LORD! (Falls to knees on stage, praying) Dear Lord, please, I beseech you. I have recently met a new woman I'm very interested in, and I'm sick of constantly fuck-

ing things up. Please – PLEASE! – help me exorcise the demons of my past from my soul forever. Amen.

(Stands up, looking at pile of things on stage) And you! You can stay on this stage forever as far as I'm concerned, to rot and fester in eternal damnation!

(Continues staring at pile) Well, except my pants. I'll need those to get home. (picks up pants)

(Continues staring at pile) And my shoes, I'll need those too. (Picks up shoes)

(Continues staring at pile) And it's pretty cold out, so I better grab my shirt... (Picks up shirt)

(Continues staring at pile) ...And I paid an awful lot for that ring... (Picks up ring)

(Continues staring at pile) ...and... (Picks up everything else but the letters, stands up, looks out guiltily at the audience, then back at the letters, yelling) But the letters! The letters stay right where they are! (Looks back at the audience for a few seconds, quickly bends down and grabs the letters, takes everything and runs off stage)

THE GUY WHO SAID FUCK A LOT

I knew this guy named Phil once. And he liked saying the word “fuck.” I mean, he liked saying “fuck” a lot.

“So we’re at fuckin’ Estelle’s and it fuckin’ sucks, so we decide to go out on the fuckin’ sidewalk and light up a fuckin’ joint. And who should come by but the fuckin’ man, the fuckin’ pigs, you know, and they look at me and say, ‘What the fuck you got there?’ and I say ‘a fuckin’ cigarette, man’ and they say, ‘that’s some fuckin’ wacky tabacky, ain’t it?’ so I say, ‘Fuck you!’ and they fuckin’ arrest me and haul me off to the fuckin’ jail. I mean – fuck!”

This was Phil’s nature. If you could point at someone and say, “That person is the physical manifestation of the word ‘fuck,’” it would pretty much have to be Phil.

“This is what I don’t fuckin’ get, okay? Every day, I walk down the fuckin’ street, on the right-hand side of the fuckin’ sidewalk, and every fuckin’ day I run into some fuckin’ asshole who’s walking the opposite fuckin’ way on the left side of the fuckin’ sidewalk. I mean, this is America, for fuck’s sake! Where’ve these people been their whole fuckin’ lives? You fuckin’ drive down the right-hand side of the fuckin’ street, and you fuckin’ walk down the right-hand side of the fuckin’ sidewalk. I mean, even if they just got off the fuckin’ boat, even if they’re some kinda fuckin’ wetback, can’t they see that the rest of the fuckin’ city’s walking down the right hand side of the fuckin’ sidewalk except them? Fuckin’ SHIT!”

Phil really liked to drink. And more than drinking, Phil really, really liked to smoke pot. He was doing it constantly, which was the catalyst for many of his problems in life. Also, when he’d get messed up, he would more than likely turn a little abusive. This also was a source of the problems. Not to mention the aforementioned infatuation with the word ‘fuck,’ which was usually the capper, the turning point between a simple disagreement and a fistfight.

“What? You want some fuckin’ change? Wait, you’re fuckin’ asking me for some fuckin’ change? Tell you what, you fuck, why don’t we both empty our fuckin’ pockets right here on this fuckin’ table and whoever’s got more fuckin’ money on ‘em has to give it over to the other person. No, you won’t do that, will you? Fuckin’ asshole. Fuck me? No, fuck you! Don’t give me any of your fuckin’ bullshit about buying some fuckin’ dinner – I know what the fuck you’re gonna do, you’re gonna walk down to the fuckin’ liquor store and buy a fuckin’ forty, and that happens to be what I’m gonna fuckin’ do with my fuckin’ money, and I’d rather get myself fuckin’ trashed with my money than you, you fuck, so fuck off! That’s right, fuck you! No, fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you!”

These incidents would embarrass me and frequently cause me trouble, too. And every so often, you’d never know, he’d get messed up and start up on you, which was never pleasant. Not to mention one night Phil almost got me arrested, and I think pretty much the last thing I want in the world, besides maybe getting back together with my ex-girlfriend, would be to go to jail again. As a result, I didn’t hang out with Phil a lot. It wasn’t that he wasn’t a nice guy or anything, it’s just... I don’t know. It’s hard for me to hang out with a mean drunk.

“I mean, you’re fuckin’ healthy, why don’t you go out and get a fuckin’ job? You think the world owes you a fuckin’ favor? Fuck you! I’m a fuckin’ drunk, and I have to work my fuckin’ ass off to be one, you stupid fuck! Fuck you! Hey, don’t fuckin’ threaten me, you fuck. I’ll kick your fuckin’ homeless, scraggly, drunk, jigaboo ass all the way down the fuckin’ block, motherfucker. Don’t fuckin’ remind me you’re black, I can fuckin’ see you’re fuckin’ black. We get in a fuckin’ fistfight, guess whose side the fuckin’ pigs are gonna take, so don’t even fuckin’ think of fuckin’ threatening me ‘cause you’re fuckin’ black, just FUCK... OFF!”

Phil was a poet. We met at an open-mic night we both read at. I always thought his stuff was pretty good, pretty raw and emotional. One night this spring, though, he put some chapbooks together and he gave me one. He tried to give it to me for free, but I happened to have just gotten paid so I gave him the cover price.

Instead of a poem, it was a short story which, as you may or may not know, I prefer over poems. And like the weird bald guys reading their bibles on the el at two in the morning, I poured over that story three or four times as I made my way home that night. Phil’s story was full of clarity, compassion, intensity and humor, glibness, profundity and profanity. In short, it was a better story than I’ve ever written, and maybe one of the better stories I’ve ever read.

And I always wanted to tell him that, but I never got the chance. We called Phil one night and his roommate said, “Dude, he’s gone,” and we said “Where?” and he said, “Uh, dude... I don’t know. He just packed up all his stuff today and... uh, I don’t know, said something about Seattle or something.”

I still have the story and I still read it and I think about whatever happened to Phil. He probably got killed – I imagine Phil getting knifed in a diner in Nebraska by a biker who didn’t take kindly to the phrase, “So you’re a fuckin’ biker, huh? Fuck you!” It would be a fitting end for Phil. He would’ve liked it.

And whenever I hear a guy using the word “fuck” a lot, I stop and think of him and say a little prayer. Phil, wherever you are, I hope you’re doing well.

You fuckin’ dope.

HER NAME IS RACHEL AND LAST NIGHT I HAD A DREAM ABOUT HER

“My name is Rachel.”

Her name is Rachel. I have to ask her, every single time I see her. For some reason that I don't know, the memory of people's names slip through and out of my system much like the iced coffee I drink here on Wednesday nights. It bothers me, but nothing I seem to do can fix the problem.

“My name... is Rachel.”

Her name is Rachel. She's one of those types of women that seems to randomly come into my life once every nine months or so. She's one of those women that I'm dying to ask out but I know I will never ask out. She's one of those women I find beautiful, gorgeous, witty, bitter, vivacious. In other words, one of those women I'm sure would have nothing to do with me, regardless of whether or not this is actually true. One of those women who make my tongue not quite work when I'm around them – (speaks gibberish for a few seconds,

pauses, then speaks gibberish again for a few seconds). My reasons for thinking this way have to do with my overwhelming fear of women that I have had since a child and that I still battle on almost a daily basis. But this fear has been well-documented and detailed in other stories of mine, and I don't wish to go into it here.

(Sighs) “My name is Rachel.”

What I wish to go into is the dream I had about

her last night.

No, it's not that kind of dream. Jesus, I swear. Actually, I wouldn't mind having that kind of dream about her, but do you think there's a chance in hell I'd get up in front of you and tell you about it? No, this was a beautiful dream, an ethereal dream, a dream like out of the pages of a Mark Helprin novel, where all the characters are blithe spirits and it's a law that only poetic, symbolic things can happen to them. This was a dream that should have been shot by Steven Spielberg and synched with some moody, orchestral soundtrack by John Williams. This was one of those dreams you wake up from and you're still in it for an hour or two of your waking day.

(Pause, then quickly) “My name is Rachel!”

Through some minor amateur research into dream analysis I have done, I can now fairly accurately trace back most things I remember in my dreams to the original stimuli that made me dream it. It's not a difficult ability, it just takes a little practice to get used to it. I will now attempt to simultaneously tell you my dream and tell you about the real stimuli behind the dream.

It was night, and I was walking through an outdoor parking lot at the corner of Wacker and Madison. I dreamt of this because I'm currently temping in the building next to this lot, and every time I walk past it I am struck with the thought, “How odd that this prime piece of real estate is filled with nothing but a barren, one-story parking lot.” Nothing big – it's just something that's struck me as odd.

It was snowing, and the individual flakes coming down were being lit by giant orange sodium lamps lighting up the parking lot. I dreamt this because I was recently back in suburban St. Louis for Thanksgiving and happened to be in a parking lot just like this one night, and it reminded me of what a strange, silent, magical thing it is to be artificially lit while it's snowing. The cold air somehow gets crisper and makes you feel high, like the whole atmosphere was made of nitrous oxide. The unnatural calm and silence of the snow builds an invisible, movable wall around you and the person you're walking with, a little cone of intimacy that follows you no matter where you go. And the million individually lit snowflakes hover and float through the air as if they had been artificially made just for your enjoyment.

Rachel was at the far edge of the empty parking lot, standing under one of the orange lamps, waiting for me. She was pregnant – I mean, preg – nant. She had on a brown twill coat and her belly was out to... well, wherever bellies go out to when one is pregnant, that's where her belly was out to.

I dreamt of this because the very first time I ever saw her, she was up on a stage, talking about a child she had borne and had given up for adoption. The story was at once joyful and heartbreaking; she was at once prideful and full of lament.

I sat there and listened to her talk, and all I could think was... a baby. My God, she's had a baby. None of this bullshit theoretical talk around a coffetable for her – “Well, let's see, if I had a kid right now, blah blah blah...” This woman has held, in her hands, the

creative output her boy is capable. (Pauses, then cups his hands and points them at the audience, gesturing from one side of the room to the other) She has held! In her hands! The only miracle that we as non-saints are capable to perform. And I don't even begin to know what that feels like, and I can't even imagine how it feels to... (acts like he's giving the 'baby' in his hands away, then slowly opens his hands, dropping them to his sides) Whenever I think of her I think of that. Which is why I dreamt about it.

In my dream, I crossed the parking lot over to her, and when I got there our heads reached out and our lips touched. It wasn't a sloppy, wet, open-mouthed lustful kiss like most of mine are – it was a chaste, electrifying, touch-you-to-the-bottom-of-your-feet kiss, unlike any I have ever had in real life. And then I woke up, and I immediately closed my eyes again and tried to slip back into the dream, but it never works, does it? So I lied in my bed and was overcome with a crushing sense of loss, ache, and desire, for this woman I don't know, this woman that I've maybe said half a dozen words to in my life. I grieved for my lost dream like I would grieve for a dead relative.

(Long pause, then in quiet voice) “My name is Rachel.”

(Long pause) I believe that she believes I'm an asshole. I believe that she believes I see her as yet another disposable waitress, another member of the serving class for me to use and discard. I believe that she believes I'm one of those guys you see at coffeehouses who snap their fingers to get her attention and shout across the room, “Honey, honey, another cappuccino over here? And could you get it to me while it's still warm this-time-thank-you-very-much?”

It's not her fault she believes this. When I'm around her, I get very... well, I get very. Ever since that dream, now every time she comes to my table and asks me if I need anything, I want to say, “Yes... (pause) Come home with me. Put down that coffeepot, get your coat and let's leave right now. We'll go to my apartment, we'll lock the door, and we'll take turns playing CDs on my portable stereo. We'll lock the door, you can stretch out across my bed and I'll lay my head on your stomach and try to change my breathing pattern to match yours without you knowing. Come with me, now, to my apartment, we'll lock the door, and we'll read passages from books out loud to each other, we'll read passages that say ‘this is me and this is what makes me tick and you better pay attention ‘cause I'll never be able to say it better than this person already did.’ I know I don't know you and I know you don't know me and you have no reason to trust me, but come with me, come to my apartment, we'll lock the door, and we'll make love on pieces of furniture never designed for the task, we'll step on each others' feet when we shower together and we'll laugh about it and then we'll grab the soap and then suddenly we won't say anything at all for awhile, we'll lock the door and I'll worship the back of your neck and you will get over-tired and slip yourself in between my chest and my arm when I least expect it and we'll lock the door and we'll never come out, we'll never ever come out of my apartment just come with me, come with me now to my apartment.”

This is what I want to say. What I do end up saying is, (in a loud whisper) “Uh, could I get another iced coffee? I'm sorry, I forgot your name.”

“It's Rachel. My name is Rachel.”

(JASON sings WGN theme song while JOHN says, "This is WGN, Channel 9.")

JASON: (In cheesy 1940's sports-announcer voice) Good afternoon and thanks for joining us. It's a beautiful autumn day here at Holy Name Cathedral in the heart of historic downtown Chicago, where we are awaiting the kickoff of the funeral... for Cardinal Joseph Bernadine. Joining me in the booth today is color commentator John Biederman, and John, we're in for some real fireworks today, aren't we?

JOHN: Right you are, Jason. The Monsignors of the Midway owe the entire credit of their last twelve winning seasons to one man, the Calavanting Cardinal, and it's no surprise to anyone that his last game would be celebrated in style. Besides, the Catholics are currently leading the league in funeral throwing and arcane rituals, so the spectacle we see today should pretty much be expected.

JASON: But with the stunning upset last week in Green Bay, the Jews seem to be poised to make a comeback, don't they?

JOHN: They are definitely a franchise to keep your eye on, Jason.

JASON: And we'd like to remind our viewers that

WGN Channel 9 is the only Chicagoland station to see live, 24-hour coverage of the Death... (in dramatic voice) of Cardinal Bernadine! Boy, John, it's hard to believe it's just been a week since we were reporting live from the deathbed vigil at the Cardinal's home.

JOHN: Well, the sudden death of the Cardinal has unleashed a flurry of excitement in the city that has not been matched since the visit by Princess Diana last spring. Joseph sightings have become the rage all over Chicago these last seven days.

JASON: I hear the cast of E.R. is in town right now and is actually being ignored!

JOHN: Well, Jason, this city loves their funerals.

JASON: Right you are, John! And while we're waiting for the kickoff, let's throw it to Margaret at the news desk for the latest headlines. Margaret, what's going on in the rest of the world?

MARGARET: (standing up in audience) Plane crash kills fourteen, rioting in South Carolina, President Clinton signs same-sex marriage bill, back to you, Jason!

JASON: Thank you, Margaret! What you're looking at right now is a live shot of hundreds of priests, archbishops and bishops now entering the field, dressed of course in their distinctive team colors and vestments. John, maybe you can explain to the viewers the origins of the team uniforms.

JOHN: Certainly, Jason. The current uniforms were adopted and approved by the Holy Roman Empire in the Fourth century, A.D. Each piece was specifically designed to remind the uneducated masses that Catholic priests were better, smarter and holier than they were. For example, the tall pointed hats we're currently looking at were symbolic of the fact that priests are closer to God than the common man and therefore are better qualified to write laws and govern the country.

JASON: I sure am glad we live in more enlightened times, when a single religious sect cannot take over and completely dominate our country's media!

JOHN: So am I, Jason.

JASON: And I'd like to remind our viewers that we've interrupted our regular broadcast to provide live, 24-hour coverage of the Death... (in a dramatic voice) of Cardinal Bernadine, just as we have for the last seven days. Stick with WGN Channel 9 for complete ritual updates.

JOHN: And don't forget, Mad About You has moved to 6 pm weekdays.

JASON: Let's check in with Margaret at the news desk for the latest headlines. Margaret?

MARGARET: (standing in audience) A fire has just broken out in the loop and is threatening to burn down the entire business district. Mayor Richard Daley was last spotted boarding a plane headed to Buenos Aires. Back to you, Jason!

JASON: Thank you, Margaret! Now, John, I understand that the funeral itself is by invitation only.

JOHN: Right you are, Jason. And my sources tell me that these are the hottest tickets in town. Next to, of course, the twenty-seventh remounting of Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.

JASON: Ooh, I just saw that last week!

JOHN: Donny Osmond is just brilliant, isn't he?

JASON: A definite must-see, John.

HELLO, SPORTS FANS!

JOHN: People have been calling in favors all this week in an attempt to get tickets to the funeral. And as can be expected, the usual crowd was spotted in front of the cathedral this morning.

JASON: (walking around in audience, wearing coat and sockcap, acting like ticket scalper) Two! I got two for the funeral! Who needs two? Come on folks, show of a lifetime! One time only! Bigger than the Stones! I got two! Who needs two?

JOHN: And the list of celebrities here puts JFK Jr's party at the Democratic Convention to shame.

JASON: (back on stage) Speaking of which, I believe I see Vice President Al Gore and his lovely wife, Tipper, there in the front row.

JOHN: That you do, Jason.

JASON: And is that... no, it can't be... is that Jack Nicholson I see sitting next to them?

JOHN: I understand he's a big fan of the Catholics.

JASON: But we should remind our viewers that the death of a Cardinal is taken fairly seriously in these parts, isn't it?

JOHN: Jason, the funeral of Cardinal Bernadine is a thousands-year-old tradition and is considered by many Catholics as the most sacred ritual still practiced in the modern world.

JASON: A sacred ritual that you, the viewer, will be a full part of, thanks to our dozen swiveling cameras positioned throughout historic Holy Name Cathedral!

JOHN: I understand we'll be trying out the new CasketCam today for the first time.

JASON: That's correct, John. Anything for the betterment of our viewers, during this, our live, 24-hour coverage of the Death... (in dramatic voice) of Cardinal Bernadine! Let's go to Margaret at the news desk. Margaret, what's the latest headlines from around the world?

MARGARET: (standing in audience and severely overacting) Giant aliens... invading earth... taking over... our brains... must get... out of my head... get out of my head, you bastard! Back to you, Jason!

JASON: Thank you, Margaret! We have in the booth with us Mark Cohen, one of the city's foremost experts on Catholicism.

MARK: I'm Jewish, Jason.

JASON: Mark, what are the latest statistics on the number of practicing Catholics in Cook county?

MARK: The latest figures show that approximately 300,000 citizens of Cook county consider themselves practicing Catholics.

JOHN: And with the current population of Cook county approaching ten million, that puts the ratio of Catholics to non-Catholics at... um...

MARK: About three percent, John.

JASON: With such a small percentage of practicing Catholics in this city, Mark, can you explain why there are currently six television stations covering the funeral live?

MARK: Oh, I don't know. Wild guess here, but maybe it's the Chicago media's tendency to exploit every tragedy, no matter how personal or non-relevant, to increase their own ratings?

JASON: Okay, Mark Cohen, thanks for stopping by the booth today! John, our colleagues at WBBM, Channel 2, reported this week that, and I quote, "Almost every citizen's life in Chicago has been touched in some way by the heroics of Cardinal Joseph Bernadine." Tell us how the Cardinal has touched your life, John.

JOHN: Well... uh. Hmm. Actually...

JASON: I'm sorry, John, I have to interrupt here for a moment, we're getting some late-breaking news that, um... yes... yes it is, the Cardinal has entered the building. We are looking at a live shot of the casket being brought into the Cathedral.

JOHN: It appears to be a mahogany casket, Jason.

JASON: Yes, that or oak. But a beautiful casket nonetheless.

JOHN: They've really outdone themselves, Jason.

JASON: Right you are, John. Now, I understand one of the final rituals before the actual funeral was the removal of the papal ring, a personal gift from Pope John Paul II.

JOHN: That is correct.

JASON: Any news of what will happen to the ring now?

JOHN: I believe it will be going on permanent display at Chicago's House of Blues, which will be opening next month.

JASON: And don't forget that WGN Channel 9 will be providing live coverage of the House of Blues grand opening next month, and what a party that will be!

JOHN: I'll be there, that's for sure.

JASON: We have to take a break here for a message from Empire Carpets, who remind you that for a limited time only, all sample showcases in the home will come with a free Hail Mary, plus a rosary while supplies last. Stay tuned for continued, live, 24 hour coverage of the Death... (in dramatic voice) of Cardinal Bernadine!

I SAW JASON PETTUS

I saw Jason Pettus once. It was a Sunday, and I was waiting for the Fullerton bus and there he was, sitting on a little concrete stoop. He had his Walkman on really loud and if you stood next to him, you could actually hear it. I thought about going over and saying something to him, but he was writing in a notebook and seemed kinda busy.

Yeah, I saw Jason Pettus. I went to this party in Wicker park one summer and got introduced to him there. He started asking me all these questions – I mean, all these questions – and it was kinda cool, ‘cause I don’t usually answer such personal questions to a complete stranger, but he had some sort of... well, there was just something about his questions and the way he listened, I guess. We talked for about three hours and then right as I was leaving he told me he was really attracted to me and wanted to go out again. It kinda creeped me out, to tell you the truth.

I saw Jason Pettus. I saw him speak. It was at some open mic somewhere. We had gone ‘cause one of our friends was reading and we thought it’d be fun to go down and have a couple drinks and watch our friend. I remember... I remember the host really liked Jason. And I remember he got a lot of applause at the end. What did he read? I don’t know. I wasn’t really paying attention.

I met Jason Pettus. In fact, he was one of the first people I met in the city. I had just moved two days previously and Chicago was kind of freaking me out and I didn’t have any friends and life was just sort of kicking my ass. I went to this coffeehouse with this book, and Jason was sitting at the table next to me, and he started asking me about the book, and then we got into a big conversation. I told him I had just moved here, and he told me all about how hard it is to move to Chicago and how hard a time he had had adjusting to the city, and I don’t know, it just made me feel better. We parted company that night and, you know, I didn’t find out until much later that that was Jason Pettus I had been talking to, but I still count it as maybe one of the first things that proved to me that I had made the right decision by moving here.

Jason Pettus temped for me once. It was a four day assignment, data entry. I mean, he was fine, he typed fast and everything, but... oh, I don’t know, his heart didn’t seem to be in it. And he took an awful lot of smoke breaks. And he was about ten minutes late for work every morning. I mean, he may be some big author or something, but he sure wasn’t the best temp I ever had, if you know what I mean.

I slept with Jason Pettus. It was a weird night – I met him at a party, we had both had too much to drink, blah blah blah. How was it? Well... it was good. I guess. As good as a drunken one-night-stand gets, I suppose. He just started... acting weird after that. He just started acting weird. How? I don’t know. Weird. He just started acting... weird. So, I stopped calling him back, and after maybe two, three weeks, I never heard from him again. Do I regret it? No, not really. I mean, I could be seeing Brad Pitt and if he started acting weird, I’d dump him, too. And I mean, come on, we’re not talking about Brad Pitt here. ...We’re talking about Jason Pettus.

I saw Jason Pettus. It was a Friday night and I had just gotten off work in the Loop and was making my way to State Street. Jason and his friends were walking by, when Jason suddenly stopped and yelled, “You! You there!” and pointed at me. I don’t remember exactly what he said, but it was something along the lines of that he was drunk and on a lot of speed and was out giving his friends an architectural tour of the Loop and I should join them. It sounded like fun, but frankly, I was tired from work. And besides, I didn’t know he was Jason Pettus. I just thought he was some drunk speed freak. And who knows what those guys are going to do next?

Yeah, I saw Jason Pettus. It was on the red line one night, maybe about midnight. He got on at Chicago and rode it all the way to Bryn Mawr. He was listening to his Walkman really loud and scribbling in a notebook. He seemed really sad. I wanted to tap him on the shoulder and ask him what was wrong, but I was a stranger to him and I figured he probably wouldn’t want me bothering him.

IN MY WORLD

In my world, professional sports are a seedy, underground profession, taking place in back rooms and slum tenements, while porn stars perform at the United Center and sign multi-million dollar endorsement deals.

In my world, you can drink a beer, smoke a joint, or pull the handle of a slot machine and never have to worry about becoming addicted to any of them.

In my world, your job performance is based on how well you perform your job.

In my world, there is a television station called "JTV" which runs nothing but shows I like, 24 hours a day. Then, when I go out and get drunk, I come back home and forget the channel exists and I'll be flipping through the stations and there's nothing but shit on until I get to my station and I go, "God, I love this show."

In my world, non-smokers have to stand outside.

In my world, women are overwhelmingly attracted to kinda geeky guys who are intellectually pure and possess an insight into the human condition. Really, did you expect it any other way?

In my world, rape is a capital offense. Of course, so is whistling in public.

In my world, everyone at Kinko's is well-trained, know what they're doing, and never overcharge or destroy your originals in the copy machine. For that matter, all employees of McDonald's always say "thank you" instead of me, and when I say, "I'd like a Big Mac and a Coke," they never say, "And what kind of drink would you like?"

In my world, if you see someone across the el who you think is really attractive, you can walk up to them and say, "You know, I'm really attracted to you." They then have the freedom to say, "You know, so am I!" or "I'm sorry, I'm not attracted to you," and your feelings are never hurt.

In my world, fourteen-year-old boys are allowed to buy *Playboy*, because, really, they're the ones who need them the most.

In my world, every poem at every open-mic night is amazing and groundbreaking and just makes you go, "Wow."

In my world, Robert Mapplethorpe never died. And neither did Keith Haring. And neither did Andy Warhol.

In my world, Liz Phair knows how much I love her. And... she loves me back!

In my world, you can buy pitchers for four bucks at Sweet Alice. Oh, I'm sorry, that's in your world, too.

In my world, Sting is still putting out cool albums.

In my world, there is a special section of Chicago set aside where you can take acid. It is full of trees and grass and sand and there's no rave music and there's no virtual reality movies and no guys trying to fuck with you, waving their hands in your face, going, "Okay, you see anything? Okay, how 'bout this? You see anything now? Huh? How 'bout this?"

Oh, and in my world minimum wage is 16 bucks an hour, and middle management doesn't exist even though the middle class does, and the phrase, "You got time to lean, you got time to clean" doesn't exist, and if your boss says something stupid, you have the legal right to slap them as hard as you can and say, "What are you, on the dope train?"

In my world, the Personals section actually works.

In my world, men have an "on/off" switch for their penis. Then, if they wake up one day and think, "You know, I really don't want to deal with my libido today," they can just turn their penis off, and the rest of the day beautiful women can walk by them and they can still remain focused and concentrated and productive.

In my world, there are hoards of "straight bashers" that roam the streets of Lincoln Park on Saturday nights, stopping guys on the streets and yelling, "Hey, what are you, some kind of hetero? You like to fuck women? You do, you like to fuck women, don't ya?" Of course, instead of beating them up, they just yell, "Shame on you! You don't know what you're missing!" then go down the street and have a drink.

In my world, I never have to finish my stories at open-mic nights, but instead I can just

JERRY GARCIA IS DEAD

WRITTEN WITH ANNA HARRINGTON

(Anna) When the egg broke, Velma knew she was in trouble. It started with breakfast. Oh, it seemed like such a simple little meal... a few bacon strips, a piece of toast, a bowl of cereal – she had no idea that eggs burned so easily, or that they make such good projectiles in fits of anger at nine a.m. But then again, he had it coming...

(Jason) “What the fuck is this?” he had said when he sat down. She stared at his stupid little Jerry Garcia tie that made him believe that he hadn’t entirely sold out. The eggs were right there, right there on the plate, right in scoopable distance...

(A) “Breakfast. You know – breakfast. Normal people have breakfast. Some every day, in fact.” She hated the Jerry Garcia tie. It only reminded her of his past as an “artist” in Wicker Park, of the man she didn’t know who lived pre-accountant-on-Wacker-job of his. It made her uncomfortable. “Isn’t he dead?” she asked.

“Yes...” He touched the eggs with his fork. “Are they supposed to be so... so crunchy?”
“Why do you want to wear a dead person on your chest?”

(J) “God. This again.” He sighed, instinctively reached for the cigarettes that were no longer there. “The Dead was an important part of my maturation process.” He poked at the eggs with his fork. “I told myself I’d never grow up and disregard that part of my life. Never apologize...” He looked up at the clock on the wall. “...Never forget.”

“Well, congratulations,” she said. “You got it half right. You never grew up.”

(A) Damn, he wanted a cigarette. They traded off each other’s nasty habits in compromise when they moved in together six months ago – he gave up cigarettes, she gave up Barbra Streisand. Maybe she was going through withdrawal symptoms, too. If he hummed a few bars from Yentel...

“...and you were never young,” she continued. “Sometimes I think you were born middle-aged.”

“I’m only twenty-seven.”

“Exactly. Do we have ketchup?”

(J) “We’ve got mustard,” he said. “I don’t want mustard.”

She walked over to the refrigerator. “Besides,” she said, her head in the fridge, “you’ve told me your Dead story before. It’s pathetic. You and your fraternity brothers would road trip to Ann Arbor every June, drinking goddamn Bud Light the whole way, and you’d get trashed inside the show and make fun of all the hippies.” She pulled out the mustard, slammed it on the table. “How is that part of your maturation process?”

He looked at her, then bent down to his plate again, smelling the bacon cautiously. “So what do you want to do today?” he said.

She sighed. “I want to be a superhero.”

(A) Maybe just a few bars of Streisand...

“I’m having an affair,” she admitted quietly.

“Oh.”

“Oh? Oh? Is that all you can say?”

He paused. “Memories... light the corners of my mind...”

Velma threw the egg and hit him in the chest, right between Jerry Garcia’s eyes.

He said nothing. Slowly he wiped the egg off his chest.

“Oh well,” she forced a laugh, turned back to the stove. “He was dead anyway.”

JIMBO, THE DUCK WHO SOLD OUT

It was Spring, and the United Duck Group of Upper Wisconsin were on their way home again, after yet another winter of hunting and gathering in the southern United States. And, as always, they had stopped for a visit at Chicago's Lincoln Park Zoo, a kind of Disneyland to them, where they could be waited on hand and foot while catching up with other ducks all around the region.

This was the first Chicago visit for Jimbo, a very bright duckling whom many in the group considered the top of the batch this mating season. After a long winter of foraging for food, laborious building of nests and relatively little payoff for their hard work, Jimbo marveled at this Utopian atmosphere, where humans were literally throwing food at them, allowing them to leisurely walk and swim about and remain satiated.

"Why, this is easy!" Jimbo thought. "All I have to do is exploit my natural duckiness and I'm made in the shade!" Which, by the way, Jimbo was particularly good at. He would swim around in the ponds and wiggle his tail, and every so often would bob his head underwater, then occasionally walk up to the picnic table and let out an adorable little "quack!" and before he knew it he had more popcorn and bread crumbs and little zoo-bought pellets than he could eat.

When the group announced one day that it was time to head to Wisconsin, Jimbo decided he was going to stay. "Why should I go up there?" he asked the elders. "Up there, we work all day long, building and hunting, and for what? To barely survive! Here, I can expend just a little energy and get all my food for the day quickly. Then I have the rest of the day to swim and fly and quack and ponder the great mysteries of life."

After a pause, the eldest of the elders spoke. "Well, Jimbo," he said, "as you know, it's your right to leave the group whenever you want. But let me give you a piece of advice. What you call toiling – the day-to-day work we all perform – is what we consider the inherent activity that keeps the duckiness to us ducks. You will find after a little while that foraging and hunting is what allows us to ponder the mysteries of life, not idle time." The elder paused, then said, "Are you sure you don't want to join us?"

"Positive," Jimbo said. "This is too good an opportunity to pass up."

"Jimbo has made his decision," the elder said to the group. "And now, ducks – we fly!" And with that, they were gone.

And so Jimbo spent the summer being a zoo duck, and it was great. So great, in fact, that he soon lost track of how many times little kids chased him through the park, trying to grab ahold of him so that they could rip his wings off. He learned not to mind when people would throw the food pellets at him as hard as they could, hitting him in the face and eyes and stinging him. He learned to not even get fazed when the macho teenage boys would flick lit cigarettes at him, yelling, "Hey, eat this, you stupid fuckin' bird! Ha, ha, ha!" To Jimbo, the immense material rewards of his cushy job warranted any kind of abuse he had to take, so much so that after a while, he forgot that the things being done to him were abuse at all.

Finally, the air started turning crisp and the leaves started turning colors and Jimbo's old group of ducks made their farewell visit to the Lincoln Park Zoo before heading off to warmer, greener pastures for the winter.

"Jimbo!" one young duck yelled when he was spotted. "Hey, Jimbo! How you doing?"

"Do I know you?" Jimbo said.

"Sure!" the duck said. By now a whole group had gathered. "We're your old friends! We stopped by to see if you wanted to go south with us this year."

"I don't know you," Jimbo said. "I don't know any of you."

"Ah, come on, Jimbo! We hung out all winter last year. Remember? We foraged, we hunted, we worked and built..."

"Look," Jimbo interrupted. "Whatever I may have done then was in my youth. I was crazy and immature then, and God only knows what I did. But I'm a grown-up now. I work for a living. And I can't have you all coming in and screwing up my schedule."

"But Jimbo!" the duck cried. "What about going south for the winter?"

"Look," Jimbo said, "You all need to learn to grow up. Carousing around and drifting from place to place is fine when you're young, but you're adults now. You have to start thinking about the future. You need to start thinking about saving. Now me, whenever I get a handful of popcorn thrown at me, I take one kernel and put it in a hole on the far side of the pond, and if I stay here at the zoo all year long for, oh... say twenty or thirty years without ever, ever leaving once, then when I'm old I'll have a whole basket of popcorn and I'll never

have to work again!"

The ducks just stood there, about as confused as they'd ever been in their life, when a child and his mother came walking by.

"Look, mommy!" the boy said. "The ducks are all quacking at each other."

"Oh, aren't they cute," the mother said. "Billy, why don't you throw them some food?"

The child took a handful of pellets and threw them as hard as he could, showering the ducks and making most of them run for cover. But not Jimbo. He ran around in the middle of the chaos, getting pelted and stung over and over.

"Hey! Hey, you!" he yelled at the other ducks as he ran around. "These are mine! QUACK! I worked hard for these pellets and you assholes aren't going to come waltzing in here and take what's rightfully mine! QUACK QUACK QUACK! I swear, you let down your guard for one minute and everyone around here's trying to stab you in the back, trying to take all the credit for your work and push you out of the loop! QUACK QUACK!"

The younger ducks looked to the eldest of the elders for guidance, but the wise old duck just sadly shook his head and said, "Come, ducks. We fly." And the last sight the ducks saw as they flew away was Jimbo, desperately trying to scoop up all the pellets, hoard them from the other animals, and push them with his beak towards the far side of the lake.

My first execution? Oh, that's an easy one. March 5, 2003. It was my ninth birthday. I remember... I remember that was the year that the old *Cyberboy* cartoon started, and I was in love with it – had Cyberboy pajamas, if you can believe that. So my mom made me this cake with little generic robots on it and you could eat them, you could bite the head off one of the robots and it was solidified icing, it would hurt your teeth as you crunched on it.

What did I get? God, I don't even know anymore. Some Cyberboy thing, I'm sure... oh wait, that's the year I got the Cyberboy video game! Oh God, I played that stupid game so much, I wore the letters off the side of it. Hmm. It's funny to think of that now. It's so crude compared to what the kids have at their disposal today. But at the time... God... there was literally nothing else like it. It was... magical. That whole day was magical.

I didn't have a party that year, I remember that, but for the life of me, I don't know why. Maybe because my dad knew he was going to take me to the execution. You know, I never really thought about that before. I've always held it in my mind that it was a spontaneous event... but I guess Dad had to know about it, had planned the whole thing. Hmm. I guess that's why I didn't have the

KANSAS CITY FALLING

party. Hmm.

Anyway, Dad put me in the car at some point, I know that, and I said, "Where are we going?" and he said, "I want to take you to see something," and I remember this next exchange very well, I'll always remember it. My mom said, "Robert, maybe it can wait 'til next year," and I knew something was up, because Mom only called my Dad 'Robert' when she was really angry. And Dad said, "He's old enough. It's time that he sees how this country works now. The sooner he sees it, the better." And he slammed the car door, and we were off.

Oh yeah, I knew exactly what we were doing once I saw where we were heading. That's where all the executions were held, and you know, I was young but I wasn't stupid, I'd heard there was going to be one today. What? Oh no, oh hell no, I never snuck into one before that day. My friends always tried to get me to, but my Dad... god, he'd pretty much told me a couple years back when they started that he'd have no problem with beating me until I had to go to the hospital if he ever found out I'd went to one. And whoo boy, I believed him. Well, you don't know my dad.

So anyway we got there and went into the plaza and it was crowded. We jostled around a bit until we found a spot I could see from. I was in a spot, I remember this, I was in this spot where the big Picasso sculpture kinda blocked my view a little bit. The irony's not lost on me now, of course, but when I was nine, you know, it was just like, "Can't we move to the side a little bit?"

Who was he? Oh, hell if I know. Some fucking oilhead. They all were back then. Convicted of... how did they used to put it? We used to taunt each other on the playground with the charges they always used. Oh yes, 'attempting to commit an act of terrorism against the United States.' You know, it's funny when people find out my age and learn that I lived through that period. They always want to know about what it was like, the riots and the paranoia and all the shit that went down then. But, you know, for God's sake, I was nine and I lived in Schaumburg. I didn't know riots. I knew Cyberboy and playing with my friends in the park and my dad cursing at the TV a lot. That's all I know.

So they had this oilhead up on the scaffolds and they asked him if he had any last words and he started shouting this Arabic bullshit as loud as he could, and the crowd's getting really angry and then these drunk guys up in front start chucking beer cans at him... oh, hell yeah people were drinking there. For some people it was like a big party. They'd bring coolers full of beer and stake out a good spot early in the morning and just sit there all day getting drunk and hooting and hollering and singing songs. You don't see that in the history books, do you?

So they pulled the lever and he dropped. I know, you'd think it would be this big traumatic event in my life, seeing a guy killed right in front of me. What can I say? He was like... you know, way over there, like a little spot, and the crowd just erupted when it happened, just erupted into cheers and applause, and that kept me a lot more interested than that tiny scaffolding so far away.

My dad leaned into me and he said... this is something else I'll never forget... he said, "This country used to not be this way." He put his big, warm hand on my shoulder and said, "REMEMBER THAT. America doesn't have to be this way. Kansas City changed everything, but it doesn't have to stay this way."

You know, sometimes I try to think about what it would be like to live in an age where if you said “Kansas City,” the only thing people would think of is the city. Think about that. It’s like... Woodstock, you know. Think about an age where if you said “Woodstock” the only thing it referred to was a sleepy little town in upstate New York. I mean, now it invokes an entire incident, I mean, invokes an entire generation by now. And Kansas City invokes an entire generation now, or even, an entire turning point in American history. I don’t know, it’s just something I think about sometimes.

But here’s the thing I never told my dad. I mean, I knew he was very angry about the things that happened in the country then, like a lot of people were. I’d never tell you this if my dad was still alive, ‘cause he’d die, he’d just die if he heard this. But that moment, that moment that the crowd burst into applause, I never felt prouder to be an American than that moment. Probably never have since then, either. I just... God, how do I express it right? I was just, in that nine-year old mentality, you know, I was just so happy and proud that I lived in a country that could stand up in front of the rest of the world and shake their fists in the air and yell, “We’re not going to put up with your bullshit anymore!” It was exhilarating. It was a rush. I was just so fucking proud to be an American that day. Well, I don’t know how to explain it better than that. I know it’s an old cliché, but it’s true, it’s so very true – Kansas City changed everything.

I have a friend. Let's call him Bob. Well, actually, Bob really is his name, so let's call him... Bob.

Bob has two particularly ugly habits that just so happen to compliment each other in much the same way that tornadoes and mobile homes do. Bob likes to take a lot of speed... and Bob also likes to watch a lot of television.

Now on the surface, one would think that these two habits would clash with each other. After all, we can opine to ourselves, television watching consists of hours upon hours of sitting on your ass, staying in a prone position and basically turning into a vegetable-like form. Speed taking, on the other hand, usually consists of running around like an idiot, climbing the walls and sputtering things to your friends at parties that make absolutely no sense whatsoever.

The way these two competing vices come together in Bob is this: his body wants to move a zillion miles a minute, yet he has to stay glued to the television. Therefore, his body races in the only way that it can: through his mind. As a result, Bob comes up with the most vastly ridiculous analyses of banal television shows I have ever witnessed, which he then proceeds to tell me in one long, unending sentence later that night. For

KATHIE LEE GIFFORD LIKES TO FUCK!

example, from March 16:

"Jason, Jason Jason Jason, I just discovered something on TV tonight and you are not going to fucking believe this. Okay, right, channel 9's started running old episodes of *Blossom*, so I've been, like, watching them everyday and then I've been taping them everyday, you know, 'cause I can, you know, I mean, how cool is that, 'I got a six-hour videotape of *Blossom* episodes!' Ha-ha! Anyway, so tonight I had nothing to do and I was on all this speed so I put in this tape and I watched the whole fuckin' thing, all goddamned six hours right in a row, well okay, I stopped for about twenty minutes to fix dinner, but guess what! Oh, guess what! So, like, I'm watching it and I'm starting to put it all together, you know, Blossom's dad and her brother are these really sensitive, artist types, and they're the good guys, you know, and her other brother who's masculine and strong, you know, the guy guy, you know, Joey Lawrence, you remember, 'Whoooa!' Joey Lawrence, well he's an idiot, I mean, he's a complete fuckin' retard on the show, and you know, Blossom doesn't have a mom so she has to do all her mom-bonding stuff with Six, her next-door neighbor, but Six is a peer of Blossom's, you know, she's like, Blossom's age, and she's constantly 'spending the night' over at Blossom's, you know, she's sneaking through Blossom's 'window' without 'Dad' knowing about it, you know, and, like, Six's name, like it's such a coincidence it sounds so much like 'sex,' and... well, you see what I'm saying, don't you?"

"No!"

"The writers of *Blossom* are subconsciously pushing an agenda of lesbianism! God, it's so obvious!"

So, that's Bob. And if you're around Bob, you get used to Bob, and you take everything he says with a grain of salt. Recently though, Bob said something at a party that struck me as rather profound:

"Oh Jason, oh, oh, Jason! You'll never guess what I figured out today! Okay, so sometimes I watch Regis and Kathie Lee, you know, and there's always been something that just has never sat right with me about that show, you know, something about that Kathie Lee that just doesn't, I don't know, sit right. So I started watching the show religiously, and this is it, man, I just figured it out today. Like, Regis is constantly making fun of Kathie Lee for being sleepy during the show, and he says it's because her husband, Frank, spent the whole last night giving her the big bone, you know, like, Frank was laying more pipe last night than the whole fuckin' Alaskan pipeline! Ha-ha! And you know, Kathie Lee makes fun back at Regis, or laughs or something, but get this, get this, man, she never denies it! Not once, in thirty-four shows, has she ever denied it! Man, Kathie Lee Gifford likes to fuck! Who woulda... ever... fuckin'... guessed!"

I sat and pondered this for awhile. Well, that can't be right. Kathie Lee? Demure, pretty, All-American, family-values, "I'm shutting down the sweatshops" Kathie Lee Gifford? Likes to fuck? Why, if this was true, it would complete disintegrate the theory I have had my entire adult life about my personal prowess in bed.

You see, I tend to date quiet women, shyer than average in public, slightly... boring, to tell the truth. And when the inevitable point always comes where one night I close my bedroom door and they attack me, when they suddenly metamorph one night into a ferocious

sexual animal, a “Fucking Machine,” when they do things in bed that I scarcely believed possible, much less legal... well, I’ve always attributed this change to the fact that I’m really good in bed. The implication, of course, being that I was able to draw this ferocity out of the woman that a normal, mere mortal man would not be able to.

But... if Kathie Lee Gifford likes to fuck, then that means that just about every woman likes to fuck. And that blows my theory to complete shit! How can I possibly justify to myself in my head on why that woman should sleep with me versus him, if she’s going to enjoy it no more and no less than with him? Why, I might as well give up fucking altogether. Well, actually, I kinda have given up fucking altogether, for nine months now, but it’s not by choice and I really don’t want to get into it right now.

Bob, being on speed, decided to put this to the test. He ran around the party and proceeded to ask every shy, serious woman there if they do, indeed, like to fuck. It would be redundant to say that Bob got smacked many, many times that night, but the surprising part was that he caught many of these women drunk and they would say in all sincerity to him, “Are you kidding me? I love to fuck! Fucking is the singlemost enjoyable leisure time activity I engage in! There are some days where the only thing that gets me out of bed in the morning is knowing that if I don’t get out there and meet someone, I’m not going to get fucked that night!”

All this information threw me into a spiral of depression, and in desperation I finally went over to my friends’ Brynn and Sam’s house, two lesbian friends of mine who frequently are the bearers of truth to me and more and more often have delivered lines of such utter clarity and profoundness to my dilemmas in life that I am starting to think of them as goddesses.

Now, Brynn’s a shy, quiet woman, but she likes to fuck – I know this because we actually dated for awhile in college. It’s a long story and frankly, I don’t know why I even mention it. Sam’s not necessarily shy or boring, but just not the type of woman you look at and think, ‘You know, I bet she likes to fuck.’ But she does – I know this because Sam got drunk one night and told me.

I put my question to them. Brynn and Sam looked at each other and rolled their eyes in exasperation, as they frequently do when talking to me. Finally Sam says – “Well of course women like to fuck, Jason. How did you get to be twenty seven years old and not know this? Look, the difference between men and women is this: If a woman fucks someone and it’s a bad fuck, she’ll never fuck them again.”

I said, “So what you’re saying is that if a man has a bad fuck, he’ll go ahead and fuck them again?”

“Please,” she said. “There’s never been a man in the history of time who’s had a bad fuck.”

I’m feeling much better these days. True, there has been a minor paradigm shift in my life and I’ve had to completely rethink the idea of how the world works and what my penis’ place is in it. However, the enlightening truth I have discovered recently has also opened up a brand new possibility to me, a new philosophy, a new mantra, if you will, that I now chant to myself as I’m sitting across the room, trying to get up the courage to go talk to that quiet, serious woman in the corner:

“Kathie Lee Gifford... she likes to fuck.”

LAZY CRAZY HAZY

There are five different coffeehouses I go to. They are in five different places in the city, and serve five different functions. Three of them are Coffee Chicagos: one at Berwyn and Broadway that is five minutes from my house and where I go when I want to get some serious writing done; one at Clark and Wellington, which is where my writing workshop is; and one at North and Wells, for when my friend Steve and I are feeling bored and decide to take a journey to the Land of Beautiful Women and just drink coffee and loiter and take in the scenery. The fourth coffeehouse is a Seattle's Best Coffee, the one at Chicago and Rush, which I visit after I've spent six hours in Borders reading books because I'm too broke to buy any, which seems to be happening more and more, and I'm all vegged out and I need a little injection of caffeine to get me up and moving again. The fifth coffeehouse is at Wabash and Lake and is called "The Coffee Grounds," which I've never heard of, but is the only coffeehouse I've found in the Loop that has outdoor seating (thus, a smoking section). I go

there when I get off work at rush hour and don't feel that particular day like being jostled and poked in the ribs by frat guys on the el while they wait for their precious Addison stop to arrive.

They must have a fixed work schedule for the employees of "The Coffee Grounds," because every time I go there, which is always between 4:30 and 5:15 pm on a weekday, I'm waited on by the same woman. She is maybe six inches shorter than me, with shoulder-length brown hair which appears to be curled and styled when she's off work, but is always pulled back and slightly messy when I see her. She is thin and pale and her eyes are a light, steely blue and her cheekbones slightly protrude, like those German students from the '70s you'd see in filmstrips in your foreign language classes in high school, filmstrips with names like "Our European Neighbors," filmstrips you would laugh at because everyone had atrocious, burlap-looking sweaters on and haircuts like Twiggy circa 1963.

I've been to "The Coffee Grounds" over a dozen times now and never really thought twice about this girl. But lately, maybe the last three or four times I've been here, I've been sitting in my little green plastic chair, watching people walk by and listening to the screeching noises the el makes as it rounds the corner from its northbound Wabash direction to its western Lake Street orientation, and almost involuntarily a waking fantasy will pop into my head about this girl and I slipping into the back room of the coffeehouse and having wild, uninhibited, nasty, sweaty sex, without ever saying a word, without ever asking each others' names or anything of the sort. I don't know why I have this fantasy about this particular girl, considering there are women I have a semi-regular contact with that are more attractive. Well, not more attractive, that's not what I mean. I mean they have a build or a wardrobe or an attitude that would more naturally inspire this kind of raw, unrefined sexual fantasy than this girl, who, admittedly, is at work and is wearing a uniform and whose dominating thoughts are probably not "Do I look sexy?" but rather "When the hell can I clean the espresso machine and get the fuck outta here?" I also don't know why this fantasy has come to me now, as opposed to when I first saw her. I do, however, have a clue.

Coincidentally, also the last three or four times I've been here, this woman has served me coffee, taken my money, given me a slight but nice smile, and then comes outside herself almost exactly ten minutes after I sit down. She sits on the other side of the patio, picks a chair that faces me, lights up a Marlboro Light 100 and takes a leisurely ten minutes to smoke it. Shielded from detection by my mirrored-lens sunglasses, I observe that she spends this ten-minute period glancing at me out of the corner of her eye, sometimes just for a moment, sometimes for five seconds or longer. It was when I first discovered these sly glances that the fantasy first appeared.

There's something undeniably sexy about observing someone under the light of a clear, bright summer day. The yellow tint of the sun tends to make people look healthy and tan, and the beads of sweat that form on their forehead gives you the pleasant mental connotations of exercise, well-being, and health. Not to mention that people's hair shine in the sun, and they tend to be wearing less clothes than in the winter.

The sexiest thing about watching someone on a summer day, however, is something that's just occurred to me now, sitting here at The Coffee Grounds, watching this girl watch me and wondering if she's wondering what I'm writing. The thing that occurs to me today is this:

If you're sitting outside in the unshaded sun on a hot July or August afternoon, like I've done the last three or four times I've been here, you're understandably going to start getting warm. And when you start getting warm you're going to start getting hot. And when you

start getting hot, you start getting uncomfortable. Sweat starts rolling down your back and collecting at your belt line. Sweat rolls down your face and, if it's really hot, makes a small drip-drip-drip off the end of your chin. The sun is in your eyes and it makes you frown and squint. Your body temperature goes up and makes your face pink and flush. Your clothes hang heavy on you and it makes you squirm, it makes you fidget in your seat and not be able to find a comfortable position to save your life and you scratch your legs and wipe your face and take another drink of your iced coffee, hoping this is going to be the one that cools you down, swallow and realize it's not.

In other words, the physical characteristics of being outdoors on a hot summer day almost exactly mirror the physical characteristics of that magical, almost religious part of sex – that time period after you've become aroused but before you've had your orgasm. True, the characteristics are achieved for entirely opposite reasons, but they mirror each other, nonetheless.

I never really stopped and thought about what my mood was like in the middle of sex – not the beginning, no, I'm pretty clear about how I am then; and not the end, I always remember that. I guess I always assumed that I was in the middle of rapture or something, but the truth of the matter is that I'm slightly annoyed in the middle of sex. My muscles are all tensed and my back is starting to hurt and I'm sweating and I've gotten past the foreplay and all the other fun, slow parts and I'm in the middle now of trying to get to my orgasm, and I just... want... to... get... there, you know what I mean? Now, don't get me wrong – this is undoubtedly the most exciting part of the entire sexual experience. Which would go a long way towards explaining why thousands of people pack up on hot August days and go down to the beach just to lay for hours on end in the unrelenting sun.

Even though this girl is not in the middle of sexual rapture, sitting at her table and hoping not to get caught by her boss, her body is giving off all the subconscious physical features of being so, which I think my brain is picking up on without me knowing and is what is producing these fantasies which are so crude yet not without their charms. Frankly, it makes me just a wee bit uncomfortable around her. But, ah, I guess that's the curse of August, and I will have to live with it.

I suppose I'll spend the remainder of the summer the same way I've spent the last two months, which is really the way all young males spend their summers – sweating, chewing ice cubes, and making up for the lack of sex in my life with little fantasies designed solely to keep me amused while I wait patiently for sundown. For now, though, I see that I am out of iced coffee, the time is 7:04 pm and the rush hour traffic has undoubtedly dissipated by now. It's probably time for me to head home. Well, maybe I'll... uh... well, I... hmmmph... Maybe I'll get one more refill.

Tom was a boy, just like all other boys. He had friends, he liked to run to the park on warm summer mornings and play kickball for hours and hours, until he'd hear the yell of his mom and knew it was time for dinner. He hated his homework and loved his dog and hated his sister but loved his sister, and was pretty much just like every other boy he knew.

But Tom did have one thing that was unusual – Tom received a visit from an angel.

It was nighttime, one April. Tom was asleep, having a great dream about a wonderful place where little boys get all the ice cream they could ever want. But all of a sudden everything started getting fuzzy, then black, and then Tom saw a bright little spot way in the back, like his parents' old television set in the basement when you would turn it on, and then the spot got brighter and brighter, until it was a huge, amazing, brilliant, awe-inspiring (and not just a little frightening) angel, with giant wings and a glowing halo.

"Tom," the angel said, "I have a message for you from God."

"A message? From God?" Tom said. "For me? You must be mistaken."

"No, Tom, there's no mistake," the angel said. "God wants you to learn how to fly."

"Fly?" Tom was confused. "I can't fly! No one can fly! That's impossible!"

"Be that as it may," the angel said, "God wants you to learn." And with that, the angel started to disappear again, twinkle and turn back into a bright dot.

"Wait!" Tom said. "Why? Why does God want me to learn how to fly?"

"You will know that," the angel said with his tiny, almost-gone voice, "when you learn how to fly." And then – he was gone.

The next day, Tom was as confused as ever, but if his parents had taught him one thing, that was to not question the will of God. So, right after school, Tom went straight to the library and went up to Marge at the front desk and asked to get as many books as he could about the subject of flying. Marge was pleased that Tom had such an interest, and ended up getting him a book on ducks, another book on jet fighter planes, and yet another book on trapeze artists.

Tom took them home and read them, and then the next week, went back and got some more books and read them, and on and on, and pretty soon, school was out for the summer, and the boys took to the park like boys always do, but Tom was too busy with his books.

Tom ended up staying in almost every day, reading his books and taking notes and staring for a long time at the pictures of the birds caught mid-flap. Tom's friends would come by and yell, "Come on, Tom! We're one short for the team! Come on, let's go play kickball!"

And Tom would look up from his books and say, "No thanks. I'm busy."

"What are you so busy with?" they would ask. "It's summer!"

And Tom wasn't sure if God wanted him to spoil the surprise, so he would say, "Just reading. That's all." And after awhile, Tom's friends stopped coming by.

As the summer went by, Tom noticed that he was starting to pick things up. Information. Useful information. Things started clicking together in his mind as the months rolled on. And, lo and behold...Tom started learning how to fly.

Tom kept reading and studying, not sure if he knew enough yet to actually try it, until one hot August day when he realized that it was now or never. Taking his small, pale body out the door, Tom headed to the tallest building he knew of, which for his neighborhood was a six story parking garage about two blocks away.

Tom climbed all the steps of that parking garage, and soon he was at the top, nothing but sky and clouds and the warm sun above him.

Tom walked over to the side and stood on the concrete edge, looked down to see the hard, hard ground below. Truth be known, Tom was really scared. He wasn't sure that his plan would absolutely work. He almost backed down.

But then he thought, No, no, God wants me to do this, and if God wants me to, then I'll do it. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and jumped...

and fell...

then hovered...

then rose. And before he even knew it, Tom was flying.

It was great, and exhilarating. He had done it! Tom felt light as a feather, and the more he kept flying, the higher he rose.

Pretty soon, he was so high that he couldn't see his house anymore. In fact, he was so high, he couldn't even tell anymore where the edge of his town stopped and the edge of the neighboring town started.

LEARNING TO FLY

It's funny, Tom thought, how when you get so high like this, you can't even tell the difference between one town and another. Why, from here, it just all looks like ground and trees and water and little gray roads running all over the place.

In fact, he continued thinking, I bet if you went high enough, you wouldn't even be able to tell where one state ended and another began. In fact, if you went high enough, I bet you wouldn't even be able to tell where one country ended and another began. From that high up, I bet the whole planet just looks like ground and water and trees.

Suddenly Tom realized what God's purpose was in wanting him to learn how to fly. Why, he was to become a messenger! As soon as people learned that a boy could fly, he would be famous. He would be on TV all the time and leaders of great countries would invite him to speak, and when he did, he would tell them all about what he had learned up here, in the sky; about how silly it was to fight other countries, and go to war, because from up here, you can't even tell where the countries are – it's just ground, and water, and trees. This was God's plan. It had to be.

Suddenly Tom heard a clap of thunder, and then, from out of nowhere, a bolt of lightning struck out and hit Tom square in the back. Tom lost his balance, and then he started falling, faster and faster, and managed to regain his balance right before he hit the ground, but he still hit it hard enough to break his arm.

That night, at the hospital, Tom dreamt again. And, again, in his dream, the angel came, winking into existence just like before.

"What happened?" Tom said. "Is God mad at me? Did I guess wrong? Why did God hit me with a bolt of lightning?"

"God... changed his mind," the angel said. "He doesn't want you to learn how to fly anymore."

"But why not?" Tom yelled. "Why? What's the reason?"

"Oh... no reason," the angel said. "God just... changed his mind." And, quick as a wink... the angel was gone.

I am an old man now, so old that my children now have children of their own. I hear these children ask my children sometimes, "Daddy? Why doesn't grandpa ever fly when he comes to visit? He always takes the train, every time, and it takes so long!" And I hear these children ask my children, sometimes, "Daddy? Why doesn't Grandpa ever go to church? Not even on Christmas! Why doesn't he go to church with us?"

My children don't know the answer either, so they usually make something up, some answer designed to satisfy little boys and little girls before they go do what's really important, which is to go run out and play some more. Which they always do.

But, me – I know the real answers, known them for quite awhile. And now, I guess, you do too.

LETTER TO A POSSIBLE LESBIAN

I'm writing this letter and I have nothing to say, which is strange. Just sitting here, watching you and thinking that maybe you are glancing at me every so often, and it's such a pleasant, simple, base activity that I don't feel like writing anything analytical about it.

I write letters like this all the time to attractive women across the room, but I never get the courage to give them to them. I write novels, and in one of my novels I have one of my characters give another character a letter like this. Someone just read the book and told me that they thought that the scene was incredibly charming, but I said that it was charming only in the context of the book, and that if a strange man really came up and gave her a note she'd probably think it was pretty weird. And she kind of agreed but wasn't sure, so we sat there at the coffeehouse and wrote notes to each other, but it just wasn't the same.

My mind is kind of mush tonight, so I'm not sure what to say. I'm listening to Pavement right now, this song that I think is called "Radioactive" – "He's got the radio active and it makes me feel okay." I've been listening to way too much Pavement recently and I'm not sure why. I guess it's just the right thing to hear these days. Do you ever get in one of those moods, where hearing a certain band is the only thing that will satisfy this sense of restlessness? Maybe it's just me.

I'm sitting at my table, trying to figure out if the woman you're sitting with is your girlfriend. Unless something very random happens, I'll never know for sure, because I'm trying to make the decision based on entirely surface-level criteria, which is an impossible task.

The two of you are having a rich conversation, full of laughing and leaning-ins and chain-smoking, which could mean that you're lovers or that you're simply good friends. You both have the same clothes on and the same haircuts, which a lot of gay couples end up unconsciously doing after dating for awhile, but could also just be a coincidence. And on top of that, your clothes and hair match the way a lot of my lesbian friends look, but it also happens to be clothes and hair that's just generally popular right now. And of course, I'm fairly sure now that you are stealing glances at me... but hell, that doesn't mean anything. You could be looking simply because you're wondering why that strange guy keeps looking at you.

Sometimes I'll be at a coffeehouse and someone will be looking at me and writing in a notebook, and there's this little part of me that hopes that they're writing about me, that they're observing me and making little opinions and conclusions based on what they see. I have this desire to go over and ask them what they're writing, just to see if I'm right. But I never do.

I don't even know why I'm writing this letter. Bored, I suppose. I'm supposed to do some work on my novel tonight, but I'm not really in the mood. I see attractive women all the time and wish I had the courage to just go over and talk to them, and of course I don't have that courage, never have as far back as I can remember. I think that's why I write these letters. I'm actually much closer to giving you this than I usually am when I write. But I don't want to slide this to you while your friend/girlfriend is with you – it would be incredibly embarrassing to me and probably not just a little awkward. So unless something ridiculously unexpected happens, like your friend leaving while you stay, it looks like this letter will be another piece of my permanent collection.

(At the top of the next page is written in large magic marker:) I have to wear a dress on the 1st day.

I went to an open mic on Tuesday, and someone wrote this in my notebook while I was in the bathroom. I still don't know who it was.

I enjoy writing letters precisely because I get to give them away and never get them back. I'm attempting to write for a living right now, and as a result have this obsessive desire to record my work, to catalogue it, make sure nothing slips through the cracks and becomes a lost piece. I get so preoccupied with this pursuit, that it truly gives me a pleasure to write something down and hand it to someone else and know that I'll never have to deal with it again, never have to keep tabs on it.

In the last two years, I've written three novels, about 40 short stories, a book and a half of non-fiction, two chapbooks, and lyrics to about a dozen songs, altogether totaling perhaps in the neighborhood of 225,000 words now. I tell you this as a way of explaining why my little one-page letter is turning into a four-plus page tome – and also hopefully as a way of showing you that writing is just what I do, and why you shouldn't be worried that I'm a stalker or psychotic or any of a thousand things that make Chicago such an adventure. I simply

write, and I write a lot – I write to my friends, I write to strangers, I write to myself, I write to audiences, I write to my grandmother, I write to attractive women across the coffeehouse from me. Writing is my way of dealing with the world, with life, which admittedly is not the most suave way to deal with it. But it occurs to me that there's much worse ways to deal.

I don't know. I sit here and watch you, wonder what your story is, your history. It's an unpleasant side effect of hanging out with a writer, this constant need of theirs to know everyone's stories. I've been this way as long as I can remember, which is strange because it was only two years ago that I decided to try to write as a career. I actually studied photography in college, but now that I am writing a lot, I recognize all kinds of personality traits of writers inside myself.

Well, your friend just went to the bathroom and then you immediately got up and went, so I assume that means that you're about ready to leave. I still haven't decided whether to give this to you, but I think I'll wrap up just in case the opportunity presents itself. Thanks for letting me ramble for a bit. I hope this letter's been interesting. Goodbye.

Dear Liz:

I was at a party once, last year, up in Logan Square and this person got really drunk and said to me, "You know, if Sharon Tate had never been butchered up by Charles Manson, she would've grown up and become Liz Phair." Needless to say, I had no response to this.

I am currently writing this letter on the red line, Chicago Transit Authority, USA, clanging my way northbound to the little hovel in Edgewater I like to call home. It is three in the morning and I am currently quite drunk myself, to tell the truth. I'm drunk because I'm depressed. I'm depressed because tonight, my three-and-a-half-year-old tape of "Exile in Guyville" finally broke. And that's why I'm writing.

I grew up in the 1980's, which means I grew up in a time when there were no heroes, when you were taught that it was idiotic to even have heroes. Heroes in the 1980's were factory made, slick products of the media who became heroes through external forces beyond their control, who became those heroes through some random act of kindness that Ronald Reagan thought could be turned into a great soundbite. And of course, as always, he was right.

LETTER TO LIZ PHAIR

So, this is how I grew up. And in 1993, exactly six days after "Exile in Guyville" arrived at my college radio station in sleepy Columbia, Missouri, I made a tape of it. I put in

on a black see-through Maxell 90 minute tape, backed it on the other side with Frank Sinatra, "Ring a Ding Ding!" and stuck on one of those green frowny face poison center stickers.

Have you ever had one of those tapes, Liz? Have you ever had one of those tapes that transcend the role of tape? One of those tapes that becomes a better confidant than your best friend could ever be? That makes love to you better than your lover ever could? That you play at just the right exact time in the right exact place and makes you jump around in the middle of the street and just be so glad that you're alive and on this earth right now?

My train has reached the Addison stop. A bunch of drunk frat guys poured themselves in and they are currently talking loudly, jostling each other in the aisles, and poking fun at sullen, tired black men who would just as soon kill them as look at them. I don't think these drunk frat guys really know what they're getting themselves into – but then again, they never do, do they? I think I'll turn up my Walkman and keep writing.

There was a certain point, I don't know when exactly but I think it was around August 1994 – that I realized that you were one of my heroes. I, of course, usually keep this information to myself, but there are certain nights, like tonight, where I have a little too much to drink and I espouse to my friends, "You know, I don't care WHAT you say. I DO have heroes."

"Oh yeah? Like who?"

"Well, like Liz Phair."

To which my friends always squint their eyes at me and go, "What? What are you talking about?" And then they pause, and then they go, "(SOUNDING DISGUSTED) Oh... God. Oh... Jason. Oh... God!"

But this is good. I don't want my heroes to be the heroes of my friends. I want my heroes to be my heroes because I am learning something from them that no one else is. I want my heroes to be my heroes because they are simply living their life and doing what they think is best and just... being my hero because they don't know what else to do. I don't want my heroes to realize they're even being heroes, because if they did realize, then what would be the point?

I met you once, inside a bar called Delilah's, and I wanted to tell you all these things that night, but what came out was, "Wow... Liz Phair! You know, your album is... well, it's, it's... well, wow, you know?" This, naturally, kept me mortified for about a year and a half after I uttered it, until I started having some success of my own here in Chicago. And now I meet people who have read my novel, and they come up and say, "Wow... Jason Pettus! You know, your book is... well, it's, it's... well, wow, you know?" And I do know. And it makes me feel not quite so stupid about being tongue-tied around you.

The last time I saw you was at a fundraiser at Steppenwolf which was, interestingly enough, being hosted by Ira Glass, who is in all likelihood listening to this letter as I speak it and who is another hero of mine and who I have ALSO gotten all tongue-tied around in front of. This was in the middle of the whole problems you were having with your new album, and every time you'd finish a song, you'd look out at the audience in amazement and say, "Wow, you guys are actually sitting there, listening to me." And I WANTED to be one of those guys at a concert who yell out, "We love you, Liz!" because, well, frankly, we do. I didn't yell it, of course, but you really have no idea how close I got.

My train has reached Bryn Mawr, my stop. My three and a half year old tape of "Exile in Guyville" broke tonight. I am holding it out to the audience as I read this, and they are all looking at it. I am quite drunk and I really, really have to pee. I am so glad I am alive and on this earth right now. And when I grow up, I want to be Liz Phair.

Sincerely,

Jason Pettus

September 30, 1996

One of the profound things in my life that proves to me that I was raised right, that proves to me that my parents were good parents and should be acknowledged as such, is that I have a natural and sincere enjoyment in my twenties for many of the same things my dad enjoyed in his twenties. I think about this sometimes, like tonight, and a list off the top of my head would have to include the following:

Simon and Garfunkel
Dobie Gillis
Dave Brubeck
Ray Bradbury
Jack Kerouac
Bob and Ray
Ayn Rand
The Smothers Brothers
Isaac Asimov
Julie London
The Dick Van Dyke Show

and others that I'm sure of but can't think of right now as I'm writing.

These are basic things, these performers I mention. They teach me that I was raised with a discerning, dry sense of humor; an enjoyment of sophistication; an appreciation for sincere, confessional work. My enjoyment of these things proves to me that I was raised right, that I was raised with a good sense of morals and ethics.

LETTER TO MY UNBORN CHILD

And the funny thing is, with the exceptions of Dave Brubeck and Isaac Asimov, all the things on this list are things that I discovered on my own. It wasn't until I would declare the new "discoveries" to my parents that I would

find out how much my dad had been into them while he was in college/post-college.

Of course, there are certain things from that period that my dad enjoyed that I don't particularly care for:

Peter, Paul and Mary
Laugh-In
James Bond
Playboy
Jesus Christ Superstar soundtrack

But even with these, I can see what it was that he enjoyed about these things, and I can picture myself enjoying them if I had happened to be that age in the 1960's myself.

So again, tonight as I sit here, off the top of my head a list of things I enjoy as a man in his twenties in the 1990's would include:

Early R.E.M.
David Lynch films
Liz Phair
Douglas Coupland
The Simpsons
Letterman when he was on NBC
Thrift store clothes
Jake Johannsen
Bob Mould and Sugar
The Star Wars trilogy
Banana Yoshimoto
Henry Rollins
The Police (the band)
Mark Leyner
Seinfeld
Art films
The Magnetic Fields
Bloom County

And I could go on, but I'm near my el stop. If you grow up and I find that you enjoy these things – if I have found that you have “discovered” them through no help of mine – these things will prove to me that I raised you right. They will prove to me that you will grow up to be a fine adult and that I have nothing to worry about. They will make me proud of you.

With Love,
Dad

LETTER WRITTEN ON AN AIRPLANE

Southwest Airlines Flight 759, Chicago/Midway to St. Louis/Lambert Field
December 21, 1996

I've had the strangest feeling since I first spotted you in the terminal. I've had this overwhelming feeling that we know each other, that we are great friends and spend weekday evenings drinking in crappy bars and bitching about our lives to each other. I don't know why I feel this way, since obviously we don't know each other and, as far as I can tell, I don't think we've ever met. Nonetheless, the feeling persists, this feeling that we are actually traveling together across and into a new city. And now you are sitting directly across from me and one aisle back.

So. One hour to write a letter to you. I'm not sure what I'm going to say, but it beats what I was going to work on – which, actually, is also a fun project but I've been spending way too much time on.

Our eyes keep catching each other's, but I don't know if that's because you're intrigued by me or because we're facing each other and you'd be looking in my direction anyway. When the woman with the oxygen mask walked by, you smiled and rolled your eyes at me, which I found charming.

What can I tell about you? Simple things – you dress yourself and carry yourself in a way that reminds me of Carol Burnett (but this is obvious to you and you've probably been told this so many times that you're sick of it). You carry a promotional totebag from Adobe and read a book on web design, so it's pretty safe to assume that you're tied to the computer industry somehow, either as a profession, a major, or serious hobby. You laugh and make small talk with the men sitting next to you, men who don't look like the type of whom you'd normally enjoy their company, which means you're outgoing, slightly gregarious, and willing to exhibit at least some grace under pressure. Oh, and also, you're willing to make funny faces in public without thinking about it, which probably means you have a healthy sense of self-confidence. Also... you were willing to buy fundraiser candy at the airport, which means you have some sense of compassion; but then you didn't buy it when you found out it was two bucks, which means that you're as poor and cynical as me and my friends.

And me. I'm trying to think of the best way to synopsise this to a half-page. Hmm... I grew up in St. Louis, which is what's taking me to our destination. I've lived in Chicago two and a half years. I write novels for a living... thus the "poor and cynical" part. I write a lot – lots and lots and lots and lots, so much so that I get afraid sometimes that I'm beginning to lose touch with the human part of humanity. I tend to hide a lot behind my paper and pen, like I'm doing right now with this letter. I used to not be this way, but certain events in my recent past are shaping me into this form that I don't like very much. It's too long of a story to go into, so... I won't.

Although I don't believe in any kind of fate, luck, superstition or the like, I nonetheless still consider the gray "ARMY" shirt that I'm currently wearing as a lucky shirt. It's a contradiction, I know. I have never been in the military – the shirt was a gift from my cousin, who is planning a career in the army. He's a good person, but a little different from me. We were actually born two hours apart, me in St. Louis and he in Kansas City, the first two grandchildren in the family. Anyway, I always wear this shirt on flights, for several reasons: 1) I don't think it ever hurts to have a little more luck on an airplane flight (I'm not actually afraid of flying, but I have to admit that the takeoff and landing parts scare the shit out of me); and 2) Along with playing my Walkman really loudly, wearing my "ARMY" shirt makes me feel tough and mysterious, neither of which I am at all in real life. I suppose we all do our little things to get us through the stress which is Midway at Christmas.

Well, they just announced St. Louis, much more quickly than I thought they would, so I'll wrap up. I hope you enjoyed this letter. I've always wanted to write a letter to another passenger on a plane, and now I have, and it really was as fun as I thought it would be. If you would like to meet and hang out and bitch about our lives to each other, please feel free to call. Otherwise, I hope the holidays are kind to you.

MISSED CONNECTIONS

When I was three years old, I was in love. Her name was Heather Callaway – she was in the four year old class upstairs, and the only time I'd see her was at recess. She would run up to me and twist my arm, around and around, in its socket until red lines would shoot up from the wrist and tears would well in my eyes. Then she'd laugh and run over to her friends on the other side of the playground. I wanted to marry her.

My relationship with the opposite sex stayed pretty much in the same vein until the age of seventeen. I was terrified of attractive women – I could feel that terror bubble up from this deep, secret part of my gut, swell in my throat so that I could no longer breathe, no longer speak right, just these guttural “ah... ah, ah... ah”s, could feel the terror wrap around my heart and squeeze like it was trying to make a diamond. We would be at the Pizza Hut or the movie theatre, and my friends would say, “Well, if you like her, just go up and talk to her!” and I wanted to grab them by the collars and shake them and scream, “ARE YOU TRYING TO KILL ME!!!”

I tell you this story not as an attempt to humiliate myself, but as a precursor to a rather strange incident that happened to me last week. I was in the Melrose Diner on Belmont with my ex-girlfriend Brynn and her roommate/lesbian lover, Sam, which is, really, too long of a story to get into, so I don't know why I even mention it. I was sitting quietly, eating my potato soup and Brynn and Sam were drinking coffee and stealing my cigarettes even though neither of them smoke and reading through the Personals section of the February 2, 1996 issue of the Chicago Reader, pointing and laughing every time they saw a lesbian ad that had the words, “No butches, please.”

All of a sudden, Sam says, “Holy shit,” and then she looks at the paper for another minute and says, “Holy shit!” and they spin the paper around so that I can see it, and it says... and I quote...

“You: black hair and goatee. Read a story about sign language last week at Sweet Alice, that touched me in a way I can't describe. Me: another reader who you see every week. Am very interested, but too shy to say so. Be patient – I'll get my courage soon.”

“That's you, isn't it?” Sam says. I mumble something, so Brynn pokes me in the forehead and chants, “Jason's got a stalker! Jason's got a stalker!” I got so mad that I took my cigarettes back from them and wouldn't let them play with them any more. ...Yeah. ...That'll teach 'em. ...Stupid... lesbians.

I entered the University of Missouri at seventeen, and it was there that I was introduced to a magical, almost heavenly technique for finally overcoming my phobia of beautiful women that had had a stranglehold on me over my entire life. The technique was thus:

- 1) Get to party.
- 2) Fill plastic cup with Bud Lite.
- 3) Drink contents of plastic cup.
- 4) Repeat as necessary.

With the aid of the sweet liquor, I found myself for the first time in my life talkative around women. Some might even say... flirtatious. Debonair, even. Well, okay, maybe not, but I found out that, you know, there actually existed some women out there that found me as cute as I found them, which was a revelation to me. And more importantly, I found out that the ratio of stupid, idiotic beautiful women to smart, interesting ones were roughly the same as men, which completely demystified the opposite sex and allowed me to hold conversations. Which led to dates. Which led to... well. You know. And pretty soon, I found that there was nothing to fear at all, and pretty soon, I found that I didn't need liquor to talk to women, and pretty soon, I found that I was actually asking out women that I thought were way too supermodelish and sophisticated for me. And they were accepting. And we were dating. Which led to... well. You get the picture.

I've been looking for you tonight. I've been studying all you people who I recognize as readers, seeing if your glances at me linger just a moment longer than politeness requires. Ultimately, it's a futile endeavor, because if you're the type of person to run an ad like that, you're the type of person who's going to completely avoid eye contact whatsoever. Still, I make the effort, and as I watch, I think. And I think.

There are definitely people I look at and hope to God it's not them. People that just scream “Stalker” with every fiber of their being. People that I just know that, despite me not owning a phone and having an unlisted address and a security gate, I would find sitting in my apartment one night, watching the Star Wars trilogy videotape I got for Christmas and eating my Cheetos, clad only in their underwear with the words, “Hello, Loverboy” painted

in lipstick across their belly.

And then again, there are three people here that I have been getting on my knees every night and praying is my secret admirer. Women that I think might just be more beautiful than life itself, women that I have found myself having waking fantasies of as I make that long, long el ride back to my apartment in Edgewater every Tuesday night. Now, I can tell you that one those three works here – one of them usually hangs out with the guitar players and the pool players – and one sits at the coveted “cool table” where everyone seems to be personal friends with the host. I can’t tell you any more than that, because of... well, you know... because of... ah... the bubble.

For we’ve gotten to the main point of my story, which is that since 1992, I have been regressing, like Cliff Robertson in that bad ‘60s movie I can’t recall the name of, where he’s severely retarded but takes this drug that makes him smart, but the drug wears off and you watch him slowly turn back into an idiot again.

In 1992 I went through a breakup that was so horrible, so paralyzing to me, that I am slowly losing the ability to talk to beautiful women again. Every time I think about introducing myself to one of these three women, my breath starts getting shallow and my heartbeat starts climbing until I get so hyperventilated that I just have to start thinking about baseball or that stupid “Third Rock from the Sun” show to calm myself down. Surprisingly enough, my dating history is currently at its most active since 1992, but it’s all been with women that I don’t find that horribly attractive or interesting or intelligent, just because I know deep within myself that when it ends, as it always will, I will experience a feeling of mild disappointment, and nothing more.

I find it fascinating – just absolutely fascinating – the prospect that one of these three women might just be my admirer. That I am head over heels for them and they are head over heels for me, but we will never get together because we are both too big of wusses to ever make the first move. Then again, there’s something terrifying about that concept, and it makes me wonder if I will ever, for the rest of my life, get into a satisfying relationship again.

I don’t have a moral to this story, or a great antidote to wrap it all up. I can tell you that Heather Callaway grew up to be a real bitch, who thought she was better than everyone else. Recently I saw her at my high school reunion and she had turned into yet another white trash wife, her third baby in the oven and a used-car salesman for a husband who smacks her when dinner’s not ready. And secretly? Yeah, I was glad. Am I going to hell for this? Well, those of you without sin... etc.

I really hope that the person who wrote that ad talks to me tonight. And, you know, if there’s someone here you like, maybe you should say something to them tonight. Maybe that’s my moral – that we all run the risk of becoming fourteen year olds again if we don’t take the occasional chance. Maybe I’ll even talk to one of those three women tonight. So... if I seem to be trying to hold a conversation with you but I’m hemming and I’m hawing and pretty much acting like a complete dork – please, be patient. Hopefully, I’ll get my courage soon.

Ah, Chicago. In August of 1994 I heard the City of Big Shoulders calling to me from my sleepy hovel in Columbia, Missouri. Oh, the bright lights! Eee, the galleries! And oh, my oh my, the chance to meet Liz Phair!

Because, of course, by that time I and millions of other red-blooded American men (and women) had become entranced with the vixen: her smart-ass comments on 120 Minutes; the lyrics that would just make you want to get trashed and scream and yell in the middle of the street; the come-hitheresque manner in which she hung out with Winona Ryder.

And I had an in! Friends from school were already living in Wicker Park, a mere six houses down from Ms. Phair. Tales they would relate over the phone would make me heady – “Oh, yeah, I just saw Liz yesterday at the grocery store, buying a Mello Yello or something.” “Well I got drunk at the Empty Bottle last week and Liz was down there with her boyfriend making out in the corner and then Urge Overkill showed up and they all got kicked out ‘cause they wouldn’t take those stupid fuckin’ medallions off.” And hell, once on a trip up there, I got my picture taken in the same photo booth that Liz did her album cover for “Exile in Guyville” from. Shit, there

MY DATE WITH LIZ PHAIR

no way I’m not going to meet her.

So I packed up, took off, and a day later landed with a resounding thud at the corner of Ashland and Division, where my home would be for the next eight months. My first week in Chicago, in the times that I wasn’t getting lost on the el, dodging bullets from the three Latino gangs that lived in my neighborhood, and wondering if working retail again would necessarily be such a bad idea, I vainly kept my eyes open for that moment that her Phairness would stroll into my coffeeshop, order herself a double latte (with extra shavings, of course – she is a wealthy rock star now, you know), glance at my oh-so-trendy yet intellectual contemporary fiction I had just picked up, and sit and converse with me on the finer points of Nelson Algren.

And then... one day... it happened.

It was a simple sheet of orange paper, shoved into my hand after yet another atrocious show at some atrocious club. Six simple words, but, oh, weighed with such power that the flyer almost knocked my ass to that Damen Avenue sidewalk –

“LIZ PHAIR SPINS - ABOUT 9 - DELILAH’S.”

Delilah’s, for those poor suckers that have never been to Chicago, is this great slackerish dive that just happens to be in the middle of the big frat guy section of town (don’t ask me – this all happened before I moved here.) The place is well known for asking Chicago indies to come and drink free beer and spin whatever weird stuff they’ve been listening to recently.

I asked my friend Carrie if she’d head my sorry lost self over to this place that night, and she said sure. This is the one that lived six doors from My Phair Lady (sorry, I have a bet with a friend about how many different Phair puns I can use in one story. I’m winning). I remember her mumbling something about, “This’ll be interesting, seeing what kinda music Liz Phair listens to...”

We got to Delilah’s that fateful sweltering night, and the first thing we noticed was that the place was... crowded. I mean, really crowded.

“Jesus,” Carrie said. “I’ve never seen this many people in Delilah’s! Fuckin’ Liz Phair...”

The second thing I noticed that there was no DJ booth. All Delilah’s has is this stereo set up on some shelves behind the bar. It’s the first thing you see when you walk in – it’s maybe three feet from me as I come through the front door. And as I made my first accidental glance across the bar to see what’s going on...

There she is. Phair skin and all.

LIZ PHAIR – A TRUE AND FALSE LIST

TRUE: Liz Phair is a really short person.

FALSE: Liz Phair was currently having sex with Nash Kato when the cover photograph of “Exile in Guyville” was taken.

TRUE: The tapes of “Girly Sounds,” Liz Phair’s first four-track recordings in her parents’ basement that eventually got sent to Matador and got her her contract, will rock your world.

TRUE: Liz Phair does have this affinity for making out in public.

FALSE: Liz Phair has great taste in music.

This club was filled with hundreds of kids with their costumes down to a science, all there to get a taste of the Phair Ball, but they were all too cool to actually, you know... actually look at her.

Except me, of course. There were two empty barstools directly opposite the stereo – apparently the idea of being within spitting distance of Phair Play intimidated the majority of the crowd – but not my friend “I kicked Steve Albini out of my own party” Carrie. She sat on her stool with the same gusto as if she were stitching a scarlet letter A on her ass, and she beckoned me to do the same.

I have to say that I would never accuse the Phairly Amazing One of playing music that night I like. But the combination of the obscure disco and the cheesy new wave hits didn't give me any palpitations – I was there! And she was there! Literally 48 inches from me. Literally so close that I swore I could hear the lyrics to the new album leaking out of her brain. Carrie and I were rapidly on our way to getting blotto; I had been in Chicago one week and hadn't gotten killed yet; and I definitely was going to have the most kick-ass story of all my friends come Christmas when I visited Missouri next. All was right in the world.

After many, many beers, Carrie finally got up and said, "Well... fuck this. I'm going home. Are you sure you're going to be able to find your way back?" I confirmed with a wave of my hand, and I suddenly found myself alone.

The moment of truth had arrived, for I found that my level of inebriation was putting me on the fast train to Slumberville myself. The moment had come for me to decide whether or not to say something to our Phair-weathered friend.

The pro, of course, is that I never might have this opportunity again. Who knows? I might just impress her. The con, obviously, is, well, she's Liz Phair, and I'm drunk as a skunk, and any attempt at this point to open my mouth might turn into a rambling, stream-of-consciousness, Ellen-Degeneris-like monologue about how the reason I have such a big crush on her is because she looks just like the girl I had my first ever crush on, who used to make me sit in her parents' basement when we were seven while she played the Grease soundtrack and make me lip-synch all of John Travolta's lines and dance around the rec room, and then damnit she grew up and married an engineer, for Christ's sake, I mean, what the hell is that all about, and put on thirty pounds and I am actually living my crush vicariously through her in order to recapture this sweet, innocent time in my past.

And that, as they say, would not be good.

A LIST OF THINGS I, JASON PETTUS, ACTUALLY CONSIDERED SAYING TO LIZ PHAIR

"Oh, I love this song." (TOO SUCK-UP)

"So, when's the new album coming out?" (TOO INDIE)

"I know you studied art in college. Can you recommend some galleries that I can see some good, contemporary, unpretentious artists?" (TOO INTELLECTUAL)

"I saw your show at Metro in January. I drove all the way from Missouri!" (TOO STALKER)

"I'm sorry I sent you a fan letter. I mean, it seemed like a good idea at the time, but now I just feel like a big geek." (TOO PATHETIC)

"I really like your jacket." (SEE FIRST ITEM)

My nervousness was rising to a fever pitch. My hands were getting sweaty. I know I'm leaving real soon, and I must, I must say something to Liz with a Z. Anything. But what to say? MY GOD, WHAT AM I GOING TO SAY TO HER?

And then, Captain Phairlight played an Erasure song. One of the female bartenders turned to her and yelled, "I did a cheerleading routine to this in high school!" Liz said, "Really? So did I!" and they started doing their routine, right there behind the bar, hip shakes and finger guns and all.

Now, this next part of the story has been open to some dispute – my friends say that this couldn't possibly have happened. But as I stand and breathe today, I swear on my full color poster of Liz that I swiped from the Matador offices, the following exchange really did take place.

The Phair and Away Girl and the bartender were desperate to find an audience for their cheerleading display. Looking around the room, they observed, as I had done earlier, that the Alternation was not going to be so gauche as to actually notice them. Except for me, of course.

So, they turned, and scarcely two feet from my eyes, the two women proceeded to do that seductive high school dance to yours truly, their party of one.

The song ended, and Liz Phair turned to me and said, "So? What did you think?"

Panicked, I jumped out of my bar stool and ran out the door.

And that, my friend, was the last time I saw our Phair-haired Ubergrrl. Barring, of course, the three minutes this last winter I was on the Milwaukee Ave. bus at the same time as her. But I don't count that, so neither should you.

Was I too hasty in running off? If I had made the perfect insightful yet irreverent comment back to her that night, would we now be fast friends, hanging out in the Bahamas while she records her new album, sharing a Mai Tai with Kim Deal and asking Bob Guccione Jr. to shave some more ice? I really, really doubt it.

But you never know. I'm told that Liz Phair peruses the Web on a regular basis. Perhaps she'll come across this article, be tickled, and e-mail me, starting the burgeoning friendship that I was so sure I was going to have with her in the first place.

Because... (all together now) all's Phair in love and war (thank you – I won the bet)!

MY THINGS AND YOUR THINGS

I have this... thing about being naked in front of other people.

You have this... thing about the size of your breasts.

I have a thing about Chicago.

You have a thing about Texas.

I have this thing about girls who are scientists.

You have this thing about guys who play an instrument.

I have a thing about Pavement.

You have a thing about the Indigo Girls.

I have a thing about smoking...

You have a thing about smoking.

I have a thing about getting kissed on the back of my neck...

You have a thing about a tongue in your ear...

I have this thing about blowjobs...

You... have this thing about blowjobs.

(Pause)

I have a thing about having dinner together at least once a week.

You have a thing about introducing me to your co-workers.

I have this thing about buying flowers.

You have this thing about making mix tapes.

I have a thing about e.e. cummings.

You have a thing about Anne Sexton.

I have this thing about doing it with the lights on...

You... have this thing about doing it with the lights on.

I have a... (frowns) thing... about summer vacations.

You have a... thing about internships.

I have a thing about you being in my room when I'm not there.

You have a thing about me showering in your bathroom.

I have this thing about living together.

You... (frowns and pauses) have this thing about... living together.

I have a... (frowns and pauses) thing about your new roommates.

You have a thing about me having a thing about your new roommates.

I have a thing about you suddenly having a thing about French males.

You have a thing about controlling personalities!

I have a thing about receiving apologies!

You have a thing about kissing and making up.

I have this thing about blowjobs...

You... have this thing about blowjobs.

(Pause)

I have a thing about us never going out on Saturdays nights any more.

You have a thing about the people I do go out with on Friday nights.

I have a thing about your clothes.

You have a thing about my drinking.

I have a thing about your constant attempts to act like you're a better person than me.

You have a thing about my self-inflicted fuck-ups because I have issues with my childhood!

Well, I have a thing about your pressure on me to graduate early!

Oh yeah, well you have a thing about graduating and hanging around a stupid fucking college town waiting for me to get my shit together!

Well, I have a thing about the entire concept of us even dating!

Actually... (long pause) you also have a thing about the entire concept of us even dating.

(Pause)

I have this thing about liquor.

(At a faster and faster pace) You have this thing about crying.

I have this thing about crying... You have this thing about liquor... I have this thing about blowjobs...

(Pause) You... have this thing about blowjobs.

(Pause)

I have this thing about grad school.

You have this thing about grad school.

I have a thing about Chicago.

You have a thing about Texas.

ODE TO A BAD POET

Last week I was brought
to a big open mike
it was like a field trip to me
one I did like
I said, "They can do it!
So why not ol' me?
I'll dazzle with poetry."
And the best part... it's free.
The first thing you'll notice
is everything must rhyme.
The second thing you'll notice
is that I have no real good sense of time
ing, or rhythm,
or meter – what's that?
I'm a poet! I've got a story!
About growing up fat.
Now here's the required part
where I bitch about my ex.
And here, quite appropriately,
is when I lament the sex.
(in a sing-song voice)
And here's where I speak
like that one guy that was cool.
I don't know why he does it
but I feel I must, too.
And here's where I'm symbolic
with quite a dreadful prose
that I learned from Dungeons and Dragons
when I was fourteen years old.
And here's where the crowd loves me
when I yell the word "Fuck!"
Everybody ready?
Okay... FUCK!
And here's where I champion
a lost cause, like the Dubliners,
and here's where I bitch
about those bastard Republicaners.
And here, I guess, I should bitch
about another open mike,
while championing another
that's closed and out of sight.
Oh, and no poem would be complete
without a misogynist slur
about a hooker I slept with
in a big, drunken blur.
So that's it! I thank you
I hope I passed the test.
Now excuse me while I get drunk
and talk through all the rest.

Richard Monaco
c/o Edward Acton
Acton, Leone, Hanson & Jaffe
Box 1106, Madison Square Station
New York, NY 10159-1106
Dear Mr. Monaco/Acton:

Well, well – your offer of a “qualified reading” of my manuscript, *Dreaming of Laura Ingalls*, seems like an intriguing one. Before I send my \$125 check, however, I feel obliged to ask the following questions –

1) You mention that your company has “discovered and developed many writers, most of whom went on to extensive and lucrative careers,” then proceed to list twenty three of them. Why is it that I’ve never heard of a single one of them?

2) Your bio lists you as a “former screenwriter.”

Why is it that you chose to leave that profession, which undoubtedly would pay you much more than a literary agent?

3) In the mandatory contract that you sent, binding me to a “reading fee” if I wish to have my book consid-

ered by your agency, it is mentioned that “there is no profit to the Holy Grail Co., Inc.” on these reading fees. But in the same contract, you mention that the minimum fee for a full novel is \$125, and could very easily reach \$175, depending on the size. If it’s true that there is no profit, Mr. Monaco/Acton, then where do I send a resume of consideration for a job of reader with your company?

4) My most important question – Why is it that when I sent my query letter to “Edward Acton” at “Acton, Leone, Hanson & Jaffe” in New York City, my letter somehow got forwarded (with no additional postmark, mind you) to “Richard Monaco” at “The Holy Grail Company, Inc.” in Scarsdale, New York?

I was a little nervous about sending out my first novel, so I asked the advice of a number of people in the industry. To a fault, they all said, “Never, ever send your book to a place that charges a reading fee.”

As a result, I did very careful work choosing the agents I sent query letters to. I spent entire weekends in the library, pouring over *The Literary Marketplace*, painstakingly compiling and writing my list of agents. I’m not sure if you know this, Mr. Monaco/Acton, but I have already spent \$500 just in stamps, envelopes and xeroxes alone in pursuit of an agent – not a small amount of money to someone like me.

To have all of my time, effort and money go to someone who is expressly shady in their business workings – well, not only does it disappoint me, Mr. Monaco/Acton, not only does it confuse me, but it actually makes me angry. I feel betrayed – as if even my most meticulous research cannot be entirely devoid of scam artists. As if an agency is so willing to lie to me from my very first encounter with them, then how could I ever trust them to fairly represent my book? In short, it made me angry enough to necessitate this letter back to you.

When I was in high school, Mr. Monaco/Acton, I worked a series of retail jobs. In each training session of each job, Personnel was very careful to point out and teach a common corporate con game, called the “bait and switch.” You obviously are not that familiar with the topic, so I’ll elaborate:

The basic idea is that a company will offer a sale on something that they never really intended to sell, in an attempt to “lure” the customer in for the purpose of convincing them to buy something much more expensive. You see, you “bait” with the sale, then “switch” to the expensive item. You’re following me so far, Mr. Monaco/Acton?

When I see what looks like a legitimate literary agency, one that lists “no reading fees” in *The Literary Marketplace*, and I see them taking sincere query letters and automatically forwarding them to a “book reading factory” which, in most likelihood, has no plans to accept my manuscript but will gladly take my fee – well, forgive me for saying so, Mr. Monaco/Acton, but this sounds suspiciously like that con game that I was always taught to avoid. By the way, I was taught to avoid it because it is highly illegal, and even the president of a company can go to jail if the company is found guilty.

Since I found myself at the computer already, I took the opportunity to make extra copies of this letter and forward them to the Association of Authors’ Representatives, the Better Business Bureau, the publication *The Literary Marketplace*, and the magazine *Publishers Weekly*. I am confident that they will be very interested in what I have to say, and might

AN OPEN LETTER TO MR. MONACO/ACTON

start wondering the same questions that I have.

I am very curious to what you might have to say about all this. In that regard, I have sent a SASE for quick response. Considering the fact, however, that it took you sixty-one days to get a query response back to me, and simply the nature of my questions, I really doubt that you will have the courage to write back. That's okay – I have other priorities in my life right now that are a little more pressing. Perhaps, though, that AAR, an organization devoted to reinforcing the good reputation of their profession...or The Literary Marketplace, whose sales and reputation rests solely on the validity of the information contained in their book... or perhaps Publishers Weekly, a magazine which prides itself on solid, insightful pieces of investigative journalism...might have a little more persistence than me. It is my hope that one or more of these groups might not be satisfied with a simple, pat answer, and that eventually you will be forced to take a good, long hard look at yourselves.

In a way, Mr. Monaco/Acton, it's actually quite sad, because you have brought this on yourself. If you had had the decency to honestly advertise yourself, I could have simply skipped you and none of us would be the wiser. As it is, however, with your refusal to call a spade a spade, you have wasted my time. You have wasted my money. You have wasted my effort, my creative process, as well as a large chunk of my optimism. Because of this, I am angry. I mean, I am really irate, Mr. Monaco/Acton. And when I am angry, I do everything in my power to make sure that the rest of the world knows what has happened to me, and hopefully make them angry, too.

My final question, Mr. Monaco/Acton: If and when I do get to the point that I have a bit of a reputation from my writing, and when they are ready to start doing interviews with me, and when they ask me what trials and tribulations I have endured over the years with my writing, can you take a guess, even if it's twenty years from now, what my first topic of conversation will always be?

Looking forward to your response,
Jason Pettus

The name of the place is The Odian Corporation, which I suppose was a radical enough name for when it was created, which was the mid-1960's.

Odian Corp. decided to get an Internet server in 1993, and of course, they had no one on staff at that point who knew anything about the Internet – this was before the Great Web Boom of '95, mind you. As a result, they did what all the corporations at that time did – they telephoned some snotty, bitter, acid-dropping ex-film majors who had decided in 1987 to drop out of life and start their own multimedia company. This, of course, is why all those snotty ex-film majors are millionaires now, in 1996, and what allows me, a snotty, bitter, acid-dropping (ex-acid-dropping) art major (graduated art major) to get a \$34,000 job at a place like The Odian Corporation. History is one long series of seemingly random, small decisions that snowball until they are out of control – much like when a quirky, minor character on a bad sitcom suddenly becomes popular and, three years later, you tune in one night and find out the entire show is now built around them.

It's still not certain whether there was a simple miscommunication over the phone (as the snotty ex-film majors claimed) or whether the snotty ex-film majors were just taking too much acid the night they set up the server and decided it would be cool to fuck up The Establishment. In any case, the happy, excited little workers of The Odian Corporation came to work the next day, anxious to start sending secret notes to their lovers across town, who were also trudging away in another nameless, faceless skyscraper. And when they booted up their computer, logged on to CC:Mail, typed their message and sent it, they quickly found out that their domain was, in actuality, called:

opium.com

A meeting was held that afternoon to determine if, in actuality, this was wrong. After a half-hour of furious debate, it was determined that yes, in fact, the name of the domain was supposed to be:

odian.com

A call was placed. "Odian? Oh, sorry, dude, we thought you said opium. Well, no, we didn't question it. Look, man, it's not our jobs to question what a place wants to be called. We're just hired to do it."

What is certain from all parties involved is that the wrong approach was taken by The Odian Corporation in regards to soliciting help from the multimedia company as to getting the problem quickly fixed. For, you see, instead of the mild-mannered summer intern who was originally ordered to "handle the Internet thing," who was the initial liaison between Odian Corp. and the bitter ex-film majors, this new call was placed by the Assistant Manager of Computer Facilities, Emerging Technologies Department. This gentleman made the unfortunate mistake of assuming that all of Mankind responded to him the way his employees did. He unfortunately was not able to see that his employees responded to him the way they did simply because their jobs depended on it. He didn't realize that his employees silently cursed him behind his back; that they quietly stole all his pens whenever he was away from his desk; that one particularly feisty employee got very drunk at a company picnic in 1989 and actually spit in his drink, without him noticing. He wrongly assumed that everyone in the world responded to him this way, because he had Power, because he Took Charge; and as a result, he treated everyone the same, from his wife down to the \$4.25 an hour McDonald's teller.

Popular rumor has it that the Assistant Manager of Computer Facilities, Emerging Technologies Department's exact words that day were, "Tell you what, boys, why don't you get your heads outta your asses and get this thing fixed, or I'm gonna come down there and then you're really gonna have some problems." This, of course, is just rumor and cannot be verified.

What has been verified was the response of the bitter ex-film majors, which was to say to this gentleman, "Okay, we'll get it cleared right up," then hanging up the phone and laughing at the gall of that asshole; deciding that The Odian Corporation could go fuck themselves as far as they were concerned, 'cause shit, man, they had already set up four more corporate servers just on the strength of the Odian contract, and had three more lined up; agreeing with each other that they had dropped out of school precisely so they wouldn't have to deal with dicks like this guy; and ultimately choosing to close up

the shop early that day, go home and smoke a little weed that, in fact, had been purchased with money from the Oadian contract.

Just in case you're wondering, I did briefly consider dropping out of college in the mid-'80s and starting up a multimedia company myself. But I was too chicken-shit. I ultimately trusted in what had been taught to me, that nothing can ever beat out a college degree in the long run. In my defense, I would remind you that Ronald Reagan was in office at the time.

An internal investigation was started to find the cause of this error. It, of course, fell squarely on the shoulders of the Assistant Manager of Computer Facilities, Emerging Technologies Department. But it just so happens that on the exact day of the original phone call, the day that the summer intern said, "Hold on a second," curled his hand around the mouthpiece of the phone so that no one on the other side could hear, jugged the receiver out into space towards the Assistant Manager of Computer Facilities, Emerging Technologies Department and said, "I got those multimedia guys on the phone. You wanna talk to them about the server?" the Assistant Manager of Computer Facilities, Emerging Technologies Department happened to be putting papers in his briefcase and heading out to a secret attendance of an afternoon Cubs game. "Jesus Christ, what do they need to know?" he said. "Just tell 'em we're ready for 'em to plug the goddamn thing in! Can you handle that?" And with that, he was gone.

Of course, the Assistant Manager of Computer Facilities, Emerging Technologies Department knew he was in trouble. So one afternoon he closed his door and typed up a memo to the intern, clearly and concisely laying out all the detailed instructions of what to say to the multimedia company, how to get things set up, and the wishes of The Oadian Corporation to have the name "odian.com" for their server. He pre-dated the memo for three days before the phone call, printed it out, signed it, snuck down to the copy room, made a xerox, then made a xerox of the xerox, went back to his office, wrinkled the memo, smoothed it back out and stuck it in his files. Later that night he took the original printout and burned it in his north suburban fireplace.

When the investigator came to talk to the Assistant Manager of Computer Facilities, Emerging Technologies Department, the Assistant Manager "hmm"ed and "ah"ed for a bit, went to his files, rummaged around, pulled out a piece of paper and said, "Ah, I do have a copy of that memo," and happily turned it over. It was determined that the intern was indeed at fault, but since it seemed to be an honest mistake, no mention of it would be made on his performance review. It was decided to just wait a few weeks and let the multimedia company straighten out the whole affair.

Six months passed. And one day, the Vice President of Emerging Technologies found himself standing next to the Assistant Manager of Computer Facilities, Emerging Technologies Department in the bathroom, the two of them currently pissing into strange-looking porcelain bowls, and he mentioned, "Say, Bob, whatever's been happening with this whole 'opium' thing, anyway? Keep me in the loop on this."

A call was made. By now, of course, the multimedia company had more business than it could handle and as a result had quadrupled its staff, including a person who actually did nothing but answer phone calls, all day long. The bitter ex-film majors had been told that such a person was called a "secretary," but they refused to believe that men such as themselves would have a secretary, so when they had business cards printed up for her, they listed her profession as "She-Ra, Queen of Voice Mail." And this, of course, suited her just fine.

She-Ra told this rather irate gentleman on the phone that she was perfectly sure she had no idea what he was talking about, that yes, she'd be happy to leave a message for her bosses but no, they weren't in, they were all currently attending a conference in San Francisco, and no, sir, she would not call them at their hotel, no sir, they left strict instructions not to be bothered except in case of emergency and well, sir, is your server actually running? Then I wouldn't classify it as an emergency, would you? and eventually she employed a trick taught to her by her bosses, which was to click the "disconnect" button on her phone while in the middle of a conversation so that it seemed to the caller that the line suddenly and innocently went dead, instead of, in fact, the caller getting deliberately hung up on, and then letting the multimedia company's voice mail answer the next call that came in from that same phone number – She-Ra, of course, knowing when the phone call was from that number because of her having Caller I.D. as any self-respecting multimedia company in 1994 had.

Two weeks later, one of the bitter ex-film majors finally took the call. “Yeah, well,” he said, “We checked into that. Turns out some Dungeons and Dragons group in Arizona’s already taken the name ‘odian.com.’ Hey, dude, it’s outta our hands. Hey, you listening to me? There’s nothin’ we can do about it! Sue us? For what? Breach of contract? Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha! Yeah, all right, dude, go ahead and sue us. If it makes your dick hard, do whatever you want, man. See you in court, asshole.”

Two weeks later, the Legal Department of the Oodian Corporation determined that a lawsuit would be a worthless endeavor – the multimedia company had shown good faith in trying to correct the problem, and ultimately it would come out in court that the entire set of directions, due to a fault of one of their summer interns, was directed over the telephone, and Oodian Corp. was ultimately to blame for any miscommunication.

Three weeks were used setting up a committee to look into a solution. A squabble broke out as to whether the committee would be comprised of employees of the Emerging Technology Department or the newly formed Information Services Department. Eventually the President of Operations had to step in and decree that the committee would, in fact, be comprised of two employees from each of these departments.

The Internet Reconfiguration Committee, as they were known, met once every two weeks for three months. Each meeting was held at a nearby restaurant, and the lunch bill for the four members were each put on the Oodian corporate account, totaling at the end of the three months approximately \$480. The Committee endlessly debated their options, ultimately deciding at the end that the most prudent solution was to simply rename the server, something that would not exactly be “odian.com” but would certainly be better than “opium.com.”

The debate, of course, was not over this decision but, rather, the best way to implement the change. Details had to be determined for any number of related items, including but not limited to: how to alert Oodian Corp.’s clients of the name change (it was determined that a four-color postcard, depicting a cartoon computer with the new name, would be best); how to best alert the 1,500 employees of Oodian Corp. of the change (a one-day seminar for all, spaced out over three weeks, explaining how to archive all their old e-mail so that they wouldn’t lose any during the change, and explaining how it was of the utmost importance that they all call their client contacts to personally remind them of the change); and how to best replace the approximately 300,000 business cards and roughly 700,000 sheets of stationary that will suddenly become obsolete with the name change (a gradual six-month roll-out).

An employee of the Marketing Department was put in charge of assembling an analysis report of how to best choose a new name. This gentleman did, in fact, graduate in the last place amongst all his peers in the Marketing Department at Michigan University, a state-run four year college whose primary motivation is athletics. Athletics, in fact, were the primary diversion of this particular Marketing employee while in college, along with drinking obscene amounts of beer, hitting on women in sports bars and then date-raping them back at his fraternity house, and listening to fairly innocuous top-forty bands. Truth be told, this particular employee was, in fact, quite dumb. Michigan was the only school that would accept him, and he chose Marketing for a major because nothing seemed to really interest him and someone told him once that Marketing majors “can make a fuckin’ bucketload of money, dude.”

This gentleman spent exactly 62 man-hours compiling this report, at an hourly wage with the company of \$22 an hour, for a total of \$1,364. His executive summary stated that “it is recommended that Oodian, Corp. choose a server name that most closely resembles the word ODIAN without currently being used by another company.” His boss was so happy that someone had volunteered to do this report, that he promoted this gentleman to manager position three months later.

A fight broke out over who was to pick the new name. Alliances were formed between workgroups and a special lunch meeting between the entire Emerging Technologies Department and Information Services Department had to be scheduled in order to get the two sides back on friendly terms with each other. The lunch shut down all work in both departments for an entire afternoon and cost Oodian Corp. approximately \$800 in food and \$3,520 in paid time for lunch.

Finally, during an unusually tense meeting, the President of Operations stood up and, in a fit of anger usually unseen in the man, yelled, “For God’s sake! I’m going to pick the new name! And that’s the end of the damn discussion!”

Ten months after originally conceiving the idea, the new server name was chosen:

odiano.com

It was determined that the roll-out date for the new name would be exactly one year from the date that I am currently writing this sentence.

Frankly, I like having “opium.com” for a server name. It adds a little panache to our company that a lot of places don’t have. It makes me feel like I’m working at one of those crazy multimedia places where they smoke pot during office hours and put things like “She-Ra” on their business cards – instead of where I do work, an advertising agency with 1,500 employees, where I’m paid \$34,000 a year to tell accountants over the phone how to change their margins in Microsoft Word, where the singlemost important and lucrative event in the history of the agency was when someone wrote down the phrase, “Have you had your break today?”

So would you like a nice little wrap-up to this story? Like those movies that run the end credits by showing pictures of each character along with a sentence that reads something like, “Charlie McGee left for Vietnam in 1968. He was killed in combat two years later”? Well, okay:

- The snotty, bitter acid-dropping ex-film majors eventually sold the entire company to a conglomerate for an amount in excess of \$12 million. As a joke, they sent in their resumes to the multimedia company after it was being run by the conglomerate. They were never called for an interview. They currently live in Prague.

- The summer intern eventually got a job with Sega for \$84,000. He happens to be a friend of mine and also happens to be a friend of the bitter ex-film majors (circles run tight in Chicago), which is why I know what their reaction to Odian Corp. was.

- As the early ‘90s became the mid ‘90s, computers eventually took over and now control The Odian Corporation. Entire full-time staffs had to be created from scratch: a staff to do nothing but watch over the network; a staff to do nothing but run around and install new computers, fix old ones; a staff to do nothing but design Web pages for our clients; and the staff I belong to, who do nothing but sit in a room all day and answer endless phone calls, telling art directors how to insert page numbers into Quark XPress documents and change text color in PowerPoint and create tables in Microsoft Word.

- Eventually “Computer Facilities” was merged into the Information Services Department, which now handles everything from document production to laptop computer check-outs to the doling out of high memory storage disks. The Emerging Technologies Department was scaled back to what they always wanted to be: six nerds sitting in a windowless room, playing endless amounts of Black Sabbath on their group stereo and sitting around testing beta versions of virtual reality animation programs and thinking about how they could be used to sell more hamburgers.

- And our old friend, the Assistant Manager of Computer Facilities, Emerging Technologies Department? Oh, I thought you knew. He’s the new Vice President of Information Services.

THE POWER

Not that many people know this, but I have this strange little quirk about me. I guess you could call it a supernatural ability, albeit a minor one. I may have been born with it – I'm not sure. I do know that I never realized I had this power until the rise of the Walkman in the early '80s.

What my power is – whenever I'm near someone with earphones on, if I stare at the earphones and concentrate, I can hear whatever they're listening to, as if it's being pumped straight into my brain.

Like I said, it's a minor supernatural power. I can't change the course of events, and I haven't really figured out a way to make money with this ability, and it's not even strange enough to get me on "Unsolved Mysteries." Still, it's a fun little ability, and it keeps me occupied when I'm bored.

The thing that's most surprising to me is that the vast majority of people, like ninety percent of something, are listening to the exact type of music you'd assume they'd be listening to. The big dumb jock-looking guys are listening to Hootie and the Blowfish and the quiet, pale girls with the long curly hair are listening to Tori Amos and the rough-looking black men with athletic clothes are listening to gangster rap and the happy queer boys with the wraparound sunglasses are always listening to dance music. You'd think people wouldn't be so willing to reinforce their stereotype. But, maybe music is too closely tied to the personality to give up.

It's always a treat when I run into someone who's breaking the stereotype – like this guy on the el this week, long frizzy hair, beat-up leather jacket, heavy-metal t-shirt – but listening to Scott Joplin.

If I had a cool power, I'd be able to read his thoughts and know why he's listening to ragtime. But I can only hear the music, so I have to make my guesses like you all do.

If I'm feeling mischievous, I'll sit across the el from someone and start tapping my foot in time with their music. If they notice it, they usually turn down their Walkman, and then when I keep tapping, they'll take their headphones off, hold them out in the air and look at them like the apparatus just betrayed them, then turn it down a little bit again. If I keep tapping, they'll usually turn it off and look at me. When that happens, I keep tapping my foot to the same beat as before, leading them to think that I happened to be randomly tapping my foot to the same exact beat of their song by coincidence, giving them the pleasure of taking home the episode of causality and telling their friends that night and being the center of attention for a few seconds.

I've only had two disconcerting episodes with my power. Once, last summer, I was sitting across from a very beautiful woman with short blonde hair and a tan and an expensive summer outfit on. She was listening to her Walkman and smiling the whole time, staring off into space, and every once in awhile she'd laugh out loud.

This, as you may imagine, piqued my curiosity, so I tuned in. I came upon a tape recording of a man's voice, speaking like he was dictating a letter. As I listened, I couldn't really believe what I was hearing, so I started writing it down in my notebook. This is where I came in:

"I don't understand why it gives you so much pleasure to hurt me so much. I can't understand you. You scare me. But I can't live without you. If you leave me, I'll kill myself. And don't think I won't do it, either, 'cause I will."

She just kept laughing and laughing, looking through her new purchases at Marshall Fields.

This winter I was on my way to work one morning and I was bored so I tuned into the guy next to me – about my age, nondescript, in a corporate uniform, staring impassively ahead at the opposite wall of the train.

He was listening to a tape he had made of himself on a live phone sex line:

"And now what do you do with me, honey?"

"Now I... push you, I push you as hard as I can. I hear you hit the wall."

"Do I fall down?"

"Yeah. Your ass hits the floor real hard."

"And is your cock out?"

"Yeah."

"And what do you do with your cock?"

"I slap you – across the face. You're crying. I slap you with my hand, right across your cheek. You're screaming, but you love it."

"You're right, baby. I do love it. I can feel a hot red mark on my cheek where you hit

me. Do you want to do that to me all over my body?"

I'm not sure which person in that conversation made me more alarmed. But then again, I stayed tuned in to the whole tape, so what does that say?

I can't listen to my Walkman anymore. I mean, I can, but I can't listen to music. Every time I step on the el, I tune my radio in exactly halfway between stations. Call it nervousness that someone else out there shares my power, I guess. But there's something about sitting on the train, listening to static as loud as I can, that makes me feel both safe and on edge at the same time.

Sssssssssssssssssssssssssstttt. That's what it sounds like.

Ssssssssssssssssssssssssssttttt.

PRAYER FROM AN ATHEIST

I call upon the omniscient, omnipresent, all powerful bundle of energy and morals and one true savior of me, a sometimes wretched, sometimes beautiful but always human human being.

I call upon It to hear me if It has ears; to absorb my words into Its mass ball of consciousness, if that is what It does; to somehow recognize my prayer and pluck it out of the sky so that It will know the things I say to It.

I come today to worship It, to bless It for the creation of this earth and this body and this cigarette and everything else around me that makes up my existence. I come today to shout at myself and to shout to everyone around me of all the things I am grateful for, that make me happy as I plug through day-to-day life, edging ever closer to that final day where I will never have to worry any more about whether I believe in It or not. I come today to thank and also to be thankful.

I thank It for the northbound red line at three in the morning when I'm really drunk.

I thank It for giving me parents who didn't beat me or fuck me or burn me with cigarettes or tell me I'd never amount to anything or disinherit me for flunking out of school or not accept my gay friends or freak out when I decided to become an artist or ever once act ashamed of me when they talked to their friends about me.

I thank It for beautiful eighteen-year-old girls with holes in their jeans who laugh out loud in the wind and make life seem the most excit-

ing it's ever been.

I thank It for Walkmans, and I thank It for giving me Bob Mould and R.E.M. and Small Factory and Liz Phair and Frank Sinatra and They Might Be Giants and Dave Brubeck, so that I have something to listen to with it.

I thank It for the Brew-n-View.

I thank It for the special wind It provides right when the weather turns from summer to autumn and you smell it whenever you're outside and every time you do smell it, you know something special's just about to happen.

I thank It for really cold orange juice when it's very early in the morning and I'm very hung over.

I thank It for infomercials on how to become rich through direct marketing.

I thank It for the opening chord of Pavement's "Crooked Rain Crooked Rain," which always makes me smile and get very excited whenever I hear it.

I thank It for amphetamines.

I thank It for these things, plus so many others that I don't have the time to list but It, in Its wisdom, must already silently know.

And now, as the dogma of religion dictates, I now beseech my omniscient force. I ask It to grant me things that I feel like I deserve for living what I consider a good life, but which have to now still eluded me. I ask It to gently push naturally evolving events just a step more in the right direction. I ask It to reward me for being the good, faithful follower that I am.

I ask It to please let me meet a woman who actually will call after she's spent the whole night at a party flirting with me and telling me she's interested in me and asking for my phone number because she wants to get together again with me.

I ask It to send a literary agent my way who will be interested in my novel.

I ask It to grant me a little more patience in my life, and to help me lose some of my anger and pessimism towards the world.

I ask It to spare me from ever getting Alzheimer's Disease, and to let me have solid stools the rest of my life.

I ask It to bless me with a healthy child when the time is right, one who will grow to be fine and strong and smart and bitter and gentle and funny, yet dry, and a sharp dresser and a purveyor of wit and good things in the world. A child I will be proud of, and who will grow one day to be proud of me.

In return for these things, I offer a sacrifice to the Life Force, the Harbinger of Energy. I sacrifice my hopes of ever finding a good job. I sacrifice the theoretical house in the suburbs and the minivan and the large dog I could have had if I had chosen another path less to It's liking. I sacrifice my free time and sense of leisure, as I fill it doing Its work. I sacrifice any real forward steps I have ever made towards a lasting, loving relationship, as I must to accomplish my goals. I even sacrifice the child I might have already had if my path had continued the way it was before It directed me anew.

I make these sacrifices because I love It. I sincerely and truly love It, no matter if It exists or not. It tells me how to live my life so that it is truly successful, or if It doesn't, It influences the things I tell myself, which is the same thing.

In Its name I pray.

Amen.

(This is an audience participation piece. Every time the reader points to the audience, they are to say “St. Jason Day” in a voice like a bored grade-schooler.)

Okay, class, settle down... class, settle down... class... class! Okay, class, now today’s March 5th, and we all know that means it’s (points to audience, who says “St. Jason Day”) very good, class. And, according to the National Holiday Act of 2014, I am now bound by law to spend six minutes of classtime explaining the origins of the holiday to you. What’s that, Tommy? No, you’re still getting homework. Anyway, here’s the federally-mandated story of (points to audience, who says “St. Jason Day”) very good, class.

Jason Pettus was born in St. Charles, Missouri in 1969 and lived a remarkably non-eventful childhood there. In 1994 he moved to Chicago, Illinois, home of... yes, Tommy, home of Rodmanworld. Yes, Tommy, I know you went there last year. The whole class knows you went.

ST. JASON DAY

Anyway, Jason was one of a growing class of males in America at that time, a class of sensitive, artistic men.

Now, class, to understand the story of (points to audience, who says “St. Jason Day”) very good, class, you have to put yourself back in time to the 1990’s. Everyone close their eyes. Yes, Greg, you too. Now imagine yourself in the 1990’s. There are still Starbucks on every corner. President Madonna was just a singer. And kids, I know it’s going to be hard to believe, but in the 1990’s, women simply didn’t want anything to do with sensitive artistic men who were in touch with their feelings and would be good in a relationship. No, really, Sally, it’s true! Why? Well, class, there are certain points in American history that can only be explained by saying that it was the expected behavior at the time. Even though we see these things as bad now, Americans at the time saw nothing wrong with it. Like... slavery. Or pregnant women smoking. Or... Microsoft.

Now, class, in the mid-1990’s, when St. Jason was still just Jason, he was in the same boat as a lot of men at the time, which was that he simply couldn’t find a date, anywhere. Women back then would repeatedly and without thought completely pass over the men that they should have been dating, the kind men, the caring men, the... good men. No, class, they would go straight over them without so much as a pleantry and head straight to the... well, let’s just call them the bad men. No, Sally, not like Greg! Greg’s a good boy! Well, at least let’s give him a couple years and see how he turns out.

Jason would befriend these women when their relationships would go sour, as they always would. He would hold them and let them cry and silently nod his head when the women would wail, “Why do I keep dating all these assholes?” Jason would patiently explain that they need to find men that are good, that would treat them with the respect they deserve, and they would nod their tear-streaked faces and say, “God, Jason, yes. Yes, you’re exactly right.” But did they heed his words? Well, as history has taught us, class... no. No, they didn’t.

Well, Jason tried to keep a sense of humor about the whole thing, but he was a man, like any other, and he eventually reached his boiling point. And on March 5, 1999, Jason’s 30th birthday, a date that will be marked throughout history, Jason strolled out into the middle of the intersection of Michigan Avenue and Randolph Street, delivered a short oration on the frustrations of dating, and... well, class, he set himself on fire. Yes, Tommy, he died.

Oh, Sally, no, don’t cry! If it hadn’t been for Jason’s courageous act of bravery, we wouldn’t live in the world we live in today! You see, news of Jason’s death passed quickly through the city, and then the country. Women who had previously turned Jason down for a date started... rethinking the situation. They started realizing all the good, wonderful things that Jason had. They started getting filled with regret that they had missed their chance. And they decided that in honor of Jason’s death, to mark the glorious act of martyrdom that he had performed, they would agree to a date with the next sensitive, artistic man who asked them out.

And, class, an amazing thing happened! Women the world over started realizing that they never had to put up with the bad men again! They discovered a literal country of men out there who worshipped the ground they walked on, who would let them pick out the CDs, who valued their opinions on subjects of the world. Not to mention a whole nation of men who made them experience things in the bedroom they had never experienced before. What’s that, Tommy? Well, wait until Health class, and it’ll all be explained then.

Women got hooked and never went back. Bolstered by a profound sense of self-confidence, sensitive artistic men took over Congress in the 2000 elections. Their first act, the National Genocide Act of 2001, called for the immediate death of any man ever in a frater-

nity... any man who ever owned a Chicago Police leather jacket... any man who was ever a bartender in Wicker Park... any man who had ever read a poem at an open mic about a prostitute falling in love with him... and any man who had ever visited the ESPN website.

Unemployment disappeared. The problem of world hunger was solved. The Chicago Transit Authority started running on time. And in the year 2005, Jason was canonized by the Catholic church. In a press statement, the current Pope, a man known only as Shappy, declared...

(Man stands up in audience and yells) "Hell, I'm dating Uma Therman now! And if that ain't a miracle, then I ain't Polish, fuckos!"

And thus, March 5 was declared (points to audience, who says "St. Jason Day") very good, class.

Well, class, our six minutes are almost up. Does anyone have any questions? Yes, Sally? Do I celebrate St. Jason Day? Well, actually... I met my wife on St. Jason Day. I was in the park reading through this book of P.G. Wodehouse stories (holds up book) when a beautiful woman approached me.

(Woman in audience stands and says) "Excuse me,"

(Jason resumes) she said,

(Woman) "Is that P.G. Wodehouse you're reading?"

(Jason) Yes, I said.

(Woman) "Ooh,"

(Jason) she said,

(Woman) "You don't know how hot I get from turn-of-the-century British satirists! Tell me more!"

We went to a coffeehouse and conversed over cappuccinos throughout the afternoon, and by that night... (he gestures to the woman, who runs up and embraces him) we were in love. (Woman continues to stand on stage, hugging Jason, giving him small kisses on the face and neck, and giggling uncontrollably. Eventually Jason murmurs "Okay, Jennifer, okay, that's fine. You can sit down now." Jennifer giggles one more time and runs back to her seat.)

Well, anyway, class, we're out of time. Now, if you'll get out your history books, please turn to Chapter 10 – "The Olson Twins, Voices of a Generation." Happy St. Jason Day, everyone.

(While narrator is reading story, a woman is also on stage, translating into sign language.) I am transfixed every time she does it, which is about three or four times now. In the middle of other activities, the woman reaches up and runs her hands across her chest (duplicates action), pushing them against her sternum, displacing her breasts just so slightly by the movement. There is a sensuality there that I find impossible to ignore.

But I am getting ahead of myself. I am currently sitting in a dark Wicker Park bar, watching my first ever signing of an open mike night. It has already been a night of surprises. I was brought here originally because my friend John described it to me as 'the meat market of poetry readings,' which is kind of like saying 'the meat market of science fiction conventions,' but I decide to go anyway. Surprise number one – everyone is hot. I'm like an alcoholic in a liquor store – I don't even know who to flirt with, there are so many attractive people here. The girls are hot. The boys are hot. The entire bar staff is hot, for God's sake – and they're all poets, too!

Surprise number two is that this girl has shown up that I once got drunk with and tried to hit on. She read a poem about how guys get drunk and...try to hit on

her, which, I suppose, technically, is surprise number three, but really, it's no surprise, when you stop and think about it.

The next surprise is when one of the art school dropouts jumps up on stage and starts signing with the poets. I am not used to this, because usually when someone is translating an event, they have on one of those all-black mime-like outfits and they go stand in the corner when they're not needed, like an exile, or a leper.

She makes these weird faces when she signs, like I always see signers do, gross exaggerations of emotion, like a clown, big wide smiles and deep dark frowns. I wonder to myself if this is a rule they teach in sign language school, or if the fact that you are literally communicating with your body just unconsciously makes you add your face to the communication.

The biggest surprise, however, is the aforementioned sensuality of the signing itself, something that I don't think I've ever noticed before in signing, except maybe if you count watching Children of a Lesser God, which I don't count, because I think that I was more occupied with the fact that I wanted to have sex with Marlee Matlin than I was with the sexiness inherent in the signing itself.

The thing is...(long pause). The thing is, I figure out, is that signers can't literally translate word-for-word – they'd be up there all night. So every gesture, every body movement, has to contain the maximum amount of narrative and emotional content possible, for greatest communication. Not like me, who can (starts swinging hands more and more in the next two sentences) swing my hands in the air while I'm ranting and trying to make a point, never having to worry if my hands are saying anything, because I can just blather on and on and on, until my point is made. Or, until someone pops me in the mouth. But that's another story.

So, while a poet is busy taking up three lines of type trying to describe a beautiful person, she simply (spreads legs apart and runs hands down them, describing curves in the figure as he goes). Or when a woman is painstakingly retelling the glory of finally kicking her misogynistic, abusive, little-dicked boyfriend out of her apartment, she beautifully sums it up with a sign even I can understand...(slams foot on the ground, scrunches up face, and flips off the audience).

And, of course, in matters of the heart, (rubbing chest) she executes the chest rub that I am falling in love with. Literally, I think I am falling in love with her as I watch her sign. Well, okay, maybe not her, but I'm falling in love with this expressive, emotional, intense language that I always knew existed, but never really just...stopped and examined before.

There really weren't that many more surprises that night – the host kept saying things like 'Don't forget to tip your waitresses, comrades' and this guy had a whole series of poems about how prostitutes keep falling in love with him, and really, (murmuring) well, really... you can't have an open mike night without...you know...at least one of those guys. This is the same guy, incidentally, who actually found a way to use the word 'peckerbending' in a poem, which is actually quite impressive in a...well, a...(looks up into the air) well. And when my friend John, who is also finishing up his novel, got up to read, a new episode of 'Rocky and Bullwinkle' starts up on the TV behind him, and the title of the episode is 'Bullwinkle Sells Out,' which makes me just stop and ponder the implications for about twenty minutes.

They even have a live drummer, who on request – (points at drummer, who starts playing a soft funk beat):

SHE RUBS HER CHEST

(Reads in a 'performing poet' rhythm and meter)
will play a pulsing, pounding rhythm
to go along with the poets
who read their lines with this
lilt and drop
lilt and drop
that slowly, quietly, peacefully
puts me to sleep

(Points at the drummer again, who stops playing.) I mean, why do poets read like that? Poets everywhere? Was there some seminar or something I missed in college?

I once got drunk at this bar at State and Division and there were these two deaf guys and man, were they trashed. They kept signing to each other, but they were slurring their sign language and they couldn't understand each other. Then they got in a fight and they kept (demonstrating) pushing the other guy and signing, and pushing the other guy and signing, at the same time. Watching this woman do her (hands down legs) and her (rubs chest) makes me wonder for the first time what it must be like when two deaf people talk dirty to each other.

I am desperate this week to learn a sentence in sign – any sentence – to end this with. I am fascinated with the idea of ending my story with a sentence that she and she alone will understand. But, I can't find a single person all week who knows sign language, and as I rack my brain to see if I can remember anything from that Sign Language merit badge I got when I was twelve, the only sign I can come up with is (puts one arm over the other like holding a baby, and rocks the arms back and forth), which may or may not be 'baby,' but that's too easy to guess, and besides, I don't want to sign something that may be construed by her as (in a smarmy voice) "Hey, baby."

Instead, I'm going to ask the woman to end the story for me, by signing a sentence, a sentence of her own, an unspoken sentence, that will be a direct message for me. I hope for it to convey a sense of what it must be like for a deaf person to stumble upon a juicy, intense spoken conversation and not be able to tell what the hell's being said. Maybe it would be good for us hearing people to be left in the dark for once. And this is the sentence – (woman turns to narrator and signs an extemporaneous sentence).

SHE WAS RIGHT – GOD, SHE WAS SO RIGHT

Not a lot of people know this, but I was a political science major for four years during college. It's for obvious reasons that I don't mention this to people I meet here in Chicago, but the truth of the matter is that I enjoyed it quite a bit. The academia, I mean. The classes. I loved sitting in policy classes, hammering out the details of how America was going to deal with this issue of apartheid. I would get all caught up in theory classes, endlessly debating with my professors about whether the entire character of American culture and history makes it impossible for us to have anything but a two-party system. I would thrill in my history classes to stories of last-minute alliances, truces, agreed to with a handshake in a smoky back room at some convention center in Chicago at the turn of the century.

I was going to be a politician. No, really. I've always had a certain gift for being able to look at a problem and rather quickly devising a simple, elegant and proactive solution. I was going to take this gift and I was going to run for office, and I was going to win. I was going to enact solutions to problems, and they would work, and I was going to be rewarded for it, and eventually rise my way to a position of power and esteem in the hallowed halls of the U.S. Capitol building.

And then, I switched my major to fine-art photography.

And now that I stop and think about it, I realize that I may have never told a single person in my life besides Gennifer Biggs, my ex-girlfriend, why I switched majors. But I've been asked to write a political story for tonight, and they do say exorcism is good for the soul. So here following is the story of why I am no longer a budding politician.

It was my junior year, and I was involved with my first-ever real election, which in actuality was just for the Presidency of our school's student government, but was nonetheless a huge race on our campus because A) unlike other schools, our President had some actual enforceable powers upon the student population, however limited they may be, and B) our student government gives away approximately \$300,000 every year to student groups, and the President and Vice President hold a large sway over exactly which groups were going to get exactly which cut. It always boils down to money, doesn't it? But that's another discussion for another time.

Now, the more astute of you may already be saying to yourselves, "Jason, if it took you three years of Poli Sci classes before you ever got involved with an actual election, maybe you should have taken that as writing on the wall." And you're right, I should have. But I plead the same amendment that we all plead when, later in life, we are trying to explain to our friends statements we have made in our youth, like, "Well, she loves me and I love her and you're an asshole if you think we have a problem and I need to break up with her" and "Bauhaus is just the most absolute greatest band in the history of music and I can't imagine a time where I'll ever like a band more than them" and "This job's different, 'cause the manager's really cool and the company really cares about me and no one acts like an asshole and they're giving me a week of paid vacation!"

Brian was our Presidential candidate. He was a policy wonk, and was respected and well-liked among the student government crowd, despite his well-known, almost public affection for exotic and rare breeds of chemical amphetamines, and his lesser-known but still known belief that he had been abducted by a UFO in 1986 and now has a 48-hour period of his life missing where presumably he was touring the stars unconsciously, being poked and prodded and painted orange across the entire left side of his body.

Bob was our Vice Presidential candidate. He was a squeaky-clean kid, who possessed a certain Dobie Gillisness about him that was impossible to resist when you met him. Bob was really good at math, which of course was a requirement of all Vice Presidential candidates for the Missouri Student Association – the veep, of course, being in charge of balancing the MSA budget each year. Bob had recently been introduced to the strange phenomenon we like to call 'marijuana,' and had just made the decision to grow his hair out and start wearing on of those plastic peace-sign necklaces that were so popular in the late '80s.

Sean was the campaign manager. Political management had been Sean's dream as long as he could remember. This was the sixth campaign Sean had worked on since he was 16. Sean always spoke in metaphors of violence:

It's time to drop the axe!

Oh, we're really getting slaughtered!

I've been getting fucked up the ass all day!

Heads are going to roll!

Sean was the first person my age I ever knew to grow a flower garden. He would tend to it

lovingly, sometimes sit for an hour or more and just stare and smell and get lost. Then he would get up, go inside his apartment, call the student newspaper and leak some detail about one of our opponents to them, some detail that was so horrifyingly personal, so embarrassing, that I could scarcely believe it was real.

And despite all of what I've said, Brian and Bob were the hands-down favorites among five slates of candidates to win this year's election. That was the first sign.

The second sign was this strange little character named Matt, a freshman who nobody knew but who had enthusiastically signed on to do grunt work for the campaign. Matt was caught one night about halfway through the campaign, running around his dorm at three in the morning, ripping down all of our opponents' flyers. When first approached by a Resident Assistant, Matt's first reaction, naturally, was to run. When caught and pressed for his name, Matt answered with an unequivocal "FUCK YOU!" When pressed further, he stated in no uncertain terms that he was working for one of Brian and Bob's opponents, and that he had been hired by them to rip down everyone else's posters.

Naturally, this made it into the student paper. Naturally, said opponents declared, "We don't know who the hell this jerk is." Naturally, the truth came out. And naturally, Brian had to make a public apology to his opponents, make a spectacle out of firing Matt from the campaign and avow to everyone he met that he really did believe in a fair, civil election and that the actions of one of his staff did not necessarily reflect the candidate.

"Don't worry about it," Sean said. "It happens all the time. You can't be personally responsible for every person who wants you elected."

"But he seemed so normal," I said. "And... I don't know, boring. How can you tell?"

Sean just shrugged. "Jason, let me tell you something, and I don't want you to ever forget it." He leaned in close to me and whispered, "There are a lot of fuckin' nutcases involved in politics." And you know what? I never have forgotten it.

The last thing was what turned into the catalyst, the straw that broke the camel's back, the event that lost Brian and Bob the election – the incident now known as "The Great Date Rape Fiasco of 1989."

It was at one of the government sponsored Presidential debates, horrible things that were always held in un-air conditioned rooms and would last for two or three hours because of the fact that there were five candidates up on stage. We were, in fact, two hours into this one, and we were all sweaty and uncomfortable and our asses were all sore from the creakety wooden chairs we were forced to sit in.

A representative from a campus women's group had just asked the candidates what they were prepared to do to combat the recently rising wave of date rape on campus. Later, Brian would admit to me that he, as well as us that night, was also sweaty and uncomfortable and sore and he had had just about enough of listening to two hours of candidates standing up for every fucking question and saying,

"Well that's a very important issue and as President I would form a committee to research the matter and come up with a viable solution."

This, he claimed, is why he stood up that night and said, "Frankly, date rapers make me sick. And when I'm President, I'll lobby the Board of Curators to enact a by-law automatically expelling any student convicted of date rape."

A hasty meeting was assembled after the debate. "Are you fuckin' NUTS!" Sean yelled at Brian.

"What?"

"Are you committing suicide? Is that what you're doing right in front of us? That's what you're doing, aren't you?"

"Oh, for God's sake, Sean, I was trying to liven things up a little. I thought I was going to spontaneously turn into liquid form if I had to sit up there another minute."

"Brian," Sean said, "let me explain something to you. We have a pool of 20,000 eligible voters in this election. Out of those 20,000 voters, 10,000 are members of a fraternity. These are guys who make a living out of date rape. It's an art form over in Greektown. There are techniques. There are scorecards. Date rape is seen by half of your voters as not only a fun weekend hobby, but an essential part of the college experience!"

"Well shit, Sean, fuck them," Brian said. "I was telling the truth. Date rapers really do make me sick. Hey, I have a strong opinion about this, and I'm not going to apologize for it."

Sean sighed. "Brian, I had you all wrong. when you decided to run for office, I assumed that you knew the one basic tenet that rules all campaigns. Obviously you don't. So I'm going to explain it to you, right now, and if you want to have the least fucking chance of ever getting

elected, you will shut up and listen.

“You no longer have any opinions, okay? You are a public servant. Well, a potential public servant. Opinion is a luxury for the civilian class, not you. You no longer feel strongly about anything. ANYTHING. You think people want to elect someone who feels strongly about something? Un-unh. Opinions frighten people, Brian. Opinions imply that someone’s going to get in there and do something. And people don’t want that. Well, you want that, and I do, and all our intelligent, free-thinking friends do, but do you think for one minute that they’re the ones who elect you?”

“Is this sinking in, Brian? Lowest common denominator. The longest-running TV shows are the ones that manage to be as bland as un buttered toast and offend the least amount of people. And the best-selling albums. And our most beloved politicians.”

Sean took a deep breath, sat down, stole one of my cigarettes and lit up. “Now here’s what you’re gonna do, Brian. Tomorrow you’re gonna get up and make a statement to the student paper that you... that you are very emotional over this issue. I don’t know, your ex-girlfriend once got date-raped. No, no, your sister, that’s better. You let your emotions get away from you last night. Of course you couldn’t really enact legislation barring students of their constitutional right of getting an education despite their past criminal records. It was just an example of how strongly you feel about this issue. And when elected President, you will definitely form a committee to look into how to best prevent date rape, before it happens.” Sean ashed his cigarette. “And we’ll hope that this country’s tendency to forget everything five minutes after they hear it will work to our advantage this time.”

That night, I quit the campaign. And three months later, I switched my major.

Brian and Bob lost, of course – Sean was completely right. I would sit in the student union and overhear conversations between two frat guys in the booth next to me – “You hear one of the candidates wants to expel anybody caught date raping? Shit, dude, half those bitches just yell ‘rape’ ‘cause they got pregnant and they don’t want their daddies to know they’re spreading it wide open for half the campus every Saturday night. And he wants to kick me out for that? Fuck him, dude.”

The guys who had been running in second place eventually won the election, two frat guys who would readily admit to anyone that they didn’t really want the job but thought it would look good on their resumes. Their fraternity had made the decision to supply the \$10,000 the candidates spent on the campaign, mostly because they thought it would be ‘kick ass’ to have two guys from their house running the government.

The candidates also readily admitted that they believed the main reason they had been in second place to begin with was because their last names, put together, rhymed with the phrase “Bartles and Jaymes,” which in case you are too young to remember, was the most popular brand of recreational liquor of the 1980’s. In fact, “Bartles and Jaymes” became their campaign slogan, and people were so tickled by it that it got them voted right into office.

And now, like Animal House, another story of college hijinx, I will neatly wrap up the eventual fates of our characters:

Brian eventually switched his major to music engineering and now lives in Florida and produces rap albums.

The last time we heard from Bob, he was quitting school to join a commune in Oregon that grows hemp during the spring and follows the Grateful Dead every summer. Now that the Grateful Dead have broken up, God only knows what’s happened to him.

Sean, as you have already probably guessed, is the Kansas City chairman of the Committee to Re-Elect Bill Clinton.

Bartles and Jaymes increased the Homecoming Steering Committee budget by \$10,000 that year, which made their constituents very happy – especially their house, which won the annual Homecoming competition for the first time in 57 years. They also drew up plans for a new intramural league of beach volleyball, which thrives on campus to this day and has become the lasting legacy of their Presidential tenure. Bartles is now a state representative. I don’t know what happened to Jaymes, but if he lived in Chicago, I’m certain he’d be my boss.

And me? I’m a writer now – a teller of tales. On election years, when I’ve had too much to drink, I partake of my now very private but still enjoyable habit of debating policy and devising simple, elegant solutions to problems. Without actually ever stating the reasons, I make it clear to my friends that I will not actively work on getting someone elected, nor will I actively protest against someone trying to get elected. And sometimes, late at night and by myself, I think back to that night that I told this whole story to Jennifer Biggs, and I think about how she held me in her arms and gently rocked me while I cried and said to me, “You know, Jason, politics is an ugly business. Why don’t you try an art class? I really think it would suit you better.” And I think – she was right. God, she was so right.

SPRING FEVER

Okay, you want the short story, or the long story? I'll tell you the short story first. No, no, wait, I'll tell you the long story first.

I see her at Sweet Alice every time I come here. And every time I'm here, I watch her do the things she does. Because she's sexy. Frankly speaking, she's very, very sexy.

Okay, maybe I should go back to the short story. It was Valentine's Day and we were all really drunk and I admitted to my friends that I have a big crush on her and they, in their drunken state, thought it would be fun if they would refuse to let me leave until I ask her out. The thought filled me with a sense of dread and oncoming doom, but I realized that my friends were just drunk enough to be serious.

Alright, back to the long story. Actually, let's jump over the long story and go straight to the longer story:

Fact #1. I love women. This is not a sexist statement, this is not a generalization, this is not a declaration that I am a Casanova or that women are objects for me to collect like Pogs. I just simply love women. Tall women, short women, women with red hair, or blonde, or black, or any artificial combination therein, women with big breasts, with small breasts. Tough women, shy women, women that look like boys, women that look like women, I... love... women. It's not by choice. I've been this way as long as I can remember, which is three years old. I never went through that period that they say boys go through where they think girls have cooties – I was falling deeply, spiritually in love with women when I was in first grade. To this day, I do everything in my power to not fall in love with women, but I just cannot help myself. Hell, there's some days when I'm heading to the store and there's a woman walking in front of me and I start thinking about what a precious natural resource the gait of a woman's walk is, how if you could somehow harness the kinetic energy inherent in a woman's walk, you could power the city of Buffalo, New York for six months. And the next thing you know, it's twenty minutes later and I'm in a completely different neighborhood, because I spaced out just watching this woman walk down the sidewalk. And no, that doesn't make me a stalker, it just makes me pathetic, so... shut up!

Fact #2. I am terrified of women. Absolutely... terrified. I don't know why God takes such pleasure in installing these two traits into the very same body, but sometimes, when it's a clear day and the wind is still and I close my eyes and listen very, very carefully, I can hear God laughing at me. In order for me to ask out a woman, I have to go through an elaborate ritual of psyching myself up for it, gulping down alcohol to release my emergency supply of courage, going through a convoluted series of mantras and justifications in my head...

(Closing eyes and whispering improvised text, along the lines of the following) Okay. This will be fine. This will be just fine. Go ahead. What do you got to lose? She's just a girl. A girl. What's that? A girl... that's just a... that's just a boy without a penis. And you can talk to boys, can't you? Go ahead. It'll be fine.

(Opening eyes) The short story: I do this for about twenty minutes, then I walk over to her... and I ask her out!

The long story: In my perfect little world that exists in my head, this is how I ask women out.

(Drummer starts playing smooth jazz. Reader stands at back of stage, picks random woman in audience, smiles and starts flirting with his eyes. He lights a cigarette, takes a drag, saunters up to the microphone). Hey. How's it going. I just got some tickets to the new Steppenwolf play. It'd be cool if you could join me. How 'bout it?

(Drums stop) In the real world, where buses run late and people get shot in the loop and I haven't had sex in six months, this is how I ask women out.

(Drummer starts playing irregular, neurotic, arrhythmical beat on snare drum. Reader speaks very fast) Uh, hi, look, I'm really drunk so if I sound like an idiot I'm really sorry or if I'm bothering you or put you in an awkward position don't worry about it 'cause you're not going to hurt my feelings either way but I got these tickets to the new Steppenwolf play and I haven't found anyone to go with me and I thought, you know, if you want to go with me it'd be really cool but if not that's fine 'cause you're not going to hurt my feelings one way or another. (Steps back, squeezes eyes shut and cringes for a few seconds)

The short story: She said, "Well, actually, I'm dating someone. But if something changes, I'll let you know."

The long story: I know this is a polite way for her to flat out turn me down, but at that moment I want to kiss her for having the decency to politely turn me down, for understanding what a horrible, gut-wrenching experience it is for me to ask someone out, for realizing

that just because some men deserve to be treated rudely for asking out women in a bar, it doesn't mean we all deserve it. For having compassion and honesty and a tolerant nature.

The short story: She and I see each other every Tuesday now, smile and say "hi" to each other. I don't really talk to her, because... well, frankly, I just kinda feel like a dope around her. And I'm not sure, but every so often she gives me a look like she wonders if I was serious about asking her out or if I was drunk and asking out women at random and maybe so drunk that I don't even remember asking her out.

The long story: Every time I see this look on her face, I want to grab her by the arm and tell her, "You know, I do remember asking you out. I really was serious. I wasn't just asking you out because you were the last person in the bar." I want to tell her all the things that I don't nearly have the courage to tell her, but for some Freudian reason I feel perfectly at ease telling you, a roomful of strangers, knowing full well that she's in this room, listening to everything I say and knowing that I'm talking about her. That when she gets up and reads her poetry, she becomes a hot knife and I become a stick of butter. That when I tell her that I like her poems, she gets this crooked little smile on her face and says, "Well, I'm just working on them," and I could so easily lose myself in that crooked little smile and never see the light of earth again. That when it's really crowded in here and she has to walk from here (points stage right) to here (points stage left) she has to carry her drink over her head and her t-shirt comes up a little bit and you can see a little slice of her waist, and it's pale and smooth and I'm not positive, but it may just be the sexiest goddamn thing I've ever seen in my life.

These are things I've wanted to say since Valentine's Day. And now I have. And now... I'm done.

Part I. I have this really annoying habit – a terrible habit, really – of assigning titles to women I like. It all came about because at any given moment, there are about five or six girls in my life that I have the hots for, and my friends can never tell them apart-

“Hey, I saw Rachel today.”

“Okay, now, is she the one that you work with, or is she the grad student?”

“Neither – she’s the one with the leather backpack.”

This led, as you may imagine, to-

“Hey, I went out with the Backpack Girl last night.”

“Oh, the Backpack Girl! And how was that?”

“Oh, well, you know... it was... well, it was really...”

And then when it would fall apart as it always does, I would start to use the title as an object of scorn, and ridicule –

“You’ll never guess who I ran into at Sweet Alice last night.”

“Who?”

(Pause) “Backpack Girl!”

“Oh no!”

SUPERVILLAINS

A friend once remarked that I used the titles much like a comic book line would use them to describe their supervillains, and I found this metaphor so entirely apropos and cosmically just that the concept stuck.

So, in honor of Anti-Valentine’s Day tonight, I will be presenting, in installments, all the supervillians that have graced my presence in the last six months. I hope you will find them as amusing and psychotic as I have.

Part II. The Backpack Girl. Rachel is a friend of a friend of mine, a student at Columbia College. The first time I met her, she was wearing one of those Barbie doll dresses with one of those patent-leather backpacks with the four straps that go all the way around your body. She introduces herself as a poet... (Pause) You know, as in her profession.

Now, my teeth are already starting to grind together, because unfortunately for about eight months, I had to live in the middle of Backpack Girl Land when, freshly arriving to Chicago and not knowing any better, I moved into the heart of Wicker Park. And I guess I have an additional bias against the Backpack Girls, because my roommate there, who I found through The Reader, which should tell you something already, was also a Backpack Girl, but a psychotic one, so psychotic that for the last two months of our lease, I had to sleep every night with my bedroom door locked, in fear that she was going to sneak in in the middle of the night and hack me up with a butcher knife. (Pause) But that’s another story.

I was strongly attracted to Backpack Girl yet wanted to just throttle her every time I saw her. I didn’t know what to do about this, so I did what any of you would do, which is to half-heartedly hit on her and every time she’d ask me to go do something with her, I’d go, schlepping my poor exhausted body over to Crobar at one in the morning when I had to get up and go to work at seven the next morning, which was never a consideration for her, ‘cause she’s a poet, you know, and poets with weekly checks from their parents don’t have to worry about middle management assholes that didn’t get any last night so they’re going to take it out on somebody, and you become the perfect target when you stumble in to work about 9:45, so hungover that you could almost be considered legally blind.

Eventually Backpack Girl started dating some dork that constantly wore one of those “ZERO” shirts like Smashing Pumpkins and had long, stringy hair and a ring through his eyebrow, which really should come as a surprise to no one. But by then I was fully busy with the battle over the next supervillain, The Chemist.

Part III. The Chemist. It’s funny how we, as a society, have about a dozen different definitions of what constitutes a date. To me, I had always thought of a date as a specific episode where two people go out, exclusively, to an event of culture or entertainment, as an excuse to spend the evening heightening and combining their level of intimacy, presumably as a first step towards involvement of a romantic and/or sweaty nature. I never knew how wrong I was until I started seeing The Chemist.

The Chemist possessed many of the traits that melt my heart – the same age as me, short hair, boyish looking, and most importantly, she was a hard scientist, which I find so sexy that it could almost be called a fetish.

The Chemist and I went out on four or five dates, ranging from dinner at this really nice place in Lakeview that was actually pretty good, to a play that we both agreed could have been better. You know... (Pause) things like that. We would always wind back up at

her place, sipping tea and listening to soft music, discussing the state of the world and the state of our lives. At no time did I try to make... (Pause) “The Move,” and I was so proud of myself. I was really starting to like her.

Finally, I could sense her impatience, and one cold night I attempted... (Pause) “The Move.” As my lips were slowly moving in to her face, she said, (Backing away from the microphone) “What are you doing?” I explained that... well... you know... we’ve been... hanging out a lot and... well... you know... we’ve gone out on like four or five dates now...

“Dates? Those weren’t dates. That was just two people going out together to an event and having a good time and getting to know each other better.

Oh.

Needless to say, things quickly fell apart after that. The Chemist kept wanting to get together and have our... (Pause) “Getting to Know You Nights,” I guess you’d call it – I don’t know, ‘cause they sure as hell weren’t dates – but I was having none of that. There’s something mortally embarrassing about reaching in to kiss someone and having them say, (Backing away from the microphone) “What are you doing?” We never saw each other again.

But soon was to come my greatest test of my superpowers. Within a month, I was about to have sex again.

Part IV. The Writer. To understand this story, you must know the following information – Before December of 1995, I had had sex two times... (Pause) in two years. Both times were with an extremely frustrated ex-girlfriend who would blow into town, get all sweaty with me, wipe her brow and take off again.

By December of 1995, I had pretty much come to grips with the idea that I was never going to have sex again... (Pause) for the rest of my life.

But then at a Christmas party this season, said ex-girlfriend, who has now moved to Chicago and is in her first lesbian relationship, which is a whole can of worms we won’t even open tonight, decides that she’s going to set me up with a co-worker of hers, because we’re both writers, you know, and we’re both cool, and frankly, we’re both a little desperate.

Brynn (the ex) warns me that The Writer is a little skittish about dating and that I should take it nice and slow. Which, of course, means that we end up sleeping together on our first date. And for another three days in a row after that. The sex is... (Pause, then laughing) Well, it’s fantastic! What do you think I’m going to say, the sex was (holds out hand and wiggles it in the air) oh, so-so? I leave for Christmas with visions of more than sugar plums dancing in my head.

As you’ve already guessed, I received... (Pause) The Big Blowoff when I got back – no communication at all from her for a week. And just when I’m about to perform (Pause, then acting like he’s writing in the air) The Big Write Off, she calls out of the blue and wants to explain why she’s been acting like an asshole. When we get together, she launches into this strange, rambling story about how every time she has sex, right as she reaches her climax, she has the thought, “What if my mother knew what I was doing right now?” and she is overcome with a wave of guilt and disgust and has an immediate urge to flee from the bed. (Pause) Which is why she hasn’t called me.

Needless to say... (Pause) I have no response to this.

About two weeks ago I got together with The Ex, and she says, “You know, the more I get to know Amy, the more I’m starting to think there’s something wrong with her. So... you know, just forget that idea I had about setting you two up. I was wrong.”

Okay. Great. Thanks, Brynn.

Part V. The 19 Year Old. I turn 27 in two weeks. For a number of years I’ve had a standing rule not to date anyone under the age of 21, which is what makes the following story so pathetic, in that I am so desperate that I will break one of the two or three only rules I have ever made about dating.

For the record, let me just say that I didn’t know she was 19 when I met her, nor even when we went on our first date, although I should have guessed something was up when I took her to a bar and she acted really nervous and ended up ordering a cup of coffee. I, of course, took it as a sign of (In a really goofy voice) “Gee, she must really like me!”

Now, I’m not going to lie and give you a line like, “She was an old 19.” I mean, she was nineteen, and acted accordingly in that realm. Really, how can one not act their age?

I would tell my friends and they would shake their heads and go, “Oh, Jason. (Pause) Oh, Jason.” But oh God was she cute. These clunky black glasses and vintage clothes and couldn’t understand the concept that in a former life, Sting was actually considered cool.

And who wouldn't be attracted to someone who wrote a zine that the head of Matador Records buys?

Eventually the traits that I found so charming in her started turning simply annoying. Her obsession with Barbie memorabilia and recapturing the childhood she never had made me feel, frankly, a bit pedophilic in the boudoir. And having to pay every time we went out because she was broke, because she still hadn't gotten a job in four months but would take her weekly checks from her parents and go to four or five live shows a week... well, you see what I'm saying.

I ended up doing something I've never done before, which was to be the breaker, which I found such a horrible experience that it makes me reconsider the idea of ever dating again. Which I haven't, to this day.

Hmm – I guess by my own definition, I now am a supervillain. Well, I leave it up to you to come up with a suitable moniker for me. Suggestions will be taken after the reading.

THINGS I HAVE NEVER TOLD ANOTHER LIVING SOUL

Every time I listen to the song "Seether," I jump around in my apartment and play air guitar and knock shit over and feel like a rock star.

Whenever I go into a public bathroom and they have one of those hot-air hand dryers with instructions on them and someone has scratched out #1 so it reads, "Push Butt," I laugh each and every time.

I came this close about nine months ago to having sex with a man.

I got drunk at Smart Bar once and convinced a guy I met that not only had I sold my novel, but last week the movie deal went through, and I was now currently worth 1.25 million dollars, and the movie was going to star Bridget Fonda and it was going to come out in about a year and a half.

I had sex with my ex-girlfriend after she got married to the guy she dumped me for. And...it wasn't that good.

Maybe the best live show I have ever seen was Bon Jovi, St. Louis Arena, 1987, with special guests Cinderella.

I own nine different videotapes of pornography.

Every time I go to a party, I steal

something inconsequential from the bathroom, like a bar of soap or a box of Band-Aids. I have done this at every party I've attended since 1988.

My freshman year in college, in my first relationship ever, I dated someone else at the same time for about a month, and one night I actually fooled around with my girlfriend in her dorm room, ran across the street and had sex with the other girl in her dorm room, then ran back across and had sex with my girlfriend in her dorm room.

The real reason that I haven't shot any new photographs, which was my major in college, since 1991, is that I'm deathly afraid of being a failure in that field.

The reason I switched from playing piano in the jazz band in high school to playing trumpet was so that I could pick up girls.

I agree with some of the things Rush Limbaugh says.

Sometimes, to this very day, I will sit in my apartment and have uncontrollable fits of crying, that can last up to 45 minutes. I have had this problem since I was in third grade.

If I had my choice, I would choose to be born retarded.

In the four times I have been in a fistfight since I was born, I have experienced such a rush and a thrill and a high from the fight that my entire body has started shaking and I've had to leave and be by myself for hours before I can calm down again.

I have had a tongue up inside my anus. And, I have done the same to another.

I had a chance to go to Europe while I was in college, and I turned it down because I have a paralyzing fear of being outside the jurisdiction of U.S. law.

When I lived in Wicker Park, I shared my apartment with this girl that was so psychotic that one night I actually, seriously considered how hard it would be to kill her. Then I realized I had no idea how to get rid of a dead body, so I forgot the whole thing.

I would have sex with the actress who played Blossom in a second. Oh, I'm sorry, I've told all kinds of people that.

I have seen the movie Blue Velvet at least three hundred times.

There's a deep tiny part of me that sincerely believes that Liz Phair would grow to love me if she could just meet me and get to know me.

I have a living, breathing contempt for about 90 percent of humanity.

I used to work at an advertising agency, and when I got fired about two months ago, the shame of it overwhelmed me so much that I almost moved back to my parents' house.

I've pretty much given up the idea that I will ever get married, or have children. The thought of this causes a depression in me that is so vast that sometimes I feel I will never recover.

I am now in a point in my smoking history that sometimes, if it's very early in the morning and it's extremely cold outside, I will cough up blood.

I cried when Robert Mapplethorpe died.

I no longer remember how to write in cursive.

Sometimes, when I'm riding the Red Line, we will be cruising up between Fullerton and Belmont and the Brown Line will be running right alongside us, right at the same exact speed, and I will look across at them and experience a moment of lucidity that approaches the closest I've ever gotten to the sublime, and it is in these moments that I think that

Chicago, 1996, is the greatest city that has ever existed in the history of the world, that I am experiencing monumental history by being here, and that I think I might die if I ever had to leave this town.

When I get really drunk, I like to turn up my Walkman so loud that my ears hurt, so that I can drown out the voice in my head which is constantly telling me about cool new things to write about and great ideas for my novel and inspirations for my next photography project. Turning up my Walkman never works, but I believe that I have already made myself partially deaf at the age of 26 because of the process.

I tell you these things not to shock and not as a form of self-therapy, but because I believe they make for a good story, and ultimately, that is what I am here to do – to tell a story, to entertain, to inform, to spur thought. I hope I have done that tonight.

I still masturbate about you, you know. It's something we don't discuss anymore, the sexual part of our past. Too much time has passed and we have moved way beyond the point where it is cute and nostalgic and a little titillating to discuss past exploits in bed. Now it is simply uncomfortable, and since it's been a long time since we've slept together and the possibilities of it happening again are slim to none, it is no longer even titillating.

Still, though, I masturbate about you now and again. It's perhaps the greatest vice in my life right now; the most damaging one and the hardest to overcome – not only chronic masturbation in general, but masturbating about women who have hurt me, who have put me through the masher and ground me into liquid form. It's difficult to masturbate about a woman who broke your heart. Somehow, though, I manage to do it.

(WOMAN 1 stands up in audience and says) Jason Pettus masturbates an average of twenty-one times a week. That is to say, he does not masturbate three times every day; that

would be ridiculous. There are some days when he can barely manage to find time for a quick one during his shower or before falling asleep. There are other days, however,

UNTITLED (VICE STORY)

where it is a lazy Saturday afternoon and Jason has nothing better to do than stay in bed all day, eat junk food, chain smoke, and watch six hours worth of movies on WGN, Channel 9. It is on days like this that it is not unusual for him to have six or seven orgasms in a twenty-four hour period.

Jason Pettus masturbates an average of twenty-one times a week. This works out to eighty-four times a month, or 1,092 times a year. This means that since the age of thirteen, when Pettus had his first orgasm, he has subsequently achieved orgasm approximately 16,380 times by his own hand...

(Jason, from stage) ...or what have you.

(WOMAN 1 resumes) Before the age of thirteen, Jason Pettus still masturbated, but perhaps only five times a week. This puts the life total of masturbatory incidents at approximately 19,760.

(Jason, from stage) I never claimed that I did not masturbate a lot. You knew that already when we started dating.

(WOMAN 1 resumes) In case you were curious, Jason Pettus has had approximately 535 orgasms by way of another's hand...

(Jason resumes) ...or what have you.

I really don't know if I masturbate more or less than the average American male. But 16,000 is a pretty big number, you have to admit. It makes me wonder what else I've done more than 16,000 times since the age of thirteen. Go to the bathroom? Probably not. I've probably smoked more than 16,000 cigarettes by now. And I think I've cursed the name of Ameritech close to 16,000 times.

Like I said, you knew of my proclivity for jerking off before we even dated. It's one of the things we talked about the first time we actually engaged in serious sexual verbal flirtation. Masturbation is an endlessly fascinating topic of discussion for men towards their lovers. We love to talk about how often we do it, how we do it, and what we're thinking about when we do it. We love to hear if you do it, how often you do it, and in what manner you do it. We love to do it for you while you are watching. We adore having you do it while we are watching. Hell, we love doing it while we're lying in your bed and you're in the bathroom, taking a shower and getting ready to start the new day.

Here's what I think about when I masturbate about you. I think about warm summer nights in Missouri, a place I miss more and more with each passing day. I think of bedrooms lit only with the light of the moon, something that is impossible here in Chicago. I think of the soft breeze that would blow the curtains open as I parted your thighs with my hand. I think about the way you used to want me, the way you used to need me like you needed nothing else.

(WOMAN 2 stands up in audience and says) Here is a list of women Jason Pettus is currently masturbating about.

Ginger Lynn.

(Jason) She's a porn star from the '80s. If you know who I'm talking about, then you know why.

(WOMAN 2) Liz Phair.

(Jason) Goes without saying.

(WOMAN 2) Annie Wood, the host of the television show Buzz.

(Jason) She does this little dance, you see, and... oh, never mind.

(WOMAN 2) Every other woman on the television show Buzz.

(Jason) (turning sideways to audience and acting like a contestant on the show) My name is Amber. I like mountain climbing, yoga, and having a good time!

(WOMAN 2) Bridget Fonda.

(Jason) Well, you know, just for good measure.

(WOMAN 2) That woman in the Saturn commercial who's buying her first new car.

(Jason) (Pause) Oh yeah, like you don't.

(WOMAN 2) That woman who played the high school student obsessed with Brandon on year four of Beverly Hills 90210.

(Jason) You see, it's in syndication on Channel 50 right now, and... oh, never mind.

(WOMAN 2) The cousin of a good friend of his.

(Jason) (holding up a photograph) This is a picture of her! She's hot!

(WOMAN 2) Blossom.

(Jason) (Pause) Oh yeah, like you don't!

(WOMAN 2) Martha Stewart.

(Jason) How'd that get in there? Just... move on, please.

(WOMAN 2) His ex-girlfriend.

(Jason) Obviously.

(WOMAN 2) His other ex-girlfriend.

(Jason) (Pause) Obviously.

(WOMAN 2) Yet another ex-girlfriend.

(Jason) (Pause) There's something else that I fantasize about when I'm masturbating about you, but I'm almost ashamed to admit it. I have romantic fantasies. I fantasize that we never broke up, and that it is I who is now going to the store and picking out furniture with you, instead of that... well, you know, the person who's replaced me. I fantasize that we are living together, that we are cooking meals together, that I am entering you without a condom because we are trying to have a baby.

These fantasies are sexually arousing to me. They give me an erection. I am able to have an orgasm because of them. And, frankly, that scares the hell out of me.

(WOMAN 3 stands in audience and says) The Hite Report on Human Sexuality reports that there are six basic options that most males choose from while masturbating. One, the stereotypical up-and-down pumping motion. Two, grasping the penis and twisting back and forth laterally, as if unscrewing and screwing the top of a plastic bottle. Three, grasping the foreskin with the thumb and forefinger and vigorously vibrating, much like a woman would do with her clitoris. Four, rubbing against a stationary object, such as a mattress or a door. Five, actual insertion of the penis into a womb-like atmosphere. And six, rare that it is, self-oral gratification.

(Jason resumes) There is a woman at one of the open mics I go to, the one at Estelle's. Her name is Jules, and last night she walked by me and lightly put her hands on my back, oh-so-gently rubbed and tickled me as she passed me on the way to the bathroom. The action literally made me melt, and I realized right then and there how void my life currently is of physical human contact. It made me realize just how much I rely on masturbation to keep me from going insane or turning into the Unabomber. When I think about it in those terms, I guess masturbation isn't so bad. I guess.

Normally this is the part of the story where I would mention you by name and bring the listener or reader of my story even more personally into it. But I had a very ugly incident last month, where I read a story at the open mic at No Exit cafe in the heart of Rogers Park. My story was grossly misunderstood by several people that night, and I was actually indirectly threatened with physical violence by the host of the open mic, Michael O'Toole, who is normally a very pleasant fellow and very easy to get along with. The whole thing has made me reconsider my normal practice of including proper names in my stories. Besides, there is a chance, however small, that your new beau might hear or read this story, and I don't want to put you in a spot where you'll get in trouble with them, or that I'll get in trouble with them.

(WOMAN 4 stands in audience and says) The following is a legal disclaimer. The preceding paragraph was in no way meant as a slanderous statement or an act of libel against Michael O'Toole, No Exit Cafe, or any of its regular patrons. The paragraph was made as a statement of fact, and should not be construed as a disparaging remark. Jason Pettus is merely saying that Michael O'Toole and other regular patrons of No Exit Cafe really need to

learn how to grow up.

(Jason resumes) I am wracking my brain, trying to think of a way of letting you know that I am writing this letter to you and not one of the three other women I could be talking about. I am desperately seeking some incident from our past that you and only you would know about, that neither you nor I have shared with another person on this planet, yet something generic enough so that it would fit all four of you without giving away any individual personality. Oh, there is one thing I can think of that might possibly work. The day after we had sex for the first time, I bought a dozen daisies and put them at your front door at a time when I knew you wouldn't be home. We talked later that night, and you almost cried when you discussed the flowers, and then you were pissed because you were almost crying about a bunch of stupid flowers.

That was a time when I was a big fan of random romantic gestures. I enjoyed doing simply, goofy things in the name of love. I believed the actions to be a sign of affection, and that they would endear the woman in question to me even more. I know better now.

(WOMAN 5 stands in audience and says) It is estimated that 99.8 percent of the American male population masturbates on a regular basis, regular meaning at least once a week. Conversely, it is estimated that 62 percent of American females engage in the same activity. In a national poll asking what the most important part of the sexual experience is, the most repeated answer among males was "the orgasm;" the most repeated answer among females was "being held." Sociological studies have shown that males that put as much importance on the emotional part of sex as their female counterparts do are less likely to receive pay raises than other males. They tend to hold less prestigious jobs and for shorter periods of time. They date less often than other males and get into far fewer long-term relationships. The women tend to be the breakers in these relationships, and it takes longer for these men to emotionally recover than other males. In addition, these men are twice as likely to be alcoholics and have a four hundred percent likelier chance of suffering from clinical depression or other mentally-related illnesses.

(Jason resumes) I still masturbate about you, you know. I hope you know me well enough to not have that make you uncomfortable. It doesn't mean I want to get back together, not by a long shot. I'm not even sure I'd have sex with you again if given the opportunity. But I still masturbate about you. I think back to warm, silent, dark summer nights in Missouri and time when you still loved me, and I just can't help myself.

VENT!

Today I came home from work and the back door of my apartment building was covered with microwavable pesto sauce. It made a slender arc, as if someone had stood in the alleyway about five feet away with a container of sauce and flung it like Tom Sawyer in front of the whitewash fence.

Last Saturday a friend of mine got thrown up against a cop car right as we were leaving a party, because they thought that his friend, who also had just left the party, was a hooker. They made us all go back inside the party while they spent twenty minutes alone with the girl. We never did find out why they thought she was a hooker, or what they were doing hanging outside of the party in the first place.

Yesterday my electricity got turned off because my temp agency has been scheduling me an average of ten hours a week. It was two in the morning when I discovered this, so I just went to bed, opening all of my windows and hoping the crack of sunlight at dawn would wake me up in time for work. It didn't. The agency called me at work and yelled at me and when I explained what happened, they said, "Well, that's not our fault."

A week ago exactly I got yelled at by a homeless guy in McDonald's because I wouldn't give him any money. He looked at my tie and said, "Won't give me any money, stupid cracker muthafucka."

In two weeks the city of Chicago will be closing off an eight block area around the United Center for the Democratic National Convention. Anyone caught in the eight block area, for any reason, at any time, whatsoever, will be automatically arrested. They say it is for security reasons.

Four days ago I had a first date with a beautiful woman. We went to a party, got lost on the way there, laughed a lot, drank free liquor, and were inundated with half a dozen of my old co-workers, who all kept whispering to her behind my back about what a great guy I was. We both agreed at the end of the night that it had been a lot of fun and that we should definitely go out again. Two days later we ran into each other at the open mic we had met at. She said, "You know, Jason, I don't think things between us are gonna fly." She offered no explanation, and I didn't ask for one.

Last weekend a friend drove me to a party, then refused to give me a ride home. My friend Steve was gracious enough to walk fifty minutes with me at six in the morning to his place and let me sleep there. On the way to his house, a black man passed us and said, "Two wrongs don't make a right" and sneered. We passed another man at the corner of North and Damen. He claimed he was from the suburbs, had driven into town and spent every last cent on liquor last night, then found out his car was broken. If we would loan him train fare, he would go out to the suburbs, and three and a half hours later bring us back our money. He offered to let us hold his glasses as collateral. To this day, I still don't know if the guy actually thought we were going to hang out at that intersection for three and a half hours.

A week and a half ago I watched a bomb blow up at the Olympics. Then everyone made fun of me because I was upset by it.

About three weeks ago I went to my friend's new condo, the one he just bought. It has a spiral staircase in the middle of the living room that goes through a hole in the ceiling, straight to the bedroom. He has a quad speaker system hooked up to his television, and when you watch a Cubs game, it sounds like the crowd is literally sitting behind you. He showed me the \$85 antique toy soldiers he had just bought. Later, after a few drinks, he admitted to me that he hates going out somewhere straight after work, because he still has his suit on and he "feels like a dork."

In three days I go to my ten-year high school reunion. When I got the invitation, there was also a list of all the people they have not been able to track down. Included in the list were all nine girls I had crushes on during high school.

Five years ago I went to my five-year reunion. Everyone thought I was gay. When I would say that I wasn't, they would say, "Well, you know, Chris Dabner came out his freshman year in college. Then he dropped out the next year, moved to Europe, and no one's heard from him since."

Also at the reunion, a stranger walked up to me and said, "Excuse me. You don't know me, but I cheated off you in Psych class our entire junior year." All I could think to say was, "What grade did you get?" He said, "B," and I found it odd, because I got a C in Psych.

Exactly eighteen days ago, I received the one hundredth rejection of my novel. At the time, it didn't upset me nearly as much as it does now.

Two weeks ago my brother got his wallet stolen in New York City. Two days ago I

found out that he's moving back into my parents' house for the second time since college.

Three months ago I got called "homophobic," "misogynist," and "phallogentric," twice, all in a two week period, all by women I was interested in.

Last night I was in a bar with a friend and started explaining how frustrating and stressful my life seems to be right now. A woman at the next table heard me and turned towards us. "Excuse me, excuse me," she said. "Look at yourself. You're young, you're white and you're male. What - I mean what could you possibly have to complain about?" I wanted to tell her everything I've just mentioned, but I thought this might bring about an incident, so instead I took another drink of my beer and just kept my mouth shut.

(Emcee of event stands on stage and yells) Hear ye, hear ye! Gather round for the annual Chicago Village Idiot Competition of 1996! Final round of competition – John Biederman versus Jason Pettus! May the best man win! Let the games begin!

(Jason and John step on stage. They pause for a few seconds, then both put on silly hats – a fez for Jason, a jester cap for John. There is a small pause between each line read.)

John: Look there! A big frog in the sky!

Jason: Land sakes! A giant purple elephant!

John: I'll be damned! My coffee's got a finger in it!

Jason: There's a place in France where the ladies wear no pants.

John: Teacher, teacher, I declare, I see Mary's underwear.

Jason: Whistle while you work. Hitler is a jerk. Mussolini bit his weenie – now it doesn't work.

John: Sure, it's cold now, but that'll pass soon.

Jason: The Chicago Bears will never move to the suburbs.

John: The Democratic Convention was a huge success, and brought lots of rewards to the city.

Jason: Riverboat casinos are good for the economy! They provide local jobs, you know.

THE VILLAGE IDIOT COMPETITION OF 1996

John: What do I do for a living? (with false modesty) ...I'm a writer.

Jason: You know, I'm featured every week at Estelle's in Wicker Park. Yep, I'm one of only twelve people that get to go on stage.

John: I know you model for a living, but would you like to go out?

Jason: I know you have a boyfriend, but would you like to go out?

John: I know you have a big ring on your finger that looks suspiciously like an engagement ring, but would you like to go out?

Jason: I know you're a lesbian, but would you like to go out?

John: If she has sex with me, that means she loves me, right?

Jason: If she has sex with me, that means she likes me, right?

John: If she has sex with me, that means she wanted to have sex with me, right?

Jason: I'm personal friends with Shappy!

John: Hey, that's my line!

Jason: Get your own line! I already used it!

John: Um... (dejected) I, uh... woke up Shappy with the phone once.

Jason: Women are attracted to artists.

John: Women really dig open mics.

Jason: Women can't keep their hands off guys who know their way around the Internet.

John: I interned for MAD Magazine.

Jason: You look just like Liz Phair, you know that?

John: Why can't I get anyone to love me?

Jason: Why can't I get anyone to... oh. Uh... pass.

John: Witty references to classic rock lyrics will never go out of style.

Jason: People never tire of my constant references to my amphetamine problem.

John: Chicago will maintain control of Meigs Field.

Jason: Richard Daley is my friend.

John: Look up. Look down. Your pants are falling down.

Jason: Hey.

John: What.

Jason: Chicken butt.

John: Look at me – (puts hands to ears and wiggles them) I'm an elephant!

Jason: Look at me – (puts hands to mouth like a duckbill) I'm a duck!

John: (tries to give next line, but Jason continues to hog microphone, making duck noises. After a few attempts, he finally says, "Excuse me!" loudly. Jason backs up.) Look at me – (raises one leg) I'm hopping around on one foot!

Jason: Look at me – (sticks out tongue) I can touch my nose with my tongue!

(John and Jason busy themselves for five or ten seconds, hopping around on stage and making 'exertion' noises as they try to outdo each other. Finally they look at each other, realize what they're doing, and stop. They go back to the microphone.)

John: I love you. Really, I do. I'm serious.

Jason: Don't leave me. For God's sake, just... don't... leave me.

(Three or four second pause, then both men say "thank you" simultaneously and exit stage.)

WHY THE FLIES AREN'T

March 5, 1996 was the day the household fly became sentient. One by one, the world over, they rubbed their legs together and looked over their body with their two hundred eyes and said to themselves with a sense of wonder and awe, "I...exist. I...am."

None of the flies knew what to do with this information. They buzzed around for awhile and walked on ceilings and ate some random garbage and pretty much continued their present behavior. But then, through the grapevine, word started spreading. Someone had heard that the average lifespan of the household fly was two weeks.

Could this be? There was much talk and a committee was formed to look into the matter. Sure enough, the committee reported its findings in the positive: their lives were indeed finite.

"What should we do?" cried one fly in its tiny, supersonic voice. The flies looked, looked, looked and looked around. They beat their wings nervously. Finally, one adventurous fly raised its little voice. "Well...I guess we should raise some hell."

The next three days were not a pleasant time on this planet. Chaos ruled the skies and anarchy bred in dumpsters. A favorite trick, and the one that gained the greatest notoriety, was the following:

A group of 50,000 to 100,000 flies would gather near a suburban home. Keeping as still as possible, they would hover outside the front door. Fifty flies would gather en masse – these were known as the kamikaze flies, because of the volunteered death mission. Their names were recorded and all etched in a stone in southeast Louisiana by the sturdy horseflies there, master craftsmen all.

These fifty flies would fling themselves as fast as possible to the doorbell, instantly killing themselves as they depressed the button inwards. The inhabitant, perhaps thinking it was a friendly call from their neighbor, there to sip coffee and discuss "just what the hell has gotten into all these flies, anyway?" would open the door, to which the flies would swarm in as a group.

Candles would overturn, gas stoves would laboriously be turned on, and carnage would usually erupt. The situation got so bad that the President of the United States had to go on television and declare a national Human Doorknock Sign, which by Congressional vote was determined to be the beloved "Shave and a haircut" rap. Under no circumstances were citizens to open their doors unless they heard this code.

As guessed, the inevitable finally happened. Flies started questioning their existence. A religion was formed – a cloudy, unclear series of rituals that experts say involved something about a giant, moldy, half-eaten package of Twinkies the size of the sun.

The flies started ganging up, usually among geographical lines. The Connecticut flies would argue on why they should stay and starve in their clean streets, when practically next door, the New York landscape would provide plenty for all?

Skirmishes broke out, then battles, then outright wars. Then, one tumultuous day that will forever be known as "Buzz Tuesday," the entire fly population gathered over the sleepy town of Lawrence, Kansas, and had a cataclysmic, almost apocalyptic, fight to the finish. Not a wing was left twitching, and the city eventually had to be evacuated, dozed over, and started again from scratch.

And now, sometimes, my grandson will come for a visit, and he'll say, "I heard an old man in a park say that he was like fly in the ointment. What does that mean, Grampy? What are flies?"

"Never you mind, boy," I say, chuckling. "Never you mind."

The snow.

The snow is snowing sideways.

It's sideways, man, it really is, I kid you not, the gently falling present from God joke is joking on me, turning on me like a bastard child.

Satan is afraid of Chicago in February.

Snow hits my face little bullets thousands of little bullets torturing me and punishing me for a crime I will commit when I'm forty-three years old. I don't know what the crime is yet. But it's bad 'cause the snow punishes me every February until I turn forty-three. And then I die.

Coffee was invented to slowly kill me.

I can feel it.

I can feel it, slowly inching its way down my pipes my piping my piping hot friend

enemy enema who laughs at me and laughs with me stares at me with its black face of midnight evil, children being raped in their own bedrooms, children with their throats slit in Colorado and stuffed up the chimney.

I have THE FEVER.

It bubbles and it boils, right under my skin. THE FEVER. If I put my sweaty palm to my sweaty forehead I can feel it coursing, bubbling, boiling, pushing my skin up in unnatural ridges and rhythms.

THE FEVER is ALIVE.

It's a living, breathing creature that has invaded me, baby boy, won't let go and will take me over until I have nothing left. THE FEVER eats me, chomps away at the inside of me and the only way it can stay alive is to kill me but once I'm dead it won't be able to live any more. THE FEVER is a stupid creature though and can't think that far ahead. And my whole life's been filled with stupid creatures trying to kill me, so why should this be any different?

But you know better, baby boy. This time it's gotten INSIDE you, it crawls around up and down and all over your body baby body baby boy and nothing is sacred, it will use anything and everything it can find to kill you, exploit every weakness, poke holes, shoot arrows, boil the pouring oil and avast ye scurry, baton rouge the mainlining smackheads and let the pillaging rejoice!

It sees things you don't want it to, baby boy.

Oh, my tender emotional vulnerable baby boy. You want to hide, crawl inside the pompadour and circumstance, crawl inside Buddy Holly and wrap yourself in buffalo plaid and condoms.

I got you right where I want you, fucker.

You pathetic wimp fool. I take you in my arms like a fucking lever and push the pivot to hurt you exactly the way you can be helped. I make you cry like the fucking baby you are, crawl into your nonexistent womb and suck your dick and cry for your mommy. I make your eyelids bleed with liquid flame so hot when you squeeze them shut like you'll set your eyes on fire. I make your chest squeeze shut make you gasp for wheezy breath and curse everything and everyone you ever loved in your life make you want to die make your muscles ache and burn brightly in the presence of strangers, give off a curious light all your own that they can smell like a dog in heat. They smell it and like blood they go crazy swoop in for the kill, stab and flick and plunge and beat hit pummel horse spin and break your fucking ankle 'cause you're no better than a sniveling uptight babydoll fourteen year old virgin, for Chrissakes. You make me sick.

THE FEVER tricks my body because it is smart, much smarter than I'll ever be. A flood of cold ripples up my body from my toes to my head in 2.2 seconds flashing a wave of goosebumps and shivering and POP right out of my head again.

THE FEVER makes me want to go over to the guy at the next table and punch him in the face as hard as I can. Just because. Just because he is EVIL he is the embodiment of everything I hate I hate hate HATE about humanity of which I am a distant cousin.

Nyquil makes coffee taste bad.

Nyquil's supposed to make ya high, I'm told, but it didn't work.

Maybe only if you take it when you're not sick.

There was a puddle of water at my el stop that kept forming silhouettes of famous people like clouds on a warm July day in McNair Park with Kellie on top of my chest. Pre-

WRITTEN WHILE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE FLU

pubescent sex is the best sex of all, 'cause you don't have to actually do it to get an orgasm. Kellie could look at me in a certain way and I'd get an orgasm.

Kellie: with light blue eyes that could pierce right through your skin.

Kellie: the only woman I've ever loved.

My body is starting to fall. It's starting to drop from the weight of THE FEVER and if I don't get home soon gravity will simply overcome me and leave me horizontal on this floor, never to get up.

I fear that I have pneumonia.

I fear that I have bronchitis.

I fear that I am dying, even as we speak. Well, of course I'm dying as we speak. I mean rapidly dying.

I fear that I am sterile. What in my life so far proves that I'm not?

A doctor on Oprah said that one of the signs of a man afraid of commitment is that they obsessively seek commitment, that they demand it much more quickly than is normal in a relationship. It makes no sense to me, but then again, Oprah believes him. Am I afraid of commitment? My neck hurts, very badly. And my back. And now I think of it now all my muscles start hurting at once, the ones on the bottom of my feet, the one in the fleshy part between my thumb and forefinger, my throat, my knees my God I am dying it's not just my imagination. I consider, right now, going to a hospital. But I'm a hypochondriac, so what the fuck do I know. It's Oprah's world and we all merely live in it.

John F. Kennedy Jr. was on Rosie today.

Jenny Jones had on daughters who beat up their mothers.

Wednesday I slept seventeen hours.

And I'm still sick.

There are thirty-four people in this coffeehouse. I have my back turned so that all I can see is one guy right in the corner of my eye. And now even he's wiggling his foot.

God, I really do hate people.

Whenever my Walkman's in a certain position on the table, I can hear a tiny, high squeal cutting over the music. It occurs to me that this might be a message from aliens trying to communicate and that I might be the only thing stopping their entire race from being exterminated.

Caryn believes in aliens. She asked me why I didn't and I said 'cause I'm an atheist and she didn't understand that. And I thought, if I have to explain it more than that then I'll never be able to explain it.

There's a lot of things about me that I can't explain. And I'm getting tired of trying. In fact, I'm just getting tired. I want to go home but I don't want to get up. It just seems like too much expenditure of energy.

The aliens are talking to me again. "HELP, JASON, HELP. SAVE US."

I am not Horton and they are not Whos.

I knew John Kennedy. And you, sir, are no John Kennedy.

I am Spartacus!

No, I am Spartacus!

Dr. Seuss and Dr. Who have never been seen at a party together. I'm not trying to imply anything. I'm just saying.

I want to write a children's book. Right now. I want to start right now and not put my pen down until it's finished. Children's books are the only kind of books that will make a writer immortal. It's a C.S. Lewis thing. I'm sure you wouldn't understand, dear.

And stop calling me Shirley.

And blue, I'll paint the ceiling blue. I want to go to Silver Dollar City RIGHT NOW.

I'm writing on top of a book of e.e. cummings poetry. When I was in college I owned the complete works of e.e. cummings and I carried that fucking thing around like it was the fucking Bible. Which, of course, it is.

Every time I'd read a poem and finally digest it, finally understand it, I'd circle its title in the table of contents.

The last time I remember, there were 136 titles circled.

Fall, 1989. I carried a notebook and I carried The Complete Works of e.e. cummings and that's what we'd do, we'd go to Shattered and sit on stage, get trashed, read e.e. cummings out loud and write poetry and bad talk women and shoo them away when they'd come over. The He-Man Woman Haters Club. God, it's been a long time since I thought about that. Me and Ted and Rock and Lee and Drew and Matt and Croy. We lived the pur-

est artist life those two years that I ever will – nihilistic and drunk and uncaring about anything practical whatsoever. It was liberating, and also surprising how much we actually got done having that attitude. I'll never be able to live like that again, even though sometimes I want to. It's why I'm at a coffeehouse tonight when THE FEVER wracks my body. Tonight I want to live that artistic life where nothing is sacred except THE IDEA, the Great and Almighty IDEA which can topple anything else in life. We spent two years doing nothing but discussing THE IDEAS, arguing them, enacting them, explaining them, defending them.

The cover of my e.e. cummings book ripped off one night, and the only tape around was this stuff for newspaper layout that was only an eighth of an inch thick. So I taped the cover back on with that. It must have taken 50 or 60 pieces of tape.

I tried to find my e.e. cummings book last Christmas, but it's lost, either in my parents' basement or someone's apartment in Columbia, Missouri.

I'd pay a million bucks to have that book back right now.

I'll flip this e.e. cummings book open and write down a random poem, the first short one I turn to.

THREE VII

Paris;this April sunset completely utters
utters serenely silently a cathedral
before whose upward lean magnificent face
the streets turn young with rain,
spiral acres of bloated rose
coiled within cobalt miles of sky
yield to an heed
the mauve
of twilight(who slenderly descends,
daintily carrying in her eyes the dangerous first stars)
people move love hurry in a gently
arriving gloom and
see!(the new moon
fills abruptly with sudden silver
these torn pockets of lame and beggin colour)while
there and here the lithe indolent prostitute
Night, argues
with certain houses

If Macintoshes had been around when e.e. cummings was writing, what the hell would've happened?

What would Thomas Jefferson's website have looked like?

If Kerouac could've self-published a zine out of his bedroom, what would he have called it?

I descend into the abyss. My body screams for me to take it to bed, but I punish it like it punishes me. I am trying to teach it that I am master over it, not the other way around. I'm afraid I'm losing.

YOU GOT THE BLUES, BOY, IS WHAT YOU GOT

Okay, so here's how it works:

I wake up about eight, so hungover that I touch my head to confirm that iron spike that someone's driven into it. I groggily reach for the phone, call my boss to tell them yes, I'm still sick, I don't know, I can't seem able to shake this bug, I hang up the phone and go back to sleep.

I wake again about noon, light a cigarette, and try to figure out one, just one solitary reason why the hell I should get out of bed today. I actually search my mind, come up with a list of things I could go do, things I could accomplish, things that just seem like necessary things to do, like eat, or go to the bathroom. But none of these things seem important enough, so I stay in bed.

I turn on the TV and continue smoking and eat whatever food might be left over from snacking drunk the night before and left at the bedside. I watch dozens of commercials throughout the afternoon about how they have lawyers on their side, so why shouldn't you, and how DeVry Business School is for a higher degree of learning and how I can declare bankruptcy with no money down and no credit? Bad credit? No problem! and how the Money Store is more than happy to consolidate all my bills into one, easy to pay monthly statement and I sit in bed and think about what a piece of shit I am, and how it really wouldn't matter if I was dead or not, sure, a number of people would be upset, but they'd get over it, and they'd get to a point

where they would only remember me one day a year, probably the anniversary of my death, and the other 364 days a year they'd be just fine.

Invariably at some point in the afternoon, some commercial will come on like that AT&T one where the whole family will surprise their parents with a birthday conference call, or that stupid fuckin' Saturn commercial where that girl's buying her first new car and everyone at the plant starts applauding and they take her picture, and this commercial will trigger a fit of crying that will last sometimes for an hour straight. I cannot control this, and the entire time I cry, I relive in my mind every single bad thing I have ever done to another person throughout my entire life.

About five or six I get up, put on some clothes, walk down to the corner and get some food, decide what I'm going to do that night. No matter what it is I decide, I always walk by the liquor store on the way home and decide instead to just stay home tonight. I pick up two 40 ounceers of malt liquor, a pack of cigarettes, and spend the evening watching sitcoms and drinking, drinking and watching, and about ten I start playing my stereo really, really loud, CD's I know beforehand depress me, sing along, until midnight or so, by which I usually have fallen asleep from the liquor. Eight hours later the whole process starts all over again.

I have been battling depression since the age of eight, but it wasn't until last year that I finally recognized it for what it is. Since that moment, I have been fascinated with going back through my life, pinpointing and recognizing those periods in my past where I was going through depression and didn't realize it, trying to disseminate the symptoms and reasons in the vain hope that I can conquer it.

I think the greatest thing that I want you to know, that I want you to understand and take home with you tonight and remember, is that I am not a sad person by nature. I rarely feel sorry for myself, especially in the last two years. I don't like to languish in my own inner angst and wear all black and quiet moan to all my friends about how sad I am. I personally consider myself a rather happy guy.

But I get these... fits, I guess you'd call them. It's like the flu – something triggers it, and much like when you go to bed one night feeling fine and chipper and healthy and you wake up the next morning with a sore throat and a fever and think you're going to die, so I too go to bed one night feeling fine and wake up the next morning lethargic and uncaring and I think I'm going to die.

I don't know what triggers these fits, but I'm starting to get some guesses. Losing a job always triggers it. When I was in college, failing a class would always trigger it. Sometimes losing a girlfriend has triggered it – but then again, sometimes not. And, as I've said, sometimes nothing at all will be wrong in my life – things can be going wonderfully in any and all facets of my existence you could name, and I still wake up one day and just... don't get out of bed.

These incidents always last for a duration of one to six weeks. At no time can I do something specific to jump out of it, because, believe me, I've tried just about everything. I drink

like a fish during these incidents – amounts I can scarcely believe later when I look back on it.

I have never seen a doctor about this, because 1) I have some sort of weird mistrust and scorn for psychologists that I've never quite figured out the root of, but must have something to do with inept counselors in grade school; 2) I never wanted to be one of those people who will stand up at an open mike and say shit like, "Okay, I wrote this next piece while I was in the hospital, suffering from depression," like they're proud of the fact – I mean, I don't understand the concept of being proud of the fact that at one point you were suicidal, just like I can't understand being proud that you were once an alcoholic or you were once addicted to heroin or you once were a child abuser; and 3) of course, I haven't had health insurance in about ten years, so I couldn't have gone anyway.

Likewise, I have never taken medication for these incidents, again because 1) I am deathly afraid that pharmaceuticals will kill off my creative drive and serve as some sort of chemical lobotomy; and 2) I never wanted to be one of those people who actually knew what it felt like to be on Prozac. The concept of taking Prozac is a great one to make jokes about, and somehow, actually taking it dilutes most of the humor involved with the joke.

I do not use these incidents as an attempt to get attention – indeed, the opposite could be said, in that, for the most part, I spend the entire time in my apartment, I lock my bedroom door if I have roommates, I don't go out with my friends and I take my phone off the hook. In the course of my life, because of these fits I have lost three jobs, one girlfriend, and have attempted suicide on two separate occasions. I tell you this because... well, I don't know. I just have this feeling that you are sitting there, thinking to yourself that this has been a self-imposed depression, and I feel this need to convince you that it is not.

I tell you this particular story tonight for a fairly simple reason – over the course of the last few weeks, I have come to realize that these simple little stories that I started writing for Sweet Alice originally to ease my writing block on my novel have turned into these great little snippets of confession, theory and entertainment, and is probably the best personal essay work I've ever written. I have decided to publish a book of the twelve best stories I've read here, and I wanted that to include a story on this particular topic tonight.

We all have our demons to wrestle, and I won't presume to know what yours are. This tonight was one of mine. Regular listeners have already heard of a number more, and future listeners will hear of a whole host yet to come. Just as I don't pretend that I can understand all of your demons, so too I don't expect all of you to understand mine. However, I leave you with this thought – the next time you hear a voice on channel 9 telling you if you don't get help at Charter, get help somewhere, stop giving the TV the finger for a minute, stop and realize what that commercial really means, and realize that it only takes a minute to call that friend that you haven't heard from in a number of weeks.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

January 1996 was when I first started my association with the Chicago poetry community. As recounted already in past memoirs on the subject, it was through no real interest in literary issues that I first got involved, but rather the fact that I wanted to get laid. Specifically, I was just finishing up my first novel, written mostly because of belonging to an amateur writing workshop for the last year that had been started by John Biederman. I didn't really have any hopes of actually writing a novel when I first joined, but had done so because I had been new to the city and was having a hard time making friends. But lo and behold, here it was a year later, and I (almost) had a finished novel on my hands, and had also ended up becoming fairly good friends with John and the other men of the writing workshop.

John showed up to the workshop one week and relayed a startling discovery he had made – namely, he had found a poetry open mic the other night that was full of hot women. This was before the poetry-slam format had really caught fire, remember, back before poetry was showing up on MTV and open mics were being held at trendy danceclubs, so the news of a roomful of hot women at a literary event was still a shocking event.

We all trudged out the next week to check it out for ourselves. Held at a trendy slacker dive called Sweet Alice in the pre-gentrified Wicker Park neighborhood, John's fanciful story turned out to be completely true; it just so happened that a number of models moonlighted as bartenders there, and their model friends were always coming in to get free drinks and shoot the shit, and for some reason all these model girls just loved the poetry night going on there on Tuesdays, so would all show up for it. Out of sheer desperation and horniness, all us guys in the novel-writing workshop decided to start writing poetry, just to have an excuse to come to Sweet Alice every week. And thus was my performance career ignobly born.

The show at Sweet Alice was called "The Testing Ground" and was hosted by Greg Gillam, the man who ultimately convinced me to continue in the genre long after the novelty of cute girls had worn off. All young writers should be blessed to have a person like Greg come into their lives at the beginnings of their careers; he is one of those rare open-mic hosts who sincerely believes in building a community of talented writers around him, and who will offer advice, subtly change performance rosters, and even buy people free drinks each week because he believes they need to keep showing up and becoming better writers. This was certainly the case with me – it was Greg who was able to listen to the admittedly pretty terrible stories I was writing at the time, recognize the good parts for what they were, help me recognize those good parts as well, help me understand why the other parts were bad parts that had to go, and in general just helped shape me into the writer I am today.

As you'll see in this book, technically I was yet to be writing poetry or slam-style performance pieces in 1996. I had yet to attend a poetry slam, in fact, and still carried a rather strong stigma with me regarding 'poetry' and how stupid and pointless it was; I preferred to think of myself as a storyteller, and the pieces written this year obviously reflect this fact. It is interesting, I think, to view this work in a long-term perspective, as these new collections allow, and note how radically my writing style changed in just a very short period of time (namely, after being introduced to the poetry slam in January 1997), even as you can still see a lot of common themes in this early work that carry on throughout my career.

Ultimately I feel that the vast majority of my pieces from 1996 don't hold up very well on their own, especially with the passage of time; most of them are too literal, too whiny, sometimes self-reflective to the point of naval-gazing disgust. They are, however, an honest record of a young writer's life at the beginning of his public career, the record of a person who was very excited about writing but just not a very good writer yet. And they do contain the seeds of the better work which was to come, which makes it interesting in a historical context, especially when compiled into a consistent chronology as this new collection does. No writer can get better, of course, without going through this process, because it's only the continual and repeated experience of actually writing that makes us better.

And for those who are curious – ironically, I only got laid once in 1996, through reasons unrelated to the poetry scene, and none of the pieces I wrote that year reflect the incident at all. As with my writing style, though, this too would quickly change after getting introduced to the poetry slam in January of the following year.

1984: The first of my performance pieces to strongly connect with a large section of the audience. Ironically, the story was originally written as the first chapter of a novel that never got written; the only reason I performed it at an open mic in the first place was because I didn't have anything else to perform one random week in 1996. This piece also began the long tradition of my audience assuming that all of my poems and monologues were true, then becoming inexplicably angry when they found out that some were made up (like this one). I found this fascinating and humorous when I was actively writing, this notion that it's okay for a novelist to write fictional stories but not a poet, and exploited this notion for full effect in the ensuing years.

NOTES ABOUT INDIVIDUAL PIECES

The absolutely true story of my ten-year high-school reunion: Though obviously a satire, all names mentioned in this story are actual names of real high-school classmates. Who would've guessed that years later, this strange little computer program would be invented called Google, and that I would subsequently receive the odd random angry email once a year or so from an old high-school classmate, pissed that my story keeps showing up every time someone Googles their name. Will the wonders of the modern world never cease?

Bob Barker's Pussy Wagon: Although unrelated to the actual story, the title of this piece was stolen from some friends of mine in college who were in a band called St. Monday, and who had a song with the same title. This was my first of many attempts over the years to emulate the pop-culture-riddled writing style of my friend Shappy Seasholtz.

Branson, Missouri is a really bad place to throw up: Fiction, although based loosely on a real experience, while visiting an ex-girlfriend in Baltimore earlier that year. Everything said about the city of Branson in this story, by the way, is true.

Chicago: One of the cool things about "The Testing Ground" was that there was a drummer in attendance (Chuck, who was also the drummer of the now-defunct Bimbobs), who brought a stripped-down version of his drum kit every week and would offer to accompany any poet on stage who wanted such accompaniment. After months of regularly performing with Chuck, in the fall of that year I decided to write a piece specifically to show off his skills and to acknowledge him as an important part of the open mic. This piece is the result.

The day I turned gay: Performed for the first time at "Thax After Dark," a popular variety show held at the legendary punk club Lounge Ax, hosted by the mysterious and brilliant Thax Douglas. The show just happened to have been attended that night by Ira Glass, host of the popular show "This American Life" on National Public Radio; it was the conversation we had that night about this piece that led to me eventually performing on the show myself, later that year (see "Letter to Liz Phair" for more).

Dear Miss Manners: In 1996 I was dealing for the first time with the monster known as Corporate America; I had recently been fired from my first-ever salaried job, at the advertising agency Frankel & Co., and by the time of these pieces was now temping for a different soulless corporate entity every week. Like many artists in their mid-twenties throughout time, I found myself going through a series of moral and ethical battles with myself over working in such positions; these battles were a regular theme of my early performance work.

Exorcism: Based on the same person on which "Branson" is also based. Man, it really did take me a long time to exorcise that woman from my life.

The guy who said fuck a lot: Based on an actual person named Phil I knew in the poetry community, with the same habits attributed to him in the story, although most of the actual dialogue is made-up. In real life Phil finally ended up in over his head and had to move back in with his parents in the late 1990s; none of us ever heard from him again.

Hello, sports fans!: Early in 1996, the entire city of Chicago came to a halt to mark the death of Cardinal Joseph Bernardine, a particularly popular Archbishop of Chicago who had

transformed the city during his time in office. As an atheist who had been raised in the Protestant-dominant Bible Belt, I found it both fascinating and repulsive that Chicago would shut down so profoundly over something like the death of a midlevel Catholic executive, and especially troubling that on the day of the funeral, not a single other thing could be found on the eight local television stations besides live coverage of said ceremony. This piece was written in response to that, although was incorrectly interpreted at the time by many in the audience as an anti-Catholic story. This would be my only chance to perform at the legendary performance-art mecca NAME Gallery before the closure of the gallery early the next year.

Her name is Rachel and last night I had a dream about her: At the beginning of my career I had a policy of using people's real names when I wrote about them. This piece unfortunately changed all that; it was heard by overprotective "friends" of the person in question, who quickly realized about whom I was talking, and who almost beat me up after the show. This experience taught me for the first time the importance of separating yourself as the writer from the subject of the story being written, a lesson that unfortunately took me several more years to master.

Jerry Garcia is dead: Just a silly little writing exercise, written back and forth one night between me and Anna Harrington, one of the only females to end up joining our novel-writing workshop.

Kansas City Falling: Like "1984," this was originally planned as the first chapter of a novel that never did get written, and became a performance piece only because I had nothing else to read one particular week at the open mics.

Learning to fly: Based on a children's book I had planned on writing and illustrating back in college, as part of a senior-level photography class, although the original story lacked such a dark ending. The story was resurrected because a party thrown by a friend of mine named Sibelle, who asked each attendant to bring a children's story with them and to read it to the other people in attendance.

Letter written on an airplane: This piece started as a legitimate letter, which I was going to tear out of my notebook at the end of my flight and give to the stranger for whom it was written; needless to say, I failed to gather the courage to actually do so by the time the flight was over. Years later, I ran into the woman again at a coffeehouse in Chicago; I happened to have the letter on me again, this time in published book form, so this time did get up the courage to go over and show her. As a result, the two of us became the very friends I predicted in the letter, and to this day I still occasionally run into her at various functions here in Chicago.

Letter to Liz Phair: Because of meeting Ira Glass earlier in the year (see "The day I turned gay" for details), I received an invitation in fall 1996 to participate in a special edition of the National Public Radio show "This American Life," called "The Letters Show" and recorded at a theatre in front of a live audience. The majority of the pieces from the show were actual letters found randomly by various people over the years, although I decided to specifically write a new, original piece for the show instead. The two-evening show ran a grand total of eight hours; it was later edited down into one hour for radio broadcast, and I unfortunately did not make the final cut.

Missed connections: A completely, utterly made-up story, written only for the opportunity to hit on a fellow audience member. Needless to say, the flirtation was unsuccessful (see "Spring fever" for more).

My date with Liz Phair: Originally written for Lick magazine, one of the first electronic music zines on the web. Yes, this is a true story!

Opium.com: Based on an actual experience I had at the advertising agency Frankel & Co., my first-ever salaried job, although the real event had nothing to do with internet domains.

Saint Jason Day: This was my first original piece for what was to turn out to be a long series of special events organized and hosted by Greg Gillam over the years, in a variety of venues and a plethora of names. This particular show was held at the Wicker Park art gallery Poop Studios and was entitled “Strange Days: Chicago writers discuss made-up holidays.” All of my pieces written over the years for Greg’s shows featured a common theme; namely, they all relied heavily on the audience for delivery of key lines from the story.

She rubs her chest: This was the piece that first brought me to the attention of Greg Gillam, host of “The Testing Ground;” in real life, in fact, he was dating the subject of this story, although no one at the open mic knew this at the time. The woman in question, in case you were curious, was unsurprisingly a fan of this piece as well.

She was right -- God, she was so right: A true story. Man, I’m amazed sometimes how much crazier my true stories sound than the ones I make up.

Spring fever: Based on my experience of unsuccessfully hitting on a woman at “The Testing Ground” one week, following the reading of “Missed connections” (see that piece for further notes). One of the nice things about republishing a set of pieces covering a long span of time is that you get to look through these pieces in detail once again, and physically be able to see how you became a slightly better writer with each passing year. This piece is a good example: like much of the work I wrote in 1996 and ‘97, “Spring fever” is based around a solid central core, but is written way too literally to stand over time as a good, enduring piece. It was only with experience that I became better at identifying and using metaphors, which is why the majority of my strongest work is from the later years of my career; my ability to devise solid, central cores to my stories never got better, but my ability to actually tell the story in a unique way did. It’s the crucial difference, I think, between a performance poet and merely a confessional writer.

Supervillains: In February 1996 I received my first-ever invitation to perform at a “closed” poetry event (that is, one with no open sign-up list); it was an anti-love poetry show, held on Valentine’s Day at the Lincoln Park Barnes & Noble in Chicago, organized by a man who was to eventually become a close friend of mine, Shappy Seasholtz. At the time it was a big deal to me; it was the first time anyone had expressed admiration for my work to the point of specifically asking me to perform at one of their events. This is the piece I wrote for that show, with every sad little detail based on an absolutely true story. Shappy was eventually fired from Barnes & Noble over this show, thus continuing his longstanding love/hate relationship with the mainstream literary industry.

Untitled (vice story): Yet another original story written for one of Greg Gillam’s one-time themed poetry events (see “Saint Jason Day” for more). This one was also held at the Wicker Park art gallery Poop Studios, and was entitled simply “The Vice Show.”

The Village Idiot Competition of 1996: One night on the el, after yet another evening of unsuccessfully hitting on women, my friend John Biederman looked over at me and said simply, “We really are the village idiots of Chicago, aren’t we?” This piece was inspired by that random innocuous statement.

Why the flies aren’t: My first-ever Chicago-based performance piece, January 1996.

COMPLETE PERFORMANCE WORK 1996-2004

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For those interested in just a sampling of Pettus' old performance work, **four compilations** are also available: *The Jason Pettus Portable Reader*, audience favorites; *More Poems About Blowjobs*, the best of the erotic stories and poems; *Love Blender*, the best romantic stories from over the years; and *Favorite Performance Work*, compiled by the author from a variety of sources, with a new introduction. And finally, for the truly dedicated, the entire collection of work can be found in a **800-page single download edition** as well, entitled *Complete Performance Work, 1996-2004*.

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