

The Hiarlette Surovell Anthology

Contributed by Hiarlette Surovell

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HER UNFINISHED MEMOIRS

Chapter One: Witches and Ghosts

I spent my childhood expecting my father, Abe Surovell, to die. He was 50 and I was 16 when his third coronary finally decimated the remnants of his tattered heart. June 4th is the anniversary of his death. A subtle end-of-May depression, a general sadness is a yearly occurrence, one which nonetheless cunningly catches me by surprise. Last May, for the first time ever, I remembered that it was impending and tried to pre-empt it by "spending time" with Abe. I did this by examining the contents of disintegrating cartons brimming over with photographs taken of, and not by, Abe. In the nineteen-forties and fifties, when a camera lens made everyone seem movie-star handsome or fashion-model glamorous, Abe was no exception. Not especially athletic, he was nonetheless capable of strenuously rowing a boat. He even wore his goofy Navy uniform well. Leaning up against a tree on the Brooklyn College campus, sketching, his mien was intent and studious. All were scenes from a life that existed before I did. I was tempted to concentrate on them, yet I couldn't linger there. A need to confront the Abe I knew, the unhappy, tense, semi-invalid father impelled me to spend most of my hours observing Abe's life as a husband, father of four and beret-wearing artiste. In those images of Abe that hung on walls or were mounted over desks, he seldom smiled for the camera. Abe always wore the identical expression--one compounded of grief, hopelessness, trauma and disappointment.

Columbia Records, Abe's employer, provided Abe not only with records (more than 5,000 when he died) but with a labyrinthian network of artist friends, mysterious cool people totally unlike the wholesome menschy couples who were my parents' constant companions. A Look lensman whose name I never knew repaid a favor by gifting Abe with a rare military photographer's camera, a Leica MP-17. When not at work, Abe was rarely seen without a sketchbook, a rapidograph pen, and one of these Leicas slung around his neck. Yet the inveterate shutterbug rarely posed for others. So, that May evening, when I attempted to stave off the impending sense of loss, I sat at one of his old drafting tables, using his ancient magnifying glass, playing detective. No matter how sublime the setting (New Hampshire's White Mountains) nor festive the occasion (Pete Seeger's annual concert/picnic), nor beloved the companion (his most-cherished treasure--his only daughter) Abe was unhappy. As I forced myself to keep looking, growing more miserable with each photo I removed from each cardboard box, the identities of the ghosts who haunted him were gradually revealed to me. I should have known their names since adulthood, but the nature of ghosts is to be cagey. It was as if Abe had taken their photos and the negatives, lying in his darkroom for so many decades in a vat of printing solution, had finally developed.

They were the faces of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, at whose grand jury Abe was called to testify. He took the Fifth, and was formally blacklisted by the government. My mother Ada told me that after the Rosenbergs were executed, "All progressive people worried that the same thing would happen to them ... that the government would arrest them on real or trumped-up charges, and that we would all have our children taken away from us. In the fifties, it wasn't just the Hollywood Ten who were the victims of witch hunts. There were many suicides, broken marriages, ruptured lives, lives on life support."

Abe's troubled visage was, on the most obvious level, related to his poor health, with everything that was attached to this--all its deprivations and connotations. He was a gentle, sweet-natured, "feminine" man, brimming over with anima and with no desire to suppress it. He loved women as men do, in an aesthetic, emotional, passionate, sexual sense, but he also felt closer to them than he did to other men. Abe had always wanted a daughter, so he waited nine years until I was born. Most of his friends at work were women, some of them high-powered executives, and almost all the neighborhood ladies who took the bus accompanied him to the bus stop every day. They confided their secrets and troubles to him, these heads of public relations and nurses aides alike. He had a sensitive, emotional nature, uninhibited and affectionate, almost gooey. Women fascinated him. I thought it was feminist when he mused, "Why is it that men get educated and women get co-educated?" and chauvinistic when he called women "Tomatoes." He was obsessed with the "hookers" he saw near his office every day, describing their glittery hot pants when Ada was out of earshot. Just what were his sexual fantasies? When I was 11, he accused me of having stolen his copy of "The Marquis de Sade." Oblivious as to who that might be and innocent of the charges, I insisted, "I never read â€œDon Quixote!"

After his second heart attack (he was 46, I was 12), he was under doctor's orders never to run, climb stairs (no less the White Mountains of New Hampshire), eat salty foods, or work past 3 p.m. Surrounded by the concerned but humiliating gazes and reprimands of a family of nurses and scolds, his certified-invalid life was filled with nightmarish emasculating incidents, each new day arriving with ingenious humiliations. And if his own inner voice wasn't sufficiently mocking, there were his sadistic bosses, Bob Cato and John Berg, art directors for Columbia Records, who never stopped enjoying the fun of playing head games with the weak-hearted cardiac patient who was told that his mortality depended on avoiding

all stress.

Surely, he was filled with rage and he needed a target. But he had a weird passive-aggressive streak that still confounds me.

When I was 15, I transferred from my rigid, academically-oriented public high school to an artsy alternative one. I didn't know any of my classmates. Frustrated and lonely, I came home and ate leftovers in the fridge. I had never before used food as an emotional crutch. One night, as our family was out walking, Abe hissed contemptuously in my ear, "You look like you've gained a lot of weight. Your thighs are rubbing together when you walk!"

I was as stunned as if a bomb had fallen, and my own heart broke a little. Did he feel that I was his ultimate artistic creation, his beautiful daughter, and so I had to maintain a physical standard I had never known existed? I punished Abe for this for years afterwards: for his criticizing me when I was so vulnerable, for his sexism, for his concern with my gaining not just a few pounds, but any weight whatsoever. Mostly, I was furious that he did not love me unconditionally, and for this, I got my revenge.

In the new high school, I wrote a story that my creative writing teacher wanted to send to publishers. It was a murder fantasy in experimental prose. When Abe read it, he threw down the papers and yelled, "No daughter of mine will ever write about violence!"

Fuck you, I thought amidst this second bomb's emotional rubble. Why would you even think you're entitled to an opinion about what I write about?

Every time we drove past the local White Castle in our white Dodge Dart station wagon, Abe would ask, "Does anyone want to stop off and get some hambaburgs?" He liked to play with words. He also said, "strumberry." "Yes, Daddy, please stop!" We'd keep begging, he kept driving.

My mother, Ada, was a housewife and political leader with Women's Strike for Peace. She also clerked part-time job at a bookstore. I was often the only person at home with Abe, so I asked about emergency protocols. How could it be that his only medical regimen was to take blood pressure medicine, to have nitroglycerine tablets on hand for emergencies and to follow a salt-free diet--the only options available to cardiac patients in the sixties, before heart transplants, open-heart and bypass surgeries, even before cholesterol-lowering drugs had been invented? Why did he never see a cardiologist, or, for that matter, New York City's ultimate top-notch cardiologist? A child of immigrants, he maintained a shtetl mentality--loyalty to his family doctor, a schleppy general practitioner named Rudolph whom Abe saw weekly, and whose wisdom Abe often questioned.

"He was sitting there eating a plate of fried chicken, and he wiped off his fingers and offered me a piece!" Abe told this story, as he told all his stories, repeatedly, always with the same exact words, vocal inflections and equal amount of incredulity. "Me, salty, greasy fried chicken!"

So, if he's such a bad doctor, why do you keep seeing him? I wondered every time.

I was also puzzled by his Columbia Records boss Bob Cato's habit of screaming into his intercom, "Abe Surovell, you S.O.B., get your ass in here this minute or else!" Abe reported to friends, neighbors that on cue, he'd run into Cato's office, his damaged heart pounding with terror. Cato, enjoying the game that just kept giving, would look up innocently and ask him, "Surovell?! What are you doing here?"

If he knows Cato keeps doing the same thing, and he's just gonna pretend that he didn't yell at Abe, then why does Abe keep letting it bother him? And why tell people about it? It makes him, not Cato, look like a sucker, I'd always think, but never say.

A few weeks after Abe died, a cardiac fitness gym he had approached about joining phoned the house, asking to speak with him about completing his paperwork.

"No, he's not here, he died on June 4th," I told them, and I could hear through the depths of their silence, the question we were both pondering, "Were we just a few weeks too late?"

A gifted visual artist, trained in sketching, painting, woodworking, lithography, drawing, design and "mechanicals," who also handwove rugs, painted on rocks, made chess sets and taught ceramics classes, Abe worked in and managed the art department of Columbia Records, where he completed the artwork on an album cover or two each day and was the official "designer for special projects." He unflinchingly brought home three to five "demo" albums, the majority of which were classical, which he then played non-stop. His love of classical music was so intense that he often went to the symphony with a sketch pad and drew the musicians on the stage or in the orchestra pit. I attended all of Leonard Bernstein's famous series, The Concerts for Young People. Emil Gilels, Glenn Gould, Vladimir Horowitz, Dinu Lipatti, Jean-Pierre Rampal, Rudolph Serkin were, like Bernstein, all Columbia Records artists. My brother Karl worshipped the

label's classical genius Sviatoslav Richter. When I was four-and-a-half years old, I made the weighty pronouncement to Abe that "Henry Purcell was the greatest classical composer of all-time, and 'Come Ye Sons of Art' is his masterpiece." He repeated that story for years, too.

Working at a record company, specifically at the "ultimate record company," was among the hippest gigs a dad could have. Mitch Miller, Columbia Records house bandleader and head of A&R threw lavish entertainment and gift-filled Christmas parties for the younger children of employees. During my scheduled visits, Abe took me around to every department, showing me off to his co-workers. But Abe's hipness cred didn't really affect me until I was a teenager, with a standing invite to visit Black Rock. Al Kooper, pulling down triple-duty as a recording artist, producer and A&R exec hung out in the hallways, always ready to "rap" if Abe was still lurching with John or Jemison Hammond. Arriving home and drinking his nightly glass of scotch, Abe regaled us: "We just signed this kid Bob, we think he's gonna be huge." Laura Nyro's tantrums over the "weak" scent of her pink perfumed LP insert for "Eli and the Thirteenth Confession" forced a miserable Abe to repeatedly send it back to the factory. He waxed euphoric about the Magritte apple on Jeff Beck's "Beck-Ola" and was bemused by the R. Crumb cartoon on Janis Joplin's "Cheap Thrills." We counted the hours until we could hang Milton Glaser's poster insert for Bob Dylan's "Greatest Hits, 1967" on our bedroom walls. Abe constantly brought me demos, too, from lesser-known folkie Carolyn Hester to psychedelic pioneers Moby Grape. We heard every Dylan album before deejays and music critics, and my brother Frederick and I play-acted the lyrics, "William Zanzinger killed Hattie Carroll, with a cane that he twirled 'round his diamond-ring finger."

Bob Dylan alone would have assured Columbia's status as the most outstanding label in the history of the music business, but along with him and his idol, Johnny Cash, and besides Beck, Grape, Joplin and Nyro in rock/pop in the nineteen-sixties and seventies there were: The Byrds, The Chambers Brothers, Leonard Cohen, Donovan, Tim Hardin, Taj Mahal, Santana, Simon and Garfunkel, Sly and the Family Stone and Super Session (Bloomfield/ Kooper/Stills). Still, if I wanted a band on a different label, like The Rolling Stones, Abe and I would trade our booty for records on London, Atlantic, RCA at the now-defunct Sam Goody's Record Store. I was relieved that Abe got these perks. While his job may have been prestigious, he was still an exploited artist, and in our family, money was always tight, a fact all of us were conscious of. I once heard him say that he had made \$30,000 a year.

To supplement this income, Abe was almost always doing extra freelance projects. One was The Fred Astaire Dance Book. He labored nights in the basement, positioning little feet in patterns on manuscript pages, and as Mr. Astaire was a martinet, Abe was stressed-out. He created the advertising campaign for Revlon's Eterna-27. He calibrated instruments, there in the dark basement with his thick glasses and his weak mole-like light jade eyes. He smoked Camels while he worked, three packs a day, until ...

I was in the third grade when Abe had his first heart attack, a massive coronary that sent him to the hospital for a month.

I loved my daddy and he worshipped me, he was always painting, sketching photographing me. When I was born he famously gave a toast saying, "My cup runneth over."

I was the only child in the family who was artistic like Abe, and the thrill was mutual when he brought me pastels, colored pencil sets, pads of drawing paper, and showed me how to mix acrylic paints, use watercolors, care for paintbrushes.

He spent almost a month in a shitty little medical facility, where no one told me exactly what had happened and afterwards, no one ever reassured me that it wouldn't happen again.

I was eight years old. The official deathwatch had begun.

Before I was born, Abe, working as a Naval cartographer in Washington, D.C., was asked to sign a loyalty oath. He refused to do so. In 1950, he was called to testify before the Rosenberg grand jury. He answered basic questions about his job and family but otherwise took the Fifth. In the late nineteen-fifties, the Surovell family: father Abe, mother Ada, oldest brother Frederick who was nine years my senior, identical twins Leon and Karl, three years Fred's junior, me, age 3, and a decrepit mutt with post-traumatic stress disorder hurriedly moved from Washington, D.C., to a joyless garden apartment with washed-out wallpaper in Queens, New York, our flight so rushed it verged on frenzy. A year later, we moved again. Abe, fired by the Navy for his political activities, copped a low-paying gig as an art supplies salesman. Our new, permanent four-bedroom home was a tidy brick structure with an attic, a basement, a front lawn and a backyard so overflowing with so many species of plants, flowers, and trees that it may have been a transplanted classic English garden. This new address was located only several blocks away, yet we found ourselves nonetheless transported to an alien universe. Suddenly, us Surovells were the token white residents of a golden ghetto, an all-Black lower middle-class neighborhood otherwise populated by Jamaican nurses, Haitian lab technicians, South Carolinian cafeteria aides, former world-wide welterweight champion Johnny Saxton, future Black Panther/Cuban exile Assata Shakur, three group homes for disturbed and unwanted children, and a foster kid or three doing hard time with weltd buttocks behind the tightly-locked doors of every private home. A few blocks down, the real estate got funkier, with wilder, shabbily-dressed children crammed into four-family homes called "Dara Gardens" which we dubbed "the projects," while a short detour westward, real estate turned upscale. My first boyfriend's foster father, a postal worker, "played the numbers," won, and paid cold cash for the stacked split-level they lived in until their retirement.

Sometimes middle-aged men wearing fedoras rang our bells and asked my mother questions. I sensed that they weren't salesmen--they never tried to sell her any products.

"Be careful what you say on the phone, they're listening," Abe warned me, as soon as I was old enough to talk, "THEY are always on the other line." I was in my twenties, trying to score weed over the phone, paranoid about getting busted by THEM, the F.B.I. agents perpetually listening to all my conversations. A lover of mine in his fifties, one of the scores of "father-figures" I futilely searched for for decades, laughed at me.

"Hayette, believe me, nobody cares about your family. No one is listening to you. No one is following you. No one is monitoring everything you do," he insisted. I still wasn't convinced. A high school friend had requested his FBI file under the Freedom of Information Act, and voila: all the notations by the fedora-men: "On April 7th, 1966, the Surovell family was seen going into the home of the Shneyers at 7 p.m. where they ..." with the rest of the report blacked-out.

So were they or weren't they still following us?

Family friends like Oscar Vago, a gentle Hungarian engineer who emigrated to escape the Nazis, had the nervous tics of a Tourette's victim, understood to be the result of his spending six months in jail, accused of working for someone accused of working for the Soviets. We spent summer vacations in Conway, New Hampshire, at a summer resort called "World Fellowship." If one followed a wooden sign saying, "Welcome! All races, colors and creeds!" up a dirt road, there would be a collection of tents in the campgrounds and a dozen wooden cottages. All were inhabited by "progressive" people. I never found it relaxing there, what with the nightly political films, lectures and slide-shows. The property contained acres of woods and a huge pond. There were nature walks and nearby, Mt. Chocorua, which all of us except Abe climbed constantly, but I really resented the obsessed-with-Marxism vibe of the place. It was run by a former Methodist minister, Dr. Willard Uphaus, and his stern missionary wife, Ola. I later learned that Willard had done serious jail time for refusing to give the names of his vacationers to the governor of New Hampshire in the nineteen-fifties.

Willard Uphaus was a beatific, gentle, white-haired man, patient with everyone, whereas Ola was always angry and irritated, yelling at people for not doing their "chores." They served odd foods, like a ham and peanut casserole, and vacationers were expected to clean away and wash their own dishes. Still, I was mortified when, as we were leaving after a two-week stay, all our camping gear packed up on the roof of our Dodge Dart station wagon, Abe leaned out the car window and said to Willard, "My angina. It's so painful, I can hardly stand it." Willard didn't reply or meet his eyes.

Why was Abe telling this to a virtual stranger, and not to us? And why to Willard, to whom everyone was always trying to talk? And why at that moment? It made me feel that Abe was desperate for someone to really hear him, as if we hadn't, as if our entire lives weren't devoted to this very angina. My own heart rolled out of my chest, and like a child's rubber ball, wobbled all the way down the hill to the "Creeds" sign.

My family never ate in restaurants, ordered in a pizza, went to the movies or watched television. We didn't drink Welch's Grape Juice, because Bob Welch was a member of the John Birch Society. Because of the Strontium-90 residue from nuclear testing, we drank powdered milk for a decade. We boycotted lettuce and grapes, and when the Vietnam War began, we demonstrated, leafleted, picketed. With so many family friends still living in Washington, D.C., we attended every demonstration held there and stayed as house guests for the rest of the weekend ... everyone, that is, except for Abe, home with the dog and his dog-eared copy of "120 Days of Sodom."

Surrounding our home in the golden ghetto was a middle-class Jewish neighborhood, the residents of these homes supplying my classmates and all of my teachers. They were religious families who celebrated holidays, went to Hebrew School, got bar and bat mitzvahed and regularly attended synagogue. Many kids weren't allowed to visit me.

Ada arranged for me to obtain a special dispensation not to say the Pledge of Allegiance, because I was an atheist and couldn't in good conscience say the words, "under God." Deciding that she didn't want me participating in the school's monthly Shelter Drills, she then arranged a second dispensation for me to stay home on practice days. I had attended enough to know the drill's drill: after the warning siren we should crouch down under our desks, covering our heads with our arms. It was the Cold War, and not only was my daddy always about to die, but real bombs were always about to rain down from the skies. Ada may have "struck" for peace and no nukes, but the message from school and the media was that a missile attack from the Russians was imminent, World War III. It would happen when we most expected it, when we least expected it. Planes from Idyllwild Airport passed too-loudly overhead, and I cringed ... could this be The One? And if so, where were all those fall-out shelters people were supposedly building and stocking with canned goods, candles and gallons of water?

My three older brothers teased me. The twins did it in tandem, double-trouble. They could be comical. Karl would say, "Eh, eh, eh, I am zee lobster man!" and pinch me with his "claws." They could be cruel. They would tag-team and tickle me, under my feet, in my armpits.

"Make them stop! Make them stop!" I begged my mother. "She loves it," Ada would say drily.

I escaped by sinking into the backyard hammock, strategically located near the honeysuckle, bluebells and the lily-of-the-valley to read, write and draw. I spent most of my childhood in that backyard, that English garden Abe tended, with the roses, hollyhocks, forsythia and the heady, heavenly lilac bushes.

Ada never considered the possibility that foisting her political, ideological beliefs on my life would make me feel different, freakish, weird. She had her political principles, case closed. It was as if there was always a buzzing in her head, drowning out all the other noise. Instead of relinquishing or compromising, she kept upping the ante. And the more vulnerable I felt, the more upset I became, and the more I cried, the more severely Ada chastised me for being "too sensitive" as if this were a character flaw. For most of my life, her mantra has been: "Hayette, you're too sensitive, too sensitive, too sensitive."

Politics was her *raison d'être*, but Ada also loved literature much the way Abe loved classical music. As a child, losing herself in tales of Siberian husky sled-dogs in Alaska and stranded Alpine mountaineers saved by St. Bernards, she harbored dreams of becoming an author. I always felt depressed by the sight of her endlessly scrubbing, dusting, mopping, ironing, and when I got older, I helped with a lot of housework. Ada schooled me well in what a friend once termed "the domestic sciences." There was a pile of books on the radiator in the kitchen, all chosen by Ada: "The Cool World," by Warren Miller, "The Ugly American," by William Lederer, "The Complete Writings of Sean O'Casey," "The Light in the Forest" by Conrad Richter, "Jews Without Money" by Michael Gold and Henry Roth's "Call it Sleep." Graham Greene, James Joyce, and Salinger graced the living-room shelves. On the coffee table was the photo album, "The Family of Man." My favorite photo/proverb was from the Russians: "Eat bread and salt and speak the truth."

One night, Ada was finessing a salt-free dinner when a dish-towel caught on fire. Everyone seated at the dinner table froze. Ada instantly became frantic, repeatedly and ineptly swatting the towel, as if the entire house and all its inhabitants were in danger of burning down.

When the flame was extinguished, moments later, she left the room, exclaiming bitterly, "Not a one of you got up to help me! Not a damned one of you."

We all felt so ashamed of ourselves.

I recently met a young French woman whose parents are divorced. Her father is a Parisian engineer and her mother a Salt Lake City born-and-bred Mormon.

"Wow!" I exclaimed when she told me this. "Your parents have such different backgrounds!"

"Isn't that the case for everyone's parents?" she coolly replied.

"Well, no." Not only were there uncanny similarities in the backgrounds of my parents and both sets of grandparents, but I could see the genetic seeds of social consciousness and artistry on both sides.

The Jews who fled Russian pogroms didn't emigrate carrying finely-wrought, bulging photo albums inscribed with ornate family crests when they arrived at Ellis Island in the early nineteen-hundreds. Nor were there genealogical associations tracking each ancestor throughout the centuries. Even the name "Surovell" was written down incorrectly by an impatient worker who misspelled "Jhuravel"--a Russian word meaning "crane." When I meet Russian people and tell them that I am actually a "jhuravel," they all say: "Is very beautiful bird. Very big bird. All Russian pipples loves zis bird."

Harry, Abe's father (I am his namesake) was orphaned at 16. The victim of a pogrom? No one knew. Nor did anyone in the family know how or why he came here, or even how he met and married his mentally-ill wife, Florence. But since they were cousins, surely it was through family connections. Florence neither cooked nor cleaned, but she sang so sweetly that a traveling operetta company, passing through her little village in the Ukraine, gave her a starring role. Chosen to play the part of a maiden at a well who bursts into song, she would repeat this performance at those rare moments in her Brooklyn tenement whenever she turned on the water in the sink to wash dishes.

Since Florence was incapable of taking care of her children, other than giving birth to and nursing them (her twin sister, a schizophrenic, was hospitalized for life in New York's state mental institution, Creedmor.) Harry did the day-to-day housework, caretaking and nurturing. A milliner who journeyed to Fifth Avenue to inspect the chicest, costliest ladies hats in the most upscale millinery stores. Harry then re-created them from memory and sold them in his brother-in-law's (Florence's brother's) shop. He designed and sewed his daughters Julia and Beatrice's coats and dresses. When sons Sam and Abe both decided to study art, Harry took the subway to Times Square, hunting through litter for "girlie magazines" so that the boys could learn anatomy. Another one of Florence's brothers owned property, and he had given Florence and Harry the four-unit building in which they lived. During the Depression, the family was comfortable, and Harry was too kind-hearted to evict his non-paying tenants. The Surovels may have been Yiddish-speaking, shtetl-bred, idiosyncratic Jews, but they were atheists. Neither Abe nor his older brother Sam were bar mitzvahed.

Ada spent an impoverished childhood filled with tragic immigrant Jewish hard-luck stories. Her mother's father worked in a leather factory until he fell into a giant vat of tanning solution. He wasn't exactly given workmen's compensation for the kidney disease he developed as a result, and for the rest of his remaining short life, his skin itched incessantly. Every night, all night long, he would cry out and complain and call for his favorite daughter, my maternal grandmother, Rose, to come and scratch his back for him. Being a teenager, she didn't want to be bothered, or maybe his illness was too emotionally-fraught for her, so she pretended not to hear him. She later confessed to Ada how ashamed she was about this deliberate "cruelty." I understood exactly how she felt. After Abe's second heart attack, he was forbidden from climbing flights of stairs. My bedroom was now located on the upper level of the house. As I read and wrote poetry there after coming home from high school, Abe would call to me from the bottom of the stairs, his tone increasingly desperate and pleading. Sometimes, I pretended not to hear him ... either because I was acting-out teenage anger and being passive-aggressive, or else because I was really angry at him for those things he had said and done or for something he had not said and not done. Maybe I was sick of his neediness and ashamed of his weakness, and angry because his first massive major heart attack had turned a happy household into a house of death, with everyone always on red alert, hyper-vigilant, tense and humorless, fearing he would die, yet knowing it was inevitable.

At the time of the Russian Revolution, Rose came to New York City with four of her eight siblings. Dismayed by the prospect of working in a sweatshop, she emigrated to Galveston, Texas, where a "lantzman" ran a small dry goods store. Oblivious to the social mores to which Jews had to be particularly attentive, Rose befriended a young black girl, an aspiring customer. She not only allowed her to shop there, but ate lunch with her on a local park bench. The storeowners feared reparations by local racists and anti-Semites alike, and so Rose was dispatched to live with a distant relative in Minneapolis.

Ada's father David also landed in Texas, sponsored by a Rothschild who believed that Russian Jewish men should help settle the West. David was the beneficiary of a homestead in Wyoming, but, much like his own difficult personality, the land was rocky, barren and unyielding. He could scarcely grow weeds. Eventually, he abandoned the dusty soil and enrolled in the University of Minnesota, planning to study scientific agrarianism. He met Rose at a meeting of Labor Zionists, a popular organization among Jewish socialists. Shortly after they were married, David was drafted. He never got his college degree nor pursued his desire to grow farmland. World War I ended before he could be shipped overseas, but by then, Rose was pregnant with their eldest child, Meriom. David owned a share of a general store with his brother, which he sold to buy a fish store. Like a character in a Sholem Alechem story, he was cheated out of his share of the money, and ended up doing manual labor in a hat factory. Then Ada was born, and lastly, two boys. They settled in West Orange, New Jersey, where the family was impoverished and the neighborhood anti-Semitic. Rose, who had grown up constantly hearing about pogroms, lived in terror, convinced that their German-American next-door neighbors, the Krauths, were going to come and kill the entire family. Ada's house was small but comfortable. During the Depression, the bank repossessed it, and so they were forced to move to claustrophobic quarters next door. David worked as an insurance agent, selling nickel-a-week funeral-service policies to disenfranchised Black people in Newark, who would otherwise be buried in unmarked graves. Rose always managed to feed her brood, but Ada grew up without any amenities, like a public library. Her parents were profoundly ill-suited. Rose was a pragmatist, forced to deal with the realities of feeding and clothing children; David was dreamy, often arrogant, deeming himself a superior intellectual. Rose was loving and warm, although not physically demonstrative with her children; David was cold, harsh, embittered and critical. The couple rarely spoke, except to fight over finances. They never embraced or kissed in front of their children. The emotional atmosphere was hostile and stressful, and Ada escaped by taking long walks with her best friend Doris in her woody, undeveloped neighborhood. She suspected that the myriad health problems that beset Rose began with an incompetent hospital abortion. She died of breast cancer at 66.

Rose had been prescient about "everyone getting killed," but not in New Jersey--her mother and those siblings who stayed in Russia were exterminated by the Nazis, ending up in Auschwitz. Ada's uncle Leibl's two sons had been partisans, fighting to their death in the forests.

Abe was the coddled baby of the Surovell family, and what a baby--breast-fed until he was six. Yes, six. His mother's mental illness or a peasant's method of birth-control? Each day, he was sent off to school with a bagel, which he hurled into the gutter, screaming, "I want titzelas!" Who wouldn't, who doesn't? But how could anyone who was nursed till first grade have the inner resources, the psychological skills to cope with the tough kids in the Flatbush streets and the Irish anti-Semite schoolteachers who ran the Brooklyn public schools in the nineteen-twenties and thirties, and who were given an imprimatur to chastise all the Christ-killers in their classes? Somehow, Abe toughened up, grew to manhood, studied art at Brooklyn College, and then was drafted into the Navy, where he served as chief petty officer in Hawaii. After his service was completed, the Navy hired him on as a Naval cartographer, and so Abe moved to Washington, D.C. Two of his siblings were also living there: Julia, who aspired to be a journalist and had married Sidney Katz, a heavy-duty, handsomely-paid union official and Sam, who had married a Florence (did he kill his mother? They may all have been atheists, but they were nonetheless superstitious Jews) and formed "Federal Graphics," a successful commercial art agency. Only sister Beatrice (nicknamed Beattie), who danced with the Pearl Lang Troupe and modeled for feminist painter Isabel Bishop, who specialized in portraits of working-class women, often situated in New York's Union Square (Bishop was a member of the "Fourteenth Street School") stayed in New York City.

Ada had taken a civil service exam after high school and began working as clerk/typist with the Naval Department in

Washington, D.C. One day she found a leaflet for a union meeting in the ladies room. She met Abe there, at the creation of the Federal Workers Union at the Hydrographic Building. Their first love-at-first-sight date was a free classical music concert--they listened drifting in rowboats on the Potomac.

"I don't think I went on more than five dates with your mother before I decided to marry her!" Abe often reminisced. This story, I liked hearing repeatedly.

In Washington, D.C., Sam and Julia became consumed with extreme, radical left-wing politics. Soon, Abe and Ada were converted. When the official Communist Party USA was dissolved in the late nineteen-forties, the Surovells and the Katzes went to meetings of the Communist Political Association. Among their many left-wing friends were Morton Sobell and Max Elitcher, key players in the Rosenbergs' trial. Until she re-joined the Communist Party in the seventies, and for the rest of her life, including in 1992, when she defected to Angela Davis' Committees of Correspondence (breaking ties with people who had been her friends for half a century.) Her ideology informed every decision Ada made ... and sentence she spoke, the majority of which included the phrases "the capitalist system" and/or "multinational corporations."

None of Ada's siblings moved out of New Jersey. They were essentially apolitical, living safe, prosperous, colorless lives. Ada's youngest brother was a multimillionaire accountant. His ritzy home was filled with glass chandeliers and plastic-covered furniture, his garage packed with newest-model Cadillacs. When my cousins were teenagers, their private den was a mini-arcade, replete with jukebox and pinball machines. I once went to pick up my uncle from a high-stakes poker game he was playing with his best friend, a Cuban accountant smoking Cuban cigars. They were drinking hundred-year-old Scotch, and I sensed that call-girls had recently graced the premises. Just a vibe, or did I smell perfume beneath the smoke?

Who wouldn't prefer to identify with Abe's side of the family, those charismatic eccentrics, those colorful artists, none of whom lived to be 70? Julia was the first to go (breast cancer), then Sam (stroke) and finally Beattie (breast cancer).

Ada once told me, "When I met Abe's family, I was intimidated by them. They were all so glamorous, they were like movie stars."

Abe and Sam were always uncomfortable together. Rivalries, disappointments, perceived deceits were imprinted on their facial terrain, in their terse body language--their relationship a bottle of fine wine turned to vinegar.

Yet even as an adult with a family of his own, Abe worshipped his big sister Julia. She was the mother of my cousin, comedian Jonathan Katz, ("Dr. Katz: Professional Therapist") with whom I hung out, along with his trust-funder gang from Goddard College, for most of my twenties. Dark as a gypsy, Julia had sallow oily skin, inky-black hair and a nose like an anteater's. Ada remembers her as a charismatic, charming person, "who could get people to do whatever she wanted." As for her son, Ada says he was "conceived so that his older sister Phyllis would have a sibling. He never suffered from too much attention. If she remembered to, Julia stuck a bottle in his mouth."

The Katzes moved to Manhattan when Sidney, an atheist, was appointed executive director of New York City's most prestigious Jewish temple, The Park Avenue Synagogue. Julia, an equally emphatic atheist, became head of the woman's auxiliary. No longer politically active, they settled into a cavernous Upper East Side apartment, with a uniformed maid they summoned by ringing a bell. Julia didn't become pregnant until her late thirties, considered a late age for women in the nineteen-forties. When the new mother beheld her infant daughter, Phyllis, with a delicate beauty Julia herself had always yearned to possess, she vowed, "If I could give her the moon, I would." Julia told Ada that she intended for Phyllis to have "a perfect life"-- the opposite of her own jerky, improvised childhood, with her disturbed mother, an aunt committed to a mental institution. To tempt Phyllis' finicky palate, Julia tinkered with all her meals. Two blueberries, a banana slice, a raisin, whatever, provided a funny face on a pancake. Then there were her famous "clown eggs." Julia believed that Phyllis could be anything, do anything, handle anything, and she told her this so often, and she pressured her so relentlessly to become the popular high school girl she herself had never been that Phyllis had a full-fledged nervous breakdown at age 14. Her one request to her doctors at her prestigious private Manhattan mental hospital was, "Keep my mother away from me!"

As a child, Phyllis had such virulent sibling rivalry with Jonathan that when she ordered her mother to "hit him really long and hard!" Julia retrieved what was known to all the relatives as "the hitting stick" and thwacked the couch repeatedly with the door partly closed. Was Phyllis fooled by the charade?

When he got married, Jonathan developed total amnesia about his neglected/abused childhood, deifying his mother, naming his daughter after her.

Phyllis married a good-looking, easy-going guy who made millions in the garment business. They furnished their own Park Avenue apartment with exotic antiques, sumptuous sofas and plush armchairs covered with canary-yellow silk and cerise satin. After a vicious divorce, Phyllis recuperated in a fishing village in Puerto Rico. Within months, she had married a local fisherman. They lived in a shack with no electricity or running water.

Sister Beattie had given up her dancing/artist model career. She married a crude, macho Merchant Marine named Haskell and became a psychiatric social worker. Her professional reputation was impeccable, despite her being as ill-tempered and cranky as our family dog. A strict Freudian who believed in penis envy, she let Haskell bully her about basically everything. She didn't care much for children. Once, she volunteered to take me to see the movie "Mary Poppins." This fun-filled fantasy day ended up with Beattie smacking me hard across my face. Their rent-controlled West 16th Street apartment was decorated with folksy art, sculpture and three needlepoints inscribed, "My heart belongs to Daddy." Haskell took long nightly walks, abetted with a walking stick. Once, his brother picked a bouquet of flowers. "What are you, a fucking pansy yourself?" Haskell shouted, shredding the flowers to bits with the stick. Beattie was seldom seen out of her favorite armchair, as she was always wearing a triple-martini, double Valium, phenobarbitolized haze like a shroud. As teenagers, Jonathan and I regularly inspected her medicine cabinets, helping ourselves to uppers, downers, tranqs, sleeping pills, painkillers: Dexedrine, Nembutal, Seconal, Black Beauties, whatever the controlled substance, she had it, an entire pharmacy in her bathroom. We depleted entire bottles without ever getting caught, as she was so out-of-it and her supply was so vast.

Beattie and Haskell owned a summer home in Sharon, Connecticut, where we often visited, even though Haskell made no attempt to hide the fact that he hated us with a passion. In fact, Beattie left all four Surovell children money in her will, and after she died, Haskell changed it, circumventing the funds to a research foundation in Copenhagen. According to Ada, "They always wanted to be WASPs, so they lived among all these people with names like Muffy and Puffy and Buffy."

Cocktail time in WASPville began at 4 p.m., and soon afterwards, Haskell would bring out huge, fat-marbled-steaks (for the adults only), making a presentation of the raw meat like a Benihana chef before he threw it on the grill.

"I shall never forgive Julia for stealing my pink lace panties," Beattie would say on cue in her Shirley Temple voice. "Anything I had, she wanted, because she knew that Daddy loved me the best. Did I ever tell you about how she used to swoop under me and lick my ice cream cone? Every, every single time we had ice cream, Julia took some of mine. Bad, bad, Julia!"

In junior high school, I started hanging out in my golden ghetto neighborhood again, with my "soul sisters" and my "soul brothers." We danced the "Rescue Me" dance to the Fontella Bass song, the 45 playing on a little plastic record player in the school playground. Weed and Boone's Farm Apple Wine were the refreshments served in a clubhouse we put together--a mattress on the floor, on which we fooled around, illuminated by candles in an empty room we discovered in Dara Gardens.

Many people describe their high schools as mini-hells, in which they earned lifelong psychic scars and inferiority complexes along with their diplomas. My alternative school was clique-less, jock-less, cheerleader-less. We had no sports teams, no tacky school-sponsored proms. My paternal grandfather, David (the only grandparent I sort of knew, he died when I was six) might have envied the "aggie" (agricultural) students, who cultivated organic creations in plots of land in the back of the school ("Where have all those flowers gone?") In film courses where we analyzed Antonioni, Bergman, Fellini, Hitchcock and Polanski, we became spellbound film freaks, cutting science and social studies classes in tandem to get educated in Manhattan's art houses. There was the Elgin, with its famous seat made out of a barber-shop chair, where "El Topo" ran for a year; Warhol flicks premiered at the Bleecker Street. When I was a junior, three of us feminist 15-year-olds helped organize the NYC High School Women's Coalition (more on this to come.) When school let out, and the sun blasted like a blue-hot furnace, I matriculated at the ultimate red-diaper summer camp, the transcendental Camp Thoreau in Walkill, New York. Paul Robeson's grandchildren, Susie and David, were counselors, as was Barbara Scales (her father served a jail term) and Mike and Robbie Meeropol (their identities as the Rosenberg's sons still a secret.) Walter Sondheim, Stephen's brother, was the groundskeeper/Mr. Fixit. Among these thirty red-diaper kids and the twenty Black kids sponsored by a union, I found my tribe. Activities at Camp Thoreau were optional (field trip: Newport Folk Festival), but everyone tried to learn at least basic guitar chords, because we sang folk songs, protest songs, peace songs, love songs, all these themes mixing along with our voices. Despite my lifetime immersion in music, this joyous world was new to me, these gorgeous, passionate, emotional, textured poems set to melodies by Eric Andersen, Ramblin' Jack Elliot, Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, Gordon Lightfoot, Joni Mitchell, Odetta, Phil Ochs, Tom Paxton, Tom Rush, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Mimi and Richard Farina, Ian and Sylvia. Songs I knew by Dylan, Donovan, Leonard Cohen took on new meaning and context, like cryptic camouflage.

After breakfast, gathered for a "town meeting," we signed up for each day's activities and events. Afterwards: the first sing-a-long of the day conjured up nostalgic memories of "Sing along with Mitch!" Everyone from the youngest camper to Walter Sondheim joined in. The most popular counselors were accomplished musicians, who strummed Gibsons and Les Pauls, and always carried picks in their shirt pockets, stuck in their hair, wedged into the waists of their blue jeans. Campers blew into kazoos, harmonicas, and jugs, mini-Jim Kweskins. We sang throughout the day, scrambling onto boulders, perched in haylofts, hiking through hickory forests, playing jacks--a Camp Thoreau obsession--on our bunk beds. At night, we built crackling campfires. Our voices were sleigh-bells and wind-chimes in the cool night air, and we sang until the mellowing embers made gentle clicking sounds. Mosquitoes buzzed along with us, fireflies flickered on and off like flashlights. The night sky, streaky with magenta and burnt-sienna (shades from my colored pencil boxes) segued into sapphire and, sometimes, shooting stars graced us: cosmic messengers.

There were no World Fellowship-ian slide presentations, and I never once heard the phrase "dialectical materialism." But as I harmonized to Eric Andersen's "Take off your thirsty boots and stay for a while, your feet are hot and weary from a dusty mile," I finally exhaled, and knew peace.

Back home, Abe gave all my new camp friends stacks of record albums.

Then one June night, I was hanging out with a high school girlfriend, smoking joints in the park. When I got home, my New Jersey uncle's latest Cadillac was parked in the driveway. Why would he be there on a weeknight, unplanned? My heart quavered.

Abe was dead.

I stayed in my room and cried until I finally had to will myself to stop.

After the funeral, Aunt Beattie knocked on my bedroom door. I let her in. She sat down, and appraised my glass menagerie.

"My, you've got a lot of pretty things," she said. "But I bet you would give them all away to have your dad back."
toc

Chapter Two: Sleep with Your Grandmother

Sweet sixteen and I hadn't even had my first multiple orgasm, yet I found myself a nationally-acclaimed "sexpert," with my opinions on teenage sexual habits and needs for sex education and contraception being sought out by Dr. Mary Steichen Calderone and John D. Rockefeller III.

I didn't even know who Edward Steichen was, or that Dr. Mary was his daughter, yet I guest-lectured with her at a Sex Information and Education Council U.S. (SIECUS) convention. It was held in the summer, and we took our meals together. Sitting outside at a picnic table, we learned that the entr e was fish.

"I never eat seafood in the summer!" the elegant, patrician, silver-haired world-renowned doctor/former acclaimed stage actress/National Women's Hall of Fame member exclaimed gaily. "It is simply swarming with staphylococcus!" I love that phrase--it should become part of the lexicon. Unlike my ex-husband, Robert, perpetually on the look-out for the meaning of life, I never experience existential dilemmas. The way I see it, things are either simply swarming with staphylococcus, or they're not.

After my father, Abe Surovell, died on June 4, 1971, I missed my opportunity to take the required high school driver's education class held that month. I read poetry in my recently renovated purple bedroom, with its lavender-flowered wallpaper. Abe had helped me design it, enthusing, "It's going to be a real showplace!" In July, my mother, Ada, my oldest brother Fred and I took a trip to California, running away from the fog of our grief, hoping it would dissipate. We reasoned that if we put physical distance between ourselves and The House of Abe, filled as it was with memories of both his morose presence, and of our own guilt over the many ways in which we had failed him, we would skip over to the next stage of grieving.

We stayed with the Goldsteins, who had moved from Queens to Los Angeles years before. They were one of dozens of leftist families my parents had maintained a friendship with since the nineteen-forties. I had never felt comfortable in their listless, gray aura'ed, humorless presence. Even the little boy they adopted, about my age, was too whiny to happily play with. Unbeknownst to Ada, the left coast lifestyle had turned the Goldsteins' interests away from political prisoners and toward her own personal pleasures. Dad Bill, a history professor, had been fired from an East Coast university for his political beliefs. He and wife Gloria were also still worried that McCarthyism would re-surface, and that their FBI files would empower the government to declare them unfit parents and send their son back to an orphanage or into the childless home of rabid Republicans. The Goldstein parents had become politically apathetic and their son, a movie-star handsome blonde California surfer-teen. He was still complaining, only now three Surovells were the subject of his discontent.

"Can't you tell them to stop talking about stupid idiot politics already?!" I heard him ... and heard him. "Who cares about their dumb-ass politics? Everything is politics this, politics that with them. Make them shut up or kick them out!"

In retrospect, I can't blame any of the trio. All obsessions are tedious. I was a real pain-in-the-ass proselytizer when I became a vegetarian, learned about astrology, got certified as a graphologist.

With us playing the role of squatters, and our hosts real estate magnates, eviction proceeded swiftly. The rest of the trip was a blur of motel rooms, coffee shops, white blaring sunshine and empty beaches. Here and there we went sightlessly sight-seeing--blind people at a museum.

Karl was in college, but we weren't sure of Leon's location. A year before Abe's death, he had joined a 12-member anarchist group, Hammer and Steel. In true anarchist form, they published encyclopedic manifestoes in illegible type, read only by themselves. The group's leader is now, predictably, a professor of business who travels the world giving lucrative, all-expense-paid speeches and seminars on the virtues of capitalism (and stiffing his ex-wife on her child support/alimony payments). But in 1970, he decreed that Leon (draft lottery number: 352) should enlist in the Army to "learn guerilla war tactics for the upcoming American revolution." My parents tried to dissuade Leon with logic, pleas, groveling, outright hysteria, and finally, a letter from our congressman offering a "compassionate re-assignment," but Leon joined up and shipped out.

Leon's conversion to anarchism was also predictable. Red-diaper families are usually Jewish, usually comprised of two or three children. One child will grow up towing the party line (for the Surovells, that would be Karl and Frederick), one develops distaste for its conformity, rigid thinking and dogma, or possesses an artistic sensibility, or both (me) and the other becomes a Trotskyite, Maoist, Weatherman, anarchist ... whatever. Our closest friends' youngest daughter earned a scholarship to an Ivy League college, dropped out after the first term to become a Maoist, found employment at the post office, and developed debilitating, disabling carpal-tunnel syndrome from her gig writing missing zip codes on envelopes by hand.

My uncle from Oregon, my mother's brother, had delivered the funeral oratory. Leon had gotten a pass to come home from the jungles of Long Binh. Afterwards, he disappeared ... no phone number, no address. Not even his twin could locate him. He became a semi-ghost, joining Abe's ghost-plagued ghost.

Grief-stricken though I was, I resented it when my uncle intoned, "Abe had three stalwart sons and one blooming daughter."

Blooming? You bet I was blooming. I never went through a little bud-sprouting, training-bra stage. One day I woke up with 36DD's, a fact which was noted loudly and often by my twin brothers ... and, as you'll read later, almost every other male in the Greater Metropolitan Area. Nonetheless, who draws attention to his niece's knockers at her father's funeral? And, wasn't I also stalwart?

Along with my huge tits, I had acquired a full-blast libido. These hormones had kicked in with a vengeance two years previously. With all the treachery a teenager can possess, I deemed the glorious emotional healing of Camp Thoreau passÃ© by the time I defected to the sophisticated Camp Abelard, another left-wing summer camp, this one filled with cutting-edge energy. I was fourteen years old and had recently dispensed with my virginity. Freud himself might develop permanent shpilkas to discover that a neighborhood gypsy lady known as "Mom" rented out rooms in Dara Gardens by the hour (where the big event had occurred.) In these cubicles, the under-aged could partake of the illegal. Mom, a toothless old hag had snarled, "Make sure you take them bloody sheets off afterwards, this ain't no hotel I'm running here." Others may have been traumatized, but I was relieved, perceiving virginity as something to be dispensed with as expeditiously as possible. Did I mention that after being wrongly accused of stealing Abe's copy of "120 Days of Sodom," I naturally went looking for it?

Camp Abelard was owned by Victor Fink, father of pop star Janis Fink, alias Janis Ian, whose first hit single was "Society's Child." Fame, fortune, wealth had not improved Janis' gloomy disposition and leaky pus-filled complexion. She did, however, have friends with the best weed connections in New York City.

Singer/songwriter Janey Schram, tall, awkward, talented, visited often. Was it she who gave me the pipeful of hash laced with DMT to smoke? Then we went riding in a car ... it wasn't a convertible, and yet it was, and the wind swooshed all around me. I looked up at a starless sky. Could it really be thus, out in the country? I turned my gaze upwards again, and this time, the heavens were choking with trillions of twinklers. The third time I looked, a single pink star hung from a string inches above my head. I reached up to touch it and ...

Camp Thoreau embodied peace, friendship, community, warmth, security. From the moment I set my duffel bag down on my bunk at Abelard, I ascertained that priorities among campers and staffers were sex, drugs and rock and roll. I was officially in "work camp," which meant that we were supposed to spend part of each day constructively building something ... wooden, I forget what, because within two days, any pretense to actual work had been abandoned by both campers, counselors and Victor Fink. He once punished me for disobeying curfew, showing up at my tent at 4 a.m. For an entire week, I was forbidden to smoke pot with the counselors on the porch of the main house.

The campers were more, well, bourgeois at Abelard. There were no Black kids sponsored by unions. One of my bunkmates, a willowy strawberry blonde, was a Park Avenue resident with divorced parents and a parade of stepfathers. Random items of our underwear, missing in the weekly wash, eventually surfaced in her trunk--she was a bona fide klepto, sent home in disgrace. Her crazy mother, about whose numerous seduction attempts I had heard numerous times, showed up unannounced at Abe's office at Black Rock at lunchtime. He did the gentlemanly thing and took her out, where she ran up his limited expense account to \$200 (it was a mostly liquid lunch.)

This wasn't the first time that a mother of a friend of mine tried to seduce bald, eyeglass wearing, mustachioed family man Abe. Marcy Silverman, my best friend from the repressive, racist, prison-like high school I had transferred out of, had a meshugenah mother who also phoned Abe, offering up her sexual favors. In those days, the phrase "dysfunctional families" hadn't been invented, nor was there much consciousness of child abuse. During my seven years in elementary school, only one of my classmates had even had divorced parents. This was considered to be such a stigma that when she gave a slumber party, parents hesitated to send their daughters to what surely must have been a den of iniquity, a virtual whorehouse.

In 1965, divorcee Alice Crimmins' two children, Missy and Edward, were found strangled to death in vacant lots, the first of which was located almost exactly one mile from my house. It was one of the very first such scandals, the kind we now read about daily, and Alice was consistently portrayed in the newspapers as having been a bad mother, even before her conviction. The evidence? She worked as a cocktail waitress, and when her marriage went south, and her husband neglected her, she stepped-out. To quote Tru TV, one of these boyfriends, was "a fifty-two-year old wealthy building contractor who sported a pencil-thin mustache and was given to silk suits and a diamond pinky ring." Even more indicting: Alice was a redhead!

Dysfunction and abuse surrounded me. Ada and I often wonder, with the hindsight of retrospect, about our next-door neighbor April, a strange-looking light-toffee colored foster child whose eyes focused in two directions at once, giving her a kind of E.T. appearance. She was capable of conversing only about a single topic: monsters. "Oh, there was a monster last night, yes there was, there it was, it was even bigger than the other one, yes it was, it was, come find it for me!" she begged, grabbing my hand. She died at nine, supposedly of a disease, but now Ada and I are convinced that she was actually killed by her foster mother, Zoysia, an ebony-skinned school cafeteria worker (more victims?) from South Carolina, whose boyfriend also died of a heart attack (induced?) Her German shepherd was chained to a tree 24/7/365, in gusting winds, hurricanes and blizzards. I can still hear his howls in my nightmares. Ada tried to reason with Zoysia, whose on-cue response was, "Beasts belong outside." So Ada ended up constantly phoning the ineffectual ASPCA. The dog also ended up dead.

Marcy Silverman's house was so dysfunctional, I hated to visit even for a few minutes. Her father, who had divorced Miriam and remarried, had a brand-new daughter and a sexy young wife. He evinced zero concern for his first two daughters. Marcy, the eldest, was brilliant, gorgeous, sharp-tongued, quick-witted, athletic, adventurous, a superstar student--genetically-perfect, a girl most fathers would worship. Her younger sister was the opposite--passive, mediocre, gawky, plain, frightened and nervous, but nonetheless his daughter--a sweet girl, not blessed, but trying to live up to her perfect older sister. Every time I visited, Miriam stood on the staircase shouting, or breaking down in crying jags, begging Marcy to give her advice, tell her how to live, what to do. "Marcy, Marcy, don't go out yet, I need you to get money from him, I called him 15 times this week and he just hangs up on me, the cocksucker! Call him, go over there, figure out something fast!" Marcy's missions to obtain child support payments were always unsuccessful. It wasn't as if Mr. Silverman didn't have the funds. Marcy and I once spent a week in his pricey Fire Island summer home. The furnishings were modern minimalist chic, which matched his aloof demeanor. The weather was hot, he was icy--displeased when we arrived and moderately elated when we left.

During my last semester in the artsy alternative high school, I still majored in cutting classes. This was an art form I had perfected in junior high school. I calculated that I attended the equivalent of three months out of the required ten in eighth grade. Back then, age 12, I would check into homeroom, sign in, be noticed and then ... leave the premises. Free at last, I would take the subway, either alone or with friends, to Greenwich Village, to hang out in Washington Square Park. We also panhandled. I made serious coin, too, standing at the intersection of MacDougal and Eighth Street, shaking my coffee cup. My friends and I overheard a beautiful blond hippie named Brent saying, "Can you help me pay for my grandmother's abortion?" We thought that was hysterically funny, really cool, even though we didn't know what the word "abortion" meant (and unaware of how weirdly prophetic that expression would become.) I bought a button to clip onto my pea-coat that read "Kumquats make you horny." I didn't know what "horny" meant, either, but I knew it was funny. People truly were filled with peace and love vibes in the late sixties, and I was drawn to the East Coast epicenter of the hippie movement as if by magnetic force. Strangers gave away money, food, joints, tabs of acid, invitations to "Be-Ins" and "Love-Ins." When they told each other that they loved them, they meant it. Everyone was sending out good vibes, careful of their karma. My hippie friends and I hung out in the cafes and head shops of MacDougal and Bleecker Street, saw the Dylan documentary "Don't Look Back" at the Eighth Street Playhouse Cinema, heard folk and rock and roll music live at Kenny's Castaways, the Village Vanguard, the Caf   Wha, met the musicians in Matt Umanov's Guitar Shop. I watched Jim Morrison whip it out at Hunter College, rocked out to Steppenwolf at the Fillmore East, danced at The Dom on St. Mark's Place. We were eclectic--one day jonesing for the sausage, onion and pepper subs that were MacDougal Street specialties, and the next drinking Mu-Tea at Souen.

My parents didn't know about any of these escapades. When I entered high school, they attempted to set down a number of rules and regulations. Even these were incredibly permissive. It wasn't that Abe and Ada were completely distracted by Abe's illness and Leon's determination to enlist in the Army. I knew intuitively, and I also deviously ascertained, that since I was nine years younger than Fred, Abe and Ada were too tired and burned-out to deal with the demands of imposing discipline on one last rebellious teenager. This was a bonus I exploited constantly. No matter what rule my parents made, I defied it. Whatever the boundary, I pushed against it. I even felt that I was entitled to freedom,

having spent all those years of my childhood in a state of paralyzing anxiety. Then, there was the fact that my parents knew that no matter how I acted out, I was extremely responsible. This is what I told the gynecologists at the Mt. Sinai Hospital Adolescent Health Center who wanted to give me birth control pills, Ovral-21's. I argued that they would cause breast cancer. "But they have been tested on women in Puerto Rico for 20 years," the doctors insisted (caveat: they were recently discovered to cause breast cancer.) I got my diaphragm and spermicide, sensing at 15 that one couldn't have too much barrier in one's birth control method. Sometimes I even used it in conjunction with condoms. The doctors were so impressed that a teenager could insert a diaphragm and spermicide appropriately that they asked me to become a peer-group counselor. I accepted their offer, and spent many afternoons among completely clueless teenagers who used feminine hygiene products as contraceptive methods.

Back in eighth grade, the dean had tried to stop me from cutting classes, but my grades were too good for him to have any real leverage. Much as I had always hated gym, never feeling competitive about sports (whereas sex was an egalitarian sport everyone could compete in, one which earned me A+ every time), the real insult came when the boys were assigned to "Shop" and the girls to "Sewing." Sewing?! I was offended to my very core. I knew how to sew on a button and trim a hem. It wasn't that I wanted to take Shop, either, not being mechanically-adept. The bureaucracy wouldn't let me just drop the class, so, when I deigned to show up, I refused to learn how to thread a sewing machine. A year later, "Home Economics," with its generic recipes for unhealthy meals made from canned and processed foods, was equally insulting to my feminist spirit.

In high school, however, the guidance counselor had appraised me shrewdly.

"Have you ever seen the results of your IQ tests, Ms. Surovell?" he inquired, appealing directly to my intellect ... and to my sibling rivalry. Leon once scored above 160 on an IQ test and had lorded this over the rest of us for perpetuity. I recalled taking those yearly tests, but the results, the magic number, was always kept top secret. The guidance counselor showed me every year's test result, the score always either exactly the same number, or one digit off. "You're in the top 2 percent of the population ... you owe it to yourself to go to an Ivy League college."

So I started attending all my classes. It was a druggie high school, which eventually, inevitably became a typical dangerous, violent urban hell-hole, with students murdered for being street gang members. Back then, many of the more than 3,000 students dropped acid before class on a daily basis. I never understood the appeal--tripping in school? Once someone brought in 200 Quaaludes to sell. Within hours, there were so many kids falling down in the hallways that the overworked school nurse notified the local hospital to send in a team of paramedics.

If we received lectures on the evils of drugs, I've forgotten all of them, or maybe I was stoned when I heard them. I know we didn't learn any shocking, discouraging facts in "Hygiene," an all-girls class taught by a sweet old marm who belonged in a one-room schoolhouse in a rural locale and the previous century. Hygiene made Home Economics seem hip. The teacher talked about menstruation. What was there to say? Tampax didn't hit the market until 1974, so we used old-fashioned style Kotex, with its little flaps to be inserted into a "sanitary belt." Still, it always made for a good excuse to be ostensibly sent home from school, to cut class. I just told the school nurse, "I'm having a really heavy period, these cramps are making me dizzy," and soon I'd be on the subway headed for West Fourth Street. I wouldn't have expected this old marm to tackle Sex Ed, but then she showed us the movie. It was set in the fifties, with the suburban main characters wearing flared skirts, cashmere sweaters and saddle shoes. Plot details are contained in the documents I've attached.

That movie really pissed me off. It was more degrading, more outdated and more offensive than Sewing and Home Economics combined. In every way, it was irrelevant to the students my urban high school, with a population in the thousands, and it was filled with misinformation, scare tactics (the sexual version of red-baiting?) and creepy, fake values-- good girls who didn't want sex, and who only prostituted themselves in order to placate their horny boyfriends, and lower-class girls who may have actually have been prostitutes. I knew what high school teenagers needed ... sex education, birth control information and birth control devices. I knew because this is what I needed, as did almost everyone my age. I had friends and classmates who had gotten pregnant. A few of them ruined their lives and kept their babies. Others had multiple abortions. At the Mt. Sinai Adolescent Clinic, all kinds of girls from all kinds of backgrounds told me in detail about the mistakes they had made, the miscalculations about when and how they could or couldn't get pregnant. "You can't get pregnant if you douche with Kool-Aid!" was typical.

It was crucial for us to learn about the dangers of venereal disease, but not that way. Why not a recently-made movie informing us that sexually-transmitted diseases were rampant and could have permanent consequences, but that they could be prevented by use of condoms and treated with antibiotics? This one was factually inaccurate ... people don't usually break out into full-body rashes days after contracting an S.T.D.

Finally, I baited the hygiene teacher, who was myopic enough, or perhaps so clueless, that she was totally obtuse about the pregnant students who had dropped out of her class.

"What advice would you give to a sexually-active girl about contraception?" I asked her, while we were discussing Sally's dilemma.

"Sleep with your grandmother!" she replied, smiling, attempting to be flip about the most serious issue possible, or maybe she was projecting ... something. She wasn't motherly, she was grandmotherly.

Marcy had heard about a city-wide feminist group, The New York High School Women's Liberation Society, and we attended meetings. The sisters there weren't focused enough on sex education. So we defected and formed a splinter group, The High School Women's Coalition, whose main priority was getting sex education into the high school curriculum, preferably in those "hygiene" classes. I was elected president. We were the Bristol Palin of 1971, convinced as she is that, for teenagers, "Abstinence is not realistic," except that we came to our conclusions without becoming teenage mothers ourselves. Learning that the New York City Board of Education had weekly meetings in Brooklyn, we attended every one, making ourselves heard, storming in in lady-like crowds, interrupting their dry budget analyses and demanding to be heard. Eventually, the bureaucrats invited us to a private meeting, where they served us tea and cookies and took our suggestions seriously.

Everything that happened next I wrote about in a speech Planned Parenthood asked me to make before John D. Rockefeller III's Presidential Commission on Population Control and the American Future. Jane E. Brody, the science editor of The New York Times, introduced herself afterwards. The next day, she put the speech on the Op Ed page, and I got a hefty check in the mail. Someone had titled it, "Most Girls Just Pray." Hey Jane, thanks! Sisterhood is powerful. I've attached a copy of this Op Ed piece and also Brody's article about my testimony. No need to be redundant about all the things that happened after we had that confab with the Board of Ed. A caveat: The Times printed a retraction the next day, saying that my piece should have read, "Irresponsibility does not cause this, it is ignorance."

Most Jewish mothers would have kvelled. But then, most of them aren't Ada, whose priorities are, um, unique. She is still so politically active in her eighties that she risks her life every week to stand in a traffic circle, holding up a banner saying, "Jewish and Palestinian Women United."

On October 1, 1971, she became hysterical.

"Someone will read this, find out where you live, and come here and rape you!" She insisted that I hand over all my fan mail to the police officer stationed in my high school (gee, that cop was cute ... big blue eyes and jet-black hair. I guess they assigned him to that "beat" after that Quaalude catastrophe.)

"Man, she's a lulu, isn't she?" was one adult's response.

After my Op Ed piece appeared, publishers called. Henrietta Schlanger, a cool, visionary lady, whose husband had left Farrar, Strauss to form Octagon Books, invited me to write articles, along with Jamaica Kincaid, for *Ingenu* magazine. She was either the founder, or executive editor, or both, and when the magazine went under, she co-authored a book, "Everything a Girl Needs to be Beautifully Healthy." Veteran publisher Sam Grafton recruited me to be an on-the-ground reporter for "Youth Report," which was bought by social workers, teachers ... anyone working or aspiring to work with youths (my high school guidance counselor?). I interviewed students about whatever subject Sam sent my way--my first reporter gig. Sam would return to reap major karma decades later. He and his wife Edith spoiled me, inviting me over for elaborate Jewish-style brunches, where Edith was shocked, "I can't believe that you have never eaten whitefish!" (Not when it's simply swarming ...) I was hired as an official consultant for Herman Engel's Texture Films documentary, "About Sex." Herman and his wife Sonya Friedman became two of my dearest friends, confidantes, soulmates, with Herman being my beloved father figure. I must have attended hundreds of their European-style dinner parties in their West Village floor-through over the years, where every guest was an artist, writer, filmmaker, photographer, or Grace Paley. Herman and Sonya made it a tradition for me to always read my short stories to the group. Psychologist/Syracuse University professor/sex educator professor Sol Gordon had me contribute to his pamphlets and sex-ed comic book line. I did some TV shows alone, wined and dined by the producers beforehand. Then Marcy and I were asked to appear on the Phil Donahue Show. We flew out to Dayton, Ohio, where it was taped. In our hotel room before the show, we smoked a few pipefuls of potent hash, and went on the air stoned and wearing matching red-leather micro-miniskirts. That footage exists in some vault somewhere. I'll just bet Phil wanted to educate us two little cock-teasers about sex.

Then were the SIECUS conventions.

Ingenu let me pick my topics.

"How about a piece about poetry?" I asked Henrietta Schlanger.

My aim in writing this was solely to seduce Galway Kinnell. I had a mad, passionate (schoolgirl?) crush on him. He was very gracious about doing the interview in his home, but I didn't succeed. I may have felt oh so grown-up, and I may have been head of a group whose members called themselves "high school women," but legally speaking, and, really, in every other way, I was 16 years old.

toc

HER TAKE ON MEN: THE MEN'S PLANET

The Men's Planet I: Me, Jane and the Men's Planet

Jane listened to all my complaints while I was going out with Martin, a former rock drummer turned video store employee. His wife had left him, ironically, for a successful rock drummer, so he lived in Brooklyn with his half St. Bernard/ half Gordon Setter dog and his pottery collection. The pottery was insured for theft but not for breakage. The dog had an enormous fringed tail, like the trim on a Davy Crockett jacket, and the vases and bowls were displayed on the coffee table, but the dog never knocked any of it down, bless her little canine heart. "Pottery," Martin told me, "is a very high aesthetic." In her "good-bye and drop dead" letter, his wife wrote, "It was practically kinky the way you would sit for hours, gazing at your goddamned dishware." I asked him about their sex life. "She didn't want to do it in front of the dog," Martin told me. For the first three months, we really got it on and the dog didn't seem to have an opinion either way. Periodically, his mother, a tiny but domineering modern dance teacher with a high, squeaky voice, would telephone and ask, "How come you never call us?" "I don't know what it is you want from me!" Martin would scream back. Eventually, I became suspicious of Martin's sexuality. We couldn't just fuck, we couldn't make love, sex couldn't be an expression of, say, tenderness, he had to always be looking at me from behind with my legs spread really wide and my tits hanging down. He often verbally compared the vista to scenes in the porn videos he took home daily from the store he worked in. As he lost the few inhibitions he had, he grew progressively more fixated with sticking his tongue up my ass. Finally, I told him, "You've been living alone with a dog for too long."

Meanwhile, Jane had auditioned for a commercial and on the set met an amnesiac named Gerard who had been in a bicycle accident in France. He had also been kidnapped as a child. He sent her a greeting card addressed to "my little snowflower of tragedy." She had to tell him what restaurant he had made reservations at five times. Next there was Jeremy, the self-hating Jew who insisted his last name was pronounced "Sha-pie-ro." A former San Franciscan and doubtless member of a "men's group," he boasted to Jane that he had a chance to go to L.A. for a week to make a couple of thousand dollars as an art consultant or something, but had decided to stay in New York and care for his friend's cat instead. Jane is a black belt in karate, and talk of cuddling up with little kittycats is not the way to her heart. Along came a dreadlocked jazz musician with an enormous tongue that he maneuvered halfway down her throat, but he never called back. "Be wary of the black jazz musician syndrome," I advised. Then I gave her a nugget of wisdom gleaned over two decades of fucking. "Don't sleep with them on the first date. Men like to go out with a woman, and then go home and jerk off, fantasizing about doing it with her. If you deprive them of this opportunity to pull their puds, they get resentful."

Jane was becoming seriously depressed when her aunt invited her to attend a ritzy wedding in Scotland, held by business associates of her late husband. Tom, the brother of the bride, a handsome and witty accountant, told her "the angels stopped in the heavens when they made you" and Jane was charmed. The next day, he sent orchids over to her hotel. They spent the night together, using fresh figs and papayas from a giant gift basket of fruit as accessories. Jane returned to New York with pheromones spritzing all over the air and announced, "I'm getting married and moving to Glasgow." Bonnie said, "Can I start an artist's colony there?" Maryann asked, "Is he politically correct?" I decided to reserve judgment and watch how things developed when Tom came over to stay with her for a couple of weeks. Jane, Bonnie, Maryann and I all worried about how an accountant from Glasgow would adapt to Avenue C, but he acclimated just fine. Jane reported that he was self-reliant while she was rehearsing her performance art and entertaining when she wasn't. Suddenly, she called me in distress. During a dinner party with four of her friends, Tom had lapsed into a catatonic state, complete with closed eyes and junkie-like nods. Could he be a borderline schizophrenic? "Honey," I told her, "Remember that he is from the Men's Planet so you have to expect a little weirdness sometimes. At least he isn't sticking his tongue up your ass. Let that be our litmus test." This mollified her, and she and her Scottish beau explored all of Manhattan's finest sex shops, since Tom was possessed of a fervent desire to buy her a super premium, state-of-the-art vibrator. Partly he wanted to watch her get off with it, and partly he hoped it would enhance whatever erotic phone calls they had when he went back to Glasgow. She could just plug it in and buzz away. Inspired, she started sending him erotic faxes, suggesting many creative uses for kilts. Fortunately he was the boss and could send his employees out of the office. He sent her poems by Byron which he had copied in longhand and I said, "Byron! Jane Darling! This is major-league. This is Mr. Right! No jaded New York guy would ever dare to send poetry, no less Byron!" A week later, Jane turned thirty-five, her sexual prime, and quite naturally developed an urge to get tied up and spanked. I recalled with fondness my first inclinations in that direction as well as memorable scenarios. But when she faxed Tom images of punishment rooms in Victorian boarding schools, he was appalled. He whined that he "didn't understand" the impulse. Good-bye, Tom. Jane started seeing a neighborhood playwright, an ex-alkie and ex-junkie with a face that was rusted as an old beer can, who worked, as so many ex-alkies do, as a bartender. He lived in a furnished room and had a large tattoo of a bulldog with a rose in its mouth on his left forearm. They were fucking and spanking zestily until she invited Tattooman over for pasta and he told her he couldn't make that kind of commitment. "Tell her that there are a lot of guys out there who would tie her up and eat pasta, too," said our Mature Friend, a literary agent who followed each action-packed moment closely. "At my age, it isn't often that I get a chance to listen to pretty girls talking about their sexual problems," he admitted. But by this time Jane was truly distraught. She asked, "Har, is something wrong with me?" "Absolutely not!" I adamantly replied. I regaled her with tales of just a couple of past amours. There was Saga, the Yugoslavian journalist whose lineage could be traced to Tito, who spoke constantly about how his retired father would go out fishing in a boat, and his retired mother would come outside and ring a giant bell for him to row back when she

wanted to ask him a question. He had been married and had two sons, but he told them that he was going around the world fighting for peace and justice and split. Meanwhile he was going around the world fighting for drugs and pussy. Then there was Charlie, the communications professor who had the audacity to criticize my writing. He was half-Italian and tried to uphold his macho image by hanging out in pool halls. He usually got involved with neurotic tight-assed WASPs who had hysterical fits and rejected him, but he would deign to see me occasionally for "non-committal sex." "No, Jane," I told her, "We are legendary-type babes whose every conversation is worthy of a Henry Jaglom film script and they, darling, they are from the Men's Planet."

toc

The Men's Planet II: The Apartment

Deanna, one of the tenants in my building, could complete the daily crossword in The New York Times, but had no common sense whatsoever. Her cleaning lady, Sara, a Brazilian lesbian with no top teeth, was an animal fanatic and a know-it-all. She lived in East Harlem with twenty-seven cats and two dogs. She couldn't bathe in her own apartment because the bathtub was entirely filled with kitty litter, so she showered in clients' homes. Sara's favorite item of apparel was a man's sleeveless undershirt, which highlighted her muscular arms.

Deanna was close to 50 and was warm, loving, and generous. In fact, she had been president of the Baptist Students Union at college until she smoked her first joint. The only time she was rude or nasty was when you asked her for some pot. She liked to maintain a hefty stash.

She was also a slurry, sloppy, but amiable drunk. The more looped she got, the more sentimental she became. Once I was hanging out there and she got a call from an uncle in his eighties.

"Oh, my dearest darling, I love you, I'm going to move down to Tennessee and take care of you," she slushed.

"Yo, Deanna, shut-up!" I kept saying.

Her cat Tubby had been neutered long ago and ever since had maintained a permanent vigil on the kitchen floor, hoping to guilt-trip someone into throwing him some extra kitty nuggets. He must have weighed twenty pounds. Deanna explained that neutering a male cat would cause him to overeat. Every time she drank, she would pick him up and sob, "I should never have cut off his balls!" She was the kind of person who liked to say the same thing all the time. I wondered if she realized she was doing this.

Three times a year, Deanna's sister Denise from California would visit and spout annoying new-age truisms about self-esteem and co-dependency that would impel Deanna to drink and smoke even more.

Her best pal, Bettyann, was the grimmest person I had ever met. Anxiety, and not maternal instinct, oozed from every pore. Nonetheless, at age 37, she decided she wanted a baby, but she didn't have any prospective "fathering" candidates. So she picked up a guy in a bar and told him that if she got pregnant, she was having the baby. He, naturally, thought she was kidding. Pretty fucking funny. Then, when Hillary the Horrible was born, she was enraged when the poor schlub wouldn't play daddy.

When Hillary the Horrible wasn't hurling paint on to a wall or sticking a crayon up her snatch, she "liberated" toys from her one terrorized playmate. Her desire to eviscerate a small dog recalled Jeffrey Dahmer. Dear Deanna benevolently looked on. "She's a sociable girl," she would say fondly.

Deanna was but one of a whole building full of eccentrics, myself included. We had a tenants' meeting and it was like a scene out of Fellini's "Satyricon." Jean-Claude, replete with toupee and wooden leg was there, as was Catherine, a tall, elegant blonde filmmaker who had recently married a short, beer-swilling, tobacco-chewing illiterate black guy with a giant tumor in his cheek who used to stand out on the street asking me to "give me some pussy." Iona the opera-singing cat lady was resplendent in sequined headdress. She had written a letter to the tenants and posted it on the bulletin board in the lobby describing how her apartment was "hot as a Brazilian jungle." Once she approached me, looking like a corpse in her long maroon velvet gown, with her pasty white skin and overly dyed black hair, and said, "You think you're better than me. All you have is an ego and nothing to base it on." I was tempted to reply, "You're right, I do think I'm better than you and I have a lot to base it on," but I didn't, because I know she's crazy and I feel sorry for her. The next day she said, "Halette, I'm sorry. I'm on Prozac and it makes me very aggressive." Elmer D., my psychotic downstairs neighbor, never one to miss out on an opportunity to give the landlord a hard time, was there as well. He was crazy' but I didn't feel sorry for him. I didn't even feel bad that he had purportedly spent his adolescence in a juvenile detention home, forcibly fellating older male inmates.

Janine chaired the meeting. The subject was the rock club that Ron Wood had opened up in our basement. The noise was preventing people from sleeping and functioning. A representative from the club patiently listened to everyone's complaints.

"I have something to add," Iona trilled. "I am a cat, meow, meow, meow!"

Janine, a bisexual poet/junkie/stripper from Smith College, had been my entree into the building. I had been teaching writing in San Francisco during the heyday of gay liberation. I even saw two guys fucking on their front porch. On every corner was a bar outfitted with "glory holes." Walking down Castro Street, I felt like a Black in South Africa. Starved for testosterone, smarting from rejection, I moved back to Manhattan.

Janine had offered to sublet me her apartment. She lived on and off with her boyfriend on 14th Street. In fact, many prior subletters' possessions were still under her bed, along with a broken stereo receiver, a broken manual typewriter, and a steamer trunk filled with water bugs. On the wall were seven broken mirrors. Janine later explained that this was some kind of voodoo ritual.

My mother and my nuttiest brother, Karl, helped me to move in. Karl had just gotten a doctorate in Soviet history, but had been unable to secure any teaching jobs. Apparently, he had been going to job interviews wearing overalls, since he considered business suits to be "bourgeois." My second nuttiest brother, Leon, moved to Canada to escape fascism when Nixon was elected president. My third nuttiest brother, Frederick, published a newsletter detailing trade agreements between socialist and capitalist countries. By 1992, he was unemployed. I would have been named Rosa, but then my grandfather, Harry, died.

Have you ever heard the expression "red-diaper baby?" I was told the phone was tapped as soon as I learned how to speak. Till the age of 6, I feared that the family dog was really an FBI agent dressed in a dog costume. There was a Marxist literature class at my summer camp. The terms "bourgeois decadence" and "capitalist alienation" were thrown around my childhood home as casually as curses in a naval barracks. Not to mention my fondness for the Black Panthers' "fascist running dog lackey of the imperialist pigs." My family hoped I would one day write a "socialist novel." The fear and paranoia my parents instilled in me about the FBI, CIA, etc., persisted until I became a crime writer and attended the Secret Service Christmas party in Washington, D.C., on December 23, 1987. All the feds present thought I was a DEA agent and tried to hit on me. A lifetime of fear evaporated. Just like that.

Standing in Janine's bedroom, I noticed a whip on the wall over the dresser. I hoped my mother would not see it, or, if she did, would repress the perception entirely, as parents, both left-wing and right, tend to do when dealing with uncomfortable truths. Naturally, on cue, Karl said, "What the fuck is a whip doing on the wall?" I later asked Janine.

"When I was at Smith, I supported myself by working as a stripper," she said. "So when I was onstage I would call men up and then whip them. I considered this a feminist act."

For the first few months, Janine kept telling me to be extra-secretive.

"If the landlord finds out I'm subletting, he'll kick you, me and all our stuff out of the apartment."

I pictured a paunchy, cigar-chomping, greasy-haired thug surrounded by leg-breakers kicking down the door. Then, one day the bell rang and a really handsome blond guy in Ralph Lauren threads said, "Hi, I'm the landlord. You must be the person who's been subletting since January. I just came by to check the radiator."

I convinced him to rent me the first apartment that became available in this rent-stabilized building. In N.Y.C. today, this could take a decade. But there was a family on the top floor with a foster daughter. The Chinese husband died of a heart attack. The Irish wife, Gladys, became an alcoholic and attacked the Indian daughter with a knife. The city removed the child from the home and rescinded Gladys' support payments. Without that income, Gladys couldn't afford her rent and was evicted. Gladys moved into the Women's Shelter and grew a mustache and I was poised to replace her when the landlord, who is Ukrainian, told me he was morally obligated to rent it to recently emigrated fellow Ukrainians.

"Don't talk to me about moral obligations," I exclaimed.

"Your Cossack ancestors conducted pogroms against my Jewish ancestors in Russia, and drove them from their villages, so, karmically, you owe me a home."

I moved in the next day.

toc

The Men's Planet III: Frenchie

It never occurred to me that Frenchie might be a homicidal sociopath until I asked him if he had ever killed anyone. This occurred on New Year's Eve. We had been seeing each other since September, always just hanging out at my apartment because, as I learned, freelance fashion photographers are paid even less frequently than freelance investigative reporters. He couldn't even afford a bottle of wine, so he brought carbonated apple cider, 2 percent alcohol. I was naturally eager to spend time chez lui, but he emphatically refused to invite me over. Towards the end of our

relationship, I began to wonder what artifacts his apartment contained--a wife, stacks of "Blueboy" and "Huge," ninja throwing stars, decomposing corpses?

I was drawn to Frenchie's classy, refined features, avant garde sensibilities and European manners. He was an intriguing jumble of contradictions. He always wore black leather jeans and motorcycle jacket, travelled by Harley and was into biker culture. Yet his diet consisted of miso soup, brewer's yeast, tahini and antihistamines for chronic allergies. He claimed the drugs fatigued him, so I always initiated sex. I liked to moan "baisez-moi" and "lechez-moi," conjuring up memories of erotic escapades sur le Rive Gauche in 1984. But I quickly realized that the idea of fucking a French fashion photographer was more of a turn-on than the act itself. In fact, I was so perplexed by Frenchie's lack of libido that I brought one of his letters to a graphologist. The expert promptly pronounced him a closet case. This resonated. Frenchie performed when challenged, ate pussy passably, but I often wondered whether his mind was on a pair of hairy buttocks while his tongue was on my clit.

I could understand him secretly hating women. His mother died when he was a baby, leaving him unprotected in the care of a brutal, dictatorial French patriarch. Dad was also an avowed Marxist. Frenchie rebelled by becoming a rightwing paratrooper and fought in Algeria, but by the time I met him, alas, he was listening to left-wing radio incessantly. His all-purpose explanation for every geo-political crisis around the globe was "American imperialism" and he perceived more CIA conspiracies than Oliver Stone. Irritated, I reminded him of French anti-Semitism and general obnoxiousness. I added that I had heard enough "dialectical materialism" from my wacko leftist family to last a lifetime, and pleaded, "Can we, like, talk about Truffaut?"

New Year's Eve began oddly. That afternoon, Frenchie had bought me a beer and falafel and then uncharacteristically emoted, "You're too nice for me. I can't handle it. I like bitches who treat me like shit, like my last girlfriend."

My friend Jane had invited us to a party. I reveled in the buzz I copped off the 12 percent alcoholic content of my glass of red wine. Frenchie slunk around in black leather.

Just before midnight, he discovered the host's collection of hunting knives. Removing them from their case, he ran his fingers over the blades, his eyes glowing. Someone asked me, "Who the fuck is this psycho?"

Curious myself, I asked him the fateful question.

"I'm not sure how many people the actual total is," he replied thoughtfully. "Aside from all the kills in combat in Algeria, I ran someone over on a dark country road in California. Then there was this fight with a biker. And I was in a motorcycle accident. Another time I was in a bar and this guy kept bothering a chick. I punched him out and his head made a strange thud when it hit the floor. I didn't stick around, but I'm pretty sure he was dead ..."

"Do I pick them or what?" I asked Jane.

She walked me to the door as I bade Frenchie, "Bon annee et au revoir!"

toc

The Men's Planet IV: Tim

"What kind of music do you like?" the handsome but shabbily-dressed new sublet tenant asked me in the lobby.

"Reggae. Rock and roll. Classical. Why?"

"Do you like jazz played on a string bass?"

"No. Why? Are you giving away your old tapes or something?"

"I'm playing a gig tonight at a club in Soho. I'm a jazz musician. Do you want to come?"

"Well, uh, sure. I haven't really done anything all weekend." He WAS cute. "How much does it cost to get in?"

"I'll put your name on the list."

All day long I wondered is this, like, a date?

The only thing I knew about the new sublet tenant was that he was subletting from Ron, a club-footed, red-faced, chain-smoking, misanthropic pseudo-writer who was mean to my neighbor Patti and played choral music at midnight in bouts of manic elation. This did not reflect well on Tim. But I hadn't gotten laid since last June, during an ill-fated reunion with the Mature Friend (see "Men's Planet I.") It had been three years since our last lovemaking session, and, on my part, it was mainly a sympathy fuck. The Mature Friend had confided his distress over the fact that, now that his hair was white,

women on the street no longer made eye contact with him.

"I feel invisible," he said piteously.

"Don't worry, I'll re-invigorate you," I promised.

The ingrate unbuttoned my blouse, unhooked my bra, and laughed.

"Your tits are the same size, but lower," he announced.

That evening, buoyed by images of sturdy young manhood, I speed-walked to the Soho club. It was a filthy little dive.

"Five dollars," said the woman at the door.

"I'm on the list," I countered.

"There is no list," she replied.

Tim greeted me.

"I got here late so it will be a while. Why don't you sit with my friends?"

I was led over to two women. Margo was Scandinavian. She had erect posture and a clenched face, was obviously a tyrannical personality. Sort of like Helga, She-Wolf of the SS.

"I smell something sweet. Are they burning incense?" she said bitchily.

"It must be my perfume."

I met her gaze until she turned away.

Aduki was a goody-goody Japanese, who sat immobile and silent, with her hands folded on her lap.

"It's chilly in here," I said.

Margo got up, located the window, and slammed it shut.

Tim played jazz viola. The same old standards I'd heard 100 times. But he was talented. He had incredible rhythm. And I loved the way he worked that bow. I imagined his hands all over my body.

He was up there for two hours, cracking jokes, relating mildly witty anecdotes. When it was finally over, he came to our table.

"Why did you ask me if I like string bass when you play viola?" I asked him.

"Did I say that?"

"I felt honored to be here," said Aduki.

Afterwards, Aduki, Tim and I went to eat at an East Village luncheonette. Tim had brought along special tablets he takes to avert intestinal spasms.

"I haven't been hungry in three years," he confided. "It all started with this raw chicken I ate in Japan."

"Where are you from?" I asked him.

"Texas."

"Waco?"

"No. Why did you say that? Everybody keeps talking about Waco. Is something going on there?"

"Don't you read the papers?"

"Not in five years."

I was ready to invite him up to my apartment, but Aduki was fiercely possessive.

"Are you taking a cab home?" I asked her, hopefully.

"Yes, but I'm not leaving yet." She accompanied us to our building.

"Tim, I need to use your bathroom," Aduki said.

"You can use mine," I cheerfully volunteered.

"No!" Her eyes flashed.

I said goodnight.

The next day I consulted my gay buddy Freddy, who has an answer for everything.

"If it was like a date, but he's fucking this Japanese chick, why did he invite her?" I inquired.

"He's probably not fucking her, but she was probably so out of it, she didn't realize what was going on. You know how Japanese people are. They're in their own world."

"So what's my next move?"

"Just wait, honey," Freddy counseled. "Just wait."

A week later, I encountered Tim in my lobby. There were a dozen holes in his baggy cotton pants. He looked like a little lost puppy.

"Tim, no offense, but may I make an observation?" I asked.

"Sure."

"You look like you need for your mommy to come to New York from Waco and buy you some clothes and make you dinner."

"Would you make me some dinner?" he pleaded, instantly infantile. "Would you? It could be like a potluck-type thing. We could share expenses."

I don't like little boys--to fuck--but then, I cannot resist a culinary challenge. So, mindful of his intestinal spasm problem, I prepared a soothing repast of coq au vin with wild mushrooms, mashed potatoes, and a spinach salad with a honey-grapefruit dressing. I put on sexy black lingerie, lit candles, slipped Mary Chapin-Carpenter on the tape deck.

Tim arrived with a bottle of \$2.99 Spanish wine that was half-empty.

"I brought this to the studio last night," he said, "but there's probably enough to get us pretty blitzed."

I resisted the urge to call him a cheap scumbag, reassured that getting blitzed was usually the preliminary to getting laid.

"I love this kind of food," Tim exclaimed. "My old girlfriend, Tracy, used to cook turkeys all the time."

"Turkeys? For two people? How long did they last?"

"A couple of days."

Liar! I thought. A fucking turkey would last two people three weeks. He's just upping the ante, the manipulative little shit. Now, if I want to get laid, I'll have to start cooking him turkeys.

"Tracy was a WASP who was really into responsible journalism," Tim continued. "She had all these rich friends who gave fancy dinner parties."

Somehow, I couldn't envision Tim attending with his torn pants. What kind of a guilt thing was this Tracy babe working out?

I turned the conversation back to myself.

"Why did you invite me to your gig?" I asked, blatantly fishing for a compliment, such as, "Because you're so pretty, sexy, interesting ..."

"Because you walked through the door," Tim replied. He yawned, announced that he had to be in the recording studio in the morning, and left.

It was another lonely night with my mechanical friend, Mr. Goodvibes.

Two days later, there was a message taped to my door.

"I lost your phone number. Call me, Tim."

I decided I would call him and ask to borrow \$10, for an "emergency" and then keep it. I had spent \$20 on food for this "potluck," and he had brought a recycled bottle of wine. If I recouped half my losses, I could just chalk up the whole experience to yet another example of ignoring my instincts. And the truth that the friends of assholes are invariably assholes, too.

Amazingly, he brought the ten bucks over immediately.

Then I got the message on my answering machine. 11:00 on a Wednesday night.

"Hello Hariette, Tim here, you know, in 5G. Listen, I bought this piece of really cheap fish and I put in the freezer. I just took it out to cook it and it smells really disgusting, really spoiled and putrid and rotten, and I was wondering if I could bring it up to you and you could smell it and tell me if I should cook it."

I called him back.

"Tim, let me get this straight. You want me to smell something vile and disgusting? Is this supposed to be an enjoyable experience for me?"

"Is that bad?"

"Tim, do me a favor. Lose my phone number again."

Maybe I should move uptown. I heard that on the Upper East Side men bring flowers and perfume ...
toc

The Men's Planet V: Jane's Wedding

My friendship with Jane ended abruptly a year ago. Billy the Fireman was the catalyst.

"I'm dying to fuck this gorgeous fireman," Jane had gushed. "I know it's meant to be because the last time I walked by the firehouse a firefly flew onto my shoulder and stayed there for like five minutes."

"Jane, I'm sure he's married."

"No, he told me he's single."

"What is he--late twenties, Irish-Catholic, lives on Staten Island?"

"How did you know?"

"Jane, when I wrote all those crime articles for Penthouse and interviewed about 50 cops, they were all married, they all fucked around, and they all lied like dogs about it. One guy swore up and down he was single, then a woman cop told me he had a week-old baby. Firemen are probably worse because they can sleep at the firehouse."

"Billy's different. I sent him an invitation to one of my performance pieces."

"Did he show up?"

"No."

"Did he mention receiving the invitation?"

"No. Maybe it got lost."

Jane ignored Aunt Hariette's excellent advice and procured a dinner invitation from Fireman Bill.

"Make me two promises," I urged. "Try to find out if he's married, and don't fuck him on the first date. He's not one of your musicians or playwrights. Trust me, he's got retrograde sexist values."

"How can I find out if he's married?"

"Ask him for his home phone number. Ask how many kids he has. You're an actress. Act!"

I waited up for Jane's report. She delivered it in her Princess Di voice.

"We had a lovely evening. He picked me up in his car and took me to an Italian restaurant, where we had a delightful meal and a bottle of red wine. Afterwards we went for a pleasant stroll and stopped off for a nightcap."

"Okay, and then?"

"We talked about our brothers, how his are always borrowing his car."

"Did you talk about his wife?"

"I did not feel it was appropriate, under the circumstances, to ask him such a personal question."

"I see. Did you think it was appropriate, under the circumstances, to sit on his face or suck his cock?"

"Certainly not! He insisted on coming up to my apartment. We made out, and when he wanted to go further, I told him it was simply not my custom to engage in sexual relations on the first date."

"Good. Because if you had there would be no more cozy dinners, no cocktails, no holding hands. Next time, he'd call you at midnight, come over, get his rocks off, and leave. I've been there, Jane. It's not great for your self-esteem."

Jane waited for Fireman Bill to call again, but he never did. She blamed yours truly and dropped me as a friend. I was relieved because I had grown sick of her selfishness. During 10 months of friendship, she had left at least 20 identical messages on my answering machine. In her Melanie Griffith voice: "I need a favor." But whenever I asked her to do something for me, she would blatantly refuse, or promise to and then forget about it. Then she'd rationalize by saying, "I'm a flake." In the Melanie Griffith voice again.

I had given Jane many items of fab footwear, including a pair of barely-worn \$215 Stefan Kelian ankle boots. She gave me a bright orange rayon skirt. I donated it to homeless people.

Then, a month ago, I received Jane's wedding invitation. An enclosed note explained that her fiance, Sy, age 45, was a fellow aspiring actor. I hoped that getting engaged had mellowed Jane out. Even though she lived on Avenue C and practiced karate, I knew that she was a middle-class girl from Long Island whose goal in life was to snag a hubby.

We made a movie date.

When I called to finalize arrangements, Jane said, "I don't really have the money for the movies. How about a drink and dinner?"

"Um, okay. Where should we meet?"

"I can't afford to eat at a restaurant. I thought I'd make something here."

"Well, okay, but I have a touch of the stomach flu and can really only eat bland things."

"What if I make some some fresh corn and tomatoes?"

"Jane, did you ever take Home Economics in high school? Corn is the hardest food to digest, and tomatoes are really acidic."

"How about a tabouli salad?"

"Scallions, lemon juice, tomatoes, are you listening to me?"

"Well, well," She was sputtering now, practically hyperventilating. "I'll make a green salad with some tuna fish."

"Let's order Chinese food. I'll get egg drop soup."

"Fine!" She slammed down the phone.

I took a cab to Avenue C. My bad back was spasming up. Jane's building was located next to a vacant lot, where a group of homeless people built a nightly bonfire. On her front stoop, two crackheads were beaming up.

Sy answered the door. He was about 5 feet tall, with a chinless, flabby face. Jane is gorgeous--that's how she gets away with all her shit. Sy probably thought he was really lucky. Poor schmuck.

I sat on a beanbag chair and popped some codeine. The phone rang in the bedroom and I heard Jane inviting someone over. The evening had metamorphosed from a movie date into a party. I hoped Jane wasn't talking to Sara. She seemed normal, even intelligent, when I met her at Jane's. Then I went to her play, "Housework." Two women held up banners embroidered with "herstorical" facts about female domestic workers in America. Jane pounded on a table, repeating "Po-ta-to!" over and over. Then she wandered into the audience, singing a Native American song and making odd hand gestures. Other cast members fell down, as if drunk.

"Wasn't it brilliant?" Jane asked me afterwards.

Jane entered the room, perky as Liza Minnelli. She gave me an anemic embrace and began complaining about how her mother would only buy her thrift shop clothing.

"She just has a problem with giving," said Jane.

Calling Dr. Freud, I thought. Dr. Freud to the white courtesy telephone, please.

I showed Jane a silver, garnet and marcasite ring I'd scored from a street vendor.

"He sold me this for twenty-two dollars, but I think he undercharged me. What do you think it's worth?" I asked Jane.

"Fifteen hundred?" she suggested, without a trace of irony in her voice.

Possibly, she's totally nuts, I thought.

I was astonished when a cute, hip-looking guy in his mid-thirties arrived. He had hazel eyes and curly hair. His name was Peter and he worked as a cameraman.

Sy said, "Hayette, I hear your parents were leftists. Mine were, too."

"Where did you go to summer camp?" asked Peter.

"The commiest camp in America," I replied. "Paul Robeson's grandchildren were counselors there."

"My stepfather believed Stalin didn't kill enough people," said Peter.

I was awestruck.

After Peter left, I asked Jane, "Is he single?"

"Yes. He just broke up with someone."

"Where does he live?"

"Three blocks away from you. He has a very tidy two-bedroom apartment with no roommates."

"Call him tomorrow and ask him what he thought about me, okay?" I said excitedly.

"No!" Jane snapped. "I'm leaving town tomorrow and I won't have time to make any phone calls."

Yet, the next morning, inevitable as air pollution, was Jane's four word message on my machine. In a whiny, demanding Joan Rivers voice.

"I need a favor."

The day before the wedding, I called Jane and asked for a description of the eligible single guys who would attend.

"You've already met Chayo," Jane said, referring to an obese Puerto Rican community activist. One night, he and Jane had watched a nature documentary about a goat giving birth. The farmer had to insert a chain into its uterus. Chayo got a hard-on and started kissing Jane.

"Call me picky, but eligible men doesn't include anyone who weighs 350 pounds and gets off on goats."

"Maybe Chayo's changed," Jane countered.

"Jane."

Her voice took on a hysterical, Sean Young edge.

"There's Peter, my brother Salaam, and Sy's boss, Al Rivera. He owns three restaurants."

Jane's brother, Salaam Schwartz, had converted to Islam in the seventies. That left Peter and Al.

I wore a low-cut black lace mini-dress and French black textured stockings, the kind that induce Pavlovian responses on the Men's Planet. Salaam immediately cornered me. He fasted on Ramadan, prayed on a rug facing Mecca, abstained from alcohol. But, apparently, he still indulged in sexual fantasies. Blatantly undressing me with his eyes, he complimented my legs and added, "Among other alluring accoutrements, your perfume is divine."

I tried to escape, but he followed me around the room. I was tempted to yell at him, "You are a traitor to the Jewish people!" Finally, I spotted Peter, and gestured for him to rescue me.

"Mmm, you're wearing lots of lace," Peter said.

Salaam was outta there.

Peter and I talked about movies and music. We seemed to have similar tastes. Then we sat down--at different tables--for dinner.

I had been seated next to Wentworth, a pudgy Black poet with a chronically sweaty face. At one of Jane's parties, he had observed, "You seem like the type of person who would make someone else suffer rather than suffer yourself."

"You say the sweetest things," I'd replied.

Looking at Wentworth's damp cheeks, I lost my appetite.

I found Jane and asked if she would introduce me to Al Rivera.

"No!" she snapped. "I can't see anything. I don't have my contacts on."

Why had I ever let her back into my life?

Salaam initiated the post-dinner speeches with an Arabic prayer from the Koran. Jane's other brother, totally shit-faced, followed with a rambling obscene joke about a rabbi's wife stuck on a toilet bowl.

"That was appropriate," I said to Peter.

Peter suggested that we share a cab home. He got out with me and asked if he could read some of my Penthouse articles.

"Come on up, I'll give you a couple right now," I said "I just xeroxed some clips."

Peter took the articles, pled fatigue, and split.

The next morning, he left a message on my machine expressing admiration for my work and a desire to see me ASAP. An incipient boyfriend loomed. I blasted The Pixies' "Here Comes Your Man."

Peter and I played phone tag for four days. Finally, we spoke, and he invited me to the movies that night.

Peter paid for the tickets. I handed him my bottle of Pellegrino water in its brown paper bag to smuggle it in his briefcase.

Inside, he handed it back to me, saying, without a trace of irony in his voice, "Here's your beer."

A Pall Mall smoker, Peter coughed up phlegm throughout the flick. I thought the story was contrived and derivative; he found it fresh and original.

Announcing that it was his custom to end an evening with two martinis, his "Father's drink," he took me to a local bar.

"Those women over there are lovers," he observed. "The women I fall in love with always turn out to be dykes."

"Oh, bullshit," I said.

Peter had alluded many times to his original screenplay, at the wedding and on the phone. Clearly, he believed himself to be the next Paul Thomas Anderson.

Finally, I asked him about it.

"It's about this guy who tortures and murders his pregnant wife," he said.

"I see."

"How often do you wash your hair?" Peter asked.

"Every day. Why?"

"I only wash mine once every four months. The rest of the time, I just put water and gel on it. You only need to use shampoo three times a year."

I had a vision of cooties crawling all over my pillow.

Nonetheless, I was trying to be tolerant. When Peter asked if he could come get some more of my true-crime clips, I acquiesced. We sat together in my big white armchair. After ten minutes, I said, "Peter, are you going to kiss me or what?"

He replied, "Halette, I'm not attracted to you."

I said, "Then get the fuck out of my apartment."

He pouted. "Can I still read your writing?"

"No."

"That's not fair!"

He slammed the door, leaving behind a tacky umbrella.

I donated it to homeless people.

toc

The Men's Planet VI: The Ultra-Sonic Nut Detector

When I met a nice Jewish boy from Flushing, Queens, it turned out that he was beyond bonkers. I have this ultra-sonic roach and rodent repellent device in my kitchen and bedroom. It emits a high-pitched frequency that supposedly only bugs and animals can hear. But when cute little 21-year-old Barry, who worked at the yuppie deli across the street, came over to help me get rid of an old mattress, he covered his ears and exclaimed, "Ouch! What is that racket? It's giving me a headache."

Later, he revealed that he had been hospitalized in numerous mental hospitals after numerous suicide attempts. And then Gerald complained that a piercing noise was giving him a migraine. Believe me, I've had those devices going 24/7/365 and no one else, myself included, has ever heard an iota of a sound. Apparently, they also function as nut detectors.

From now on, as soon as I meet a guy, I'm just going to bring him into my kitchen and ask, "Do you hear anything?"

I met Gerald on the Fifth Avenue bus, having just replenished my Coco perfume supply at Bergdorf Goodman's. Hey, they sent me the credit card in the mail--did I ever say I could pay the bill? I gravitated like a magnet towards an

incredibly handsome blond guy and tried to open the window.

"What are you looking for?" he asked me.

"Air," I said.

He pointed to an opened hatch in the ceiling that also doubled as an emergency exit.

"That's in case we get attacked by a troop of elephants or a band of terrorists," he said.

Impressed by his wit, I commenced a conversation. He told me he worked as a cotton importer and an art collector.

"You look artistic and autistic," I said.

He stayed on the bus for an extra three stops, and when he took my card, I knew he'd actually call me, unlike all the self-involved liars I'd met in the last three months.

Okay, I admit it's just a fantasy of mine that I date guys three times before I sleep with them. Okay, so I succumb to sensual self-indulgence on the first date, but at least I've been using condoms avec my diaphragm since 1972.

When Gerald asked me out to dinner, I envisioned a classy Italian restaurant. Then, the night before, on the phone, he said something about pizza.

"I don't eat junk like pizza," I said snottily. "I'm into seafood, veggies and salad."

But on the day we were supposed to go out, I was stricken with the worst PMS in world history. If I was in England and had committed a murder, I would have gotten acquitted using the PMS defense. Plus, there was a nasty, damp, clingy rain and my bad back felt like it had been broken into two pieces. All I wanted to do was to eat pizza, lying in bed on my heating pad. But I was also incredibly horny, the only positive feature of the PMS experience. I always have so many memorable orgasms then.

So I asked him if he would just come directly over to my apartment with a pizza, some Jamaican ginger beer, and a bottle of Advil. Over the phone, he mentioned that he had a 20-year-old son, the child of an ex-girlfriend he had adopted at the age of two. In my demented, hormone-tormented brain, I rationalized that this made him mature, sympathetic, responsible, and trustworthy.

By the time he got over to my apartment, I was starving and totally ragged out. I grabbed the cheese off three slices and gobbled it down. Then I told him I had to immediately segue to the bedroom. I could barely sit up.

I felt so comfortable with him, despite the fact that he heard the ultra-sonic roach detector, and we had such hot sex, with him spanking my ass, and forcing me to jerk him off, saying in a mean, domineering voice, "You know how to make a man's dick hard, make it hard" that I told him my sexual fantasies which I challenge you, dear readers, to guess at.

He told me I was too skinny, but he said, "Now you have a boyfriend and you'll start getting laid regularly and you'll start eating more and getting more zaftig."

He chain-smoked, was about 30 pounds overweight, and only read magazines in airplanes, but to paraphrase Patricia Arquette in "Ed Wood," "If I ever made any value judgments, I'd never have any friends." Anyway, ever since I hit 40, my priority is: Can you get it up and keep it up? Hell, go weigh 500 pounds, be illiterate and smoke five packs a day. I don't give a fuck.

The first time, despite my queasiness, and the fact that we had already consumed a pizza, he kept suggesting we go out for Thai food, but by the second time he came over, he had apparently lost his desire to spend money on me and told me he'd be eating something before driving in from Queens. I was in the mood to prepare dinner: Cornish hens, home-fried organic yams, steamed veggies, mesclun salad with homemade bleu cheese dressing. Can you believe with my dual culinary and orgasmic talents I'm still single? I asked him to bring a bottle of champagne.

"Are you very picky about your bubbly?" he asked.

"Of course," I said.

But when he got to my apartment, he claimed the liquor store was closed and had brought a bottle of strawberry-kiwi juice, three apples, and a candy bar.

This reminded me of Suzanne, whose dog I walked when she went to Paris for a month. She was supposed to bring me

back a pair of French jeans and a bottle of Coco perfume, but returned instead with a beige sweatshirt, a pair of lace stockings, a package of almond cookies and a bottle of shower gel.

"We can take a walk later and get the champagne," he said, and I knew we never would.

He had brought a jogging suit to change into and insisted that he only drinks from glass, not plastic. Compared to my ex, the famous writer who made incessant emotional demands on me for eight years and was constantly saying, "You're not giving me enough affection," this seemed like a relatively straightforward request. I told myself that it was refreshing to be with a nonintellectual extrovert whose only concern was his physical comfort. I did, however, feel compelled to say, "You're the most neurasthenic person I've ever met in my life. Do you know what that means?"

(He didn't.)

The next day he called to tell me he was going to his oncologist for a biopsy. A biopsy? Everybody, myself included, is obsessed with AIDS. But cancer? Radiation. Chemotherapy. When I asked him which part of his body was involved, he said, "Stop being such an investigative reporter."

I was writing an article about a group of police impersonators who ripped off Colombian stash houses. I had to call my source and say, "Bob, I may have to reach out to you over the weekend, could you keep your beeper on? I just lost a day's worth of work. I've been seeing this guy and he just laid this whole trip on me that he might have cancer and it totally freaked me."

"Oh, that's an old routine," said Bob. "I'm dying, I don't have long to live, you have to do all these disgusting things to me."

Sure enough, the next time I talked to Gerald, he asked me if I would stick my tongue where the sun doesn't shine (see "Men's Planet I.")

"No, because you can get hepatitis, and you haven't even gone down on me yet," I said.

He had, however, scored major points for erotic creativity by inspecting me closely and whispering, "You have a beautiful clit." I came really, really hard.

Somehow, the conversation turned to food. I said that my specialty was pasta with white clam sauce, and that I used eight cloves of garlic.

"This Korean woman vibed me out with a heavy garlic trip," he said. "She's still chasing after me."

Previously, he had mentioned living with French and Belgian women.

"What is it with you and the international babes?" I asked.

"Do you have something against us passionate Jewesses?"

Then he told me he was off to a urologist to check out a rash on his scrotum. He didn't know if it was from the biopsy, or, frankly, from my ... you know.

I told him again about the relatively celibate life I had been living since fracturing a vertebrae of my spine.

"Have you slept with anyone else after me?" I asked.

"Just one girl, but she's clean as a whistle," he replied.

Then he told me he had gotten a negative AIDS test.

"Are you saying you want me to take a test?" I asked.

"Because the only sex I've had, I've used condoms plus my diaphragm," I said.

"You can't just get AIDS from sex, you can get it from a blood transfusion!" he yelled.

"How many people get blood transfusions?" I yelled back.

"And may I assume you always use condoms with your assorted femmes du monde?"

"I use a lot of bags and I break a lot of bags," he replied. "But I always destroy condoms after I come because a lot of

women are after my beautiful blond Jewish babies.

As I was saying about that nut detector ...
toc

The Men's Planet VII: Adventures in Taxidermy

Before the Corpse went cyber, I often mentioned my downstairs neighbor, Elmer, he of the Frankenstein-shaped head, crab-like sideways walk, and tendency to obsessively rant on ... you name the subject. He lives on mental disability checks but claims to be an "antiques dealer"--he will sell you a used extension cord for 50 cents. He's the type of guy who, if found on a rooftop with an AK-47 picking off pedestrians, would not elicit the usual neighborly responses to the press: "But he seemed so normal!!!"

A while back, because he basically had nothing better to do, he decided to wage a campaign of terror against me. He discovered an obscure branch of the N.Y.C. civil courts system: the IMCR Dispute Resolution Center. It was established for tenants to resolve grudges against other tenants through the use of "mediators." The IMCR Dispute Resolution Center is so Kafkaesque that you would actually have to be crazy just to locate it, no less utilize it. Elmer had been on my case for "walking too loudly" for years, even though the previous tenants of this apartment had been a 250-pound wife, her raging alcoholic husband, and their abused foster daughter. I tried to reason that physics alone would dictate that a fat family of three would create a louder decibel level than a single, slender woman who basically walked from her bedroom to her office in the kitchen and back. I also reminded Elmer that, for one thing, I had graciously complied with his request when I first moved in that I go barefoot whenever I was at home, even though I was under no legal obligation to do so, and that he had never been particularly thankful for this effort on my part. Rather, he was always compulsively rude and nasty whenever I saw him. He also requested that I do no walking whatsoever after 3 a.m. I said, "But Elmer, what am I supposed to do if I need to go the bathroom? Fly there?" "Just don't go," he responded. The next logical step would have been for him to get a court-order for me to wear Depends at night.

My landlord was too wimpy to intervene, and at that time, everyone in the building was afraid of Elmer, because he was doing lots of blow (he told me this much later) and was so aggressive and angry, picking fights with everyone, that no one wanted to get in the same elevator as him, no less sign a petition on my behalf.

So I kept finding these little yellow slips under my front door summoning me to the IMCR Dispute Resolution Center, threatening me that if I didn't go, the "case" would go to civil court. I finally decided to go, because I know that Elmer's mind is so anarchic, so oceanic, that he needs to have someone telling him how to behave (like a mediator saying, "Leave her alone, you creep.") Sort of like a habitual offender who can't make it on the outside, so he keeps committing crimes because he craves the structure of prison life.

When I finally showed up, the building was as shabby as a South Bronx tenement. In the family court in front of the IMCR "court," an African-American woman stood up and said that she wanted the man she lived with to stop beating on her. "And what is this man's name?" asked the judge. "Tyrone." "Tyrone what?" "How the fuck am I supposed to know?" I knew I had descended into one of Dante's Circles of Hell.

The "center" was actually a small room, where Elmer and I sat across from each other on folding chairs. A Black man in judge's garb sat at a table before us. He seemed pleasant enough, until he introduced himself, with a West Indian accent, as a "judge, lawyer, musician, playwright, poet and taxidermist."

Ohmigod! I thought. He's even crazier than Elmer!!! --a possibility I had never considered. I chided myself for not having brought along a dead squirrel for the "judge" to stuff while he deliberated.

Elmer spoke first. Believing himself to be in a nineteenth-century British courtroom filled with barristers wearing powdered wigs, he enunciated in a peculiarly pretentious style,

"You see, your Honor, when Ms. Surovell peruses the length of her abode, she creates an unbearable cacophony which is astoundingly disconcerting."

To my utter amazement, the mediator replied, "But Ms. Surovell is but a young woman. Would you wish that she had ... no vitality?"

I was in a state of total shock and amazement. It had never before occurred to me, and yet it was all so obvious. The only way to "get through" to someone crazy is to talk to them in their language.

"Well, no ... I guess I want her to have vitality. But her walking really disturbs me after 10 p.m." Here he held up a map of my apartment, which was the same scale as his own, and in the living room he had drawn a small pathway on which I should be restricted to walking on at certain hours. I became instantly livid. "You motherfucker!" I shouted. "How dare you think you can tell me where to walk in the apartment I pay rent for?"

"Calm down," said the mediator. "Elmer, Ms. Surovell is a writer, she is an artist. Do you wish her to be restricted to sitting on a sofa? Don't you agree that she must have the freedom to walk from room to room, seeking inspiration, communing with the muse?"

I got into the spirit. "Yes!" I exclaimed. "And furthermore, is this not America? Is this Russia, where the government comes in and tells you how to furnish your home?" (I don't know whether they do that in Russia, but it sounded plausible at the time.)

"Well, no," said Elmer, mulling it over. "I guess you guys are right."

"What if Ms. Surovell agrees to always wear rubber-soled slippers, like hospital slippers, in the apartment, would that be an adequate solution for you?"

"Sure," said Elmer, beaming scarily.

Then the mediator said, "Ms. Surovell, I was wondering if I could ask you how to get published?" and he handed both of us sheets of his original poetry. Illustrated with the kind of kindergarten-esque drawings of robins and stick-figures a schizophrenic homeless person begging for money on the subway would shove in your face. The rhymes went along the lines of "In the merry month of May, we have fun all day, then the sun goes down and we can't play."

"Um, um, I'll see what I can do." I was quickly making headway to the seventh circle ...

"Now I want you to shake hands and walk out together." I disdainfully shook Elmer's sweaty palm; he was still radiant with the thrill of "victory," even though, technically, he had lost. As we walked out, Elmer asked me. "Weren't those poems brilliant?"

The mediator had followed us, and said he had to speak to me personally. He asked if he could take me out to lunch, and I accepted his offer, hoping I could convince him to issue a decree that Elmer never have further verbal contact with me, under penalty of, say, a monetary fine. At a tacky nearby cafeteria, the judge instead unsuccessfully tried to put the moves on me. I did some checking up and found that he was neither a judge nor a lawyer. NYC trains psychotic people and then pays them \$30,000 a year to be "mediators." However, this Romeo may well have legitimately been a taxidermist ... I just didn't really want to go there and find out. All I wanted him to stuff was ...

I began a campaign of writing to the mayor, who is always whining about finances, as mayors tend to do, saying that I found it unfair that any mentally-ill person could harass a fellow tenant with any complaint whatsoever (she has little green men standing on her fire escape shooting gamma rays at me) and that he could save millions by simply disbanding this idiotic "pseudo-court." I continued to receive replies from the N.Y. Dept. of Mental Health saying that mentally-ill people have the same rights as do any other people to annoy their neighbors.

I never once wore the slippers. Elmer never mentioned the subject of my "thundering footsteps" again. I think, essentially, that he ran out of money or lost his blow connection, so that every sound emanating from my apartment wasn't amplified 50 million times in his already deranged brain. I still suspected, nonetheless, that he could probably hear those silent dog whistles.

Then, they invented Prozac. Now, Elmer is still an energy vampire, he will rant at a moment's notice, but he doesn't seem homicidal.

Nonetheless, I decided to do get revenge in my own way. I got a black candle in the shape of a nude male from the creepy Satanic evil witchcraft store (which has since been closed down by the N.Y.P.D.), retrieved one of Elmer's many erratic, nonsensical notes featuring the looniest handwriting in the annals of graphology (because I needed something that had personally belonged to him to work the spell), and stuck the note up the candle's ass with a pushpin. Then I put it in the freezer. I told my neighbor Sherry I was doing this.

It was summer and I had a problem with the freezer a few days later. I had forgotten about the candle, but the Russian immigrant super never mentioned it. Perhaps he thought frozen candles were a common American custom.

Several weeks later Sherry stopped me in the hallway as I was coming home to my apartment and looked at me with genuine fear. "I will never, ever fuck with you for the rest of my life," she said. (Naturally, she fucked with me big-time several months later, but that's another story.)

"Why? What happened?"

"Elmer is in the hospital."

"The mental hospital?"

"No, the regular kind. He has a perforated bowel."

Finally, justice had prevailed.

toc

The Men's Planet VIII: My Suzanne Obsession

Most of the residents of my Greenwich Village building are eccentric. There is Jean-Lac, the drunken trumpet player with the crooked wig and wooden leg; ancient, decrepit Iona, who either dresses as an opera singer in sequined headdress and floor-length maroon velvet gown or as Little Bo Peep in a ruffly little girl's dress with giant bows on the bodice; Maxi, the lesbian poet junkie stripper from Wellesley College and Elmer, who claims to be an antiques dealer (he sells used light bulbs and extension cords for 50 cents). But I had never realized that Suzanne was the most eccentric of all until last summer.

Suzanne looked to be in her forties. She was a tall, hefty (150 pounds?), intelligent-looking, blue-eyed blonde. Someone had once mentioned that she was a graphic artist. The fact that she me never recognized any of the other tenants, no matter how many times we shared an elevator with her, intrigued me and incited my admiration. I would love to be that unaware, that self-involved, that oblivious, even just for one day. But when Suzanne got an adorable little cocker spaniel named Sparkle, she began consistently recognizing me. She seemed to appreciate my interest in the dog, and allowed me to pet him for five minute stretches. He'd come running over whenever he saw me. Some months after Sparkle's arrival, I began noticing a five-foot-one homely Black Bowery bum with a giant tumor in his cheek who always wore high-water overalls hanging around the building. All the tenants tried to avoid getting into the elevator with him or letting him in the front door. Then I was informed by a neighbor who I knew to be Suzanne's only confidante that he was Suzanne's husband.

Her husband! I was utterly fascinated. I asked the confidante for details.

Suzanne had met Leroy on the Bowery when he begged a quarter from her, and now she was supporting him financially. He was still a Bowery bum, and drinking Bud and Boone's Farm on a bench with his homeboys, but now with a home to return to. And, the confidante added, he was completely illiterate. In fact, Suzanne had told her that he wanted to get a job, but was incapable of filling out an application form.

Totally illiterate! How, how could it be? Until that point, I'd been willing to concede that Leroy might well be a fascinating, charismatic Bowery Bum (although I doubted it).

I was recovering from a serious back injury and under doctor's orders not to work. It was summer, brutally hot and humid, and, until then, my days had been spent sitting in my air-conditioned apartment watching "Court TV," Now, I had found new purpose: to discover how a bright, pretty, talented woman could marry an illiterate Bowery bum. I schemed away and eventually decided to volunteer to take care of Sparkle should Suzanne wish to take a weekend trip out of town. Suzanne would be compelled to instruct me in the dog's care, giving me an opportunity to ask strategic questions.

My opportunity presented itself one morning while I was in the lobby getting my mail. Suzanne walked in with Sparkle, looking extremely agitated.

"My in-laws are here from Alabama and I don't know what to do!" Suzanne exclaimed. They're all illiterate, and they're not interested in anything! Leroy's illiterate, but at least he's been living in New York for awhile!" (Yeah, on the Bowery, I thought, but kept quiet.) "All his mother does is fry pork fat all day long. She's not even into television. Maybe I'll take them to the Bronx Zoo."

"That sounds like a good idea," I replied, then added. "Hey, Suzanne. I was thinking, if you and Leroy ever want to take like a weekend trip, I'd be glad to take care of Sparkle."

"Would you?" She looked ecstatic. "That would be incredible. I haven't been able to go anywhere ever since I got him. By the way, do you like cats, because I have two cats as well?"

"No, I'm to allergic to cats, and I just really don't like them at all."

"That's fine. I can pay one of the kids in the building to care for them."

The next day Suzanne left a message on my answering machine asking if I could take care of Sparkle for three-and-a-half weeks while she and Leroy went to Paris and the south of France. I was incensed. My impulse was to call and say, "Now, this is rather inappropriate on your part ..." But, at the same time, this new wrinkle was an accelerant to my obsession. Leroy in his high-water overalls on the Champs-Elysses! Leroy in the Louvre! Leroy in le Jeu du Paume! The

possibilities were endless. I decided to stall for time with my answer. For the first time since injuring my back, I felt no remorse over my lack of contact with the outside world. Obviously, I need never leave the parameters of my apartment building again. Life was a cabaret.

As I mulled over my decision, Suzanne left me a message saying that she had decided to have a college kid stay rent-free in her apartment who would feed Sparkle and walk him in the morning and at night. Could I cover his daily mid-afternoon walk? I told her I'd be delighted to. Suzanne suggested I go on a trial walk with her so I could acquaint myself with Sparkle's favorite route.

"Never walk the dog on Third Street, the Hell's Angels' block, because if the dog pees on one of their motorcycles, they'll shoot it," she advised.

"Fine," I said.

I asked her about her work. She said she had a masters in French and currently worked as a decorator. Feigning ignorance, I asked her what Leroy did.

"He sleeps fifteen hours a day," she replied.

I asked her about her family. She said that her father had left her mother when she was a baby, so she had never known him, and that her mother was a cold, controlling person, a professional Doberman breeder of German descent, with whom she hadn't spoken in fifteen years. I began feeling truly sorry for her, and experienced a fleeting pang of guilt. But I quickly became irritated with Suzanne when we stopped at the cemetery.

"See those cats?" she asked in a sorrowful tone, pointing at a couple of skinny white strays. "Two of them are dying of leukemia, and someone in the neighborhood just told me that a third has contracted it, too."

I repressed my urge to say, "Suzanne. I already told you really don't care about cats, either known or unknown. I'm a die-hard dog person, and my sympathies otherwise are with homeless people." I didn't like feeling manipulated. Then I remembered that I was manipulating her. I walked them back to her apartment. Leroy opened the door and asked me, "You seen that Clint Easter movie, 'The Unforgetting,' 'The Unforgotten,' 'The Unforgettable' ... whatever it's called?"

"Yes, I did. Did you like it?"

"I didn't understand that movie." He shook his head, baffled.

Suzanne had mentioned that her second husband was a fat, bald fifty-year-old Jamaican reggae deejay she had divorced when she discovered that he was seducing fourteen-year-old girls. I asked her if she wanted to split the cost of the upcoming Reggae Sunsplash concert on pay-per-view and watch it at my apartment.

Suzanne and Sparkle arrived half an hour early. Suzanne was sporting a shiner. Suzanne had brought six doorknobs with her to paint. She set up newspaper and watercolor paints, and I got her and the dog water.

Then I asked her, "Did Leroy hit you?"

"Yes," she replied in a stoical voice. "And it isn't the first time."

"Why would you live with a man who hits you?"

"All men hit women."

"No, they don't."

"Yes, they do."

"No, they don't," I said firmly, "and Suzanne, if you believe that they do, you have a really twisted, warped perspective on men."

"Well, all Black men hit women."

"No, they don't. And, anyway, why do you have to only hook up with Black men?"

She didn't answer. I let her reflect and paint doorknobs. She began talking about her experiences as a Peace Corps worker in Africa, sharing the fact that she had contracted a permanent intestinal disorder that resulted in constant flatulence. That she launched into a brilliant analysis of British colonialism. She had a very cerebral, even, dare I say,

masculine, intellect. Finally I just said it.

"Suzanne, you've told me that Leroy is illiterate. Can you tell me why you married him?"

"For companionship," she replied quickly. "That's why. For companionship."

"Do you mean sexual companionship?"

"No, we don't have a physical relationship. But believe me ..." Here she looked at me sharply, challengingly. "At one time, I was a very sensual person."

"I believe you!" I assured her. "Why wouldn't I believe you?" Then I asked, "Don't you need intellectual companionship?"

She snorted derisively. "I've been with intellectuals, baby. Believe me, they're the worst companions of all."

I couldn't think of a rejoinder, so I decided to be risky. "Suzanne, please don't be offended by this question, but do you, like, have a problem with your self-esteem?"

"No!"

"Well, can I ask you something I've been wondering about?"

"Sure."

"When you go to Paris, are you gonna take Leroy to the Louvre?"

"No," she replied, thoughtfully. "I will go to the Louvre and Leroy will entertain himself."

Sans doute dans les taverns et auberges de Paris, I speculated. Still. I was skeptical. Leroy seemed unable to conduct himself any further than the Bowery, several blocks away. I had often wondered how he had gotten to New York from Alabama and found his Mecca, the Bowery. I couldn't picture him navigating around, of all places, Paris.

Then Suzanne launched into an account of a local dog who had been hit by a car. Practically every bone in her body had been broken. She was currently recovering at the Humane Society. I completely ignored her. I was as little interested in the tragic life of an anonymous dog as I was in anonymous leukemic cats. Then the Reggae Sunsplash came on.

Over the next week, whenever I ran into Suzanne, or she came by to borrow something (she'd grown instantly dependent), she'd bring up the injured stray dog. How nice it was, how it needed a good home. Obviously, it wasn't enough for her that I had generously offered to walk her dog every day for three-and-a-half weeks (in exchange for a pair of French jeans and a bottle of Coco perfume). Now she was trying to con me into adopting one of my own. I told her that I didn't like all dogs, just cocker spaniels (not true), hoping the matter would be closed.

Meanwhile, her Paris plans were in place, but she hadn't found a college student to stay in her apartment. I asked her why she had bought the airline tickets, etc., without first finding a subletter.

"Because if I don't just make plans and go, I'll never go on vacation and I'll be like my mother who didn't leave the kennel for seventeen years and worked my grandparents to death."

"Wait a minute ... you don't mean ... literally ... to death?"

"Oh, yes," Suzanne calmly insisted. "She worked them to death." Then she segued, "I'll never forget lying in bed at night and hearing those Dobermans sneaking all over the house. There was one named Satin--I thought of him as Satan--and he was a really, really quiet, sneaky one--all I could hear was his toenail clicking against the wooden stair. Every night, I lay in bed petrified that Satan was coming to kill me."

"Hardly the most nurturing environment for a little girl," I suggested.

She nodded her head, winked at me, and then said, "I went to see that dog again ..."

Next came a message from Suzanne on my answering machine: "You've got to come over the minute you get home. I have the cutest thing to show you in my apartment." Leroy answered the door, grinning drunkenly. Two cocker spaniels were now running around their apartment. I immediately figured out that Suzanne had assumed that, since I liked cocker spaniels, I would be overwhelmed with love and would volunteer to adopt a stray if she brought one home. I actually never did find out where she got it from because I said, "You better get rid of that dog before you go to Europe! I'm not walking two dogs while you're gone!"

Leroy nonetheless blurted out, "Do you want this doag? Why don't you take this doag?"

"No!" I snapped. "I do not want a dog, and that's that." Suzanne looked devastated. I regretted my harsh tone.

Sparkle, though a male, kept attempting to mount the other dog, also a male. I hadn't known that male dogs did that.

"See that!" I exclaimed. "Whenever I meet a guy I like in New York City, he turns out to be gay."

"No, dis doag ain't no faggot, he just hoany," Leroy protested. "That all. He hoany. He ain't never had no pussy, and he ain't never gonna get no pussy, cause if we ever give him some, then he gonna turn into de stud. And dis doag ain't gonna be no stud." Then he yelled, "Sparkle, you gets offs dat doag or I'm gonna put them sandals on you!"

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

Leroy gestured towards a pair of Birkenstocks on the floor. "I puts them sandals on his feet when he be bad." Leroy said. It seemed to me like a medieval torture ritual. I kept silent to avoid causing trouble, and possibly getting Suzanne beaten up.

Back in my apartment, I wondered if Suzanne had been unable to distinguish the difference between a stray animal and a stray person when she brought Leroy home.

At the last minute, Suzanne found a college student. She xeroxed me a copy of her original, six-page, single-spaced, typed "Dog Care Guide" booklet. It mentioned that Sparkle's Alpo should always be heated and mixed with fresh pasta and cooked fresh vegetables, and other instructions no twenty-year-old college girl would ever follow.

Suzanne called me from the South of France. "First Leroy went swimming in a river and he became convinced it was filled with poisonous snakes that were trying to kill him, That night he couldn't find his traveler's checks (signed with an X? I wondered) and he accused my friend's husband of stealing them. He stormed out of the house and slammed the front door so hard it came off its hinges. My friends kicked us out and we had to stay in a hotel."

At this point, I felt sorry for Leroy. How must he have felt surrounded by a bunch of intellectual Europeans, when he could hardly communicate in English? No wonder he was angry and slamming doors. But he was too passive and dependent on Suzanne, who supported him, to ever say, "I wouldn't feel comfortable in Europe. I'll just stay on the Bowery with my homies."

"Well, at least you don't have to worry about Sparkle," I said, reassuringly. "He and I are having a wonderful time, playing ball for one to two hours a day."

"Thank you," Suzanne said, her voice choking up. "You'll never know how much your kindness has meant to me. Allowing me to go on this vacation. If there's ever anything, anything I can ever do for you ..."

"Just bring me the tightest, sexiest jeans in the city of Paris," I replied. "That would make me tres content." Sparkle and I were having a wonderful time. I had been incredibly lonely during the thousands of hours spent recuperating in my apartment after my back injury, and the little guy was cheering me up immeasurably. In return, I was spoiling him with hamburgers, cheese, bacon, sausage and a variety of doggie toys. As soon as we left the building, he'd start heading towards the pet store, a block away.

We were in the midst of playing ball in Suzanne's apartment when they returned. Leroy immediately announced that he was going out for a drink. Suzanne hugged me warmly and then said. "Oh, Sparkle. I missed you so much!" Sparkle gave her a blank look, as if she were a total stranger, and retrieved his ball. I got a creepy premonition. The next evening, Suzanne brought over my presents. A bottle of shower gel (ripped off by Leroy in their hotel room?), two bars of Nivea soap, a package of almond cookies, a pair of lace stockings, and a beige sweatshirt. Neither jeans nor perfume were included. Then Suzanne began ranting about her French friends.

"I don't need the coffee klatch!" she shouted. "I don't need the yabba yabba!"

I didn't have a clue.

"My friend Dominique is such a snob. She said to me, 'Suzanne, you always marry down.' How dare she say that to me!" (Would you consider marrying Leroy marrying up? I wondered.) "Oh, she forgets that when she was doing a documentary on homeless people, who took her around and introduced her to all his friends? That's right, Leroy!" She fixed me with a furious gaze. "She'd look down on funky freelancers like you! That's right! That's what I said! Funky freelancers!"

Then, suddenly, she announced, "I've got to get rid of Leroy. This morning he threw the vacuum cleaner at Sparkle and missed him by an inch. All the dirt spilled out of it and then he ordered me to clean it up. Said he was mad because it was too noisy. He comes home, eats his dinner, makes a face."

My heart lurched with concern for Sparkle. How often had Leroy abused that sweet little animal? How unfair on her part. It was one thing if she let Leroy beat her up, but how dare she not protect her pet? Especially since she was always giving out Humane Society brochures and talking about how much money she contributed to animal rights causes. The sandals were probably the most benign of Leroy's punishments.

"Is he abusive to the cats, too?" I asked.

"He scoots them and scats at them and torments them. I'm going to have to get Leroy put in jail. That's the only way I'll ever get rid of him."

Now my sympathies lay with Leroy. There he was, living on the Bowery, minding his own business, and then one day fate led him to ask Suzanne for a quarter and, the next thing you know, he's hallucinating copperheads in a river in Provence and then he's incarcerated. I briefly contemplated organizing a Leroy Defense Fund.

"Suzanne, why don't you just change your locks?" I suggested. "That would get rid of Leroy. It's not like he has all these resources available to him. He can't even read--how could he call up the ACLU or Legal Aid?"

"No, jail is the only way," she said snippily. "Believe me, I'm a very revengeful person, and when someone hurts me, they pay for it." She glared at me and was off again. "My father beat my mother while she was pregnant with his son and she lost the baby. He never forgave her for that. Then, when I was born, he was angry that I was a girl and he left her. My grandmother was a very educated, very cultured person, and she married an illiterate alcoholic who beat her constantly."

Calling Dr. Freud! I thought. Summoning Sigmund to the white courtesy telephone, please.

"Suzanne," I said, striving for a tactful tone of voice, "did you ever think you might be acting out an, um, Oedipal pattern?"

"No," she replied thoughtfully. "But you might be right. I have to think about that."

Whenever I encountered her in the lobby or elevator after that, Suzanne would complain that Sparkle was no longer affectionate to her. She implied that I had deliberately sabotaged their relationship. Clearly, she hated me.

Then I shared an elevator with a looped Leroy. When he saw me, Sparkle ran between my legs and refused to budge. Leroy gave us a look of utter bewilderment. "Why you like that doag so much anyway?" he asked. "Whattsa matter, you don't like no mens, you like a doag? What is you--a freak? You is a freak wit dat doag??"

"Hey, don't you be dissin' me now!" I retorted, wagging my finger at him, pretending to be offended.

The next day, Suzanne left me a six-page, single-spaced letter under my door. It began, "Your love affair with the dog must end." I never read the rest.

I had finally figured out why a woman with an MA in French had married an illiterate Bowery bum. Because she was totally, totally nuts. And her Doberman-breeding, Nazi sadist, Ilsa, She-Wolf of the S.S. mother had been terminally Fruit Loops as well. And it was probable that Granny the Masochist had had many moments of dementia, too.

I resumed watching "Court TV."

toc

The Men's Planet IX: A Trying Day for a Diplomat

My friend Sally's boyfriend is a Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers lookalike who rarely bathes and picks fights with strangers. I was therefore less than astounded when she suddenly confided that he has been residing in mental institutions on and off for seven years, ever since his mother absconded with his bar mitzvah money.

Sally said, "They diagnosed him as a manic-depressive, but he told me he's really just manic, so he took himself off lithium." Recently, she added, he had been spending eight-hour stretches penning tomes on the existential nature of pinball.

"Sally, there is no â€"just manic," I told her. "Remember Newton's Law of Gravity?"

"What happens to manic-depressives who don't take lithium?" she asked.

"I think they eventually commit suicide."

We spent four hours making plans for her to carefully extricate herself and her possessions over a period of weeks and move to Brooklyn. The next morning, she called to say she had had a long talk with the pinball wizard, he was much better, she was staying.

"Sally, why would you want to live with a man who periodically ends up in the looney bin?"

"I'm starting to really get into pinball."

Later that afternoon, I found myself in a copy shop on the Upper West Side, on my way to my third visit to a "doctor"-- actually, a "Psy.D."(?) shrink. An Eastern European-looking man in a dweeby wool cap was obsessively collating stacks of papers covered with geometric designs, probably IQ tests for schizophrenics. Ever cognizant of a New Yorker's most obsessive and elusive commodity, physical space, I squigged my elbows onto the counter with great restraint and sensitivity, smelling extravagantly of Magic Noire perfume. Nonetheless, Wool Cap shot me a less-than-chivalrous look. After an eight-year romance with a WASP who automatically stood up whenever I entered a restaurant, I've developed zero tolerance for ungentlemanly behavior. "Pardon me, sir," I felt compelled to point out, "But most men would be flattered to have me rest my elbows next to them."

"Do you mean lonely men on the Upper West Side?" he countered.

"You must be talking about yourself." I flashed a dazzling smile.

"You must be talking about yourself," he shot back, snickering, like he was on a roll,

"That would be rather irrational, considering I'm a woman, and, anyway, I live downtown," I said in a superior tone (implying: where the hip people live.) "Are you Eastern European?"

"No, Western European."

"From where?"

"France."

"Enchants," I replied, and extended my hand, because I'm basically a diplomat and I prefer to attempt to resurrect harmony whenever possible.

"I don't think so," he sniffed.

I sighed mournfully. "Must you be so stereotypically French?" I asked.

"How do you mean?"

"Humorless and arrogant."

"I thought we were supposed to be charming and romantic?" he actually retorted.

"I had the worst sex of my life in France," I trilled, making a lavish exit.

The therapist was skinny, with a pinched, sour face, hunched shoulders, and compulsively shaking legs. He told me I was "lying on the couch in the wrong direction." When I related my dream about going to the home of a creative writing teacher who had three cats--one of which was all white, with white eyes, wearing a white veil, who was named Queen Victoria, one of which was black with a striped white tail, like a skunk, and one of which was stuffed, he frowned irritably and declared that he could offer no insights.

"Exactly what kind of therapy is this, anyway?" I asked.

"It's interpersonal. All that matters is how I feel towards you and right now I'm feeling extremely hostile. I'd like to see you be in a great deal of pain."

I attempted to slam his door off its hinges, then stumbled down Columbus Avenue in the rain, ultimately consoling myself by buying a fringed suede sexpot jacket a la Shelly Tambo in "Northern Exposure." I walked all the way to the SONY screening room, Fifty-Fifth and Madison, to review a horror flick for a downtown arts magazine that doesn't pay me any money, where I had invited a new acquaintance, a 50-year old hypnotherapist, as my plus one. She was clad in a kelly green turtleneck shirt, a cherry red sweater and a grape colored floor length washable silk skirt. Between the insults,

trauma, and dismissal of my invaluable advice I had suffered, the shrieks emanating from the world's most authentic sound system, and my plus one's color scheme, I feared I was in danger of developing Adult Autism. After the film, the hypnotherapist had apparently placed herself in a hypnotic trance, because when I told her I wanted to take the bus downtown, she had no idea whatsoever about how to get change for her five-dollar bill, other than to suggest that we walk thirteen blocks to Grand Central. I had to literally lead her, like a seeing-eye dog, into Kaufmann's All-Night Pharmacy. There she asked the cashier in a little-girl voice, "Can you give me change for the bus?"

"Would you just buy a goddamn pack of gum!" I finally shouted.

Even a diplomat like myself has her Limits.

toc

The Men's Planet X: How I Spent My Summer Vacation

I agree with Sarah Palin that the best road trips are taken by plane. So, this year I booked a flight to Halifax, Nova Scotia, to visit my brother Leon who has been afflicted with an acute case of Empty Nest Syndrome ever since my nephew went away to college a decade ago.

This past year was stressful. Not only did I endure my Long, Epic Battle with the Faceless Monster Verizon, which began in December of 2008 and was resolved to my dissatisfaction in May of 2009, but my neighbors, Dave and Dean, a gay couple, had solicited my help in a fierce custody battle over a sweet-tempered puppy, Bernardo. Bernardo was not the name given to him by his original owner (hereafter referred to as "Prima Donald.") Dave and Dean (hereafter referred to as "Da Boyz") have a joint crush on George Chakiris, the Greco-American actor who played Bernardo, leader of the Sharks in "West Side Story." Da Boyz worried that a name change might be traumatic to their canine charge.

I was optimistic. "Don't worry. Think of him as the Pax Jolie-Pitt, formerly Pham Quang Sang, of the puppy world."

Prima Donald is an aging, raging, flaming, fading-out queen. I don't know his history vis-a-vis dog ownership, only that he is an inveterate boozehound. Oblivious to the needs of his new pet, he indulged in the hair of the dog until reregistering as a guest in one of the Manhattan snake pit hospitals Richard Yates so often called home. He phoned Da Boyz and asked if they could care for his latest internet purchase in his absence. Dave entered a stale cigarette-smoke-filled studio apartment, its velvet drapes tightly drawn to block out any remnants of an offending sun. He navigated shit-covered floors, coaxing the starving animal out from under the bed. "Get him out of here right now!" Prima Donald screeched imperiously before dialing 911 to summon the proverbial white-coaters. Dave said the environment reminded him of weekends in his own childhood home, when his parents would get all George and Martha and routinely ship him and his siblings off to their grandmother's house. So emotionally traumatic was the experience, and so frantic was he to rescue the victim that he forgot to get its ownership and other necessary papers.

Da Boyz relished their new roles, and motherhood particularly suited Dave. The routine of walking Bernardo four times daily and feeding him on a schedule seems to have cured his ADD-ish spaciness. As Da Boyz nested and nurtured, Bernardo became a joyful, active, adorable little terrier, quickly attaining top dog celeb status in our apartment building. I took pleasure in observing this happy household, although I experienced hair-raising anxiety when Dean showed me the two leashes they were contemplating buying--one green-patterned and the other, the ever-fashionable basic black.

"I'm leaning towards the black. It has a kind of S&M look," Dean explained.

Inevitably, Prima Donald "finished" "rehab" and wanted his property back. Da Boyz were adamant. There was no way they were returning a dog to someone who maintained, "I didn't abuse him, I only neglected him."

So they planned a luncheon date.

"Don't go!" I, well, screamed over the phone. "He's your ADVERSARY now--you want his dog, he wants it back. What would you accomplish by socializing with him? If you plan to keep Bernardo, you can't also keep this guy as a friend."

They took my advice, but worried obsessively. Dean told me that Dave feared that Prima Donald or his sister would come and "throw firecrackers under their door."

"Say WHAT?" I asked. Dose Boyz ...

Finally, they were summoned to criminal court. Their Oliver Wendell Holmesian legal strategy: "We're going to tell the judge that Prima Donald has a gay stalker crush on Dean and that when he got fired from Hermes, he made a big scene and got really hysterical!"

Did I have any choice other to contact an organization which will not only take up the cause of custody of a puppy, but that of a fly who has been swatted ... yes, the paint-throwing, publicity-seeking Petans? One of their executives, despite

being on vacation (Mykonos? Ibiza? A pig farm?) spent three entire hours on the phone with me, imparting handy-dandy all-purpose legal advice, namely, "Tell them just to stick to the facts!"

Fortunately, Prima Donald had drunkenly filed papers in the wrong court, so the case was dismissed. As of today Bernardo resides with Da Boyz, and there I vow he will remain, possession being nine-tenths and about six litigation-free months having passed. Finally, I felt secure enough to go visit Leon, a math professor at a Haligonian university who had completed teaching his yearly courses. I haven't visited Halifax since the nineteen-eighties, when my nephew was obsessed with playing with Transformers and plastic swords and I took him and his little pals to see "National Lampoon's Summer Vacation." Now he is getting a Ph.D. in Philosophy, and will soon become an academic in the Surovellian tradition. During my last trip, Leon and I had such an explosive blow-out sib-fest that my long-time lover, the New Yorker writer/editor paid for me to go stay in Halifax's only five-star hotel (doubtlessly placing this charge on his unlimited, unsupervised expense account.) At the time, I was impressed, but I just checked out the room price for a night, and it is way, way cheaper (as I learned from the Autistic Kid in this story's title) than any zero-star hotel room located anywhere here in New York City.

This time, hoping for an agita-free experience, I explained to Leon that ever since I injured my back, I need to rest often, to sleep on firm mattresses and sit in comfortable chairs, that I wouldn't be hiking his favorite hilly nature trails, and finally, that I love my caffeine and would bring along a coffee-maker.

"That doesn't sound so high maintenance," he replied. The prospect of harmony tugged at my heart-strings as harp-strings played in my head.

Shortly before my departure date, Michael Jackson overdosed on the surgical anesthesia drugs and hundreds of narcotics he ingested daily, "a victim of sycophants and enablers" (did they force-feed them to him?), "a tragic figure who never enjoyed a real childhood" (nor ever partook of an hour of psychotherapy), "a wonderful father" (who insisted his children always appear in public wearing animal masks, since celebrity's children are so often the targets of kidnappers, like ... well, there was Frank Sinatra, Jr., kidnapped on December 8, 1963, and returned unharmed two days later) "to his--shockingly--non-biological children" (Gee, I had always believed that dyeing one's skin changes one's DNA!). This bald, noseless lipstick-wearing white female impersonator who hung out with creepy faghags like La Liz and La Liza was mourned and celebrated as a Black man at NYC's Apollo Theatre in Harlem, where photographs of him as a young Negro child were flaunted by the desperate and delusional. Any Emperor's New Clothes dynamic always makes me apoplectic, and this one showed no signs of abating. To quote Sir Paul McCartney, the "boyman's" deification in the media only picked up steam, with former "Court TV" anchor Nancy Grace, who had repeatedly informed her viewers that he was guilty, guilty, guilty, and therefore was expertly psyching out and manipulating his star-struck jurors (several of whom told the media that they had changed their minds days after rendering their not-guilty verdict) during his child molestation trial now doing the splashiest 180 of all. I received so many CNN Breaking News Alerts about the tragedy to end all tragedies, so many more than I would get if, say, a world leader like the prime minister of Canada had died, that I may need to purchase a new hard drive.

So, I didn't bring my laptop with me. I wanted a break from computers, from "breaking news," from my e-mail.

What possessed me to think that my spiffily renovated Matahariette website, so ultra-feminine, so "me" in every way, so appropriate after the former red-plaid homepage that a male "web designer" created for me would be completed by my webmasters before I left, just because that was what I had "planned?" I know my Dylan lyrics, and the "Jokerman" he sings about is Mr. F-U Fate. The ultimate free spirit, Jokerman will kick your butt if you try to control him (was it a coincidence that I read "The Short-Timers" by Gustav Hasford on my trip, a Vietnam fever-dreamy reminiscence narrated by a Marine nicknamed Joker?) As a friend once advised, "Don't make appointments and you won't be disappointed." My personal internet real estate was finally constructed to perfection literally (predictably?) on the last day of my vacation. This meant that I needed to check my e-mail several times daily, asking Heidi and Jeff, so spandexcellent.com to endlessly delete, add, change and tweak. Leon, who has a state-of-the-art computer in his office, owns such a user-hostile generic home model that I immediately became a sort of, well, Mac whore, one without a Mac daddy to scout for me. I didn't exchange sexual favors for computer time, but whenever someone seemed like a likely candidate (e.g., Leon's next-door neighbors) I would meet, greet and then ask them, "Do you guys happen to have a Mac in your house? Could I just come in for a few minutes to check my e-mail?" Everyone accommodated in their friendly Haligonian fashion because Canadians are generally upbeat and chipper, especially during that window of opportunity before they start drinking their numerous nightly beer (sic), eh? (In bars, the custom is to ask for "Blues," i.e., Labatt's.)

Neither friendly nor accommodating were Leon's many friends, all male, also all professors at Leon's school. Like him, they are exceedingly thrifty, but during their vacations, they eat in restaurants both daily and nightly. Each repast was Marie-Antoinette-ish, as lunchers and diners ordered soups, multiple appetizers, extra everythings, side dishes and desserts (although no one but me drank coffee.) Greek, Syrian, Thai, Italian, nouvelle, Chinese, seafood ... amazing restaurants all, every culinary experience memorable. When my nephew arrived three days before the end of my vacation (we had planned it that way), we celebrated at his favorite Thai place and devoured spring rolls, soup, papaya salad, fish cakes, iced teas, and five entrees for three. Despite my emotional prep-work, my conflicts with Leon mostly centered around food ("Standing on the water, casting your bread ... Oh, Jokerman"), because he will eat anything, and I,

like most chicks, am finicky. Leon behaved as if my avoidance of calamari was a personal and injurious affront and kept threatening to force me to learn to enjoy it (as if I have never had the opportunity?) I avoided going to what he described as one of the world's best sushi bars because I pretty much stick to tuna, salmon, and maybe yellow-tail, and I didn't relish the inevitable prospect of being badgered about not ingesting eel (ever see the movie "The Tin Drum?") At a Greek feast, Leon ordered grilled octopus, and kept grabbing my arms, urging me to taste it.

"I don't partake of anything with pods, tentacles or suction cups," I finally declared.

What did Leon care what I ate? It was just the same old sibling stuff, re-packaged. I experimented with changing our birth order by referring to him as "Little Brother" (result: total failure.) But although Leon was hyper-vigilant about, say, not turning on lights, urging me to travel from the hallway through the computer room in the dark (like a mole?), he was also incredibly generous, and treated me not only to every enormous meal we ate, but he also paid for my plane ticket, our groceries, the repair of my new shoes and movie tickets. He even bought me copies of *The Globe* and *The National Enquirer* (\$1.00 extra in Canada) which I read simply to find out if the inevitable trashing of Michael Jackson had yet commenced (it hadn't and hasn't.) In short, he was a princely big bro.

Yet despite brotherly love, yours truly, Mataharriette, so often the star of the show and the belle of the ball, who can work any room and light up any life, became a veritable wallflower. Not one of Leon's friends ever deigned to asked me a single personal question ("Ain't nobody there would want marry your sister ... oh, Jokerman.") I felt like one of the many mannequins who resided at The Neverland Ranch and at Michael Jackson's secret condo in Century City (27 in one room, according to Christopher Andersen's "Michael Jackson Unauthorized," Simon and Schuster, 1994.) Some of these professors (physics, Black studies, history, math) were paranoid Marxists, while others skipped from one topic to another like a pre-Bernardo Dave. One person's (Leon's) characterization of Morton's "professorial mode" was another's (mine) analysis of a narcissistic personality disorder. During a dinner party held in Morton's country home, he yammered on for ... (who knows?) without anyone reacting or interacting about Stalin's genius-caliber political strategies and Mao Tse Tung's lucky opportunism. I kept signaling to Leon with my eyes, and, although he saw me, he didn't respond, either verbally or non. I finally heard myself yelling out, "Okay, that's enough already, give it a rest!" At another dinner party, hosted by Zack, the dynamic was completely opposite. I unsuccessfully tried to join an animated conversation about Hitler, having watched the History Channel's documentary "Hitler and the Occult" five times. Everything I said--about the Nazi's belief that the Aryans were descendants of the lost continent of Atlantis, that the storm-troopers' bodies were kept in special crypt so that they could be resurrected, that astrological charts were charted daily, that they pursued "The Holy Grail" and explored dousing ... was shouted down, so that I was unable to share even a single freaky fact until, finally, "Would you please stop interrupting everything I say?" burst spontaneously out of my mouth. Showing no interest in me, but a fascination with Leon's identical twin, Karl, who is a frequent Haligonian visitor, George asked me, "Why is Karl so weird?" Finally, conversation! It ended when I answered, "Don't diss my brother, Dude."

During the third and final week, I found a congenial companion who lived in a comfortable home--Leon's neighbor, Joe, who has Asberger's syndrome/autism. Tics, head-shakes and sudden spastic movements aside, he was so Greek godly-handsome that his father told me a talent scout from Elle had approached him about becoming a magazine model on a Costa Rican beach. "Can you believe that my son would prefer to work for \$10 an hour?" Neal, a British psychologist, asked me. Perhaps Joe was more self-aware than he appeared, and could envision his own distress in being asked to remain "totally still" for a camera shoot. While most of Joe's conversation involved numerical percentages, such as, "Here is how one rates the quality of a hotel. One star means ..." and "Do you agree with 44 percent of Americans who ... whatever?" he was a kind person and an engaged listener. When he asked me, "What do most Americans think of the policies of Stephen Harper?" and I replied, "Who is he?" he neither took umbrage nor lectured me on American political myopia. I became addicted to the lush, plush armchairs and sofas Neal had purchased when he inherited a few mill (in pounds or loonies?), as well as their state-of-the-art computers with 24-inch monitors. When I had gone to Morton's house to use his Mac, this is what I heard for the entire afternoon:

Morton (to his wife): "You never make plans. That is your problem. You are psychologically and emotionally incapable of making plans."

Wife: "I made a plan, I did. I swear I made a plan. I really did."

Morton: "No, you did not. You have never made a plan. You just cannot make a plan. This is the story of your life. It's pathetic, you're pathetic."

Wife: "But I did make a plan. I just forgot what it was."

She was mostly bed-ridden (who wouldn't be, under the circumstances?) Visiting at his country house, Morton, Leon and I went out for a drive. As we toiled through restful scenery, woods or water to either side, Morton worried that when he returned, his wife, who planned to bring plants back to their house in town, would misplace his watch and track dirt everywhere like Dennis the Menace. She did neither.

As Leon drove, Morton spoke about his former sister-in-law, who had died of Alzheimer's in her forties.

"We think it may have had psychological causes," Morton opined. "Her husband was verbally abusive to her."

I asked Leon what Morton's own background was. Vain, self-involved mother? I guessed. Bingo. Domineering father? Not only was he an egomaniac, but after he divorced Morton's mother, he seduced and then married Morton's own girlfriend.

Morton has two daughters, neither of whom he loves as much as he does his two dogs, a fact he has told both daughters, as well as the dogs and anyone who will listen. One of these daughters he actively dislikes (more so with each successive suicide attempt.) Yet he was very kind and asexually-affectionate towards the daughter of a colleague whom he pays to do errands for his wife when he is not at home to berate her. This 35-year-old brought a homemade spaghetti sauce to a small soiree which was originally meant to be a barbeque, and shared with us the fact that this was the very first dish she had ever cooked. A combination of tomato paste and numerous cans of olives, both green and black, it was actually an "olive sauce." When I left a salty, rubbery pile on my plate, Leon loudly, incredulously asked, "What's the matter, don't you like olives?!" I waxed nostalgic for my usual vacations sur le Rive Gauche de Paris, for the chic boutiques de St. Germain des-Pres, where I get my fashionista fix, and for the pastels room (Lautrec, Degas) of the Musee D'Orsay, where I bliss out on aesthetics. (On August 11th, a woman assaulted "La Gioconda" with a mug of English Breakfast Tea. ("Michelangelo indeed could have carved out her features ... oh, Jokerman.)) Did she find her fixed Cheshire cat smile more unnerving than the 10,000 paintings of a suffering crucified Christ, his eyes always beseeching, never accepting? And why was English Breakfast her weapon of choice?)

Although Leon never stuck up for me when his friends were obnoxious, and he even attempted to lecture me on the protocol of confronting chronic interrupters ("Don't even go there," was my reply); though he often stated that I should stop drinking coffee altogether whenever I craved a cappuccino from one of the many local Starbuck-ian chains ("Second Cup," "Just Us"), ("Hey, I don't tell you what you should or shouldn't do," was my reply) I left him and his home with genuine regret. The inevitable scary sibling dogfight commenced one afternoon after Leon had been chopping trees in his yard as I drank iced coffee and read "The Bad Seed." I don't even remember what set it off like a firecracker, but I decided to quickly extinguish its flames, because really, why undo in minutes what had taken so much effort to rehabilitate? My sweet, tender feelings towards Leon persist, and so I had a happy summer vacation.

I returned the day before my mother's birthday (we had planned it this way) and Karl attended her party at a Japanese restaurant in my East Village hood. Also a professor (political science and history), Karl has been carrying around a little girl's pink and purple striped vinyl knapsack (hereafter to be referred to as "the pocketbook") for three years. He thrives on provoking people into making snide comments which he then claims enrage him, as he can only exist in a pissed-off state of mind. My oldest brother Frederick has been on the Dr. Mark Fuhrman diet for perhaps half a decade, (i.e., he consumes a daily regimen of: five pounds of vegetables, juiced, vegetable and bean soups for lunch and dinner, and fruit in-between. C'est du tout au tout.) Since the restaurant did not serve edamame beans, he feasted on cabbage soup afterwards, chez lui. He is not only gaunt, but he has completely lost what minimal vitality he once had. His eyes are ringed with purple circles, his eyebrows have fallen off, his veins are ropier than Madonna's, and beta-carotene ingestion has turned his skin color pumpkiny-orange. Whenever I talked to Frederick about my life, a non-stop adventure he has seldom been a part of due to a decades-long never-resolved feud I am willing to finally overlook, he kept giving me unsolicited bad advice in his soft, trailing-into-the-ether voice. It was all essentially the same: "Don't be yourself, be like me, be passive." I finally asked him, "Do I appear to you to have difficulty making my way in the world? Have I been asking you for your opinion on how I should function with my fellow humans?" (I hadn't mentioned any Canadian academicians.) Oblivious to our dynamics and slightly drunk on sake, my sister-in-law bogarted my attention as she repeated her mantra, "Your brother and I are going to end up getting a divorce! I'm telling you, Hariette, this diet is ruining our marriage! We are going to have culinary irreconcilable differences!"--but then she has been saying the same thing with different details ever since Frederick took a 12-year break from general society to move into the basement of their large New Jersey home and work for 20 hours a day seven days a week self-publishing an economics newsletter which documented trade agreements between socialist and capitalist countries. For those years in which he toiled in his dungeon, finally peaking with a circulation of 200 (mostly university libraries) he never became current, and he ultimately abandoned the enterprise one issue behind, which has always been a perfect metaphor for Frederick's all-around modus operandi and emotional gestalt. My mom's birthday shindig continued at her apartment, sans yours truly, because I know that the fireworks that get thrown under her door and explode all night long are always about the same topics: Karl's behavior in restaurants (after he has either: brought a sack of White Castle burgers into a diner, a cup of clam chowder into an upscale eatery, licked a serving-dish as a waiter was removing it, vigorously lapped up any remaining particles of food from his bowl, or harangued a staffer about every ingredient in every "special," asking if they might be organic, including in fast-food joints) or, his pocketbook. That night was a double-header, as Karl had queried our Japanese waitress, "Excuse me, but could you tell me what you think of this bag? I really like it. But people are always giving me shit about it. Do you think it looks like a kid's bag?" "No understandingly," she shook her head with a sad little smile. "Me not many English." I was later informed that my niece, sated with the same-old same-o as we all are, derided the pocketbook as making Karl look Michael Jackson-ish. Taking a new approach, she told him, "If you really want to meet women, you should stop carrying it around." I saw Karl just last night, as I had accidentally taken home one of Leon's library books, and Karl volunteered to return it to him, as he was about to undertake his own road trip up north, because he and his twin are locked into an endless love/hate, attraction/repulsion dance. They can neither live together nor apart,

as they mechanically mine the same emotional fields, discussing ancient and new grudges, some red-hot, some warmed-over, others simmering since childhood, all essentially half-baked, without ever making progress or achieving closure. They clearly desire neither. I have always theorized that, since neither my skinny mother with her bird-like appetite nor her sexist obstetrician in the pre-sonogram nineteen-forties days of patronizing male doctors and their rigid theories knew she was carrying twins (he sternly admonished her not to gain more than 25 pounds, while her starving body urged her to eat, eat, eat) until Leon, the older and more dominant one, materialized, both Leon and Karl were so seriously underweight that they began life in incubators. Could Leon have latched onto the majority of the placentian food supply? This may sound, pardon the pun, nutty, but does anyone else have a better explanation for the constant physical and emotional hunger the twins continue to exhibit? (Readers, perhaps you have theories about why all three of my brothers make a casserole of food, eating, restaurant protocol and left-wing politics? ("Molotov cocktails and rocks behind every curtain ... oh, Jokerman.") If so, please e-mail me via the Contact form on Matahalette.com !) As Karl and I walked to the subway and he bitterly denounced my niece, I remained Switzerlandian neutral as always, not that he ever notices. Karl claims that carrying this pocketbook is "unconventional." But despite his Surovellian left-wing politics, what are the life goals he wishes to achieve at age 60? A house with a white-picket fence, a wife with unshaved legs (one of his many fetishes), and a passel of children. Perhaps he may still find a mate, procreate, adopt or whatever, but it's becoming less likely with each summer's passing. I wonder if he could even care for a Bernardo of his own ("A small dog licking your face ... oh, Jokerman"), since whenever he takes one of his bi-yearly road trips to Greece, thriftily saving money on hotels or even youth hostels by pitching his pup tent on mountainsides ("You're a man of the mountains ... oh, Jokerman."), he depends on my mother (whom he still calls "Mommy") to shlep over to his apartment to water his plants.

Do Corpse readers recall Suzanne, the heroine of "My Suzanne Obsession," now also residing online among its fellow "Men's Planets"? Suzanne's husband Leroy, the former Bowery bum' has died of AIDS. While he was alive, she logged in dozens of hours at the local police precinct taking out a series of restraining orders against him, but after his death, she pulled a Michael Jacksonian maneuver, deifying him in her own way by planting a tree in his honor on the Bowery. Her own year was not just stressful, but exceedingly gloomy, with a good friend dying of cancer, and her meanie-head Mom squandering her inheritance on a Peta-like dog rescue charity. Every night in this hood, the streets are dominated by boxy, angular white stretch limos--ungainly objects filled with uptight, Red Bull-swilling celebs, most of them famous for being famous, the non-entity "reality TV stars," the tormented genius Heath Ledgerses, on their way to party and/or OD at the new bars, clubs and hotels (with doormen) located on the all-new hip and trendy Bowery. Rather sinisterly, the Bowery bums have also vanished. After leaving Karl at the Broadway-Lafayette station, I purchased a framed antique Indian print of a woman selling pencils at the Houston Street bazaar and carried it home. Three cute girls sitting outside a cafe voiced their approval. They were visual artists from S.F., looking for funky fun. "Know where we can meet any cute guys?" they asked me. "Obviously, I don't have to explain to you why I moved back here!" I replied, having checked into the city of hills and fog and calla lilies during the Harvey Milk era (when every gay guy I knew, i.e., almost every guy, was orgyng in bath houses and plunging into glory holes, not engaging in political activism, as the movie implied. I did have one boyfriend there, a musician with the S.F. Mime Troupe, and before that, with Country Joe and the Fish, who was a scorching, fanatically-foreplaying Scorpio, but who had been recycled so many times by rapacious females I always feared he was teeming with sexually-transmitted diseases.) I told the girls that Diddy started the Bowery bum-removal trend when he bought The Marquee Club, and that now marble and steel condo edifices housing N.Y.U. undergrad trust-funders block out any remaining shafts of sunlight. "But what happened to the Bowery Bums?" Nikki, Laura and Tasha asked, echoing my own constant concern. "I dunno," I replied. ("Take the motherless children off of the street ... oh, Jokerman.") They told me that during S.F.'s nasty gentrification process, the city shipped all its coolest homeless people out of town to parts unknown, including Clifford, a hulking gentle Black giant who had always escorted them around, not even for cash, but just to be a gentleman and to protect the girls. "Mikey my boy, I'm going to go undercover down at the Waterfront!" I can hear Karl Malden saying in the "Streets of San Francisco" episode where the cops rescue tragically-disappearing apparently-murdered bums. I hope Leroy's tree is thriving, but, more importantly, I wonder, wherever shall Suzanne find a suitable new husband? What is a woman with degrees in French and film studies to do sans a suitable supply of Bowery bums to take home as she does stray cocker spaniels? This spring, when her friend was diagnosed as being terminally ill, she told me she had planned to use funds he once gave her for an emergency for his funeral. Then everyone decided to have a public ceremony in a community garden in the Bronx, so Suzanne had money for her annual road trip to Paris and the south of France. You go, girl! Before departing, she told me that the gardener was an ex-con who had been arrested in Pennsylvania with 13,000 (or was it 130,000?) guns, all but one of which he claims were licensed, that lone firearm earning him a two year stint in Riker's Island. There he took classes in horticulture (good long-term planning, eh?) He also got a tattoo on his neck which reads, "Shit happens." Said Suzanne, "He is a very little guy with a very big slogan." "And?" I asked. "Yeah," she mused. "Possibly, a very big schlong."

Bro Karl, you can buy a million little-girl pocketbooks, but for my money, tattooing "Shit happens" on your neck is, well, truly unconventional.

toc

CRIME REPORTING

Queenpins of the Cali Cartel

On February 7, 1997, an international fugitive, who had undergone extensive plastic surgery, stepped off a plane in the

Rio de Janeiro Airport, preparing to don a real mask to participate in "Carnival." The fugitive, age 44, carried 13 passports and a ledger book containing the names of cocaine-trafficking clients, and was immediately arrested by a bevy of Brazilian police and federal agents on the tarmac. This arrest, and the subsequent extradition of the fugitive to N.Y.C. by U.S. Marshals on April 20, 1998, represented more than a victory for persistent law enforcement officials. The fugitive's name was Mery Valencia, her nickname was "La Senora," and she was one of the pre-eminent international cocaine traffickers in the formerly male-dominated Cali cartel. The scope of her operation, which had begun in 1986, involved multiple millions of dollars and over 25 tons of cocaine, which were shipped from Colombia to the United States via Puerto Rico, and then transshipped to NY, NJ, IL, FL, OH and CA. On the same day that she was arrested in Brazil, her arrest being the culmination of a two-year Drug Enforcement Administration investigation, 56 other members of the drug organization were either indicted or arrested in America. Those raids netted over 320 kilos of cocaine and \$20 million in cash. Valencia's April, 1998 extradition to NYC was due to the persistence of NYC U.S. Attorney Mary Jo White. While the Brazilian authorities had remained adamant that policy prevented them from extraditing her for being a narcotics trafficker, they finally relented when White insisted that she be returned to the U.S. to be arrested on money-laundering charges. Valencia faced numerous federal narcotics-trafficking related charges. On December 16th, 1999, Mery Valencia was sentenced to life in prison and ordered to pay a \$250,000 fine by Judge Kimba Wood, who represented the Southern District of the State of New York. Wood was President Clinton's original pick for U.S. Attorney General, before the debatable "Nanny-Scam" revelations. In her trial, Judge Wood determined that Valencia distributed more than 12,000 kilograms of cocaine worth more than \$180 million (wholesale) during the late eighties, and again in 1997 and 1998, prior to her arrest. The Valencia Organization controlled a series of "stash houses" in Miami, Houston, Los Angeles, and also ingeniously supplied the residents of NYC by working with a Dominican crack-dealing gang.

Just as remarkable as the fact that this operation was headed by a woman is the fact that all of Valencia's top lieutenants were also female. Included were her sister, Luz Dary Valenica-Castrillon, who is allegedly overseeing money-laundering operations from Colombia; another sister, Alba Valencia, sister-in-law Ana Maria Valencia; ex-sister-in-law Josephine Valencia and first cousin Flor Alban Castano. Josephine and Flor each employed their two daughters, as did a non-relative, Maria Teresa Serna (also a mother of two girls), giving new meaning to the concept of "Bring Your Daughter to Work Day."

Not especially pretty or sexy, Valencia's personality has been described by the press as "severe". She has been dubbed a "behind-the-scenes taskmaster", demanding an exact accounting for every ounce of coke sold, "a bean-counting boss who made her own sister pay up for losses due to bounced checks." Apparently, she even intimidated the male members of her organization, one of whom was heard saying on a wiretapped phone conversation that he "would never do anything without La Senora's permission." This same employee was instrumental in Valencia's Brazilian arrest, when he inadvertently tipped off the feds by urging fellow employees "to call La Senora, because La Senora was going to leave soon for Carnival." It was at that point that federal agents, unable to locate her themselves, notified the Brazilian authorities to anticipate a special new guest who would be arriving to attend the world's biggest party. Mery Valencia was not the only female in her organization who could appear harsh. The same hapless male employee was later chastised by a woman colleague who told him that he "had better close his mouth and start doing things right, because if not, they were going to end up in a hole ..." like Mery, who was "in a world of shit."

La Senora had been sporadically under federal surveillance since 1989, after one of her stash houses was busted in Long Beach, CA. However, she had not been physically present at the bust, and she successfully evaded the cops. She was so crafty, well-organized and elusive that she didn't become the target of a federal probe until confidential informants were successfully able to infiltrate her huge family-run organization in 1995. Dubbed "Operation Merry-Go-Round" by D.E.A. agents in NY and Miami, FL, who also worked with the F.B.I., the use of wiretap surveillance was critical to the investigation. The informants also discovered, through their daily activities, that there was extensive use of offshore bank accounts, wire transmittals and bulk shipping to get the cash out of the U.S. and into Colombia. Between 1995 and 1997, \$6.7 million was laundered ... but she was formally charged with having earned \$50 million in illegal profits. Amounts of \$100,000 in U.S. cash currency had twice been intercepted. And street surveillance of drug pick-ups always led back to the Mery Valencia Organization.

One might wonder why Valencia used so many "G.I. Janes" in her operation. Law enforcement experts insist that she was simply carrying on the Colombian tradition of using family members and associates from her hometown, which was Santa Rosa de Cabal ... a suburb of Peirrerá. However, it appears that her female relatives attained more stature and power than did the males. Perhaps Valencia felt that women were more compliant, less threatening, and easier to control. They certainly inspired her loyalty. In any event, the Valencia Organization fulfilled one female stereotype--it was non-violent. Her indictment, atypically, included no murder charges, just a single firearms charge of a gun being discharged by a male employee in a drug transaction.

The 46th defendant to be convicted in this investigation, Valencia also revealed in "an affluent lifestyle as a result of the profits generated from her cocaine-trafficking activities ... the evidence showed that she enjoyed extensive foreign travel and owned several apartments and country homes in Colombia; a discotheque called Back Streets in her home town of Santa Rosa, Colombia; and a health and beauty aids store called Beverly Hills in Cali, Colombia."

Not since the late nineteen-seventies, when Medellin Cartel trafficker Griselda Blanco earned multiple millions through

her entrepreneurial brilliance has one woman attained so much power and profit in the notoriously sexist world of the drug cartels.

It is a mantra among law enforcement officials that when it comes to crime, whenever a vacuum opens up, it is immediately filled. In this case, that vacuum was created by the murder and arrest of all but five of the top leaders of the Cali cartel, and the almost complete dissolution of the Medellin cartel. There currently remain five or six main narcotics-trafficking groups situated in Cali's North Valley.

According to some law-enforcement experts, women's prominence in the drug trade has been consistently undervalued. Women have been working as mules, stash-house guards, secretaries and money-launderers since the nineteen-seventies. Now, they're ready to obtain "power in the powder room."

Some women are attracted to drug-dealing to support their own habits, or to make money through criminal means. Some get involved with men who they discover are "in the business." Naturally, some are coerced by their spouses or lovers. But when it comes to the Colombians, there is almost always a family connection. And many women, like Mery Valencia, want to be the boss.

NYC Detective Frank Puello, an expert in Latino drug traffickers, has spent years trying to convince his colleagues that women are actually superior criminals.

"Women have been into crime since forever, but this has been downplayed by chauvinistic law enforcement and media reporters who don't give them the attention they deserve," Puello says emphatically.

"Men always try to utilize women to assist them in low-level capacities, not knowing that the women are building a niche because they're smarter than men, they have more organizational attributes, and they are more adept than men at insulating themselves. Crime organizations run by women are tighter, harder to detect, and less likely to be infiltrated. This may sound sexist, but I think that women are better at creating organizations because they are raised to be mothers. What is a family but a tightly-organized, well-oiled machine...and who really wields the power? My prediction is that eventually women will take over drug-dealing, and that there will be more harmony and less violence between big-level drug-dealers."

Puello's theory about motherhood was articulated by two male drug dealers the day after Valencia's extradition, when D.E.A. intercepted them bemoaning the fact that "our mother is down the drain."

Other law enforcement officials believe that women will take over the Cali Mafia because it has always been "less sexist" than Medellin's. "Women are good for spending money, not for making it" and "Whenever a deal goes bad, there's a bitch involved" are two traditional Medellin sayings.

Another D.E.A. agent says, "When you think of drug-trafficking, everyone thinks of men, but at least 25 percent of D.E.A. arrests have been women. They range from independent traffickers to wholesale distributors of cocaine and heroin. They have been around for ten to fifteen years and are just as successful as the men.

"Colombians from Cali are super-professional. While Pablo Escobar's hit team was killing judges, cops, journalists and blowing up airlines, Cali people were quietly supporting politicians, paying off police, and gradually gaining control of the city. Time and time again, deals have been made with Cali women in high-level positions. They make deliveries, negotiate, launder money, even head up organizations."

According to legendary D.E.A. agent Bill Mockler, "Cali women are the most active drug traffickers in history. Hispanic culture may be sexist, but many females are very dominant. They're smarter than some of the men in the business and more of them tend to be bilingual. The machismo bravado thing is obvious, but the one pulling the strings is the woman who has the brains. In Hispanic groups, women play a key role, much more than they ever played in the drug business. And they get all their relatives involved. With the Mafia, women and business were kept separate. The women took care of the kids. Before the Colombians entered the action, organized crime guys did not utilize women."

Prior to the arrest of Mery Valencia, one of the highest-level female Cali traffickers was Maria Amanda Jimenez. Jimenez was arrested in NJ and then arraigned and brought to New York City on April 27, 1995. Jimenez's organization of a dozen employees moved cocaine and heroin from New Orleans to NYC to Detroit for distribution. They would then coordinate the collection of drug proceeds for their eventual planned return to Colombia.

Cali-born Maria Jimenez, now in her forties, was targeted by the Detroit branch of the Drug Enforcement Administration in the mid-nineteen-eighties. Agents in that city had stopped her on a number of occasions because they had information that she was laundering money, but they had insufficient information to make an arrest. Jimenez had fallen under suspicion because her first husband, a Colombian national, was being investigated for drug trafficking. In 1988, her husband fled to Colombia, and Jimenez married another Colombian man in Detroit. Although there is no evidence that her second husband was involved in criminal activity, he did introduce Jimenez to Willie Franklin, the head of an

extremely violent American Black Detroit-based coke and heroin distribution ring. Through her network of Colombian suppliers, Jimenez sold cocaine and heroin to Franklin. One of her main suppliers was her new brother-in-law, Julio Guerrero, nicknamed "The Doctor" because he worked as a technician in the Microbiology Lab of N.Y.C.'s prestigious Cornell Medical Center. Guerrero was ultimately arrested, but he made bail and fled to Colombia, where the U.S. Marshals are searching for him.

In 1992, Jimenez left Detroit and was assumed to be living in FL. Of all the female cocaine queenpins targeted by D.E.A., Jimenez was deemed to be the most peripatetic, constantly moving from Detroit to Miami to Chicago and eventually to NYC (although she also maintained a residence in nearby Cliffside, NJ). After learning that Jimenez was active in NYC, and was laundering huge quantities of drug dollars in Queens, NY, D.E.A. identified her as a major trafficker and placed her under surveillance in 1994. They obtained authorization to do a wiretap on all of her phones. It was a wiretap on one of her cell phones that yielded information that led to busts on April 26th, 27th and 28th, 1995 by NY and NJ / D.E.A. agents, and NJ State Police. The agents seized 398 kilogram packages of cocaine from a tractor-trailer; \$1.2 million in a stashhouse, and an additional \$88,000 in cash and a .44 Magnum revolver at Jimenez's residence. The busts also yielded Maria Jimenez, who was arrested getting into her car ... and eleven of her employees. On 12/21/95, Jimenez pled guilty to multiple charges of narcotics trafficking and money-laundering and was sentenced to 10 years in a federal prison. Her eleven employees were also convicted.

According to the D.E.A. undercover agent who worked her case, Jimenez would "play coy and cutesy" to get the cheapest price on heroin ... and she came out a winner every time. If she found herself in a situation where she was getting strong-armed, she'd act out a little-girl routine to the extent of actually saying, "Oh, please, Papi!" She would whine, she would flirt, she would do whatever was necessary. She was also an outstanding businessperson who took "excellent care" of her employees. Secretive to a pathological degree, she would frequently disappear for days without warning. Ever in fear of arrest, she prepared herself for a possible hasty departure by always wearing four pairs of underwear. On the other hand, the D.E.A. agent also says that her nature was dichotomous, as Jimenez was "both totally relentless and very laid-back." While husband number two chilled out as a househusband, Jimenez acquired a Cuban lover with whom she was frequently seen in public. Conniving, erratic, driven yet mellow.... Maria Jimenez is one of the most mysterious of the Cali queenpins.

Unlike the contradictory and paradoxical Maria Jimenez, Daisy Zea was a more typical all-business Cali, Colombian businessperson. She was neither attractive nor sexy, but she possessed superb management and organizational skills, and she worshipped cold cash. As the mistress of Cali Cartel heavyweight Jaime Orjuela, she could easily terrorize her minions. Although she was arrested in 1992, her fate was sealed in 1985. It was then that D.E.A. Intelligence sources were informed that Jaime Orjuela, the recently-deceased Cali Cartel Chief Jose Santacruz Londono's former right-hand man, was running five cocaine-processing labs in NYC, Long Island, NY, North Carolina, and in Minden, NY.

Shortly after D.E.A. received this intelligence, the Minden, NY Lab exploded (due to careless use of ether), and Jaime Orjuela and many of his associates fled to Colombia, never to return (Orjuela was eventually arrested by the Colombian police in 1994, and he remains imprisoned in Cali.) Before that time, he had been living with his wife, Gladys Lopez, in Bayside, Queens. In 1986, D.E.A. Intelligence sources learned that he had murdered Lopez in Colombia and married another woman there. However, he continued to maintain stashhouses in NYC, filled with massive quantities of precursor chemicals for use in the remaining labs. In 1987, D.E.A. agents discovered mail addressed to a Daisy Zea in one of Orjuela's stashhouses and were told by an anonymous source that "she used to live there." It was eventually concluded that Zea had been Orjuela's mistress. Zea's own husband was imprisoned in Texas on drug charges. Between the years of 1986-1990, D.E.A. seized another \$16 million and 10,000 kilos of cocaine from Orjuela's organization. D.E.A. had a particular interest in investigating those chemicals that are restricted in Colombia but obtainable in America--such as ether, HCL, even gun-cleaning solvent--all of which can be used to convert base cocaine--which is the form the Colombians shipped coke in--into powder.

In October 1991, the investigation took a new twist when agents began investigating yet another coke lab. Surveillance operatives were stunned to observe Daisy Zea, whom they believed to be living in Colombia, driving up from NYC in a van to pick up chemicals near Stewart Airport, NY for use in one of Orjuela's laboratories. The D.E.A. agent followed her to Meadow Street, in Brooklyn, where they learned that Zea was in charge of running an extremely sophisticated laboratory. They also learned that she was still involved with Orjuela, in a "long-distance romance." Enabled by a warrant, agents broke into the Meadow St. warehouse at 4 a.m. and installed a camera...which revealed a laboratory set up with 10' tanks and 30 drums of chemicals capable of producing 100 kilos of coke daily. The lab had been set up as an "engine repair shop"--which is exactly what a casual observer would see if he opened up the garage door. But behind the shop was the lab, complete with a huge press to make cocaine blocks from cocaine HCL, which were sold wholesale in two kilo quantities.

Says the D.E.A. agent who was awed by Zea's business acumen, "That press was so professional it was phenomenal."

Zea's operation consisted of having "ceramic" tiles, which were actually "cocaine" tiles imported through Panama and Baltimore into a Brooklyn warehouse, The Madison Tile Company, which was actually a stash house. On a daily basis, 50 keys of crushed tile were delivered to one of Zea's employees on a N.Y.C. street corner. The tile was then driven to

the Meadow Street lab to undergo the conversion process.

As Orjuela's mistress, Zea wielded total control over her employees, who were said by law enforcement to have "trembled before her authority," but she was not invulnerable. Her chief chemist was dispatched to Cali and questioned about the fact that their conversion process was yielding less-than-perfect results. In a scene straight out of the movie, "Scarface," Zea's chemist was compelled to demonstrate his methods before a suspicious group of cartel heavyweights. It was determined that the chemist's technique was flawed (he was fired, not killed), and Zea hired a new chemist renowned for his innovative brilliance.

Shortly thereafter, one of her workers "made" the surveillance, and so Zea hired an all-new group of workers to re-build a new lab from scratch several blocks away.

When intelligence sources revealed that the process had finally become successful, D.E.A. agents were urged to "take down" the case. Thanks to the photographs, a wiretap on Zea's home and a huge amount of additional accumulated intelligence information, D.E.A. arrested Zea, her chemist, and 37 employees in July 1992.

Says the D.E.A. agent, "It was ironic. It took them a long time to perfect the process--and within days of they're perfecting it, they all got busted."

Zea was charged with setting up and maintaining the lab, cocaine distribution, and money laundering. She pled guilty to these narcotics trafficking charges and was sentenced to ten years in a federal penitentiary.

As for her love affair with Orjuela, the D.E.A. agent says, "Zea was romantically involved with Orjuela for five years. Was it a grand passion? I doubt it. In all candor, Zea wasn't just unattractive, she was extremely homely. Emotionally, I would characterize her as a typical trafficker--tough, hard and cold."

But of all the crafty, clever queenpins who have headed up trafficking organizations, none is as fascinating as the sociopathic Griselda Blanco. She was not only one of the first women drug traffickers (even though she worked for Medellin), she was also one of the first major traffickers, period. Many law enforcement experts regard her as a twisted visionary, one of the first people to see the infinite capabilities in building a bridge between NYC, Miami and Colombia for the distribution of cocaine.

Blanco was a drug trafficker and a serial killer nicknamed "The Black Widow." She killed her three husbands, and she killed or had killed anyone she owed money to, anyone who angered her, or anyone who got in the way of business. Sometimes, she killed just for fun. Usually, she operated like a Mafia Don, hiring hitmen in twenty different cities, so that she seldom "got her hands dirty" or could be traced to the homicide.

A rape victim, abused child, prostitute, pickpocket and street urchin, who came from the most extreme poverty in Medellin, Griselda Blanco came to Queens in the late 60's with her lover, and the father of three of her four sons, Carlos Trujillo. Trujillo introduced her to Alberto Bravo, a trafficker from Medellin, and Bravo introduced Griselda to his world. Ultimately, Bravo said something that offended her, so she stuck the muzzle of a loaded gun into his mouth and pulled it. (One of the first of many murders Blanco committed and has not been charged with.) In 1971, she started her own cocaine network. She used multiple sources of supply for her cocaine.

Always an active bi-sexual, Blanco used only female mules, who wore lingerie Blanco had designed herself and which were sold in her Medellin Boutique. This underwear contained special pockets capable of concealing two kilograms of cocaine. Soon, Blanco was grossing \$8 million a month. She traveled frequently between NYC and Miami, FL, moving south in 1978. There she assembled a group of young assassins called "The Pisteleros." To become a member, one needed to kill someone and cut off a body part as proof of the deed.

At that time, Roy Pena, currently a D.E.A., Intelligence Analyst, was working with the Queens Homicide Task Force. Suddenly, a string of unsolved murder cases came in, the only common thread was bloodless corpses. It was eventually learned that they were the handiwork of Paco Sepulveda, one of Griselda's premiere hired hitters. Paco's m.o. was to hang his victims upside down, cut their throats and drain their bodies of blood.

"This made it easier to fold the body into Pampers or TV boxes and dump them into the street," says Pena. "They were the most neatly-folded D.O.A.'s we'd ever come across."

In 1979, Griselda Blanco orchestrated the infamous Dade County Shopping Mall Massacre. A van advertising party supplies unleashed two hitmen, armed with automatic weapons, who converged on a liquor store where Blanco had arranged to meet two drug competitors to whom she owed a great deal of money. Her intention was to kill the competitors and thereby eradicate her debt. Her hitmen assassinated the two targets, and then chased two liquor store employees, who had been witnesses, throughout the mall, pushing aside shrieking little old blue-haired Jewish ladies and spraying bullets, "Miami Vice" style. The two witnesses were wounded but the hitmen escaped.

After the Dade County Massacre, Miami law enforcement officials had definitively identified Blanco as a potential suspect--possibly the mastermind behind it. In 1981, a group called CENTAC--Central Tactical Unit--was formed out of NYC by former D.E.A. agent Bill Mockler and Miami homicide detectives Al Singleton and June Hawkins, and other law enforcement officials. Their objective: Get Griselda. They soon learned that she had temporarily re-located to Colombia, where she owned vast tracts of land. She began frequently moving back and forth from Colombia to Miami. They learned, too, that her hitmen, using Paco Sepulveda's m.o., were traveling between NYC and Miami, committing multiple murders.

In 1982, Blanco ordered a hit on Chucho Castro, a former employee who had angered her because he refused to meet with her. Blanco's assassins drove up alongside Castro's van, fired shots, and, missing Chucho, killed his toddler son, Johnny, instead. Also, in that year, she ordered the assassination of a couple who owed her drug money, the Lorenzos. Afterwards, Blanco was incensed that the hit-men had left the couple's three children alive. Blanco inspired such fear, and insulated herself so successfully, that it took 16 years for law enforcement to find anyone willing to testify against her. Her nemesis eventually turned out to be Riverito, her favorite hitman, who, in 1993, facing the death penalty on various murder charges, began trading information about Blanco for a negotiated plea of 25 years in prison.

Between 1981-1984, while CENTAC was extremely active, Griselda Blanco, a chronic bazooka user (a highly potent, smokable form of cocaine), smoked her way through \$7 million worth of cocaine and began slowly losing her mind. She bought Eva Peron's diamonds and the Queen of England's tea set. She killed strippers and topless dancers for fun, and once shot a pregnant woman in the stomach. She ripped off her best friend for \$1.8 million, and then had her tortured, beaten, shot, wrapped in plastic and tossed into a canal. Her lover bought her an emerald and gold encrusted MAC-10 as a Christmas present. She had frequent Lesbian and bisexual orgies.

After twenty years of smoking bazooka, Blanco, had grown fat and blowzy, and had resorted to forcing men to have sex with her at gunpoint. When she reconciled with her most prolific hitman, Jorge Ayala, a/k/a Riverito (after he had ripped off \$80,000 from her and fled to Chicago) she asked him if he would be her lover as well as her hired gun. Riverito replied, "Griselda, I'll kill for you, but that's where I draw the line, because everyone who fucks you ends up dead."

Eventually, she became addicted to painkillers and tranquilizers, and her three oldest, largely illiterate sons took over most of the trafficking (although she still supervised their actions). Somewhere around this time, she switched her base of operations to Irvine, CA, where she lived like an ordinary housewife with her youngest son, Michael Corleone Sepulveda. In 1985, Blanco was arrested in Irvine on narcotics trafficking charges by the man who had tracked her relentlessly for years, D.E.A. agent Bob Palumbo. Blanco was extradited to FL, where she was represented by William Kennedy Smith attorney Roy Black, and given a ten year sentence for drug dealing. In 1993, she was indicted for murder, thanks to Riverito. Al Singleton and June Hawkins had debriefed "Rivi" for years. And yet, her murder trial has been delayed so often that federal agents and police joke that she must practice Santeria in her prison cell.

Al Singleton states emphatically, "I have never heard of any woman who was as prolific a killer as Griselda Blanco. She may be the most prolific killer of all time. Riverito's testimony linked her directly to twelve homicides in Queens, twelve in Miami ... and implied an unknown quantity in Colombia. She put out hits on Colombians from the United States and also from Colombia where she lived periodically. She had no remorse whatsoever."

"She didn't just have people shot. In September, 1982, one of her hitmen stabbed a rival 19 times with a bayonet as he was going through Customs in Miami International Airport. He lived ... but didn't press charges."

"In the late seventies, early eighties, she began to make a bridge from Colombia to Miami to NYC for cocaine trafficking. She was one of the first entrepreneurs. She had the vision to see a market ... and she had all the power and influence from Colombia and the reputation."

But, in July 1998, a scandal erupted, delaying Blanco's trial from its scheduled date of October 1999. It was then discovered that Riverito had begun paying secretaries at the Miami-Dade State Attorney's Office for phone sex, while remaining incarcerated in a Witness Protection Prison. Two of these secretaries have been suspended without pay when it was discovered that they had cashed money orders for "Rivi" at the office. The prosecutors, naturally, worried that he may have confided in them, compromising the case.

Says Singleton, "This whole thing turned into a real clusterfuck. Someone leaked this to the media and it has received more coverage than Griselda Blanco's incredible array of heinous crimes ... which she has never had to account for!"

Finally, on October 1, 1998, state prosecutors decided to negotiate a plea with Blanco.

Griselda Blanco pled guilty to ordering the murders of the Lorenzos, and of ordering the murder of Chucho Castro, resulting in his son Johnny's death. Her sentence? Twenty years in a FL state prison. She will never face charges for the Dadeland Massacre.

Says Al Singleton, "I feel angry, but relieved that it's over because it's been such a long time. The only consolation to me

is that she is now 56 years old and in poor health, due to her life of debauchery. She has already had one heart attack in prison. Maybe these 20 years will be a life sentence."

toc

HER TALES FROM THE HOOD

My Long Epic Fight with the Faceless Monster Verizon

You can always tell a Texan, but you can't tell him much--old Texas saying.

"Do you have any enemies?" "T," the Verizon security expert suddenly asked me. "Enemies?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Is there someone out there who would want to do you harm?"

I felt like Briscoe and Logan from "Law and Order" were at my door, investigating a homicide, or in my case, potential identity theft.

ENEMIES?!

It was the second week of April 2009.

I had first contacted Verizon in December 2008, about a simple customer service snafu. Since then, I had logged in an inestimable number of hours sending e-mails, waiting on hold at the mysterious, David Cronenbergian e-center, speaking to human Verizon employees, then speaking to their supervisors, and, most recently, having daily conversations with "T." Could someone in my sphere of acquaintances--a friend, an ex-friend, a neighbor, an anonymous evildoer--harbor a V-for-Verizon vendetta?

During December in New York City, vigilance is imperative. Crowds of Christmas shoppers fill the streets, as do pickpockets, hoping to avail themselves of pocketbooks stuffed full of cash. Yet despite my caution, my checkbook became a casualty, stolen on a Friday evening (while I was out seeing the movie "Milk" and then eating an Italian restaurant dinner with my elderly mother). Fortunately, I realized that it was missing the next evening, and I reached a bank agent on the phone. He gave me a special pin number which allowed me to withdraw all the money in my checking account from an ATM, and then he closed it out. During the following week, I went to my local bank branch and opened up a brand-new checking account. I received pristine checks and a shiny bank card, all linked to an obscure, bank-generated password in about the time it takes to order a slice of pizza.

Next, I needed to notify the service providers who automatically debit my checking account. This included Verizon (which also sends me a monthly hard copy bill.)

So, I phoned my business office. I reported that my checkbook had been stolen, and therefore, I needed to change my checking account information.

"I can't help you with that!" the business office rep yelled, angrily, and abruptly hung up.

I was stunned. Then I wondered: Whatever had possessed me to deal with humans and their many moods in a cyber universe? So I changed the required data myself in my verizon.com account. The computer assured me that my account would be automatically debited, once monthly, only now with the updated information.

Only ... it wasn't. No monies were taken out in December.

On January 8, 2009, I engaged in a "live chat" session with "an e-person" who informed me that I now owed even more money, which I could conveniently pay 24 hours a day at verizon.com. I was encouraged to call the "e-center."

I called the e-center. I did so five times. Each time I was asked to wait for 15 minutes, which became 30 minutes, which became an hour. I couldn't go the distance.

So I called the business office again. I told a different rep, "My checkbook was stolen, and I have been trying to correct the information in my account for months and verizon.com just won't debit it!"

"I talked to you once before," the rep replied, exhibiting impressive memory skills. "But you didn't say that your checkbook had been stolen! That really changes things! I'll take care of it for you right now!"

So he did. He did it by transferring me to the e-center, where I waited for 15 minutes, 30 minutes, reading my e-mail, posting theories about the sociopathic personality of "Damages" arch-villain Patty Hewes on imdb.com and browsing

through The Huffington Post until I heard an announcement saying, "The e-center is now closed. Please call back again tomorrow between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m."

I called the business office the next day and got the same rep. I begged and pleaded. "I don't want to wait for hours on the e-center line again."

"But there's no other way to do it. You have got to call the e-center."

"What time do they close?" I asked, just to see if he would give me the wrong information. He did not disappoint. "Eight p.m.," he replied.

The next day, as I schemed away, obsessing about avoiding the e-center, I was granted a reprieve. An e-mail I had written on verizon.com had somehow reached a human being, much like a message sent out to sea in a bottle.

The human called me. He sounded so distraught, and seemed so genuinely concerned that I pictured him as Burl Ives, a folksy, fatherly fellow with a large beard and a sad, lined face. "Burl" was so upset by my travails he sounded almost teary.

"My goodness," he said. "I can see that you changed your checking account information, but for some reason, it just never went through in the system. I sure am sorry about this, and I'm sorry that you have gone through so much trouble. And I'm especially sorry that you got your checkbook stolen."

"Well, actually, that wasn't really such a big deal, because I took out all the funds from the account and closed it the next day," I replied.

"Boy oh boy, Ms. Surovell," he said. "We are just so sorry about everything. Now if you just send us a check, and next month, when you get your bill, you put an x on a box and mail it back to us, that will get you re-enrolled in our automatic debit program. But gee, I sure do feel bad that we didn't fix this for you before."

"It's okay!" I kept insisting. "I'm a big girl! It wasn't all that traumatic ..." Then I succumbed, wrapping myself in his empathy as if it were a down comforter. The information Burl gave me about enrolling in the auto-payment plan was actually wrong, but did I care? The woman he transferred me to, who was surprisingly also quite pleasant and very efficient, took my payment information and automatically re-enrolled me in auto-debit. I had paid my bills for December, January and February. Just like that. Problem solved. I was on a roll.

I spent a few weeks doing things like working, reading, seeing friends, having fun ... even, paying other bills. Then, at the end of March, while looking over my bank account statement I realized with a jolt that my checking account had been debited for my March bill, but I had never received my hard copy of the bill in the mail.

I called the business office. A woman told me, "Just go into your verizon.com account and check the box that says 'suppress bill.'"

"Suppress bill?"

"Yes."

"How did that box get checked in the first place? I never said I wanted my bills to be suppressed."

"Just go in there and fix it." She hung up, because in the ultimate irony, Verizon apparently instructs its employees not to use the two basic terms which define a phone conversation: "Hello" and "Good-bye."

There was no "suppress" button anywhere on the site.

When I called the business office again to report that there was no such item as a "suppress button" on verizon.com, I was told that no one knew how to help me, and that I should phone the e-center. "No way," I said, like Gandhi finally deciding to practice his civil disobedience, like Rosa Parks sitting down wherever she pleased. "I won't call there. I need to speak to a customer service rep." Someone connected me to one, who in turn, called the e-center, with me still holding. I assumed we would soon be having a conference call. The rep was placed on hold for 19 minutes. I waited on the other end, reading my e-mail, posting theories about the sociopathic psychology of "Big Love's" Roman Grant on imdb.com, browsing through The Huffington Post. As the twentieth minute approached, the rep fearfully told me, "Ms. Surovell, I am only allowed to spend 20 minutes helping each customer. From this point on, you will have to hold for the e-center yourself."

"So, what was the point of your being involved at all, if you can't do anything for me?" I asked. "Ma'am, I'd like to help you, I would, but I'll get in trouble if I don't get off the line now."

He was becoming frantic.

I stayed on the line, holding for the e-center until I got the announcement. It was 6 p.m., and the e-center was officially closed. I was welcome to phone back the next day between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m.

This was the wall, and I had hit it. This was critical mass, and I had reached it. I had had enough of the e-center, of misinformed business office representatives, of rude Verizon employees, of verizon.com and their "e-people."

I refused to converse with another Verizon employee. From now on, I would only send e-mails through their website and hope against hope that they once again reached Burl Ives.

And that's when I made the discovery.

It was on the "My Profile" section of my verizon.com account. I had never before had the time or the incentive to read this obscure section.

But if my Verizon account was the Titanic, the "My Profile" page was the iceberg. Under "Billing Information," it stated that my bills were to be mailed to c/o ... I'll call him Jose, at an address in New York State, in a city close to Rochester.

In other words, my money was debited from my bank account, but my bills were being sent to a complete stranger.

My blood pressure soared into toxic digits. I dialed information in "Rochester," and asked for "Jose's" phone number. I was told that there was no telephone listing for him.

"Do you mean that he is unlisted?"

"No, there is no Jose in Rochester, New York."

Of course there is, and if you look him up on Zabasearch, you will see that Jose, age 51 lives with his wife "M" and "F," their 22-year-old son. Their phone number is also listed. They have e-mail, too.

I spent an anxious evening.

The next day, I called the business office and asked if there was a management office I could call, which would be appropriate for when matters had escalated beyond simple customer service complaints. Finally I was given the number of "The President's Line."

"It sounds like your site was hacked into!" the President's Line employee exclaimed.

"What do you mean? I thought the Verizon site was totally secure!"

"Well, any site can get hacked into."

"That's not what you people told me when you encouraged me to set up an account at verizon.com!"

Imitating a Verizon employee, I hung up. Then I called back and related my tale to someone else. She was perplexed, and requested that I elaborate on the details numerous times. Finally, she informed me that a Verizon Security Expert would be contacting me shortly.

No one contacted me the next day, or the next.

So I called the President's Line again.

"I was told a Verizon Security Expert would be calling me, but no one has done so."

"A security expert?" was the response, as if this had all been MY idea. "What do you mean?"

"Are you really asking me what *I* mean?" Just look in your computer and check out my case." Finally, I was told that I would be receiving a phone call from Verizon Security Investigator "T." "T" formally, and I do mean formally, introduced himself during the first week of April 2009.

"Ma'am, my name is 'T' and I have been assigned to your case," he announced with such a thick Texas twang that it practically oozed barbeque sauce. "I have your file here. I haven't read it yet, but I promise I will have it read by tomorrow."

"Okay," I replied, slightly irritated. I frankly hadn't expected him to be prepared, or to have read my file, but nonetheless, why had he wasted my time by contacting me prematurely? "If you're going to call me tomorrow, could you please do it after 3 p.m.? I'm a writer, and I like to work at night."

"A writer? No kiddin'. Do you mind my askin', what is it you write?"

"Books. Articles," I said vaguely, knowing from long experience what was coming next. My instincts did not fail me.

"No kiddin'! That is really somethin'. Someday, I want to write a book about my experiences living in Tampa, Florida. People there are very strange. I could tell you some stories, you would not believe them."

"Are you in Tampa now?" I asked.

"No'm. I am now in New Hampshire. I'm originally from Texas, though. I gotta tell you, Ma'am, you sound like a real ticket! I mean it, Ma'am, you're a ticket."

I had no idea what he meant by this expression. I got the impression it meant "feisty l'il gal" or "interesting gal" or ... something.

The next day, he called me after 3 p.m., and we began discussing my "case."

For the first two weeks of April, I had almost-daily (during weekdays) "conversations" with "T." He only called me from his car phone (apparently, a legal act in New Hampshire), and, as he would frequently go out of range, we often got disconnected. Then I would have to repeat whatever I had just said.

Much of the time, "T" would speculate about whether or not Jose was a sleazy, scheming identity thief; he would make references to the oddities of Tampa residents (I've been there, to see the Mets at spring training. It never struck me as a city filled with lunatics, or even eccentrics), he would call me a "ticket," and then "T's" ever-present road rage would kick into, pun intended, "overdrive."

This is a verbatim conversation:

"Now Ma'am, you say you set up your new account, and at first you were receiving your bills?"

"Yep."

"And then, suddenly, you stopped receiving them and that's when this â€˜Jose' character started getting them?"

"I don't know. I only know that I saw on verizon.com that it said that my bills were to be sent to â€˜Jose.'"

"And this â€˜Jose' character never notified Verizon that he was getting your bills?"

"I wouldn't know. When I called information to get his phone number, I was told that he didn't exist."

"T" snorted in derision.

"Oh, he exists, Ma'am, oh yes he does!" he exclaimed, as if "Jose" were the top fugitive on the FBI's Most Wanted List. "Oh yes indeed, you can be sure that this man is real!"

"Well, I wouldn't know why he didn't notify Verizon. He wasn't obligated to do so. Listen, â€˜T,' if this turns out to be some internal Verizon mistake, like a computer error, I'll be relieved, okay? I'm not going to be angry. I would obviously prefer that to be the outcome than to think that there is some complicated plot going on."

"Well, I gotta be honest here, Ma'am, and tell you that it's not looking good. Now, let me warn you, we're going into a zone, and my cell may go out, so ..."

"I didn't hear the last thing you said. You're fading out."

"What? What did you say?"

"I said I can't hear you! I'm hanging up."

"What was that, Ma'am?"

A few minutes later, he called back.

"â€ˆT, I can't stay on the phone with you like this every day. These calls are taking a lot of time, and I need to use my time to be writing my articles."

"Ma'am, you are a ticket! Hey, can you hold on there a minute, some people should not be allowed on the road. (Screaming out the window...) Lady, you fucking idiot, you goddamned moron, who the fuck taught you how to drive?! (Without skipping a beat...) Pardon my language there, Ma'am, I hope I didn't offend you, but some people driving out there can really rile you up."

"I'm a New Yorker, it takes more than the f-word to shock me." I lied. "T's" segues from extreme formality (I was being "Ma'am'ed" more than Judge Judy) into gross obscenity unnerved me.

"Well you are a ticket, I tell you, that's what you are!"

Since I was loathe to engage "T" on any level other than the facts of my case, I never asked him what the expression, "You're a ticket" meant. I assumed it was a familiar Texan saying, or, much less probably, a Tampan saying. It was also possible that given the fact that "T" was a road-rager, he may have been literally worried about receiving tickets for his driving, his cursing ... whatever.

After my daily discussions with "T" were finally concluded, I searched the net, including many sites devoted to idiosyncratic "Texas Talk" (or, as the sites refer to it, "Tawk.") I couldn't find one single example of the usage of "ticket" as a descriptive term. "That's the ticket" is (or was) "a positive interjection used to express confirmation." "A hot ticket" meant "an extremely popular person or thing." In the nineteen-fifties, "a hot ticket" was a "hot" expression, implying that something was "all the rage," as in "That Benny Goodman show is the hottest ticket in town!" The internet "urban dictionary" had many current definitions for the word, none of which seemed applicable. Today, "ticket" may mean "one million dollars," as in, "Yo, man, I just spent a ticket on this house!" It can also be slang for "heart," as in, "Yo, Jerome got his ticket broke by his shorty."

The Beatles song "Ticket to Ride" has been minutely analyzed on Wikipedia. John Lennon may have coined this phrase to describe the "card indicating a clean bill of health" handed out to the Hamburg prostitutes the band had frequented when they played gigs in Germany before becoming famous. In other words, "She has a ticket to ride" meant "the government clinic has determined that she is disease-free and able to have sex."

Surely, "T" could not be equating me to a Hamburg hooker, circa 1960!

And yet ... My mother told me, "When you call someone â€ˆa hot ticket, it means she's â€ˆa sexpot."

Could â€ˆT have been calling me "sexy"? But how would he know? Had he seen a photograph of me somewhere? If so, where? Had he bought my book "Lovestrokes: Handwriting Analysis for Love, Sex and Compatibility" and checked out the back cover photo? My suspicions were heightened when I read a review of the erotic appeal of actress Megan Fox in The Daily Mail: "She's one hot ticket in some sizzling scenes."

During one conversation, I mentioned in passing that I had changed my checking account information after having had my checkbook stolen. Silly me, assuming that this would have been in my "file."

"You had your checkbook stolen?!" "T" gasped.

"Yeah, why, I didn't mention that?"

"No, Ma'am, you did not."

"Does it make a difference? I still got my Verizon bills after it was stolen."

"Ma'am, this does indeed change everything. When did this happen?"

"Back in December. But, what difference does it make? Are you implying that â€ˆJose' stole my checkbook?"

"No'm."

"Well, what could someone find out from my phone bill, anyway? All it has is my name, address and phone number on it."

Another snort. Perhaps "T" had ridden horses on a Texas ranch. "They could find out plenty, Ma'am!"

The next afternoon, "T" called me to announce, "Ma'am, there has been a security breach on this account! We have

positively determined this." He sounded bizarrely triumphant.

Now, I was worried. And not just about the state of "T's" mental health.

"A security breach? What kind of security breach?"

"I am not at liberty to say that, Ma'am."

"Then what is the point of calling me up and getting me all upset?"

"I thought you should know that there has been a security breach."

"But for what purpose, if you're not going to tell me what it is?"

"T" was like an eight year old. I half-expected him to answer, "Because, because, because."

The next day, I wasn't feeling well. A severe case of Verizonitis? I lay in bed all day, and I especially didn't answer my phone, including "T's" daily check-in.

But I succumbed on the following day, which was when he asked the Briscoe and Logan question: "Ma'am, do you have any enemies?"

"Enemies? No way!"

"There's no one out there who is trying to make trouble for you?"

If this was suddenly a personal matter, then what was the relevance of my stolen checkbook, or my bills being sent to "Jose"?

All I could think of was an article I had written for Salon, "Poor Little Rich Thugs."

It was about the numerous criminal acts committed by Howard Bloomgarden, the son of an ophthalmologist and an art therapy professor. Bloomgarden pled guilty to conspiracy to extortion to commit murder. Ever since the article was posted on salon, an internet publication, in July 1998, I have been contacted by an array of readers. Most of them, however, much like "T" himself, are interested in writing their own books. The son of one of the criminals in Bloomgarden's enterprise, Gary Friedman, who had been a practicing attorney, is currently serving two life sentences. His son had believed in his innocence until 2004, when the state of California pursued death penalty charges against him. Friedman finally admitted his guilt, and his son inquired if I could help him in his efforts to publish his memoirs of growing up, not exactly Gotti, but son of Friedman.

"I covered a murder trial and wrote about it in 2000," I told "T," giving him the wrong date of when the article was posted online. "But I can't imagine anyone involved with that trial trying to steal my identity or hack into my verizon.com account!"

"Nonetheless, I think you should change your password in your verizon.com site."

"Please don't ask me to call that business office again."

"I can do it for you, Ma'am. What would you like to use? The last four digits of your social?"

"Aren't people always advised that one should never use their birth date or their social for any kind of password?"

He didn't answer me. But he probably felt insulted. Because then, he really upped the ante:

"Ma'am, given that you did lose your checkbook, and that we know there has been a security breach, I am encouraging you to call the credit agencies and have them flag your new bank account. I want you to contact Equifax, Trans Union or Experian (here are the numbers for each of them), and ask them if anyone has tried to open anything in your name. Tell them that you have been working with Verizon security, and that someone has changed your billing address. No, say it this way, tell them that you have been a victim of someone changing your billing address for your phone service and see what they can do to flag your account. You need to file a report with them now."

So I called each of the credit reporting agencies.

There were no humans to talk to, no live customer service agents. There was only the usual computer menu, with no options allowing one to "Press 2 on your touch-tone telephone to speak with a representative." What had "T" been talking about, saying I should call and "ask them, tell them" anything? What kind of security expert was he if he didn't even know

how credit reporting agencies operated?

The next day, "T" reported:

"Ma'am, we have finally discovered what the problem was. It was a system error. Your order was written in error. Someone caught it and was supposed to have canceled it in December. They were supposed to notify everyone but they didn't."

"So ... what you are saying to me is that it was exactly what I predicted it would be, a stupid internal error, where someone made a mistake, right?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"So, there was no fraud, there was no security breach, it was just Verizon messing up, is that right?"

"Well, if you put it that way, yes, Ma'am."

"And therefore, there was no reason for you to scare me about having potential enemies or for me to put a fraud alert on my account, is that right?"

"Well, Ma'am, I would have put on the fraud alert because your checkbook got stolen."

"But that had nothing to do with Verizon. If I felt nervous about having had my checkbook stolen, I would have put on my own fraud alert in December."

"Ma'am, if you are not satisfied with the way I handled this case, you are free to call my supervisor, â€"R."

There was no, "I'm very sorry about: the way I handled this, wasted your time, made you nervous or anxious, upset you, caused you to engage in unnecessary actions, acted inappropriately, used obscenities, called you â€"a ticket." But he sounded depressed, chastened, morose. This eight-year-old child had misbehaved and he knew it.

A few days later, I called "R." He also had a Texas accent. Had Verizon imported the two as a team? But unlike "T," his boss was not only unfriendly, he was overtly hostile. "T's" accent conjured up images of two-steppin' couples, "R's" ... a coiled rattlesnake.

"Did â€"T' talk to you about my case?" I asked him.

"Yes he did. I understand that you write about murders," "R" replied. "Who told you that?" I asked him.

"â€"T' did. Is this true or not?"

"I wrote about â€"a' murder trial. What does that have to do with anything?" Radio silence.

I moved along, feeling venomous myself. How dare he imply that I consorted with killers? His intentions were obvious-- that I knew all manner of shady characters.

"You're â€"T's supervisor. Is he supposed to be talking about how he wants to write a book about his experiences living in Tampa?"

"No, Ma'am."

"Is he supposed to be telling me that I am â€"a ticket'?"

"No, Ma'am."

"When he is talking to me, should he be cursing out other drivers? And by the way, why is he always talking on his cell phone while he's driving? Isn't that illegal?"

"Not in the state of New Hampshire."

"Was it appropriate for him to call me up and ask me if I â€"have any enemies'? What was the point of that, other than to scare me?"

"Well, Ma'am, what he should have done, was to ask you if there was someone in your life, maybe an ex-boyfriend, or an ex-husband, who had access to your computer, and who might be wanting to make trouble for you. That often is the case in these situations."

"Oh!" A Judge Judy scenario. "If he had explained it to me that way, it would have made sense."

Right. What was I not thinking? I am quite familiar with the judge and her daily parade of vendetta-filled ex-boyfriends and girlfriends, any of whom would surely mess with each other's phone bills if possible. A Judge Judyville World, a world I am not a part of, thank you.

"Was it necessary for â€˜T' to call me every single day, staying on the phone for up to an hour at a time?"

"No, Ma'am. He should have notified you that he was handling your case, and then only called you a few times until it was resolved."

"So are you going to have a little chat with â€˜T'?"

"Yes, Ma'am. I will be speaking to him."

"Should he have advised me to put a fraud alert on my account when there actually was no security breach?"

"I can't really say at this point."

"I'd like you to write a letter to the credit agencies asking them to undo this fraud alert."

By this time, I had received letters from all three agencies, informing me that not only was it in place, but as a special courtesy, they had instituted measures preventing me from receiving any pre-screened telephone credit card offers for six months. I like getting prescreened telephone credit card offers! On principle, I also refused to do the extensive paperwork and snail-mailing the agencies required to get the alert lifted.

"I'll see if I can do that, Ma'am."

I spoke to "R" again. Now, his voice was filled with hematoxin as he suddenly defended everything "T" had ever done. In his Olympian Gold Medal moment, he let me know that one of my documented phone conversations with "T" had lasted FOR ONLY THREE MINUTES!

"R" left me a message on my machine, telling me that he wanted to explain to me why he would not send the credit agencies a letter.

I didn't want to talk to him. As in, ever again. Going against my better instincts, I called him. On Friday, May 1st. Just for, I dunno, closure? To put a period on things? Or, because I had come this far?

I wonder if my dear deceased creative writing professor, Joseph Heller, would have called our conversation, "Catch 23"...

"Ms. Surovell, I will not be writing that letter for you about your fraud alert," "R" said in a familiar antagonistic tone.

"Why not?"

"Because your checkbook was stolen and because we believed that there was a system error."

"So what? That's not Verizon's problem. If I felt I was in danger because of the stolen checkbook, I would have contacted one of the companies myself to initiate a fraud alert."

"I'm still not sending that letter."

"Why not?"

"Because your checkbook was stolen."

"By the way, Mr. â€˜R,' I didn't really appreciate your calling me up and telling me, â€˜I understand you write about murders.'"

"That is not what I said, Ma'am."

"It is exactly what you said."

"No, it is not what I said, Ma'am."

"Then what did you say?"

"I am not going to tell you that."

"And ... why not?"

"Because I did not say that, Ma'am."

"Then, why don't you correct me and tell me what it is you said."

"I will not tell you that, Ma'am."

"What's your reason for not telling me this?"

"Because that is not what I said to you, Ma'am."

"Mr. â€”R,' I have been a reporter since for more than twenty years. I took copious notes during every single conversation I had with â€”T,' and every one I had with you, too."

"Ma'am, I need to warn you right now, that Florida is a two-party state and if you are taping this conversation it is not acceptable."

"Did I say was taping this conversation?"

The fangs were out, the rattlers were buzzing. "R" was poised to strike ...

"Ma'am, I am going to ask you again. Are you currently taping this conversation?"

"Why would I be taping it?"

"Ma'am, I am not going to sit here and talk to you. I don't have anything more to say," were the last words he screamed at me before he terminated the call.

Literally, screamed at me.

So I phoned The President's Line. One of the agents told me in a matter-of-fact tone that she would be referring my case over to the internal unit. That was the last I heard about it from her, The President's Line, Verizon.

Shortly afterwards, I complained to the Local Public Utilities Commission for New York State, as well as to the Federal Trade Commission on Business Practices. The two government employees to whom I reported were consummate professionals. But even they sounded incredulous. And when I told them about "the tickets" and the cursing, they laughed.

But I still didn't feel any closure, whatever that feels like. I didn't feel that warm, fuzzy feeling that results when someone apologizes. Nor did I experience the relief of vindication.

So I took to the Internet.

Like a weary explorer who suddenly discovers a land filled with riches, I came upon the consumerist.com , specifically, Ben Popken's article "Executive Customer Support: Finding the Number."

Manna from heaven! Music to my ears! Joy to my heart!

Although I am a reporter, I had refrained from using my media contacts. But now, I chose to e-mail the head of media relations. On the evening of May 2nd, 2009, I sent out: "Journalist consumer seeks resolution before resorting to media."

He replied by e-mail on Sunday afternoon, May 3rd. On a Sunday. This was dedication. Or, more probably, fear.

"The characterizations you've mentioned in your note are certainly not the way we would want our customers to describe the service we provide," he wrote. "I do not have access to our customers' account information. The only thing I can guarantee to you (sic) is that I will get your concerns to the appropriate group for handling."

That Monday, I got a phone call from the employee the Verizon executive had contacted.

He said that he had begun investigating my case, but, curiously, he did not ask me to explain what had happened. Instead, he informed me that he had been in touch with "Collections," "Billing Orders," "Security" and "Customer Service."

Collections? Billing Orders?

He had a flat, expressionless, but not unfriendly voice. As I told him the details, he rushed me along, so that whenever he said, "That's enough," which was frequently, I would say, "That's just the tip of the iceberg." I was able to tell him most, but not all of the story.

I said that I wanted the following: An explanation for why these things had happened; for a report to be made about the actions of "T" and "R," and for them to be penalized by being fired, placed on probation, or having a loss of salary; a letter, fax or e-mail to be generated from Verizon requesting that my fraud alert be lifted, and explaining that they had never detected fraud; and that I receive five or six months of free Verizon service to compensate me for the six months of the time they had wasted (I knew there wasn't a snowball's chance in, y'know, that they would ever give me this, but I just thought I'd ask, because, y'know, I deserved it.)

The rep said he would be back in touch with me on Wednesday.

He called me on Wednesday, May 6th and left a cheerful and pleasant-sounding message saying that he had "an update on my case." I was unable to return his call that day, so I called the next day, May 7th.

Apparently, his good cheer and pleasantness had dissipated. Perhaps he was having a bad day. Maybe he had found himself on the other end of one of "R's" tongue-lashings. I really can't explain the 180 degree turn his tone of voice took.

All I know is that, SIX MONTHS TO THE DAY of my checkbook getting stolen, the final outcome was this:

Verizon would not give me any document asking that the fraud alert be lifted.

Verizon would not be giving me even one day's worth of free service.

"T" and "R" were going to be subjected to an internal review by the Special Investigations Unit. (Yeah, sure.)

Customer Service Agents would be required to take sensitivity-training courses so that my experiences would never be repeated. (Yeah, sure.)

My response was, "So that's it? I'm the Harriet Tubman pioneer who suffered so that future customers will not have to do so?"

"Essentially, yes."

"I never signed up for that role. Will Verizon write me a letter of apology?"

"No, we will not."

I wasn't appeased. Not even slightly. Not even a smidge. Not even an iota. I didn't believe any of it--especially not the bit about the sensitivity classes. And so, since Verizon clearly has an instituted company policy forbidding employees from ever uttering those two little words which were all I ever wanted to hear--WE'RE SORRY!-- I have kept my promise to the Media Executive. Here, Dear Readers, is my verbatim account. Now, I feel closure.

Prologue: September 2009

Dear Andrei:

I just read an article in Rolling Stone about "Phreakers," who are the hackers of the phone system. The phreaker who starred in this story, "The Boy who Heard Too Much" by David Kushner, was a blind, obese loser named Matt Weigman, who could hear tones even animals can't and therefore can hack into any phone system, impersonating the voices of other phone officials, and ... do you sense what's coming?

http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/29787673/the_boy_who_heard_too_much/print

A, call me a motherfucking "ticket"! Eventually, the FBI started investigating Weigman, with the help of "a Verizon fraud investigator" i.e. Billy Smith, aka "T" from my Verizon true tale! They picked HIM for an investigation? No wonder all the other feds call FBI agents "feeb's" hate their guts and love to tell people how completely incompetent they truly are (did you know that the FBI's actual success rate for catching kidnapped children is 5 percent? That's a 95 percent failure rate! All those TV shows and flicks where people say, "Don't negotiate with the kidnappers, call the FBI" are disseminating major misinformation!) Here is Kushner's copy: "Late one night that April, the telephone rang at the New Hampshire home of William Smith ... when Smith picked up, however, there was no one at the other end of the line. In the nights that

followed, it happened again and again. At first, Smith didn't make much of it ..." (YEAH, BECAUSE HE'S A TOTAL TARD, MORE TARDATED THAN TRIGG MEGA-TARD PALIN! KUSHNER, DUDE, YOUR PHONE IS RINGING ... IT'S YOUR READERS WONDERING WHY THIS PASSES FOR "RESEARCH" AT "ROLLING STONE"!)). Matt, the 18-year-old kid easily hacked into all of Billy's numbers, forcing him "to change his home phone number, but it made no difference. The phone would ring again at all hours--this time with Smith's own cell phone as the point of origin. Weigman, he soon learned (a person with an IQ of say, 85, would have learned this much sooner, say, on the first or second night that it occurred--Har) was using his skills ... to ferret out Smith's private numbers and harass him. In the midst of the harassment, Smith called a travel agent and booked a flight for his wife to visit their son in Georgia. Then he called his son to inform him of the travel plans. Minutes later, the phone rang. This time, the caller ID showed his son's phone. But when Smith picked up, it wasn't his son after all, it was Weigman. Matt was using his phone-company connections to track every call that made and received--and the veteran fraud investigator for Verizon could do nothing to stop him." AND THE REPORTER FROM ROLLING STONE APPARENTLY DIDN'T REALIZE WHY "THE VETERAN FRAUD INVESTIGATOR" COULD DO NOTHING TO STOP HIM! Kushner even characterized Smith as having a "Southern," not in-your-face Texan accent. Naturally, I didn't fall asleep for many, many hours! I was too busy ROFLMAO! P.S. Voila, another chapter for my memoirs! I had forgotten about when an editor at Rolling Stone sent me to Washington, D.C., to do a piece about the Hell's Angels, and well, stay tuned, it's on its way, H.

toc

My Unwanted Guests

America's recession is not just the purview of homeowners of the heartland on Main Street. As I wrote Chapter One of my memoirs, working from 3 p.m. to sometimes 6 a.m., I received a nightly visitor, on a schedule as nocturnal as my own. It made its appearance promptly at 3:30 a.m., squeezing through (somewhere, somehow) a tiny hole in the kitchen wall and into my living room/workspace. My beauteous home now resembles a super-max prison, with even canned goods in lockdown in air-tight plastic containers. The current tally spent to rid myself of this non rent-paying, grocery-consuming resident: \$400 on top-of-the-line ultra-sonic devices, about another \$150 on assorted modes of glue traps and electronic gizmos, \$20 on peppermint oil (warning to ladies, that stuff is MUY FUERTE, no touching la chocha after applying it to cotton balls to leave in strategic areas), \$87 on airtight plastic containers, \$54 on a stainless garbage can, \$2,507.56 on eating 1 meal a day outside the crib over a 2-week period ... No need for me to get graphic except to say that this (these?) are NYC mice, smart survivors who laugh at every single thing I throw at them. They extricate themselves from glue traps, and, receiving last-minute stays of execution, they endure many volts of electricity from the battery-baits and then just bail. This building is like 1/2 rent-stab'ed and rent-controlled and the other 1/2 trust-funders paying market value. The trust-funders never complain to El Slumlordo, who hasn't exterminated in six months, despite the fact that we all now reside between an Italian restaurant and a wood-burning pizza oven/tapas/wine-tasting bar filled with loud little die-yuppie-scummers 24/7.

I called an Internet site, and this chick was in like Iowa, or Idaho--one of the "I" states, and she kept repeating, "All you can do is to keep the building clean and keep using the glue traps and the snap traps, the glue traps and the snap traps, the glue traps and the snap traps, the glue traps and the snap traps." In these cases (like when credit card companies ask me if I want to pay to get a discount at places like Wal-Mart, I always have to ask, "Have you ever seen a movie based in NYC? We don't have live in houses, we don't have malls. We don't go to Applebee's or Costco or The Macaroni Grill. We live in apartment buildings run by evil landlords. I can't force him to keep the building clean!!!!" Her response? "Well, like I said, all you can do is keep the building clean and keep using the ... "

Do they actually grill macaroni at that place? Whatta weird name.

The Democratic presidential campaign seemed to have the same mentality, as Obama and Biden talked exclusively about "the heartland" and the home mortgage crises on "Main Street," never once referring to us urbanites. I obsessed away: "Whatever happened to CITIES?" One would assume that the population of urban areas, where NOBODY lives in houses (okay, maybe Katharine Hepburn's house is still standing as an historical landmark in Turtle Bay, but, otherwise ...) makes up the majority of the population of the U.S. and probably every other country in the universe, n'est-ce pas? I personally know of a country where most people live in houses--it's called CANADA.

We finally have a superintendent, fresh from (the?) Ukraine. I had to demonstrate the flexibility of the "R" species to him on the Internet, as he was entirely skeptical when I insisted that they can squeeze into one-half inch spaces. He also appeared to be thinking of birds when he suggested that "if we kill mother and father, they cannot bring food to babies in the nest."

I got up at 8 a.m. to pee the other day (having gone to sleep three hours earlier, as I had been perfectionistically finessing my prose in my usual fashion) when the phone rang. It was my super, informing me that "exterminator man is coming here in maybe 10, maybe 15 minutes."

I got up as FAST as a ... no, I won't go there, but fast, turned on all the lights, etc. The exterminator came. He looked like a rat, with sharp little teeth and red eyes. He plugged holes with steel wool, put down more useless glue-traps, and gave me discouraging advice. When I told him that even that the electrocution devices weren't working, he opened one up,

stuck his nose inside it, and said, "Smells like dead rodent to me!"

Oooooooooooooohhhhhh I am grossing myself out.

I should have known. Life is too predictable. As in, why should this night have been different than any other night? Naturally, it was the \$20 peppermint oil that finally convinced them to find a new roommate.

The point of this update is that, yours truly, Matahariette, an apartment-dweller, am suffering from my own home-related recession, so this weekend I am going to revise and revitalize Chapter 1 for our 11/15 pub date. We still gotta date, handsome?

toc

The Year of the Illnesses

Dear A:

Andrei, you're so sweet, no wonder you are my oldest and most treasured friend.

Your words of empathy were like honeysuckle to a bee. A bee displaced by global warming, confusedly expecting forsythia and lilacs to bloom in May, not get deluged by a blizzard!

Everyone is so busy lately, and so stressed, and freaked-out about the state of the country, the world and the planet that empathy has become another rare commodity. And when you have one trauma after another, people feel burdened listening to it all. Or, at least I felt that way telling them about illness after illness.

But inside, I was desperate. I know that you are probably the only person who truly believes me when I say that after I got that diagnosis of arthritis in my two writing fingers, I left the doctor's office and almost walked in front of a moving truck. Why those fingers and none other? Because I basically wore out the collagen in them, always preferring to write by hand, so by holding a pen there for almost exactly 50 years, starting when I was 7 years old and learned how to write (I so vividly remember that feeling ... I couldn't wait to learn to read, but to write?! That was all I ever wanted in life! That was magic, that was heaven!) I overused those fingers and the collagen in them. So now I have osteoarthritis, not rheumatoid, so I won't get all gnarly hands.

While other altruistic tykes were detailing their dreams of becoming nurses and firemen, I still have my framed second grade composition, "What I want to do when I grow up" in which I most emphatically state that I want to become "a FAMOUS writer" signed, "Robert Louis Harriet" (I changed the spelling of my name in seventh grade when I started learning French. It was such a grandmotherly name to have amidst all the JAP-py Rhodas, Rhonas, Loris, Susies and Debbies in nineteen-sixties Queens, New York.)

My devoted ex-husband worries about me, but as you know, he joined the Canadian Army, and has since gotten a promotion to sergeant. I swear on a stack of Tim Horton's, a pile of maple leaves! He recently went out on maneuvers, loaded, cleaned and shot his rifle. Now he has a license to carry a gun, eh?

Hey, btw, Darlin', what is the name of that hotel in "The Shining," I mean, the one you were staying in at the Jersey Shore? My mom wants to celebrate her birthday by going to the Jersey Shore with her children, in-laws and two grandchildren. Esther has NO health problems except for osteoporosis, so she is basically bent over on a cane like a 90-degree angle. Naturally this does not deter her from participating in her weekly vigil which consists of standing in a traffic circle in Union Square, with three other old Jewish ladies who hold up a banner that reads "Palestinian and Jewish Women United." To date, no Palestinian women have expressed interest, although Esther has been verbally assaulted and even pelted with foodstuffs by the crowd, as well as labeled an "enemy of the Jews" on an Internet site. Like a postman, neither rain, sleet, global warming or mouthy assholes will deter her.

So, we've been trying to plan this family getaway since forever. Bro Karl, in typical fine form, suggested that we go the White Mountains of New Hampshire, which is where we spent our summers at that communist resort run by Minister Willard Uphaus who was jailed by HUAC. It's a very sentimental thought. Ever helpful, Karl adds that we don't even need to rent a motel room when we can go camping at night, and by day, mountain-climbing! While the cosmos may be completely anarchic, one can always count on Bro Karl to be nuttier than all the pecans in New Orleans Original Pecan Pralines and other divine confections.

Love,

Har

P.S. I neglected to fill you in on the fate of Bernardo the Dog. Remember his original owner, Prima Donald from "Summer Vacay"?

Donald was the repeat-offending rehabber who asked Da Boyz down the hall to come rescue his brand-new puppy after suddenly realizing that he hadn't left his own crib in weeks, and that he needed to feed, walk and take care of this animal. He summoned Dean to rescue the pup, found cringing and starving under a bed, and whom Da Boyz treated just as if he were their very own gay adopted child. Dave made headlines of his own last September when he dropped an air-conditioner out of his window onto the head of a guy every resident of this building unanimously referred to as "Fuckface." In fact, I only learned his real-name when this incident became an international news story!

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1316188/Vietnam-War-veteran-escapes-death-heavy-air-conditioning-falls-SIX-floors.html>

I did write to you all about that, didn't I? (The senior moments, they come so often, like a non-barrage.) Or should I? It's another one of the thousand-and-one tales I have sent you direct from this building. I never have to even open my door to get this 100 percent verbatim material.

Anyway, Prima Donald finally went to court with Da Boyz, suing them for ownership of Bernardo, claiming that they had "stolen him."

Yeah sure, as in, came in through an unlocked window?

The verdict just came in and Bernardo is back with his abuser. That peanut-brained judge might as well have imposed a death sentence on the joyful mixed-breed terrier.

No male has ever loved me as unconditionally as Bernardo does. Whenever he saw me, he would jump straight up and down, over and over, without ever bending his knees (he really gained serious traction and got up high, too ... almost as if he had an invisible trampoline!). And when it came to my titties, well, he would run into my kitchen, where I'd be sitting in a chair, climb into my lap, and nestle his furry face against my 38 DDDs, like a baby seeking nurturance, or like a male of any species, just wanting to put his head there.

Love,
Har
toc

Aunt Hariette's Tips for Beating Depression

This past spring, I suddenly underwent my first major depression since my college days. I developed all the classic symptoms: a fear of leaving the house, a loss of interest in food, a sense of hopelessness. I felt like I was submerged in Dante's deep forest, with no paths to guide me out. My nutty neighbors, whom I have written about so explicitly in the "Men's Planet" before the Corpse went cyber, began to seem threatening.

I stayed in the apartment 24/7. I didn't want any fellow residents asking me how I was doing--ditto for the local waiters, bodega owners, music and health food store employees, etc., who were accustomed to my big smile. As I lay on the sofa with my eyes shut, my cheery, mellow husband Robin became increasingly distressed. He kept pleading with me to: go take a walk, eat in a restaurant, listen to live jazz gigs, and to call all my friends. He knew that the situation had become drastic when I spurned his suggestions of seeing movies! Traditionally, no matter how sucky life is, the five magic words, "Let's go to the movies" have me running out the door. Hey, I didn't even want to buy clothes or shoes!!!

To compound everything, a mouse took up residence in the bedroom closet. Rodents skeeze me out to the point of nausea, but this particular new visitor seemed ominous. I, too, began feeling like a mouse--furtive, afraid, content to live in the darkest corners. It was as if the mouse had symbolized all my self-loathing and desire to hide.

One day, our best friend, Ricardo Llorca, asked Robin, "What's up with Hariette? I haven't heard from her in a month!" Robin replied, "She hasn't been out of the house in a month!"

When Robin relayed this conversation to me, I felt even more miserable for having hurt Ricardo's feelings, but I was still too depressed to call him on the phone. I suddenly remembered that five years before, Ricardo had lent me a biography of Truman Capote which I had never read. As I reveled in Truman's drug addictions, alcoholism, humiliating and self-destructive public appearances, and general silliness, I began to feel a bit better about myself. No matter what had happened in my life, at least I hadn't appeared drunk and goofy on the Dick Cavett Show; nor had I spent years writing the despicable "Answered Prayers." Suddenly, I remembered that I also had an unread Elvis bio. Then I picked up Jerry Lewis, and learned about him scoring Percodan from bell-hops, shitting in his pants, and sticking a gun into his mouth with his finger on the trigger. My path out of the forest was illuminated! Onto Groucho Marx, who verbally and emotionally abused all his wives, alienated all his children, and was generally a miserable motherfucker. Montgomery Clift ruled. He was such a stone-cold alkie, and took so many different drugs on a daily basis, that at any moment during a dinner party or on a movie set, he would just keel over and fall flat on his face. Liz Taylor was Monty's dear friend. How sublime it was

to learn of La Liz's multiple hellish marriages, moronic money management, and the drug and alcohol combinations she has ingested which began almost killing her since the fifties. Robin the jazz musician was so thrilled to see me taking an interest in something that he even listened patiently as I described Liz's first visit to The Neverland Ranch--a true historic hallmark for pure surrealism.

I began feeling guilty about my new obsession, and attempted to redeem myself by delving into "Miriam's Song" (the life story of Miriam Mathabane, sister of Mark, who wrote "Kaffir Boy.") Wow, did I learn all about apartheid and the current political climate in South Africa ... but the next day, I was back to Judy Garland.

Somehow, the mouse, too, had mysteriously bailed during this process ...

Which is how I derived Aunt Hariette's Cure for Depression.

Read celebrity bios. I suspect that they are written for this very purpose. No matter how dreary your life seems, I guarantee that you will perk up and rediscover joie de vivre after immersing yourself in tales of people who had brilliant careers; mega-millions; lavish, indulgent lifestyles; glamorous love affairs ... and who all ended up as bankrupt suicidal drug-addicted alcoholics.

The skies will be turquoise again, the sun will become your personal overhead lamp, and everyone you know will ask, "Where have you been??? I missed you!!!"

toc

THREE PROFILES

Profile I: Interracial Couple

On the bedroom wall of their Soho loft hung two wooden plaques. One read "Spirit of Leo" and the other, "Spirit of Gemini." The Gemini plaque was inscribed with the information that, among three other signs, Geminis are compatible with Leos; vice-versa for the Leo plaque. When you read this, you thought how fitting it was, how they did indeed seem to mesh in many ways, this former model from Pittsburgh, this Black jazz bass player. She was older than he was, and he liked the fact that she took good care of him in her slow, meticulous way. She was a pro vegetarian cook, but, as he told friends, "no rocket scientist." She was always a hard worker, though, and he admired that. When he was between gigs, she worked part-time in bakeries and in record stores, and she did so uncomplainingly. Too old to model, she was still a tall, sexy redhead, like a girl out of his childhood fantasies, and she liked to act out sexual fantasies, too. When he went on tour, he promised to be faithful, and he meant to be. But the other dudes would have thought that he was pussy-whipped, and besides, those German girls, those German girls! One was named Greta and she played electric violin. Back home, he confessed to his wife, and she accepted all. Why didn't she give him an argument, the dumb-ass bitch, he thought. That night in bed she told him she was pregnant.

Their son was named Eric, but the Gemini called him "Little Man." He liked to swing him over his shoulders. Little Man had his musical genes; he was always drumming with silverware. A phone call one day from the Gemini's manager--his band had been offered a six-month tour. Greta travelled with them. When he returned, he told the Leo he needed a woman with talent. Little Man was only one and a half years old, he hardly knew his father, so a divorce shouldn't really affect him, the Gemini rationalized.

The Leo found herself another Gemini--a Black homicide detective who loved children.

"I've always heard that cops have the best drugs," she told him when they met, and he proceeded to prove the truth of that rumor for years. She kept the plaques up on the bedroom wall. The cop also sometimes got annoyed with her big, passive, cow-like blue eyes, which accepted anything, which endured anything, but he didn't leave her. After all, she was a hot sexy redhead, and she took real good care of him, real good care of him.

toc

Profile II: Grandpa

He was a delicate old man with feathery white hair, and even though he was Jewish, he'd spent the last 17 years living in a YMCA in New Orleans. He liked living there, he had his friends, all retired gentlemen like himself, all good poker players. At this point, he could outguess their moves. But then he had a stroke, and after he recovered, his daughter was worried that he might have another one, and she wanted him living near her. Her lawyer husband bought him a co-op studio on West 90th Street in New York City. There was only one other senior citizen in the building, a Mrs. Wilensky. She was a kind-hearted lady, hard-of-hearing, not too bright. Sometimes they went to Riverside Park together. His daughter lived in Maspeth, Long Island. Every weekend his son-in-law picked him up in his maroon Cadillac Seville and silently drove him out to their house for dinner.

The old man had three granddaughters. They were plump, sulky teenagers who seemed to always be polishing their fingernails. His daughter had to reprimand them to say hello to their grandfather. "Get off our cases!" they'd whine.

When it was Marcy's birthday, Grandpa brought her a blouse he'd purchased in K-Mart: white rayon with lace at the collar.

"Here, darling, much joy to you," he said.

"Ooh, tack-y!" Marcy replied, her expression even more sour than usual.

The next day Grandpa went to the park with Mrs. Wilensky. "Did you have a good weekend?" he asked, when they were positioned comfortably on a bench with cans of grape soda.

"Yes, it is the spring season," she said, nodding happily.

Grandpa opened up his New York Post. On page four, there was a photo of a dark-haired local college girl. She had been abducted while waiting for a taxi in her hometown on spring break, then raped and stabbed to death by unknown assailants.

"Why are you crying? What is it, my darling?" Mrs. Wilensky asked, putting a protective arm around his shoulders. The sun burned into her astigmatic eyes like ammonia.

"Such a beautiful girl. What a world. Those animals," Grandpa replied, shaking all over.

toc

Profile III: Island of Tropical Breezes

Yesterday, on the N train, a man sat down next to me who looked as if he were singularly trying to atone for the bad image created by this year's Puerto Rican Day Parade. Middle-aged, he was a genial sort, albeit, as Chris Rock would say, "a crazy Puerto Rican." He was wearing a Puerto Rican flag shirt with a Miss America-type sash with a rubber frog pasted onto it. He even had a Puerto Rican pride wristband.

I asked him why he was wearing a frog.

He explained to me about the singing frogs in Puerto Rico, which can only exist in that climate ("Always the hurricanes blowing ...") and whose females incessantly call out for sex to the males.

"Ten thousand of them, everywhere you go, all night long, it's more noisier than Yankee Stadium."

This gave me some insight into the behavior of my cousin Lois. She had married a guy making mega-bucks in the rag trade and they began hating each other mere minutes after exchanging vows. He was as mellow as the average Canadian, she was more tightly wound than an Internet stock trader. Anyway, they bought a crib on 79th between Park and Lex, and furnished it in exquisite taste--every ottoman cost \$5K. Since they were miserable and it was the eighties, it all went up their noses. She called me up once, asking, as all my female cousins do, "How do I have an orgasm?" "How the fuck should I know????!! Get a vibrator!" has been my consistent reply. Then she visited her father in his vacation cottage in Puerto Rico. There she met a local fisherman, moved to his one-room shack with no plumbing or electricity, and is now blissfully remarried (and, presumably, Big-O'ing) with two children.

Next time I get one of those cousinly calls (just because my middle name is Ruth, does this make me Dr. Ruth?) I'll advise, "Why not take a vacation to San Juan (â€"I know a boat you can get on') and listen to 10,000 horned toads?"

toc

CRITICISM

Precious (A Christmas Carol)

Louis Farrakhan is an evil sociopathic anti-Semite who was responsible for the murder of Malcolm X, but he was right-on about one thing--the Jews who ran Hollywood were racists. The celluloid presence of shiftless, stupid, lazy, greedy, sassy Blacks, featured exclusively as maids and butlers, tainted major studio releases from the nineteen-thirties to the fifties, rendering heartwarming family fare, cutting-edge comedy classics and edgy film noir expeditions into psychic cringe fests. What was the purpose of including Black actors if only to cast them as bobbly-eyed cooks and butlers unable to follow the simplest commands, who frequently fell down (since they were also incapable of learning how to walk properly), and bug-eyed, big-bottomed maids who either sassed their employees, broke or stole things, or relayed misinformation? Their presence was usually irrelevant to the plot, and it always interfered with my cinematic suspension of disbelief. As soon as I felt myself swept up in emotion I ended up obsessing about why Louis B. Mayer, Harry Cohn, Jack Warner, et al., found it necessary to demean and ridicule Black people. These studio-owners were always kvetching about not being included in Hollywood's old WASP society, forcing them to form their own country clubs. Shouldn't they

have understood prejudice on a personal level?

What a difference the decades make! Now, not only are Black people directing and producing movies filled with vile racist stereotypes, but they also fill them with good, kindly, benevolent Jews, whom they cast as the saviors of the bad, bad Black people. Consider the cynically-crafted "Precious: Based on the Novel Push (sic) by Sapphire Jones." It was produced by the team of Oprah Winfrey (who never met a high-profile incest abuse project she didn't love), Tyler Perry, (best known for his drag queen/fat suit incarnation of a crazy Black grandmother, "Madea,") and was directed by Lee Daniels, a gay Black man who claims to have suffered abuse from his bio-family. It's based on a novel, "Push," written by a gay woman, Sapphire Jones. The double entendre implicit in the title is that Precious, the book's main character, must push against the barriers of her life and forward into a meaningful existence, and she must literally push out the two babies. As a work of cinema, "Precious" functions to an entirely different end ... awards and kudos for Oprah. Why else would this movie focus on evil ghetto-dwellers who perpetrate unspeakable atrocities on each other, yet who are ultimately saved by empathic Jews who have the power to "heal" and the incentive and access to help? "Precious" is nothing more than an obvious ploy on the part of media whiz Oprah Winfrey to nab multiple nominations for the movie and its cast of nonactor actors. It is an overt bid to get consideration from the predominantly Jewish members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS.) This is why "Precious" opens with a screen imprinted with words of wisdom not from the works of Toni Morrison, Harriet Tubman, Franz Fanon, W.E. B. Du Bois or the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. but The Talmud:

Every blade of grass has its Angel that bends over it and whispers, "Grow, grow."
--The Talmud

For anyone lucky enough not to have already seen it: "Precious" is the nickname for the ebonically-spelled Claireece Jones, played by a nonactress, Gabourey Sidibe. My favorite review of her performance comes from the Web site allvoices.com . "I was also very impressed by newcomer Gabourey Sidibe whose flat affect conveys a child severely abused." In other words, her nonacting constitutes acting. This kind of nonsensical doublespeak characterizes every frame of the movie. Precious is a morbidly obese (pushing 400 pounds?) Black girl who lives in 1987 Harlem with her emotionally, physically and sexually abusive mother, Mary and (in flashbacks) her sexually abusive father. She is pregnant with her second child, with the baby daddy being ... her daddy! We see Precious' father zestfully raping her, in plain sight of Mary, and when Precious cries out, he covers her mouth with his hand. Mary is played by the comedian Mo'Nique, who is also obese, although not in Sidibe's league. She is almost always seen supine, disrobed and wigless on a couch. Mary demands many things from her only child: that she clean, shop and cook for her, that she depilate pig's-feet before deep-frying them, that she venture out 24/7 and buy her cigarettes, and that she perform oral sex on her (all these activities having the same, pun intended, emotional weight.) When Precious is slow to act on a command, her mother hurls ashtrays and skillet at her head or pours pots of water on her, calling her "Little Piggy Cunt," "Lying Whore," "Fat Little Slut," "Stupid-mouth Bitch," and, most offensive of all ... "Crafty Scorpio!"

Precious later relates the details of giving birth to her first child while lying on the kitchen floor, with her mother kicking her "upside my head" throughout. This first child, a girl with Downs Syndrome (or, as Precious informs someone, "Sinder"--an arbitrary and completely false note ... why would she not know the word "syndrome"?), is cared for by her grandmother, a benign, passive lady who brings the baby over on the days when a moronic Black caseworker comes to check in. This city official has been successfully scammed into believing that the baby lives there so that Mary can collect its AFDC check. Despite a total absence of any children's toys, furniture, clothes or tchotchkes in the apartment, this ruse has worked effectively for two years, although one wonders how the grandmother is able to financially support the child. When the social worker leaves, and Mary throws the baby off her lap in disgust, Grandma merely shakes her head in puzzlement, as she does when observing all of her daughter's sadistic rages and temper tantrums. We never learn why Mary has become a monster.

Baby number one is named Mongo, a fact I found disturbing, mostly because of its implications about the mental capacity of legendary jazz musician Mongo Santamaria. His cover of Herbie Hancock's "Watermelon Man" was played constantly on the radio during my childhood, so I'm sentimental about him. Precious' daughter Mongo is a light-skinned, almost white child, which is puzzling, since both Precious and her father are dark-skinned--one of the many genetic anomalies presented in "Precious."

The apartment Precious and Mary inhabit is a huge duplex with a long staircase separating each level. Where, one wonders, can such an apartment be found in Harlem? I sure would love to live there when Mary gets evicted! It's not in a housing project, it's located in a place called Movie Fantasyland. Could Lee Daniels be a Woody Allen devotee? He houses his characters in Park Avenue triplexes, Daniels invents Harlem duplexes.

The apartment is appropriately dingy, and yet, in it there resides the Jones' family's heart and soul, the center of its hopes and dreams, the repository of all intellectual life ... a big television set, usually tuned to a game show. Also sharing this apartment with Precious and Mary are two cats, Mary's pets. As I watched, I kept asking my friend, "Why would this woman have pets?" The answer is ... she wouldn't, unless their presence is a visual reinforcement of the fact that there is pussy in this household, but how could anyone forget this fact, what with Precious being pregnant and the explicit scenes of Mary masturbating ("Come take care of Mommy!" she demands)? Despite being so illiterate that she is unable to read

a sentence from a children's book, Precious is a "ninte-grader" who is "good with numbers." How do we know this? Because she herself informs us, in an epic ebonical external monologue that opens the movie and only ends as the final credits roll. All the other students in Precious' math class are not only slender and svelte, they are fashionable and attractive ... and yet, in this part of Harlem, customers routinely purchase 10-piece fried chicken dinners with potato salad at greasy take-out joints.

The plot kicks off when the school principal, a Jewish lady, Mrs. Lichtenstein, summons Precious to her office to point out that she is apparently pregnant with her second child. The audience is confused ... however could she tell? Even after giving birth to this second child, the house-sized Precious could still do damage to an NFL linebacker. When Precious is uncooperative, Mrs. Lichtenstein threatens to come to her home to visit with her mother. We hear Precious' thought process, such as it is:

"Nosy ass white bitch mad â€˜cause she can't come over my house. I don't be coming to this bitch's house in Weschesser."

I didn't buy it. Precious doesn't know the word "syndrome," even though she is mother to a Downs syndrome child, but she somehow has divined that her principal lives in upscale Westchester County, NY? This was as bogus a detail as a group of little boys, presumably as uneducated as Precious, calling her "Orca," and not "whale." Despite her hostility towards Mrs. Lichtenstein, Precious does a 180 when the principal braves the mean streets of Harlem at night, standing alone in the dark, bumming cigarettes from strangers. Her intention? Like all public school principals who exist exclusively in the imagination of filmmakers, she's making a Harlem house call to tell Precious, albeit over their buzzer system, to check out an alternative school. Precious doesn't know what the word "alternative" means, and Mary wants her to stay home and collect Welfare, but she is nonetheless inspired to go. A full ten minutes are wasted on Precious asking an office worker about the word "alternative."

Her teacher is a pretty, extremely light-skinned black woman with straightened hair in her thirties. Her name is Blu Rain, spelled just like that (but spelled "Blue" in the book) as in, as in, as in well, Blu-Ray discs! I wonder what percentage of Blu-Ray sales of this movie Oprah negotiated? On the wall of her home, there is a poster for the play, "For Colored Girls Who Have Committed Suicide, When the Rainbow is Enough," by Ntozake Shange. Tyler Perry is in pre-production to make a movie of that play--it will be in theaters in 2011. The year is 1987, the play ran in 1975. The poster is Tyler Perry's attempt at blatant product placement. Oprah's many product placement attempts come later on in the film.

The other students in this alternative school are all pretty, svelte, stylin' chicks. Isn't there anyone as unattractive as Precious out there? Not even one other overweight person in Harlem except for Mary? In 2001, a study showed that 33 percent of all African-American children in the U.S. are morbidly obese. Are they all living outside of Lee Daniels' version of Harlem? If so, then where are they?

Ms. Rain asks everyone to talk about themselves, and to tell their favorite color. A girl named Joanne says that hers is "fluorescent beige." Is that actually a color? Then Ms. Rain asks the class to write the letters of the alphabet on the board. The action ends when someone is stumped by "E."

Despite the fact that most of the students are equally as illiterate, with Precious thinking that the word "at" is actually "ate" (she's not 400 pounds because she starves herself), Ms. Rain informs them that they will be writing in their journals on a daily basis. Just as *The Bard* explored the concept of a play within a play, so "Precious" pretends that its subtext is the omniscient power of writing.

When Precious goes home, her mother insists that she stop going to school so that she can get welfare, her main concern being affording her cigarettes. Besides, for Mary, welfare is the one true way of life and should be every Black person's destiny. The next morning, Precious meets with her very own welfare caseworker. This is no dumb Black lady!

Since Precious' life is on an upswing, she has earned herself a Jew, Mrs. Weiss! An ostensible Jew, played by an oddly miscast oddly Hispanic-looking Mariah Carey, who phones in a performance with all the vitality, energy and natural acting ability she displayed in "Glitter." Mrs. Weiss asks Precious the identity of her children's father.

"My daddy," Precious replies. "He give me this baby comin' and my other one before. Thas all I know. Don't see him."

Mrs. Weiss looks startled (as startled as Mariah Carey playing a social worker, or, well, playing anybody, can look), but does nothing. She doesn't make an effort to locate Precious' father, nor does she talk to the police or the district attorney's office about getting a warrant out for his arrest, because in *Movieland* Harlem, fathers can impregnate their daughters repeatedly without legal consequences.

Next we see Precious in the hospital, where she has given birth to a healthy baby boy. No birth defects, no "down sinder" for little Abdul, even though the baby was deprived of nutrition, prenatal care, and was fathered by its grandfather.

We learn from the voice-over that a social worker (it's unclear whether by this she means Mrs. Weiss or a hospital social worker) is encouraging Precious to give up both Abdul and Mongo. Her grandmother has informed Precious that "only a

dog will drop its baby and walk off." Really? It's my understanding that bitches are devoted mothers. Which bitch is the old lady really talking about here?

Only a few months have elapsed since Precious entered Ms. Rain's classroom, but she is magically writing regular journal entries, filling entire pages with sentences and paragraphs! Ms. Rain is surely the most brilliant teacher in the entire history of education! Whatever her secret is, she needs to patent it! Soon, Precious will be explaining to another student what Ms. Rain means when she discusses "a protagonist's unrelenting circumstances."

Ms. Rain addresses this issue in her notes to Precious:

"Dear Precious, You are not a dog." (Whew! Whatta relief. I was worried for a while ...)

"You are a wonderful young woman who is trying to make something of her life. I have some questions for you. Where was your grandmother when your father was abusing you? Where is Little Mongo now?"

I had some thoughts about this, too. I wondered, One, where has Ms. Rain been throughout all this? and two, is Ms. Rain deliberately disobeying the New York City law mandating that teachers report suspected child abuse cases to the authorities?

Eventually, Precious must leave the hospital, so she returns to her home, carrying Abdul. Mary greets her by screaming "Bitch!" She hurls a vase at her daughter and grandson, then a plant (Why would she have a plant? A plant, a pet ... why, oh, why?) She stands above Precious and hits her directly with the plant so that Precious is covered with dirt. This is the second time Daniels has attempted to employ symbolism. When we first saw Precious being raped by her father, he then cut to a visual of meat sizzling in a frying pan (she's a piece of meat, she's treated like dirt, get it?) Then, her fury only increasing, Mary attempts to "ram Precious and Abdul like a bull." This is verbatim as it was written on the shooting script. Dogs, rams, bulls ... either Daniels is obsessed with astrology, or he associates Black people with animals.

In her effort to escape, Precious overturns the television set and runs down the stairs to the lobby. Mary then throws the set down the steps, where it threatens the lives of Precious and Abdul! Is this meant to be a commentary about the evils of television, how it has killed Mary's desire to live and to be a part of the world, and almost ensnared Precious in its evil grip? Actually, no! Because soon afterwards, Precious ends up in Ms. Rain's apartment, where they ... watch television! Ms. Rain lives with her "wife," Katherine, who is also a light-skinned black woman. They insist to Precious that they are indeed married, despite the fact that gay marriage is still illegal in NYC in 2010.

And then comes the most insidious moment in the entire movie. Watching Ms. Rain dance with Katherine, Precious sorts through her confusion. "Are homos really (as she has always been taught) bad people?" There is no reason for the teacher to be gay. It's irrelevant to the plot and adds nothing. However, it leads Precious to contemplate the single most important question of the film: If Ms. Rain be a homo, and she nice then, what's the truth about Oprah, whom Mary also dissed? Employing the single most creative product-placement technique in the annals of cinema, Precious muses, "I wonder what Oprah have to say about that?"

And then she asks, "Y'all watch Oprah?"

Ms. Rain gives her a loving smile and extols Oprah's virtues. So convincing is she that when Precious moves into a halfway house, she decorates it with ... a postcard of Oprah!

Readers, Oprah executive-produced this movie! Precious, can you spell conflict-of-interest yet?

Well, I could go on and on, as the movie did, citing, for instance, Precious telling us, "I find out mayor's office give me literacy award and check for progress!" which should make all viewers very nervous about what the criteria for winning was.

Or I could talk about how Precious moves to a halfway house, where Mary visits to inform her that her father has died from AIDS, but that she herself is HIV-negative because the sex she had with him was "not like faggots, in the ass and all." This news motivates Precious to get tested (naturally, she's positive), because although she gave birth to a child of incest in a city hospital, they never tested either her or her child (who is, unlike Precious, miraculously AIDS-free, yet another genetic anomaly.)

Or, I could tell you about how Precious attends an "insect survivor's meeting." She may have won a mayoral literacy award, and she knows what a "protagonist" is, and her life itself may be the very essence of "unrelenting circumstances" but somehow she never learned the term for the act which has defined her existence.

Or, I could go into detail about Precious' final visit with Mrs. Weiss, a session also attended by Mary, and the, no pun intended, climax of the movie. But then, I might be accused of leaking spoilers!

I did, however, wonder whether Precious had plans to re-christen "Mongo." I asked my friend, "What should she name

her?"

My friend thought briefly, and replied, "Mango?"

When Oscar time comes, and the screeners are sent out to the members of AMPAS, I expect them to come in an envelope inscribed, "Shalom uv'racha leYisrael!"

toc

Coming Soon

I've been out-of-town since July 2010, but I'm back in Gentrificationland. Been here lately? The hood of funky dives, cool cafes and George-Therese Dickenson's crib (did I tell you that my landlord reports that she permanently joined a nudist's colony?) now looks like Lex in the forties or anywhere on the Upper East Side. Sky-scrapery buildings and bourgeois restaurants, all are meant to cater to NYU trust-funders and Hollywood celebs in their stretch limos. Will they re-name "The Bowery" something like "Cooper Alley"? And where exactly have all the Bowery Bums gone?

My brain is scheming away about what will hopefully my next Corpse piece ... in which I barbeque 3, 3, 3 sacred cows simultaneously. It will be titled "Constipated Colette: The Need for a Flush." Based on New Yorker contributor and "feminist" Judith Thurman's biography, "Colette: The Secrets of the Flesh," I will examine the total lack of disconnect exhibited by Colette, an anti-Semite as a fetus, who blithely and sincerely penned Nazi propaganda for Reich magazines as her third husband, wearing a yellow star, was sent to a labor camp. Her hype has endured long enough and must end immediately. She who wrote only about love, sex, and nature (tediously at that), was a complete fraud as a sensualist (my careful reading of this bio as well as Colette's overrated oeuvre proves that she never even experienced the Big O), while other residents of Gay Paree like Natalie Barney kept stables filled with showgirls and actresses who populated her nightly orgies, during which Natalie would get it on ... and on ... and on ... and on! In fact, the bizarrely beribboned and otherwise dolled-up French poodle, so offensive to the eye of anyone who thinks dogs should roll in mud and eat Alpo will learn that during La Belle Epoque, this adorned animal was meant to be a signal to those trolling Les Tuileries, its secret code meaning, "I may look like a dog, but my mistress aime lechant la chatte." Barney, so full of beans, piss, vinegar and come-juice was the polar opposite of the dreary Colette, who was obnoxious to everyone in her life, most blatantly her neglected daughter, and most inexplicably her elderly mother, Sidonie, who was perhaps the only mother in history to offer utterly unappreciated maternal advice like, "Why don't you make your latest lover (your 24-year-old stepson) jealous by pretending that your ex (a tuxedo-wearing trans) just sent you an enamored telegram?"

Why do I call the recipient of Le Prix Goncourt constipated? At the beginning of the book, Thurman tells us how this same Sidonie, so hip in vicarious matters of the flesh, was equally rigid in matters of the flush. Therefore, just like Edie Sedgwick, Colette was harshly toilet-trained at six months. A lifetime that begins comme ca always spirals into sadism, narcissism and self-loathing and will never have a happy ending (or even middle), but Thurman ignores any Freudian implications, including the incident of Colette's wet-nurse, a hired village slave, sadistically weaning her unsuspecting charge (Colette writes, "She told me I nursed like an adult, standing up," which is the only credible thing Colette ever wrote) by smearing moutarde all over those pretty pink nipples to which the incipient dykelet had grown so attached, and afterwards, as la pauvre petite reeled from shock, shame, and the taste of curry and turmeric, laughed at her hysterically along with the stable boy she was schtupping. As far as I was concerned, Thurman could have ended the book there, but, on and on she wrote, compiling petty details without ever arriving at conclusions, leaving the reader to wonder how Colette, who spouts anti-Semitic remarks more or less hourly (that's when she's not otherwise engaged in committing them to her literature, i.e., in a story I read last night, "The Kepi." "She handled her pearls like an old Jewess,") could actually fall in love with and marry a Jew.

Why in need of "a flush"? Well, after just one of dozens of especially cruel romantic rejections, Colette, a "proud gourmand and glutton" "consoles herself with platters and platters of seafood." We're talking LOTS of seafood here, A. Half the Atlantic Ocean, in fact, and yet, what happens to it afterwards? Scatology is the secret thread that runs throughout this National Book Award finalist tome.

Perhaps the only aspect of the book more offensive than its half-assed scholarship and constant exposure to Colette's unpleasant personality is the Q&A section at the back, conducted between Ms. Thurman and the Self-Appointed Queen of the Feminists, Erica Jong. I've always wondered how Jong came to be considered part of the literary community. The success of "Fear of Flying" hinged (no pun ...) on what many considered to be a racy, and I deem an irrational turn-of-phrase, "a ziplless fuck." How can one fuck without unzipping zippers? If the book's success had been based on the phrase, "an anonymous fuck," "a spontaneous fuck," or any other such permutation, I could fathom why it became a best-seller among lame-ass readers, but to catapult Jong into the literary pantheon?! Time for her to zip it up, Baby.

Anyway, during this Q&A, the two literary feminists pretend to discuss their literary feminist heroine, but what actually is of paramount concern to both of them is Colette's "obesity," the result of her consuming not just les fruits des mer, mais le beurre, du creme, des tartes, les cassoulets, etc. etc. etc. Jong is shocked (or more likely she herself would like to enjoy similar repasts and is curious about Colette's secret. Jong did, after all, name her first book of poetry "Fruits and Vegetables") that Colette could still attract les hommes, femmes et garcons while weighing in at what Jong and Thurman

estimate to be 185 pounds.

Thurman's response to these, um, weighty matters?

Verbatim, Big A: "I know! Like all other women, when I'm not thin, I'm SUICIDAL." Suicidal?

All three need a skewering, to be followed by a disemboweling. First I must begin my research into that fun-loving party girl Natalie Barney, whose bad poetry can be overlooked, given her greater contributions, like her vraie gourmandise--the eating of 18 pussies in one single evening.

Well, Darlin', love the current Corpse. I am proud to believe that I single-handedly inspired the note to contributors stating that no changes will be permitted once a piece has been submitted.

Wishing you cool breezes and hot chochas,

Aunt Har
toc

The Selling of the Americans: Insidious Movie Product Placement Trends

Television shows are sponsored by advertisers who really get bangs for their mega-bucks when the products promoted during commercial interruptions are also used as props in the show itself, or even more insidiously, written into the plot.

"Seinfeld," brought to you by Snapple, created controversy by having its characters not only drink the beverage, but tell jokes about it. "Too fruity!" said the character Babu Bhatt in the episode "The Visa."

Another NBC hit, "30 Rock," a television show about making a television show (it's the updated Shakespearean concept) is also sponsored by Snapple. The discussion among the show's staff in the episode "Jack-Tor" about how "Diet Snapple tastes just as good as regular Snapple" was followed by an actual Snapple ad in the subsequent commercial break.

"Mad Men," the AMC cable series about a nineteen-sixties Madison Avenue advertising firm, Sterling Cooper, is sponsored by Heineken. In the episode, "A Night to Remember," Sterling Cooper takes on Heineken as a client. Coincidentally, Betty Draper, one of the executives' wives, serves Heineken at a dinner party, unaware that her own husband had just talked up the virtues of introducing suburban housewives to exotic foreign beers. Betty's menu causes much mirth among the dinner guests. Cut to a real commercial break for ... what else? Heineken.

In season two of the F/X cable drama "Damages" starring Glenn Close, the show's main sponsor was Cadillac, and a Cadillac Escalade became one of the most strategic "characters" in the plot. This Escalade, present in a bit role for most of the series, eventually became its true star. Glenn Close, cast as lawyer Patty Hewes, finally figured out that the numbers on its dashboard held the key to unlocking a mystery and outsmarting her legal adversary. During commercial breaks, Close leaned suggestively against another Escalade, purring seductively like a pre-psychotic bunny-boiling Alex Forrest about what a superior car it was and promoting the accompanying F/X Cadillac Escalade sweepstakes. One could win a trip to, for no specified reason, Costa Rica, if, after watching the show on F/X, they segued to the network's website, where a photo of an Escalade held essential entry information.

I watch one sur (reality) TV show, "The Real Housewives of Orange County," basically because I keep wondering when someone, perhaps the show's director or producer, will realize that one of these "housewives", Vicki, has a full-time job and another, Gretchen, isn't married. Despite Gretchen's chronic acne, which no amount of industrial-strength "foundation" seems to conceal, she has developed, not a regimen of skin care products, but generic eye-shadows. Gretchen's adventures creating, packaging and financing this enterprise is really pure advertisement, "disguised" as being part of the show's "story." During the commercial breaks, Gretchen seamlessly segues into appearing in a bona fide advertisement. Specifically, she does her taxes with "Turbo Tax."

Not to be outdone is the magazine of pop culture--television, cable, music videos and major motion pictures--Entertainment Weekly. Its pages have diminished so drastically that it should properly be called a pamphlet. Yet it has made room for a new feature, "Style Hunter," which brazenly pimps out items the stars wear onscreen. In the January 22, 2010 issue, a reader asked where she could buy the necklace Vera Farmiga sported in "Up in the Air." Details on its exact make and model were provided and readers learned where to purchase it.

In my Corpse review of the movie "Precious," I pointed out something no other critic seemed to have noticed (why not, for crissakes?)--rampant product placement and advertising actually written into the text of the script and also used in the set decorations.

"Precious" was produced by Tyler Perry and executive-produced by Oprah Winfrey. Oprah Winfrey's television show was a subject of discussion in the script, with the characters extolling Oprah's virtues and then actively watched her show,

inspiring the title character, Precious, to buy a postcard of Oprah with which to decorate her bedroom. Tyler Perry's movie version of the 1976 stage play by Ntozake Shange, "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide, When the Rainbow is Enuf" (sic) is now in pre-production and is scheduled to be released in 2011. Although "Precious" was set in 1987, Precious's teacher had a poster from Shange's play hanging on her living-room wall.

Most critics buried "The Lovely Bones" in that special toxic waste dump reserved for D movies, but none noticed how blatantly Peter Jackson, its director, used his position to advertise his movie trilogy, "The Lord of the Rings." "Bones" is set in Morristown, Pennsylvania, 1973, and, guess which literary box-set is advertised in the local mall's bookstore? Huge posters in vivid hues for "The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring" (screenplay written, directed and produced by Peter Jackson in 2001,) "The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers" (ditto by Jackson in 2002,) and "The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King" (Jackson again, 2003) are plastered all over its glass facade.

I did some double-checking, to see if any editions of any of these books were published in 1972 to 1973, because if they were, it would be logical for bookstores in malls everywhere to be advertising them.

Here are the pub dates:

"The Lord of the Rings" was published in three volumes as "The Fellowship of the Ring," "The Two Towers," and "The Return of the King" in 1954, and then again in 1966, and finally, 1994. Why, then, would a Morristown mall be promoting the LOTR trilogy? Actually, it wouldn't.

Since viewers have accepted the fact that the function of "art" is to promote capitalism, why should filmmakers and television show directors draw any lines whatsoever? Why not just let every plot be related to the products advertised, and every item of art direction be a visual reminder of the producer/director's ... hey why not the D.P.'s ... past and future projects? To be totally pragmatic, we could eliminate any pretense of plot or story, making all creative content one long commercial!

Doesn't it bother anyone else out there, no less almost everyone, that the 2008 Democratic National Convention was held in Denver's Pepsi Center and that Obama and Biden accepted their nominations at Boulder's Invesco Field? It's disillusioning enough watching Eric Clapton, aka Slowhand (forget the "God" nickname!) do T-Mobile commercials for quick cash (does he really need it?), but am I the only ex-hippie who experienced a bad acid flashback upon hearing that his long-awaited reunion gig with Stevie Winwood occurred on the stage of the Nokia Theatre?

toc

Valentino, The Last Emperor

This statement so alienated me that when a cutting-edge journo correctly predicted that Valentino would soon suffer the fate of another fashion "emperor," Pierre Cardin, "whose name now only sells belt buckles," I cheered. The Valentino Fashion Group was indeed bought out in 2002, then the buyer sold-out or was bought-out, whatever, and then the new designated chief designers quit or were fired. Does any of this matter in a documentary devoid of facts? Valentino's lover, Giancarlo Giammetti, stated on the record that despite their constant mutual hissy-fittings ("Your belly is showing!" "Look who is talking! You and your three layers!"), they have only been separated for 60 days in 45 years. Could the testy Napoleon and his collagen-lipped acolyte have even spent hours excessively self-tanning together?

<http://www.awfulplasticsurgery.com/category/valentino>

I attempted to do the math in my head when Valentino commanded his main seamstress to oversee the hand-sewing of "millions" of sequins on a dress (an outfit so amateurish that the kvelling it received from his many slaves and sycophants was a clear-cut example of "the emperor's new clothes.") The movie's piece-de-resistance, Valentino's "45 Years of Style Celebration" in the Roman Forum was an aesthetic catastrophe, an exercise in garish ghoulishness, an event so tacky that the ghosts of Nero and Caligula were heard screaming. Zillions of air-kisses were exchanged by the guests, mostly scary-looking celebs, each one sporting new facial features: blubbery lips, snipped-off noses, the popularity-expanding "chipmunk cheeks." Wig-less mannequins clothed in lengthy Valentino classics ("Never in my life have I designed an evening gown that exposed a woman's ankles!") were mounted vertically on crypt-like walls. Karl Lagerfeld (in signature shades, natch), perused these vaults as if scouting out a bank job, half-heartedly pretending to be Valentino's vrai industry copain--not what he has always been, a cut-throat competitor. The most important stars of the movie were Valentino's "beautiful dogs." Call it my pet peeve, but it was clear that their lives had more value to Valentino than any and all of the women who have funded his livelihood and lifestyle for half a century. They were five or six identical pugs, their tails permanently twirled up like corkscrews, thus perpetually revealing their huge grey-black anuses. Such access surely allows fellow canines to greet them more easily, but wouldn't constant exposure to wind, rain, snow, hail and falling icicles ultimately erode this delicate fabric? What happens to pugs who escape their cosseted lives? And don't they ever just want to straighten their tails?

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Two Rants: The Millennium and The Meredith Berkman Pregnancy Watch and the Biblical Literalists

The Millennium

I don't read The New York Times every day. Among New York City "intellectuals," this is tantamount to a confession which may forever lose me credibility. But it's just too long, and whenever I have it, I feel compelled to read every single article in every single section, which ends up taking up approximately two hours--time which could be spent much more constructively, like watching "Law and Order" re-runs on the A&E Channel. Plus, I love The New York Post, even though I know it's a reactionary rag with crazed columnists. I was recently visiting friends in New Jersey, and I was amazed at the way in which the local newspaper actually printed, well, news. The New York Post has lost all pretenses to being anything other than what it is--a tabloid. For example, the tragedy of a bride being murdered by her ex-boyfriend on her wedding day was mentioned among many other articles in the Times, but I knew it would snag front page attention for almost a week in the Post. On Sundays, it has unique little columns, like a single guy writing about his life of misery; I enjoy reading "Ask the Vet" even though I don't own any pets, but my favorite is "guy-gercounter," a weekly poll which might as well have been conceptualized by the late, great Ed Wood, Jr., The Eternal Master of Pure Lunacy. In it, an arbitrary man agrees to subject himself to be stopped on the street, photographed and rated by a selected panel of arbitrary women who work in professions ranging from salesclerk to music video producer, on his personal grooming and general sex appeal. They can categorize him anywhere from "No Chemistry," "Not Even Close" to "Oh, baby!" I'm glad the Numerology Lady is gone, however. In her entire year-long or so tenure, she gave only one cheerful weekly forecast. I used to send her e-mails saying, "Could you change your perspective and look on the sunny side of the street occasionally? You're depressing New Yorkers with these doom and gloom forecasts, and we tend to be depressed enough already."

I also love to hate The New York Post, particularly it's right-wing, smarmy columnists. Some months back, I got into an e-mail catfight, the likes of which would have made Aaron Spelling proud, with Meredith Berkman, who appears to be distinguished only by the fact that other than having interviewed fellow braggart Kathie Lee Gifford for Redbook, she is ... Oh My God, Meredith, please tell us every single detail, just as if you, too, were a Hollywood celebrity ... pregnant!

In her morally-bankrupt Opinion piece, "And Then I Heard the Heartbeat," Meredith "shares" the fact that she had been a life-long pro-choicer, until she became pregnant with her first child and heard the baby's heartbeat and saw its image on a sonogram. Presented with this tangible evidence that the fetus was actually a person, she felt fiercely protective and wondered how she could ever even hypothetically contemplate aborting it! This epiphany, she claims, made her "pro-choice with an asterisk."

I maintain that you simply cannot be "pro-choice with an asterisk." You're either pro-choice or you're not, and if you write about your newfound ambivalences, you're giving fodder to Right-to-Lifers who will in all likelihood gleefully reprint your column in their literature and use it as an excuse to bomb more abortion clinics and murder more doctors, patients, employees and bystanders.

Furthermore, I felt like this article was a diss to the zillions of women throughout history who have had babies before technological advances like sonograms allowed them to see the image of their fetuses. Is Meredith saying that because previous generations of mothers didn't have access to state-of-the-art obstetrical equipment, they couldn't "bond" as closely with their unborn children? Heck, my mother didn't even know she was having twins until after my older brother Alan was born, and then, ten minutes later, along came Jeff. Does this mean that she loved them any less, had less maternal instincts during those strategic nine months? Yet my mother, who gave birth to four children without acting like a martyr, saint or movie star, has also remained a lifelong pro-choicer. Are adoptive or foster parents less loving parents, and should their love for their children influence their views on abortion? If a technological advance is enough to push someone out of the pro-choice camp, I'd say they were never too firmly entrenched in there to begin with.

But enough about Meredith, because, frankly, I think the whole column was just an excuse to boast about her pregnancy, (hopefully, she can creatively one-up her fellow columnarclist, Susan Brady Konig, who "pre-wrote" the birth to her third child a week before the event actually occurred--making the infant somewhat akin to Jesus Christ, who was born before his birthday--see later reference in rant. Well, Susan, that was so very thoughtful of you because all Post readers, especially yours truly, were ever so fascinated!!! A woman giving birth--call "Eyewitness News," this has never happened in N.Y.C. before!). Can I stand the suspense of waiting for Meredith to apprise readers of the birth, the early days of motherhood, yadda, yadda, simply because it's Rule Number One in The Narcissist's Handbook? I recommend that both Berkman and Brady Konig call Burrelle's and purchase a tape of George Carlin's memorable HBO Special, "You Are All Diseased," so they can listen raptly to his brilliant take on yuppie parenting in the nineties. But, like with the remote control, which enables me to change channels, with Meredith, I also have an option ... I can stop reading her. And if I ever stop being addicted to the Post, I can always get my share of sleaze from Salon.com . A top news story entitled "You've Got Male," in which author Michael Alvear asks the question, "How did AOL become the bathhouse of the Internet? (Size Matters)," treats us to a quote from a public relations expert and AOL chat room devotee who proclaims, "I can have dick delivered to my door faster than a pizza." (One hopes there is a person attached.)

More compelling even than the Post's triumph in finding men who will permit themselves to be dissected by a panel of vicious, merciless and plain-out meanie-headed women judges: "He needs to work out more to be able to pull off wearing

those tight pants--he looks flabby," "his jaw is too square for that funky buzz-cut--looks pretentious," (are the guys overly optimistic, exhibitionistic, do they secretly suffer low self-esteem, or are they just looking for fashion tips from chicks?) was the random poll they conducted about the "Millennium," which is basically the subject of my rant. The question posed was whether the recent spate of earthquakes, hurricanes and other natural disasters was related to the upcoming Millennium." Every single person (ranging from college kids to middle-aged professionals) replied "yes." Many otherwise smart people I know also believe that "The X-Files" is not merely a creation of network television, but a prophecy: come the Year 2,000, aliens will land. To which I always reply, "Then why didn't they arrive in 1,000 A.D.?"

But this is disingenuous on my part, since I don't believe in a Millennium. For starters, there's the issue of why anyone who isn't a Christian should consider the birth of Christ as the beginning of "the first calendar." Why shouldn't time have officially begun when the first hominids appeared on the earth? Why would the birth of Christ have any relevance to the millions of atheists, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists--or any other religious or nonreligious group? And supposing that everyone agrees to use this Christian calendar nonetheless: I called the New York Public Library Information Service and was informed of the following facts: The Random House Dictionary states that the Christian Calendar is based on the Birth of Christ (B.C.), and yet, according to The Encyclopedia Britannica, Christ was born from between four to seven years B.C. Excuse me? He was born before his birth? Okay, since he was ostensibly born to a virgin mother, this, too, seems feasible. But here's my point: If there is a scientific discrepancy over exactly WHEN Christ was born, how accurate is our calendar? It seems like the evidence is overwhelming that the Millennium already occurred sometime between 1993 to 1996. Who knows? My point is: If this is the case, would everybody just CHILL OUT already? If the Aliens are disguised in the form of Meredith Berkman, you can just send them a series of logical e-mails and trust me, they will back off.

The Meredith Berkman Pregnancy Watch and the Biblical Literalists

Don't you think the trend of www.everything-on-earth-becoming-a.com is making people more nervous than they already are? It reminds me of elementary school, where they would show us educational films in "assembly" about how, in the future, automation would make human labor obsolete, making us all wonder, "Then, why bother growing up?" Perhaps the Internet has already taken over our lives, but must we be reminded of this fact 24/7? In any event, never let it be said that I do not live online, so kindly check out my bi-monthly rants at: www.Matahariette.com .

As I predicted in Rant number one, "The Millennium," in a recent column, "I'll Take That Epidural," Meredith Berkman, The New York Post's silliest columnist, (a Herculean feat), "shared" with her readers by updating us on her pregnancy. The gist of her "opinion piece" was that women oppress other women by pressuring them to have natural childbirth and by guilt-tripping them if they opt for painless deliveries. Oh, poor, sensitive Meredith, so vulnerable to peer pressure!!! If anyone I knew, was related to, or anyone anywhere had the incredible audacity and rudeness to even suggest the method in which I should deliver my unborn child, you can be assured I'd tell them to www.mind-your-own-fucking-business.com! Isn't the goal to actually HAVE THE KID, not to focus obsessively over its delivery?

I think an old episode of the classic TV show "Northern Exposure" summed up Lamaze. In it, Maggie O'Connell (Janine Turner), the well-meaning optimist, tricks Dr. Joel Fleischman (Rob Morrow), the pragmatic man of medicine, into lecturing at a clinic for expectant mothers and their mates. Joel says, "Ladies, here are the four words you'll need to know when you go into labor: I WANT MY EPIDURAL!" Irritated, Maggie tries to teach everyone Lamaze breathing techniques, but later in the episode, a woman's contractions begin, and despite Maggie's patronizing New Age advice, the incipient Mom screams out, "I want my epidural!" Case fucking closed.

Perhaps you are thinking, How can this Hariette ranter find time to write if she watches so much television? Maybe I'm adept at "multi-tasking," as long as I'm given a "head's-up" that a project I'm working on is "green-lit." I proudly espouse the position that well-written television shows (current and on reruns) are superior in quality to anything I read in all the generic j-school glossy magazines (see upcoming J-School Rant) which proliferate like roaches, or most webzines, with exceptions, like Cyber Corpse. Let me not even discuss the cinematic atrocities of 1999, which may be rant-worthy if I can force myself to recall all those tedious, ludicrous, wasted hours. No, I refer specifically to "Oz," "Law and Order," "Sex and the City," "The Sopranos," "The X-Files"... and in reruns, "Homicide," "Northern Exposure," "Seinfeld," "The Equalizer" (wouldn't we all like to be Robert McCall for a day and tell someone, "My name is Robert McCall. You are going to do exactly what I tell you to do in the next five minutes or you will be very, very sorry, indeed." And everyone always does it!) And since Saul Bellow's son is writing a book about nepotism, might I plug my cousin Jonathan Katz's animated comedy, "Dr. Katz: Professional Therapist"? I wish "Wiseguy," "Miami Vice," "Crime Story," "E-Z Streets" and "thirtysomething" were still on. I was nothing less than devastated when Patricia Kalember said in TV Guide (hey, it's a better read than Esquire) that she had always hated her role as the cranky Susannah Hart from "thirtysomething." I worshipped Susannah and her refusal ever to capitulate to other people's expectations and behave politely, or even moderately socially, even when she was an (infrequent) guest in their homes. In "Beauty and the Beast," the underutilized but consistently compelling actress Jo Anderson, playing Detective Diana Bennett, who lived alone in a secretly located loft, was constantly breaking dates with her boyfriend, even forgot her own niece's birthday, and was generally rude and unaccommodating, gave everybody a hard time. When she finally agreed to take on the case of who killed Catherine Chandler (Linda Hamilton), I was jazzed. Every week, I wondered giddily, When will Diana discover that Catherine's mystery love, Vincent, was actually half-lion? More importantly, Is Vincent and Catherine's baby leonine or

human? Now, THERE was a celebrity baby I actually gave two shits about.

Which brings us back to The New York Post, and mediocre columnists trying to transform themselves into celebrities by tediously telling us about their pregnancies. Meredith Berkman's fellow columnaricist, Susan Brady Konig, recently wrote about how strangers make rude comments to her because she has more than two children (this pre-dated her riotous account of cleaning up an old house she's moving into to accommodate her brood). Did someone recently pass a journalism law mandating that women are only permitted to write about maternity? "Like, duh, hello," I seem to remember a rather widespread feminist movement, spurred on by the publication of Betty Friedan's "The Feminine Mystique" in 1963. No wonder a Lesbian friend recently called me a "breeder." At the time, I pissily retorted, "I don't cast aspersions on your sexual preferences, so would kindly not criticize mine using terminology derived from the Aryan Nations." Upon reflection, perhaps "homegirl" just reads more newspapers and magazines than yours truly: what else are women writing about other than breeding? Girlfriends, it's a Ladies Home Journal world! In an edition of the Sunday New York Post, there was an interview with Marilu Henner, which I read because I was in an Ed Wood, Jr., kind of mood. In it, I learned this fact: "A few years ago, she also hosted a documentary, 'We're Having a Baby,' that followed her second pregnancy right through the 4 a.m. delivery--all of which was televised." Coincidentally, I saw that there was going to be an e! cable TV special on the perky actress in TV Guide. In it, Marilu, filled with what she called "Hennergy," said (not verbatim, but this was the general idea): that she had decided to make the documentary so that other women could observe the processes of pregnancy and childbirth, thus demystifying them. Liar! She just wanted to brag about her baby like every other Narcissist in America. While she did not reveal what John Leguizamo refers to as the "vaginga" in his Emmy-winning HBO special, "Freak," there was a scary moment when the baby's head began to crown while Ms. Henner sat on the toilet. "Oh my God!" she screamed. "Now I'm worried that if I have a baby, I might not make it to the hospital in time and it will fall into the toilet bowl and drown!

READERS, PLEASE EXPLAIN TO ME WHY WOULD ANYONE CARE ABOUT ONE SINGLE DETAIL OF MARILU HENNERGY'S PREGNANCY? In the e! special, I also discovered that she wrote a book "sharing" her very own parenting techniques. Since the majority of American women can barely afford to pay for decent day care for their children because they're underpaid and overtaxed, why would they listen to the advice of a zero-charisma former television sitcom actress who can afford countless nannies, elite private schools, organic produce... The Narcissism disease is knocking off women with the intensity of the Body-Snatchers. But, wait, I'm being www.unfair-to-my-sisters.com. In the November 8th issue of The New Yorker, a new father, John Seabrook, published an opus defending the practice of his ten-month-old son "co-sleeping" in his marital bed. This oppressive drivel could have been contained in a mere paragraph: "The United States Consumer Products Safety Commission's chairwoman, Ann Brown, published a study in October 1999, saying that 64 infant deaths are caused yearly by babies sleeping in their parent's bed (they either get smothered, strangle in the bedding, or drown in waterbeds.) Yet in 1997, 2,705 infants died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), and many experts, such as James J. McKenna, a biological anthropologist at Notre Dame University, suggest that 'solitariness may conspire with infantile deficits to increase infant risks.'" Case fucking closed! If you want your baby to sleep in your bed, the percentages justify that you can do so without feeling guilty about it. But that's not what Seabrook REALLY wanted to write about (and write ... and write ... and write). He wanted to wow us with his closing paragraph, about how, despite the sleep deprivation "co-sleeping" has induced, he continues to practice it because otherwise "what I would miss is the sight of my son's face just as he is waking up... And then there is this smile, a big, radiant grin provoked by nothing more than the mere presence of another day." What killer Anne Lamottian-calibre imagery!!! What a unique and original concept! Perhaps Salon.com really is "The New Yorker of the Internet," because the creatively-challenged John Seabrook would be a perfect pick to start a new column, "Fathers Who Don't Think." LADIES AND GENTLEMEN ALIKE, I IMPLORE YOU, PLEASE STOP BRAGGING ABOUT YOUR CHILDREN RIGHT NOW BECAUSE NO ONE CARES!!! WE DON'T GIVE A FLYING FUCK, BECAUSE WE DON'T KNOW YOU OR YOUR BABIES!!! We care about our own children, our friend's children, our nieces and nephews, but not about your anonymous offspring. All babies smile, coo, gurgle, throw up, spit up ... maybe Baby Seabrook wakes up feeling happy because he has just moved his bowels. It only takes a village to raise a child when you're living on a kibbutz. (Even Hillary Rodham Clinton, Esq., first lady and superstar lawyer wrote a book about "breeding," not a tome of brilliant legal insights, damnit.) The giant peapods are stacking up in the backs of trucks across the land, inspired by Anne Lamott, whose child-rearing frustrations she candidly discusses on Salon.com, even though she outs herself as an emotional and physical child abuser according to the statutes of the California Legislative Analyst's Office, Seabrook, Henner, Demi Moore's "controversial" Vanity Fair pregnancy photo, Brady Konig and of course, Meredith "Call Eyewitness News, I'm Pregnant" Berkman. Could Meredith's attempt at breederly wit conceivably be lamer: "I'm convinced that mothers are pregnant for nine months so they have time to organize their closets." In her most illogical column (so far), "Not the Usual Celebrity Split," she analyzes the decision to divorce by Howard and Alison Stern, noting that her husband was wisely unfazed when she tearfully informed him, "Howard's getting a divorce!" while eating a bowl of soggy Cap'n Crunch. "Now I'm not saying that Howard and Alison Stern were role models," Berkman muses, "I've never met them, so I wouldn't know." Gee, Meredith, I sometimes enjoy Howard Stern's radio show and agree with his contrary takes on current events, but I think you would have to be www.totally-out-in-the-ozone.com to even speculate on whether the Sterns were "marital role models." Howard Stern grew livid and spewed vitriol to the press when Kathie Lee Gifford wrote him a letter of condolence--he'd probably jerk off on Meredith's tree-waster. Let's examine Howard Stern, alias Fartman, who in all probability would not describe himself as "compassionate." He hosts a nightly television show on e! in which he encourages an assortment of not terribly bright but always desperate and pathetic young women to disrobe on national television, telling them how much he'd like to sleep with them, insulting their intelligence while complimenting or criticizing

their physical attributes ... in-between constantly complaining about the unsatisfying sex life he had with his wife and how he had to use a vibrator to get her off. (I can only imagine the hellish school experiences of the three Stern daughters: "Eww, gross, your daddy talked about finger-fucking your mommy in the dedication to his book!") When I try to conjure up marital role models, the Sterns would rate about as highly as John and Patricia Ramsey. Yet Berkman actually continues on this train of thought, "But the public death of a private marriage is a sad spectacle with a ripple effect that has very little to do with fame: We feel for the broken family in question, and cherish the family we have at home." Yes, hearing the news of Howard Stern's marital break-up made me weep profusely!!! I could barely bring myself to surf the Net, which I do more than ever since I've cancelled all my magazine subscriptions, except for TV Guide.

While pretending to diss "our culture of celebrity worship," Meredith Berkman proves again that she's the biggest autograph hound around.

Because I believe that Ed Wood, Jr., is hiring New York Post columnists from Planet Solaranite, along comes the www.not-as-attractive-as-she-claims-she-is-according-to-her-photo.com Amy Sohn (ooh, catfight ... down, boys!) who formerly had a column in the New York Press where she constantly whined about how she could never get laid, yet somehow failed to inspire my empathy, since it's really not that difficult a task, and who completely alienated me as a reader when she meticulously "shared" all the details of expelling a large turd at a potential lover's apartment (sorry, Amy, I just personally really "didn't want to go there.") It was not her lackluster yet megalomaniacal prose that occasioned my infrequent readings of Sohn's "Gee I Met Another Cute Guy, But He Didn't Want to Fuck Me" columns, nor the fact that New York Press is free: no, it was pure fascination on my part that someone so eager to give up the vaginga could be so consistently "clueless" about succeeding in her quest. Also fixating on Howard and Alison Stern's break-up, in one of her New York Post columns "Stern's Not-So Private Parting" (perhaps it was a typo that should have read "Farting"?) Amy quoted an anonymous woman who said that "whenever she and her boyfriend fought, she took refuge in the fact that Howard and Alison stayed together, but now she felt hopeless." Yet the newest columnaricist never explored the obvious issue: Why should anyone compare her own relationship to that of a celebrity's? And if they do so, shouldn't she go get: an ego, a shrink, "a life," a "reality check"?

C'mon, Wacko Jacko, publish a book about "parenting" ... a 20 percent discount to all NAMBLA members!!!

I often ask myself which is more frightening--Salon.com, Anne Lamott, Meredith Berkman, the world in general; people who believe in the Millennium (according to a recent Newsweek article, this encompasses most Americans, who are convinced that the world will end in the year 2,000) or the Biblical Literalists.

In the article "Science vs. Bible: Debate Moves to the Cosmos" published on October 10, 1999, New York Times reporter James Glanz revealed that last August, a furor occurred over the Kansas School Board's vote to "remove evolution from its education standards." This decision was apparently influenced by "a handful of SCIENTISTS whose literal faith in the Bible has helped convince them that the universe is only a few thousand years old." (On October 17, an international team of REAL scientists airlifted an unearthed almost fully intact, frozen woolly mammoth, from the Siberian tundra, estimated to be 23,000 years old. They were co-funded by television's The Discovery Channel ... hmmm, what was their agenda? On November 1, 1999, a dead coelacanth fish was discovered in a fish market in Indonesia, fascinating the fossil folks, since the original coelacanths originated approximately 16 million years ago. The discoveries keep coming: on November 4, paleontologists found the bones of a previously unknown dinosaur, a 60-ton giraffe-like creature 110 million years old.) But if the earth is only several thousand years old, then all these sneaky scientists must be zealously inventing these facts, and clandestinely manufacturing these fossils, bones, humongous footprints, etc., collectively conspiring through the decades, utilizing the same creative verve and intensity with which Holocaust deniers claim that Nazi death camp photos are faked and Holocaust survivors are liars. And all those college courses I avoided because I thought science teachers were geeks--little did I know that they are the true artists of our age! Re-create a fake T-Rex? I couldn't even come up with a decent Halloween costume!

"Young Earth Creationists," as they are also called, have invented their own theories to explain how cosmic history could be condensed into mere thousands of years.

"Beyond the expunging of the Big Bang Theory," wrote Glanz, "the board also took out references to the hundreds of millions of years of Earth's geologic ages and modified sections on using the slow decay of radioactive elements to measure the age of fossils and other rocks."

"The theory relies on a peculiar feature of Einstein's equations which predict that powerful gravitational fields can speed the progress of time (as in, time seems to go faster when you're having fun?) and, in effect, makes clocks run at different rates in different places."

So Dr. Russell Humphreys (a nuclear weapons engineer at Sandia National Laboratory) has concluded that "the earth is close to the center of a structure related to a black hole, in which gravity is especially intense, so that billions of years could pass in deep space while only a few thousand years went by on earth."

"Hello?" "Dr." Humphreys makes NUKES? Sandia is a U.S. Department of Energy National Security Laboratory.

Humphries believes the world is only 2,000 years old, but he's using the most advanced technologies ever invented to zestfully help destroy this new, young, fresh planet. Sandia, a Lockheed Martin Company, leads the market in manufacturing supercomputers, an intrinsic component of nuclear weapons. Incidentally, the lab was investigated by Congress when nuclear secrets were leaked to the Chinese. A techno-wizard who has decided to reject all rational scientific evidence because of his religious "beliefs"? Does anyone else find this dichotomous? Monotheist extremists should not be allowed to create weapons of mass destruction!!! A certifiable schizophrenic responsible for my "national security"? Are we all feeling as nervous as yours truly?

"This theory can even be reconciled with the existence of the Bible," writes Glanz. ("Even"? Wouldn't that be the whole point of creating such an imbecilic and delusional concept?) "According to another "scientist," Dr. Hugh Ross,... six days of Genesis could stand for six long periods of time." (Like six periods of 776 million years, "Doc"?)

I don't have a science or engineering degree, but wouldn't this imply that the ancient Africans, Mesopotamians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Mayans, Jews, Romans never existed ... or that they only existed in the past 2,000 years? I'm currently reading a book about ancient Mesopotamia, but according to the Biblical Literalist Boys, its author, who examined all those artifacts discovered in archaeological digs must be demonically possessed, because he claims that their culture existed in The Fourth Millennium, B.C. Somehow ... "I don't think so"... "I'm down with his program." This author seems rational and his evidence--"ancient art, from temple architecture and palace reliefs to cylinder seals and filigree jewellery," as well as "accurate and readable modern translations of the extensive Sumerian and Babylonian literature" is persuasive. My pick for "Nutjobs of the Year" would be Humphries and Ross. Since we know these anti-evolutionists don't accept the evolution of the hominids dating back 5 to 6 million years ago, expliquez-moi the almost-but-not-quite-human-looking skull of the Tautavel Man, (too large for him to wear zee beret) discovered in France in 1941, and estimated to be 450,000 years old. Oh, je comprend! Since he was French, he must have had joie de vivre, and les cloches et horloges must run really fast in that hedonistic country, making Monsieur Tautavel about 500 years old (?) on the Biblical Literalist timeline.

Legitimate scientists everywhere: Mainstream scientists, physicists, astronomers, cosmologists, etc., such as Dr. Jerome Friedman, a physicist at M.I.T. who won the Nobel Prize in 1990 for collaborating in the discovery of "quarks," are understandably appalled, infuriated and distraught over the potential spread of such unadulterated idiocy, according to Glanz. But Kansas City Board Member Steve Abrams, a VETERINARIAN is blase, saying there were "legitimate scientific doubts about whether the universe is more than several thousand years old." A Nobel winner's views versus a vet's? Hey: No contest!!!

Another board member, John W. Bacon, profession not disclosed, said, "I don't understand what they're squealing (like ... pigs?) about. Millions or billions of years ago ... I wasn't there, and neither were they."

Clearly, they gave the Nobel to the wrong man! Dr. Jerome Friedman, please surrender yours to John W. Bacon, who has invented an entirely new system of logical thought process. NOBODY WAS THERE, SO NOBODY KNOWS NOTHIN! Therefore, the earth could well be anywhere from 130 (the approximate age of the world's oldest survivor) to infinity years old!!!

Are these Fruit Loop fanatics really so far removed from the mainstream, with national polls showing that the majority of American citizens not only believe in biblical millennial revelations, but also in the existence of angels and devils? I never thought of Reader's Digest as the contemporary Ramparts, but in its final issue of "The Millennium" a "noted historian," Paul Johnson reassures his readers that Christian churches currently have one billion followers, and possibly two, so that if Jesus Christ were to resurface in the "Third Millennium" he would "Hear the same injunctions he addressed to the common people of Judea almost 2,000 years ago." Thanks, Mr. Johnson, and the relevance of your soothing remarks to the non-Christian world is ...?

Most American adults were taught the Bible when they were children. As Johnson remarks, "Nearly half of all Americans attend places of worship." Why continue believing it as if it were The Gospel as adults? They are onto Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny (hopefully) so why, why, why are they still convinced that Adam and Eve were in a garden, and a TALKING SNAKE (which language did it use?) told Eve to tell Adam to eat an apple? Every time I try to read the Bible, I just skip over to the Corinthians, which is so gorgeously poetic, but nonetheless, I obsess, What about the dinosaurs? How come the Bible never mentions the dinosaurs? Did Adam and Eve look around and realize they were naked and surrounded by dinosaur corpses? Are the Biblical Literalists saying that all those dinosaur footprints, bones, and reconstructed skeletons are only 2,000 years old, or that the only dinosaurs that ever existed were the digitalized creations in the movie "Jurassic Park" and its sequel? Drs. Russell and Ross, I must insist that this seems www.highly-unlikely-to-the-point-of-you-should-have-your-degrees-retracted.com. But maybe Call Eyewitness News, I'm Pregnant Meredith Berkman, whose brains have clearly become addled by eating too much Cap'n Crunch, might become a convert.

toc

Extra-Literary Entertainment

My celebrity bio reading habit, which began in the spring of 2000, has emerged into an all-consuming obsession, one that is growing increasingly obscure, arcane and occasionally just plain silly. Upon discovering that Vivien Leigh, a certified homicidal maniac, attempted to strangle her lover Peter Finch's infant daughter with a pillow and that Peter **NONETHELESS CONTINUED FUCKING HER!**, could even a court order have prevented me from learning just exactly how tweaked was the actor I so admired in "Far From the Madding Crowd"? Could anyone, under these circumstances, resist ordering a used copy of "Finch, Bloody Finch" over the Internet? In Dorothy Parker's bio, her intriguing remark that her dear friend Oscar Levant "was resented by people because he made lots of money by saying mean things about his friends" naturally led me to devour "A Talent for Genius." Although I didn't discover how I could purchase a co-op crib on Fifth Avenue by dissing my pals, I felt an affinity with Oscar, who chose to remain, p.j.-clad, in bed for the last 20 years of his life. Frankly, I wouldn't mind living in a five-star hotel, with five-star room service (including frozen fruit daiquiris), a mini-bar, a sauna, on-call masseuses and a computer so that I could order used celebrity bios online. I never maintained that I am anything other than totally decadent and, frankly, as lazy as my druthers and my bank account will allow me to be. Oscar's candor did, however, perplex me. If I felt hostile towards my homies, I just wouldn't hang out with them anymore.

Other Corpse contributors can write about books, I explore extra-literary entertainment. I would rather read The Globe than The New York Review of Books any week, well, make that every week. Nor am I interested in reading novels about professors, professors of writing, any variety of academicians, writers, writers with writing block, journalists, reporters, etc.

I actually found a book review somewhere about a novel concerning "a retired Columbia University graduate school admissions coordinator." What would Kurt Vonnegut, my first-ever college writing professor, say about that one? "You've got an imagination so use it or get the hell out of here goddamnit!" he barked at us from the luxury of his luxurious home. "Write about being a goddamned Native American. Anyone who ever writes about being a writer can just leave right now." Which were, even then, my sentiments exactly. How I worshipped His Crankitude for his anti-social personality, and because he made no effort to hide the controlled substances in his personal medicine cabinet.

I would rather fill my brain with thoughts of Mariah Carey's incoherent website rantings, Paula Poundstone's "lewd and drunken advances" towards her foster daughter, and can we shout a collective, "Party On, Girlfriends" for the Bush Twins? Who could not admire Lara Flynn Boyle for constantly exchanging boyfriend Jack Nicholson's gifts of designer dresses for cold cash? Nonetheless, the latest trend in celebrity parenthood is plain obnoxious, and even formerly juicy tabs disappoint. Tom Hanks, Steven Spielberg, David Duchovny, Jodie Foster, et al., extolling the joys of parenthood, going to charity events and worshipping their numerous scrungy-ass dogs is just bad public relations. Annette Bening (who completely lost her edge since "The Grifters" and "Bugsy"-- she was such a good bad girl back then) recently exhorted a group of gals, "Women! Have babies! Have children! Have babies!" (If you can afford nannies, nannies, nannies!) This is not leading to another parental narcissism Rant a la Meredith Berkman, but does Annette really think anyone would want to buy a bio about her wholesome nuclear family rather than accounts of booze-filled orgies at Pickfair? Mommy Earnest is not earning herself a place in posterity.

Celebs today "think" that just admitting that they have a substance abuse/alcohol problem and going into rehab is sleazy enough for those of us with Enquiring Minds. This rote exercise has become a smarmy foray into self-congratulation. The only "recovered" drug-addicted celeb who remotely interests me is Melanie Griffith, who "shared" her spiritual experiences with her Web site readers when she checked into Promises, then escaped after eight days to keep an eye on that hot studmuffin Antonio Banderas, who bought her a gold charm of a giant Vicodin tablet in gratitude for her (according to the experts) prematurely-brief rehab stint. Melanie Griffith is maybe the only celeb consistently worth watching, because in her Michael Jackson-esque efforts to secure the sexual interest of Antonio (who should also just shut up already about his desire to have a son before he totally alienates his female fans--even those of us who still love him from all those kinky roles in his Pedro Almodovar movies), she has taken a pretty face and turned it into a Halloween mask. Nonetheless, every week, Melanie dominates the Tabs, proclaiming to the world in that inimitable baby voice (imagine a conversation between Melanie and Goldie Hawn--still the "Giggle Girl" in her fifties!) that she must get more nips and tucks, collagen lip implants, etc., due to her phobia of losing Antonio to younger, sexier actresses (who can, presumably, "give him sons.")

I may start a new website, The-Melanie-Griffith-and-Antonio-Banderas-Divorce-Countdown.com

Today's celebrities are as generic as the margarine-esque movies they perform in. (I will be reviewing new film regularly again on my website, www.matahariette.com.) Thus far, it hasn't been a "New Millennium" for film.

In 2000, I liked "Boiler Room" because it was hip, edgy, twisty and cool. I don't know why everyone hated "The Beach." True, it was not Leo di Caprio's most inspired performance (that would be "Gilbert Grape,") but Tilda Swinton as a crazed, dictatorial leader of a secret cult group was Swinton-esque. By the way, Tilda fanatics can see her in the new Fox flick, "The Deep End," which is an idiotic movie, and not her best performance, but I'll see her in anything and everything she's attached to, having been a Tilda fanatic since "Orlando." Also in 2000, I enjoyed "High Fidelity" for about a day, then I pretty much forgot it. "Wonder Boys" was funny, despite the plot being about a blocked writing-professor at a small East Coast college, and his misadventures in academia teaching creative writing. It explored every concept I

loathe, but it was a relief to see Michael Douglas playing a pothead, wearing a pink woman's bathrobe, and acting befuddled rather than super-slick and controlled. I dunno. Let's ask Kurt! "Tigerland" was mesmerizing, gritty and enigmatic. My final pick would be "The Contender," because Gary Oldman is a genius, and also for the star-making turn of Kathryn Morris as Special Agent Willomina.

These movies will soon be at a theatre near you or on video/DVD:

"Pandaemonium" (USA): Wordsworth vs. Coleridge. Who knew that the literary world in the seventeen-nineties was so cut-throat and competitive, filled with plagiarism, intrigue and machinations. On second thought, why should that night have been different than any other night?

"Together" (IFC Films): A seventies commune in Stockholm. Sometimes hilarious, sometimes lame. The stand-out actors here are the children, possibly some of the best-directed children in cinema history (after the French classic, "Forbidden Games.")

"Ghost World" (MGM/UA): Worth every over-priced dollar just for Illeana Douglas' clueless p.c. art teacher alone, who praises a student's sculpture of a "tampon in a teacup" and completely overlooks Thora Birch's ingenious and skillful drawings.

"Baby Boy" (Columbia/Sony): John Singleton returns to the hood, serving up classic lines of hood-ly dialogue like, "Let me smell your dick." Plus, Snoop is in the cast, and he long ago earned my eternal admiration simply for titling his CD, "Doggy-Style."

"Sexy Beast" (Fox): I guarantee that you will forget Ben Kingsley as Gandhi telling his upper-caste wife, "You must cover and rake the latrine" when you check out his Oscar-caliber performance as a psycho Cockney career-criminal.

"The Score" (Paramount): I retract any previous dissing of Ed Norton on my Web site. Yes, he rules. I am also befuddled as to why director Frank Oz wouldn't let Marlon Brando play his character as His Mountain-ness envisioned him, as a screaming queen. Would you interfere with any of Marlon Brando's creative impulses? Like his suggestion to promote "The Island of Dr. Moreau" by playing the bongo drums as Don Rickles narrated dialogue?

Given the standards of the cineplex, it appears that the suits at Paramount Home Entertainment are the true creative visionaries of our time. As long ago as last year, they began re-releasing classics on VHS and DVD, everything from "Chinatown" to "The Warriors" to "The Longest Yard," with the primo picks being two from Coppola: 1974's "The Conversation" (possibly even more relevant today as we commence The Cold War, Part Two) and October's upcoming "Godfather Three Trilogy" on DVD, with numerous special features, including an interview with Coppola. These films particularly haunt me, since they both feature the performances of the late, great John Cazale, one of the most versatile and talented actors of all time.

Dark, intense, mournful, brooding, sensitive-looking Cazale, who acted in the five greatest films of the nineteen-seventies: "The Godfather I and II," "The Conversation," "Dog Day Afternoon" and "The Deerhunter," before dying of cancer in his forties, is probably best-known as Fredo in "The Godfather" series, as well he should be. He was at once nebbishy, gracious, clueless, conflicted, sweet, amoral, good-hearted, gullible, ferrety, Hedonistic, guilt-ridden, kind, embarrassing, exasperating, dim-witted and shrewd. Always misinterpreting everything, consistently a prominent and sloppy screw-up when compared to Michael (Al Pacino's rigid perfectionist) Cazale as Fredo flawlessly, heart-breakingly plumbed infinite depths of a single character. Fredo is the single most important character in "The Godfather" after Michael. The movie is about the metamorphosis of Michael Corleone from earnest college-kid turned war hero to remorseless mass-murderer ... all of his murders committed for the sake of "the family." Yet no murder can equal that of Fredo's. When Michael kills his own brother, he betrays all the tenets of family loyalty he espouses.

When you're not reading your novels about "retired Columbia University graduate school admissions coordinators," or checking out flicks and vids, there is always television, the gold standard for all things surreal. I recently contemplated changing careers and becoming a famous actress for the express purpose of going on Bravo's "The Actor's Studio" with James Lipton, whose lizard-like visage is more frightening than any "X-Files" alien, just so I can yell at him, "You are absolutely wrong in every possible way. Fire your fact-checkers--they're incompetent! These moronic questions insult my intelligence!" (As opposed to, every single actor's "surprised" exclamations of, "However did you figure that out? How do you do your research?")

There is plenty to watch on The Altar of Worship, I mean the television--like Larry Ziegler, I mean "Larry King, Live." Sir Paul McCartney gave an inspired impression of Mike Meyers imitating Sir Paul McCartney, when Larry asked him, "How have you dealt with the horrendous, painful, prolonged death from cancer of your beloved wife?" and Sir Paul answered, "Just a minute there, Mate. Look, I've just taken your photo on me new digital watch. Hey, everybody, it's Larry King, Live! Now, what was your question?" If I were Larry Ziegler, I would have taken that golden opportunity to ask Sir Paul the only question everyone really wants to know: "Well, since that subject can't sustain your A.D.D.-level attention-span, let's cut to the chase: What were you not thinking by letting Linda McCartney sing with Wings?" Even more cringe-

inducing was Ziegler's interview with the mentally and physically fidgety Angelina Jolie. Anyone who has to prove THAT hard how unconventional she is can only be the most conventional person who ever lived, and I don't care how many beavers she and Billy Bob adopt. Did Larry officially lose his edge when he ignored this candid revelation? There sat the woman, widely-regarded as one of the world's hottest sex-symbols, and when asked about her lovers (of both sexes), she replied, "I haven't had that many. Actually, I really don't like to be touched."

You, um, don't like to be touched???

The obvious response would have been, "Are you saying that you have never had an orgasm, Angelina? How does it feel to pretend to be a sex goddess when you can't even come?"

But then, I don't have my own cable show ... yet.

As for my other obsessions, "Wiseguy with Ken Wahl, is still airing weekends on "Court TV," and it shares most of its cast members with the clever, quirky "Crime Story," which is now airing Monday nights on A&E.

For any intellectual snob who thinks of television as a lowly art form, well, I dare you to find me a contemporary novel as poetic as Joan Chen's soliloquy on Wiseguy's "Rag Trade" arc, also starring Jerry Lewis, Ron Silver, Stanley Tucci and the ultra-cool villain of Crime Story," the hypnotic Anthony Denison (Ray Luca):

"My mother was a poet. When she read me her poems at night, the wind shivered. My father was an economist, making plans for the New China. One day, during the Cultural Revolution, a group of boys came after him. They beat him with rakes and hoes while I hid. My father went insane. He died talking to animals. My mother died talking to his ghost."

I haven't read the book, but I would nonetheless bet that Joan Chen's poetic take on her poet mother is more eloquent than "Joan Schwartz, a retired Columbia University graduate school admissions coordinator was possessed by a enormous sense of ennui when she no longer had forms to evaluate!"

Part Two

One almost wishes that the Mormon Angel Moroni, the Italian angel, had descended upon the 2002 Salt Lake City, Utah, Olympics. Between Vladimir Putin's mistaking the Ice Games for the Cold War, the South Koreans acting like "axes of evil" by hiring a local law firm to diss-pute the speed-skating referees, the Lithuanian ice-dancers litigiously following in the Canadians' footwork, this noble sporting event promoting world harmony (see Adolph Hitler, 1936) was more like a Rumble in the Olympic Village. I couldn't quite distinguish between the Jets and the Sharks, but I wished Officer Krupke would put in an appearance, or Rodney King ("Can't we just all get along?") or even Emily Post!

For this sports fan, not even the first-ever performance of Jonny Moseley's "dinner roll" could equal the adrenaline-packed thrill of watching the Olympic Village's very own Lois Lane, Kelly O'Connell. Sporting crimson hair, scarlet lipstick, and a vermilion sweater, the ace investigative reporter told Dick Clark-clone Mike Costas how she had staked out the controversial French figure-skating judge, Marie Reine Le Gougne, widely described as being both "emotionally fragile" and "corrupt." The excitement in her voice as palpable as if she had just landed a quadruple axel, O'Connell reported, "She was recently seen at her hotel speaking with an unidentified man. Reports that she has checked out of the Olympic Village have not been verified."

Give Kelly a 5.9 for performance! I was as jazzed as if I had just injected darbepoetin (hey, couldn't everyone use some extra red blood cells?) Yet no sooner did Kelly score, than the dispute was settled, duplicate gold medals were given to the modest but fervent Canadian pair (Now watch, just like James Cameron winning his Oscar, soon they'll be shouting out, "We're king and queen of the world!") and the intrigue was over. No more need for O'Connell's sneaky reporters tricks! The only fun left for me was hoping that Michelle Kwan fell down (she did not disappoint). My reactions were based solely on her New York Post interview in which she shared her hubris-y world view about how it "wasn't all about winning the Gold Medal. I feel like, â€˜Hey, I'm Michelle Kwan. Whatever!'"

Not even remotely entertaining, however, was speed-skater Apolo Ohno being blizzardd with 16,000 hate e-mails (including death threats) after he won on a technicality, shutting down the U.S.O.C.'s server for nine hours. This reminded me of Cynthia Cotts getting "freeped" for pointing out in her Village Voice column "Press Clips" that the media in general, and CNN most specifically, had pulled a Le Gougne of sorts by implying that John Walker Lindh was guilty before he had been duly tried. She received over 50 e-mails, seemingly largely composed by American males with a Taliban-esque mentality towards women, who attributed her reportorial success to her typing ability.

I wondered: Has technology become what my cousin Jonathan Katz, aka "Dr. Katz, Professional Therapist" would call "a blurse--a blessing and a curse"?

With the Games complete, and the requisite 20 partying drunken youths arrested, who else but a hip and wholesome band like Kiss to perform at the Olympics closing ceremonies? Stan Eisen, a/k/a Paul Stanley, who grew up about half a

mile away from me in my childhood hood, widely picked on because he had been born with only half an earlobe (children are so cruel ... guess who's laughing now!), informed the press that Kiss "would provide a memorable Olympic moment" by playing its signature hit "Rock and Roll All Nite" in full make-up.

"We're going to do the rock & roll national anthem," Eisen said in an interview. "Since every country is being represented, the Kiss Army has to represent with &Rock and roll all nite and party every day!"

I awarded Eisen, a graduate of my own elementary school, P.S. 154 in Flushing, Queens, a 3.2 for grammar!

His quote reminded me of basically any statement made by Mother-of-the-Year Linda Kantares, star of the "Transsexual Custody Case," which aired in February 2001, on "Court TV." The live coverage was as addictive as darbepoetin. Linda Kantares, a former donut-fryer turned elementary-school teacher, who never encountered a double negative she didn't embrace, was ridiculed by her very own lawyer, Claudia Wheeler. Establishing thrilling new legal precedent, the mouthpiece stated, "My client is obviously really, really stupid." I couldn't decide which was more fascinating: medical expert Dr. Huang, describing an artificially-constructed penis as a "meat-stick," or Linda herself, who when told that a court psychologist had diagnosed her as having "borderline personality disorder" screeched, "I'd like to confront him about where did he got that idea!" and who blithely chatted away about how son Matthew "doesn't feel no pain" when she routinely "clocked him in the mouth". Dignified Judge Gerald O'Brien seemed to have the most difficulty pronouncing the name of Transsexual Dad Michael Kantares' new flame, Sherry Noodwang, calling her, "Ms. Woodwang," "Ms. Woodwing" and even "Ms. Hoodwink." The white-haired jurist otherwise acclimated seamlessly to the proceedings. Initially reserved, eventually he comfortably debated the intricacies of strap-on dildoes.

Now that I am teaching college after a 20-year sabbatical, my "Court TV" watching days are dramatically limited. As I will be teaching a summer course called "Great Works," colleagues constantly ask me "What books do you read?" I reply, "The Cool World" (by Warren Miller, Fawcett, 1959). Written in the scornful, bewildered, observant, cynical, wistful, placating, bemused "voice" of a Black gangmember, Duke Custis, it was called "one of the finest novels about Harlem that has ever come my way" by none other than James Baldwin, who also couldn't determine whether the white, Jewish author was, in fact what was then termed a "Negro." This seems clueless on Baldwin's part. Clearly, Miller himself is symbolized by the juvenile-home shrink Doc Levine, who sums up the book's message-within-a-message when he tells Duke (sic), "Readin ... That the beginning of evry thing ... When you can read an' write why you can do anything. Do anything. Be anything."

Anyway, I was originally going to compose this Rant "soully" about "The Cool World," but then I reached out through the miracle of the Internet and discovered America's premiere Warren Millerologist, who well-intentionedly and courteously barraged me with so many e-mails (it became somewhat of a blurse) linking Warren Miller to everyone from Earl Warren to Warren G. Harding that I will need at least another semester to digest all this data and write a worthy homage. In the interim, I continue to read and reread this masterpiece, wondering if I am afflicted with a form of literary autism. Savoring each sentence a requisite three times, postponing the pleasure of one of the book's most classic lines, in the final chapter, "Man that one sue cio city an I don't care if I never see it again." (You kind of have to be there ...) I'm still in a snit that "The Cool World" lost out in 1960's National Book Award contest to Philip Roth for "Good-bye, Columbus" (on my deathbed, will I be able to forgive either that literary body or the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences for awarding 1950's Best Actress Oscar to one-note Judy Holliday for "Born Yesterday" rather than to genius Gloria Swanson for "Sunset Boulevard"?) However, as I bemoaned Miller's loss, I was reminded of a Roth classic, "Portnoy's Complaint," which seemed the perfect suggestion for one of my freshman students on his winter break looking for a fun read!

Michael Valevich chimed in with this precocious book review:

Subject: Re: need a good book

I'm half-way through "Portnoy's Complaint"--finally got it from the library. Somebody didn't want to give it up. It's a beautiful, beautiful book. It should be in every Jewish household--kept next to the Menorah or in center of the bookcase or in some other significant place."

I am also compulsively reading Matthew Ehrlich (a/k/a Gustave) on the Web site Television Without Pit--24, in which he takes on the new, thrilling, originally formatted, yet eminently dissable and laughably ludicrous cliff-hanger "24" starring Kiefer Sutherland, which airs Tuesdays on Fox TV at 9 p.m. With each weekly episode, Matthew Ehrlich composes a veritable classic of world literature!

As regards movies in general, they are almost all becoming sillier than the average Kiss performance. Contemporary cinematic efforts seem to be completely devoid of serious fact-checking, thus preventing the necessary suspension of disbelief. Documentaries excluded, only when a movie's details are accurate can the viewer immerse him/herself in fantasy. But screenwriters, directors, producers, et al have been playing free and loose with the facts ever since Dustin Hoffman, an ambitious, oft-promoted advertising executive confessed to earning only \$28,000 a year while ex-wife Meryl

Streep, who had been hired by Mademoiselle's art department in her first-ever post-college gig trumped him by pulling in \$31K in "Kramer vs. Kramer." Filmic fact-checking has deteriorated to such a degree that when a film actually gets the details right, it's a cause for celebration. I have already put in my 400 words on the subject at www.rj93.com, but, Movie Fans, the ranting has barely begun!

The platinum standard for inaccuracy in films is the now-so-bad-it-has-become-a-cult-classic, "Eyes Which Really, Really, Really Should Have Stayed Wide Shut." Four years after its much-maligned debut, I still can't believe that I, along with my fellow film critics waited so impatiently those two long years it took for Stanley Kubrick to make and to release it. One actually wonders whether the reclusive genius, who had been living in an English castle repeatedly watching Steve Martin's "The Jerk," and who died before "Eyes" opened, was actually playing a joke on his legions of fans with this swan song whose lyrics read, "Fuck you, you suckers!" Since 1999, in a form of cinematic autism, I have been alternately tormenting and entertaining myself by pondering the following:

1) Exactly what kind of house-call making doctor is Tom Cruise? He sees children, elderly patients, overdosed junkie hookers ... and Nicole Kidman also refers to his performing breast exams. Just a run-of-the-mill 32-year-old multi-zillionaire family practitioner/cum gyno/cum rehab specialist?

2) Why would the prostitute not charge him for time spent?

3) Since when does a medical license function as a detective badge? Tom Cruise flashes his everywhere he goes, explaining, "I am a doctor" to: successfully get information from a waitress and also a motel desk clerk on the whereabouts of pianist pal "Nick Nightingale" and to the owner of the costume shop, to gain entry after it has closed. Undercover cops in NYC should have it so good!? Cruise, however, dazzles as a virtual police impersonator, a la "Untrue Blue"! Okay, I know it's ONLY a television show, but nonetheless, consider "Law and Order." "We're here to investigate the quadruple homicides of your next-door neighbors, Ma'am," Briscoe will delicately volunteer, only to be countered with, "Can't ya see I'm making a tuna fish sandwich/washing my hair/rearranging my file cabinets?" Or, "Go away, I'm watching my soaps/taking a nap/jerking off!" average citizens will yell from behind closed doors. Even better, "You guys got a warrant? Otherwise call my lawyer!" "Law and Order" fans: If two homicide detectives were ever to knock on my door, if I were as innocent as Olympic snow, or as guilty as Robert Blake (Does art imitate life OR WHAT?), I would invite them to sit down and say, "Yessirs, Officers, Sirs, is there any way in which I can hopefully help you, Sirs Officers Mr. Policemen Sirs?"

I was planning to count the amount of times Tom Cruise utters the phrase, "I am a doctor," when I figured it might be simpler to note the times he actually DOESN'T say it. Then I lost interest in this exercise. Perhaps the movie should actually be re-titled, "I am a Doctor." Whoop-ti-doo.

4) I did calculate a running tab of the amount of cold cash Tom spent. Why? Because he wandered through the mean streets of Manhattan at 4 a.m., chased by threatening orgy-organizing henchmen, and gangs of macho college kids calling him "Mary" (In 1999? Not, "Hey, Fag?") limo-less, with a wallet full of Benjamins, and yet never once stopped at a cash machine. He spent: \$150 on the prostitute, who never mentions her name (yet, oddly, when Cruise returns to her apartment the next day, discovering that she has just received the results of her Annual Christmas Eve Aids Test, he refers to "Domino"); \$375 at the costume shop, and \$180 plus the amount of the running meter of the taxi which drove him out to the Long Island orgy-mansion (another \$200? \$300?). Plus, he drank a cappuccino at a West Village café: \$3.75 + tip, although he seems to have run out without paying THAT tab!

5) It was set in contemporary New York City, but there were no blue recycling garbage cans on the pristine streets!

6) Exactly what does Tom Cruise mean when he tells med-school mess-up Nick Nightingale, "You know what they say ... once a doctor, always a doctor." This statement seemed as illogical as the critically acclaimed and incessantly quoted Danny DeVito line in David Mamet's "Heist": "Everyone needs money, that's why they call it money."

7) When Cruise goes in to check on the overdosed hooker he has conveniently just read about in The New York Post (wouldn't someone who boasts about "being a doctor" in every other sentence pick up the elitist New York Times?) he tells the woman at the hospital's front desk (was it indeed a hospital or a five-star hotel?) that he was her physician and had checked her in earlier in critical condition, yet the newspaper story says that she overdosed in her home. Perhaps this is more of a plot hole than an inaccuracy, because wouldn't the doctor's name who brought her in--DEAD, not still alive--be on that computer?

8) After leaving the kind of 27-room apartment replete with uniformed Third World maid only seen in Woody Allen movies, Cruise walks a few blocks into the West Village, when he clearly could only have been either on Central Park West or the Upper East Side.

9) Just as it strains credulity to imagine an aging Eastern European lothario trying to pick up a chick at a party by asking her if she has read the oeuvre of Ovid, as well as by bragging, "I know some people IN THE ART GAME" could (would) Sydney Pollack (or anyone) really forget the name "Nick Nightingale," when he referred to "that prick piano-player, Nick

whatever the fuck his name was"? Sydney, by the way, appears to reside in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

I was naturally steamed over the 2002 Academy Awards ceremony--but not for the coolheaded reasons cited by the critics. I wanted the Oscars to replicate the Olympics, since its frosty atmosphere was barely concealed behind the lukewarm scripted banter. Imagine if the show had been replete with tantrums, protests, lawsuits, investigative reporters, Stan Eisen "representing with rock and roll all nite and party every day!" Although there were frightful profusions of British Sirs and Dames in all their foppish/frumpishness, not a single saucy French soubrette comme Juliette Binoche seduced as either nominee or presenter. Pourquoi pas Madame Le Gougne? The account of her confession by Richard Pfenning, the Olympic skating referee, who claims "she broke down in the post-competition meeting on the morning after the event (with) a rambling avalanche of words," reveals to this celeb-watcher that "La Femme Fragile" may in fact be a veritable Tinsel-Towner who should check herself into Promises Rehab Center STAT! (Quick! Call Melanie Griffith!)

10). Wouldn't the bronze figure-skating medalist also have pumped up the animosity lurking so blatantly beneath the surface like freezing waters beneath a sheath of ice? Imagine those ice- queens, Joan and Melissa "Frozen" Rivers sneezing at Kwan's gown (might she wear one of her trademark tacky, sequined baby-doll nighties ... I mean, skating-costumes?) What better come-back than, "Hey, I'm Michelle Kwan! Whatever!"

toc

Kaufmanology

I have been fascinated by the momentous Andy Kaufman phenomenon ever since my first viewing of Milos Forman's 1999 movie masterpiece, "The Man on the Moon." This biography of Kaufman's life and work starred Jim Carrey in one of the most astonishing acting performances in cinematic history.

I had always associated Kaufman with his character Latka Gravas on the TV sitcom "Taxi." I remembered him singing "Mighty Mouse" on "Saturday Night Live," and I vaguely recalled his obsessions with wrestling women before his own death, at 35, of lung cancer.

After seeing "Man on the Moon" three times, watching Kaufman's "Midnight Special," and, recently, both his classic episodes of "Taxi" and his "Carnegie Hall Special," (just released by Paramount Home Entertainment) and reading two biographies of him, I am as awed, confused and intrigued as ever. Was he, in fact, as many have said, the first true performance artist? A cultural commentator? A Dada-ist, a Brechtian, reminiscent of Ionesco? Was he the most innovative, original comedian since Lenny Bruce, the groundbreaker for entire generations of comedians? Or was he a highly-functioning schizophrenic, possessed by obsessive-compulsive disorder? Was he a feminist or a closet misogynist? Does anything matter other than his body of work?

Although Andy Kaufman's childhood was dominated by television shows (like Andy Warhol, he worshipped "Howdy Doody,") as an adult, he had only contempt for the genre. He was the only sitcom star known to actually negotiate the fewest possible appearances in his contract. He perceived of "Taxi" as a way to gain exposure so that he could fund himself to do what he really wanted in concerts, in comedy venues: to tweak perceptions, and then retweak them, and then, just when you thought you had him figured out, to tweak them again. And yet, he couldn't help but to be brilliant on "Taxi"--especially when "Latka" developed multiple personalities, allowing Andy to develop and perfect an entirely new role--the macho, egotistical playboy, Vic Ferrari.

The first and greatest Elvis Impersonator of all time, (he was Elvis' personal favorite); the mastermind of inter-gender wrestling competitions (it's obvious to me that they were a pro-feminist commentary) and of his most hilarious comic creation--Tony Clifton, the obnoxious Las Vegas Lounge Lizard who lived to offend his audience, Kaufman relentlessly used the characters he had created to bite the hand that fed him. When audiences chanted for him to do "Latka," he became "British Man" and read to them from "The Great Gatsby." After having negotiated his "Taxi" contract, he added in a clause that Tony Clifton would make appearances--and then had Clifton show up, late, drunk, with "chickaroones" in tow, so incredibly rude and arrogant that he actually provoked a fistfight. Kaufman was delirious that Clifton had almost shut down the taping.

Adamant that Kaufman was not Clifton, Kaufman hired Clifton impersonators to portray him so that he could be physically present in an audience while Clifton was onstage, confusing the press who tried to "bust" him for years. After Kaufman's death, Clifton impersonators played concerts, disrupted press conferences, giving credence to the rumor that Kaufman, like Elvis, was not really dead--but was just perpetrating the ultimate scam.

These are some other things Kaufman did: Booked to play Harrah's Casino at Reno, he invited so many "working girls" from the nearby Mustang Ranch into his suite that the management became alarmed, as he was supposed to vacate it for the super-straight John Davidson. He and wrestling legend Jerry Lawler orchestrated a pretend feud that took on national proportions. He refused to stop wrestling women, even though his audiences found it distasteful, taunting the Amazons he pinned with sexist slogans, in what he perceived of as a feminist act. He brought his "newly-adopted" three Black sons onto David Letterman--one, known as Tino--also Tino--explained that he had been about to mug Kaufman when they struck up a friendship. He had his cohort, Bob Zmuda, interview him at a press conference, confronting him

with being a fraud, with repeating the same tired material, with being diagnosed as having multiple personality disorder. He went on "The Dating Game" as Foreign Man, and then pitched a fit when he didn't "win" the date--"Is unfair! I have answered all zee questions!" He had Robin Williams impersonate his grandmother and enlisted Kris Kristofferson to assist him to psych out airline passengers. He found a born-again Christian on "The Lawrence Welk Show," to whom he proposed, leaking to all the tabloids that he had converted to Christianity, and then a week later, sent out a press release that he had changed his mind and called off the marriage, because he couldn't handle constantly wearing the requisite polyester suits. At Carnegie Hall, he presented both the Rockettes and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir--but the Rockettes were actually members of a modern dance troupe and the choir was from a local community college. Opening as Tony Clifton for Rodney Dangerfield at the Fillmore West, he attracted so much animosity, that he had to perform in full SFPD riot gear, with a microphone attached to his face shield, shielding by netting to repel pelted produce. When Tony went live on "The Dinah Shore Show," he insulted everyone present and then whipped off his original breakfast recipe--bacon and eggs, consisting of a dozen cracked eggs swimming with eggshells, which he then threw at Ms. Shore when she tried to eject him from the stage.

Tony Clifton: a virtuoso make-up artist's creation, he was based on an actual Las Vegas lounge singer Kaufman had seen in a casino while waiting to meet Elvis. A huge schnozz, the world's tackiest rug, gigantic shades, a blue ruffled tuxedo shirt barely concealing a gargantuan gut and a trademark peach-colored tuxedo, Clifton uncannily mangled cornball classics like "Carolina" and "If You're Happy" and "Anything You Can Do." After relentlessly insulting the audience (especially his "plant," Bob Zmuda) to the point of inevitably getting booed off the stage, he always ended with, "If I have made just one person happy here today, it has all been worth it." The irony is that there actually is something endearing about the Tony Clifton character: legend-in-his-own-mind/ pathetic schlub--in his own warped blustery way, he was the sweetest of all Kaufman's personae, as well as the funniest.

Then "Clifton" satirized those same songs, belting out "Oklahoma" and hiring actress Cindy Williams to disco-dance to it right behind him.

Kaufmanology: Just when you thought you "got" him ... "Gotch'a!"

First performance artist, comedic genius and eternal inspiration, or passive-aggressive wild-eyed wacko ... Kaufman's legacy was to take everything seriously (David Letterman has said that he was his most professional, reliable and original guest), but to never take anything too seriously.

Least of all, one's self.

As Jim Carrey said in an interview, "Andy Kaufman is the patron saint of comedians. He showed us that you don't have to do a routine with a joke with a beginning, middle and punchline." Milos Forman admired him because "Andy didn't care if people loved or hated him, as long as he provoked a reaction from them."

Now, THAT'S entertainment.

toc

Dissing Salon Again

When I ratted out those P.C. Fascists at Salon, I was initially nervous about biting the hand that didn't feed me, until I received over 80 e-mails from other writers, and even editors, who had had similar unprecedentedly unprofessional experiences with the Premiere Exploiters of the Internet.

Salon has become such an embarrassment that I have deleted the two articles I published on their site from my resume. Yet, still, people consider this insufferably badly-written (with a few exceptions, like my articles) and completely unedited webzine to be "The New Yorker of the Internet." Why? Let's examine one of their favorite obsessions. First, they published a cover story claiming that "mainstream acceptance" of actress Jennifer Lopez's abundant buttocks is a "victory for multi-culturalism." Since when is the fact that men develop fetishes over female body parts newsworthy? But "The New Yorker of the Internet" didn't stop there, and followed up by printing a black woman, Erin Aubry's, response: a prolonged meditation on her own ass, about which she says she has "alternately embraced and lamented and written about extensively as a metaphor for tortuously unrealized black assimilation in America." Really? Physically embraced? Like, she fondles her own ass-cheeks all day long? In public, or does she work at home? Wow, a real-live exhibitionist!!! Well, thanks so much for sharing, Erin! We're not fascinated! Can anyone spell N-A-R-C-I-S-S-I-S-T? By the way, you can easily access this article the way I did, by just entering the words "black butts" under the search section on Salon. Yes, that's search in Salon, not Hustler On-Line. Since a magazine called Big Butt already exists, I often muse that they should re-title Salon: Big Butt II, Without Photos.

A short while back, Dorothy Allison, author of "Bastard Out of Carolina," which is an excellent book and was an even better Showtime movie special, wrote an essay entitled, "All Books are Lesbian Books." Yes, Dorothy, and all people are Lesbians, even men, and the earth is flat, except that we don't really live on the earth, but in the land of Oz, somewhere in the sky, which is ruled by a Wizard (shhh ... it's a secret.) Notable "Lesbian" books would, of course be "Pride and

Prejudice," because if you read carefully between the lines, the five sisters didn't really want to marry all the men they fell in love with, but each other, and "Gone With the Wind," where Scarlett O'Hara was just pretending to be in love with Rhett Butler, but her heart really belonged to her devoted Black slave/handmaiden.

The sickest thing about Salon is the reverence afforded to award-winning writer Anne Lamott, who previously wrote numerous "Mothers Who Think" columns (shouldn't mothers who don't think leave their children in foster care?) How this writer ever won any awards is a mystery to me, because each one of her articles follows the same rigid, contrived formula: Lamott misbehaves, becomes enraged over something petty, and then has some sort of phony religious epiphany ... which never really seems to stick with her, because in each consecutive confession, she's become even more disturbed. Isn't there a publication like Mental Health Weekly she could vent in? From reading her oeuvre, it is painfully obvious that Anne Lamott is mentally ill and is using the Internet as a giant cry for help ("Please, would someone tell me it's okay just to go into therapy and take Prozac already?") since none of her idiot friends seem to have enough sense to steer her to a shrink. She is so angry that she scares me. Her anger encompasses everything except for the repulsive sketch that was drawn of her and which is posted alongside many of her pieces. Ferret-faced with stringy hair ... I saw a photo of Lamott in Mirabella--and while the artist's likeness may have been accurate, couldn't s/he have improvised just a bit? Or maybe Lamott did get mad, and that's why her name appears on Salon's ever-lengthening list of "Discontinued Columnists."

Here are some excerpts from Salon's Anne Lamott archives:

In "Momcat" she informs us that she grew up in a dysfunctional alcoholic Atheist family, and that her childhood best friend's mother Lee was a Christian Scientist who prayed for her constantly. Lamott has only contempt for her own parents, who were, as I see it, justifiably upset that Lee never got her children medical attention when they became ill.

Fast-forward to "Cracks," where Anne has become a cokehead alcoholic who spends her days having an extra-marital affair and watching TV in "X-rated motels: tasteful erotic romps ... like "The Bitch of the Gestapo." I doubt that this was the movie's actual title, but who says an online magazine needs editors? Or could this be accurate, and Lamott is confessing that she's a closet Nazi? During a sober moment, having run out of money for blow, Lamott heads over to St. Stephen's Church in Tiburon, California, (oh, poor Anne, she's living in one of the most exquisitely beautiful and expensive locales in America) and becomes "born again" after a man tells her that rediscovering Jesus is like "discovering you're on the shelf of a pawnshop, dusty and forgotten and maybe not worth very much. But Jesus comes in and tells the pawnbroker, "I'll take her place on the shelf. Let her go outside again."

Voila--his attempts at conversion are successful, despite the utter banality of the words of this mysterious spiritual helper. Lamott thrives on similar trite slogans like, "Jesus is Coming: Look Busy!" as if she were a gullible eighth-grader.

Thus, we get "Spiritual Chemo-therapy," in which the instantly ultra-religious Lamott says, "I got sober, I got pregnant, don't ask me how that works ..." Um, Anne, I think the way it works is that you fuck without using birth control, and then you get knocked up. Her young son, Sam, the only kid in his peer group who is forced to go to church, resents doing so deeply. But she forces him to go weekly, because, "I make him because I can. I outweigh him by nearly 100 pounds." In another words, she's a bully. "My relatives all live in the Bay Area," writes Lamott in this odd opus ... "but they are all as mentally ill and as skittishly self-obsessed as I am." Finally, finally, she has admitted the truth: she's totally Fruit Loops!

"A Heart's Breath" is about her 45th birthday in Hawaii. She begins by informing the readers that the weeks before her birthday happen to be her "most bereft and neurotic." In the past, Little Ms. Vindictive had a birthday reminder on her answering machine for weeks, "and then, on the day after, changed it to include an alphabetized and frequently updated list of family and friends who had neglected to send anything. There were fewer people every day." And finally, only one despicable person is listed: Evan Connell. I am SO disappointed that the classy author of "Mr. Bridge" and "Mrs. Bridge" takes Lamott seriously enough to be included in her social circle. Or maybe he doesn't, which is why he didn't send a gift, and she's just name-dropping.

Anyway, partying away in a free hotel room "with tropical beauty filling the windows" (oh, poor Anne, she got an all expenses-paid trip to one of the most exquisitely beautiful and expensive locales in America), her son Sam goes swimming, gets sand in his eye and cries, as all children do when they are injured. All the Empress of Spiritual Saintliness, Lamott, can think is, "Oh, for God's sake! This is not Kosovo! And you're ruining my birthday!"

I doubt any child psychologist would maintain that a child's mind would wander along the lines of "I have an eye infection, and it hurts, but I shouldn't complain, I should instead hope that the NATO missiles hit their correct targets in the Kosovar villages tonight."

Does Lamott really expect her readers to react with, How dare your son spoil your birthday when you're only a little baby yourself, just 45 years old? Can anyone spell P-A-T-H-O-L-O-G-I-C-A-L NARCISSIST? How about borderline personality disorder with sociopathic tendencies? Yet the idea of seeing a therapist, even going to a Children of Alcoholic's self-help group never occurs to her, even though faith doesn't keep her burgeoning, disproportionate anger and immaturity in check.

On to "Mother Rage," in which Lamott candidly "shares" details about her screaming fits which are "so charged and toxic" that they actually shock her ... when they're over and the damage has been done. Son Sam (who will doubtless one day read his mother's oeuvre in which she vividly details everything she loathes and detests about him, and compares him to "a rat"), is her perpetual pathetic victim. "I have felt many times over the years that I was capable of hurting him ... I have spanked him a few times, yanked him and grabbed him too hard." Lamott admits that she cannot tolerate children's "tiny problem with self-absorption." Yes, Anne, children tend to be self-absorbed, because THEY'RE CHILDREN. After she freaks out when a "play date" that had been set up for Sam is canceled, and the little guy gets upset (he had probably been fantasizing all day about the chance to get away from Monster Mommy) she thinks, "What about all those times this week when I DID arrange play dates? Do I get any FUCKING credit for that?" No, you don't, Anne, did anyone tell you that you should? Here's the deal: you are the parent and he is the child, and arranging "play dates" is YOUR responsibility. Sam constantly interferes with her desire to watch the evening news (apparently the idea of taping the news on a VCR has never occurred to Mommie Dearest), provoking her to threaten to allow his pets to starve to death, even to have made "worse threats, thrown toys off the deck into the street and slammed the door to his room so hard things fell off his bookshelf. I have screamed at him with such rage for ignoring me that you would have thought he'd tried to set my bed on fire. And the list goes on." Lamott justifies "Mother Rage" by speculating that we "blow up at our kids because all day we've been nursing anger toward the boss or the boyfriend or mother," and "If regular people saw your secret angry inside self, they'd draw back when they saw you coming." What's the secret? The woman has been spewing venom nonstop ever since "Salon" anointed her their poster girl for political correctness. Is there ever one single moment in Lamott's life when she's NOT furious?

"Jesus and the Lemon" details Anne wanting to trade in her Jeep for another vehicle, but when she determines that the salesman is patronizing her, she feels "like Gandhi in diapers, on bad cocaine." Hello, calling all editors to help explain what that image means. She then pounds on the salesman's desk and, like "the towering Lion of Judah" (isn't that a symbol for Rastafarianism?) yells at him, "Don't you DARE patronize me." Later, she consults with her priest to see what Jesus would have done in a similar circumstance (why, does she have delusions that she IS Jesus Christ?) and is told, "Jesus would have bought a bicycle." Actually, I don't think that bicycles were invented back then or Jesus wouldn't have kept wandering the desert in those tattered, raggedy sandals. Nor is this priest particularly helpful ... does he expect a mother with a small child living in California not to possess a car?

Again, in "My Advent Adventure," Lamott comes clean about how barely functional she really is, as the subtitle for this piece is, "It's not that I don't have a lot of faith that God will heal us. It's just that I have a lot of mental problems. And I want to fix them now."

"Advent (â€"a big time of year for my Jesusy people") is about the coming of Emmanuel, which means â€"Godwithus," Lamott writes. She says she wants that belief, that patience, and yet ... "I have instead been feeling a little--what is the psychiatric term?--cuckoo." She considers calling her pastor, but the woman has left town, which is "intolerable" to the livid Lamott. "I have told her more than once that we wouldn't have hired her if we'd known that she was a minister with boundaries." I'll just bet she did! After all, Lamott's the expert on "boundaries" ... she doesn't have any!

So, she starts calling all the other religious people in her personal circle. A Jewish friend's children were "keening in the background." Lamott advises her friend to smack them. Her friend asks if she's joking; she isn't.

She calls another minister and says, "My mind is on the fritz." The minister provides no counseling, nor do any other of the people she calls.

So I, Hariette Surovell, would like to make a plea to the California Department of Mental Health: Can someone create a file for Anne Lamott? She has been using the Internet as a cry for help for years, and I HAVE HEARD HER. Please, instruct a mental health professional to make a home visit, to refer her to a therapist, perhaps to a doctor familiar with the many new psychotropic medications before she hurts her son, herself, or her elderly mother.

"Thanksgiving," the last piece of hers that I could bring myself to read, describes a visit to the aforementioned elderly mother. She had seen her a few days before, and looked at her "through the moo-goo-gai-pan eyes of love."

I don't think a college freshman creative writing teacher would let a student get away with writing such an incongruous image. Did this mean that Lamott had bits of chicken, cashew, celery, mushroom and water chestnuts stuck in her eyelids?

Lamott's mother is in her mid-seventies, and has "profound problems with memory."

Although "this is not a problem when I am spiritually fit," Lamott was apparently extremely unfit on this particular day, whatever "spiritual fitness" means. When Lamott offers to run into a Safeway supermarket and pick up a few items, Senior Citizen Mom says, "I do need toilet paper and cat food" and expresses the desire to go into the store herself, as she prefers certain brands (doesn't everybody?), so Lamott allows Mom to accompany her. (This is probably the homebound oldster's first contact with anyone other than her deranged daughter in a week ...) Then, she notices that her

mother, whom she has for some bizarre reason nicknamed "Coyote Trickster" has snuck into the deli section! Not only is she speaking with the employees, but, writes Lamott, "She had coupons hidden in her purse!!! In an instant, I saw myself in the housewares department, picking up a hammer to kill her with."

Is anyone besides yours truly paying attention?

toc

The Write On Wranter

Eldridge Cleaver should be given historical credit for inventing the currently popular form of self-expression, in which I frequently indulge, known as Ranting. Growing up in Queens, New York, the Black Panthers were headquartered a mile from my family's home, and copies of their weekly newspaper were as accessible as The New York Press is in Manhattan today. New York Press boxes, when emptied, are frequently used by creative homeless people, who hide their sandwiches, scarves and other belongings in them. This is the only purpose The New York Press serves. I will never understand why people want to read detailed descriptions by Russ Smith, alias "Mugger," of the comped gourmet feasts he and "Mrs. Mugger" greedily devour, while most New Yorkers struggle to pay their exorbitant rents and try to afford over-priced groceries. They certainly are not helped in this effort by writing for The New York Press, which pays writers pathetically low wages and always has. (According to Andrei Codrescu, when he wrote for Russ Smith and John Strasbaugh in Baltimore's City Paper, they paid him \$25 a column.) In their favor, they did have enough class to give my friend Catherine Seipp, a brilliant journalist, a regular column, "Letter from L.A." But I digress ...

Tonight, while cleaning out our own crib, my musician husband decided to place an old green tambourine in a New York Press box. We are waiting to see which one of the locals retrieves it and what s/he does with it--will the bearded Hispanic guy use it as a hat? A pan-handling dish? Actually jingle it?

Anyway, I think Eldridge Cleaver has been overlooked as The Very First Ranter. Granted, he frequently rambled, and it is true that he was not always as coherent as one would wish, but as I recall, he had the ingenuity to use the phrase "fascist running-dog lackey to the imperialist pigs" in practically every paragraph, and to this, I say, "Right On!"

toc

Ten Beautiful, Sensuous Films Which Do Not Contain Explicit Sex

As your basic Hedonistic film critic, I can really get off on a truly great graphic sex scene--like Richard Gere pleasuring Katherine Borowitz from behind in Mike Figgis' sizzling "Internal Affairs." I also see merit in the perspective of The Master, Alfred Hitchcock, who was sexually obsessed (think Kim Novak in "Vertigo") but blatantly refused to portray any intimate act on celluloid. Quoth Hitch: "If an actress wants to convey a sexy quality, she ought to maintain a slightly mysterious air." I began thinking of films which are incredibly sensuous and erotic but totally nongraphic. Just conjure up the image of Daniel Day-Lewis rapturously kissing Michelle Pfeiffer's satin slipper on her decadent leopard-skin rug in "The Age of Innocence"...

1) "Death in Venice" (1971). Luchino Visconti's cinematic vision of Thomas Mann's masterpiece is widely considered to be one of the most gorgeous films ever made, with the look of a Manet painting. Set in heavenly Venice, Dirk Bogarde plays a widowed world-famous composer, who, in keeping with his eternal search for beauty in art and in life, becomes lasciviously enthralled by an angelic, androgynous-looking young blonde Polish boy who wears sailor suits, frolics in the ocean, and returns Bogarde's strange, suggestive smiles.

2) "The Age of Innocence" (1993). Martin Scorsese's precise adaptation of Edith Wharton's novel, (which won a 1994 Oscar for Best Costume Design) takes place in 1870's New York, in elegant mansions filled with ornately bejeweled and luxuriantly gowned women; in lavish gardens and at orgiastic feasts. Protagonist Daniel Day-Lewis is torn between his consuming love for the scandalous, experienced, worldly Michelle Pfeiffer (Countess Oleska) and his contempt for the naivete of his virginal fiancée, Winona Ryder. Without anyone even making an overt reference, but with double entendre aplenty, each actor in this sumptuous film is so carnally consumed that it should more accurately be titled "The Age of Sexual Obsession."

3) "The Dead" (1987). John Huston's rendition of a story from "The Dubliners" shows us the virtue of simple pleasures ... instead of Whartonian gourmet gluttony, an Irish family gathers together to derive joy and excitement from a perfectly-cooked slice of goose, a wedge of delectable plum pudding. The regal Angelica Huston has never looked as beautiful; snowfall has never seemed so sensual or so sad; the events and ambiance inspire Huston to tearfully tell her husband the heart-rending story of a deceased young man, the only one she had ever truly loved. More about romantic love than sex itself, the attention to detail makes this film's subtlety sublime.

4) "Gods and Monsters" (1998). Directed by Bill Condon, and starring Ian McKellan, Brendan Fraser and Lynne Redgrave (nominated for a Best Supporting Actress Oscar for 1999), this exquisitely-detailed drama of a sensitive, thoughtful aging gay man's (McKellan) inspired but unsuccessful attempts to seduce his irresistibly handsome straight gardener (Fraser) is filled with pathos, sadness, beauty and eventually, transformation.

5) "Far From the Madding Crowd" (1967). The brilliant director John Schlesinger ("Midnight Cowboy") working with cinematographer-turned-director Nicolas Roeg have created a breath-taking adaptation of the Thomas Hardy novel about Bathsheba Everdene (Julie Christie), a "maddeningly beautiful" and independent young woman who inherits a farm in the lush English countryside, and of the three men: Peter Finch, an older, wealthy landowner who is possessive of her; Terence Stamp, a charismatic young soldier whose phallic swordplay is one of the classic scenes of cinema; and Alan Bates, a humble but loyal shepherd--all of whom vie to worship her. Love, love, love and lust are the hallmarks of the second most gorgeous film ever made.

6) "The Story of Adele H." (1975). Directed by Francois Truffaut, it is the sorrowful true tale of Victor Hugo's daughter Adele, played by the unbelievably ravishing Isabelle Adjani when she was just 20 years old ... and quite possibly the world's most beautiful woman. In the surreally foggy city of Halifax, Nova Scotia, in the late eighteen-hundreds, the intensely passionate Adele Hugo tries unsuccessfully to win back the affections of her unworthy ex-lover, a decadent Army Colonel, as she writes feverish poetry and discreetly follows him, wearing scarlet satin gowns in covered carriages, to his trysts with other women. She even sends a prostitute to his quarters so she can enjoy him vicariously.

7) "Shall We Dance?" (1996). Masayuki Suo wrote and directed this story of a repressed businessman, Koji Yakusho who wants to ... and succeeds ... in learning to express his emotions, passion and joie de vivre by studying ballroom dancing. Splendidly realized and captivately choreographed, Yakusho's graceful and gracious teacher was formerly one of Japan's premiere ballerinas, Tamiyo Kusakari.

8) "Black Orpheus" (1959). Marcel Camus' 1960 Best Foreign Language Film Oscar winner is an amazingly vibrant and colorful retelling of the tragic, passionate myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in (then) contemporary Brazil during Carnival, ending with the two lovers, Marpessa Dawn and Bruno Mello falling together, in an eternal embrace, into a giant flower. Will the two star-crossed lovers make love in the afterlife?

9) "Gabbeh"(1996). Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf tells of the fable of Gabbeh, a lovely young woman from an almost extinct nomadic mountain clan. Gabbeh (Shaghayegh Djodat) travels with her family through luscious scenery, dreaming of the mysterious horseman who pursues her, howling love songs ... with her tale of unfulfilled desire simultaneously being woven into vividly-hued tapestries by a wise elderly couple.

10) "Three Seasons" (April 1999). The first American film to be shot in Vietnam since the war by writer/director Tony Bui (and last year's Sundance Grand Jury, Audience and Cinematography Awards winner,) it tells of the fates of four strangers, as they love and survive in the hauntingly scenic old city of Saigon; in ponds where a young woman, Gnoc Hiep, harvests white lotuses while old women sing constantly; on a tree-lined street where a sweet young prostitute, Zoe Bui (no relation to the director), whose suitor sees only her inner beauty, wears a white dress and a red scarf and dances ecstatically with upturned hands, twirling and swirling, as clouds of red blossoms cascade upon her.

toc

Wasted Hours

Film Review of "The Hours"

Who knew a movie could make you want to jump in a river? The Mississippi, the Thames... any river will do!

"The Hours," based on Michael Cunningham's novel of the same title, is a fictional imagining of tormented suicidal female literary genius Virginia Woolf (Nicole Kidman) completing the writing of "Mrs. Dalloway" before drowning herself; Laura Brown (Julianne Moore) as a repressed nineteen-fifties housewife who is influenced by reading Woolf's masterpiece; and Clarissa Vaughn (Meryl Streep), a contemporary Lesbian editor who is nicknamed "Clarissa Dalloway" by her now-also-gay ex-lover, Richard (Ed Harris), the recipient of a prestigious poetry award who is dying of AIDS. Are we confused yet? This reviewer still is, many hundreds of hours after viewing all these weary, dreary drones drowning their sorrows with sorrow. Why has such a muddy puddle of phony tears garnered so many critical cries of passion? Sob sisters unite!

Even the vivid, colorful cameo by Miranda Richardson as Woolf's sister, Bohemian artist extraordinaire Vanessa Bell is depressing, since it reminds us that Richardson, who is much more naturally talented than Streep, has been reduced to playing lowly bit parts since her explosive debut in Mike Newell's 1985 classic "Dance With a Stranger." Unlike Richardson, Stagey Streep just can't stop overacting--either she is discreetly wiping wet eyes or her voice subtly cracks in despair or ... She never lets her fellow Thespians breathe, as she uses up all the oxygen in a room. Streep is not a team player, damnit, and shouldn't a gracious actress at least share the celluloid space? Julianne Moore, reprising her role as a repressed nineteen-fifties housewife in the also overrated "Far from Heaven," but here with a dowdier wardrobe, is so affectless it makes one nostalgic for her sensitive yet amoral porn star Amber Waves in "Boogie Nights." Kidman is instantly forgettable, except for her now notorious witchlike prosthetic beak. Hopefully Gwyneth Paltrow, playing tormented suicidal female literary genius Sylvia Plath in the upcoming biopic will make her character rise through the air like "Lady Lazarus."

toc

LETTERS TO HARIETTE SUROVELL

Date: Mon, 14 Feb 2000 00:44:09 -0500
Subject: Hariette Surovell

I just discovered one of your rants on the Exquisite Corpse site, and I am totally enthralled. Although getting through all of it was time-consuming, I am glad I did it.

I am a ranter, too, although I have only achieved local (and somewhat regional) notoriety in the armpit of America (Southeast - Midwest). I was posting a rant a day at <http://tonybaize.webjump.com> , but I burned out quickly. I still do a monthly column in an underground (paper) publication, but my web presence has been limited to the paying gigs I can scrounge up.

Anyway, enough about me. I just wanted to say that you really kick ass, and I will be reading everything I can find with your name on it.

Never stop kicking ass, and never lighten up.

Tony

...

Subject: Hariette Surovell
Date: Tue, 28 Mar 2000

Your piece in Exquisite Corpse was especially on the mark, and also caused great micturations of mirth among all the freelancers around here. I did come away from Salon with the distinct sense that I'd much rather be writing about them than for them. The scene reminded me of my small-newsmagazine days, when I never phoned anyone back and tried to avoid paying kill fees. Except that I was at a dinky monthly with a \$500,000 budget, not a NASDAQ-traded dotcom.

Doug Saunders

...

Date: Wed, 8 Mar 2000 21:28:13 EST
Subject: Hariette Surovell

Hariette,

Your writing is hilarious! Not being a New Yorker at all times, nor even a citizen of the great United States, I often do not know the people you are talking about. Still, I love the energy, the dissident tone. Somehow in reading what you write, I enjoy a kind of vicarious pleasure. The joy of saying, "I'm not going to listen to your drivel for another moment without telling you what I think!"

After I read your most recent rant, I found myself writing asides in dotcoms ...

What fun to read your no-way-you-are-going-to inflict-this-on-the-public-without- a-carefully-worded-nasty-retort-from-me.com!

I'll be back to read more.

Best, Barbara

...

From: Grayson_Daughters
To: Hariette
Date: Mon, 14 Feb 2000
Subject: Hariette Surovell/Pregnancy rant

H Dearest:

Am just now taking a moment to read your Meredith B./Pregnancy rant in full. How wonderful! And I'm sure you've read the NYT Mag (yesterday) story by now about the overwhelming insipidness of women-oriented media, particularly web-sites. (That writer needs to be directed to Matahariette.com and WaySouth.com , thank-you-very much.)

Back to the rant!

Gracie D.

...

From: "Kartr Higgins"
Subject: Hariette Surovell/Two Rants
Date: Mon, 14 Feb 2000

Dear Hariette Surovell,

It sounds like you believe yourself to be of superior intelligence. If you are so convinced the theory of evolution is indeed correct, maybe you would be interested in checking out the following website: www.drdino.com . He has an ongoing offer for \$250,000.00 for evidence for evolution. Maybe you should check this out. We don't believe the world is only 2000 years old, its more like 6000 years old. Maybe you should actually read up on a subject before you start ranting and raving about it. Regarding dinosaurs in the Bible, they are there. Read Job 40: 15-24 and Job 41.

Kartr Higgins

P.S. I found it very ironic, that on your Web page you featured the poem "Happiness" by Jane Kenyon. This is clearly based on a parable from the Bible.

...

Hariette Surovell replies:

Dear Ms. Higgins:

Thank you so very much for taking the time to read my website, www.matahariette.com. I am glad that we share the same tastes in poetry.

I will give The Bible another shot, but I always get distracted by all the hot sex in it.

Thanks again,

Hariette Surovell

...

Tue May 16 17:29:28 2000
From: John Watson
Subject: Thank you!

Ms. Surovell: I found your site through a link on the Drudge Report. I have read several of your true crime stories. You have a wonderful style that completely immerses your reader into the scene you are describing. I just wanted to let you know how much I enjoy your work and look forward to reading more in the future.

Thank you, again.

John Watson Brownsville, TX.

...

Mon May 15 12:26:29 2000
From: Edward McFadden
Subject: Reader's Digest

We've had e-mail troubles, so I'm resending my message from Friday again. I enjoyed your Cali Cartel piece. I'm an editor w/ Reader's Digest and we're on the lookout for true crime stories, mysteries, etc. As well, we're looking for writers who can write such stories well. I'd be interested in speaking with you should have a moment to do so. I can be reached at (202) 223-9520. [begin_of_the_skype_highlighting](#). Cheers.

...

Date: Sun, 14 May 2000
From: DICK DROST
Subject: (no subject)

A NEW, EXCITING AND INNOVATIVE INTERNET "PLAYBOY-TYPE" MONTHLY MAGAZINE ENTITLED www.E-M-A-G.com WILL MAKE IT'S DEBUT ON AUGUST 1ST, 2000. WE WOULD LIKE TO INCLUDE YOUR SUPERB INFORMATIVE REPORT ON QUEENPINS OF THE CALI CARTEL IN IT'S ENTIRITY, WITH YOUR PERMISSION, OF COURSE... MAY WE DO SO? ATTACHED HEREIN IS OUR "COVER" PROTOTYPE.

DICK DROST - EDITOR AND PUBLISHER E-M-A-G

...

Mon May 15 16:26:03 2000
From: "Nick Thimmesch"
Subject: RE: Hi from Hariette Surovell

Hariette: Love your web site & especially that link to the Cali women story. USA Media Communications is a one-man media monitoring & consultation service (cheaper than Lexus/Nexus) that "tracks" stories & writers of political and public policy interest. Obviously I saw your story on DRUDGE -- a friend and ally.

...

Hariette Surovell replies:
To: Nick Thimmesch
Subject: Hi from Hariette Surovell

Thanks for your comments, Nick! I don't have an e-mail list per se, but besides maintaining my website, www.matahariette.com, I'm a regular contributor to www.corpse.org when I'm not writing for print magazines. Could you please tell me more about USA Media Communications? Thanks, Hariette Surovell

...

Fri May 12 18:53:59 2000
From: UC Berkeley Library Public PC User
Subject: That's a movie. (Cali drug women.)
Very interesting story, great read.

Dear Hariette Surovell,

Hello. I am Frank Tonge, a Corpse fan and sometimes contributor. I really like your stuff in general and particularly the piece on Andy Kaufman. Or was that Jim Carrey? I agree that Carrey's performance is astonishing. And Kaufman himself was ... Well. I don't really know what to say about him. I must have been his perfect audience because he was always one step ahead of me. I just never caught up. From Mighty Mouse to getting chased off "The David Letterman Show," everything he ever did made me run through the same drill: uncertainty, mild or not so mild discomfort, realization that I've been had, rueful admiration of his brilliance. Whatever he was, there was only one of him.

Thanks for the good writing.

Frank Tonge

...

Subject: Salon dismissed/Lamott disemboweled

Your story on Lamott is AMAZING. Everyone here in San Francisco just LOVES her and I hit my forehead and wonder how or why she's always doing these radio gigs and telling people how to do things. You, girl, you're slinging artichokes at the giants and I'm right there ... right there waaaay behind you, because when it comes to writer folks, I'm never quite sure what I'm talking about. See, I think Stephen King is genius (even though I haven't read him since PET SEMETARY came out when I was in high school). Formula? Sure, why not. Plays come in three parts; screenplays are 120 pages. I don't care. I just hope to GOD my books never, ever get big enough for YOU to review. Yours truly, Erika Lopez (San Francisco)

...

Subject: Lordy Lordy!

Having published a couple of essays in Salon.com myself (and they're damn lucky to have â€™em too), I couldn't help but chortle over your piece in EC about that site! Especially that ratty-head psycho Anne Lamott.

But I thought Salon was just soooo over the top, West-Coast, Bay-Area blather that I was inspired to start my own e-zine, WaySouth. Now I can blather away with over-the-top, Southern-oriented nonsense to my heart's content.

<http://www.waysouth.com>

Enjoyed your piece a whole lot ...

Grayson Daughters

...

Subject: Wait, is this Lamott woman real?

Yours was the first essay I read in the online Exquisite Corpse, and your informal style nails the point about this author from Salon magazine deftly. Still, I must wonder: Are you sure this woman isn't, say, fictional? Maybe she's a personality projection by the publishers. I'm a tad scared to check with Salon (maybe I'll examine the phone book) to confirm she isn't, say, an outcast from the old Processed Word zine or perhaps the state-mandated therapy for a child-beater. Just a thought, as the idea that any professional magazine would pay a wacko except by direct deposit ... maybe that's it. They're not a professional magazine. Maybe you've hit on something else: that Salon is less a publication as a Geocities for hacks. Keep up the fab work! Dante Blando, Utica, NY

...

Subject: Birdbrain by Birdbrain

I just read your piece about Anne Lamott in EC. I thought it was mean spirited. Thank you. The only thing worse than reading her, is listening to her read her stuff. Whining, monotone, zombie. (No disrespect to Zombies intended.) I think I'd like to hear what you have to say about Garrison Keillor. Matt Eggleston

...

Subject: Re: Salon dismissed/Lamott disemboweled

Is your Web site "Panix.com"? I'll check it out. I'd actually found out about you because I was at home writing or fucking around, with the radio on, and the Russian-sounding guy that does commentaries was on "Talk of the Nation" about scary stories. (I'm horrible with names.) They said he edits "Exquisite Corpse.org", and so I checked it out. I'd only heard of Salon last year when someone told me they gave me a bad review of one of my books, and I haven't really checked it out since. So of course, your title got my attention. And your writing's really good. You cut right through it all and you're not too cool. I can't STAND all of these snide writers who're just TOO COOL. Boring. Erika

...

Subject: "Exquisite Corpse"

Hariette, I enjoyed your piece "Dissing Salon Again" in Andrei's EXQUISITE CORPSE immensely, as well as all the referenced pieces included. I only have one theoretical question. I know you are an Editor, et al., but are you misspelling MILLENNIUM (on your URL) for some reason of artistic license, or is it an insider's joke I am failing to pick up on? Just wonderin'.

Ms. Paris TironeÂ

...

Subject: Re: Birdbrain by Birdbrain

Sorry to bug you again. But I wanted to talk you into listening to Bride of Christ Looney Lady Lamott read one of her own pieces. You must savor the time lengthening effect of her drone. Listen to her often and you may not live forever, but you'll know what it feels like. I wonder which ring of hell her voice would be the sound track for. You decide. The site is www.thislife.org/ (This American Life) look for the program from June 5, 1998 entitled "Music Lessons." You can listen to

the show via Realaudio. David Sedaris also reads something on this show and does a dead on imitation of Billie Holiday singing the Oscar Meyer Bologna song. You won't be sorry! Matt

...

Subject: Lamott
Man, are you funny!
Subject: SaLon SaLon

Hariette, Was headed over to see what musical misstep Salon had made this week, when I clicked over to EC instead and came across your spot-on pieces on their ivory web-tower. While I may eventually cringe at the memory of my dogged pursuit of various editors there, I will savor this sense of liberation as long as the vibe can be prolonged. Thanks! Regards,

...

Subject: corpse story

Hey Hariette: Very funny, the "court" piece. How've you been? This is my first trip to the Corpse site. It's nice that I can just zip in there at my desk at my new job, just chow on a black forest ham and smoked gouda sandwich while the smell of stinky cheese emanates from some of your characters. Have a good turkey day.

Joe Maynard

...

Subject: YEAH Hariette!

God, I thought I was the only one who thought that the Anne Lamott articles in "Mothers Who Think" were a bunch of claptrap. Yes, I am paying attention. I just don't have your eloquence! Merci.

kac

...

Subject: Maybe nuts ain't so charming after all

H, Just read ADVENTURES IN TAXIDERM. Looking at things from your point of view, I can see why you aren't as charmed by weirdoes as I sometimes am. So, to amend my statement, weirdoes are great as long as you don't have to live in the same building with them. That black candle trick is something I'm gonna have to add to my repertoire of gags.

...

Subject: salon.com

dear hariette surlyvell, thank you for your discreditation of saloon.com and in particular the work of anne lamott. i have never visited salmon.com nor have i read the writings of ms. lummoX but it is quite possible that i might have in the future. That is, until you stopped me. Where were you when "Howard the Duck" came out? i thought, "wow, a george lucas film about an extra-terrestrial duck. this is gonna be great!" i wish i had been forwarned. (entre nous, it's not a good movie). it seems clear to me now that this anne lambchop just doesn't know what the internet's for! maybe she should take a class or something or get one of those internet books for dummies. what do you think?

i often do internet wide searches on "black butts" and it was only a matter of time before i got to the salaam.com article (probably right before your "review" of salsa.com). when you want a big black butt, there's no time to waste at the new yorker of the internet! that's for darn sure! thanks again for steerin' me straight.

mark podojil
toc

PRAISE FOR HARIETTE SUROVELL

Hariette Surovell's brother, a vivid character in her memoirs, responds to her disemboweling of the movie "Precious":

1) Extremely insightful, perceptive.

2) Well-written, lively, even provocative style.

3) Your key point about the Jewish Hollywood producers being racist is well-taken, but could you add what I think is the obvious corollary, namely, that the state of Israel has treated its non-Jewish citizens as they were treated by Nazis and other anti-Semites? I don't think this would be too "controversial."

4) Hebrew phrase "Shalom...YIsrael": I think it might be translated so people know what the fuck it means. Even I (of Jewish descent) don't ...

5) Might mention also that not only the Jews were racist vis-a-vis Blacks in Hollywood, that it was part of a more generalized white racism. But the obvious point is that one would think and hope that the Jews would have more empathy, decency, and understanding ... probably just indicates the universal human tendency of all groups to use scapegoats whenever possible...

6) You say in NYC gay marriage is "illegal"--better to say it is "not legal" (yet).

7) You imply that it is absurd that the family has plants & pets ... I am not sure this is true. I think it is possible ...

8) You question the fact that the child of 2 dark-skinned parents is light-skinned, but I think it certainly is possible, and one often hears about such cases, given that genes can come out at any time, with any generation ...

9) You say the name Mongo has implications of Mongo Santamaria's mental capacity--I think this is perhaps subjective on your part, a bit of a stretch, and is overly reflective of your subjective feelings; the use of Mongo may simply be coincidental,

10) The title is creative, but I wonder whether it is too out there, that because it uses the worst kind of racist paraphrases of Black speech it may actually be taken as insensitive.

Brother Karl, December 25, 2009

...

Your review of Precious was WONDERFUL! Very well written. Right on point about Oprah, and the inconsistencies...everything! My take on it from last week: <http://staceymarierobinson.blogspot.com/2009/12/review-precious-feel-bad-movie-of-year.html>

....

Wow! Hariette Surovell, Thanks for this piece [the review of "Precious."] It's terrific.

Ishmael Reed, December 26, 2009

P.S. Say hello to my old friend Andrei.

Editor's note: Ishmael savaged "Precious" himself in a New York Times op-ed piece.

...

Hi Robin, Nice to talk with you. I went to the Exquisite Cadaver site and was fascinated by Hariette's work. She grew in a different America than I did at the same time! I realized I knew that title ["Witches and Ghosts"] from reading about the surrealists, not the publication. Thanks for the heads up! More work in 2010!

Ed Cionek, January 11, 2010

....

Read some of "Witches and Ghosts," and wow, the Rosenbergs, Columbia Records, artist Abe ... great stories, Har!

Jeff Abell, January 28, 2010

...

The beauty of this kind of writing and why I always preferred memoirs over fiction is that it takes me away to other places, other times. Stuff like Revolutionary Road or Stepford Wives or Updike or anything else from the post-war period (East

Coast at least) drives me up the wall. There is more drama and poignancy in your memories of lilacs growing in your secret garden than in all the hyped up tragedy and guignol of those writers. More please!

Martin Blythe, author "Sexual Fables," date unknown

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