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The 22nd Gear by Mike Sirota

CHAPTER ONE

"A Standard by Which All Others Are Measured"

Yeah, well, since it's Friday afternoon, that means I've gone through nearly a whole work week of reality time.

Went kind of fast, actually. Plenty of stuff happening. I didn't even think much about the Ultimate Bike Path, the Old Guys, any of that. I'm not sure why.

Yes I am.

Right, Holly Dragonette. Big surprise, huh? Real tough getting inside ole Jack's head. I could feel how hard you were trying.

Assuming she'd ended the "old business" with Mr. Cedar Rapids last Sunday, I'd hoped she would call either then or on Monday. She didn't.

So then I figured she would call on Tuesday. She didn't.

But I *did* get a birthday card from her that day. Yeah, my birthday was on Wednesday. Thirty-five, not any great significance, like the "big three-oh," or the one I have to look forward to in five years, when your friends wear black arm bands, give you "Over the Hill" coffee mugs, and tell you that the helium balloons are to help you elevate what is

undoubtedly limp and shriveled...

Anyway, seeing the return address freaked me out at first. Thought I was the recipient of a "Dear Jack" letter or something. Uh-uh, it was just a card. Not one of those cutesy generic Hallmark things, which isn't Holly's style. This was an astrological card with a colorful picture of Cancer the Crab and beautiful Earth maidens with rainbows and flowers and such in their hair. That's how Holly knew it was my birthday, because being into astrology she had asked me what my sign was. (She's a Libra, by the way, and I hear *they* can be pretty off the wall... but then, what do I know?) On the inside, heretofore blank, she had written: *Jack—Happy Birthday!!!* (Her three exclamation points.) *Talk to you soon. Holly.*

That was it.

Well, I liked the *Talk to you soon* part. But *soon* wasn't Wednesday, or Thursday, or today... yet.

Who cares?

Guess I must, to make myself so crazy with it.

I *did* get a call from my mother, Mrs. Rose Miller Leventhal of Pompano Beach, Florida, which was amazing, since it hadn't been "two weeks around" since the last time I'd spoken to her. Earlier in the week I'd gotten *her* birthday card, the identical one for three years now. I think it's because, see, she buys these boxed sets from Hadassah or some other fund-raising organization, so assuming there are ten in a box, I can look forward to the same one until I'm forty-two. At least there was the usual nice money order, which enabled me to partake in a compact disk mini-orgy at Tower Records.

You remember my mother's accident last Saturday? Well, no problem, she's doing fine. But her best friend, Sadie Melman? You know, the woman of a thousand *oys*? In all the excitement of the day she had "worked herself into a conniption" (my mother's words) and was now bedridden. (*Maybe you'll send her a get-well card, Jackie? You know how much she likes you.*)

I met Sadie Melman *once*, a couple of years ago, when I went there to visit my mother. Next to the aforementioned Mrs. Rose Miller Leventhal, Sadie is my "biggest fan" in South Florida. She even calls me "Meester

Miller," impressed as she is by the fact that I'm a writer. ("Oy, *Meester Miller, I just feenished Bloody Cockroaches of Ish Kabibble!* "That's Blood Roaches of Ibask-lar, Sadie." "It was great, it was wonderful, I enjoyed it a lot... maybe you'll explain to me what it means?")

Well, I considered sending a card to Sadie, then figured she might get so excited that she'd have an even bigger conniption and die (Can a person *oy* herself to death?), and it'd be my fault, so I let it slide.

At least I didn't have to spend my birthday alone. Nope, my good buddy Phil Melkowitz saw to that. He and his significant other, Jennifer King, took me to the Mandarin Plaza in San Diego, where we gorged ourselves with the restaurant's famous All-The-Chinese-Food-You-Can-Stuff-Into-Your-Face-At-One-Sitting Buffet. It was *wonderful*. Nothing like a sweet and sour pork pig-out to drown your sorrows.

I told you that Jennifer and Holly were cousins. That was how I met Holly in the first place. But they weren't *that* close, so Jennifer couldn't say for sure how the current scenario was going to turn out. Her guess, based on some "girl talk" between them when Holly was out here, was that the thing with Mr. Cedar Rapids was over, that my cross-country bike ride to Iowa would still go off as planned, soon.

Nice lady, that Jennifer. Hope she's right.

I did get another call on Wednesday, although it had nothing to do with another year of my life passing by. Izzy McCarthy, my agent, had no memory for birthdays, not even his own. I once asked him, and he had to look it up on his driver's license. Yeah, I swear! Couldn't remember anniversaries, either, one of the reasons why, he once told me, he had two ex-wives. Uh-uh, that wasn't why he called.

It was good stuff, actually. You remember my projects being put on hold because of the upheaval at the publishing house? Okay, they're definitely going ahead with *Wasp Women of Naheedi*, and even though the sequel to *Tree Men of Quazzak* was still hanging, Izzy believed it would be resolved soon. So, in about eight months another Jack Miller literary gem will grace your local bookstores, supermarkets, and airport newsstands!

Speaking of writing, I spent time earlier this week consigning to hard

disk all that had happened on my most recent excursion along the *mhuva lun gallee*. Didn't seem to take long. And since I felt a need to lose myself in work I started giving thought to a new project, even though it hadn't been that long since I'd finished my recent masterpiece, *Mutant Bats of Krimmia*. To tell the truth, I wasn't too bent out of shape about the publisher's decision to hold on the sequel to *Tree Men of Quazzak*, because I really didn't feel like doing it yet. In fact, I actually considered starting a book that *wasn't* fantasy, something that Izzy had been *noodging* me about for the longest time now. ("*You want to make real money, Jack? Stop writing that same old crap. You're versatile, I know you are.*")

Okay, so I thought I'd find out just how versatile I was. Forget writing westerns, jet-set romances, books on making Cobol easy to understand, house plants, meditations for the New Age, or anything about *Women Who Love Men Way too Much, Men Who Don't Love Women Enough, Why Do Women Love Men? How Come Men Like To Love Women? Men Who Love to Hate Women, Women Who Hate to Love Men, Are You Addicted to Men? Twelve Steps to Breaking Your Addiction to Women, Thirteen Steps to Getting That Old Baggage Out of Your Life, Fourteen Steps to Successfully Bringing New Baggage Into Your Life, or Zen and the Art of Codependent Women Loving Men Who Learn to Leave Women in Fifteen Steps Because of Their Dysfunctional Type G Personalities and the Eternal Quest for the Tao of Higher Consciousness and the Enlightenment of Loving Themselves Through Crystal Power*. Nope, it had to be something *I* enjoyed reading.

So I decided on a horror novel. Yeah, I'd read my share, and based on the best-seller lists for the past two decades, *so have you*. Now, the way I've always done a book is title first, then story. It's just the way I work. And based on all the brilliant titles I'd concocted for my fantasy novels, you'd think that wouldn't be a problem, right?

Here's the thing: most horror novels have either one-word titles, period, like *Carrie, Cujo, Koko, Creature, Watchers, Strangers, Wurm, Whispers*, or two-word *The* titles. You know, like *The Glow, The Well, The Stand, The Fury, The Rats, The Mask, The Unwanted*, that sort of thing. And the trouble is, most of the good titles are taken. So at this stage of the week, Friday afternoon, even though I have a story line rolling around in my brain, I have yet to write word one, because there is still no title gracing the top of the page.

But it hasn't been for want of trying. Most of yesterday, either walking on the beach or pacing around my condo a few hundred times, I thought about titles. Here's some of what I came up with: *Entrails, Hogs, Vomitus, Intestines, Bleeders, Molars, Squids, Liver, Mandibles, Lobotomy, Plasma, Sewage, Clams*. Or: *The Creep, The Gutting, The Maggots, The Rending, The Retching, The Slicing, The Microwaving, The Silverfish, The Gerbils, The Vile, The Gross, The Repugnant, The Unspeakable, The Stench*.

What do you think?

Anyway, it's a tough choice—which I haven't made yet—and I know I'm procrastinating, but what the hell. Jack Miller's new opus of unbridled terror will have to wait, because—for the first time this week—I actually began thinking how nifty it would be to again ride the Ultimate Bike Path. Sure, Holly might call while I was gone, but since in real time I would only be gone a couple of hours, what did it matter? After all, did she think I had nothing better to do than sit around and wait for her to phone?

You know all those aforementioned books on men and women and relationships and codependency? Maybe I wasn't going to write one, but it's possible that *reading* a couple wouldn't hurt.

Is Holly Dragonette the great-whatever grandmother of Melvin Butterwood, or... ?

Okay, enough making myself crazy with that. The Nishiki on my bike rack, Padres hat firmly on my head, I drove up to the Starting Point on Camp Pendleton.

"Can you hear me, Old Guy?" I said out loud, feeling kind of stupid, as always. "I'm ready to rock and roll. How about meeting me at the tree and letting me know what's happening?"

The "afternoon commute" being a few hours away, the drive up to Oceanside was easy. Today I was able to enter Camp Pendleton's main gate only after signing in, showing three IDs, and informing the MP who won last year's World Series. Sometimes it's like that.

Not many people were riding the bike lanes. All along the way to the lone eucalyptus I kept putting out vibes to the Old Guy and his cronies, but at first it didn't do much good, because there was nary a soul on the

mesa. Just for the hell of it I pedaled north another half a mile, then turned around. Felt kind of good to be out, actually.

Remember me mentioning that the once-beautiful flower fields near the eucalyptus were being replaced by base housing? Okay, the construction was moving along rapidly, and recently, on both sides of the street off Stuart Mesa Road leading into the housing, they'd raised a low wall, so that you felt like you were passing through a gate into a private community. Lots of suburban developments have these entry statements, and they're sometimes ornate, and they almost always bear the name of the community: striking names like Poinsettia Estates, Meadowridge, Casa Del Oro, Indian Creek Villas. So, do you know what the statements to Camp Pendleton's base housing on Stuart Mesa had carved on them?

STUART MESA HOUSING.

We're talking right to the point here.

Anyway, I was about to set off on another jaunt when my Old Guy appeared, pedaling furiously in low gear up the Stuart Mesa hill. At first I hadn't thought it was him, because, whoa, you would not *believe* what he was riding, or how he was dressed! His old Schwinn had been replaced by a Bridgestone MB-3; he wore a sleeveless yellow jersey, blue and black Performance cycling shorts—which did a great injustice to his knobby knees—a pair of Nike Fatz shoes, sans socks, and a Vetta Corsalite helmet. It was only when he waved vigorously and nearly fell off the Bridgestone that I knew for sure it was him.

"Halloo, Jack!" he called, then angled across the road and was almost flattened by a High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle, the driver leaning on the horn for five seconds. Unperturbed, he hopped off the bike (rather gracefully, this time) and stood it against the eucalyptus, then shook my hand in that electric way of his.

"Nice to see you again," I said. "So you got my message."

He grinned. "Yes, this time I was home."

"Uh, right. Where are your buddies?"

"We've been involved in a number of projects since our paths last crossed. At the moment we are trying to understand why the flesh-eating

tree mice of Estinarra II suffer from such severe urinary tract problems."

Jeez, it's always something like that, isn't it? "Yeah, well, a Nobel Prize in Medicine will be awaiting your group when you come up with that answer," I told him, and he beamed proudly, so he must've believed me.

"Thank you," he said. "In any case, your excursions along the *mhuva lun gallee* take precedence, so the others will soon be joining me." He scratched his head. "Most of them, anyway. I have good news and bad news, Jack."

I showed him a stiff upper lip. "Okay, give me the bad news first."

"Old Guy #2 is in charge of that study and must remain with it for a long time, so in all likelihood he will not be observing you anymore."

That was the bad news? "Dang, and I was really fond of him, too," I said, which puzzled the Old Guy, since I'd only met Old Guy #2 once, for about two minutes, and I wasn't even sure if it was him or #1.

Anyway, my Old Guy grinned and announced dramatically, "But the *good* news is, we have someone to replace him!"

"Aww-right, New Old Guy #2!"

"But that's not it, Jack."

"You mean... there's *more* good news?"

"Yes, there will be *two* other observers on your upcoming excursions!"

Old Guys #5 and #6! Was I becoming a hot ticket, or what!

"Well, I hope they won't be disappointed."

"Having followed you through so much, I know they will be impressed. Uh, Jack?"

"Yeah?"

He seemed tentative. I knew what was on his mind. "Have you heard from your female since the last time I saw you?"

So, the study of carnivorous mice who couldn't piss properly *had* kept him from looking in on my private life. "Nope, not a word from Holly."

"Didn't think so. Why else would you want to return to the *mhuva lun gallee* so soon?" He shrugged. "I still cannot begin to understand, but I intend to continue my research during some of the lulls. Honestly, this concept of heterosexuality is... well, enough of that, because I know you wish to begin, and my field will disperse soon anyway. Be assured that the study group is with you at the outset. Good luck, Jack!"

It seemed that there were questions I'd been meaning to ask, but at the moment they escaped me, and I really *did* want to get going. The Old Guy climbed back on his Bridgestone, waved once, and continued north along Stuart Mesa Road. This time, staring after his retreating figure, I actually saw him begin to fade in a shimmer of little dancing lights. No shit, *Beam me up, Scotty!* I guess he knew enough to prevent anyone else from seeing him, or there might've been some interesting stuff on the news in recent weeks.

Whatever; the hillside was deserted, and there was a mother of a tailwind, so it didn't take much effort to hit thirty-two mph, which was when I shifted easily into the twenty-second gear...

... and burst through the blue door onto the Ultimate Bike Path for what seemed the first time in a long while.

You know, even though I haven't said much about it since the whole thing began, I've given thought to the enigmatic *twenty-second gear*, discovered long ago by the intrepid explorer named Vurdabrok. Okay, I know for sure that it's included in the half that I couldn't possibly begin to understand, but still... what the devil is it? How does it work? Even when Old Guy #3 (or #4) had it stripped down in Lethargia, I couldn't tell a thing! Ah well, maybe after I've acquired some vast store of knowledge and wisdom (yeah, right), it'll all seem as easy as the concept of a light switch.

Just how *does* a light switch... never mind.

The copper-colored walls of the universal tunnel seemed as familiar to me as the paneling in my spare bedroom, which I used as an office. After the first couple of times I'd always found riding between them relaxing. I started slowly, taking in each of the gates, presently a random mix of Gorbachev birthmarks, Elmer Fudds, blue doors with pyramids, and

iridescent snowmen. Before long the Elmer Fudds dominated, so I switched to a cadence that was many steps below blur-speed, but still fast enough to produce the kaleidoscopic effect, which I enjoyed. I slowed down amid a long run of Bart Simpson heads, immediately sped up while trying to keep my brain free of any thoughts about this and that, then resumed the leisurely pace when the random pattern—this time with no less than six different gates—began again.

The first rider I came across, traveling in the opposite direction, was something that looked like an upside-down, purple and yellow parrot with three twiglike legs (I think) stuck in an equal number of lettuces (letti?). Even though both of us were going slow, there was only a split second that we were near one another. I said hello; it clattered its beak (or something), and we went on, and that was that.

But the second rider *was* going my way, and it nearly scared the shit out of me when it overtook the Nishiki.

"Nice weather we're having," a voice on my left said.

How come I knew that voice? I thought, after nearly wetting my spandex. I glanced over.

Oh, shit, the diseased rat with the dreadlocks in the bedpan go-thing.

"Hey, it's you!" the rat exclaimed. "I was looking for you; it's the reason I'm riding along."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Remember when I had wullat, and you suggested I go through that Elmer Fudd gate and find Hazel the Healer?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, I found her. Wow, what an ugly hag! Anyway, she cured me of the wullat, and I wanted to thank you for the advice. Shake, pal!"

I looked at the rat dubiously. "You're sure Hazel took care of it?"

"Oh, absolutely."

Well, what the hey. The worst scenario was, even if he still had wullat, I

wasn't about to contract a tingling in my whiskers.

I reached for his little paw.

An inch away he suddenly pulled it back and cried, "Whoops!"

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I forgot there was another reason why I was riding along."

"What's that?"

"I have ibla, and it's transmittable through skin contact."

"Oh, really? What's ibla?" I smiled. "Will it make my nose twitch, or my tail stand up straight?"

The rat shook his head, the dreadlocks smacking him in the face. "Ibla causes your testicles to swell up, then explode within the first three hours. I have about an hour left to find Hazel the Healer again."

See? Another one of those rodent things...

Causes your testicles to swell up and explode? Jesus!

I'd been one inch away from having ibla!

"Maybe I should ride on ahead," the diseased rat said, "so that there's no chance of you..."

I didn't hear what else he said, because (all together) *I got the hell out of there fast!*

Not ever again, I thought as the gates sped by at blurrier-than-blur-speed and nearly made me dizzy. I don't care *how* personable the little dreadlocked guy or his brethren might be. Next time I see another one, *I'm gone!* At least I didn't feel an overwhelming urge to wash my hands, or my... never mind.

After a few minutes (seconds?) of blurrier-than-blur-speed I considered the potential of doing serious damage to either myself or another traveling life-form, so I slowed to a safe speed. Uh-oh, I didn't like this at all. You remember those creepy gates shaped like upside-down toothbrushes with

the heart halfway up the handle? That's what there were a whole lot of now, and they were giving off one really weird aura. Okay, that was worth a burst of blur-speed.

But fortunately it was a short run, and pretty soon there was a random pattern of black circles, watery green Florida gates, and the ubiquitous Elmer Fudds. I was still trying to get that dread-locked rodent out of my head as I slowed down. At about the same time I realized that I was now ready to lose myself in one of the gates, so I concentrated on any that might beckon. But as yet none seemed inclined to extend an invitation.

Then, another anomaly popped up on the *mhuva lun gallee*. Oh, great!

Remember when the Ultimate Bike Path split off in two directions? Remember how thrilled I was about it?

The Ultimate Bike Path now split off in *three* directions!

No, I didn't have a *clue* what to do, especially in the one-point-one seconds (even less than last time) I had to make a decision. So, not particularly inclined to the far left or far right in other areas of my life, I chose the middle tunnel.

Almost immediately I regretted that decision.

Toothbrushes and Bart Simpsons dominated, their combined emanations *really* unnerving. Being in a cautious mode I pedaled by them slowly, which turned out to be a good thing, because in a short while *this* tunnel split in two!

Hey, was I having fun yet, or what! How about *or what?* This was a bit much, considering the fact that all the times I'd ridden the Path before this had happened just once. But the only alternative to this new fork was a Bart Simpson on one side or a toothbrush on the other.

What the hell, I took the right fork.

Okay, this wasn't bad. A couple of toothbrushes, but mostly iridescent snowmen, Gorbachev birthmarks, and...

A *new* gate!

It was shaped like the profile of a shopping cart and had large, multicolored bubbles, similar to the ones you see in lava lamps (available at most garage sales), floating slowly in an amber mist. You could actually hear the bubbles *blurping* as they formed, and another sound, a sort of oscillating whistle. Not a particularly ominous gate; rather pleasing, in fact, worthy of an excursion.

So of course, just as I think this, there are no more shopping cart gates. Well, there were only two to begin with. I kept looking for one amid a long run of blue doors and isosceles triangles, but no go. Okay, I can be patient.

Something felt weird. I'm not sure if it had to do with the fact that I was riding along a fork of a fork of the Path, or what. My anxiety level had risen to somewhere between my knees and stomach, which was puzzling, because this enigmatic universal tunnel usually had a calming effect. I couldn't quite put a finger on it...

Then I realized I was riding at an angle, both bike and body skewed to the left.

Not steep, but slight, like the lower part of a velodrome. Still, I felt odd. Before long I straightened out, then tilted again, this time to the right, and more sharply. It was like this for a while.

Then, the fireworks from an isosceles triangle poured out of that gate, exploding soundlessly but brightly all over the *mhuva lun gallee*. Scared the shit out of me.

The pyramids from a blue door came whizzing through the air, like nunchucks hurled by a ninja. They buried themselves into the opposite "wall" of the tunnel; again, no sound.

What in hell was going on here?

One of the Florida gates overflowed its banks. The water rushed toward me like the flash flood on the Universal Studios tram ride. Having no desire to find out whether I would really be drowned or not, I pedaled faster.

My angst climbed up to my clavicle.

The angle of the misty "floor" grew steeper yet. I *had* to slow down.

More fireworks, more nunchucks. And now, the veins and arteries from the "heart" on a toothbrush gate snaked toward me like Medusa's hair after an unsuccessful perm. They weaved amid the spokes of the wheels, under my chin, around my head; two of the sinuous things made like they wanted passage up my nostrils.

A scream was definitely forming.

I batted the strands away. They felt wet and warm, but otherwise not very menacing.

More toothbrush gates appeared; hence, more of the stupid soggy strands. Then I was level. The weird stuff fell behind, and stayed there.

Soon my anxiety level had dropped to my ankles.

With that entertaining interlude over, I concentrated on the portals. I was still hoping one of those shopping carts would show up, but no, the Force wasn't with me, so it was mostly the damn toothbrushes, with an occasional Gorbachev birthmark. Now, the last Gorby I'd popped through had seen me roaming the countryside as a padoodle and spending some time in Frankenstein's castle, among other things. Yeah, well, was that so bad? Maybe it was time to try another one.

Then I got to thinking about something.

You don't happen to remember Rule-To-Live-By #789 when traveling along the Ultimate Bike Path, do you? Well, don't tax your brain; it has to do with *never* entering a toothbrush gate. Now I was thinking, *Why not?* Yeah, you're right, we've gone through this scenario before. But I'll say it again: I *am* an explorer, and I'm breaking new ground here, and I'm supposed to take the bad with the good, right? Okay, so the world beyond the last toothbrush gate was no pleasure; but maybe the next one will be Paradise, or a place where the women make Amazins and Vulvans look like hags (Isn't that the *same* as Paradise?). So why be narrow-minded? I decided to try another toothbrush gate.

I angled toward one on the right, doing my best to ignore the fact that it was pulsating eerily.

Do you know what a benchmark is?

A benchmark is a high standard by which all other things are measured. You know, like the Louisville Slugger is the benchmark of baseball bats, and Sir Laurence Olivier is the benchmark of Shakespearean actors, and so on.

We've also had occasions to discuss the topic of enlarged posterior orifices, haven't we?

Jack Benjamin Miller, son of the late Henry Miller (not the writer) and Mrs. Rose Miller Leventhal, was about to become the benchmark of enlarged posterior orifices.

You'll know why in a few seconds...

CHAPTER TWO

Jerome

I shifted down from the twenty-second gear on the other side of the toothbrush gate, not an easy thing to do, being totally underwater.

It was weird water, actually. Reddish, with lots of little dark things floating in it that looked like mouse turds but probably weren't. Maybe some of it was broken bits of kelp, algae, stuff like that. Beats me. I'm not Jacques Cousteau.

Anyway, you might've figured out that this was the least of my problems, because ... *I was underwater, for chrissake!* And since I'd been screaming (what else is new?) on my way through the gate, I was about three quarters of the way in the opposite direction from an inhale.

I had a situation here, and it was conducive to drowning.

Is ole Jack a benchmark, or is he not? You be the judge.

Am I impressing the hell out of you, Old Guys #5 and #6? How about you, New Old Guy #2? Ready to return to a more rewarding study of maggot physiology or something? I wouldn't blame you.

Well, of *course* I reached for the Bukko.

Then I noticed some things. First, the "water" was thick with all the stuff floating in it, and even with the Nishiki as an anchor I wasn't dropping like a rock. (*Was this water, or some sort of toxic ... oh, please!*) Second, I could see light shimmering just above my head. Maybe I wasn't two hundred feet down.

I let go of the Bukko, and let me tell you, it took some *testiculos*.

I wrapped my legs around the frame of the bike, and with a bunch of flailing strokes that would not have reminded *anyone* of Mark Spitz, I swam up.

My head broke the surface a few seconds later, and I sucked in air. It was warm and tasted bad, but at least it *was* air. Yeah, another marginal Class M world.

Okay, so I wasn't in a vat of industrial waste or anything. This body of water was at least a lake, maybe an ocean. No way I could be sure, because visibility was limited to less than a mile in all directions by a coppery haze. In fact, everything about this place was reddish, even the sky, an effect of a humongous blood-red sun suspended directly overhead. It was kind of creepy, if you want to know the truth.

I suppose that *had* this been acid, my flesh would have long since started dissolving. So, not to worry. Besides, the Old Guy said that the study group would be observing from the outset, and they wouldn't have let anything like that happen.

Right?

So I concentrated on the fact that even though this stuff was buoyant, it *was* water, and I could only swim or tread for so long, especially since I was hanging on to the Nishiki. With surprising calm (Do you believe that? If so, I have oceanfront property in Nebraska to sell you) I looked around, but nowhere was there an outline of land, nor vessels of any kind. Swell.

So, pick a direction and start swimming. Which I did, but after about fifteen minutes I stopped, because it was murder trying to drag the Nishiki through this stuff. Treading was easier, even though it got me nowhere.

It had been eerily silent, other than the lapping of small waves or an

occasional *maledictus* uttered by me in honor of the situation. Now a low, distant screaming became a loud, nearby screaming. I saw a trail of black smoke high in the coppery sky, then the thing that was making it.

A missile. Not a Scud or Patriot, or any other that necessity and the media has made us familiar with. This was more like one of those old V-2 rockets that Germany fired on England during World War II. It was following an erratic, twisting course, the smoke trail intersecting itself many times, making it look like skywriting. (Crazily, I imagined letters saying *better hope I don't go out of control and land in the vicinity jack.*) After dipping to about a hundred yards above the water (*Jeez, my ears!*) it rose higher, then eventually disappeared.

So, there were intelligent beings around. I use that term conditionally, because I don't know if *anyone* who fires an offensive weapon of destruction can be considered "intelligent." Anyway, I wasn't about to get too excited, because it could have been launched from somewhere two hundred miles from here, on its way to another place *three* hundred miles from here. Big deal.

As yet I hadn't noticed a single sea bird overhead. No gulls, terns, pelicans, cormorants, *nada*. For that matter there was nothing leaping above, floating atop, or swimming below the surface of the red sea. (That's lowercase. This isn't the Book of Exodus, you know.) Which was good, because the last thing I would've needed...

Something the size of a nuclear submarine passed below me.

Maybe it *was* a nuclear submarine. If so, I was saved.

It wasn't.

The thing that broke the surface twenty yards away looked like the result of a cross-breeding experiment gone awry between a killer whale and an iguana. It was still mostly the former, except for a greenish, scaly head with a serrated crest, and four bulgy eyes in diverse locations. When it opened its *large* mouth I immediately thought of the Holland Tunnel. Each one of its *very sharp* teeth was about the size of the Transamerica pyramid in San Francisco.

While pondering why it would be even remotely interested in so insignificant a tidbit as Jack Miller, I again (all together now) reached for

the Bukko.

"Hey, Old Guys," I called, "you have under two seconds to pull my ass out of here, then I rub!"

"Excuse me?" the killer whale/iguana-thing said.

Huh?

The *big* mouth closed halfway. One of its weird, bulging eyes rolled down from the top to stare at me (*eeey-yoo!*)

"I understand the words you said," the thing went on, "but they didn't make any sense. Can you explain?"

I swear on my collection of Neil Diamond CDs that the following fact is true: The killer whale/iguana-thing sounded *exactly* like Clint Eastwood! (*Go ahead, make my blowhole?*)

Tucking the amulet back into my jersey I said, "Oh, nothing. Just fooling around."

"I see." The thing nodded; the ensuing tidal wave carried me half a mile.

I was sputtering when the monster caught up. "Hey, be careful next time!" I exclaimed, spewing out half a gallon of the brackish water.

"Whoops, I'm really quite sorry," it said with a great deal of sincerity.

"Yeah, well... Anyway, what—*who* are you?"

The thing smiled (yeah, you could tell). "I had surfaced to ask the same question. Very well. My name is Jerome. Now it's your turn."

Honest to God, that's what it said its name was! "Yes, right; I'm Jack."

"Nice to meet you, Jack," Jerome said. (I'll tell you, this was one personable killer whale/iguana-thing.) "As to the matter of *what* I am..."

"Uh, I didn't mean... that is—"

"I don't mind." It smiled again. "I'm a growwath. My kind have

inhabited this world for millennia. Oh, we've seen a lot in that time; we surely have."

"Yeah, I'll bet. So what about *my* kind? Are there any of them nearby?"

"Actually," Jerome said, "I've never seen *anything* quite like you, Jack. You're not from around here, are you?"

"That's a reasonable assumption." I wasn't ready to get into details just yet.

But wait, what about that rocket? If *my kind* didn't fire it, then who did?

Jerome seemed to anticipate my thoughts when he said, "There are life-forms similar to you who live on islands. Some are not a great distance from where we are." He scowled (yeah, you could tell that, too). "But you wouldn't want to go *there*."

"Oh, yes I would!" I told him, rather insistently.

One of those bulging eyes studied me. "You would? Why?"

"For one thing, I'll be drowning before long."

The growwath shrugged (yeah...). "Oh, where are my manners? I just assume everyone takes to the water. Wait here a moment, Jack." (Now *that* was a brilliant thing to say.)

"Yeah, sure."

Since most of the rest of him was already submerged, I don't know why he didn't just go under right then and there. Maybe this was some growwath ritual. What he did was, he swam off a considerable distance, then reared high above the surface and dove back into the water rostrum-first, the rest of his curving body following. At one point I thought I was looking at the Gateway Arch in St. Louis. Yeah, that's how *big* this mother was! I braced myself for what I assumed would be another tidal wave, far in excess of the first.

Guess what, nothing happened. He cut the water so cleanly, there was hardly a ripple. Only his tail flukes—which were about the size of

Argentina—stirred up some waves, but no big deal.

When Jerome again resurfaced, both the Nishiki and me were lifted high and dry fifty feet above the water. It was unnerving, to tell you the truth. There was a flat part on his scaly head, near his blowhole (the diameter of which, by the way, was the same as Mt. Vesuvius). I thought it might be slippery, but it was actually kind of rough, the soles of my bike shoes practically sticking to it.

All in all, it was good to be out of the water. But I still held tightly to the bike.

One of Jerome's roving eyes skated up the side of his head (God, I hated that!) and stopped a couple of yards away, where it looked me over. "There, is that better?" the Clint Eastwood voice asked from far below.

"Yeah, great. Thanks, Jerome."

"Now then, can you tell me what other reason you might have for wanting to go to one of those awful islands?"

Uh-oh, I didn't like that *awful islands* part. "It's kind of hard to explain, actually."

"Try me."

Well, what was the big deal in telling him? The Old Guy never said anything about the Prime Directive being in force.

"In order to get back to where I come from I need either a steep hill, a tall mountain, or a deep crevice."

Jerome shook his head. I nearly fell on my ass. "I see what you mean; makes no sense at all. No matter. Growwaths are not a nosy race, so I won't press you. But, Jack, if you're looking for a mountain, I can take you to some below the sea that dwarf anything on the islands. What do you think?"

"Sorry, but it has to be on land. Nice try, though."

He shrugged; felt like a five-point-two under my feet. "Very well then, to one of the islands. Let's see, the closest is Hoyo-monodo, or is it

Doyomohono? Wait, I passed that yesterday, headed due south, so it's probably neither of them, which means that Nohodoyomo..."

I didn't know what in hell he was talking about, so I kept my mouth shut while he worked it out. He finally reached a conclusion.

"Yes, I'm certain it's Yodonomoho, not any of the others."

Didn't he say that already? "How far is... what was it?"

"Yodonomoho? About a two-hour journey to the northwest. Sit back and relax, Jack."

Relax? Riding atop a killer whale/iguana-thing the size of Candlestick Park, with nothing but red sea all around? Easy for him to say.

Yeah, I know, Paul Atreides wasn't this scared shitless when he rode the giant worm in *Dune*. But I never thought myself being of the same mettle as that heroic fellow.

Still, I was determined to stick it out (being devoid of options made that a given), and you know, it wasn't bad. I sat down, as Jerome had suggested, one hand around the frame of the Nishiki, the other grasping a thin, knobby protuberance on his scaly head that looked like a Nintendo joystick. The growwath traveled at considerable speed, but for the most part it was a smooth ride. He also made interesting conversation, which helped pass the time.

One question I deemed important to ask Jerome (in a roundabout way) was what growwaths liked to eat.

I'm sure he was smiling when he told me, "We feed on algae, plankton, smaller fish, and sea creatures. No, Jack, we don't have any interest in humanoid flesh."

"Glad to hear that."

"Which is not to say we haven't killed our share of them through the centuries."

Yeah, nervous time again. "Oh?"

"But only in self-defense. They used to hunt growwaths in large vessels,

take the bodies back to their islands for reasons of which we have no understanding. At one time there were not many of us left. Then, the slaughter stopped, and we were able to replenish ourselves."

"Why did they back off?"

"It's another thing we don't understand, but it seemed that the humanoids of the islands turned their attention to the destruction of each other. Is this something you might be able to make clear to me, Jack?"

That explained the V-2 rocket. So, the intelligentsia of this place were dealing with some heavy-duty shit. Utilizing our own destructively analagous world I tried as best I could to lay it all out for Jerome. He listened intently, nodded, posed a few questions, but for the most part couldn't grasp too much of what I was talking about.

Yeah, well, it never made a whole hell of a lot of sense to me, either.

At one point I heard that same screaming sound and I knew another rocket was on the way. Jerome really got bent out of shape, because he stopped, and his massive body shuddered. I had a really bad feeling about this, and it grew worse when he started to dive under the red sea.

Dive under... !

"Hey, Jerome! Tell me the plan!" I exclaimed, but it did no good. I let go of the joystick but held tightly to my bike, which worked out well after I was thrown from the growwath's head into the icky sea. Another tsunami carried me way the hell down the road, which was an acceptable alternative to being smashed by the creature's tail flukes or something, so I didn't complain about all the water that I swallowed.

The rocket screamed past overhead, then disappeared in under two minutes.

I was treading water again, back where I'd started...

... until Jerome rose up out of the red sea, like one of the Hawaiian islands after some upheaval millions of years ago. Once again I was atop his head, and a couple of bulbous eyes were looking at me as a geyser that dwarfed Yellowstone's Old Faithful rose from his blowhole.

"Sorry about that, Jack," the growwath said.

"You should be!" I exclaimed, still coughing up water.

"It's just that those things in the sky really frighten us."

Yeah, well, I understood. Those *things* gave me a few bad dreams too. I felt kind of bad for getting pissed at Jerome, and I told him so.

"Many of them fall into the sea," he said, "and growwaths are either killed or stunned, which turns out to be the same thing, because they soon drown."

So, the dipshits couldn't even hit their targets. I was beginning to wonder just how much I wanted to go to this Yodonomoho, or Doyomohono, or wherever-the-hell Jerome was taking me. Maybe there was another piece of land somewhere, preferably *deserted*, with a nice mountain or rift or whatever. It could even be a lot farther away; I was patient. But when I asked the killer whale/ iguana-thing he said no, he couldn't think of any, just that quartet of aforementioned islands.

Okay, the winner was Yodonomoho (Jerome verified that). It wasn't far, and he thought there were mountains inland, maybe even nearer to the coast. I was hoping for the latter. Get me up, get me down, get me outta here. This was *not* a garden spot.

Jerome assured me that if another missile screamed by, he would not do what he did before. This was good; what was even better was that we didn't have occasion to find out if he was a creature of his word, since no more of the damn things appeared. The red sea, the red sky, the red everything else, stayed exactly the same throughout the two-hour journey, which began to wind down when the outline of an island popped up amid the haze half a mile ahead.

"Yodonomoho," the Clint Eastwood voice said with unfeigned disgust.

What an ugly place! I thought as we neared to within a quarter mile of a rather drab stretch of beach. It was black, charred, like someone had popped the whole damn place into a toaster and forgotten about it for a long time. The abbreviated beach ended at a forest of dead, gnarly tree trunks. This was *not* on the Club Med itinerary.

And the worst thing was, I didn't see mountains or hills anywhere. Everything was flat!

"Can you circle around?" I asked Jerome.

"Oh, certainly. I have no pressing engagements this afternoon."

Huh?

He paralleled the coastline of Yodonomoho for a long time, still seeing nothing within the limited visibility afforded us before the red haze got in the way. Soon we were passing the burnt-out remains of what must have been fishing villages, the black skeletons of medium-sized ships and smaller boats lying high and dry on pebbled beaches. Nowhere did we see a single person... humanoid, whatever. It was starting to get depressing.

"Strange," Jerome said, "there were many here the last time I passed by."

"When was that?"

"We are not good at measuring the passage of time. It might have been two months, or perhaps a year."

There was a slight pause before each of his guesses; the UT7 had taken an instant longer to interpret his vague interpretations of time. Whatever. None of this was helping me very much.

And speaking of *time*, we'd been traveling around the island for what I guessed was half an hour, and still there was nothing that looked promising. I was beginning to get a wee bit frustrated, and I advised my host of this fact.

Jerome probably would've scratched his head right about this time, had he been able to. "I know there are mountains, because you used to be able to see them. All this red stuff now in the air..."

"Look, you've done enough," I said. "Let me off on shore, and I'll head inland on foot or bike."

"Of course. Where?"

Not wanting to pass through one of those devastated fishing villages, I

had him carry me around a jutting point to a calm bay, where gentle waves lapped up on a grayish beach. He stopped about a hundred yards from shore.

"This is as far as I go, Jack. It's shallow, and if I get stuck you probably won't be able to get me back out to deep water."

"You have that right." I stood the Nishiki up. "Thanks for everything, Jerome. I hope things get better for your... people."

He lowered his head and deposited me gently into the water, where once again I started the old treading bit. I figured he would turn and leave, but he remained there, all his eyes skating down and stopping near each other (*eeey-yoo, was that weird!*).

"Uh, Jack?" he said.

"Yeah?"

"I'm sure you'll find what you want here. But in case something goes awry, and you have need to get away from Yodonomoho, it might be good if you could summon me."

"Sounds like a plan," I agreed. "How would I do that?"

"First, you put both hands under the water. Then, you must say a song, and you must say it loud. No matter where I am, the vibrations will reach me."

"Uh, right."

"Say the song now, Jack, so I will know which one is yours."

"Any song?"

"Whatever you choose."

I thought for a moment, then belted out the chorus of one of my favorite songs ever. Hearing my voice I think Jerome winced, but I wouldn't swear to it.

When I was done he said, "Interesting. The tune is familiar; sounds like the song of Harvey, one of our kind, although he won't mind you using it,

since he's been dead for a century."

"Nice of Harv," I told him.

"The words puzzle me, though," he went on. "Brother Love's show? Pack up babies? Grab old ladies? I... well, never mind. It will be the song of Jack, and will bring me to you if the need occurs. Good-bye."

"Thanks again for everything, Jerome."

He turned; I braced myself for the turbulence that would throw me up on shore, but it didn't come. The submarine-sized body glided off slowly, forming a mini-wave that rode me in about a third of the distance. Shortly after I was able to touch bottom. I trudged the rest of the way up to the ugly beach.

The bike wasn't in bad shape, just wet. Me too. I propped it up against the trunk of a vertical but dead tree, then sat down on one that had fallen. This wood might have burned a long time ago, but you could still smell it, and let me assure you, it was not one of my favorite aromas. Well, I'd better get used to it, because the whole place was like this.

The air was hot, dry, and that reddish haze hung everywhere, limiting visibility even more. I tried not to consider the possibility that this was radioactive fallout or some such thing. *No way; you Old Guys would've had me outta here a long time ago, right?*

I could still see the upper half of Jerome's retreating bulk out beyond the bay. The leviathan suddenly leaped, this time not doing that arch thing, but propelling his entire body out of the water. *Jesus, it was as big as the Sears Tower in Chicago!* And this time, when he hit the water, a tidal wave formed! Yeah, at least the size of the one ole Zeus hurled down from Mt. Olympus to wipe out the good folk of Argos.

I suddenly pictured myself drowning where I sat.

But the growlath knew what he was doing, because the wave (*God, was it BIG!*) set out to sea, and I quickly lost it beyond the haze. I felt sorry for anyone or anything in its path. Jerome's massive body also faded from sight.

An eerie stillness surrounded me. Suddenly I didn't want to be sitting

here anymore.

Walking the Nishiki, I penetrated the burnt-out forest of Yodonomoho.

CHAPTER THREE

Yodonomoho

Jeez, what a dismal place! Yeah, it sure as heck *smelled* as bad as I'd guessed, especially here in the forest, where I couldn't spot a single tree that had escaped the devastation. Nor could I find my way out of it quickly.

But I *did* come across the start (or end) of a road.

Compared to others I'd seen in my travels it was a pretty decent road, wide and blacktopped (brown-topped, actually), even a white stripe running down the middle. The charred trees edged up to the narrow shoulders. There were no vehicles in either direction, which really wasn't saying much, because you couldn't see very far whichever way you looked.

Okay, this should get me where I wanted to go a lot faster. I climbed on the Nishiki and set off at a slow ten mph. Other than a few cracks, the road appeared to be in good repair; still, I wasn't taking chances.

Good move, because half a mile along, just around a curve, at least ten yards of the road was gone.

That's all, just *gone*. I mean, *not there*. It resumed on the far side of a pit that had to be forty feet deep. Something had taken the sucker out.

I had a fairly good idea what that *something* was.

Returning to the fricasseed forest I gave the pit a wide berth, then caught the road and started off again. Three minutes later I came across my first Yodonomohon vehicle.

It looked like an M151 jeep, only with a metallic domed roof. I'm not sure what color it had been, but now it was (what else?) a wretched gray-black. For the most part it was intact, although in a few places the

steel had melted, then re-formed to hang down like a stalactite. The tires had dissolved to nothingness; the windows had shattered. Amid the shards, on the front seat, was a lump, something that resembled a large misshapen charcoal briquette. I didn't want to *know* what that was.

More jeeps and trucks appeared along the road, which now passed near some defoliated hills; small ones, nothing that was going to help me, but it was a promising sign...

A skeletal body hung out the window of one of the trucks.

Smallish, charred to a crisp, but definitely humanoid. The front of the truck had slammed into a tree. But the driver, whose one hand was still on the wheel, had probably been dead before that happened.

More of them were around, either in vehicles or on the brown-topped road, the shoulders, or the brittle earth along the edge of the forest.

I'm telling you the truth: *I really wanted out of here.*

But no way yet. So I kept on pedaling and tried not to look, which wasn't easy.

Ten minutes later the only thing about the landscape that had changed was the number of bodies scattered across it. About this time I saw a road sign. The "letters" looked like Egyptian hieroglyphics interspersed with lots of little hangman's nooses. I touched the sign, and it read: thimiz, 5 miles.

A town; maybe a city. More than likely a whole hell of a lot more bodies. Did I really want to go there?

Did I really have much of a choice?

Nope, not even side roads. And no sense turning back along this one, since I knew where it went.

I continued on to Thimiz.

There were fragments of buildings on both sides of the road now, skeletons of what had been cottages, barns, that sort of thing. And speaking of skeletons, in addition to the humanoids there were also those

of a variety of animals, some of considerable size. And that burnt smell, which I'd first noticed on the beach after leaving Jerome, was overwhelming here.

Sorry, this isn't the neatest thing I've ever shared with you, but I had to go off to the side of the road and get sick (don't ask me why it had to be the *side*).

Larger buildings started to appear; I was getting closer to Thimiz. Surprisingly, the number of charred skeletons began to decrease. I rode as fast as I could, which wasn't fast at all. In addition to dodging the remains of the Yodonomohons, the road was in shitty condition. I don't mean blown to hell, like before, but gouged deeply in many places, some of the furrows paralleling each other. Really weird.

Off to the right of the road was this one house, flanked by others, that didn't seem to be nearly as devastated. Most of the roof was off and the windows had imploded, but that was it. I walked up to the door, which had swung inward. The top of the portal was about six inches higher than my head, and really narrow. I imagine Gumby's house would have a doorway like this.

"Hello, anyone home?" I called out, which *really* was stupid, considering what I'd seen all along the road. Yeah, well, I didn't think it would be polite to just walk in to someone's house without an invitation. How's that for programming?

But you know what? I heard something from inside, a sort of scurrying noise, so maybe it wasn't stupid. I couldn't see anything moving, even though it wasn't that dark in there, what with the roof missing. And whatever it was, it didn't last long.

Yeah, it gave me the willies, but I went inside anyway.

The front room was small. There was furniture: a weird, horseshoe-shaped couch, some skinny, straight-backed chairs, and a long stone thing that might have been either a coffee table or a morgue slab. All of it was covered with a layer of dust or ash. On one wall there were a couple of large, framed pictures, also dusty. I wiped some of it off and stepped back to have my first look at a Yodonomohon.

Wow, this was odd! At first glance the humanoids in the two pictures

looked a lot like the skeletons I'd been passing. Okay, they had *some* flesh on their birdlike faces, but not much, and what they did have was thin and yellowish. Their noses, long and skinny, resembled Pinocchio's after the first couple of times he'd pissed the Blue Fairy off. One thing you could tell was that the pictures were of a male and a female. Both had the same broad lips, but the female's was tinted with purplish lipstick, and her cascading blond hair (I swear!) was much longer than the male's dark crew cut. Oh, yeah, he was wearing a bow tie around a neck that was as scrawny as a chicken's. They weren't smiling, but they didn't look angry, just detached.

Anyway, this matriarch and patriarch were overseeing an empty house, because I searched every corner and couldn't find a thing. Assuming it wasn't my imagination, whatever I'd heard before was probably an animal, maybe a rat or something. (Oh, I hope not!) On that note the Nishiki and me made a hasty exit.

Back on the paved road again, I noticed where it curved sharply thirty yards ahead. I also became aware of the outline of something quite large, barely discernible through the ever-present red haze.

The outline of a mountain range. *Aww-right!*

But first things first, and *first thing* happened to be a whirring, clanking, sputtering sound from somewhere beyond where the road curved. Okay, a confrontation was *not* on my agenda, so I wheeled the Nishiki around some corpses and a truck that lay on its side. My goal was a small building—maybe a storage shed—that was mostly gone but still had a facade to hide behind.

Uh-uh, no time, because the whatever-was-coming suddenly *whir-clank-sputtered* around the curve. I tossed the bike into the canvas-covered back of the truck and scrambled in after it, bruising my knee. Choking down a choice expletive I peered out through a hole in the canvas.

The vehicle coming up the road was pretty much like the one I was hiding in. One noticeable thing was that it had no tires, and the metal rims it rode atop were not perfectly round. That accounted for those deep grooves I'd been seeing for a while. There were two humanoids in the windshieldless cab, both intent on the road ahead, so I breathed a sigh of relief, figuring they hadn't seen me.

Whoops, the truck *whir-clank-sputtered* to a stop in front of where I was hidden.

The Yodonomohons, both males (I'm pretty sure), climbed down from the truck. Their only garments were something that looked like khaki Bermuda shorts and a pair of wing-tipped combat boots. My impression of the pictures in that house wasn't too far off; they really *did* look like walking corpses.

And speaking of corpses, they weren't interested in me, but the skeletons in the immediate vicinity. They would pick one up, toss it in the back of the truck, then go after another. Their methodical work was performed in silence, but you could read the pain in their odd bird-faces.

I stayed put while they worked their way twenty yards along the road, stopping often to perform their grim function. After the truck rolled past, I had a look in back.

It was piled from top to bottom, side to side, with the bodies of Yodonomohons.

Which was the reason why they turned back, not an easy task in that conveyance. They had a full load.

With a few sickly *chugs* added to the *whir-clank-sputter*, the truck disappeared around the curve where I'd first seen it. By this time I'd climbed out of my hiding place. Let me tell you, my legs were shaky, and I had to prop my back against the vehicle to keep from toppling over.

"Not a pleasant sight, is it?" a voice from behind me said, and it scared the shit out of me so badly that I nearly (right) wet my spandex. I staggered around to face whoever it was.

The bird-faced Yodonomohon standing near the gutted storage shed had a startling shock of white hair. He was stooped over, his gnarly fingers wrapped around the handle of a pencil-thin cane, which despite its fragile appearance seemed strong enough to support him. He wasn't smiling as he looked me up and down, but I could sense a gentleness in his demeanor.

"You didn't answer me," he said as he started toward me, his right leg dragging behind.

I shook my head. "You're right, it's pretty bad. Uh, who are you?"

"My name is Scribbet. And yours?"

"It's Jack."

He pointed an incredibly bent finger at me. "You come from somewhere far away, yes?"

"That's right."

"It's obvious." He shrugged. "Ah well, in the past I would have loved to learn about you, but now there are other matters that warrant attention." He started to walk off.

"Hey, wait a minute!"

Scribbet turned. "Yes?"

I gestured around. "What... happened here? Who did this to you?"

"So, you are even more of a stranger than I imagined. Very well; walk with me, and I will explain."

"Uh, I won't be in any danger, will I?"

He sort of smiled. "Not from the people of Yodonomoho."

Well, I think that was an okay answer. He started down the road, and I joined him. The Nishiki piqued his curiosity, but he didn't say anything.

"This devastation that you wonder about," he told me, "was more than likely caused by the flame bombs of Doyomohono."

"What do you mean, 'more than likely'? Don't you know who your enemies are?"

"Oh, I suppose it could have been Hoyomonodo, or Nohodo-yomo, but of course the Doyomohonons have always been our worst foes, so we must assume it's them. In any case it doesn't matter now."

We had rounded the curve and were definitely entering the heart of Thimiz. Mounds of rubble from buildings that had once been tall lined the

main thoroughfare, as well as alleys and side streets.

There were charred vehicles around, but no corpses. I suppose the cleanup detail had taken care of the city and was now working its way out.

"What do you mean it doesn't matter?" I asked. "Look what they did to you!"

Scribbet shook his head. "Our people were not as innocent as you think. We too had the flame bombs. For decades we sent them off with regularity toward Doyomohono, and it's likely we did a lot of damage there. But our hot rock cooled first, and of course disintegrated, and we became helpless, so now it is only a matter of time before we are totally destroyed."

Hot rock? That's what the UT7 said he said, but it sounded weird. Even so, I got the picture.

"These hot rocks are what juice up the flame bombs, right?"

Scribbet scratched his bony head. "*Juice up?* Yes, I suppose that's a way of simplifying it."

"And these Doyomohonons—did I say that right?—still have one of these hot rocks?"

"You said it fine. Yes, they have theirs, as do the Hoyomo-nodons and the Nohodoyomons, we think. Communications is not one of the strong points of our world."

Four small Yodonomohons—children—in tattered clothes were playing amid the rubble. Near them, something popped out of a crevice and started crawling along the ground. It looked like a pink, fleshy lobster with a long possum's tail. Pretty gross.

Before I knew what was going on, Scribbet hefted his walking stick like a javelin and hurled it at the thing. Great throw, because he impaled it through the middle. The beastie died with an awful hiss. One of the children calmly shook it into a sack held by another, then returned the stick to Scribbet. The two nodded at each other grimly, and the kid went on her way.

"There isn't much food left," Scribbet explained, which is what I had

figured, but *yuck!*

"Hey, little girl, wait a minute," I called, digging into my bike bag.

The kid came back. I pulled out four granola bars, fresh ones this time, having packed them before this excursion. What the hell, I wasn't going to be here long, and I sure as hell had no appetite.

"Here, one for each of you," I told her.

She took the bars, studied them, then looked up. This time there was a wanna-be smile on her birdlike face. "Thanks a lot, mister," she said in a gravelly little voice.

None of the children dug into the bars after she'd handed them out, but instead ran off. Undoubtedly they were programmed to share whatever they found with their families.

Scribbet put a hand on my shoulder. "That was very kind of you, Jack," he said.

"Yeah, no problem."

"Tell me, is there anything I can do for you?"

I pointed through the haze. "You can answer me this: Those *are* mountains, are they not?"

"Yes, of course. Quite an imposing range. It is beyond them that our hot rock was kept."

"And there are roads leading up into them?"

He nodded. "This one, in fact, but it is very steep."

"That's fine, because I won't need too much of it."

Now I'm sure I was thoroughly confusing him, but he didn't pursue it. We kept on walking through downtown Thimiz. A few other Yodonomohons were afoot, and some vehicles, sans tires, *whir-clank-sputtered* about. Let me assure you, it was not an impressive place.

"You seem a reasonable... man, Scribbet," I said. "Did you always want such a terrible war?"

Now he looked at me kind of pissedly. "Even in the old days, before the hot rocks came to the four countries and our battles were done at sea, I always petitioned for peace. The quarrels of our lands are so ancient that there is no one who remembers what they are anymore. But that never stopped the Belligerents—our leaders, unfortunately—who far outnumbered the Scholars, so the war went on."

"The other countries are also led by Belligerents?"

"Oh, indeed."

"But do they also have Scholars, who might feel the same way you do?"

"I believe that to be so, but as I mentioned, we sadly lack for communications here."

"Are your leaders here, in Thimiz?"

Scribbet shook his head. "The Belligerents are dead. They trusted in the hot rock, and all were within its sphere—beyond the mountains, as I told you—when it cooled."

"What happened?"

"I'm not certain, but the theory is that a Doyomohonon flame bomb fell upon just the right spot and caused an upheaval that loosed a deep underground lake. We could see the steam rising afterward. As yet we have no desire to go find what is left."

Yeah, I would've seconded that plan. "So if you had your druthers, you'd just as soon live in peace, right?"

I think *druthers* confused him, but he replied, "Yes. But it is not to be. Sooner or later other flame bombs will find their mark, and Yodonomoho will cease to exist."

We were now in the center of Thimiz. No less than *three* vehicles full of corpses *whir-clank-sputtered* in a row down an intersecting road. Scribbet pointed after them.

"We've already filled one mass grave and are halfway through another," he told me.

Jeez, the matter-of-fact way in which he said it really gave me the creeps!

"Here is where I must leave you, Jack," he went on. "I hope you find whatever it is you seek in the mountains."

"Uh-huh," I said dumbly, not moving.

The Yodonomohon held up his gnarly hand in a peace sign. I still didn't do anything. "Is something wrong, Jack?" he asked.

What do *you* think? Images were flitting through my brain, like I was looking through an old stereopticon projector. The piece of road that wasn't there; the gutted vehicles; the pictures in the house; the corpses, either on the ground or piled high in the trucks...

The children playing in the rubble, and the thing they were taking home to eat.

"Wait!" I exclaimed, which was dumb, because Scribbet was still standing next to me.

"What is it?"

"You said there might be Scholars on Doyomohono, and the other places, right?"

"I said it's likely, but—"

"And that communications is one of the greatest barriers?"

"Yes."

"What if I could help put you in touch with them? Would you be willing to go there if that was a possibility?"

"I... well, of course I would! But, Jack, no Yodonomohon ship has sailed the sea in decades. All of them are destroyed. And I doubt if my people would want to start building—"

"You won't have to!" I interrupted. "Trust me, Scribbet. I'll deliver you there."

The white-haired little guy with the bird-face was starting to get into this, I could tell. "Others among the Scholars would wish to come along too!"

"Great, gather them up. We can have a talk tonight, then head out in the morning. Does that sound like a plan?"

He scratched his head. "*Tonight? Morning?* I don't know these words."

Say what? "Tonight; you know, after it gets dark?"

"But it never gets dark here, Jack."

You know, just as he said it I realized that the humongous bloodred sun, which had been directly overhead when I'd first surfaced in the red sea, was *still* directly overhead. Okay, so they didn't know night from day here. Didn't matter, though, because *I* was tired.

"Okay, new plan," I said. "Lead me to a place where I can catch a few... where I can get some sleep, and in the meantime go gather the troops, then come and get me."

Nodding, Scribbet led me to a room in a gutted building nearby. The small room was utilitarian at best. He waved me to a lumpy mattress, spread out futon style on the floor.

"Can I... get you some food, Jack?" he asked hesitantly. "There are still some canned provisions left."

"Save it for the kids."

"Sleep well, then." He turned and started out the door. "Oh, if this could only be!" I heard him say excitedly.

I lay there thinking, *What the hell was I doing!* In an hour I could be back on the Ultimate Bike Path, hunting down Vulvan Reproductors or something. This place was hazardous to one's health! I mean, even with Yodonomoho minus their hot rock, flame bombs still flew everywhere. Why did I want to get involved?

Thanks a lot, mister.

Yeah, well, I did, so I rolled over and went to sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Scholarly Crew

A female Yodonomohon was leaning over me when I awakened, so close that she nearly scared me shitless.

I felt refreshed. For all I knew I'd crashed for ten hours. In a land of eternal daylight it was hard to tell. The female, whose long hair was as white as Scribbet's, nodded, but the staid expression on her bird-face went unchanged.

"We trust you slept well?" she asked.

Scribbet joined her. "You appeared to be tired, so in spite of our curiosity we let you sleep."

"Yeah, well, thanks," I said, sitting up.

There were two others crammed into the room, both males. One had short white hair; the other's was longer, and black.

"Let us get on with this now," the latter said, "and hear what the stranger wants."

"Be patient, Lafe," Scribbet told him. "Jack, these are the members of the council. This is Telia, my mate, and Brenchil, and the restless one is Lafe. Most young Scholars, I can attest, are like him."

They bowed in unison, like Japanese tourists at Disneyland. I bowed back. They sat down in a half circle, facing me, and I explained what I had in mind.

All of them thought it was the craziest thing they'd ever heard.

All of them couldn't wait to give it a try.

"Okay then, what's the fastest way to the coast?"

It turned out to be down a river that ran through Thimiz. A narrow river, mucky and polluted, by *what* I didn't want to know. Our conveyance looked like a small garbage scow. The five of us, with a crew of three, set out immediately along the swiftly flowing tributary. Naturally the Nishiki came with me. Craziess and stupidity do *not* necessarily go hand in hand.

This river emerged from the mountains that had been my goal. I stared wistfully at them for a while, then turned when the red haze blotted them out.

The others were quiet during the journey, which didn't take long. One of the things that got to us was the fact that there was another road paralleling the river, and because of everything that needed to be done in Thimiz they hadn't yet been able to clear it, so all along its miles...

You can guess.

Soon the mucky river poured into the red sea, the last mile reminding me of Roaring Rapids. We traveled around a promontory to a bay, which might have been the same one where Jerome first dropped me off, but I couldn't be sure. The scow was dragged up on the beach. The crew fell back to the edge of the forest; the council and me stood by the shoreline.

"All right," Lafe said, "let's see this miraculous summoning." (Was this guy from Missouri, or what!)

Feeling like an idiot I waded out up to my knees, shoved both hands under the water, and belted out two choruses of "Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Show."

Hallelujah!

Scared the shit out of the Yodonomohons, I did. One of the crew ran into the forest.

"Now what?" Brenchil asked.

"Now, we wait. I don't have a clue where Jerome might be."

We sat down on the sand and stared across the red sea. This time

Scribbet, joined by the others, asked questions about who I was, where I came from, the usual thing. I answered in as many straightforward generalities as possible, which both pleased and enthralled them. Before long all of them, even Lafe, was convinced I might be able to pull this weird scheme off.

The first thing we saw appear from across the sea was *not* Jerome the growwath.

It was a flame bomb.

Yeah, one of those damn V-2 rockets. We'd heard it first, of course, and were already on our feet when it screamed into sight. Half a mile or more up, and twisting erratically on its northeast course (Telia told me that). Doubtless launched by the Doyomo-honons against Yodonomoho. Barring a sudden change in direction it would overshoot the island by a wide margin and fall far out at sea.

The screaming faded, and the Yodonomohons sat down again, like nothing had happened.

Scribbet had brought food, a thick, bland pudding in a can. This time, being hungry, I ate some of it. Only a bit; I couldn't stop thinking about those kids.

An hour later the Yodonomohons were growing fidgety. "Jack, are you sure this Jerome can be counted on?" Scribbet asked.

"He seemed like a decent... fellow," I replied. "Let me give it another try."

So, back to the red sea, where I wailed another chorus of what the growwath had called the song of Jack. This time the Yodonomohons were prepared; all of them covered their ears.

Five minutes later Jerome's massive bulk appeared through the haze. I could hear the bones of the bird-faced folk rattling. Ole doubting Lafe nearly fainted.

And when I swam out to meet Jerome? It was like that god business back on Murlug again! I could've written a Yodonomo-hon dictionary of superlatives right there.

"How're you doing, pal?" I said to the killer whale/iguana-thing as I neared to within ten yards of his buggy eyes.

"Fine, Jack," the Clint Eastwood voice replied. "But you really didn't have to shout. I was already on the way."

"Sorry about that, but I couldn't be sure."

"I understand. So, you could not find what you were seeking on Yodonomoho, is that it?"

"Actually, what I wanted *was* here, but something else came up, and I thought you might be able to help."

I explained the plan to him, and even though a lot didn't make sense, he got the gist. "Yes, I was wondering why all those people were there," he said. "Of course I'll help you, Jack; happy to do it. But I don't know how easy it will be for the Yodonomohons to ride atop a growwath, despite what they said."

"You may have a point, Jerome. Any ideas?"

He did, and he told me. I swam back to shore. Guess what, the bird-faced folk really *were* having an anxiety attack after seeing the monster in the flesh. Still, they agreed to go ahead with it, especially after hearing Jerome's idea.

Which was to pick them up scow and all, so they'd have something familiar under their feet. Lafe ordered the crew to push it into the water; they did, then hurried back up the beach. By this time scores of Yodonomohons, alerted to what was happening, began emerging from the forest. Needless to say, they were freaked out by what they saw. Telia called to the throng and settled them down.

Brenchil, Lafe, and me rowed the scow into deep water. By this time Jerome had retreated to do his nifty arch thing, which impressed the hell out of everyone. A minute later the scow was high and dry above the surface of the red sea. Lafe almost screamed (which would have made me feel happier about life in general), but managed to hold it down.

Can you imagine what the guy must've thought when one of Jerome's buggy eyes glided up his head and stopped a couple of yards from the

scow? But it didn't seem to bother the others.

"Quite interesting," Scribbet said, and Telia nodded.

From below Jerome's Clint Eastwood voice called out, "Well hello, my Yodonomohon friends!"

Okay, that settled Lafe down. Introductions were made, and when that was over Jerome promised a smooth ride to Doyomo-hono. The council waved to the people on shore; they waved back, and something like a cheer rose from their throats, except it was kind of hoarse. Best they could do under the circumstances.

Lafe nearly freaked again when Jerome took off; so did the others, for that matter, even though the growwath was going more slowly than he had the first time he carried me. Once they realized nothing was going to happen they lightened up, and pretty soon they were enjoying the ride. Brenchil couldn't get enough of pointing out this and that on all sides. I don't know what the guy was seeing, the mist-enshrouded seascape looking pretty much the same to me. The others must've thought the same, because after a while they were regarding Brenchil as a real pain in the ass.

After his slow start, Jerome turned it on. I don't think the bird-faced folk noticed the change. Within an hour even the pesky Brenchil had fallen silent.

It was then that the Yodonomohons did something *real* weird. They weren't even looking at one another when their bodies suddenly went rigid, then twisted like pretzels as they sank in four heaps to the deck of the scow. Scared the crap out of me, until a check revealed that they were breathing evenly. They'd gone to sleep.

Well, why not? Just because *I'd* had a shitload of sleep and wasn't tired... This *was* a land of endless daylight, and at the moment nothing was happening, so why not catch a few Zs? It was just the way they went about it that was unnerving.

Seeing that the Yodonomohons were asleep, Jerome struck up a conversation. In order not to disturb the others I climbed out of the scow and sat next to an earhole, at the moment only a couple of feet from one of his eyes, which was *very* weird. He wanted to know more about what I'd

seen on the island, so I filled him in. He found the whole thing interesting, even though he didn't understand a lot of it.

When I was finished the killer whale/iguana-thing said, "So you think that by having the parties communicate, they will end their differences and stop sending the... what did you call them?"

"Flame bombs. I don't know if it will work, but it's the only chance they have."

Jerome's eye rolled around counterclockwise as he thought (*eeey-yoof*). "One thing disturbs me greatly, Jack."

"What's that?"

"Should all of them make peace, I'm afraid they might resume their hunting of the growwaths. We would again be threatened with extinction."

I hadn't thought of that. By helping the Yodonomohons establish communications with the others, he might be endangering his species. Uh-oh, not a good thing, especially with us being at his mercy here in the middle of the red sea. Still, I believed him to be an honorable creature.

"I'll talk to Scribbet and make sure *any* treaty includes leaving the growwaths alone. I know he'll agree to it."

That seemed to satisfy Jerome. We talked some more, and a second hour passed.

Then, another flame bomb screamed across our bow.

The growwath stopped. I felt the huge body trembling, his instinct urging him to dive below. Fortunately he didn't, and the rocket twisted out of sight.

All this time not one of the Yodonomohons stirred from their deep sleep. Which, to tell you the truth, was almost as disturbing as the passage of the bomb.

Half an hour later, Jerome said that Doyomohono was near. His eye rolled down as I returned to the scow to awaken the Yodonomohons. *That,*

I believed, was not going to be an easy task, considering how deeply they were under.

So of course their eyes snapped open simultaneously, and they stood up as if they'd each been goosed with a knitting needle.

Need I tell you what I almost did?

"How is our journey progressing, Jack?" Scribbet asked.

For an answer I pointed ahead, where for the first time you could see the dim outline of Doyomohono. I expected Lafe to verge on a conniption (sorry, Ma). He verged. But this time, so did the others. Never is easy confronting your demons, is it?

But the four kept their shit together, and soon we were close to shore. Jerome had mentioned a large town that stood near the ocean, and this was our goal. But guess what, even from a distance we could see that the place had been fried to a crisp. I'm talking *major* devastation, few walls of buildings even left standing. And if anyone was around this hellhole, they were doing quite a job making themselves scarce.

"What do you think?" I asked Scribbet.

He pondered a moment, then indicated a rocky point farther along the coast. "Let's try there."

Jerome complied, and soon we were paralleling the shoreline of a quiet bay. But this place was as bad as Yodonomoho, the sand singed, trees charred, fishing villages leveled. And again, no Doyomohonons were around.

"They have probably moved inland," Lafe said.

"Yes."

"Yes," Telia agreed, "all of them are within the sphere of their hot rock, and—"

"Look there!" Scribbet exclaimed.

Three forms appeared from under the remains of a dock. I couldn't be sure from here, but they looked to be identical to the skeletal, bird-faced

Yodonomohons. They were pointing at us and chattering among themselves. Jerome stopped and rolled his eye back.

"What would you like me to do?" he asked. "I can get closer, for the water in this bay is deep."

"Do so, then," Scribbet said.

Whoops, bad call. As soon as he started moving again, the trio took off as though a razorback hog was eight inches from their butts. The growwath halted.

"Perhaps it would be better if we went the rest of the way by boat," Telia suggested.

Jerome lowered the scow. This time all five of us shared duties on the oars. In a couple of minutes we were standing on the gray sand.

"Wait here," Scribbet said.

His hand raised, the white-haired Yodonomohon walked slowly toward the part of the blackened forest where the trio had disappeared. When he was halfway there, one of them emerged. From where I stood the guy looked like Scribbet's twin. He too held his hand up. The pair met, bowed, talked. Scribbet then led him toward us. I could tell from the expression on his face that the Yodonomohon was bent out of shape.

"This is Fitz, among the leading Scholars of Doyomohono," he said. "According to him, their hot rock was cooled half a year ago when a flame bomb diverted the course of a mighty river. The crater in which the hot rock was kept filled rapidly, killing all the Belligerents. Since then they have been helpless, and other bombs have fallen. They have been blaming us."

"But our hot rock was cooled *before* that!" Lafe exclaimed. "Then... it was not the Doyomohonons who destroyed us!"

"And it was not the Yodonomohons who destroyed *us*," Fitz said.

"Indeed not," Scribbet assured him.

"Then it was certainly the Hoyomonodons!" Brenchil said.

"Oh, yes," Fitz agreed.

Hey, folks, it could've been the Nohodoyomons too, you know, but I didn't say anything. Jeez, do you believe these people!

Okay, here's what happened on Doyomohono, in a nutshell: Fitz told the Yodonomohon council that his people would go along with any treaty that brought peace to the four countries, even though he didn't think it was possible. His cronies having joined him by this time, he assigned them to take word of what was going down to the rest of the council. Why not him? they asked. Because he was coming along with us to Hoyomonodo as a show of unity. Yeah, he was gutsy, even though the idea of riding on a growwath had a strange effect on his heart rate.

So off we went, yours truly trying to ignore a nearby range of mountains. I mean, they all seemed to be on the right track now, so why was my presence necessary?

I thought even harder along those very same lines when the next flame bomb screamed over our heads.

Coming from the direction of Nohodoyomo, Fitz said, although both he and the Yodonomohon council agreed that the erratic missiles have been known to alter their course drastically, even turn completely around. So there was just as much chance that it was a Hoyomonodon flame bomb.

Jerome, of course, didn't give a shit. I'm sure that he would've rather been foraging for anchovies or something. But give him credit, he was going to stick it out.

This cruise took a lot longer. Halfway through it the Yodonomohons, *and* the Doyomohonon, dropped off to sleep at the same moment. I joined them this time, and fortunately was still out when they snapped up, which spared me from another fright.

Wasn't *any* of this world different? Same red sea, same red mist, same gloomy island appearing through it. Hoyomonodo, which could've easily passed for the other two, except for a bit less devastation. One patch of forest that we passed still showed some green, and a small fishing village, unlike three others we'd seen previously as we circled the island, was virtually intact. Quite a few people were there, though most scattered when we came ashore, this time from way out.

Guess what, none of the flame bombs we'd seen had come from Hoyomonodo, because *their* hot rock had cooled about *three* months ago, the same time most of their Belligerents had bought the farm. Some of the latter were still around, but the Scholars weren't taking any shit from them. And now that the Hoyomo-nodon *honcho*, an elder named Yob, knew that the weapons had not been coming from Doyomohono or Yodonomoho, and vice versa, it became easy for he and the others to solve the mystery.

Right, the island of Nohodoyomo was the culprit!

Are you following all of this okay?

So Yob (whose people, by the way, looked *exactly* like everyone else) agreed to jump on the peace train and come with us to Nohodoyomo. But not, however, until Jerome had a chance to rest. Yeah, even killer whale/iguana-things pooped out. We did our veggie imitation in the village, where the Hoyomonodons fed us well. It wasn't that they were any better provisioned than the others; they just figured it would be over soon, and there would be lots of food to go around, and all that good stuff.

Right?

But if so, how come I wasn't the only one questioning it? Since everyone knew that Nohodoyomo was definitely the last stop, and that *their* hot rock was still hot, I sensed trepidation from the bird-faced folk. What if they couldn't get through to the Nohodo-yomon Scholars? What if they (that's *we*) got blown out of the water? What if... ?

At one point Fitz asked me, "Jack, how come you fondle the strange coin around your neck so much?"

Right, that should tell you where I was at.

But what the hey, I was as committed as them. We started discussing strategy, which is about when everyone in the village melted to the ground, like a hundred Wicked Witches of the West, and fell asleep.

Jerome showed up half an hour later, as bright-eyed and bushy-tailed (bushy-fluked?) as I was. Not wanting to prolong this thing, I shook Scribbet awake gently.

Everyone else's eyes snapped open at the same time. *Dang!*

"To Nohodoyomo!" Scribbet announced, rather dramatically, I thought.

CHAPTER FIVE

Don't Make Waves

So now there were seven of us in the scow on Jerome's head. Those in the know (everyone but me) agreed that the best way to approach the island was from the west. The villages on that side were Scholar strongholds, or had been long ago. Either way, Belligerents tended to congregate near the hot rock, so there likely would be none around. Now, as long as Nohodoyomo's Scholars felt the same way as the others...

Oh, of course they felt that way.

Ayup.

Having endured a rude interruption earlier on Hoyomonodo, the bird-faced folk again melted to sleep. I worked my way back to Jerome's earhole and engaged in small talk with the leviathan. The diversion helped me avoid their creepy wake-up routine.

It turned out that Nohodoyomo was closer to Hoyomonodo than the other islands had been to each other. Also, the ubiquitous red mist wasn't as dense here, because you could see inland for miles, all the way to a range of mountains. The proportion of charred to green forest was about fifty-fifty. Obviously, this place had not suffered nearly as much as its counterparts.

As we stood and watched, Nohodoyomo began to shake. I swear, you could see it! Then, a fiery streak rose above the mountains, leveled off at half a mile, and headed out to sea.

We all looked at one another and shared a single thought: *Yeah, this was the right place.*

Under Scribbet's guidance Jerome passed on a large town and headed for a village near the mouth of a river. Fishing boats (yeah, floaters for a

change) were out at sea, doing their thing. Hoping that we hadn't yet been spotted, I told Jerome to dive.

"Good luck, everyone," he said. "I'll be waiting to hear what happens. When you are ready for me, Jack, use your song."

The growwath went under without a ripple. We started paddling toward shore, and before long it was clear we'd been spotted. Scribbet, Telia, and Fitz abandoned their oars to stand at the bow and hold up peace signs, while the rest of us struggled with the awkward craft. (Hey, who determined this division of labor? I can make a peace sign as good as anyone!)

Fortunately the peace signs were returned by the bird-faced Nohodoyomons (yeah, peas in a pod, same as the others). A bunch of them were awaiting us on shore, including a distinguished elder named Ellag. Ah-hah, a little *nachis*, because it turned out that this Ellag was a real mucky-muck among the Scholars. He listened to all that Scribbet and the others had to say and at first was real pleased, but then grew somber.

"Your goal of peace is commendable, my friends," he said, "and there are many here who would go along with it. But unlike yourselves we have our Belligerents to deal with, and as long as they have the hot rock, there is no hope of anything changing. Sorry about that."

Yeah, end of story. So who do you think they all turn to?

"What now, Jack?" Lafe said, rather challengingly, I might add. "This was your idea."

I looked at their bird-faces and thought, *Come on, dipshit, work out a decent ending for this story. You always said you had a million of 'em. Okay, all you need is one.*

"You must give me a few minutes to... meditate," I told them. "No one is to follow."

"I'll see to it," Ellag said.

I started walking down the beach. No, I wasn't bullshitting them. Whenever I needed a new story line, or an ending for a work in progress, I either rode my bike or took a long walk along the ocean. There wasn't any

difference here, right?

So how come, ten minutes later, I couldn't come up with anything better than *Sneak in and steal the hot rock out from under the (long) noses of the Belligerents!* Jeez, how brilliant! After getting past hundreds of them you need only put the stone, *which is probably half a million degrees hot*, in your back pocket and get the hell out of there.

They were all watching me from the village, waiting with baited breath (did you ever smell bait on someone's breath?) for a germ of wisdom...

... which I think just came, thanks be to whatever Greater Power is responsible for such things!

I hurried back and approached Ellag, who retreated a step. It occurred to me that I looked as weird to these people as they did to me, so I slowed down and flashed him a grin.

"Ellag, can we talk?" I asked, and I thought my Joan Rivers impression was pretty good, but he didn't.

"Yes, of course," he said warily.

"First thing, where is the location of your hot rock?"

He pointed a bony finger toward the middle of the mountain range. "In a deep, sheltered cave there."

"Okay. Next question, do you have enough ships to take your people out to sea for a period of time?"

"I think so, but I don't understand what you have in mind."

"Yes, Jack," Scribbet said, "you're confusing us. Can you explain?"

I told them the plan, which was outrageous. Naturally, they liked it.

So while most of them got all excited and stuff, Ellag took some practical action and issued orders to other Nohodoyomons. They quickly left the village in a variety of vehicles similar to those I'd seen on Yodonomoho. Except these all had tires.

"It will take a while to summon the Scholars," Ellag told me.

"Fortunately all of us live on this, the sheltered side of Nohodo-yomo. What would you have us do now?"

"I was thinking: We simply can't destroy all of the Belligerents without offering them an ultimatum."

"Why not?" Brenchil asked indignantly.

"I agree," Yob said. "Why do this for the scumbuckets?"

Scumbuckets? "Because if we don't, it makes us no better than they are. Don't you understand that?"

They did, and were properly chastened. "You're right, Jack," Telia said. "We're sorry."

"There is a way we can present this to them without sending a messenger," Ellag said. "Each village has been provided with a communications device that is linked directly to their headquarters. Would you like me to give them a jingle?"

I *swear* that's what he said! "Not yet. I want them to have as little time as possible to react. Now, there's work to do."

The leaders, along with a bunch of Nohodoyomons, followed me to the sea. I shoved my hands under and belted out a single chorus of "Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Show" (one woman fainted), then took a dingy and rowed out to deep water.

Jerome hadn't been far off. He joined me quickly. "Have you made peace yet, Jack?" he asked.

"No, there are complications. I have a plan, but I'll need your help for it to work."

He listened while I laid it out. Wow, he thought it was cool! "Yes," he said, "there will be no problem summoning enough growwaths for the job. Quite a few are in the area."

"Where would be the best place for the Nohodoyomon ships to wait?" I asked.

One tail fluke rose above the water, swayed from side to side, then went

rigid. "Out there, a mile from shore. That will be more than enough of a safety margin."

We discussed signals, and then Jerome left. I rowed back to shore. The Nohodoyomons from the village were filing onto ships, while others were arriving in trucks. Most were puzzled, but they followed the instructions of their leaders without question.

"Everything is going well here, Jack," Scribbet said.

"Ditto out there," I replied, which really confused them.

"Uh, yes," Ellag said. "Shall I give the Belligerents a jingle now?"

"Nope, let's keep that on hold."

We continued filling up the vessels, and soon some were on their way out to sea. All this time my eyes were on the spot where I had last talked to Jerome, until finally I saw his signal.

A spout of water from his blowhole reached way up above the surface, hung there for a moment, then rained down.

"Okay, *now* you can call the Belligerents," I told Ellag.

But surprise, the village's sole communications device, which looked like one of those antique wall phones, started jingling before we got to it. Ellag answered.

"Nnnnyell-oh," he said, which almost cracked me up.

The voice on the other end of the receiver, which Ellag held away from him, came through loud, clear, and blustery: "This is the fucking captain of the fucking guard! What the motherhump-ing shit is going on down there? All those fucking ships sailing away from the motherhumping docks! We have told Grem that something is fucking going on, so you'd better fucking come clean!"

I swear, that's how the UT7 translated all the cuss words, and with nary a twinge!

Ellag covered up the receiver and told me, "Their sentries on the mountaintop have spotted the activity." Then, into the receiver: "You tell

Grem that I will talk to him, and only him. Say that it is important."

There were lots more cuss words, then a brief silence, until Grem, who was the leader of the whole megillah, got on the line. He made the last guy sound like a nun.

"Ellag, you old gallon of diarrhea!" he roared. "If you don't fucking tell me what's fucking going on I'll string up the whole fucking shitload of you turdball Scholars and—!"

"Grem, listen to me," Ellag interrupted. "We are giving you an... ultimatum."

"A fucking *what*?"

Ellag looked at me. Okay, this was my idea, so I took the phone. "Listen, you anus of a worm!" I bellowed (yeah, I could play the posturing game). "You have a *real* brief fucking period of time before we cool off your fucking hot rock, and the rest of you fuckheads with it! You fucking understand that?"

There was a brief silence before he exclaimed, "Who the fuck is this? You don't sound like a fucking Scholar!"

"None of your fucking business. We have a whole shitload of people here who want to make peace and stop all this killing. We have Yodonomohons, Doyomohonons, Hoyomonodons, and your own Nohodoyomons. You'd better stop dicking around, or you'll all be fucking dead! You understand that?"

There was a rumbling laughter. "You want the Belligerents to fucking surrender to you?"

"Right on, fuckface."

"Or you'll destroy us all?"

"Uh-huh."

"How much fucking time do we have to give you a fucking answer?"

"Two minutes, fartbreath!"

I heard him shout some orders in the background. "You'll have your fucking answer before then, you pus from an infected wound!" (Oh, very original!)

About ten seconds later the ground shook. A flame bomb rose above the mountains and screamed its way out to sea. I closed my eyes and prayed that, of all the ones they launched, this particular missile would *not* find land.

"There, you like that fucking answer, shit-for-brains?" Grem bellowed. "You'd better fucking watch out, because the next one may go right up your asshole!"

I was through posturing. "That's your decision, then?"

"Fucking A!"

"Don't say we didn't warn you."

I hung up the phone. It started ringing again, so I threw it to the ground, which shattered it in about two hundred pieces. Then, like a schmuck, I flipped the bird to the mountain range. Yeah, I was pissed!

"Let's get outta here," I told the leaders.

All the vessels, save one, were at sea. We hurried aboard and followed the others with undue haste, Ellag assuring me the Belligerents would not risk dropping a flame bomb so close to their homeland. I didn't care what he said, I still didn't trust the crazy bastards, so I was glad when we reached the place where everyone else was waiting.

"Do it, Jack," Lafe said, and everyone nodded.

Okay, this *was* my plan, right? Two of them held my ankles and lowered me to the water. I shoved my hands under and started to sing.

Not the song of Jack, but another that I had auditioned for Jerome, solely for this occasion.

I belted out some of Barry Maguire's "Eve of Destruction."

Ten seconds later Jerome and four of his fellow growwaths leaped in unison above the surface of the red sea. It was an awesome sight. A

collective gasp rose from the ships.

The thunder of their bodies striking the water was doubly awesome.

The sight of the wave now rising was triply awesome.

It was half a mile high, just as wide, and it grew larger, picking up speed as it raced toward Nohodoyomo. Even though we were quite a distance away, it was unnerving.

An equally incredible thing was that on the opposite side of the island five other growwaths did the exact same thing.

The tidal wave on our side struck the shore, destroying everything in its path: vehicles, houses, the whole nine yards. The Scholars of Nohodoyomo didn't care, Ellag had said. They would be glad to rebuild the entire thing.

Good, because the *entire thing* was all but underwater, and the wave, still massive, was roaring toward the mountain range. There! Beyond the latter I could see the crest of the other wave! I could not believe this was happening!

The two waves met with a thunder that out-thundered all previous thunder. Water rose high in the sky, then rained down on the island and a vast portion of the red sea, including us. But no one gave a hoot about getting wet, they were too excited.

"How will we know if the hot rock has been cooled?" I asked of no one in particular.

Ellag didn't have a clue, but Yob, Fitz, and the Yodonomohons, who had seen it before, tried to answer at the same time and finally said, "It will be evident, because—ah, see!"

Steam, that's what we were looking at! It rose above Nohodo-yomo in a broad, cylindrical column, accompanied by a hissing sound that... well, try to imagine the air brakes on ten thousand trains all being engaged at the same time, the sudden stop really pissing off the cargo, which happens to be five thousand snakes per train.

Yeah, the hot rock was *definitely* being cooled off.

Hands over our ears, we watched the column of steam rise even higher than the crest of the mountainous wave that had been created by the incredible convergence. The top of it formed a mushroom cloud, which spread out to cover Nohodoyomo, as well as the red sea for two miles in all directions. That included us, of course, so it was no great surprise when the rain turned hot, I don't mean scalding hot, since it was already cooling on the way down. But until we knew for sure, it was nerve-racking.

It was amazing that the force of all this didn't split the island into pieces. After a while the hissing abated, the water mountain fell, and the last of the steam column joined the cloud, which floated off to the north.

The whole thing was over.

There followed about five seconds of the most absolute dead silence I'd ever experienced in my life. It gave me the creeps. Then, a triumphant cry (I found that out later. It sounded more like staccato croaking made by a bunch of bullfrogs in serious pain) rose from the throats of all the bird-faced people. Those who deemed themselves fortunate enough to be aboard our vessel pounded the leaders and me on our backs, which really hurt after a while. I was even kissed by a bunch of the females, not the most sensual experience, but what the hell.

"You did it, Jack!" Scribbet exclaimed. "Now peace and prosperity will reign across our land. Oh, I never thought it would be possible!"

Yeah, well, glad to be of service. "Just remember, a lot of the work is only beginning." (How's that for sagacity?)

"We're aware of that," Yob said, and the rest of the leaders nodded. "But it will be pleasant work."

Anyway, the water was still receding from Nohodoyomo, so we waited a bit longer before going ashore. During this time Jerome and his nine buddies surfaced off our stern. It looked like the Rockies emerging in the wake of a great upheaval. Scared the living crap out of the bird-faced folk, it did.

Then, the leaders began to cheer the growwaths, and soon all the people were letting loose with that croak-thing. Jerome came forward. He did it slowly, but still nearly swamped the boat.

"I presume it worked," he said.

"Oh, indeed!" Scribbet told him. "We are greatly indebted to you."

"We wish no debt, only to coexist in peace with the humanoids of the four islands. Will you promise not to hunt us?"

All the leaders were vocal about that one. "It will be a major provision in our treaty," Ellag assured him.

Jerome would have nodded but thought better of it. "Then we will return to our business." He thought for a moment. "Unless, Jack, you still have need of my services, which of course I offer gladly."

I indicated the mountains. "What I need is right there. Thanks anyway, pal. It's been great knowing you."

"Likewise," the killer whale/iguana-thing said. "Uh, Jack, I would ask a favor of you."

"Sure, anything."

"Since you will be here no longer, may I adopt the song of Jack as my own? I have grown quite fond of it."

"It's yours, pal, with my compliments."

"Thank you. And will you teach it to these folks, so they can summon me when they are ready to return to their islands and spread the good news?"

This excited the leaders no end. "Of course," I told him.

Jerome rejoined his buddies, and they swam off. Shiploads of Nohodoyomons were already headed back in, because the water had receded almost to the original shoreline, and by the time they got there the docks were emerging. Ours was among the last vessels to arrive.

Let me tell you, what followed was, under the circumstances, one heck of a celebration! Sure, their homes were gone, and so was most everything else. But the Nohodoyomons didn't care, because it was only *stuff*, and *stuff* could be replaced. The leaders of the other countries had already agreed to share what they had left, so no big deal. Peace was at hand, and

that was what mattered the most, so they broke out the food and drink they had left, and we had a great party, with dancing and all that. It reminded me of that last scene in *Return of the Jedi*, with Luke and Han and everyone getting it on with the Ewoks after kicking the shit out of the Empire.

During the party I taught the leaders how to sing "Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Show," now known as the song of Jerome. Man, you should have heard Fitz getting into those *hallelujahs*!

A couple of hours into the party *all* the bird-faced folk melted to the ground and fell asleep. What the hell, I'd had my share of Nohodoyomon wine (it tasted like Formula 44 with a slight bouquet of Windex), so I joined them.

Upon awakening I decided it was time to *exit, stage left*. All the leaders, and scores of Nohodoyomons, went with me up into the mountains. When I mentioned the fact that the steep road would have to be cleared of all the mud and rocks before it would be of use to me, the people stumbled over one another in their efforts to get the job done.

When all was ready, the leaders pumped my hand one final time. "Farewell, Jack," Scribbit said in what became the start of a ceremony. "What you have done for the people of our world cannot be measured. Although we may never see you again, be assured that you and your deeds will not be forgotten!"

Thanks a lot, mister . . .

Yeah, well, if you don't think ole Jack wasn't full of himself right about now, then you don't know me very well.

With a boisterous chorus of "Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Show" rising above Nohodoyomo, I started down the hill.

CHAPTER SIX

A Return Trip

Okay, there I was, riding along the Ultimate Bike Path (or a branch of

it, or a branch of a branch of it), thinking, *Maybe I wasn't the benchmark of enlarged posterior orifices after all.*

Sure, I'd gone against a Rule-To-Live-By and entered a toothbrush gate, one that hadn't even *asked* me to come in. Then again, maybe it *had*. A summons didn't necessarily have to be a gate practically yanking the Nishiki out from under me. I'd chosen that portal, and the world on the other side was obviously in need of a whole lot of help, and I'd wound up doing some good, right? That had to mean it was destiny.

I've talked myself out of it, indeed I have. There've been many times when I gladly admitted to being a posterior orifice, and occasionally even an enlarged one. But not this time, no. And as far as being the benchmark of the aforementioned? Uh-uh, that would have to be reserved for some really special *faux pas* yet to come.

Hey, Old Guys, what did you think? Were you New Old Guys impressed all to hell? Was I everything my Old Guy said? Yeah, but now it's over, and I suppose one fact is the same in universal study groups as it is in life: *What have you done for me lately?* Yeah, so what does ole Jack do for an encore?

Good question.

Scenario: Study Group Old Guys Being Impressed All To Hell After Jack Miller's Exploits In The World Of Eternal Daylight Where The Names Of The Countries Sound Alike.

Study Group Old Guy #5: "I was"—inserts finger in ear—"impressed all to hell"—removes finger—"with your Jack Miller." Study Group New Old Guy #2: "Yes, so was I." My Old Guy: "Was he not everything I said he would be?" Study Group Old Guy #6: "Actually, for a goodly portion of his excursion he behaved like a"—inserts finger in ear—"dipshit"—removes finger. "But when the"—inserts finger in ear—"chips are down"—removes finger—"he seems to perform admirably."

Study Group Old Guy #1: "Yes, that has always been his way."

Study Group Old Guy #3: "Then you'll continue your observations of Jack with us?"

Study Group New Old Guy #2: "I will."

Study Group Old Guy #6: "Yes, me too."

Study Group Old Guy #5: "I'm afraid I must take leave for a time. A past study of mine has been resumed, and I'm needed."

Study Group Old Guy #4: (excited): "Is it... the effects of nasal discharge on the wind currents of Zandra?"

Study Group Old Guy #5: "Yes, that's the one."

Study Group Old Guy #4: "Oh, I *must* join you!"

Study Group Old Guy #1: "I wouldn't miss that for"—inserts finger in ear—"all the tea in China!"—removes finger.

My Old Guy (pissed, but gracious): "Sorry to see the three of you go. I know you may think it difficult for Jack to top his recent exploits, but somehow he always does."

Study Group Old Guy #5 (stands): "Advise us if he is on the verge of something significant, and we will hurry back."

Yeah, I can see word spreading all through the Old Guys' mother ship, or wherever they come from, right now. It might get a bit crowded with Study Group Old Guys #17, #18, and so on. But what the hell, being a legend kind of rang my bell.

Right, I'd gotten over worrying about what I was going to do next. So far these things had taken care of themselves. Just keep riding, Jack-o, and something is bound to happen.

An analysis of my current situation along the *mhuva lun gallee*: I'd been passing plenty of blue doors, and the one back to my place and time had shown up *twice*. So, not to worry about being in a branch (of a branch of a branch, or whatever) of the Path, because as long as I had that ticket home, everything was okay.

Next, after putting my ass on the line and doing my good deed for the day, what did I want next? Well, in pondering the question the first thing that came to mind was a sincere wish to be able to recognize the iridescent snowman gate that led back to Amazina... *after* I'd left my mark.

I guess that answered that.

There was another iridescent snowman that would have served a similar purpose.

Hey, Old Guy, aren't you supposed to be able to read minds?

In any case I'd been back on the Ultimate Bike Path for a while now, and so far no snowmen. There were more of the toothbrushes with hearts, but you can guess what I felt about them. Blue doors, like I said before, an occasional Gorbachev birthmark, and the ever-present Elmer Fudds, but none of the shopping cart gates, of which I'd had only a brief glimpse. Being new, one of them would have been a sure choice for my next excursion.

Speaking of Elmer Fudds, I realized that it had been quite a while since I'd gone into one; yeah, the place where I'd been paralyzed, then cured by Hazel the Healer. Okay, if a shopping cart didn't turn up, another Elmer would be an acceptable choice. But not yet; I was still satisfied riding the Path.

Naturally, just as I start having shopping carts and Elmer Fudds on the brain, an endless run of isosceles triangles shows up. I mean *nothing* in between. Since none of the triangles with the fireworks were especially ominous, I had no trouble riding past them. The only thing was, after a while it got kind of boring. So I went into blur-speed, and before long a random pattern resumed.

Since returning to the *mhuva lun gallee* I hadn't seen a single other rider. Now, as I was on the verge of choosing an Elmer Fudd, one appeared ahead and definitely warranted my attention. I slowed down to the same speed and followed at a distance of ten feet.

What I was looking at from behind, pumping the blocky pedals of a tall tricycle with balloon tires, was what I would have nominated as the most incredible pair of legs in the universe. If snapshots of these legs had found their way to our boys overseas during World War II, Betty Grable wouldn't have had a chance. Loo-oong, smooth, and white as ivory, feet shod in black suede high heels. You leg men would have freaked; this one already was.

Now, lest you think I was ignoring the rest of the body, wrong-o,

because it wasn't visible. Yeah, the upper part of this tricycle had some sort of wide, scalloped thing in back. It reminded me of a Mad Hatter teacup at Disneyland. Whoever belonged to those legs was on the other side. I sped up just enough to parallel it.

Guess what, nothing was there.

Wait a minute, yes there was. Craning my neck I looked down into a "bowl" that sat atop the go-thing's seat. I first thought what I saw was an orange tennis ball, but no, it was a head, with a little tuft of cottony white hair. Two eyes and a mouth had been *drawn* on it (I think) in the same way a kid decorates a jack-o'-lantern. But its nose was different, more like a long, writhing earthworm. Really weird.

"What the hell are you gawking at, fool?" the tennis ball exclaimed in a deep masculine voice.

"Uh, sorry," I said, "thought you were someone else." Now wasn't that brilliant?

"Go on, get lost!"

Boy, this tennis ball was pissed! "Right, I'm gone."

I rode off, though not without a last wistful look at the legs-to-die-for that happened to belong to an ornery tennis ball.

All of a sudden there was a long run of the watery Florida gates, which I also realized I'd been passing on since my visit to Galaxyland. I added them to my *immediate consideration* list, but continued to stay on the Path. Just a hunch that something's coming. I don't know what it is, but it is gonna be great.

Apologies to Stephen Sondheim.

Another rider appeared on the Path ahead. Nothing bizarre this time.

It was a Vulvan.

Were you listening to me after all, Old Guy? Or was this the work of powers greater than ourselves?

Who cares!

Wait a minute, Jack, don't get excited yet. One thing I learned when I visited Vulvan was that not *all* of the drop-dead-sexy cat-women were Reproductors. Make sure first.

I pulled up alongside the silver scooter go-thing, which she was propelling with her Daisy Duck feet. Yep, she was gorgeous.

"Hi there, my name is Jack," I told her, and I tried one of those nifty Vulvan bows, which was a stupid thing to do on a mountain bike.

She did the same thing—much more gracefully—then said, "For economy's sake you may call me Vageena."

This was promising, oh, yes! "Nice to meet you, Vageena." I was trying to be cool. "You know, I've been to Vulvan before."

"Have you?"

"Yes. Uh, by some remote chance you wouldn't happen to be a Reproducer?"

Her incredible indigo eyes opened a bit wider. "You are perceptive, Jack. Indeed I am."

That killer aroma! I had my first whiff of it. "Wait a minute, don't start yet!" I blurted.

"But it is time to be invigorated, and I cannot—"

"Here, follow me! I have an idea."

Vageena nodded. This was good. I glanced around quickly and saw a blue door on the left. Okay, maybe we'd wind up on the 1840s Great Plains in the path of a buffalo stampede or, worse, inside a nunnery. But it was a chance that at the moment I was willing to take.

I angled toward the door, Vageena following, and we burst through...

... onto a grassy knoll overlooking a quiet lake. The sun was shining, and it was warm. There were no people around.

Thank you.

We got off our go-things and...

Do you remember, in the old movies, when the couple started with the good stuff, the camera would pan over to the window and you would see the curtain fluttering?

Close your eyes for a minute and try to imagine what that fluttering curtain looked like...

Here I am, back on the Path, this time definitely ready to go off in quest of grand and glorious adventure on the other side of an Elmer Fudd or a shopping cart or a Stetson-wearing Florida. All I had to do was make up my mind...

THERE IT WAS.

Whoa, overly dramatic, but I couldn't help it. How long now had I been looking for that small, diamond-shaped white portal? Sure, you may say, I passed it by twice; but remember the circumstances? First, it was because I needed reality time, and let me assure you, until you've ridden the *mhuva lun gallee* you can't understand that the need for reality time is more irresistible than *any* gate. And the second time was when the translator was broken, which would have been an exercise in futility.

This time, however, all the planets were in their proper alignment.

I angled toward the diamond-shaped gate...

... and shifted down in the wonderful world of light.

Yeah, this was the place, white gritty floor, silver-and-gold-flecked clouds, the whole dizzying thing. My body, which had endured its share of abuse during the last trip, suddenly felt great. Wow, that was worth the price of admission alone!

I had gotten off the Nishiki and for a while just stood there soaking it in. Oh, this light! You could sense it enfolding every fiber of your being in so beneficent a way. It wasn't like that drained feeling after stepping out of a spa. On the contrary, I felt stronger, more than ready to rock and roll!

More than ready to again sit before Ralph Ralph.

This time I remembered climbing back on the bike. I didn't have to wonder about which direction to take. The Nishiki knew. I pedaled slowly, not concerned about anything, basking in the glow of this unique place.

After what I believe was a long time the lure of the light grew stronger, pulling me more insistently. Last trip the coarse floor had sloped up, and I'd had a lengthy climb to the summit of the hill (or mountain) where Ralph Ralph communed with his endless thoughts. I figured it would be the same now.

Surprise, the floor sloped *down*, sharply at first, then less so, but enough that I kept squeezing the brakes as I looked around for something to appear through the light. Nothing did, not for what seemed a long while, and I began to wonder if the Nishiki's manitou really did have a clue where it was going.

Something occurred to me as I continued downhill: I had ridden on flat "ground" the first time, then up that steep grade to Ralph Ralph. If this *was* the wrong way, I would wind up with *two* nasty hills to negotiate. Swell.

Then, through the light, I saw what might have been the edge of a town. Still hard to tell, because the "buildings" were white, or at least a variation of it. The gritty floor leveled out, and I pedaled faster.

Yeah, they *were* buildings. I could see between some of them now. They were low, smallish, with windows near the top. And emerging from these windows, as well as other places throughout the town, were beams of light. They spread out like a peacock's feathers toward the "sky," disappearing amid the threaded clouds. Impressive as hell, I gotta say.

Believe it or not, I was on a road. Yeah, you could tell. It was narrow and, like the buildings, a shade darker than the rest of the floor.

A robed figure with white hair was walking along the road ten yards ahead.

I swear, I must've been blind not to notice him before. Not wanting to scare the shit out of him I slowed down and called out, "Excuse me."

The figure turned. Yes, his beard was long and white! Yes, his eyes were all-knowing! Yes, he looked like Charlton Heston at the end of *The Ten*

Commandmentsl

Yes, he had to be...

Ralph Ralph.

"Yeah, you want something?" he said, kind of pissedly. Oh, yes, this was *definitely* Ralph.

"It's me, Ralph; it's Jack Miller. Don't you remember?" I don't think I was being presumptuous. After all, he *was* supposed to know everything in the universe.

"Ralph? What do you mean, Ralph?" he said, regarding me as one would a hangnail. "I'm not Ralph!"

"You're not Ralph Ralph?"

"Oh, *that* Ralph. No, I'm not him either."

Huh?

"Sorry about that."

"I'm George Fred, just so you know."

"Can you tell me where to find Ralph Ralph?"

He didn't answer, just pointed in the direction of the town and resumed walking. I rode ahead of him, stopping again when two more white-haired, robed figures came toward me.

Yes, they both had long white beards. Yes, their eyes were all-knowing. And yes, they both looked like Charlton Heston at the end of *The Ten Commandments*.

"Yeah, you want something?" they both said, also kind of pissedly.

"I was trying to find Ralph Ralph."

They faced each other. One said, "Who am I?"

"You're Fred Bill," the other replied. "What about me?"

"You're Bill George."

They looked at me and said, "Neither of us are Ralph Ralph. Now stop bothering us." *Assholes!* "Can you tell me where to find Ralph Ralph?"

They both pointed behind them, then continued on. So did I, gladly.

Passing between the first of the buildings, which looked to be made of stucco, I noticed *lots* of white-haired, robed figures. Yes, they all had long white beards. Yes, they all had all-knowing eyes. And yes, they *all* looked like Charlton Heston at the end of *The Ten Commandments*. This was really swell.

A group of four consisted of John Fred, George John, Stanley Stanley, and Dick Boris. No help there, except they all pointed in the same direction. Among the next unhelpful bunch, which was larger, were Fred Alvin, Theodore George, George Alvin, Simon Theodore, Alvin Theodore (brothers?), and Bill Bill.

So T went through Theodore Bill, Jim Fred, Alvin Alvin, Bob Bill, Bob Bob, Alvin Fred (Didn't he already... naaah), George Dick, Dick Theodore, and Alvin Dick, before finally...

Dick Ralph!

Okay, at least it was closer. He pointed me to Boris Ralph, who pointed me to Fred Ralph, who looked exceptionally pissed when he pointed me to Simon Ralph, who didn't seem to be a half-bad guy when he pointed me to Ralph Theodore, who ignored me altogether after telling me his name.

So I picked it up at Ralph George, who gave me the finger when he pointed me to Alvin Ralph, who nodded me in the direction of Ralph Alvin, who gestured with his toe at Ralph Ralph, who seemed about to have a conniption when...

Ralph Ralph!

"What are you staring at, dipshit?" he exclaimed when I stayed there. "Didn't I tell you—?"

"Ralph, it's me," I interrupted. "From up in the cave that time. Don't you remember?"

His blue eyes regarded me carefully. "Oh, yes, Norman Bates, from Earth."

"Jack Miller."

"What?"

"I'm Jack Miller. We talked about Norman Bates, that's what you were thinking of."

"Yes, I knew that. Well, good to see you again, my friend. As it is said, '*It is one of the blessings of old friends that you can afford to be stupid with them.*'"

"Uh, right." Nope, no twinge from the UT7, but that was Emerson, so it was too soon to tell. Anyway, I don't know what in hell that had to do with anything.

"So, Jack," he went on, "you understand now why I sought sanctuary up there? Tell me the truth, have you ever seen so many assholes in one place?"

"You weren't kidding, Ralph," I agreed.

"Oh, I hate it. As it is said, '*Away with this hurrah of masses, and let us have the considerate vote of single men.*' Come on, we'll go over to my place."

Emerson again. It must've been on his current reading list. I followed him to a nearby building and left my bike outside. The front room was small, sparsely furnished. We both sat cross-legged on a thick rug around a low table. On it there was a stone pitcher, four cups, and a bowl filled with white, pear-shaped fruit. Ralph dug in and motioned for me to do the same.

"Eat, eat," he told me. "Food is a wonderful thing. As it is said..."

Here it comes!

"... the upchuck of a man's repast is the callousness of starvation on the islands of flatulence and plague."

Say what the hey! I waited for incredible pain to stab my neck, but

nothing happened.

"Who said that?" I asked.

"Tinka the Wise, of Pruntor. Brilliant person."

"Yeah, you mentioned him the last time. Ralph, would you do me a favor?"

"What?"

"Recite that quote again... slowly."

He did. It came out the same. And nothing hurt.

Without a doubt the Pruntorians had a different interpretation of their sage's words.

In spite of that quote (which sounded gross, even though it made no sense at all) I still had an appetite, so I bit into one of the white pear-things. It was hard, like a raw potato, but had a flavor of strawberries mixed with bananas. Not bad, actually. The stuff in the pitcher was potent. It tasted like fermented cherry Kool-Aid. Couldn't handle too much.

While I was stuffing my face and psyching myself to be the recipient of so much wisdom, Ralph said, "Tell me about where you come from, Jack." He smiled dreamily. "Ah, one's homeland. As it is said, '*Each blade of grass has its spot on earth whence it drew its life, its strength; and so is man rooted to the land from which he draws his faith together with his life.*'"

Big deal, Joseph Conrad. What is this, does Earth have a monopoly on the universe's great thinkers? I *really* doubted it.

Okay, I told him about southern California. A lot of it made his brow furrow more deeply. I suppose most aliens would have that kind of reaction. Midwesterners would, too.

After finishing I asked him, "What about this place? Where is it? Or maybe I should say, *what* is it?"

Ralph Ralph shook his head. "To explain would be futile. As it is said, '

It is part of the half you would not understand."

Hey, my Old Guy got quoted here! Must be a highly respected guy back on wherever-the-hell the study group comes from. Yeah, but I was tired of getting treated like a moron by everyone. I got good scores on my SATs; I earned a college degree without being a jock. Why doesn't someone *try* to make me understand once in a while? So what if we Earthers use only three percent or so of our brains? I can still reason, you know.

"Well, if you won't answer that, would you mind me asking you some other questions?"

"Isn't that what you came all the way here for?"

He answered a question with a question. My mother, Mrs. Rose Miller Leventhal, always did the same thing. ("Are you feeling okay, Ma?" "How should I be feeling?" "Did you make boiled chicken again for dinner, Ma?" "Does Howdy Doody have a wooden head?")

Actually, Ma, I think that goes, *Does Howdy Doody have wooden balls?*

"Uh, right. Okay, what does the universe have to say about death and afterlife?"

"Yes, the afterlife! As it is said, '*Modern man, if he dared to be articulate about his concept of heaven, would describe a vision which would look like the biggest department store in the world, showing new things and gadgets, and himself having plenty of money with which to buy them.*'"

Right, Erich Fromm. "Listen, do me a favor."

"What now?" he said. Kind of peevishly, I might add.

"How about passing on the wisdom of Earth, since I already have that available to me?"

"Well, all right, Norman."

"Jack."

"What?"

"My name's Jack."

"I knew that. You didn't have to repeat it. Now then, death and the afterlife; fascinating subjects. As it is said, *'The manifestation of stones rotting in the diseased fungus of mutant ground squirrels can certainly be adapted to incestual lemons and the cancerous cells within the plasma of pregnant mountain grubs. At such a time, however, when the stained underwear of diuretic sharks begins a metamorphosis with—'*"

"Hold it, hold it!" I exclaimed.

"Is this bothering your neck again?"

"No, my neck's fine, but... who said that last thing? Not Tinka the Wise again."

"Oh, definitely not. Umbar of Zetz once penned those immortal words. Are you not impressed all to shit, Jack?"

Umbar of Zetz ? No, actually I *wasn't* impressed all to shit, but other thoughts were beginning to form in my small brain. I decided to wait a while before sorting them out.

"Yeah, right," I told him. "Why don't we forget about death and afterlife, okay? Tell me what the universe has to say about love and relationships."

"Oh, it is a body of information the size of which defies description!" Ralph exclaimed. "Of course, by eliminating the thoughts of those from your world on the subjects, that does whittle it down considerably."

"No duh."

"No *what?*"

"Forget it. Just do it the way I asked, please."

"Very well then," Ralph sputtered. "Love and relationships. As it is written, *'The boon of muted orgasms is insignificant in the shadow of stigmatized lungfish when two carrots can skate across the droppings of pigeons and four-legged whales. In the afterglow of carnality the thunderous approval of lost card games seems to land close behind the*

rectal bladder of affectionate warmongers who—"

"Excuse me, Ralph."

"*What!*"

He scared the crap out of me when he did that. "I have to take a leak."

"Take a... ? Oh, yes, the bodily functions of you Earthers. Damned annoyance, don't you think? Well, go ahead."

"Do you have a bathroom?"

"No bathroom. Go outside."

I really did have to go, but I also wanted time alone to think, so I exited through a doorless portal. One of the first things I thought about was how could someone who ate and drank have no need for bodily functions. Weird. But I wasn't even going to *try* to figure it out.

The second thing I thought about was how could I be alone with these robed guys who all looked like Charlton Heston at the end of *The Ten Commandments* everywhere? I swear, they were on the paths, between buildings, practically shoulder to shoulder! There weren't that many before, not that I recall, anyway. Jeez, how could they memorize every name!

I finally found a secluded spot behind a dwelling that stood along the edge of town. There was a cluster of rocks, smooth and shiny like marble (surprise). After making sure no one had followed, I rolled down the top of my spandex pants and commenced my business.

Here's why my brain was in overdrive: After the first couple of non-Earther quotes I began thinking that—

"What the hell are you doing there?"

Jesus, five years of my life gone, just like that! The guy was two inches behind me, looking over my shoulder. Good thing I jumped up, rather than back, or I would've flattened him. For a second I peed all over my bike shoes, then regained control. I glared at him, but he was transfixed on my lower extremities.

"I said, what the... wait a moment, I know! You're performing a bodily function, are you not?"

"Very observant," I said dryly.

"Thank you. Well, go right on with it. Don't let me stop you. I'll just continue my study."

Did it seem like the residents of the universe got off on studying some strange things, or was it just me? "Uh, excuse me... what's your name?"

He had to think about that for a few seconds. "It's Arthur Theodore. You can call me Arthur."

"Right, Arthur. Listen, it's important to us Earthers to have privacy when performing bodily functions."

"Yes, I knew that. You didn't have to repeat it."

Huh?

But he didn't leave, so I said, "Arthur, I'd appreciate you getting los—er, leaving me alone."

"Exactly! And I'll make sure no one else intrudes."

Good man (or whatever). He left, and I finished with my business, which was an immense relief, honest.

Okay, as I was saying: After hearing those quotes I was thinking that the wisdom of the universe might just be a crock of shit. But then I started to believe that my way of thinking was yet *another* example of Earther arrogance. There are without a doubt life-forms in the untold numbers of galaxies that are to us what we are to the amoeba. Perhaps the Pruntorians, or the good folk of Zetz, fall in that category. If so, their "words" may make as much sense to us as the Gettysburg Address or a recipe for lasagna would to the aforementioned naked mass of protoplasm.

Face it, Jack-o, your three percent brain is *not* ready for this.

So, that's that. I finished up, thanked Arthur Theodore on the way out, and returned to the townful of guys who looked like Charlton Heston at the end of *The Ten Commandments*. Now, just to cite an example of limited

mental capacity in humans, it occurred to me that with all the people looking the same, and ditto the buildings, how in hell was I going to find my way back to Ralph Ralph? I imagined going through all those names again, which was nowhere near as bad as listening to the Recitation of the Order of Demakk, but annoying enough.

That's when I saw my Nishiki propped up against the front of Ralph's dwelling, right where I had left it.

Did I say three percent? How about two and a half?

"So, you finally dragged your ass back here," Ralph said in the way of a greeting. "Well, if you must know, even some advanced life-forms in the universe are still bogged down by such trivialities. As it is said, '*The bowels of green mushrooms initiate uneven rows of poetic leeches to titillate the festering carrion of geographically imperfect cold sores. But when anal regulation is disrupted by the granite eggs of three-legged houseflies, it becomes a known offense to introduce the sap of young trees into the principal lining of the orifice.*' "

I didn't even want to *know* where that came from. Be it bullshit, or enlightenment beyond reason, I had heard enough.

"Uh, Ralph, I have to go now," I said.

"So soon? But there is much wisdom left to impart. Even eliminating that of your world—quite an insignificant amount, actually, except for all that business about love—there is still hundreds of millennia worth."

"Sorry; but I'm late, I'm late, for a very important date."

Yeah, and one pill makes me larger.

Ralph looked kind of sad. "Will you come back someday?"

"Oh, definitely... when I'm ready."

I meant that. Of course, it might be a whole lot of centuries and reincarnations before I was *ready*. After all, three percent worth of understanding doesn't change overnight.

Ralph came outside with me. "By which way did you arrive?"

I showed him. He pointed in the other direction.

"Go that way. It will be easier."

"Thanks. Well, good-bye, Ralph."

His all-knowing blue eyes shone on me benevolently. "Although our paths may cross in the future, I will not dwell on it. As it is said, '*The future is an opaque mirror. Anyone who tries to look into it sees nothing but the dim outlines of an old and worried face.*'"

Hey, that made sense! "Who said that?" I asked.

"A journalist of Earth called Jim Bishop."

Okay, so not all of us were three percenters. I started off alongside the Nishiki.

"Good-bye, Norman," Ralph Ralph called.

Whatever.

I wove my way through an even denser crowd of guys who looked like Charlton Heston at the end of *The Ten Commandments*, and once they'd thinned out I climbed on and began pedaling. Soon the road that was no longer a road sloped down steeply. I held back a moment, thinking that whatever truth I'd come to accept here, this was still one nifty place. The warmth of the light still bathed me within, and my body felt like it was in the shape of the best-conditioned athlete.

Yeah, maybe someday I *would* come back to the "world" behind the diamond-shaped portal.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Oh, What a Knight!

A single thought about this and that while riding along the Ultimate Bike Path:

Back when I was a little kid growing up in White Plains, New York, there was an interesting person who lived in the neighborhood. I can't remember her name for sure; it was Mrs. Goldfarb, or Goldstein, something like that. But all of us kids had another name for her.

We called her the Crazy Lady.

It wasn't that we were a bunch of little pricks or something; this woman really came off *weird*. She was old, at least by our standards, and always wore this heavy blue coat, even in the summer, and was *almost* always pulling one of those small, two-wheeled shopping carts behind her. Okay, we'd be playing stoop-ball or something, minding our business, when the Crazy Lady would come along, glare at us from under her babushka, and start yelling.

"You leetle bestids!" she would say. "I'll get you, you leetle goddem bestids!"

Well, she was creepy, but she couldn't move too fast, so we would put some distance between us and her, then start hooting and hollering. Mostly we imitated *her*. Mine wasn't too good, but Davey Feldman did a great one.

The older kids in the neighborhood had been doing the same thing for years. They told us she'd always been like that. And they knew something else about the Crazy Lady.

They knew that under the sleeves of her coat she had these numbers tattooed on her arm.

One of the jokes going around was that she couldn't remember her phone number, that's why she had it stamped there. Another was that she took math in night school and wrote down answers so she could cheat on tests.

When I was older my parents told me what the numbers on her arm were all about. By that time the Crazy Lady—Mrs. Goldfarb or Goldstein—had passed away.

Anyway, I hadn't thought about it for a while.

It was strange to think that my long quest for the diamond-shaped

portal—under the right conditions, of course—was over. Was I satisfied? Hard to tell. Was I humbled?

Without question.

But maybe Ralph Ralph himself wasn't as awesome as I'd once perceived. I suppose you might call him the hard disk of the universe. He could store all that information, cross-reference it, whatever, but not *understand* its meaning, or translate it so those with limited mental abilities, such as ourselves, would have a *clue* regarding its significance.

Well, I don't think he *is* a computer, because why would any superintelligent life-form program him with an attitude problem? And I'm still not forgetting that he eats and drinks, despite performing no bodily functions. (Even Data the android on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* performs bodily functions, right? In one old episode, didn't he and Lt. Tasha Yar get it on... never mind.)

Okay, lest ole Jack make himself crazy again, how about we get off the subject? I'd been negotiating the *mhuva lun gallee* for what I think was a considerable length of time since returning, and so far nothing significant had happened. The branch I'd been in had merged with another, but that change was barely noticeable. I hadn't seen another rider, also no big deal. Nor had any shopping cart gates appeared, which was good. I wasn't ready for another excursion yet, and by passing them up I might've felt like I was missing something.

Then, a rider appeared ahead, and wow, was I glad I hadn't been traveling at blur-speed! This whatever was huge, its body spanning a *lot* of the tunnel. And from what I could tell, it would've been *me* suffering all the damage from a rear-end collision, because—I swear—the rider was made out of stone!

There was enough room on the right to pull up alongside, which I did. Okay, remember the Rockbiter in *The Never-ending Story*? Yeah, that gentle soul with the ugly-sweet face whose greatest pleasure was dining on yummy gourmet rocks? This whatever sort of resembled the Rockbiter, except *its* ugly face had a pissed-off look. It was "pedaling" a go-thing, although all I could see beneath its massive bulk were three small stone wheels.

"On your right," I called, not wanting to spook him/it.

The stone rider glanced at me; the pissed-off look altered slightly to what I think was a smile. One rocky hand, at the end of a tree branch arm, reached in my direction.

"Ooo, you look meaty!" the rider said in a high-pitched voice that would have made Tiny Tim sound manly. "I can't wait to squeeze out your juices, then chew up the rest of you and use your bones to pick my teeth!"

Nope, this one didn't seem to favor yummy gourmet rocks.

Yep, *I got the hell outta there fast!*

But guess what, this time it was different, because the stone rider stayed on my ass! That humongous hand kept swiping at me, and it was getting pretty damn close.

I went from blur-speed to blurrier-than-blur-speed; the stone dude stayed with me.

I went from blurrier-than-blur-speed to beyond-blurrier-than-blur-speed, which, let me assure you, was scarier than hell. And worse, the stone dude *still* stayed with me.

Uh-uh, no way; I *had* to slow down. The only advantage I had was that even though it could pedal fast, its tree arms moved slowly, and its go-thing didn't have much maneuverability. Yeah, but how long would I be able to keep this up?

"Hey, Old Guys! I'm not getting ready to rub the Bukko, see?" (That might've had something to do with not being able to spare either hand at the moment.) "But don't you think you'd better pull my butt outta here, like now?"

Well, I guess not. Okay, Jack-o, let's see you utilize that three percent of soft, convoluted white and gray matter to save your own ass!

"This is fun!" the stone dude cried from a few yards behind. "They always taste better after they've put up a struggle."

Yo' momma, Rocky. Now I was really pissed. With this kind of motivation I put the brain into overdrive. Unfortunately, nothing came quickly.

"And don't try to escape through any of the gates," the stone dipshit added. "I'll run you down wherever you go!"

The gates! Until this moment I hadn't even thought about them. Now, slowing and zigzagging, I noticed that a fair number, amid a random pattern, were toothbrushes. Okay, considering what was on the other side of the couple I'd gone through before, there was no way I wanted to try another one. But this granitoid asshole didn't know that, did he?

When the next one appeared, I angled toward it.

Rocky laughed—it was a really annoying titter—and barreled after me.

Ten yards from the portal; five. Ten *feet* from it; five.

Two feet away. I jerked the mountain bike sharply to the left. Almost went over, but I kept myself up by shoving my foot under the red mist on the "floor." What the hell, I'd rolled along it before and didn't die or anything, right?

The stone dude, unable to stop his ponderous go-thing, disappeared with a loud scream (*aww-right!*) through the toothbrush gate.

See ya, chump! Hope you wind up underwater, or in a stone quarry.

Yeah, I know, that's tacky and vindictive, *but he was going to pulverize me!*

Actually, it was a couple of hairy moments before I regained control of the Nishiki. Once done I rode off quickly, because I didn't want to take a chance that Rocky would reappear out of that same gate seconds after going in.

Elephant-flies; carnivorous pea pods; stone dudes. What kind of universal artery *was* this?

Well, it was time to get off, and there were plenty of Elmer Fudds around, which would have been fine, except one of those shopping carts suddenly appeared on the right. I burst through the lava lamp bubbles in the amber mist and...

... shifted down from the twenty-second gear after a bumpy stop on a

rather rocky road.

Rocks! Why did it have to be rocks!

Well, at least I wasn't underwater or anything. This road cut across a broad plain, and everything around me seemed kind of normal, at least by Earther standards. There were distant mountains in a couple of directions, and some wooded areas, one of these directly ahead, two or three miles. I'm pretty sure there was a sun up in the mostly blue sky, but at present it was hidden by a large, puffy white cloud that—I swear—was shaped like two people making love on top of a camel.

The road looked well traveled, despite its crudeness, with wheel ruts, hoofprints, and footprints galore, although right now there was nothing coming in either direction. What the hell, I got back on the Nishiki and set out toward the aforementioned woods; slowly, because some of those ruts were nasty, and I already told you about the rocks, right? Because of all that I decided to leave my helmet on; a head injury was not high on my list of fun things.

Less than a mile from the edge of the woods I encountered the first inhabitants of this place. They were coming toward me. Two appeared to be human, while the third looked like a small horse, although as they got closer I decided it was a mule or something. There was a man and a woman, the latter riding sidesaddle on the animal, the guy stooped under a heavy bundle on his back. Both were dressed in dull peasants' clothes.

There was no question they had noticed me coming, because they had stopped and were now talking as they gestured furiously in my direction. I waved a few times as I pedaled closer, then climbed off the bike ten feet away.

"Yo, how's it going?" I said cheerfully.

The man's jaw dropped. "Blessed Mary Mother of God!" he exclaimed, crossing himself. "The enchanter in the magic helm speaks to us!"

The woman was wide-eyed. "We must get out of here!" she cried.

"Yes, indeed we must! Come on, Juanita, move your ass!"

Huh?

Oh, now I got it. Anyway, the guy ran past me on one side, the bundle not slowing him down, while Juanita, driving her heels into the animal's sides, hurried by on the other.

"Hey, wait a minute!" I called after them. "I'm not what you think..."

But they shouted a bunch of Hail Marys and kept on truckin'. Well, if they really *were* the simple folk they appeared to be I could understand how the Nishiki, and a guy dressed like me, could scare the crap out of them. Okay, so I didn't go after them; *that* might've started them on the way to meeting their Maker.

Wait a minute! *Hail Marys*? That meant I *had* to be back on Earth, didn't it? But wasn't it only the blue doors... no, I was being presumptuous. Obviously the shopping cart gates served that purpose, and there were probably others along the *mhuva lun gallee* that did the same thing. Will new discoveries never end?

The thing was, I'd been avoiding blue doors for a long time now, in case you hadn't noticed. First, because I was afraid of learning the future, and second, because I didn't want to risk screwing around with the past. Well, if this *was* our world—and all indications pointed that way—then I had a decision to make. Either see where the road would lead, or head straight for the nearest foothills and get back on the Path.

I was uneasy, really. But the latter sounded like the coward's way out, so I continued along the road.

The sun had popped out briefly, but now, as I neared the wood, it was hidden again, this time by a cloud shaped like John Candy. It would be quite a while before it appeared again, I figured.

This woods, mostly full of oaks, wasn't exactly what you'd call dense. The road, however, started rising and dipping about a half mile in, and it twisted around an occasional boulder (one of which honest-to-God scared the shit out of me, it looked so much like that stone asshole on the *mhuva lun gallee*).

The rocky path had been deserted since those peasants, but now I heard voices on the road ahead, just around a curve. These were punctuated by a cracking sound, and a woman's scream. I pedaled faster to see what was going on.

"You cheated us, miserable wench!" a man bellowed.

"You are wrong, swine!" a woman replied. "I gave you all that you paid for!"

"No more of this!" That was the man. "I will take it out of your hide!"

Damn, that cracking sound again! Now, from a slight rise, I could see what was going on. There were two guys, actually, a *big* one with a whip and a small one who stood back from the scenario in progress... which happened to be the former beating up on a long-haired woman whose hands were tied around an oak. The back of her dress had been torn halfway down, and there were already some nasty marks on her.

"You coward," the woman cried, "to do this to... *aiiyeee!*"

He laid the lash across her back. Was this bullshit, or what! I tore ass down the hill and came to one of those nifty *screeching halts* right in front of the guy. My Cycle Pro Mudslinger tires threw half a ton of dirt into his ugly, bearded face. He coughed and sputtered, and I used the diversion to wrench the bullwhip out of his hand. Without a plan the only thing I could think of doing was to hurl it up in the branches of a tree. At least it stayed there.

"Who dares interfere with Joachim?" the guy roared as he tried to clear his eyes.

You know, he looked even bigger from down here, sort of like Andre the Giant. Swell.

I still had the other guy to worry about, right? But if you can believe this, he looked terrified as he stared at me. He'd even backed away. Okay, maybe he wasn't going to be a problem after all.

But old Joachim, that was another story. He had managed to open one eye, which was now on yours truly. To say he looked *pissed* would have been an understatement. But I figured that I still had the advantage, so what the hell, before he tore out my heart or something I decided to go with it.

Laying the Nishiki down on the road I ran helmet-first into his ample stomach and knocked the wind out of him (a gust of bad breath almost

knocked *me* out). Then, as he tried to suck it back in, I kicked him in both shins. (Was I an impressive warrior here, or what!) He dropped to his knees.

I hope that when this guy recovers, I'm in Argentina or something.

"Hey, good going!" the woman exclaimed. "Knee him in the balls!"

Say what?

"Oh, I will *kill* the son of a whore who did this!" Joachim blustered.

Now wait a minute! *Son of a whore?* No way is Mrs. Rose Miller Leventhal of Pompano Beach... !

The other guy, who looked like he was going to shake to death, inched over to the big fellow and put a hand on his shoulder. "Uh, listen, Joachim—"

But he didn't get to finish, because Joachim put the back of his hand across the guy's face and knocked him ten feet. Give the little pecker credit, he returned for more.

"Joachim, it's me, Cardenio! You must listen! He who would defy you is a sorcerer! We must get our asses out of here!"

The big jerk almost flattened his buddy again, but this time restrained himself. Recovering slightly, he stared at me with bloodshot eyes, then glanced at the Nishiki.

"By all the whores in Barcelona, it *is* a sorcerer!" he exclaimed. "Let us flee!"

Joachim scrambled off like a wounded bull, Cardenio following. They climbed on two mule-things that had been tethered to a bush, and moments later they were gone over a ridge.

The woman looked a bit unnerved as I approached, even though I'd just saved her from a hell of a beating. But she lightened up when I took off my helmet and put it on the ground next to the Nishiki.

"There are not many who would stand up to Joachim the Mutilator," she said as I was untying her. (The *Mutilator!* Oh, great!) "Perhaps you

are a sorcerer, as Cardenio said."

"Perhaps," I replied, but with a smile, so I figured she knew better. "What was all that about, anyway?"

She spat up the road after them. A breeze nearly blew it back in my face. "They, uh, bartered for my services last night at an inn where I work. For what they paid, both of the swine received more than their money's worth. But the Mutilator"—Jeez, I wish she wouldn't say that!—"wasn't satisfied, so he carried me off this morning. It was only because I resisted him that he was whipping me. Ah, thank you!"

She was free now. The first thing she did was adjust her flouncy peasant dress, which was tattered and threadbare in a number of places. She stood an inch or two over five feet and was average-looking, but she did have a pair of *very large* breasts, which were barely concealed by the garment's low-cut front. Dirt streaked a goodly portion of her body, and her aroma was on the opposite end of the spectrum from a Vulvan in the throes of invigoration. The worst of it—I found out when she threw her arms around me—was her breath, which made Joachim's smell like he had gargled with Scope for ten minutes.

Eyeing me provocatively she said, "Is there some other way you would wish Sally to show her appreciation?"

"Uh-uh, the hug was fine," I assured her. "So, your name is Sally?"

"Yes, Sally Fuerte. And yours?"

"It's—Jesus!"

Her eyes went wide, and she crossed herself. "You are Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior? O Blessed Mother!"

"No, it's nothing like that. Look there!"

Two mounted guys were coming from the direction in which I had been traveling. The one in front sat astride a bent horse that gave new meaning to the word *nag*. It *had* to be a glue factory reject. Its rider was also a piece of work, an old, skinny fellow with a pointy beard and a soulful face. He was wearing eight hundred pounds of rusty armor and something that looked like a cracked bowl or bedpan on top of his head. Tucked under his

arm was a lance, at the moment aimed in the general direction of Sally and me.

Yeah, you're right, it was Don Quixote.

Sancho Panza, his chubby squire, was just behind the knight-errant, riding one of the little mule-things. Both were staring at me intensely. I stared back; so did Sally, who was a feisty lady.

"I don't like the look of these doofuses," she said (I swear!).

Don Quixote reined Rocinante to a stop near where I had left the Nishiki. Sancho's mule-thing ran into the horse. The Don was knocked forward and would have fallen off, except the lance got stuck in the road and held him up. Sancho climbed off his mount and pushed his master back straight, then worked the point of the lance free. Don Quixote maintained an air of proper decorum, like nothing had happened.

"We had come to yon ridge," he said, pointing behind him with the lance (and nearly putting it up against the side of Sancho's head), "when the winds carried to us the cries of yon fair damsel in distress. By the nature of my calling I would have succored her, but then saw thou timely arrival astride yon enchanted thing." He indicated the bike and nearly impaled one of the tires. "Oh, how thou routed yon louts! But now thou must tell me something."

Whoa, I think he was pissed. "What's that?"

"Be thou sorcerer, or be thou knight?"

Oh, well, that was okay. "A knight, for sure a knight. I am known as Don Jack of Del Mar."

He got so excited he nearly fell off his horse (again). "Oh, I knew I was not the only one left to heed yon calling! I am Don Quixote of La Mancha, aka Knight of the Soulful Countenance, and yon unwashed one be my squire, Sancho Panza. Perhaps thou hast heard of my exploits, which warrant comparisons to those of Amadis of Gaul and the Knights of the Round Table?"

"For sure, you are well known to me." This was true; it was one of my favorite classics.

This really got the Don all excited. "Sancho, get off thou ass and help me down. I would shake the hand of this worthy."

"But, Master, I am not *on* my ass," the little guy told him.

"Indeed. Then what are thou waiting for?"

Sancho bent over and became a footstool. Don Quixote handed him the lance and walked toward me, armor creaking; sounded as bad as that door in Dr. Frankenstein's castle. He shook my hand, and I gotta say, he had a hell of a grip.

While he was thus engaged, Sally leaned over and whispered, "I fear this fool is a couple of wineskins short of a six-pack."

Don Quixote smiled at Sally. "Thou beauty reminds me of my own beloved, Dulcinea of Toboso. Tell me, Don Jack, dost this be the lady to whom thou has sworn eternal fealty and chastity?"

"Oh, no, my fealty and chastity"—Jeez!—"have been sworn to the incomparable Holly of Cedar Rapids," I replied, which made Sally give me a look that said *up yours jack*. "This fair damsel is Sally Fu—"

"Gadzooks!" he cried. "Can I be so dim with blindness? Yon damsel, whose beauty is second in the world only to my beloved Dulcinea's, is without question the princess Rosabel of Belarose! Oh, Don Jack, thou hast performed so great a boon in succoring her!"

He fell before Sally and began kissing her sandaled feet, then the dusty ground, which set him off on a sneezing jag. At first Sally looked at him like he was a carrier of bubonic plague or something; then she started enjoying all the uncharacteristic adoration being heaped on her.

"Definitely a lunatic," she whispered, "but a nice lunatic. Uh, you may rise now, Sir Knight."

Don Quixote snapped to attention, then toppled backward, where Sancho caught him. The expression on the squire's face read something like *oh god he activated my hernia again*.

"I do not know who is the greater dipshit," the squire muttered, "he who goes around doing all these idiotic things, or he who follows he who

goes around doing all these idiotic things!"

"O blindingly beautiful lady," Don Quixote said dramatically, "my lance and sword be at thou disposal! Name a boon, any boon, and it will be done."

"Right, a boon," Sally said. "I can use a lift back to the inn where I work."

Don Quixote went to scratch his head and nearly broke his hand on the bedpan/helmet. "The inn where thou work?" he puzzled.

"The lady pulls your leg, Sir Knight," I told him. "She of course means, 'the castle where she is a guest.' Isn't that right, Princess Rosabel?"

"Oh, yes, indeed," Sally said with a wink.

Don Quixote smiled. "Of course, I knew that."

Sancho shrugged. "They are all as mad as a castrated bull."

I thought *that* was supposed to calm them down. Anyway, the Don was still scratching his helmet. "Pulling my leg?" he mused. "The lady doth not—"

"Never mind," I said. "Will you accompany her?"

He looked indignant. "It goes without saying that I would perform this boon. But what of thou, Don Jack of... where did thou say?"

"Del Mar."

"Yes. Will thou not ride to the castle too? As knights-errant we will be wined and dined and in general treated like hot shit"— *huh?*—"by the lord of that worthy place. It is one of the fringe benefits. And who knows what grand and glorious adventures we will find on the journey! Giants and enchanters and such! Ah, is this not what we live for?"

Well, sort of. Yeah, what the hell. As a certain killer whale/iguana-thing once said, I didn't have any pressing engagements that day, and crazy or not, this *was* Don Quixote of La Mancha.

"Sure, count me in," I said.

"*Aww-right!*" the Knight of the Soulful Countenance cried (I *swear* he did). "Sancho, get me on my horse, then get off thou ass and get on thou ass! We are going to seek out new adventures with this illustrious company!"

"If I thought his promise of giving me an island to rule was bullshit," Sancho muttered to himself, "I'd chuck this whole gig, empty a couple of wineskins, then ask the virtuous princess over there what her fee was for a roll in the straw."

As the squire helped his creaking, clanking master back to Rocinante, they chanced to pass by (and nearly trip over) my bike. Don Quixote stopped, knelt, and began looking it over. The expression on his face was similar to that on a kid who had been taken into a Mrs. Fields cookie store and told he could have his choice, but no more than twenty-seven.

"Oh, such a splendid enchanted thing," he said admiringly. "Tell me, Sir Knight, what do you call your metal steed?"

Who, *me?* Sir Knight? I *liked* that! "My steed's name is Nishiki."

He nodded, even though I think that confused the hell out of him. Then, he leaned over more and stuck his face up to my yellow Bell helmet, which if you remember I had put down next to the bike. Now, if he'd witnessed my rout of yon louts, he had to have seen it before. But it sure didn't appear that way.

"No! I don't believe it!" he exclaimed. "It cannot be! And yet I am sure..."

"Oh, no," Sancho groaned, "not the golden helmet bullshit again."

"Yes, it is the golden helmet of Mambrino! How could I have been so in error?" He removed his own headpiece and looked at it disdainfully. "What is this bedpan doing on my head?"

Sancho caught it when he tossed it away, then glanced at Sally and me. "He stole it from a poor medical student. The Holy Brotherhood will hang him by the balls for it. But he is in so much trouble, a little more would hardly matter."

"Why do you follow this person?" Sally asked.

"Because even though he is demented, insane, crazy as a loon, wacko, daft, unhinged, all fucked up, mentally unbalanced, and full of more shit than a Christmas turkey... I *like* him; I really do."

Don Quixote's hands were trembling as he held the helmet in front of his face. "But of course, who am I to presume that *I* should be its wearer? For thou, Don Jack of Del Mar, are a more than worthy knight. Still, if I might presume upon your greatness"—wow!—"to allow the splendid helm to sit upon my humble brow for no more than a minute, I will forever be indebted to thou personage."

"Tell you what," I said, "why don't you wear the golden helmet until we reach the i... the castle?"

Jeez, you would've thought his six Lotto numbers had just turned up! He *creak-clanked* around in a wild dance, and the sounds he made were like those of a guy on the verge of a climax. Sally got real interested in that.

"Sir Knight, thou honor me beyond measure!" he exclaimed, and he placed the bike helmet reverently—and backward—on his head. I straightened it and strapped it under his pointy chin.

"It doesn't look half bad on the old fool," Sally said.

"Now then," the Don continued, "have the footmen bring the princess's royal coach, and we shall set out for the castle."

I shrugged. "Uh, Princess Rosabel's coach was swallowed by quicksand, and her footmen devoured by a giant."

"Yes, there's a lot of that going around," Don Quixote said.

"Right. Anyway, she'll have to double with one of us."

"I don't want her on my ass," Sancho said.

Sally screwed up her face as she pointed at my bike. "And I do not wish to ride upon Nishiki, your magic steed."

I looked at the Don. "Well, my man, I guess her highness doubles with you."

His eyes started rolling around in his head. "Another knight with whom to share my adventures," he gasped. "The golden helmet of Mambrino upon my head. And now, the exquisite Princess Rosabel of Belarose riding behind upon my noble steed! It is proof that I have been brave and virtuous, for the Lord has chosen to smile upon me..."

Don Quixote passed out from all the excitement.

Another four inches to the left and his eight hundred pounds of armor might've done some serious damage to my front wheel.

"Oh, shit, here we go again," Sancho muttered.

Okay, take a break. It's going to be a while, I'm afraid, before we can revive Don Quixote and get started for the inn (yeah, I can say *inn*, because the poor guy's out like a light).

CHAPTER EIGHT

Wherein is recounted

the grand and glorious adventures of our noble hero, Don Jack of Del Mar, as he embarks on his first sally with Sally, the virtuous and semicomatose Don Quixote of La Mancha, and the pissed-off but nonetheless blockheaded Sancho Panza, toward the inn that is really not a castle, with all manner of strange and terrifying events upon the long and winding road that leads... never mind. And then later, at the aforementioned inn, all kinds of shit that befalls our intrepid band as they try to convince the boorish innkeeper to let them spend the night in this pestilent place. (What do you want from me? Cervantes titles most of his chapters like this, and his stuff is *classic literature!*)

You would think that a good squire would have a supply of water around, right? But then, I don't know if any literary scholar of the past three centuries had ever considered Sancho Panza to be a *good* squire. It was always *gimme gimme gimme*. Gimme some food, gimme an island to rule, gimme a soft bed of straw on which to lay my ass.

Anyway, the bottom line was that he didn't, so guess what, it befell me

to revive Don Quixote with a few squirts of Gatorade in his soulful face. He liked the taste, and of course figured it was some kind of nectar from the gods, the mere thought of which almost caused him to pass out again. With Sancho's help I managed to get him on his feet. Then he saw the kitchen slut Sally Fuerte—whom he fancied as Princess Rosabel of Belarose— sitting astride the indefatigable Rocinante.

Don Quixote passed out again.

Shit, more Gatorade down the tubes. But this time, after coming to, he seemed more in control of himself than at any time before and wondered what all the attention was about.

"Sancho, my lance!" he cried. "My sword!"

The squire handed him the lance (upside down) and said, "Uh, Master, your sword is already buckled around your waist."

"Yes, I knew that." He waved the lance and nearly impaled his foot. "And now, let us sally forth to glorious adventure!"

"That's Sally *Fuerte*," Sally said.

"I beg your pardon, my lady?"

"Never mind," I said. "Let us indeed sally forth."

"It's Sally *Fuerte*, Don Jack," Sally said.

Yeh! Anyway, Sancho Panza, who had sat down again, got off his ass and got on his ass. I pushed, and Sally pulled, and together we managed to get Don Quixote and his eight hundred pounds of armor up on Rocinante's sagging back. (Jeez, did I feel sorry for that poor horse!) To their intense curiosity I straddled Nishiki, the enchanted metal steed, and without further ado we started to sally forth to glorious adventure.

"That's Sally *Fuerte*" Sally said.

Within half a mile the road forked. Was I getting my share of this lately, or what! Sancho pointed along the right fork. "That is the way we came."

Sally pointed along the left fork. "That is the way to the i... the castle

where I am staying as a guest."

Don Quixote tried to scratch his head; his finger got caught in a vent of the Bell helmet. "Which way should we go?" he asked.

Sancho shrugged and muttered, "All his qualities aside, my master is quite a doofus."

I glared at the twerp. "Why don't you get off his case?"

"What do thou think, Don Jack?" Don Quixote asked.

"Your decision, my man."

He stroked his beard and thought hard. "I choose... this way!" Yeah, he pointed to the left fork.

Sally turned her nose up at Sancho. "See?" she said.

"Good call," I told Don Quixote.

"I knew that," he said.

The road angled toward the nearest of the mountain ranges, and the plain started getting hilly. The trees thinned out, but there were still plenty on both sides of the rocky path. Oftentimes the road wound around one of the aforementioned hills, and you had no idea where you were going until you got there.

It was around one particular hill that we saw the windmills.

There were about twenty of them, big ones, their large sails turning slowly but steadily in a breeze that was growing stronger. Sancho and Sally exhibited as much excitement upon seeing them as they would have at a wedding ceremony for two blades of crabgrass. Not so our other illustrious traveler.

"What ho, tally ho, holy shit!" Don Quixote exclaimed. (*Tally ho?*) "The hand of Providence hath surely put us on this path, for there be giants walking yon land! Oh, what a foul, smelly breed that so brazenly imitates man in form and feature, but cannot hide their freakish monstrosity. It hath fallen to me to rid the world of yon pestilence!"

Sancho glanced at me wearily. "I told you he was a doofus."

"My lady, I beg of thou dismount," the Don said to Sally. "I would not wish one ruffled hair on thou pristine head, not one iota of flesh disturbed on the exquisiteness of thou body, not a single—"

"You made your point," Sally interrupted, jumping down. "I'm outta here."

"Sir Knight, attend me, I prithee," Don Quixote said, and yeah, he was looking in my direction.

"Who, me?" I asked dumbly.

"Why of course!" I think he was appalled. "Is this not what we have sworn our mighty arms to defend against? Is this not the purpose of our lives?"

Well, I could've made an argument there, but why disillusion the old fellow? Actually, when you thought about it, tilting with windmills was pretty cool. Through the centuries, scholars have assigned all sorts of symbolism to this ludicrous combat. Be it challenging any bureaucracy, questioning old ways and traditions, whatever, the bottom line is that the tilting *itself* is the most important thing, not whether you succeed in kicking the shit out of the "giants," or whether they stomp *you* into the ground. At least you *tried*. And yeah, I could relate to it, because I'd tilted with a few windmills in my time.

Nodding at Don Quixote I said, "Let's do it."

The man was elated. He unsheathed his sword and handed it to me. I'm sure he would have reared high on Rocinante, had the steed been able to raise more than one foot at a time off the ground. He adjusted the golden helmet of Mambrino on his head.

I adjusted the Padres cap on *my* head.

There we stood, Don Quixote of La Mancha astride the noble Rocinante, Don Jack of Del Mar astride the noble Nishiki, ready to sally forth in glorious combat against... giants.

"That's Sally *Fuerte*," Sally said.

We charged the windmills at the best speed Rocinante could muster, which was the equivalent of nearly-falling-over. Don Quixote held his lance horizontally, not aware that he was still pointing it the wrong way.

When we were ten yards from the nearest of the windmills, the whole lot of them turned into giants.

Neanderthal types, ugly, hairy, and cyclopean, and every one over fifteen feet tall.

I braked to a stop.

Don Quixote, having straightened out his lance, waded in amid them, yelling and screaming and all kinds of shit.

"Yo, Sir Knight, I don't think you want to do that!" I yelled after him.

But you know what, he *did*, and he was having a ball! The giants bellowed and blustered and in general tried to rip his head off, but the Don kept jabbing away with his lance. His aim was occasionally deliberate, mostly accidental. Every time he swung the damn stick around, he impaled one of the buggers. Let me tell you, he was really pissing them off!

"How many have you felled, Don Jack?" he called out, and it was understandable why he couldn't see for himself, because the bike helmet had fallen down over his eyes.

"Oh, I've lost count!" I answered. "They've been felled left and right!"

I glanced back at Sally and Sancho, who shook their heads disdainfully. They were *not* impressed.

All right, what the hell, with my sword thrusting and parrying I waded in amid the giants. Even managed to inflict a flesh wound on the thigh of one...

Before they all turned back into what they had first been.

Don Quixote ceased his jousting and pushed the helmet back up on his head. He looked around, then turned to me.

"*Now* they're windmills," he said, and rode back to the fair Princess

Rosabel of Belarose.

Yeah, well, go figure. Even when we passed the windmills, which were on both sides of the road, I was still uneasy; so were Sancho and Sally. But the old fellow didn't so much as give them a second look.

In the next few miles we passed other travelers, most of them peasants, all going in the opposite direction. (Really, did you think *we* would overtake anyone with such a speedy entourage?) Our appearance—or at least that of me and the Don—was the cause of consternation for most who saw us. Folks crossed themselves, hurled Hail Marys to the high heavens, and in general did everything they could to get the hell away from there fast. Cries of "Move your ass!" echoed off distant rock facings, until it became hard to separate the last ones from the most recent.

By this time the road we'd been traveling upon was no longer the only game in town. A number of others, both wide and narrow, intersected it every so often.

It was along one of the former, near dusk, that we first spotted the very weird procession.

Since the windmills, Don Quixote had been quiet, his eyes firm on the path ahead. The passing parade of perturbed peasants had not warranted his attention; no wench had been mistaken for a highborn lady, no goatherd for a lord. Now, at this crossroads, he turned to the right, the direction from which the very weird procession was proceeding. His brow was creased with deep concern.

"What manner of devil's work is this?" he cried, pointing with his lance. "I must find out. My lady, I beg of thou—"

Sally jumped down. "Don't need to hear that *pristine head* crap again," she muttered.

This time I was determined to go with the Don, if for nothing else than to keep him out of trouble. You see, even though the very weird procession looked very weird, it did not appear to be very dangerous. Up front were five monks in hooded saffron robes. (Maybe they were monkettes; I couldn't see their faces.) They walked facedown, hands crossed in front of them. Just behind were four monks (definitely; they were unhooded) in black robes, these guys bearing a fairly large litter. Atop the litter, covered

by layers of white filmy cloth, was a body. You could see just enough of its outlines to give you the creeps. Walking alongside it, waving what looked like a silent maraca, was a guy in a three-piece dark green suit and spit-shined leather shoes. And bringing up the rear were five more people, three women and two men, all finely dressed in appropriate period costumes. They were crawling on hands and knees, beating their chests, wailing, throwing dirt in their faces, banging heads on the ground, for the most part making a hell of a scene.

"I think it's a funeral procession," I told Don Quixote as we rode toward it.

He looked askance of me. "Be thou limited of senses, Sir Knight, that thou cannot tell what lyeth under yon sheet?"

"Looks like a dead person lyething under yon sheet. I mean, what else—"

"*It is a*"—he suddenly realized he was screaming and lowered his voice—"a servant of Satan himself, Don Jack! By my sword, they will not be allowed to place the hell-born thing amid the people of God! I will—!"

"You'll cool it," I warned, "until we check this out. I mean, you got your religious folk here, and your bereaved family in the throes of mourning, and I don't think it would be polite to piss them off."

"Very well, Don Jack. I will allow them the benefit of the doubt. But be on guard, I prithee."

This *prithie* crap again. Anyway, we confronted the very weird procession, Rocinante nearly knocking down and trampling one of the monks (no, it *was* a monkette) in a saffron robe. These folks, and the litter bearers, and the guy in the green suit, all stopped; the mourners kept on doing their stuff, which was unnerving when they crawled closer.

"I would converse with thou leader," Don Quixote announced.

The ones in robes looked all around. It was Green Suit who stepped forward. "State your purpose for this delay and make it fast," he said, kind of pissedly. "We are in a hurry."

"Yes, I would wager thou to be," Don Quixote said smugly. "I would

learn the identity of the deceased."

"None of your friggin' business," Green Suit replied (yeah, that's what he said). "You—*arrgghh!*"

The Don had shoved the tip of the lance up under the guy's chin. "Need I repeat my question, knave?"

"He... is a man of some means from the province of Alicante," Green Suit answered hurriedly. "We are bearing him to Seville, where his parents were born, for burial. Can you not let us pass now, Sir Knight? You see how bereaved his kinfolk are."

Like I said before, these "bereaved kinfolk" continued to do their thing, and they were close now, although as yet none had acknowledged the presence of the Don or me. Then, one of the women, after shoving a handful of dirt in her ear, crawled over and bit the Nishiki's front tire. There was no way she could damage it, of course, but even so...

With a loud hiss the Cycle Pro Mudslinger went flat.

The woman glanced up at me, except she was no longer a woman, but something that looked like a *big* snake with a baboon's face. *Her* hiss was louder than my deflating tire. I jumped off the bike before she could do something similar to my leg.

Don Quixote impaled Green Suit, who had turned into something that resembled a megalosaurus, an ugly, bipedal dinosaur. You don't want to *know* the color and viscosity of the stuff that spewed over the knight's rusty armor.

Now all hell broke loose... literally. The bearers put the litter down and turned into frog-things with sharp *teeth*. The mourners turned into things identical to the creature that had popped my tire. All the other monks and monkettes became dark, misty things with long talons. And every blasted one of these monstrosities had an attitude problem.

But the worst of it hadn't even happened yet.

First things first, though. Don Quixote and me were back to back, him with his lance, me with the sword, which fortunately I had not returned after the battle with the... you know. Roci-nante stood nearby and for the

most part was left alone, but when one of the creatures got too close he would lash out with his hooves and send the whatever flying with a scream that sounded like when you grabbed a guy hard by the balls. Some of the things were also attacking the Nishiki; not meeting much resistance, though.

Most of them were coming for us, and needless to say, we kept busy. "Guess you were right," I told the Don as I carved up one of the frog-things.

"Yes, I always am," he replied, impaling one of the baboon-things.

No comment.

We were holding our own, although to tell the truth the odds were not in our favor. Then I noticed that Sally, having picked up a heavy branch, was laying the suckers out left and right. Sancho, who had first tried to talk her out of it, now followed her with a little pig-sticker. He seemed to be having the most success with the black misty things.

That was when the worst of it *did* happen.

The dark figure beneath the sheets on the litter started to glow a weird red-orange, like it was on fire. The sheets rose in the air, first taking on the contours of Casper the Friendly Ghost, then *poofing* out of existence. Whatever they had been covering was too bright to see at the moment, but I knew it was moving, changing from horizontal to vertical, like the biblical pillar of fire.

Then the fire died, and you don't want to *know* what was standing there... but I'll tell you anyway.

You might remember in the first *Predator* movie, when Arnold Schwarzenegger stands face-to-face with the alien and says, "*You're wan ogly modderfohker!*" Yeah, so was this thing, only a hundred times oglier, I swear! I'm talking scales and fangs and slimy flesh and mandibles and slavering jaws and insides hanging out and outsides twisted in and dirty fingernails and flared nostrils with boogers hanging like icicles and oversize Ferengi ears and muscles that would have made even Schwarzenegger say "*Fokk dis, I go home*" and a scrotum that...

Did I detail it enough?

"Oh, my, this could be challenging," Don Quixote said by way of understatement.

But let me tell you, as the monstrosity tried to rally its demoralized troops, the old fellow raced toward it on his spindly legs. Okay, so he tripped and fell on his face, and the lance went flying and caught the creature right between its fiery red eyes, which I forgot to tell you bulged out like googly-glasses and dripped some sort of purplish-brown discharge. Its subsequent scream would have shattered every wineglass in the Memorex cupboard from a distance of two light-years. But what the hey, it worked, and as the hell-thing started sinking into the ground, so did all the other horrors. Sally, Sancho, and me kept on thrusting, sticking, and clouting until the last of them melted away.

"Yo, what a *team!*" I exclaimed as we helped Don Quixote up. "Did we kick some ass, or what!"

The Don retrieved his lance, which had *not* gone to hell with the monstrosity, and said solemnly, "Had the Devil's spawn been taken to a place of men and women, where the like of us was not on guard, who knows what havoc would have been wrought!"

"Here's to the like of us!" Sally cried, hoisting a fist.

"To the like of us!" I said, and did the same thing.

So did Don Quixote, only *his* fist caught Sancho in the face and knocked the little guy unconscious.

"Uh, let's get him on his ass," the gaunt fellow said.

We did, then returned to the main road after I'd gathered up my wounded Nishiki. It was even darker now, and let me tell you, fighting the evil spawn of Hell could wear a person out, not to mention stimulating an appetite.

"How far is the i... the castle?" I asked Sally.

"Just around the bend."

"Great. I'll fix the fla... tend to my steed's wounds after we get there."

"A dwarf on the battlement!" Don Quixote exclaimed, looking all crazy and wild-eyed again.

Sally cocked her head. "Huh?"

"There must be a dwarf on the battlement of yon castle to herald our coming, my lady. It is the way of knight-errantry. Someone must go on ahead and see to it." He glanced at Sancho and scratched the helmet. "But my squire, I fear, is presently at odds with sensibility."

"I'll go," Sally said, and hurried down the road. I think she muttered "Gladly," but I won't swear to it.

"But, Princess Rosabel!" the Don exclaimed. "It is a task so beneath your exquisiteness."

Sally turned but kept backpedaling as she said, "Hey, no problemo."

Don Quixote nodded admiringly as he watched her. "Truly among the highest of highborn is the Princess Rosabel of Belarose," he said. "Oh, but she reeks of virtue!"

"Among other things," I said, but he didn't hear me.

"A valiant woman of incomparable beauty!" he ranted on. "Only to my own matchless Dulcinea of Tabasco—"

"Toboso," I told him.

"Yes, thank you. Only to *her* can the Princess Rosabel come in second!"

"Oh, yeah?" I said in the guise of a prick. "I'll put my own Holly of Cedar Rapids up against them anytime."

"My apologies, Don Jack." He looked properly chastened. "I forgot about your Holly of Cedar Rapids, of whom all you say must be true, owing to your strength and courage."

"Let's not forget fealty and chastity," I reminded him.

"Of course not. Ah, see! Yonder lies yon castle, beyon' yon ridge!"

That was a lot of *yons*. Anyway, he was right; not about the castle,

mind you. The Posada del Fernando (yeah, that's what a ratty sign said), which looked like a mini-Alamo, was lit up by a bunch of torches. I didn't see Sally on the road, so she must have really hustled (no pun intended) to get there. By this time Sancho, still sprawled over his mule-thing, was starting to moan and groan. I told him that food, drink, and rest were near, and this elated him no end. He sat up on his ass.

"Ah, Sancho, my worthy squire!" Don Quixote cried. "Thou are just in time. See! A dwarf stands on yon battlement of yon castle to herald us in!"

Well, *someone* was on the roof, a chubby guy who was short, but certainly no dwarf. And he didn't have a trumpet either, not even a kazoo.

"You want to be welcomed to the *castle*?" he called, rather disdainfully. "Well, here's your welcome!"

He tossed us the bird, first with one finger, then with his whole arm. Don Quixote was elated.

"You want a trumpet to herald your arrival?" the guy went on. "Okay, here's your trumpet!"

He turned around, leaned over, stuck his *large* buns out, and blew a fart that nearly propelled him off the roof. After that explosion came a long staccato blast. Don Quixote smiled and twisted his head around like Gomer Pyle.

"The lord of *this* castle is certainly familiar with the etiquette involved in the reception of a knight-errant," he said with much admiration.

Yeh!

With a final flip of the bird the guy started down on the other side. We continued to the entrance of the shabby place, where Sally was waiting.

"My boss, Fernando—the *lord* of this castle—is not a patient or forgiving man. I suggest you pay him for a night of food, lodging, and care of your beasts, then get out of his face as quickly as you can."

"But, my lady," the Don protested, "it is unseemly for the lord of a castle to seek recompense from a knight-errant, especially one who has vowed his sword to protect that lord's kingdom while he dwells within its

borders. Unseemly, nay; it is an affront!" He reached for his sword. Fortunately, I still had it.

The innkeeper was walking across the courtyard. Behind him were four brutish muleteers. They had a demeanor about them that said *oh boy some new assholes that we can kick the shit out of*.

"Sir Knight, you'd best restrain yourself," I warned.

"Don Jack is right," Sally said, but the old fellow continued to seethe. "Now, does this mean you do not intend to pay?"

The innkeeper was closer now. "What is this I hear about not intending to pay?" he bellowed.

"We knights-errant—*mmmluuppph.hr*" Don Quixote began, but couldn't finish, because Sally's fist was in his mouth.

I grinned at Fernando and his cronies. "You heard wrong, pal. She said we do not intend to *play*. That is because we have come a long way and are tired and hungry and only wish to rest, so it is *play* that we intend not to do."

"*Mmmluuppphh!*" the Don repeated.

The innkeeper cocked a dubious eye. "Well, Sally told me of the hell-things you turned away, which is good, because this might have been their next stop. I am a fair man, and in light of this boon I will make an offer: thirty-five percent off of our usual weekday rates for food, drink, and bed of straw. Twenty percent off meals for you, and your animals eat for free. Any, ah, liaison with Sally or our other princesses of virtue can be worked out with them. If this satisfies you, then so be it! And if it does not... then get your asses out of here!"

"But, sir," Sancho said, "we only have one ass."

"We'll take it," I said, and glared at Don Quixote, who nodded vigorously, so Sally freed him. "Go on, pay the man."

Don Quixote shook his head. "Knights-errant cannot be trifled with the carrying of yon coin."

Sancho Panza shook his head. "My master has paid me nothing since we undertook this quest, but he has promised me an island to rule—"

Sally Fuerte shook her head. "None of you expect *me* to pay for this, do you?"

All eyes were now on yours truly. "Well, I'll pick up the tab," I said, "but I'm not exactly sure we're dealing with coin of the realm here."

I dug in my seat bag, where there was always some loose change, and pulled out two quarters, three dimes, a nickel, and seven pennies. Fernando took the handful, studied them, bit a couple. The dorky-looking muleteers peered over his shoulder, waiting for a response.

Finally, the innkeeper snorted and nodded. "Everyone have a good night in the castle, and stay the hell out of my way," he said, then turned and walked off. He and the muleteers were chortling over the ninety-two cents; must've figured they'd gotten the best of us hayseeds.

Don Quixote was still indignant. "It is appalling that the host of two knights-errant and their entourage would expect money for our honoring him with our presence!"

Yeah, right. Come on, old fellow, get real! (Hey, there's a pun! You see, one of Spain's old monetary units was called a real, which was the equal to a quarter of a pesta... never mind.)

In any case we had paid the price, so (Are you ready for another lousy pun?) we were *inn*).

CHAPTER NINE

Wherein is continued the misadventures of our hero, Don Jack of Del Mar, at the inn that a certain wanna-be chivalrous knight, who is at least two and a half cans short of a six-pack, thinks is a castle and drives everyone there meshuggeneh trying to convince them of the aforementioned fact; of the arrival of the bachelor Samson Carrasco, and certain other bachelors, and of all the shit that hits the fan up in the hayloft after a night of anticipated carnal activity goes awry.

So maybe Sancho Panza wasn't a half-bad squire after all. Even though his stomach was growling like a lion whose sleep had just been disturbed by Marlin Perkins shoving a camera in its face ("Observe closely as the king of beasts spits the camera far across the veldt before taking a bite out of Marlin's arm"), he would not eat until he'd tended to both his mule-thing and Rocinante. Once assured that Sally and me had the Don under control he led the animals to the stable, which had to be nearby, because that's what the whole courtyard of the inn smelled like.

"What about thou own wounded steed, Don Jack?" Don Quixote asked as we walked over to a well to clean up.

"I am the only one who can cure Nishiki of its ailment," I told him solemnly, "so it comes with me."

Despite being tired and hungry I decided that fixing the flat was a priority. Sure, all this tilting with windmills and battling hell-demons with one of my favorite literary figures was fun; but as you know, these excursions had a tendency to get out of hand, and I wanted to make absolutely certain there was a way to negotiate a hasty *exeunt*, if needed. So I patched up the Cycle Pro Mudslinger right there by the well, which fascinated Don Quixote no end. And when I pumped it up... I swear, the old fellow nearly had an orgasm!

"An amazing steed, your Nishiki," was all he could say.

Dinner at Posada del Fernando was alfresco at a long communal table fabricated of rotting wood, located in front of the wide, doorless entrance to the stable. Yeah, I was right about that. Sally led us over and promised to bring some food. This time Don Quixote didn't dwell on the fact that a lady as highborn as the Princess Rosabel of Belarose was off to perform so menial a task. Maybe he was too hungry to worry about it.

A few muleteers were already seated at the table when we got there. The *creak-clank* of Don Quixote's eight hundred pounds of armor alerted them to our approach. Yeah, they were snickering and stuff, which pissed me off but didn't faze the knight-errant in the least.

"Listen, Sir Knight," I said, "don't you think you'd be more comfortable with that armor off? It must weigh a ton."

"Yea, verily," he replied. "But I do not pursue my calling with

expectations of comfort. Nay, Don Jack, the armor stays on."

Yea, nay, what the hey. In any case he *creak-clanked* over to one of the long benches. A couple of seedy-looking muleteers were stuffing their faces at the far end. Don Quixote positioned himself over the near end and sat down.

The two muleteers were catapulted over our heads and landed hard in the dusty courtyard. With the bench tilting up, Don Quixote also wound up on his ass.

"In the days of my youth," he muttered, "things such as this were constructed more sturdily."

Whoa, were the muleteers pissed! After pulling themselves up groggily they started toward us, but Sally, whose arms were laden with food, intercepted them.

"Go sit down, you swine," she said sternly. "The old man meant nothing by it. Here, I have more food for you."

Well, they bitched and moaned but finally took a seat... on the other side. Sally gave them some of the food, then came around and helped me lift the Don up off the ground.

"The scum will leave you alone... for now," she told us in the way of a warning. "I gave them swill to fill their wretched stomachs. But for you"—she indicated the plates of food she'd put down on the table—"I brought the best food that was available. Being a kitchen slut has its advantages."

Not getting served swill was swell, but the stuff on the table didn't exactly make me forget the Fish Market in Del Mar, or even Jack-in-the-Box. It was some kind of stew, with big chunks of meat and odd veggies swimming in a greenish-brown gravy. I hoped the little black things bobbing around were either raisins or olives. I'm not sure if it smelled funny, considering what we were next to.

But the first thing was to get Don Quixote seated properly. He *creak-clanked* to the middle of the bench, and we helped him down slowly.

This time the bench cracked in half, and he wound up on his ass again.

"Perhaps it would be best if I partake of my repast thusly," he said after we'd spun him around.

Good plan. Sally brought straw mats because of all the dust and other stuff you don't want to know about on the courtyard floor. I sat down next to him, and Sancho joined us. Sally filled up stone goblets with wine from a large pitcher. Not exactly Fetzer chardonnay, but heady stuff. With two goblets of it down my throat I didn't really give a shit what that stew tasted like, which I think was for the better.

During dinner the Don made one concession to comfort and took off my bike helmet, although he did keep it on his lap. I was beginning to have this funny feeling that getting it back was going to be a challenge. But hey, I'll worry about it later; let the old fellow enjoy it.

Dinner conversation turned out to be almost nil. Sally was serving food not only to us but to others; Sancho was stuffing it into his face as quickly as it was put down, while Don Quixote, occasionally taking a bite or two, looked to be in a trance as he stared all around the place that, in his mind, was a castle. There wasn't much going on; people drawing water from the well, drunken muleteers staggering about, laughing and shouting lewd suggestions to a couple of other working wenches (Maria and Anita, I found out later), one guy taking a leak on the side of an ox cart, wonderful stuff like that. None of this pestilent behavior appealed to the Don, whose grip tightened on his lance as he watched.

Considering the nature of this place, I couldn't wait to see where we were supposed to sleep.

Actually, I could.

About the time we were finishing with dinner and helping Don Quixote up, a ruckus arose at the main gate. One of the wenches shouted something about new arrivals. Fernando, who by this time had gotten himself sloshed, came staggering and bellowing across the courtyard, no doubt to extend a gracious welcome to his guests.

"Yeah, what in the name of my father's overactive sex organ do you scumlickers want?" he called out into the night, blowing a fart behind him that bowled over one of the muleteers.

"Now, Fernando, these could be people of worth," Sally told him. "Stay

your tongue and your flatulence until you find out one way or another."

He farted again, made like he was going to belt Sally, then nodded. "You're right, I'll be a perfect host," and he grinned, showing a mouthful of broken brown teeth.

By this time we had come nearer, Don Quixote ready to defend his fair lady against an assault by the rabble. Still wary, we turned our attention to the arriving coach; quite a fancy one, I gotta say. The coachman was a nattily attired dwarf, which thrilled the Don no end. Maybe tomorrow morning I could pay him to blow a trumpet on the battlement as we left the castle to sally forth on new adventures.

"That's Sally *Fuerte*, Don Jack," Sally said.

Jeez, how the hell does she do that!

Anyway, the door of the coach opened, and three of the slickest dudes you've ever seen emerged. They were identically dressed in black satin waistcoats, baggy black trousers, and black boots. Each wore a thin black mustache and sharp goatee on his face, with an oily black pompadour on top. From ten feet away it was impossible to tell them apart in the dim torchlight of the Posada del Fernando. But closer up there was a *big* difference. The first guy was a handsome devil, the second ordinary; the third, I swear, was as *ogly* as what we had met on the road earlier.

Still grinning, the innkeeper asked, "What is it you gentlemen wish?"

The first guy, who was leering at Sally and removing her clothes with his eyes, said, "Good evening, my friends, I am the bachelor Samson Carrasco, and these are my traveling companions, the bachelor Pedro Mendoza and the bachelor Jose Moreno. Having been on the road since morning we seek food, a soft bed, and any other, ah, diversions that might help pass the night."

Fernando squinted one eye at the bachelor Samson Carrasco. "I presume you have money, amigo," he challenged.

Carrasco nodded. "Reals and pestas, lots of them."

He dug into his purse (no, not *that* kind), pulled out a handful of coins, and gave them to Fernando. The innkeeper stared at them for a while,

maybe adding them up, although I'm not sure he could count. Satisfied, he put them in his pocket.

"Whatever you work out with the wenches is separate," he told the bachelors. "Have a good night in the... castle, and stay the hell out of my way."

Maybe that was his version of *Have a nice day*. He staggered off with his low-life buddies, while Sally, Maria, and Anita began strutting their stuff before the trio, each jostling for position near Carrasco, who was clearly the goal of each, even though the other two were shoveling out the reals.

"I wonder who will win," Sancho mused.

"Let's make it fair," I said. "Sally, who has seniority among the three of you?"

The women began beating the crap out of one another. Sally wound up knocking Maria and Anita on their asses.

"I do, Don Jack," she said.

So call me a posterior orifice, but I couldn't resist doing what I did next. Standing in front of the three guys I shrieked, "Sally Fuerte, don't keep our audience in suspense! Do you choose bachelor number *one*, bachelor number *two*... *orrrr* bachelor number *three*!"

"Oh, bachelor number one, Don Jack!" she said excitedly.

The bachelor Samson Carrasco poured a bunch of coins down Sally's cleavage, and they walked off arm in arm. Knowing what was at stake, the other women resumed their scrape. Maria knocked Anita on *her* ass.

"I choose bachelor number two, Don Jack!" she blurted.

Well, the bachelor Pedro Mendoza wasn't *that* bad, even though he had to part with a lot more coins before he and Maria walked off. Anita, no raving beauty herself, glared at me as she stood and faced the bachelor Jose Moreno. I have a sneaking suspicion she was sizing up my *testiculos* for tomorrow's stew.

The bachelor Jose Moreno had to pour even *more* coins down Anita's dress before she would walk off with him. So many, in fact, that she was bent nearly in half.

When I rejoined Don Quixote and Sancho, the former said, "A perceptive way in which thou solved yon dilemma, Don Jack. At times you show the wisdom of Solomon."

Right.

Anyway, here's what went on after that. The dwarf carried the luggage of his bosses—three humongous chests—up to their beds in the hayloft above the stable (yuck). The wenches of the Posada del Fernando sat at the table with the three bachelors, drinking and laughing. Or at least Sally was laughing. Maria's expression said *why oh why can't I be somewhere else*, while Anita looked like she was partaking in the pleasures of PMS. The bachelor Pedro Mendoza and the bachelor Jose Moreno continued to drop coins between breasts, the latter stopping when Anita's head hit the table.

In the meantime the muleteers, those still conscious, were playing cards or shooting craps or something on the side of the stable. There was much muttering about the wenches being preoccupied. You could tell some of them were getting *really* pissed.

Sancho had wanted to go to sleep, but first he had to help Don Quixote off with his armor so the old fellow could take care of business, then help him back on with it again. Jeez, the gentleman from La Mancha did have a one-track mind! Finally, muttering something about *doofuses*, the little squire climbed up to the hayloft.

Not yet ready for that I chained my bike to the strongest beam I could find, then went over and kept Don Quixote company. He had decided to take up a vigil and protect the castle from demons or giants or some such bullshit in return for the favors bestowed upon us by our host, the lordly Fernando (*yeh!*). The object of his attention was the well, which he was convinced led into the bowels of Perdition itself. He kept *creak-clanking* around it, the lance over his shoulder, like a sentry's rifle.

Once, when a drunken muleteer tried to reach the well, the Don turned around suddenly, his lance *whopping* the wretch on the side of the head and knocking him unconscious. Fortunately none of the other muleteers witnessed the incident. I dragged the guy off, hoping he would forget what

happened by the time he came to, which would probably not be till morning.

I also decided to get this walking disaster-waiting-to-happen out of harm's way.

"Yo, Sir Knight," I called, ducking under the lance when he turned, "what say we hit the hay?"

"Thou may seek the dark folds of slumber, Don Jack. But I am bound to yon lord of this castle, and to yon fair Princess Rosabel of Belarose, and as a knight-errant of the highest integrity I will maintain yon vigil at all cost, even though yon servants of Hell itself... !"

He fell forward, asleep, the tip of the lance sticking in the ground and holding him upright.

By this time the three bachelors, properly plastered, were ready to go upstairs. The women had promised to join them later, after they'd freshened up. I got them to help me, and we carried Don Quixote up to the hayloft. The floorboards creaked ominously when we took a few steps, which prompted our decision to lay him gently on the nearest bed of straw. I swear, the whole floor was sagging! Hope he wasn't a restless sleeper.

The hayloft wasn't as bad as I'd thought it would be; it was worse. First of all, the animal smell from below mixed with the odor of sweaty, drunken bodies lying around with only a few feet of space between them. The ventilation consisted of a single small window, currently closed. And the beds of straw were as thick as a double-ply Kleenex. The "blankets," which had once been burlap sacks, were alive with crawly things. Honest to God, this place would have made the meanest inner-city flophouse seem like a Hilton.

The only consolation was that a bunch of the muleteers had passed out downstairs, or there would have been an even greater crush of humanity. All three bachelors were equally appalled by the accommodations, although their servant, before falling asleep, had prepared spaces for them that were a notch above the rest. They grumbled while undressing, although the anticipated visitation by the wenches tempered their disgust.

Don Quixote, having been laid on his back, was snoring, although you

could hardly single him out from the rest. I was amazed *anyone* could sleep amid this, but they seemed to be doing fine. By the way, all that I'd described up here was visible by the light of one lantern, which hung by a nail on a support beam. I wondered if the blasted thing would have to stay on all night, since my spot, by process of elimination, was right below it, and I had trouble sleeping with *any* kind of a light on.

Then, a muleteer looked up groggily and mumbled, "Hey, shithead, last one up douses the friggin' light, ya know?"

Well, fine. I did it, then laid on my straw bed. It was so dark now you couldn't see the guy next to you, which in my case happened to be Sancho, whose gurgling stomach sounded like ten thousand happy babies. With that, and the snoring, I gave serious consideration to finding a place downstairs to catch some Zs. But I was beat, and even while thinking it I started to nod.

Unfortunately, the craziness of the night was hardly over.

???

Okay, you have to understand that the following play-by-play was not *as it happened*, because there was no way in Hades to tell what was going on. I pieced most of it together after the fact.

I had fallen into what I guess was about three quarters of a stupor, thanks to weariness and wine. The cacophony of snores, mumblings, farts, and such in the hayloft were still penetrating the recesses of my brain, not enough to disturb me, even though I was still a long way from REM sleep.

About this time the three kitchen sluts climbed up into the hayloft to fulfill their prepaid obligations. Earlier they had instructed the bachelors where to be waiting for them; but that, of course, was a whole hell of a lot of wine ago, so at this point neither trio had a clue what was going on. And to make matters worse, with no source of light it was blacker up there than a painting of a piece of coal at midnight (Huh?).

I went from three quarters of a stupor to a half stupor when one of the wenches straddled my supine form.

"It is me, bachelor number two, as promised," a voice close to my ear said.

"Hey, I'm not—*mmurrrghh!*" I started to say, but too loud, because Maria (That's who won bachelor number two, right?) put a hand over my mouth.

"Be still now, and let Maria"—see?—"entertain you."

She kissed my neck and shoved her tongue in my ear. Her hand came off my mouth and started playing down to... never mind.

Okay, so I had now risen to a quarter stupor, and in this state I was aware of what was going on. By keeping my mouth shut I would get to enjoy what someone else had already paid for. And even though Maria's breath smelled kind of boozy, the rest of her was pretty nice. Obviously *freshening up* had done wonders for these kitchen sluts.

But even though her tongue and fingers were having a magical effect on sundry parts of my anatomy, I had to put the brakes to it. First, I didn't need any of the bachelors pissed at me. Foppish as they seemed, they were probably masters with the saber or epee or whatever. And second, a most important foil-wrapped item was presently in the seat bag of my bike, and I was not of a mind to climb down to retrieve it.

"Yo, Maria," I whispered. "You got the wrong trick. It's me, Don Jack."

"Who cares?" she said, and started peeling off my jersey. Yeah, Maria really got into her work.

I sat up and held her wrists. "You'd best take care of business. After all, he paid you well."

"Oh, all right," she muttered. "You wouldn't happen to know where bachelor number two is, would you?"

I waved vaguely into the darkness. "Over there, I think."

She squeezed my buns and said suggestively, "I can always come back after I'm done."

"Tell you what, put me down in your Daytimer for tomorrow night, okay?"

She only half understood that, but agreed. "Sleep well, Don Jack," she

said in a purring voice, which I liked.

At the same time Anita had mistakenly crawled into Sancho's bed. Being half-sloshed, and of course in the dark, Anita really didn't give a hoot how *ogly* bachelor number three was. She planned on happily doing her business and coming away with another cleavageful of reals and pestas. So she went to work on the little squire, who by this time was in a full stupor and really enjoyed the attentions proffered upon him, which went on for a few minutes.

"Ooo, Juana, are we going to make another little one?" Sancho finally said, which was the tip-off to Anita, because Juana was Mrs. Panza's first name. Whoa, did she want to take those few minutes out of Sancho's hide!

But she controlled her temper, excused herself, and asked directions to bachelor number three. Having less of a clue than me, Sancho also gestured vaguely across the dark loft.

Then there was Sally, who had done a little better than the other wenches and wound up going down on bachelor number three, until she worked her way up and got a dim look at his *ogly* face. She nearly screamed but held it in.

"The bachelor Samson Carrasco is over that way," the bachelor Jose Moreno told her, holding up his hand and pointing in whatever direction he pleased.

All three of the Posada del Fernando's wenches began crawling across the floor of the hayloft at the same moment.

All three of the Posada del Fernando's wenches were crawling toward the loudly snoring Don Quixote of La Mancha.

All three straddled different parts of his anatomy.

"Yecchh, metal!" all three cried, spitting out the taste of his rusty armor.

"*Wah . . . hnnuhh?*" the Don mumbled, trying to push himself up.

Three hundred and fifty-some-odd pounds of wench, added to eight hundred-whatever pounds of knight-errant and armor, were too much for

the shaky floor of the hayloft.

The four of them plummeted to the stable below.

A thick layer of straw broke their fall; the Don nearly broke Sancho's ass.

A bunch of other asses started kicking; horses started snorting, which was really gross when you thought about it.

I grabbed a support beam to keep from going into the hole, but Sancho wasn't as fortunate, and this time *he* nearly broke his ass, as well as his ass.

When I grabbed the beam the lantern came off the nail and set the hayloft afire.

The three bachelors, who had been half-awake while waiting for the wenches to aw wive (heh-heh-heh), started stamping out the fire, and they did a good job, until they too fell down the hole.

The rest of the hayloft floor gave way, and this time I nearly broke *my* ass.

Fernando the innkeeper, and the muleteers who had passed out below, were now running around crazily as animals poured out of the stable.

The muleteers who had been asleep in the hayloft when it had *been* a hayloft also ran around crazily, even though some of them were still snoring.

Don Quixote, helped to his feet by Sally and Sancho, was totally convinced that all manner of demons and hell-spawn had risen up out of the well in the courtyard. Yelling all kinds of *days of yore* bullshit he *creak-clanked* around the inn, waving the lance and laying people out left and right, a few times inserting it deep within places where the sun never shone, which raised a few *soprano* wails from the normally baritone muleteers.

The wenches, convinced the misplaced bachelors were responsible for this, were slapping the shit out of the poor guys.

Sancho, now fully awake, was raiding the kitchen.

Stampeding horses and kicking asses were getting dangerously close to my Nishiki. I unchained it quickly.

The dwarf, as close to a sane person as I could find in the Posada del Fernando, said, "I think it would be wise if we got the hell out of here."

You're on, buddy. I sent him ahead to open the gate, then maneuvered the bike through a maze of abusive wenches, abused bachelors, freaked-out equines, face-stuffing squires, blustering innkeepers, muleteers auditioning for the Vienna Boys Choir...

... and that most impressive rusty-armored figure, that lighter of wrongs, that arm of vengeance against all things evil and nasty and disreputable, the whacked-out-of-his-skull *Don Quixote of La Mancha!* (Okay, Jack-o, don't get carried away.)

The dwarf was waiting at the open gate. I swung him up on the seat behind me, pedaled two hundred yards down the road, and stopped in a thicket.

Five minutes later, with all the noise and craziness rising above the inn that was definitely *not* a castle, with the dwarf already snoring under a tree five yards away, I stretched out on the soft grass, sucked in the *sweet* air, and fell asleep rather quickly.

CHAPTER TEN

Hey, a Normal-Sized Chapter Title!

Guess what, I was still alive in the morning.

No very weird procession had come by in the night with *ogly modder fokker* hell-things that jumped out from under sheets and made a snack of your brains and entrails. It was a promising start to the day.

The dwarf, already awake, was looking at my bike. "An interesting thing," he said admiringly. "Thank you for hauling my ass out of there on it."

Was that everyone's favorite word here, or what! "My pleasure." I nodded toward the inn. "Anything doing over there?"

"No, it has been quiet. I perceived that a good plan might be for the two of us to check it out together."

Actually, *my* plan had been to head for the nearest hillside and get the hell back to the Ultimate Bike Path. I mean, hanging around with Don Quixote could be hazardous to your health. But after all we'd been through, I wouldn't have felt right just *poofing* out on the guy. So I told the dwarf, whose name was Rodrigo, that his plan was wonderful, and he was all excited about that, probably because he wasn't used to people saying nice things to him.

With Rodrigo again on the bike seat I pedaled back to the Posada del Fernando. From where we'd been you could barely hear the noise coming from the walled inn.

From just outside it was downright deafening.

If not for the horrendous snoring, you would have thought everyone and everything in the place was dead. No one's ass moved; neither did the horses, nor the people. They were sprawled everywhere in some of the most unbelievably contorted positions you've ever seen, ones that would've made Gumby scream in agony. Amid them, entwined provocatively and nakedly, were the three wenches and their respective bachelors. Apparently they had made their peace during the ruckus. Anita's face was inches away from that of the *ogly* bachelor, Jose Moreno. It would be fun when she opened her eyes.

And overseeing this sleeping, snoring mass—himself sleeping and snoring—was Don Quixote of La Mancha. The pointed end of his lance had been stuck in the ground next to the well; the Don hung from the top, like a coat on a rack. It was amazing that his eight hundred-whatever pounds only bowed the lance but didn't snap it in half.

I awakened him as gently as I could. He looked around and tried to walk; the lance snapped in half.

"Oh, what a night, Don Jack!" he exclaimed as I helped him to his feet. All manner of hell-born demons poured out of yon well, their vast minions overrunning yon castle! But try as they did to overpower me, they were

thwarted at every turn." He looked around suspiciously. "They are thwarted, aren't they?"

I nodded. "You're one hell of a thwarter, Sir Knight."

This pleased the old fellow. He started *creak-clanking* around the courtyard, which woke everyone up and pissed them off no end, although they were too hung over to make trouble.

As predicted, Anita took one look at the face of bachelor number three and screamed her head off. Sally settled that by practically strangling the wench.

"Sancho!" Don Quixote suddenly exclaimed. "Hast thou seen my squire, Don Jack?"

"He's around somewhere."

"I'll bet thou didn't know that even though Sancho was the first squire I ever had, there were others who came after him."

"No, I didn't."

"It is true. But then, I always go back to squire one!"

Hey, he made a joke, and *he* thought it was funny as hell! His armor rattled as he chortled, and flakes of rusty metal fell like snow. I finally got him to stop.

"There's Sancho now," I told him.

The little guy, looking (and smelling) quite bad, walked up and said, "What do you want, Master?"

"Yon lance has suffered damage in glorious combat and must be repaired."

"Again?" the squire groaned.

"Verily. Go and see to it. Then, before departing, we will receive the plaudits of the lord of yon castle for the boon we have performed."

Taking Sancho aside I told him, "The only *plaudits* we're likely to

receive from Fernando will be shaped like hot coals and inserted in our eye sockets. Do what your boss wants, and then we'll get our asses out of here."

"But, Don Jack," Sancho said, "we only have one ass."

Was this never going to end!

The squire left to take care of the lance. Don Quixote followed, probably to supervise. Sally, who had disentangled herself from the bachelor Samson Carrasco and pulled on some clothes, joined me.

"An interesting night, was it not, Don Jack?" she said.

"For sure." I nodded.

"But now, it would be wise if you and... *he* left. I have placated Fernando for the time being, but as I told you, he is neither a patient nor forgiving man."

"Yep, that was the plan."

She looked me over, put hands on hips, and did a nifty bump-and-grind. "A pity, Don Jack, that I was not able to repay you for saving me from Joachim the Mutilator."

Oh, yeah, I'd forgotten about that. "Hey, no problem. But if you want to do something, how about throwing together some food to go?"

"Of course, I would be happy to."

"Maybe a few pieces of fresh fruit, some bread. Uh, you can skip the stew."

"I don't blame you, Don Jack. A stew made from the flesh of ferrets is not usually as tasty after the third week."

Yeh!

Sally left to do what I'd asked. All I could think about was *glad nobody told me last night what I was eating*. I was also thankful there was nothing in my stomach at the moment.

The bachelors were also making ready for a hasty departure. Seems

that Fernando was blaming *all* his nonregulars for the destruction of the stable, as well as various other damage to this *vano* that he called an inn. Rodrigo, the dwarf, was hitching up the team, and the harried, half-dressed guys were trying to get into the coach. But Fernando, having buttonholed them, was extracting more reals and pestas from their seemingly bottomless purses.

Sancho had finished repairing the Don's lance, because now he was busy saddling up both Rocinante and his mule-thing. There was Don Quixote, waving the weapon as he berated two burly muleteers who were still too groggy to get up off the ground. He was undoubtedly adding to their Everest-sized headaches, and I had a hunch they wouldn't put up with it for long. I hurried over and steered him away.

"The rudeness of yon louts!" Don Quixote exclaimed. "To not honor a knight-errant who has come to serve their master. I would have thrashed—!"

"As you saw, Sir Knight, both of yon louts were grievously wounded in last evening's combat with the hell-things. I am sure they are honoring you in their own way."

Well, that bit of kaka seemed to placate him. While he was acting pleased with himself I looked at the shaft of the lance. I swear, you couldn't even see where a crack had been. And if I read Sancho right, he'd fixed it many times before. So what was he using, some kind of Inquisitional Crazy Glue? Beats me.

"Ah, Sancho!" Don Quixote exclaimed when he saw his squire. "Thou hast saddled my noble steed, and without my having to call out the order. Thou art indeed a perceptive man. For that thou shall have *two* islands to rule!"

"Yeah, when horse sweat becomes baby formula," the ungrateful little wretch muttered.

"What was that, Sancho?"

"I was just offering my thanks to your grace. Perhaps your ears are too heavily laden with wax again."

The Don removed my bike helmet from his head. "No, likely it is the

golden helmet of Mambrino that retards my hearing, for it is not meant that I should wear it." He handed it to me. "Thank thou, Don Jack, for letting me know its wonders, however brief it was. Oh, how invincible it must make thou feel!"

Well, I don't know about *invincible*, but it did lessen the odds of my having a close working relationship with a head injury attorney at any time in the future. Sancho finished cinching the saddle around Rocinante's underbelly. The tired horse looked at his master with an expression that read *oh no the dipshit with his stupid frigging armor is getting on my aching back again*.

Don Quixote swung himself up, and I swear, you could have heard the poor horse's groan in Toledo! (That's both in Spain *and* Ohio.)

Sally returned with a sackful of goodies, which I secured to my rear rack. I waved adieu to her and the other wenches, then looked around for Rodrigo, who was walking toward me after loading the luggage of the bachelors on the coach. I had already abandoned my idea of asking him to perform that little service on the *battlement* of the *castle*, because I didn't want to insult him. But you know what, he was a perceptive guy, and he offered to do it on his own!

"Usually it is done when a knight arrives, rather than leaves," he said, "but your friend won't mind, because I don't think he knows whether he is coming or going."

I grinned. "You got that right, pal. Thanks a million. But what will you use for a trumpet?"

He dug into his sack and pulled out a little horn. It looked like one of the things you blew into on a particular night of the year when Dick Clark was having an orgasm about a ball falling down a building in New York.

"This will have to do," he said.

"It's perfect."

We shook hands and parted. Don Quixote and Sancho were already on their way to the gate. I caught up quickly, and we rode out of the Posada del Fernando. About twenty yards down the road I told them to stop, and we turned around.

The coach had also emerged but now stood there, and the nimble Rodrigo was scrambling to the parapet over the doorway. All three bachelors were waving fists out the windows and griping like crazy, but the dwarf didn't give a shit. He waved at us, then started tooting on his horn. Yeah, it sounded like a one-note New Year's Eve jobbie, too.

But do you think Don Quixote cared? The old fellow was absolutely radiant as he took in each note. Even the jaded Sancho got caught up in the ceremony.

But Fernando, the innkeeper, was still pissed about everything and decided to make Rodrigo the scapegoat. Climbing up to the parapet he snuck up behind the tooting dwarf, turned around, and bent over. It was clear he planned on blowing Rodrigo off the wall with one of his thunderous farts.

Surprise, just before I could call a warning Rodrigo did an awesome back flip and wound up eye to eye with the innkeeper, whose flatulent foray found empty air. The dwarf tooted his horn in Fernando's face, startling the innkeeper and sending him backward. He plummeted to the road, hit it hard, and lay there, which was probably a good thing for all of us who were on his day's shit list.

Second's later Rodrigo was back on the coach, exhorting his horses to considerable haste. We gave each other a thumbs-up when he passed. It was amazing how, over the noise of hoofbeats, you could hear the three bachelors still bitching and moaning.

"A cunning fellow," Don Quixote said admiringly. "It is plain that he has been enchanted."

"Oh, definitely," I agreed, and Sancho looked at me as if to say *methinks you are as whacked out of your skull as my master*.

We rode for an hour, and everything was pretty laid back; no demon-things from Hell, no windmills, *nada*. Finally the road intersected a steep trail leading into some mountains on our right. The guys weren't interested, but it was exactly what I was looking for, having decided it was time to move on.

Don Quixote shook my hand; his armor creaked like crazy. "I am sorry to see thou leave, Don Jack," he said solemnly. "We have shared grand and

glorious adventures together, have we not?"

"We sure have."

"Ah, but I understand that thou must travel to yon distant places to perform other grand and valorous deeds in the name of thou beloved Holly of Cedar Rapids, just as I must do the same for the chaste and virginal Dulcinea of Tomato..."

"Toboso," I told him. How can he remember *Holly of Cedar Rapids* and not *that!*

"Yes. Anyway, Don Jack, be assured that if our paths again cross, I shall deem it an honor to ride at yon side. To chivalry!" He raised his lance.

"Yo, to chivalry!" I repeated, hoisting a bad-assed fist in the air.

He left. Sancho shook my hand and said, "Do you think I am a great schumck for hanging around him, Don Jack?"

"No, I think you're a great friend. Keep him out of trouble, pal, and you may get your reward someday."

He joined his master, and they continued along the road. As I watched their retreating forms, I thought about how neat it was to have ridden with Don Quixote, shared some of his adventures. Okay, he was nuttier than a macadamia farm; no one ever denied it. But you find that out in the first chapter of Cervantes's *very long* book, so it's not even an issue. Just like with the windmills, what matters is that he went out and did what he wanted to do. He *tried*. In the aptly named song "The Impossible Dream," his quest was likened to a star he must follow, no matter how hopeless or far away it might be. And if you believe in something so strongly, then the hell with what everyone else thinks. *Just do it.*

That's what I was thinking as I watched Don Quixote of La Mancha—the Knight of the Soulful Countenance—on Rocinante, and Sancho Panza, his squire, on his gray mule-thing, disappear over a ridge.

Okay, this excursion was about over. Time for me to hit the Ultimate Bike Path and sally forth to new adventures.

"That's Sally *Fuerte*, Don Jack," Sally said, even though she wasn't

there.

Huh?

Speaking of that kind-hearted kitchen slut from the Posada del Fernando, she had packed a couple of pretty decent-looking yellow apples, a jar of honey, and a loaf of bread that while not exactly fresh from the Wonder bakery, at least had nothing blue or gray growing on it. She'd also filled up my bike bottle with wine, which would've been okay, except it had been half-full with Gatorade, and she hadn't bothered to pour that out. It tasted strange, but what the hell. I drank most of it and ate everything else before starting out again.

The mountain trail, though climbable, was in miserable shape and would've been a bitch to ride down at the speed I required. Not to worry, because I was already higher up than I'd thought, and when the trail wound around some tall outcroppings it revealed a gaping canyon, the lower reaches of which were fogbound. Now, all my experience notwithstanding, I still preferred a steep hill to a plummet into oblivion, especially since the twenty-second gear had been a no-show after that time I'd left Great Big Woman Valley and tried to get back to the *mhuva lun gallee*. But it *was* easier than spending hours clearing the path.

What the hell, I jumped off the cliff, screamed a little on general principles, and shifted into the twenty-second gear just as soon as I could...

... which put me easily back on the Ultimate Bike Path, with only a slight course correction leaving me right smack down the middle of it.

Remember how hard I had looked for the shopping cart gate? Well, now there was a long run of them, broken every so often by a Bart Simpson head, and less frequently by a Gorbachev birthmark. Not that it mattered right now, because I wasn't looking for either the way back to Camp Pendleton or another portal for my next excursion. I was satisfied to be where I was.

Before, on the mountain trail, I'd already decided that even though reality time sounded okay, it didn't yet have that strong pull on me and therefore would have to wait at least one more journey. Now, that could've changed when I got back on the Path; but no, I felt the same.

So at average speed I set off past the shopping cart gates, which eventually became part of a random pattern. In fact, this seemed to be the most *random* of any I'd ever seen, because no two gates in a row were the same. That streak finally ended when two Elmer Fudds appeared across from each other, but the pattern continued.

The only exception to the randomness of the long run was the absence of *any* blue doors. Now, as wonderful as it has been to travel the Ultimate Bike Path, and as safe as I've felt with the study group watching me, or with the Bukko around my neck in case they weren't, I still utilized the presence of the blue door back to my time and place as a kind of security blanket. You may remember the Old Guy telling me it would appear often, and I suppose it has, considering that you might not see others duplicated for a millennium. But during prior long stretches when it did not show up, I admit to feeling *major* anxiety.

Just like I did right now.

So to make something happen I went into blur-speed for a minute, finally stopping amid a long run of toothbrush gates, which really sucked... except that the only gates to break up this run were four blue doors, and one of them was mine. Okay, now I felt better.

I put the stupid toothbrush gates behind with a short burst of blurrier-than-blur-speed, then slowed along a stretch of primarily iridescent snowmen and black circles, with an occasional shopping cart thrown in.

"Hey, Old Guy, how're you doing?" I called out. "How about all you other Old Guys? Are you standing shoulder to shoulder on the mother ship, trying to have a look? Are tickets to *The Jack Miller Show* becoming as scarce as *Phantom of the Opera*? Well, I don't know if that last bit of craziness thrilled you or not, but I have a hunch something more cosmically significant might be in the offing, so stay tuned, and don't touch that remote!"

Scenario: Study Group Old Guys Wondering What The Hell A Remote Is.

My Old Guy: "All of you, take your fingers out, I will tell you what a remote is later."

Study Group New Old Guy #2: "That was an interesting excursion Jack made, but also puzzling."

Study Group Old Guy #6: "Yes, quite puzzling. All the activities of the night in the hayloft were caused by anticipation of a mere biological act."

Study Group Old Guy #3: "A heterosexual one, no less!"

My Old Guy: "I will explain it to you when there is time. Meanwhile, it would serve you well to absorb some of Earth's endless volumes of literature on the subject, especially the works of the late twentieth-century masters, Sidney Sheldon and Jackie Collins."

Study Group Old Guy #6 (excited): "I'm going to do that now! It will help me to understand Jack's future experiences more clearly."

Study Group Old Guy #3: "I also will be back shortly. There is a study going on in an area that has always fascinated me, and I want to have a look."

My Old Guy: "What study is that?"

Study Group Old Guy #3: "The hatching of Trumbian intestinal worms after the eggs have been laid in the festering sores of mountain sheep."

My Old Guy (guarded): "Are those northern mountain sheep or southern?"

Study Group Old Guy #3: "The southern ones."

My Old Guy (bent out of shape): "What I would not give to see that! Oh, the southern ones! However, I'm going to continue to observe Jack."

Study Group New Old Guy #2: "I'll stay here with you."

My Old Guy: "But if his excursions appear to lag, or if he chooses a return to reality time, I will surely stop by for a peek. The *southern* ones...!"

Yeah, I see it now. A voice comes over the loudspeaker on the mother ship: "*Your attention. Due to the popularity of Jack Miller's adventures along the mhuva lun gallee, we have decided to move the study group's place of observation off the ship to the Silverdome in Pontiac, Michigan,*

Earth, which looks very much like the ship. The ticket window will be open two hours longer each day to accommodate the overwhelming demand."

Anyway, I'd been pedaling along the Ultimate Bike Path for some time now and was getting close to making my travel plans.

Prior to the diamond-shaped portal I'd decided that an Elmer Fudd or a Florida gate would do just fine, and I didn't know why it should be different now.

Then, for the first time since returning from my storybook adventures with Don Quixote, I spotted another rider.

There was a time when I looked forward to meeting other travelers along the Ultimate Bike Path. I mean, this *was* a universal artery, so whoever you met along here had to be from somewhere in our galaxy, or from any of the countless ones beyond it, which made *all* of them close encounters of the third kind, and that was pretty exciting. But after being threatened with dissection, digestion, pulverization, whatever, I was becoming a bit alien-shy. You'd think there would be some way of checking folks out before they got on the Path, like a metal detector at an airport, only much more cosmic. Maybe a questionnaire or something. (*In descending order, list the five life-forms you most prefer to chow down on.*)

Anyway, that wasn't the case, so you can understand why I gave this new rider a wide berth as I went to pass it on the left. This time, if there was going to be any conversation, the other party would have to initiate it.

Which I didn't think would be happening, because the rider was a seagull.

Well, it looked *almost* like a seagull, same white and gray feathers, same claws, the head and body seagull-sized, ditto the wingspan. But its small face was practically human, and I swear, it resembled an actor from the past named Jay Silverheels, who played Tonto on *The Lone Ranger*. The only un-Tonto-like thing about this face were a pair of little pince-nez eyeglasses *pincing* its *nez*.

You wonder how I knew about its wingspan? No, it wasn't flying, but it *was* flapping its wings as a means of propelling its go-thing, which looked

like two big upside-down lollipops. Not continuously, either, just a couple of beats, then it would roll along for a while. Kind of ludicrous to think that a bird, which could do what so many envious life-forms were unable to, would want to travel this way.

"I beg your pardon," the seagull that looked like Jay Silver-heels said, "but do you have even a rudimentary form of language by which our palpably diverse cultures might endeavor something akin to communication?"

"If you're saying you'd like to have a chat," I told him, "yeah, that's a possibility."

Both little eyes squinted behind the pince-nez. He angled closer to me, using his wings to steer. Though still wary, I had a hunch he wasn't dangerous.

"Astounding," he said. "Despite your consummate alien facade you somehow comprehend me, and you even verbalize the vernacular of my world, though in a rather elementary way, of course. About equivalent to a youth of our preschool level, I would hypothesize."

"You don't say." Gee, we just met, and already this bird was starting to piss me off.

He looked me up and down. "I don't suppose you could venture an opinion on the quantum eccentricities of the Jungian premise that the formation of complexes and the fragmentation of personality were not at all dissimilar?"

"Excuse me?"

"What about the tacit knowing of contextual right brain theorum whose holistic anomalies are often perceived as hypothetical and linear?"

"Uh-uh, but if you'd like to talk baseball or old movies, or maybe have a nice chat about the weather..."

"Ah, the weather!" the seagull exclaimed. "Can you conjecture upon the *vent du Midi* of southern France and its relevance to epileptic seizures and rheumatoidal inflammation? Or perhaps the meteorological abnormalities in the planetesimal ring bodies that orbit the seventeenth geochemical

hybrid ventigrain of Ursalia VII?"

"Nope, afraid not. But maybe we can talk about—"

"Ah, what a pity," the seagull said with a shrug. "I'm beginning to conjecture if there are *any* intelligent species in the universe, or merely slugs."

Well, I should've got the hell outta there fast, because I was tired of being insulted. But you know what?

Before I could move, the *seagull* got the hell outta there fast! Nope, he wanted no part of dealing with a mental midget like me.

You probably think I was pissed, right? Not really, because I remembered what *I'd* been thinking when I first saw the bird. Yeah, just by looking at it I decided then and there that it was a sub-species, an *animal*, incapable of more than a few squawks, certainly not worthy of my time, even if I could figure a few of those squawks out. So it turned out just the opposite, and sure, the highbrow seagull was rude, but probably no more rude or condescending that I would have been.

Okay, Jack Miller gets put in his place. But I'd learned a major lesson, and one good thing about me and major lessons was that I usually learned them well and didn't make the same idiotic mistake twice.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

To Hell in a Handbasket

Rush hour again on the Ultimate Bike Path.

Passing in the opposite direction was a group of praying mantises wearing red jerseys and square green helmets, each riding on a long, wheeled salami-thing that had a phallic look about it. Going my way on a pedal-propelled golf cart was a squat, blue, gelatinous life-form who otherwise looked like Albert Einstein. I didn't slow down to talk to *him*, not after coming up nearly brain-dead to a seagull. But I did nod a friendly greeting to a big black worm with four enormous eyes and six various limbs, two of which were steering a clay go-thing that reminded me of a

Tonka pickup truck. The pleasantries were not returned by anything vocal; instead, something resembling a fleshy fire hose emerged from its underbelly. Okay, that might've been its mouth, but I didn't wait to find out.

After passing something that looked like a jumbo fossilized trilobite on a nonmotorized moped, the *mhuva lun gallee* became clear. I didn't wait any longer to make a choice, not after an Elmer Fudd sent a subliminal message my way that said *yo jack ah link dis mus' be da place*. Angling toward the spurts of molten lava, I closed my eyes and burst through...

... then shifted down from the twenty-second gear as I braked to a stop inside another tunnel.

No, this tunnel wasn't *anything* like the Path. Its walls, floor, and ceiling had a look of milky, translucent glass. Yeah, that's what it felt like, too; I knew that after running my finger along the nearest wall, as well as the surface under my feet. Solid stuff. The opposite wall was twenty-five yards away, the ceiling the same from the floor, which meant that this tunnel was square. Aside from the cloudy streaks in the glass or plastic or whatever-the-hell-it-was, the tunnel was featureless.

Uh-uh, wrong. Running down the middle, going on as far as I could see in both directions, was a crack, its width about half an inch. It didn't look like something left here by a whim of nature; probably life-form-made.

Having no desire to stand around and wonder about it, I got back on the Nishiki and started pedaling along the glassy tunnel. Wise choice of direction, actually, because the floor sloped down. Not real steep, but consistent. I stayed in high gear and mostly coasted. The crack, which I bumped over a few times, was not a hazard, my tires being much wider.

A minute later I was nearly knocked off my bike by a basket.

It was shaped like what you carry your picnic lunch in, only without handles or lids. A lot bigger, too, about the size of a bump 'em car. Nothing was in it, I noted as it passed, which was a few seconds after I'd been alerted to its approach by a *clink-clunk-pathootie* sound coming from under the floor. Since the basket was positioned right over the crack, I assumed it was being pulled along on a cable or something.

I followed along for a while as the basket *clink-clunk-pathootied*

merrily on its way. Then, it angled toward the left, and I noticed another crack branching off that way. It led to the solid wall, which the basket was about to run into. I stopped to watch the collision.

There was an almost imperceptible flash of light and a brief slurping sound as the wall absorbed the basket.

Weird, huh? And even weirder was when I rode over to the wall, looked it up and down, then rapped on it tentatively. Solid as a rock, just like before. I pushed on it, which was kind of stupid. Same result.

Even if I had blinked, which I hadn't, I could not have missed a door or something opening to let the basket in, then closing again. It *had* gone through the wall. *Why question it, Jack?* you say. *Don't you, the intrepid explorer, go through doors that appear solid or molten or whatever?* Yeah, right, but at least I'm in control of my go-thing. There was *no one* in that basket who could've made it happen. It just *went!*

I hung around for a few seconds, beat on the wall again, checked for secret panels or something (wasn't *that* brilliant). Nope, *nada*. Okay, back on the bike, headed down, this time riding six feet to the right of the center crack. Now I was noticing more of the branches, probably because I was looking for them. They veered off in both directions, always ending at one of the walls.

A minute later another empty basket *clink-clunk-pathootied* past, went on for a hundred yards, angled to the right, and was swallowed by the milky wall. Then, a third, which I was able to follow for a bit longer, until the same thing happened.

The next basket to *clink-clunk-pathootie* by had a person sitting in it.

Scared the crap out of me, because I didn't even glance in until the basket was practically alongside. The passenger did not exhibit the least bit of curiosity in me, his eyes transfixed on the tunnel ahead. He was an old man, most of his silver hair gone, the bald areas flecked by liver spots, as were the backs of his hands. A sweet, grandfatherly expression lit his face. He was dressed in a long white thing that might've been a hospital gown.

I pumped the pedals a few times until I was parallel with the basket, leaving room to maneuver in case it decided to veer off on my side. The old

fellow *must* have seen me, but he still showed no interest.

"Excuse me," I called, "this may sound like a stupid question, but can you tell me what this place is?"

That really *was* a stupid question, when you thought about it. Picture a guy asking you the same thing. Sure, maybe his starship just landed in the cornfield across the road, or maybe he just emerged from a century in deep-freeze and was a mite disoriented. So even though the reason for his odd question was genuine, what would you tell him other than "*Get the fuck out of my face*"?

The old, sweet guy in the basket turned to me and said, "Get the fuck out of my face."

What he *actually* said, with a heavy accent, was "*Getta da fuck outta my face.*"

Right. Okay, still remembering that the question might've sounded weird to him, and that he might be thinking I'm a pervert or something, I smiled and held up a hand. "You don't understand, sir," I said. "All I would like to know is—"

That sweet face didn't look so sweet anymore. "I tella you again, you piece a shit, you getta de fuck outta my face or I make a for you da new shoes from a da cement and t'row you inna da Hudson River, you *kapish*?"

Eee-yooo, the Hudson River! Get caught in a backwash of toxic waste, then go under and have the sludgefish pick the flesh off my bones. No thanks.

"Yo, I'm *kapishing* outta here," I told the grandfatherly fellow, veering off.

What I did was stay behind the basket at a safe distance to see what would happen. The old man wasn't looking back over his shoulder, and the conveyance was not equipped with a sideview mirror, so I figured I was safe. To tell the truth, I'm not sure why his threats shook me up. I mean, what could a guy like that do? Maybe it was the way he said it...

Wait a minute, the *Hudson River*? He had to be referring to *the* Hudson River, because it was a long shot that another with the same

name existed on some distant world. Again, just like with Don Quixote, I wondered if I was somewhere on Earth, maybe way in the future. But through an *Elmer Fudd* gate? Sorry, I didn't think so.

Anyway, the old man's basket wound up veering off to the left, and he was absorbed by the wall. Can't say I was sorry to see him go, even though I was really curious about where I was.

After checking out the wall again (yep, solid as an industrial diamond), I continued along the tunnel. Soon, another basket with a white-gowned passenger *clink-clunk-pathootied* by. It was a woman this time, in her late forties, maybe fifty-something. Hard to tell, because her face was worn and haggard, her hair unkempt. She was scowling as she looked me over, her expression saying *don't come anywhere near me dickbrain or I'll drop-kick your balls halfway to Neptune*.

"Hi there." I smiled. "I'd like to ask—"

"Don't come anywhere near me, dickbrain," the woman said, "or I'll drop-kick your balls halfway to Neptune!"

Oh, yeah, I hadn't noticed the meat cleaver in her lap, but now I saw it, so I gave her a wide right-of-way. Unlike the old man she turned and kept watching me, up until the moment she was absorbed by the wall.

This was getting a bit annoying. Where was this place? *What* was it? A weird ride in another cosmic theme park or something? Maybe the answer was at the bottom, but where *was* the bottom?

"You really shouldn't be disturbing the new arrivals, Jack."

The voice scared me so *unbelievably* shitless that I (all together) nearly fell off my bike and (all together) nearly wet my spandex. I mean, it was right in my ear! That's how close the guy was without my knowing he was there. I'd thought I was in possession of fair peripheral vision, some basic instincts, whatever. Guess not.

I recovered quickly and had a look at the guy. If this wasn't Buffalo Bob Smith when he was young and hosting *The Howdy Doody Show*, then it was a reasonable facsimile; he even had on a frilly cowboy outfit. Despite having issued me a fairly stern warning, he was smiling. He wore Rollerblades, black and fluorescent green, which clashed with the rest of

his clothes.

"Excuse me?" I asked, my voice cracking, like I was emerging from puberty.

"I said that you—"

"Whoa, I know what you *said*," I interrupted, "but I don't know what you *mean*. All I'm trying to find out is where the devil I am!"

Buffalo Bob smiled kind of funny when I said that. "No, of course you wouldn't understand. Well, you're in luck, because I'm going to be your guide, so you'll soon know as much as your capabilities will allow."

With my wee brain that probably wouldn't be much. I looked squint-eyed at the guy. "You're not, uh, Buffalo Bob Smith, are you?" I asked, which *really* sounded stupid.

He rubbed his chin and said, "I don't under—ah, a name! Yes, that would make it easier for you, would it not? Very well, a name." He thought for a moment. "You may call me Nananana."

He actually *sang* his name, and it sounded like the part of that Steam oldie chanted by nasty sports fans when the opposing team is walking off the court, ice, whatever, after the hometown boys have just kicked the shit out of them. I almost jumped in and did the *hey-hey-ey, good-bye* part but thought better of it.

"Right; catchy name," I said, and he smiled that wonderful Buffalo Bob smile, the one loved by peanut galleries everywhere. "So, who are these new arrivals I'm not supposed to bug, and just *where* are they arriving at?"

"Ask me who they were."

Who was this, Jacob Marley? "Okay, who *were* they, then?"

"They were beings who, in their brief time on Earth, lived their lives poorly, were cruel and hateful. Now they're dead, so they've come here."

I was almost afraid to ask. "And where is *here*?"

"This is Hell, Jack."

I had a hunch he'd say that. "Yeah, okay, Nananana—"

"That's *Nananana*," he interrupted, singing it again.

"Right. Listen, *Nananana*, I—"

"Much better."

"I wanted to know, is this *a* hell, with a lowercase h, or *the* Hell, capitalized?"

"Oh, it's Hell, all right, maybe not the same as people perceive it, but Hell nonetheless."

I knew it was the capitalized one, just by the way he said it. Whoa, this was heavy! So maybe Ralph Ralph hadn't turned out to be...

You know.

But here I was, on the opposite end of the coin, in a place that definitely did *not* meet my expectations of fire and brimstone and all that nasty stuff. Of course, maybe that's what was on the other side of the milky walls.

This question sounded stupid, but I asked it anyway: "Are we in hell—"

"That's Hell."

"Yeah. Are we in *Hell* right now? I mean, right here where we're standing?" (See how stupid?)

Nananana shook his head. "This is Hell's Entry way Number Two and is merely a passage for the newly dead arrivals to their ultimate destinations, which lies beyond any number of Hell's Doors. You've already seen carriers pass through, have you not?"

"Yes. I tried to follow, but the... walls were solid."

"That's because you're not dead. And even—whoops, watch out, Jack."

Another basket *clink-clunk-pathootied* past, this time with a little old

bespectacled lady, who threw more cuss words at us than you would've found in a gangster movie. It pissed me off, but Nananana took it all in stride.

"Here, let's keep moving," the Buffalo Bob clone said.

So I pedaled, and he skated next to me effortlessly on his Rollerblades. "What did you start to say?" I asked as the little old cussing lady was sucked into a wall.

"That even if you *were* dead, it might not be to this place that you would come. Such matters are determined elsewhere."

Jeez, I hope not! Anyway, my mind was bogging about the prospects of learning more.

"Okay, let's see if I got this straight," I said. "Someone dies, they pass through a processing center to determine which direction they'll take. North to an Afterward, south to here."

"Extremely simplified, but basically correct," Nananana said.

"Can you tell me much more about this 'processing center'?"

"To try to do so would be to delve into—"

"The half I wouldn't understand. Okay, forget it."

"How did you know I was going to say that?"

"Never mind. So after it's been determined that they've earned a southward journey, they get stuck in a basket and sent along a Hell's Entry way, either Number One or Number Two, or..." I looked at him.

"That's all, just two," he said. "The first is for those deemed Terribly Frigging Bad, Beyond Redemption. This one—the lesser of two evils, so to speak—is for those determined to be Pretty Damn Bad, But Salvageable."

"What do you mean by salvageable?"

"You'll understand that better when I've shown you more. Look out again, Jack!"

I had drifted too close to the crack and had to get out of the way of another basket, this one carrying a guy in his late teens or twenties. He had a switchblade in one hand, a machete in the other, and was doing a fine imitation of Leonard Bernstein with them.

"You woulda come a little closer, motherfucker, I woulda made a sandwich of yer pecker between yer ears and shoved it down yer throat!"

Yeah, I really wanted to know what *salvageable* meant.

In any case I'd been wondering why none of these unpleasant folks, most of all the kid, hadn't jumped out of their baskets to try to make good on their threats. Then I watched as his woven conveyance was swung toward the left wall. Whoa, did he freak! He flailed his arms, screamed and cussed, but there was nothing he could do against the invisible seat belt or whatever that held him in. Rather animatedly, he disappeared into the wall.

Turning to Nananana again I said, "Since I can't go behind the scenes, how are you going to show me more so I can *grok* this better?"

I don't know if it was *behind the scenes* or *grok* that made him scrunch up his cherubic Buffalo Bob face. "You can't go through the walls, but there is a way for you to see what happens to our residents."

"Yeah? How?"

"By using one of Hell's Overpasses. We'll be encountering them shortly."

"Hell's Overpasses," I said numbly.

Another empty basket *clink-clunk-pathootied* down Hell's Entry way Number Two. This was good, because I was tired of taking all that crap from the assholes in the previous ones. We paralleled it for a while, and it was still headed down the middle of the tunnel when Nananana got all excited.

"There, a Hell's Overpass!" he exclaimed, gesturing toward the right wall.

Glad he knew that, because I couldn't see... oh, yeah, now I got it. A narrow passageway was formed through a split in the wall, but because

everything was all milky white it was nearly impossible to notice. My first instinct, having ridden the Ultimate Bike Path for so long, was to angle sharply and quickly toward it. But my guide was a bit more laid back. He gestured me to a stop, and we stood looking at the crack.

"Are you certain you're ready for this, Jack?" he asked.

"Yeah, I think so." I wished his tone hadn't sounded so ominous.

"Some of what you witness might be a bit unsettling."

An image of all those bodies along the road on Yodonomoho flashed in my brain. Unsettling. "I've come this far, and I'm curious," I told him. "Let's do it."

He smiled. "I figured that. Very well; stay close to me."

Nananana skated over to the wall; I followed, walking the bike. If it was okay to ride, I figured he would say something; he didn't. So I was still on foot when we entered the rift, which despite appearances was wide enough for me and the Nishiki to fit through. The only weird thing was that it twisted and turned sharply, and often, a good enough reason not to try to negotiate it on two wheels.

After a couple of minutes the passage narrowed, and I began having this claustrophobic obsession that the milky walls were going to come together and squash me like a bug. Nananana sensed my uneasiness.

"It's just a fake-out, Jack," he assured me (yeah, in those words). "I'll skate in front of you. Keep your eyes on me, and everything will be all right."

I did like he said, and it was better. Even though I was trying hard not to glance at them, the walls eventually began to change. First, the milk-white streaks seemed to float farther away, and the translucency altered to dim transparency. It was like looking at the designs embedded deep in fine crystal. This continued until they faded out.

All of a sudden the whole thing—walls, floor, ceiling—was *totally* transparent, as in *gone*, and let me tell you, that really freaked me out!

No, they couldn't have been gone, because I still stood on something

solid. Nananana was there, and he had this reassuring smile, which was fine, but I think he could've told me what was going to happen.

Here's what *seemed* to be going on: I was hovering in midair, a sky full of dark clouds above, a broad plain fifty yards below. From research I'd done for some of my novels I recognized the latter as an African savanna. Herds of zebras and wildebeests grazing amid tall yellow grass in the distance kind of gave that away.

So did the rhinoceros that burst out of a bordering grove of acacia trees and trotted across the savanna.

It was a two-horned white rhino, one of the species on the "endangered" list. Wonderful animal. But what was it—and the others—doing *here*! Was this a tour of Hell, or the San Diego Zoo?

I posed that question—in so many words—to Nananana.

"Yes, you're still in Hell. What did you think?"

"Are you saying... *that's* Hell?"

He half smiled. "It's *someone's* Hell. Watch."

I leaned my bike up against... whatever and, like Nananana, rested my elbows on top of... whatever and looked down. Ooo, was this weird! There was something like a railing, but like everything else it was invisible. It would take some getting used to, and I wasn't quite there yet.

Below, the rhino disappeared beyond some baobob trees across the savanna. Just as it did, a head with a shock of silver-white hair and matching mustache popped out from behind a termite mound. The guy darted furtive glances all around, then stepped into the open.

This was getting curiouser and curiouser, because the guy was Marlin Perkins, who used to host Mutual of Omaha's *Wild Kingdom* on television.

Before I could ask Nananana anything, another rhinoceros—a black one, this time—suddenly appeared and shoved part of its loo-oong horn up Marlin's kazoo. Marlin did a screaming somersault, landed on his feet, and started running across the savanna.

As they passed below us, I started to get the picture. This was a *dream*. After all, you probably recall me referencing this scenario before, so it was obviously in my memory bank. And what is stored on your brain's floppy disk often becomes the stuff that dreams are made of, so it makes perfect sense. Yeah, I'm probably at home in bed, or getting a nasty sunburn on Torrey Pines State Beach, or maybe...

"Let me tell you about this resident, Jack," Nananana said, and he scared the shit out of me. Straightening up, I bashed my head on something I couldn't see. Hurt like hell. Okay, forget the dream theory.

"I *know* who he is," I said angrily, rubbing my head, "and that's why I think this is bullshit. That's Marlin Perkins, and there is *no way* he would've wound up here, because he was a really great guy! Famous zoologist, television host, defender of animal rights, that kind of stuff!"

Nananana was fiddling with something that looked like a pocket calculator but likely wasn't. "Marlin—?" he said, puzzled. "No, this resident's name is George Popnik, place of death St. Louis, Missouri. Ah, wait, there *is* reference to this Marlin person later on."

Below, the white-haired Perkins/Popnik/whoever, having been tossed a few more times by the rhino's horn, finally escaped by diving into some shrubbery. Almost immediately he reappeared, this time with an Indian rhino on his ass (On an *African* savanna?), and the scene was repeated. Watching it, and listening to my guide, was starting to make me crazy.

"Will you *please* tell me what's happening?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, that's what I was trying to do," Nananana said, a bit pissedly. "George Popnik led a questionable existence during his most recent incarnation on your world. A delinquent youth, later a petty criminal, swindler, that sort of stuff. Never did a thing for anyone but himself, stepped on whoever got in his way.

"In his middle years Popnik realized that he bore a striking resemblance to a man of note named Marlin Perkins. No need to detail that individual, for you already know him. Popnik began utilizing that resemblance to his advantage, affording himself of free meals in restaurants, goods and services in other business establishments; you get the picture.

"Popnik hated animals, never understood why this Marlin Perkins fellow was always associating with them. The thing that terrified Popnik the most was when Perkins got up close and personal with the rhinoceros creature; used to have nightmares about them, he did."

"Hey, I got it!" I exclaimed as Popnik was given another horn enema by the Indian rhino. "So when Popnik died and got sent to Hell, this big fear of his became his fate for eternity."

"Close, Jack," Nananana said. "Remember, he was deemed Pretty Damn Bad, But Salvageable, which was why he was sent down Hell's Entry way Number Two. No, Popnik will not have to be here for an eternity."

"How long then?"

"Just like everyone else, his present fate will last for a millennium."

"A *thousand* years? He'll be doing this for a *thousand* years?"

The guide shook his head. "He's already done twelve, so he only has nine hundred and eighty-eight left."

"Oh, right, excuse *me*," I said dryly. "Okay, what happens after he's done his *time*!"

"As best as you might be able to understand, his... *soul* is returned to Earth in another incarnation, a life we trust will be better lived than the previous one."

And if he screws up again, then what? *Two* millennia like this? *Three*? Maybe he doesn't get to pass Go or collect two hundred dollars but continues right down Hell's Entry way Number One to Terribly Frigging Bad, Beyond Redemption, where...

Oh, shit, this was getting too metaphysical for me!

I had a hunch Shirley MacLaine would like this tour, though.

Below, George Popnik had pried himself off the white rhino's horn and raced amid some acacias. A few seconds later he emerged with *two* black rhinos chasing him.

Can *you*, fellow traveler, imagine spending every minute of the next

thousand years—or even nine hundred and eighty-eight— with a rhinoceros taking your temperature rectally?

You'd have to guess that after the experience your next life would be much better spent.

This was weird, you know?

Nananana clapped me on the shoulder and said, "You want to see more, Jack?" Yeah, he scared the crap out of me again, and yeah, I hit my head on... whatever again.

Below, the rhinos had cut off Popnik's avenue of escape. One of them hoisted the guy up on its horn, then tossed him to its buddy. The two perissodactyl mammals started playing catch with the Marlin Perkins impersonator who had led a questionable life before going to Hell.

I looked at Nananana and replied (a bit uneasily), "You got my interest. Lead on."

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Scariest Hell of All (??)

Well, I'd guessed wrong. I figured we would head on back to Hell's Entry way Number Two, but instead we continued along. For a moment I had this feeling we'd be emerging on Hell's Entryway Number One, and I gotta say, *that* freaked me out. Wrong-o. Nananana assured me otherwise.

"In the first place, Hell's Entryway Number One is quite a distance from here," he said. "Second, as far as going back to where we started, there's no need. Plenty of shortcuts, and I know my way around. Whaddya think, I'm from Minsk or Pinsk?"

Huh?

Anyway, the invisible floor and walls began clouding up again, which was a relief. Soon we were back in one of those twisting, milky-white passageways. But this time, as soon as I thought the walls were closing in, I focused on the back of the Buffalo Bob clone's head, and it wasn't bad.

"You can get used to just about anything," Nananana called over his shoulder.

Uh-uh, I don't think there was *anything* I wanted to get *used to* down here. Like visiting the dungeons of the Spanish Inquisition or the Tower of London when you made a trip to Europe, this was a stop on a guided tour, nothing else. Have a look, make a crack or two, ask some dumb questions, then get on to the next place. So what if this was a *cosmic* guided tour? Same idea.

The passageway turned out to be real short. Everything became transparent, and again I was "walking" in midair.

This time over the glitz and noise of what looked like the casino at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas.

Despite the racket the casino floor was all but devoid of people. Those who were there congregated in one spot, at a blackjack table right under us. The dealer, a generic sort, had just flipped up a ten and an ace to the table's sole player, a middle-aged guy in an out-of-style leisure suit. This lucky dude had a pile of chips in front of him roughly the size and shape of the New York skyline. And if that wasn't enough, he was surrounded by five gorgeous women, two sitting at his feet, the others looking over his shoulder, all smiling and applauding his good fortune, kissing his face, darting tongues into his ears, that sort of thing.

How *gorgeous* were they? you ask. Imagine taking five Amazon women, putting them in slinky tight dresses, spike heels, and copious makeup. Enough said.

I looked at Nananana. "Hell?" I said.

He nodded. "Hell."

Wait a minute, you know what? The look on the face of the guy at the blackjack table was not in keeping with the situation, which at the moment was the dealer forking over an enormous pot and one of the women playing with the zipper on his pants. You'd expect the same expression on someone sitting in a doctor's waiting room after being told, "Yes, there's a seventy percent chance you have cancer, so take a seat and we'll know for sure in fifteen minutes." Honest, that's what the guy looked like!

You know, there was something oddly familiar about the scenario below, but at the moment I couldn't quite put a finger on it. I glanced at my guide again; this time he was looking at that calculator thing.

"Ah, here it is," he said. "Willy Moran, place of death Los Angeles, California. The *cause* of death had something to do with his not being able to pay a rather large sum of money to someone called a... *bookie*. A gambler and self-styled womanizer, Moran's first marriage ended after he sold off their house to support his gambling. The same happened to a second marriage when he conned his mother-in-law out of her savings. Subsequently he wooed a number of rich lonely spinsters and widows for their money, and... broke their hearts." (He scratched his head over that.)

Willy Moran was looking up at us. I suddenly realized that he had heard everything Nananana said. He shrugged and flashed a kind of dumb *Who, me?* grin. Asshole!

Wait a minute, now I got it! You know why this was so familiar? Back on the old *Twilight Zone* (I'm talking the *original*, not anything that came after) there was an episode called "A Nice Place to Visit." See, Larry Blyden plays a small-time crook named Rocky Valentine who gets blown away by the cops at the beginning. His "guardian angel," a white-haired guy named Pip, shows up. Pip is played by Sebastian Cabot, who was the butler on that sitcom with Buffy and Jody, two of *the* most obnoxious television kids...

Anyway, Pip is there to give Valentine whatever he wants, which of course turns out to be primarily booze, women, and cards. Valentine, who figures he's in Heaven, has a ball. But after he keeps winning at every game, has all these dynamite females slobbering over him, it first becomes boring, then intolerable. He even wishes he could be sent to the Other Place. That's when Pip tells him, "This is the Other Place." Cool!

Yeah, too much of a good thing can turn out to be Hell, and in Rocky Valentine's case he was consigned to it for eternity. Since Willy Moran had been deemed Pretty Damn Bad, But Salvageable, there was at least a limit to his "torment."

The dealer flipped Willy Moran an ace and a king. One of the women was rubbing up against his back; another was disrobing (there's a nice word). A third had her hand... never mind.

Moran looked up and said, "How'd you like to help me out, pal?"

I rapped sharply on the invisible barrier. "Sorry."

He nodded in a *yeah I understand* way, then scowled as the third woman with the eager hand... never mind.

Just a thought: Even though yours truly, Jack Miller, would never in a *million* years come to this place (unless I *really* had to pay the price for writing *Brain Ingestors of Musi*), let's just say, *what if it happened?* Would I wind up in a Chinese restaurant with waiters who never stopped bringing me food? Would I be scarfing down egg rolls and won ton soup and paper-wrapped beef and sweet and sour pork and egg foo young and cashew chicken and Peking duck for a thousand years? Would every fortune cookie I opened up say *burp hearty asshole there's more on the way!* A shitty turn of events, when a dream becomes a nightmare.

Anyway, I'd seen enough. Nananana led me off the Overpass. I glanced one last time at Willy Moran, who flipped me the bird (how rude!), just as the third woman... never mind.

Now it seemed like the next of these "private Hells" (as I had begun to think of them) was closer, as all subsequent ones proved to be. We were hovering above what looked like an ordinary living room in an ordinary house. A woman was sitting in a tattered armchair staring at a television set. Hey, I knew her! It was the woman I'd seen in the basket, the one who'd wanted to drop-kick my balls somewhere. She wore regular clothes, and the meat cleaver was gone.

Nananana was scrolling through his index again. "Ah, one of our new arrivals. Etta Donegan of Hamtramck, Michigan. That was both her place of birth *and* death. Was a poor mother to her three children, sad to say. Either punished them excessively or ignored them totally. Two are turning out to be just like her, which is sometimes what happens. So, Etta will be residing here for a millennium, then will see if she can get it right the next time."

There were three women on the television screen at which Etta was staring, a blonde, a brunette, and a redhead, all beautiful in an Oscar de la Renta sort of way. They were sitting at a table in an expensive restaurant, sipping white wine and talking cattily.

"It's all over between Eric and me," the blonde said. "Yes, it has been now for six hours."

"You had better be right, Marcie," the brunette stated, "because... I'm carrying Eric's baby!"

"But, Laura," the redhead said incredulously, "I thought you were carrying *Paul's* baby."

"No, *I'm* carrying Paul's baby," the blonde insisted. "But, Susan, I thought *you* were carrying Jeffrey's baby."

"Which Jeffrey?" the redhead asked.

"Surely not *my* Jeffrey," the brunette said pissedly.

"Oh, definitely not *your* Jeffery, dear," the blonde said, "since *he* ran off with... Jonathan."

"I thought *my* Jeffrey did that," the redhead mused.

"Oh, no, not *your* Jeffrey," the brunette said, "not after he had one look at Stacy!"

"But Stacy is... my teenaged daughter!" the blonde exclaimed.

"Then... you mean... ?" the redhead stammered.

"Yes, it's *Stacy* who's carrying Paul's baby!" the brunette revealed.

"I thought you said it was Jeffrey's baby," the blonde said.

"Who's Paul?" the redhead asked.

Etta Donegan shifted in her armchair. "Shit, I saw this one already, and it sucks," she muttered.

I looked at Nananana. "She has to watch soap operas for a thousand years?"

He shook his head. "Just that one episode."

Jeez, do you think it could get worse? Yeah, because a door to Etta's

"living room" burst open, admitting three ambulatory preschoolers, a girl and two boys, and a huge hairy mutt. The kids were dressed in frilly cowboy and cowgirl outfits, which made my Buffalo Bob guide beam proudly. One boy rode a tricycle, the others got around just as fast on booted, thudding feet. They were screaming, shouting, firing cap pistols as they scooted around Etta's chair; the kid on the trike was squeezing a bulb horn that sounded like a whoopee cushion; the dog was barking its head off. Etta Donegan shouted at them and tried to get up from the chair, but couldn't move.

On the screen the fashion princesses were now discussing the comparative manhoods of two guys named Evan and Roger.

Oh, yeah, this was *for sure* someone's Hell.

"Pretty awful, huh?" Nananana said in my ear, again scaring me shitless and making me crack my head against something I couldn't see.

"You act like you're enjoying it," I replied sourly, rubbing the new sore spot.

"No, not at all. But one who labors down here must maintain one's sense of humor, you know."

Yeah, I suppose one must. Still, I wasn't sure if his attitude was commensurate with the gravity of the situation.

A millennium of the same soap opera, commercials and all, and a tireless family of screaming monsters!

The worst of it was when Etta, who by now was beginning to figure the whole thing out, looked up at me helplessly, and this time I knew she had no thought of kicking my balls anywhere.

"Let's get out of here," I told my guide.

"Back to Hell's Entryway Number Two?" he asked.

"No, I suppose I can handle some more."

He flashed me that peanut gallery smile again. "This way then, Jack."

You know what I was thinking about as Nananana led me along

another of the milky-white passageways? If until now I *had* led a rotten existence and just happened to get a sneak preview of this place—which I was—I'd go back and change my life, do a whole hell of a lot of repenting, work for the betterment of my fellow human beings, the planet, all of that. Yeah, *definitely*.

And what if everyone had the same peek at one of a possible number of futures for them and saw stuff like this? Might be a much nicer world, don't you think?

Maybe all of us *did* receive that body of information at one time.

Let's assume that as *newly formed* but unassigned souls we are given the whole big universal picture; one time, and *only* one. It could be done as an infinite number of options, or maybe just a handful, like this: Fuck up *royally* and you go to Hell as Terribly Frigging Bad, Beyond Redemption. Just plain fuck up and you do a millennium of this crap, then have another shot. Lead an okay but ordinary life, seldom reaching outside the confines of your three percent brain, and you get to turn around when you croak and try it again, maybe after a brief (Decade? Century?) stay in the Afterward. But achieve some level of higher consciousness, spiritual awareness, enlightenment, whatever, during your existence on Earth as an incarnated or reincarnated soul, and you *do* get to pass Go (or the Afterward), collect your two hundred dollars, and head on out to that great cosmic Club Med for a blissful eternity.

Anyway, enough waxing metaphysical. Like I said before, the passageways connecting Hell's Overpasses were getting shorter, and this one was the shortest of all. Once again I was "walking on air," this time above a forest of assorted pines on the rocky slope of a mountain. There was a clearing near the center of these trees, dotted with boulders and other jagged outcroppings. A man was kneeling amid a clump of the latter, hiding from someone or something.

Nananana didn't even need his index to catalog this scene. "Ah, here we have Mr. J. P. Richfield of Fort Worth, Texas. Quite wealthy in life through some unscrupulous oil deals. Fashioned himself a 'big game' hunter. Including rabbits and birds, killed over eight thousand animals. Had a fondness for golden eagles, bighorn sheep, African elephants, and other endangered species. Once shot a family of deer along the side of the road from his vehicle. He'll be with us for another nine hundred and ninety-one years."

Below, Richfield burst from the rocks and ran toward a large conifer. He was dressed in a goose-down camouflage jacket, black Stetson hat, and twelve-inch L. L. Bean Maine Hunting Shoes. Ten feet from the tree he was confronted by a bighorn sheep, a male with an awesome pair of curved horns. The animal, looking like something out of Gary Larson, stood on its hind legs. It held a Winchester model 490 auto rifle in its front ones. From this angle I guessed that the sights of the gun were trained on Richfield's balls. The guy pulled up and stared at the sheep, which was grinning as it pulled the trigger.

"*Shii-iiit!*" Richfield screamed, leaping up and doing the splits, the bullet cutting through empty air. Hey, not bad for a burly guy who looked to be in his late fifties. He turned and tore ass back to the rocks, a couple more bullets *pinging* the ground around him.

Yeah, I could tell the sheep was playing games. Then, one round lodged in his left bun, and let me tell you, the ensuing scream put to shame anything previously uttered by yours truly.

Before he could again utilize the rocks three mule deer with bows and arrows popped up and turned Mr. J. P. Richfield into a pincushion. Next, a golden eagle with a pair of pearl-handled Colts in its talons swooped down and began doing its imitation of Jesse James. The guy jumped, danced, screamed, clutched at spreading wounds. Dead or not, he was in some *serious* pain.

The bighorn sheep finally brought him down with a shot right between the eyes.

The animals surrounded the bloodied form, prodded it for signs of life, then congratulated each other with a round of high fives (or whatever you called them in their case). What remained of J. P. Richfield was dragged into the forest by the bighorn sheep. The other animals dispersed.

Two-point-three seconds later the "big game" hunter, dressed in clean clothes, was again ducking and feinting through the rocks and trees.

This time *I* led Nananana off the Overpass... though not without walking into something that I couldn't see.

When measured against a millennium, all the folks I'd seen so far were fresh out of the chute. Not so the next guy.

"Claude LeBlanc, Marseilles, France," Nananana announced. "Guillotine operator from 1792 to 1793, during the French Revolution. Although following orders, he took a perverse pleasure in his work. Decapitated over a thousand people; would have been a lot more, had a heart attack not claimed his life while in bed with two harlots."

What a way to go! Anyway, the masked LeBlanc was standing alongside a nasty-looking guillotine, poised to release the blade and deposit the head of the next victim onto the dusty ground. Two gendarmes suddenly appeared with that victim, a long-haired young woman in a shabby dress, her hands tied behind her back. She was crying and pleading and shouting "*Mon dieu!*" and stuff like that, but it didn't seem to be doing her any good. The gendarmes were snickering as they got ready to push her down to her knees and position her neck under the blade.

Then the woman put on some moves that would've made a *ninja* warrior jealous. A back flip pulled her free of the guards, who banged into each other as they turned to pursue her. A forward somersault deposited her in front of LeBlanc, whom she kneed hard in a place that causes serious pain to those of the male gender. When he doubled over, she kicked him in the ass. Right, he wound up with his head in the hole of the guillotine. Before he could do a thing the nimble wench released the blade, and *whump*, old Claude's head rolled a couple of yards away. The rest of his spurting torso stood up, danced spastically for a moment, then crumpled to the ground. This brought a burst of laughter from the woman, who raced off with the gendarmes in hot pursuit.

Weird scene, huh? But wait, here's what happened next. After a couple of seconds the torso, no longer spurting, got up and walked over to the head. Dusting it off, it jammed the masked thing down on its neck, twisted it a few times, then let go. The head stayed.

Whole again, Claude LeBlanc returned to the guillotine to await the next "victim," who of course would be himself. Well, at least *he* only had about eight hundred years to go.

You know, I'd been giving thought to asking my Buffalo Bob guide for a peek at the *other* part of this place. But if an executioner for the French Revolution was *here*, just think of who was *there*. Did I *really* want to witness the eternal damnation of Hitler, Stalin, Papa Doc Duvalier, Mao Tse-tung, Johannes Vor-ster, and various and sundry mass-murdering loonies?

Uh-uh.

Did I really want to witness more of what I already *had* been witnessing?

Guess so, because I followed Nananana to the next Overpass. Sure, this whole thing was creepy, but I admit to a morbid fascination with it, so sor-ree.

Okay, the next one was cool. This small-time thug and all-around asshole, strapped in a ball park seat below with a couple of hot dogs and a beer only an inch beyond his reach, had lived and died in Chicago. And coincidentally, the aforementioned asshole had been a fervent Cubs fan.

So there in front of him, re-created on this guy's field of nightmares, was *every inning* of the doubleheader that the Mets took from the Cubs late in the 1969 season to move past them into first place, and *every inning* of the Padres' three wins in the 1984 playoffs, and *every inning* of what Will Clark and the Giants did to them in 1989.

The fellow did *not* look pleased.

If the national pastime is still being played a millennium from now (which I know it will be), maybe he'll be reincarnated as an Oakland A's fan.

The next case, Nananana informed me, was an interesting one, without a doubt an exception to the rules of this place. "You see," he said, "the person down there is not dead as yet. But since he already knew he'd be residing here in the future, he worked out a deal with the powers that be."

Wow, that *was* weird! The burly, dark-haired guy below wore thick glasses and looked to be along in his forties. I knew him; I would've sworn to that. He was moving furtively through what I think was a sewer, peering into its darkest corners, when a huge St. Bernard jumped out and tried to bite him on the ass. Scared the hell out of me, but it didn't faze the guy at all. He waved at the beast disdainfully, and it slunk off.

But at the next dark corner a fanged clown with a bunch of balloons in one hand and a paper boat in the other popped out and tried to strike up a conversation. The guy flipped him the bird and moved on.

"The man is a writer of horror novels," Nananana said. "He has scared millions of people, has caused angst, nightmares, bedwetting, foul language in schoolyards, all manner of trauma. And he will do the same to millions more before his time of judgment comes, so he definitely would have wound up here."

Whoa, really? Maybe my next project *will* be *Women Who Hate to Love Men*.

Below, a bunch of dorky-looking preteens with rocks in their hands confronted the guy. He gestured for them to get lost. Then, from the next dark corner, a frumpy woman in a nurse's uniform stepped out. She was wielding an ax. The guy stuck his tongue out at her, and she faded to black.

"But I still don't understand," I told my guide. "What is he doing here now?"

"For an addition to the time he would have spent in Hell, he has been allowed to come down periodically in quest of new ideas. This is where he found many of his previous ones."

Oh, yeah, huh? Now I got it. That's why he was passing up all the old demons. Like right now, when this spacy-looking teenaged girl drenched in blood was walking toward him, and he did this nifty little juke to get around her. Then, a guy who looked like Jack Nicholson but probably wasn't came toward him, grinning maniacally, but he passed on that, too.

Hey, now check *this* out! Something tall and gnarly and sort of humanoid but with too many limbs and lots of torn flesh oozing blood and pus and other black stuff and a face that looked like the salt vampire from the old *Star Trek* episode only uglier and carrying something snakelike and evil that curled around its leg and squeezed out some other kind of purple-brown body fluid from big festering wounds that covered large portions of the aforementioned limbs but not the longer ones with the pink diseased layers of skin caught the burly fellow's interest. The thing, after disgorging a smaller dead version of itself from its malformed mouth, started off. The guy would have followed, except for what happened next.

What happened was that he started shaking, and after this had gone on for a while a dark human shape of the same height and girth separated

itself from him. Its twisted face turned around; its malevolent eyes found his.

It flipped *him* the bird and started up the dank tunnel.

"Hey, wait a minute!" the guy exclaimed, pointing in the opposite direction of the fleeing monstrosity. "Didn't you see we have a hot one here?"

"Yo' *momma!*" his darker half replied.

The guy, with a last wistful look at the monstrosity, started after the other. "Come on, I need you!" he cried. "And you need me! You know that!"

"Yo' *momma times two! I can write that shit without you!*"

This went on and on, echoing for a while, finally fading.

In my head I started tallying the sales figures for *Brain Ingestors of Musi* and *Blood Roaches of Ibasklar*.

Can you go to Hell for scaring the bejesus out of a mere thirty thousand people?

Actually, only *fifteen* thousand, since the same ones probably read both books.

And to tell the truth, most of them were probably warped *before* they read those two literary gems. So how could I be held responsible?

"Ready to go, Jack?" Nananana asked, this time scaring me so shitless that I nearly knocked myself unconscious on yet another barrier that I couldn't see.

"Yeah, and this time how about outta here?" I said, trying to ignore the fact that there was three of him.

"Of course. But some other Overpasses may be unavoidable."

"No problem; lead on."

Concussion or not, I managed to focus on his back as the milky-white

walls of this weird place again took us. Now I was sure the time had come to bid a fond adieu to beautiful downtown Hell. I could negotiate the remaining Overpasses with blinders on, if need be.

But when the next one appeared, there was no way I could turn away.

It was a small living room in an apartment or house, and it looked like a composite of *all* the living rooms of my uncles, aunts, grandparents, and such back in New York, circa the fifties and sixties. Mismatched old furniture, coffee tables and sideboards cluttered with ugly figurines, a hardwood floor partly covered with an oval, threadbare rug, a dull painting of bewigged Europeans hanging on a wall. Even one of those old televisions with a screen the size of a Watchman and a chassis the size of Elizabeth, New Jersey. Despite the invisible barrier I could *smell* the oldness of the room.

A guy was walking around the room in carpet slippers. He looked forty-something, although I had a hunch he was younger. Balding, unshaven, potbellied, he wore a dingy white undershirt and a pair of baggy brown pants. His head jerked to the right occasionally in what was a nervous tic. A green, six-ounce bottle of Coca-Cola, half-consumed, was in one hand; his other reached for a bag of Wise potato chips on a marred coffee table.

Nananana saw I was interested and started playing with his index. "Sheldon Kronstein," he said, "place of birth and death Brooklyn, New York. Worked many jobs, including shoe salesman, seltzer bottle delivery person, stock clerk at John's Bargain Store; never held any longer than a year. Married twice, divorced twice, beat both his wives. Exposed himself to women and children on subways, buses, the street. Used to promise candy to little boys, then—"

"I got the picture," I interrupted. "Sweetheart of a guy."

"*Nu*, Sheldon, are you *fressing* those potato chips again?" an accented voice called from an adjoining room. "Such a nice dinner I'm making, and you eat that *chozzerrail*"

"Ma, I—" Sheldon started to say.

"And that sweet Coca-Cola you're drinking? *Oy*, pimples you'll get from it, *nebech!* And did you see the *schmootz* on my kitchen floor that you

tracked in from your rubbers? Next time, *shmendrick*, you'll take off your rubbers in the hallway!"

"Ma, I—"

She appeared in the doorway. I stood up stiffly; almost cracked my head again. Couldn't help it. She was small, older than middle age but younger than old age. Her bunned-up hair was white; she wore glasses, and a housedress that was probably thirty years old, and an apron, and rolled-up stockings above *her* carpet slippers. She was wagging a finger at the guy.

Oh, no, this was more than any human being, alive or dead, should have to endure!

This was the Hell of the Jewish Mother!

"Look at you: a bum, an *oysvorf!* Such a nice shirt your Uncle Jake gives you and you walk around in underwear, like an *oysvorf!*"

"Ma, the shirt had holes and went out of style ten—"

"What about your brother, the accountant! You couldn't be like *him*, Sheldon? From your brother *nachis*, and nothing from you but *tsooris!*"

"Ma, I—"

"You couldn't work for the post office, *puti?* Putting shoes on women's smelly feet is a job? *Feh!* Or you schlepp heavy cases of seltzer and God forbid get a hernia?"

"Ma, I'm not—"

"You're not working, *nu!* Not even those miserable jobs you keep, so now you don't bring a shekel in! *Oy vey!* Your father—may he rest in peace—is right now rolling over in the plot that your Uncle Sol had to pay for!"

Sheldon, starting to get pissed, reached for one of the ugly figurines. "Ma, listen, if you don't—!"

"*Meesis Blattner* says she saw you with a woman. So tell me, Sheldon, is she Jewish? You're not, God forbid, seeing another *shiksa!* What it did last

time to my heart! *Gevalt*, I should *plotz*! Soon I'll be lying next to your father—may he rest in peace—and we'll both roll over from our miserable son with a *shiksa!*"

Sheldon lost it. He swung the figurine at her head. Mrs. Kronstein—or the cyborg or whatever beneath the wrinkled skin—ducked under it with a move that would have made Sugar Ray Leonard applaud, then jumped high in the air and threw a nasty heel in the guy's face. Blood gushing from his nose, Sheldon fell backward atop an old armchair, which was covered with plastic. The figurine flew from his hand and was about to smash on the floor. But the Jewish mother-thing, with a flying leap, caught it and returned it lovingly to where it had been.

"You'll use a Kleenex, schmuck, and not bleed on the furniture," she said, resuming her millennial *noodge*. "So come, *bubeleh*, I made boiled chicken and canned peas and Melba toast, like you like."

"Ma, I hate—!"

"And after dinner Bertha Lipsky is coming over, and she'll bring her daughter Rachel; *oy*, such a lovely *maidel*, so what if she's a little plump, and cross-eyed?"

"Ma, *pleeeeeeeese*—I"

"A good thing," Nananana said, "he only has nine hundred and eighty-two years of this... uh, Jack?"

Yeah, I heard him, but I was already tearing ass across the Overpass, and this time I slammed into an invisible wall and knocked myself unconscious, which was preferable to what I'd just been watching.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Rubbed the Wrong Way

"Welcome back, Jack."

"Nuh-huh. Where are we?"

"In Hell's Entryway Number Two. I used an emergency passage to get us here quickly. You haven't been unconscious for long, so I've a hunch the blow was not serious. How do you feel?"

Nananana, standing a yard away, was just beginning to come into focus. My head felt as if Lee Trevino had hit it with a three-wood, and my throat had a lot in common with the floor of the Mojave Desert.

"Wonderful," I muttered. "You got a drink?"

"There's nothing here that would appeal to you, I'm afraid. But what about this container of yours?"

He handed me the bike bottle. Yuck, it was the half-wine, half-Gatorade stuff that Sally Fuerte had prepared at the Posada del Fernando, and not much of it, either. Whatever; I squeezed it down, and it helped a little.

I sat up slowly, propping my back against a wall of Hell's Entryway Number Two. That's where we were for sure, because one of those empty baskets passed with a *clink-clunk-pathootie*, and was followed by an occupied one. A rather rotund bald guy with a pissed-off expression shouted a stream of epithets when he saw us. Now I didn't care about the language, but the loudness was echoing in my brain. I was glad when a wall sucked him up.

The Buffalo Bob clone was looking at his index thing as he asked, "Are you certain you're all right, Jack?"

This time I stood up, which *really* hurt. "Yeah, honest."

"Good, because I'm afraid it's time for me to leave you. Lots of things on the fire down here... so to speak."

"Yeah, well, thanks for the tour. One last thing."

"Yes?"

"How do I get out of here?"

His look held the unspoken message *gee jack you really are quite a doofus*. "The same way you came, on your bicycle."

"Right, thanks. Can you lead me to a steep hill, or the edge of a deep

chasm, or the top of a mountain?"

He thought a moment. "No to the latter two. As for a hill, won't this passage do?"

"I don't think it's steep enough, but if I have no choice... How about hanging in until I find out?"

"Of course."

Throbbing head and all I got on the bike, waited a moment while a basket with a subdued-looking old woman *clink-clunk-pathootied* past, then started down the grade of Hell's Entry way Number Two. Nananana, on his Rollerblades, cruised behind. Bottom line: Even pedaling like crazy—which I could maintain for only a few seconds before my head threatened to explode off my shoulders—I couldn't do any better than twenty-eight-point-five, and that was *not* going to get me into the Vurdabrok Gear. I finally stopped, aching and frustrated.

The Buffalo Bob clone swerved to avoid running into me and fell on his ass. Jeez, how had he kept up?

Joining me again he asked, "No luck, huh?" He was smiling that peanut gallery smile, so I guess he was all right.

"Nope. I don't suppose it gets any steeper."

He shook his head. "It's like this all the way down." He was thinking again. "You say a deep chasm would do?"

"Yeah."

"Wait here then."

Nananana walked over to the wall, punched a few keys on the index thing, then stepped through. *That* freaked me out, because I hadn't been expecting it. I figured he'd be gone awhile and nearly sat down again, which of course was when he reappeared.

"Well, it's a bit irregular," he said, "but since options are limited, I've obtained permission to take you where you'll have what you need."

"Oh? And where might that be?" I was a mite leery about hearing the

answer.

"We'll start along Hell's Entry way Number One."

Shit, I knew it would be something like that! "You say we'll *start* there?"

"Yes. Unfortunately it is no more steep than this passage, so it will not serve the purpose. We must go... beyond it. Of course, you'll be able to do this with impunity. But I'm obliged to warn you, Jack: A lot of what you see may be unnerving."

Like what I'd seen so far *wasn't*, right? Jeez, was my headache getting bigger! "Well, if it's the only way," I said, "let's do it."

An empty basket *clink-clunk-pathootied* down. Nananana did something with the index thing, and it stopped.

"Get in, quickly," he said. "We wouldn't want the next one catching up."

Definitely not. I gotta tell you, with the Buffalo Bob look-alike, the Nishiki, and me in the basket, it was snug. One of Nananana's hands was stuck for a moment, but he pulled it free. With both of them raised above his head he again played with the index thing. The basket turned sharply, *clink-clunk-pathootied* toward the right wall and was slurped in.

Yeah, it was like one of the gates along the *mhuva lun gallee*, and yeah, I nearly screamed.

It was a tunnel with milky-white walls again. Remember me saying that they caused a claustrophobic illusion, even though the tunnel wasn't as tight as it seemed? Well I'm sorry, *these* walls were right up against both sides of the basket, and the ceiling was just above my head, and oh, God, I wanted out of here!

Was this Excedrin Headache Number Thirty-four, or what!

Wait a minute; I didn't have any Excedrin, but I had that tin of Tylenol in my seat bag! Nothing to wash them down with, but that didn't matter. I popped three of the suckers, managing enough saliva to get them where they would do some good.

Then I closed my eyes, a good move, because in addition to claustrophobia I was overwhelmed by the sensation that this basket we were riding in—this rather ordinary if oversized straw basket—was moving along at something approximating the speed of light. The question whether it or me would disintegrate first crossed my mind.

"This is my favorite part," I heard Nananana say, although his voice sounded weird as we left it in the lurch.

I'm not sure how long this went on, but the headache eased a little. Even though things were—I presume—getting curiouser and curiouser, I kept my eyes shut the whole time. No way could I have made it otherwise.

When the feeling of excessive speed lessened, I opened my eyes. Oh, jeez, the milky-white walls and ceiling had been replaced by bloodred walls and ceiling! They were still translucent, and deep inside you could see swirls or either darker red or black moving about in the manner of intoxicated snakes. Some within the left wall worked their way toward my face, because *yes*, that wall *was* only inches from the side of the basket. It was ominous, and creepy, and foreboding, and repugnant, and you're right, I closed my eyes again.

"We're almost there," Nananana said, and this time his voice wasn't left in the lurch.

I'm not sure if I was supposed to be happy about almost being *there* or not.

Then we emerged in Hell's Entry way Number One, and I *knew* that I wasn't.

Its dimensions were identical to the other, and there was a crack in the middle, but that's where any similarity ended. The walls, floor, and ceiling were of the same translucent bloodred hue as the recent passage, but here those dark swirls *oozed* out of the seemingly solid material, forming tarry puddles on the floor and tarry runnels on the walls and tarry stalactites hanging from above and *eeey-yooo* they were *gross!*

And what was worse was, the stuff seemed alive, expanding and contracting like it was breathing, twisting around like it was belly-dancing, *blurping* out of the translucent surfaces, then being sucked back in. Uh-uh, I didn't like this one bit.

Whoa, you know what else was *real* creepy? Back in Hell's Entryway Number Two, in between the *clink-clunk-pathooties* of the passing baskets and the invectives of their occupants, there had been dead silence. Not here. The sound permeating Hell's Entry-way Number One was a low, steady moan, something made by a guy who'd been tortured for five hours and had screamed his head off the whole time but was now all screamed out and on the verge of a blissful coma. Between that, the *blurping* tar, and my lessening but lingering headache, I was not a happy camper.

"Are you hanging in there, Jack?" Nananana asked.

"Barely. How come we're not riding down the middle?"

This was true. We were zigzagging back and forth on the cracks to the left of the main one, occasionally getting close to it, then veering away again.

"We would really... how do you say, 'screw up the works' if we did that here. Wait a moment and you'll see."

It didn't take long. Looking over my shoulder I saw something coming down the middle of the tunnel. Nope, not a basket; more like a metal ore car, with thick walls. And the sound it made as it was pulled along by the cable or whatever was akin to *gropp-grummet-wothoo*, which came out even creepier when it blended with that moaning. This one was empty. It passed us at consider-able speed, much faster than any basket had been going. Probably would've squashed us.

"Got it?" Nananana asked.

"Got it. Uh, how long do we have to stay here?"

"Not long at all. The turnoff is just ahead."

Good. But first another ore car *gropp-grummet-wothooed* down the pike, and this one was occupied. The guy in it was dressed in gray pajamas or something. He was tall, with a hawklike face and shaved head; he had coal-black eyes and lips formed in a snarl, and this may sound prosaic, but looking at him made my blood run cold. I swear, next to this guy Dr. Hannibal Lecter would have come off like the friendly smiling face in the window of your local Burger King.

Nananana fiddled with his index. "This new arrival is—"

"Yeah, that's okay!" I interrupted.

Really, I didn't want to hear it. Whoever this guy might be he was Terribly Frigging Bad, Beyond Redemption, and he was *here*, and that was all I needed to know.

The ore car went twenty yards past us, veered sharply toward the left wall, and was sucked in with a burst of red and black and a *creepy* amplified moan. As quickly as it was over, it wasn't fast enough.

"Time to switch now," the Buffalo Bob clone said, and I suddenly realized we were riding down the middle.

"I thought you said—!" I cried, but he held up a hand.

"Everything is momentarily shut down," he explained. "It has to be, or this will not work. All right, here we go!"

Our *straw* basket veered to the right, toward the same kind of swirling wall that had just taken a car made of heavy metal.

Sorry, Old Guys, and everyone else, but this was one of Jack Miller's most prodigious screams yet.

About scared the living (dead?) shit out of my guide.

And inside the wall? Where black oozy serpents swirled around and said *let's play boa constrictor with all his various organs and appendages!* And the moaning sound was like the dungeons of the Spanish Inquisition after Torquemada's girlfriend told him *not tonight tombs I have a headache!*

Yeah, I *definitely* shut my eyes again.

"Look alert, Jack," Nananana said. "This is the shortest part of the journey."

Hey, that was the best thing anyone could have said! Okay, I looked as alert as I could, which wasn't *that* alert, but enough to satisfy my guide. Yeah, the snakes were still on the make, and yeah, the victims of the rack and the bamboo shoots under the fingernails were still asking for the

understanding of their fellow man. But I did some deep breathing, recited a silent *om*, and got through it.

The basket finally stopped.

Nananana climbed out. I'm not sure if I really wanted to, but I did anyway, then lifted the Nishiki.

A tarry mound resembling a volcano *blurped* up at my feet.

"Funny, I thought everything was on hold," Nananana said.

Oh, that made me feel great!

He pointed at the wall that had been on our left, which I now realized *wasn't* a wall but another tunnel. Yeah, and *its* walls were also alive with that swirling shit, but at least the moaning had stopped. A small consolation, with my head again feeling like the village smithy had taken exception to its shape.

"The way is through here," he said. "I—"

His index thing suddenly beeped like a pocket pager. He stared at it a few seconds, a concerned look forming on his face.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

"The powers that be wish us to hurry along. Things cannot be ground to a halt very long. Come quickly, and use your bike!"

Sounded like a plan to me. He skated down the tunnel; I rode. More tarry mounds *blurped* up. One tentacle went for the front tire, but I made a nifty move to get around it.

Wake-up time in the Inquisitional dungeons. The moaning and groaning and the whole nine yards' worth of agony, torment, and such was worse than at any time before. And in addition to all of the aforementioned, it had grown awfully hot in the short passageway.

What that meant was, WE WERE HERE.

And if Nananana hadn't motioned me to a stop with his hand in the next one-point-two seconds I would've been plummeting down before I'd

had a chance to find out where HERE was.

Well, I'd asked for the edge of a chasm, and I'd gotten it. Peering over, I flinched from an intense blast of heat that rose from its depths. It was a wide pit, five yards in diameter, and I suppose it was real deep, although there was *no way* you could see the bottom through the stuff that swirled around in it.

The *stuff* was mist, or gas, or vapor, and came in a variety of colors, none of them meant to remind you of Rainbow Brite's play area or fields of wildflowers in the spring. Dark greens and dark reds and dark grays and dark purples, all with those ubiquitous tarry streaks undulating amid them. And through rifts in these *clouds*, from far below, flashes of white-yellow light created even eerier shadows in the pit.

Yeah, this was closer to what most folks perceived as Hell.

And this was the only way for me to get back to the Ultimate Bike Path!

"Well, Jack, will this do?" Nananana asked.

"There are no other choices?"

"None."

"Then it's wonderful," I said, trying not to look down. "Let's get it over with."

"Good idea. I—whoops."

His index thing beeped again. He looked at it.

"What now?" I asked.

"We have to wait. There was a backup, and things have to be eased a bit. Lots of action down here these days, you know. Now, we're fine right where we're standing, but please don't move."

Oh, for sure. I stood as stiffly as if someone had sprayed me with liquid nitrogen. Not until I heard *gropp-grummet-wothoo* in the distance did I have a clue what was going to happen.

The car appeared on the opposite side of the chasm. I couldn't really see the swarthy, scowling passenger that great, except to notice that he had a generic Latin American dictator look about him. That was all I could absorb before the ore car braked to a sudden halt, the front part flapping open and catapulting the guy into the pit. He plummeted down, at first shocked into silence. Then, as the vapors engulfed him and the heat became intense, this gurgling scream rose above all the other cries and moans, and I could hear it for a long time, even after I couldn't see him.

"There, that didn't take long," Nananana said matter-of-factly. "Go on now, Jack; it's clear."

Yeah, I guess it was. The ore car was gone from the other side; I hadn't even noticed it *gropp-grummet-wothoo* off. I glanced at the Buffalo Bob Smith clone and said, "Well, see ya," then looked up at the creepy ceiling of the tunnel and muttered, "Hey, Old Guy, you and your buddies damn well better be tuned in right about now."

"Excuse me?" Nananana asked.

"Never mind."

My heart pounding louder than my head, I leaped into the bowels of Hell.

The mere thought of *that* almost caused a bowel movement.

The temperature rose to something just short of 451 degrees Fahrenheit.

From above—if you can believe this—Nananana was actually singing *that song* with his name in it. Here, under these circumstances, *hey hey-ey, good-bye* had a rather ominous meaning.

The screams that engulfed me sounded like a hundred guys from some Master Chorale all being castrated at the same time.

But soon my own unchained *yow!* had drowned them out.

Those weird, ugly-colored vapors were ready to suck me down.

Fortunately, free-fall got you up to speed quickly. I stopped screaming

long enough to shift into the twenty-second gear...

... and started pedaling slowly just as soon as I reappeared on the Ultimate Bike Path, right smack down the middle.

Oh, did I feel like *absolute* shit warmed over! My head was doing its pre-Tylenol pounding; I was shaking from either fear or fever, and my throat could've been used by Bob Vila to sandpaper a door. Reality time beckoned like never before, and yet no way did I want to go back like this. I needed to rest, a fact made more than evident by the effort it took to pedal my bike along the *mhuva lun gallee*, something that had always been easy. It felt like I was going uphill in a headwind.

Naturally, the only gates at the moment were Bart Simpsons and toothbrushes. Uh-uh to both. I wanted to bypass them quickly but at the moment wasn't even able to get much beyond nearly-falling-over. Fortunately it was a short run, and a random pattern resumed. Plenty to choose from now.

Scenario: Study Group Old Guys About To Discontinue Their Observations Of Jack Miller.

My Old Guy: "That was quite an interesting excursion, don't you think?"

Study Group New Old Guy #2: "Oh, indeed! I am fascinated by your Jack Miller. What will he do now?"

My Old Guy: "He is ready for reality time. That means there will be a lull, so if you wish to—"

Study Group Old Guy #3 (bursts in): "Oh, how excellent! The eggs of the Trumbian intestinal worms have begun to hatch!"

My Old Guy: "And you're certain they were laid in the festering sores of *southern* mountain sheep?"

Study Group Old Guy #3: "Absolutely."

Study Group New Old Guy #2 (excited): "I must see that!" My Old Guy: "Yes, me too. You both go on ahead. I'll make sure Jack finds a safe place to rest before his return to reality time, then I'll join you."

Okay, I wasn't wasting time with this, especially with my top speed of nearly-falling-over about to become on-his-ass.

A warm, vibrating isosceles triangle appeared on my right. I rode through the fireworks without so much as a whimper...

... and shifted down from the twenty-second gear at the base of a grassy knoll.

Yo, chalk up one for the *nachis* column! Blue skies, gently glowing sun, green-yellow meadows, and a winding river about two Joe Montana heaves from where I stood. And less than a mile away, when I needed it, a range of mountains with a well-defined path climbing up. This place had been made-to-order.

I pedaled to the river with all I had left... not a hell of a lot. Hey, even better, there were trees by the river laden with fruit, things that looked like enormous strawberries. But first things first. I washed my face in the cold, clear water, stuck my head below, and gulped down about fourteen gallons... a stupid thing to do, I realized, after I'd gagged for a few seconds. Yeah, but it was wonderful.

Then, cautiously, I tasted the fruit and found that they *were* giant strawberries. I ate a whole one, thought about a second, then passed, because what I really wanted was to catch a few Zs. I stretched out on the soft, grassy bank, too tired to even take off my bike shoes. The headache had abated, which was good.

With wispy clouds floating overhead, with birds singing in the giant strawberry trees, I fell asleep.

When I awakened, the headache was gone, but I was surrounded by monsters.

Yeah, the suckers were everywhere, in one tightening circle around me. Slimy amphibious ones, resembling the Swamp Thing in the throes of a prostate examination, had climbed out of the river. Others, emerging from behind the trees, looked like giant versions of those mutated babies in the *It's Alive!* films. There were tall, hairless monstrosities with penile noses, half-gorilla, half-boar things with curved talons large enough to disembowel a 747, something that looked like a five-foot vertical cockroach that had risen from the slab halfway through heart surgery, and

sundry other things that I had no time to examine. And beyond this circle, scattered about the meadow and across the river, were hundreds of walking dead, a veritable roll call of every extra who had ever played in an Italian zombie movie.

I was in some serious kaka here.

Yeah, but it could've been worse, I thought as the circle closed to twenty feet. I might not have woken up until they were all over me. You know what was passing through my brain, kind of crazily? I wondered how far my flesh would've gone in feeding this crew.

I think Rule-To-Live-By #514 when traveling along the Ultimate Bike Path was something like: Never go to sleep in a strange place without having a sheer cliff alongside. I'll have to ask the Old Guy.

The circle of monsters closed to fifteen feet.

Jeez, they were so damn quiet! Why couldn't they snarl, or howl, or something?

Options, options. Not many. The circle was tight, and real thick, and there were plenty of other grotesque shitheads to contend with beyond it. No way to pedal out of this mess.

The circle of monsters closed to ten feet, and stopped. This was good... I think.

They were all staring at me when one of the half-gorilla, half-boar things stepped forward and said, "The spleen is mine."

I reached for the Bukko.

The circle of monsters started moving again.

"Hey, Old Guys, listen up," I called, wrapping my other hand around the Nishiki's frame. "I know there's at least twenty of you tuned in. Okay, I humbly admit this situation falls in the no-win category; you've probably figured that out. So, since this has already been a shitty day, and since I don't feel like having this go any further, how about you pull my ass out of here, *now*?"

The circle of monsters closed to eight feet.

"Really," I went on, "I don't want to use the Bukko, and I know you don't want me to either. So why don't you—?"

The circle of monsters closed to six feet. They looked *real* hungry.

"Come on, stop dicking around!" I cried, rather pissedly. "Sor-ree, my little three percenter is *not* going to get me out of this one, so how about getting a move on?"

The monsters were in my face now. Talons and fangs and tentacles and *yechh!* were doing their imitation of AT&T reaching out to touch someone. I could've run the Clorets concession from all the fetid breath that overwhelmed me.

Honest to God, there was nothing left to do.

I RUBBED THE BUKKO.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

And the Verdict From Cedar Rapids Is...

Hoo boy, it felt like Hulk Hogan had just body-slammed me to the mat!

I was flat on my back along the squishy south bank of the Santa Margarita River, practically under the bridge. The Nishiki was *in* the river, stuck in the mud. The Old Guy stood on his head atop one of the boulders that you had to climb to get up to Stuart Mesa Road. I wondered if his people felt pain.

Was this a great scenario, or what?

The "ride" here was impossible to describe. It couldn't have taken more than three hundredths of a second. I remember a flash of green, some cold wind.

That was it.

Okay, I don't care if I was hurting all over, or if the Old Guy was trying to figure out what to do about his possible brain damage. I was pissed! After dragging myself up I started toward the rocks; but the Old Guy, doing a wonderful imitation of Jack LaLanne, somersaulted to his feet and alit in front of me. Impressive. Still, I wasn't deterred from my purpose.

"Why the hell didn't you pull me out?" I cried. "There was, what, *twenty* of you watching me? Couldn't even *one* guess that I was in trouble, without me shouting all over the place?"

"Uh, Jack—" He seemed reluctant to say anything.

"There *were* a lot of you watching me, right?"

"Well, during your excursion to Yodonomoho and those other islands, there was myself and six others in the study group."

"Yeah, I knew that. But didn't the crowd grow larger?"

He shook his head. "When you made your return visit to Ralph Ralph, and the next excursion with Don Quixote, there was myself and three others."

I was taken aback. "And after that?"

"Your journey to Hell commanded the attention of myself and *one* other, although some would have returned before long. Then, knowing you were on your way back to reality time and seemingly safe, the two of us were diverted elsewhere. Sorry, Jack."

Yeah, well, I'd already figured *that* out. But you know what was getting to me here? All the time I'd thought I was a hot item, with Old Guys galore tripping over themselves to have a peek at my exploits... the study group was *shrinking!* Talk about feeling like an orifice!

A *humbled* orifice.

First the seagull, and now this. I was learning some great lessons about myself along the way, huh?

The Bukko was still in my hand. I undid my fingers and looked at it.

Yep, the left horn on the ugly animal was gone.

"No way this can be undone?" I asked hopefully.

He shook his head. "I explained to you at the outset about the rules that govern our activities. The next time you rub the Bukko, Jack, your excursions along the *mhuva lun gallee* will be over." He flashed me one of those well-practiced smiles. "But let me tell you what you've accomplished so far."

"Yeah?" I said glumly.

"First, no one has *ever* gone as long as you have without rubbing the Bukko. Many have even done it with the study group watching, not attempting to utilize their own abilities."

"No shit?"

"No shit, Jack. Life-forms like this have not even been allowed a second chance. And although you *could* have asked to be saved in a number of situations, the only time we've pulled you out during this whole time was when you were hallucinating from that water."

"And I didn't even call you then!"

"Exactly. You have done *quite* well, Jack. If it bothers you that more are not observing your exploits, perhaps I might be able to—"

"No, forget it," I interrupted. "It's not important. As long as I know *you're* ... up there, it's fine."

He grinned again. "Like I told you at the start, I can't promise to *always* be there. But I'll do the best I can."

I felt better now; I mean, this wasn't supposed to go on forever, was it? Sooner or later I had to settle down, get serious about life, find out who was going to be Melvin Butterwood's great-whatever grandmother...

But not yet; no, not for a long time.

"Well, I'd better dig the bike out," I said.

"Yes, it has looked better. And I must get back, lest the others be concerned about how quickly I was pulled away. Uh, do you have any idea how long this reality time is going to be?"

"At least the weekend." I thought a moment. "Tell you what, I'll meet you at the tree Monday morning, ten o'clock. That's Pacific Daylight Savings time, of course."

"Oh, of course," he replied, even though I knew he'd have to look it up later. "Have a nice break. I hope you hear from your female."

My female. Yeah, I was hoping I'd hear from her too.

I guess.

Anyway, with the Old Guy's help I pulled the Nishiki out of the mud and cleaned it off. When I carried it up to Stuart Mesa Road, he stayed under the bridge. Well, since he hadn't arrived by the usual means, it was safe to assume he wasn't returning that way either.

Pedaling to my car, it occurred to me that I didn't have a clue whether I'd slept for ten minutes or ten hours before the rude interruption by that bevy of monsters. I still felt shitty, and the head was throbbing again, although all of that might have had to do with the hasty passage back, as well as the teeth-jarring landing. Whatever; I needed the Jacuzzi, and I needed my bed, and I was glad I hadn't made plans for Friday night. My ambition did not extend beyond going home and being a zucchini.

Well, my female *hadn't* called while I was gone. Neither had anyone else. Fine. I went over and soaked for a period of time that was probably outside the recommended safety limits. The reason I finally left was because one of the neighbors uttered a single short sentence that contained the words *overexposed*, *lobster*, and *skin cancer*.

Not long after emerging from the caldron, I was asleep. I'd even refused an invitation to play Nintendo with Maury Khazuti and listen to his latest Zamfir album. The phone remained silent, and I made it all the way to the break of the next day.

Okay, now I felt better. The plan was to start inputting on my hard disk all that had happened since I'd first turned up in the red sea. But as I sipped coffee out of my *Star Trek* mug (Kirk, Spock, and McCoy are in the transporter. When hot coffee fills up the mug, they beam out. Cute) and ate my breakfast (A poppy-seed bagel, heavy on the Philadelphia cream cheese, and a side of bacon. How's that for a mixed-culture nosh?), it occurred to me that there was something about Saturday morning I was

forgetting. I thought about it awhile.

Oh, yeah, now I remembered. My neighbor on the other side, old but plucky Mrs. Leanna DeMutt, made it a point of knowing the business of everyone in the complex. Maybe everyone in Del Mar. Who knows? Anyway, she'd found out a while back that this one condo across the street, which had been empty for a long time, had finally been rented. And more recently she'd had a look at the new occupant.

"A young woman, my boy," she had said. (She always called me *my boy*.) "A very tall, very blond, very sexy young woman. Reminded me of that babe Stallone was married to for a while."

"Brigitte Nielsen," I had replied.

"That's the one. Bet you'd *love* those legs wrapped around your back! Her name's Tracy Jacobs. Good hunting, my boy."

Mrs. Leanna DeMutt was fun, but she could be embarrassing.

In any case, she had a good eye, so I was looking forward to seeing this goddess, whom Mrs. DeMutt had said was moving in on Saturday morning. She hadn't said when, so I made it a point to eat breakfast in the living room, where I could keep an eye on the front window.

At nine-forty a blue Mazda pulled up ahead of a Hertz/Penske truck, and I had my first look at Tracy Jacobs.

She was very tall.

She was very blond.

She was *very* sexy.

And yeah, she bore quite a resemblance to the former Mrs. Rambo.

A guy in surfer dude clothes got out of the truck. He was even taller than she and had arms like sequoia trunks and looked a hell of a lot like Patrick Swayze.

Two other guys in surfer dude clothes got out of a red Nissan pickup that had followed. They were just as tall as the first guy and had arms like sequoia trunks and also looked a hell of a lot like Patrick Swayze.

Well, I had thought about offering to help her move in, but why go out of your way to schlepp furniture and stuff when there was nothing but profound gratitude at the other end? I mean, I was *not* a Patrick Swayze type, you know? So I went up to my office, which also overlooked the street, and started working.

Near noon they finished unloading the truck. Each of the three Patrick Swayze surfer dudes was standing out front holding a can of Coors; Tracy had a diet Coke. She hugged two of the Patrick Swayze surfer dudes. They climbed into the Hertz/Penske truck and drove off. She hugged the third Patrick Swayze surfer dude.

She kissed the third Patrick Swayze surfer dude. Hard.

They did all kinds of feelies with their hands. Sitting there and watching, the word *voyeur* came to mind.

Hands on buns, they walked into Tracy's condo, probably to start unpacking boxes.

Possibly to break the place in.

I stuck my (large) nose back into my work and got a lot done before my gurgling stomach and the squinty-eyed way in which I was staring at the words on the monitor told me it was time to knock off.

Used to be my good buddy Phil Melkowitz was almost *always* available on Saturday nights, and we would find something to do, or just do nothing, which was okay too. No more. This Jennifer King thing was getting kind of serious. Well, it couldn't have happened to a nicer guy. I was glad for him.

Really.

So, an ideal Jack Miller-home-alone night was in order. *That* consisted of a whole lot of take-out Chinese food, a Padres game on the tube, and a horror movie. Nirvana.

Speaking of Brigitte Nielsen (*Were we?*), have you ever had experience with phone dating?

It's become a promising way to meet the potential mate of your

dreams, actually. In case you don't know, it works—with minor variations—like this: You place a brief ad in a newspaper, which gets printed with a voice mail code. The person responding calls a 900 number, and for about a buck a minute gets to listen to your longer message, then leaves one of his or her own if interested. Yeah, you can go through a lot of frogs, but sometimes there's a prince or princess. And it's pretty safe, too.

I read a story about a woman who placed one of these ads. She described herself as *Six feet tall, Brigitte Nielsen look-alike*.

She got two hundred and fifty responses in two weeks.

Had to catalog them on a Rolodex, or establish a data base, or something.

Since the ad didn't say diddly about the inner person, you have to assume that two hundred and fifty guys out there were mainly interested in how many times she could wrap her loo-oong legs around *their* backs.

There couldn't possibly be that many Patrick Swayze surfer dudes out there!

I used to respond to ads like that.

The physical thing was real important. Sometimes that was the *only* thing that attracted me. And since the other party was more often than not also looking for a Patrick Swayze surfer dude, and since yours truly fell somewhere between Billy Crystal and Mister Rogers, it led to some pretty brief first meetings. ("Cups of coffee," they're called in the dating game.)

Anyway, I started to get real not long ago. The ads that appealed to me more described the inner person, someone who had a brain, a heart, was balanced, communicative, had a *great* sense of humor, a zest for life, and sought all of the same in a soulmate. And if that someone happened to be attractive, well, there was a nice fringe benefit.

A *someone* just like Holly Dragonette...

I had this weird dream during the night. See, I'm walking through a South American rain forest when Arnold Schwarzenegger pops out from behind a tree, and he's decked out in enough weaponry to have personally

closed out Operation Desert Storm *and* the war on drugs, and he looks *really* pissed.

"I seek of you making fon of how I talk, modder fokker!" he says.

Well, at least he didn't think I was an *ogly* one!

Anyway, he points this *big* gun with the word *Navarone* on the side of it at me, just about at *testiculos* level, but I manage to deflect it with a good swift kick. A shell about the size of Anchorage disappears above the treetops, then explodes, and the sky opens up, and there's this big ghostly image of Valeria, who was Conan the Barbarian's lost love, slain in the movie by a snake arrow fired by James Earl Jones, who could barely keep a straight face playing the evil sorcerer Thulsa Doom. She looks down at Arnold and says, "Do you wanna live forever?"

He replies, "Fokkin A, beetch!"

So she hurls down a bunch of lightning bolts before fading to black, and Arnold gets all burnt up, like Wile E. Coyote after the Road Runner has left him an Acme bomb sandwich. Now he's even *more* pissed, and he turns that cannon on me again, only now it's the size of the Love Boat.

"Thees all your fault, Jock Meeller!" he bellows. "I reep out your heart! I cut off your deeck and shove eet up where no moonshine weell reach the darkness!"

Huh?

So now I'm running through the rain forest, and of course it's raining (Why do you think they call it a *rain* forest?), and Arnold keeps trying to fit that mother of a gun you-know-where, and I'm zigzagging like O. J. Simpson on many Sunday afternoons past, and Capt. Steubing and that asshole purser from the Love Boat are running on both sides of me, except they both disappear when about twenty of those Predator aliens sans helmets switch off their light deflectors and make their presence known, like at the end of *Predator II*. And behind me, Arnold starts laughing his ass off.

"Crom, look at all the ogly modder fokkers!" he exclaims.

I step aside, noticing that Arnold no longer has the cannon, or any

other weapon, for that matter, just his humongous fists, which he's bashing together, the resultant sound approximating that of two garbage trucks colliding head-on. The Predators pull out every conceivable kind of galactic weapon as he wades in among them.

A minute later twenty aliens are spread out across the landscape, either dead or practically so. Arnold hardly has a scratch on him.

"Now for you, *asshull*," he says, banging his fists together again, and this time they sound like two DC-10s colliding over LAX.

He was right about the *asshull* part, because I'd backed myself into a rocky cul-de-sac and had no way out. So I stand up to him, figuring he'll break me in two... which he does, right at the waist. Then he picks up both halves of me and heaves them high in the sky. Along the way the half with the hands manages to grab hold of the half with the legs, and I stick myself back together.

Just as I start falling toward Thulsa Doom's evil fortress. The roof is off, and in one chamber a wild orgy is in progress. James Earl Jones is standing next to a huge vat of boiling green stuff filled with hands and feet and heads, and he's laughing his ass off, either because of the role he's playing, or because the aforementioned vat just happens to be my destination.

In his wonderfully sonorous voice he calls out, "It's customary to wash your hands, Luke, when you drop in for dinner, but I suppose we can overlook it."

"My name's Jack," I tell him.

He grins. "It won't matter much in a moment."

The bubbling appendage stew is coming up fast. A hand *blurps* to the surface and flips me the bird.

This seems like a good time to wake up, I think.

Then, Valeria reaches down from the heavens, plucks me up, and deposits me on the ground in front of the fortress.

"I know *you* wanna live forever, Jack," she says.

Right on. So I'm going to thank her, but she's gone, and Arnold is there, only this time he's less than three feet tall. He throws a few kicks at my shins, then hurls a string of Arnold-style epithets at me, but in the voice of Alvin (or maybe Theodore) the Chipmunk, which is really weird.

Well, now that he's of a size I could handle, I try to get hold of the little bugger. But he scampers off, pausing just long enough to call back in his Alvin (possibly Theodore) voice, "I'll be back, modder fokker!"

See? He *still* didn't think I was ugly!

Anyway, that was when I finally woke up. It was 8:10 on Sunday morning, which was late for me. The body alarm was not going off at 5:56 as much as it used to.

The pickup truck belonging to the Patrick Swayze surfer dude was still parked on the street, in front of Tracy Jacobs's condo. I'm sure it had been there all night. Yeah, they'd really broken the place in right.

Okay, the plan for most of the day was to finish writing down (so to speak) my recent excursions along the Ultimate Bike Path. That was until 9:12 a.m.

What happened at 9:12 a.m.? I suppose there's no need to get overly dramatic about it... but I will anyway.

I GOT A PHONE CALL FROM HOLLY DRAGONETTE!

We spent an hour and a half talking. (My mother, Mrs. Rose Miller Leventhal, would have had a conniption about that, and she wouldn't have cared *who* made the call.)

You don't need a play-by-play. The gist of it was, Mr. Cedar Rapids was *definitely* out of her life, once and for all. It had not taken her long to be certain of that, especially after she'd started missing *me* even more than she'd imagined she would (I *liked* that!). But then, her *very* overprotective family had gone to work on Holly in a last-ditch effort to keep her there. And they were so aggressive that she needed an escape, so she'd gone off by herself and for most of the past week had thought, meditated, communed with the universe, that sort of thing.

After that, the decisions she'd already made about her life became

irrevocable. She wanted her company to transfer her to southern California, and she wanted to study for her doctorate here, and she *for sure* wanted a relationship with Jack Miller! The refrain of "I'm sorry, Jack, for putting you through all *my stuff*" was uttered at least two dozen times during the course of the conversation (occasionally transmuted into "I'm *really* sorry, *babe*, for putting you through all *my stuff*," which I also liked), even though I told her about the same number of times to forget it. She hoped I wasn't angry at her and still wanted to give the relationship a chance.

Right.

Okay, as planned she was going to haul her things out here in a rental truck. Since she'd requested the transfer, her company had no intention of paying to move her. But unlike before she wanted out of there *fast*, hopefully in another week to ten days. So, forget about biking to Iowa. The tentative plan, which I would confirm tomorrow, was to fly there either Wednesday or Thursday. If everything worked out on her end, we would start back to California by Monday of the following week.

The two things she said again before we hung up were how much she missed me and "I'm really *really* sorry, *babe*, for putting you through all *my stuff*."

Do you think I was a happy camper now?

I got the rest of my inputting done and only half noticed when four more Patrick Swayze surfer dudes showed up at the door of my new Brigitte Nielsen look-alike neighbor.

That evening I took a walk on the beach by the Del Mar cliffs, and you know what I uttered more than once?

Thank you, universe.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Feeling a Bit Light-headed, Are We?

"So, you finally heard from your female?"

"Yep."

"Even though I still barely understand it, I know how happy you are. You look more at peace with yourself than at any time in recent memory. So I too am happy for you, Jack."

"Thanks."

The Old Guy had regressed a bit. He had met me at the lone eucalyptus on Stuart Mesa Road dressed in blue Dockers shorts, an America's Cup T-shirt, and Thorn McCann deck shoes. And you would not *believe* what he wobbled up the hill on, a decrepit, gearless Sears bike that must've been in their catalog when they sold surries with fringes on top. It was one of those items always left over at the end of a garage sale, and you could have it for nothing if you hauled it away. I had a hunch he employed some means other than two legs to get it here. Whatever, I didn't say a word about anything.

Actually, for a while I hadn't even been sure I was going to make it to the appointed place at ten a.m., Monday. Right now, the quick passage of a few days of reality time sounded wonderful. I'd even made my travel plans earlier, and called Holly to let her know. I'd be flying out late Wednesday morning; with connections, and the loss of two hours, I'd get to Cedar Rapids in the evening. The Old Guy would've found me, I figured, if I was a no-show.

Then I decided it would be assholish on my part if I didn't do it in person.

Then I decided it might be a while before I had either the time or the desire to travel the Ultimate Bike Path again, so why not one more excursion before I began this next, potentially wonderful phase of my life?

So be it.

The Old Guy had pretty much figured it out. Still smiling broadly he said, "I hope this excursion will be an excellent one. I'll see you after."

"Right."

We shook hands. Then he did one of those slap-yourself-in-the-head things that you do when you just remembered something you should have

before. Only trouble was, he did it too hard and nearly knocked himself unconscious. I helped him up.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Can't believe I forgot! In addition to myself, five of the six others will be rejoining me to observe you. I knew you'd be glad to hear that."

"Oh, for sure." Actually, you and I know it was not high on my Most Important Things list now. "Tell them all I said hello."

This seemed to please the Old Guy. He pedaled off, headed north, the miserable bike swaying like a drunk. I waited for him to beam up, but after a couple of minutes it hadn't happened, so I started down the hill.

Aborted Plummet Number One: This loo-oong convoy of humvees and Dragon Wagons was suddenly on my left, one of the drivers leaning on his horn because I had ventured a quarter inch out of the bike lane. *That* nearly put me in the ravine. Fortunately all of this occurred not far from the top, so I didn't have to retrace much distance.

Aborted Plummet Number Two: Would you believe that somewhere in the two and a half miles between Camp Pendleton's main gate and the lone eucalyptus, I'd biked past Muriel, Walt, and two of their pals and had already forgotten it? Thinking about Holly in general, and the upcoming trip in particular, had that effect. Yeah, great. I'd better get the mind-set going in another direction before hitting the *mhuva lun gallee*.

Anyway, the seniors had gotten less than halfway up the hill before having to dismount and walk their bikes. Muriel, of course, was waving at me as I sped past, about one-point-three seconds before I would have shifted into the twenty-second gear, so I didn't, but slowed down, which took me nearly all the way to the Santa Margarita River bridge. Swell, I had to go up again.

Muriel and the other couple were gasping and wheezing when I caught up to them. Walt, back on his bike, was grinning as he pedaled a couple of yards ahead.

"What's wrong, you *old folks* run out of gas?" He chuckled over his shoulder, kind of prickishly. "Wow, I'm feeling great!"

"You didn't have any staying power in bed last night, Walt," Muriel said. "Could hardly get a rise out of you. What were you doing, saving it all for today?"

I got the hell outta there *real* fast.

Knowing their ascent would consume a bit more time, I rode a mile north to where Stuart Mesa Road paralleled the Santa Fe railroad tracks. Did I ever tell you that I had this thing about watching trains go past? I liked Amtrak trains, especially when they added some of the classic cars during the horse racing season at the Del Mar Fairgrounds. But I liked watching the long freights even more. Now, you Mid westerners, having often been delayed five minutes or more at a crossing by one of those trains with seven thousand and twelve cars, might not relate to that. What the hell, it's just the way I am.

I gave it five minutes, but nothing came, so I returned to the top of the hill. Muriel and the other couple were there; Walt had either given up the ghost or been pushed into the scrub by his pissed-off spouse, because at first I didn't see him. Oh, yeah, there he was, just coming over the ridge, walking his bike and praying for the divine intervention of a respirator.

Muriel was pointing me out to the other lady in their group. The latter, about five feet tall and nearly the same around, was all dressed in purple spandex and matching helmet. She smiled as she listened to Muriel; then the two of them performed a nicely choreographed bump-and-grind in my direction.

You *know* what I did.

Fortunately there was no Aborted Plummet Number Three, the planets or whatever finally falling into alignment. I got up to speed quickly and shifted into the Vurdabrok Gear...

... which put me right smack down the middle of the *mhuva lun gallee*.

Right smack in the path of a whole bunch of go-things headed in the opposite direction!

The go-things themselves looked like giant yams, each atop a dozen bagel-wheels. (Maybe there was a thirteenth there; I don't know.) Their riders were skinny water buffaloes wearing derbies similar to what Lou

Costello always used to have on.

Pretty good observations to make in one-point-eight seconds, which is how long it took before they were around me.

Bellowing, snorting, shouting all kinds of vile things about my lineage and such. Somehow I managed to weave through the lot of them without a single collision, although one did lean over and *whap* me on the helmet with a cloven hoof, which rang my chimes. The asshole!

After all, this wasn't my fault! First, everyone took the same chance when getting on the Ultimate Bike Path, right? Considering its scope, it was a minimal risk. And second, for so large a group these yam-riders were really hogging (buffaloing?) a wide portion of the rust-red tunnel. *Any* traveler coming in the other direction would have been in their way, or vice versa. So I made sure to let them know that fact—rather huffily, I might add—after the last of the three dozen or so was behind me. A fat lot of good that did, huh?

Anyway, no harm done, other than pissing me off. The *mhuva lun gallee* was now in its usual state of *all-but-deserted*, and I turned my attention to the gates.

Oh, great, a whole bunch of toothbrushes. Other than an occasional Elmer Fudd, they dominated for a long time. I got tired of them and went into blur-speed, which I had to repeat twice before getting past the bloody things. A random pattern finally began, and I continued at normal speed.

Thoughts about this and that while riding along the Ultimate Bike Path (with an addendum that none of these thoughts evoke any form of universal interest, especially within the Afterwards):

Isn't it great to have James Brown out of prison and doing his thing again? (*Owwwoooo, ah feeeel good!*)

I'm not sure which to believe, that Elvis's soul has been reincarnated in the unborn offspring of a geisha girl and a sumo wrestler in Osaka, or that aliens from the planet Deevabla have taken that soul on their starship and placed it in suspended animation for the six-thousand-year trip home. Tough choice.

Did you know that at the Last Supper one of the diners was known as

James the Less? But not a single guy there was named Archie or Sal.

In the late fifties rock and roll was considered godless and subversive, a sure bet to fry the brains of America's youth and assure the takeover of communism. Maybe what scared the nay-sayers the most was that the phrase *rock and roll* came about from the old Negro euphemism for sexual intercourse.

Sure, I loved Lucy as much as the next guy, but my favorite old sitcom was *The Honeymooners*. Do you remember Ralph Kramden, golf club in hand, stepping up to the ball, planting his feet firmly, and addressing it? To this day I can't drive past a golf course and see someone getting ready to tee off without shouting "Hel-loooo, ball!" and cracking up.

Next time you watch the classic 1956 science fiction movie *Forbidden Planet* (with that *Naked Gun* cop, Leslie Nielsen), see if you don't think you're watching an episode of *Star Trek* a decade too soon.

I know that Nananana, who looked like Buffalo Bob Smith from *The Howdy Doody Show*, had assured me that I was in *the Hell* when he gave me the royal tour, not just *any* hell, and from what I'd seen (down?) there it was a hard thing to deny.

Still, was that where I *really* was?

The odds of Holly turning out to be the great-whatever grandmother of Melvin Butterwood had just changed dramatically. I wonder what they'd give me in the sports book at the Las Vegas Hilton.

Speaking of which, it was time to stop dawdling and make a choice. With the random pattern continuing I had sped up, fond as I was of the kaleidoscopic effect. Neat, but kind of hypnotic. So, with a shake of the head to throw off the constricting webs of lethargy (How's that for prosaic kaka?), I slowed down and thought about my next port of call.

A Florida gate. Yeah, it had been a while, and there were plenty around, so no protracted search was necessary. Each watery portal I rode past seemed to tug a little harder, but I waited, until finally this one seemed to reach out with an ethereal *yank* that nearly unseated me. It had a dozen or so little dots scattered across the state, and one large one on the panhandle, about the location of Tallahassee, which made me think of Freddy Cannon, which made me think of Palisades Park in New Jersey,

which made me think of how much I hated to ride on roller coasters, which... never mind.

All my stupidity notwithstanding, I had remembered to angle the Nishiki in the direction of the beckoning gate. I burst through the greenish water...

And shifted down from the twenty-second gear as I braked to a stop—unnecessarily—in a field of tall grass.

I don't mean it-hasn't-been-mowed-in-a-week tall. I'm talking *TALL*, way above my head, too tall to even see *how* tall, and dense, so if there was any sky over this world—whatever its color—I couldn't see it.

Never thought a machete could be so desirable.

Well, one way or another I had to get out of here. But as you can imagine, moving through the grass was hard, especially having to drag along the Nishiki. The first few steps I took—if you can call them steps—made me feel like I was walking in slow motion along the bottom of a swimming pool filled with Jell-O. At least the damp, half-inch-wide blades had no sharp edges to slice up my unprotected parts, or I could've been in some serious hurt.

I'm not sure how long I traipsed through the smothering greenness. It felt longer than it actually was, I'm sure. In any case it suddenly did end; I mean, *real* abruptly. No thinning out, nothing. Yeah, I was free, and the grass now below my feet was about it-hasn't-been-mowed-in-a-week tall, which was okay by me. I took a step, wanting to put a bit more distance between myself and the edge of the weird grass forest.

I had to let go of the Nishiki as the step carried me up two feet above the ground, which made me freak and flail, which carried me *five* feet above the ground, which made me freak and flail some more, which flipped me upside down, which was when I decided to stop freaking and flailing, which was when I floated gently down to the it-hasn't-been-mowed-in-a-week-tall grass, landed on my head alongside the bike, and rolled over.

What the hey!

I got up real slowwwwww. One thing I pride myself on is being a fast

learner. Standing there, feet firmly on the grass, I chanced a slight hop, one that would've gotten me four millimeters off the ground on our world. I rose vertically, like an Atlas rocket, to a height of twelve feet, then touched down.

Hey, cool! Obviously this world was lacking in gravity. Considering that, I'm not sure how I could be standing here and breathing the air; but then I wasn't going to worry about it, because I'd often made myself crazy with matters of lesser importance, right?

Now I was in control. I wheeled the bike farther away from the *TALL* grass... the top of which, by the way, I still couldn't see. It was amazing how light the bike felt. Once again I laid it down, this time sitting cross-legged next to it. With no more surprises at hand, I had a look at my surroundings.

Well, other than the *TALL* grass forest and the gravity problem this seemed like a normal place. Yeah, but so had my last port of call, and you know what happened there, so *caution* was now a Jack Miller buzzword. There was a lapis lazuli sky with lots of oddly shaped white clouds. (One of the latter was shaped like two dirty-dancing elephants.) There were tall mountains far ahead, and a shimmering expanse in another direction that might have been an ocean, maybe a desert. An orange sun overhead, shimmering brightly, could likely play tricks on your mind if you stayed out too long. Everything else I could see from where I sat—hills, plains, a river—looked to be the right color, size, and so forth.

Only the *TALL* grass forest seemed out of place.

Speaking of the *TALL* grass forest, Ed McMahon suddenly stepped out from it ten yards away.

Actually, it was a humanoid life-form whose body, below the neck, was the color and texture of a red gummi bear; but the head was human, and the face looked *exactly* like Ed McMahon, I swear!

Smiling and waving an envelope the whatever started in my direction, asking, "Are you Cyrus Frapper of Bunwell, Nebraska?"

"Nope, sorry," I replied.

The Ed-thing scratched his head with a gummi finger. "Real odd, I

could've sworn..." He looked in the window of the envelope. "Are you Jack Miller of Del Mar, California?"

Now how in hell... ? This time I stood up, slowwwwwly. "Yeah, that's right."

He exclaimed, "Jack Miller of Del Mar, California, you may have already won the giant whopperprize of twenty million dollars in the Publishers Dumping Ground brand-new Mother of All Sweepstakes sweepstakes! Return this entry before whenever-the-heck-you-want, and in addition to the whopperprize we'll give you"—honest to God, there was a roll of drums—"a new home in the country!"

I was about to ask him, kind of smart-assedly, *what country* when he turned and started off. "Hey, what about my entry?" I called, but the Ed-thing disappeared in the *TALL* grass forest.

Darn, twenty million dollars!

Anyway, I got to wondering what it would be like to ride the Nishiki on a world with minimal gravity. And pursuant to that, you know what image kept running through my brain? The one of Elliott riding his bike in front of the moon with E.T. sitting in the basket. Somehow I didn't think it was going to be the same.

It wasn't. At first it seemed okay. I pedaled slowwwwwly, the bike moved slowwwwwly, the tires for the most part touching the ground. But the first bump I hit—a rather small one—sent both metal and me up a few feet. It took a moment to realize that I was still pumping the pedals, which of course was getting me nowhere. It was like being on an exercise bike.

After bouncing a couple of times the tires again grabbed the ground, and I continued on. A glance back at the *TALL* grass forest revealed that the tops of the blades were at least twelve feet high. Weird that they could get up there, considering how soft and soggy they were.

There were enough impediments in the shorter grass to make me bounce a few more times, but now I was getting the hang of it. After about twenty minutes I still had not come across anything resembling a road. And aside from the Ed McMahon gummi bear there was nothing around to indicate the presence of life-forms.

Then I intersected a dirt trail. It was four feet wide and cluttered with debris, but at least I could see whatever was in my way. Figuring it had to lead somewhere, I set off down the middle.

Well, I couldn't spot *every* bit of whatever. I bounced a couple of times, and one seemingly innocuous pothole sent me skyward seven feet, where I again flipped upside down, this time with the bike. The subsequent landing, while soft, wasn't graceful and would've earned no more than a six-point-seven from the Russian judge.

Another twenty minutes went past, and still no signs of life. I wished I could've buttonholed the Ed-thing to find out where I was, but it hadn't happened, so why worry about it? The trail I was on, if anything, grew a bit narrower.

You know, I'd had a hunch I was way above sea level. Now, as the trail started winding down along what looked like some pretty rugged bluffs, I was sure of it. For the first mile or so I squeezed my brakes, owing to the sharp curves. Then, at what I guessed to be near the bottom, the trail straightened out in one long, steep run, and it looked pretty clear. What the hell, I thought, go for it.

So I released the brakes and started down the imposing grade. You know what? I hardly built up any speed at all, not even when I pumped the pedals. Just the same steady crawl as when I'd been on the higher meadow. Streamlining my body accomplished diddly. The best I could do was eleven mph. Let me assure you, it was a weird feeling. I mean, this hill should have allowed me a major plummet!

Well, whatever. I glided to the bottom, and once level the dirt trail doubled in width, although it was still as rugged as before. Without the grade my speed decreased by three mph. Big deal.

Okay, time for some exploring. From the top of that steep hill I had spotted what looked like a town or village a mile ahead, possibly more. The visibility was so good here, you couldn't be sure...

Wait a minute.

Wait... a... frigging... minute.

I just realized that I had a problem here.

A *serious* problem.

Does your three percent brain work quicker than mine? If so, maybe you figured it out already.

I'd just gone down a hill the approximate length and angle of Stuart Mesa Road at a top speed of eleven mph!

How the hell was I supposed to get back on the Ultimate Bike Path?

Okay, wait; it's not like I was going to be stuck till the end of time or anything, right? I could always rub the Bukko again and wind up on my ass under the Santa Margarita River bridge. Sure, my travelin' days would be over for good, but at least I'd be home.

I didn't want that.

Or I could advise the Old Guys, whom I *knew* were watching, that I had a situation here and needed to be pulled out. Yeah, they'd comply; but what an asshole they'd think I was! Hey, forget this Jack Miller dude. Let's pull the twenty-second gear out of the bike and truck on down the galaxy, find some other life-form with *testiculos*.

I didn't want *that*, either.

Okay, it wasn't like I was facing a horde of slaving monsters that wanted to play Chef Boyardee with my intestines or anything, which would've necessitated some quick decisive action. I could explore this place, which was what I'd planned anyway, and while doing that I'd see what options there were for a return trip to the *mhuva lun gallee*. Even if they proved to be nil I would at least have tried, and then the study group would yank my butt without being pissed. Yeah, that sounded good.

So I continued along the dirt road, headed for the town or whatever-it-was I'd seen from above. Pedaling slowwwwwly, which by now I knew was the *only* way I could pedal, I thought about free-fall. Even with minimal gravity, if I jumped off something *very* high, wouldn't my speed increase enough for me to shift into the Vurdabrok Gear? It was worthy of consideration, even though I didn't know how I'd put it to the test.

Maybe the patron saint of doofuses was watching over me, because half

a mile along these big rifts started appearing. It looked like some nasty seismic activity had occurred. Granitoid rocks and boulders (Why did it have to be rock and boulders?) had been disgorged by the upheavals and were now scattered about.

The first few rifts were not impressive, but the next one I checked out was two yards across and went *way* down into the earth. With the sun overhead I could make out the craggy floor of the chasm, at least half a mile below.

Now, lest you think I was going to be a *major* doofus, I will assure you otherwise. I was not about to jump in, for two very good reasons: First, I really did want to check this place out and wasn't ready to go back yet. Second, if it didn't work and I wound up on the bottom... how in hell would I get back up?

So what I did was pick out a particular rock that weighed about the same as the bike and me (I think). I threw it in, then observed its plummet.

A very slowwwwww plummet.

Honest, it was hypnotic watching the thing fall, or more accurately, float. Seemed to take forever to reach that craggy floor. No way, I was sure, had its plummeting speed reached thirty mph.

I thought it would settle on the floor like a falling leaf.

Instead, it smashed into a zillion pieces—all of which dispersed in the same slowwwwww motion.

So I wouldn't have been able to shift into the twenty-second gear, but I *would* have been turned into chasm floor splat.

Swell.

"Stay tuned, Old Guys," I said, continuing along the road, "this one ought to be interesting."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Go East, Young Man

The aforementioned rifts became a pain in the ass for the next quarter mile. I had to keep weaving around them. But finally they were gone, and the road was in decent shape. Big deal, I still couldn't go faster.

That town, comprised of thirty-odd buildings in all shapes and sizes, was now two hundred yards ahead. You know what was on my mind as I neared? Food. I'd had a light breakfast many hours ago, and in my usual fashion had forgotten to shove a granola bar or two in the bag. Other things occupying my brain, I guess. Yeah, Miller, great excuse.

The road became the town's main street. Figures were moving on it, though none beyond the town limits. At first I couldn't see them clearly; then, when I could, I hoped my eyes were playing tricks on me.

You remember the Land of Boobies in *Pinocchio*, where the boys had donkey heads and tails? Yeah, that's what was walking around this place, smiling, nodding, and shaking hands with each other and in general *nnyee-hawwwing* up a storm.

Funny, all of them seemed to be moving around normally, unaffected by the minimal gravity. So had the Ed-thing, now that I thought of it. Although I was close enough to have been visible for some time, none of them were too interested in my approach. For a moment I thought about bypassing the shabbily built town; good way to avoid trouble. But somehow these *nnyee-hawwwing* folks with their bucktoothed grins did not come off as menacing.

There were males and females along the street. The guys wore baggy red or yellow trousers held up by suspenders, with white shirts and brown shoes. They were like nightmare prom dates. The uniform of the ladies was a purple blouse, black leather miniskirt, and white skimmers. Not a bad-looking bunch of legs, actually.

A couple of the latter glanced at me, grinned their wide donkey grins, *nnyee-hawwwed* seductively, and did a Muriel-style bump-and-grind, which made their tails swing. (Can you imagine a *nnyee-hawww* sounding seductive? Try it.)

I stopped the bike and got off slowwwwwwwly. "Hi there," I said, doffing my Padres cap. "As you can see, I'm a stranger in these parts. Can you tell

me where I am?"

"You're here," one of them answered.

"*Nnyee-hawww*, he is not," the other brayed, pointing at me. "He's *there*."

"You're wrong, dearie," the first one countered, "he's most definitely here."

"I beg to differ, bitch," the second said nastily, "he's over there!"

"*Nnyee-hawww!*" the first *nnyee-hawwwed*, "how would you like your teeth—?"

"Excuse me, ladies," I interrupted, "but it really doesn't matter. Can you, uh, point me to whoever is in charge?"

"That would be, *nnyee-hawww*, Mensh and Pulkie," the second said. "They were mating earlier but should be done by now."

"This is true," the first added. "I've mated with Mensh before, and it *never* takes him very long."

"What about you, stranger?" the second asked. "Can you keep it up for a while?"

"Uh, where will I find these two?" I asked.

"That building," the first said, pointing at a large structure in the middle of town. "Yes, I see them there now."

"Well, thanks," I said, starting off.

"Are you sure you wouldn't like to mate, stranger?" the second asked.

"Why would he want to mate with one as old as you, *dear*," the first said, "when he can, *nnyee-hawww*, have a younger—"

"All right, *sweetie*, that's the last straw!" the second exclaimed. "I'll see you, *nnyee-hawww*, in an hour, at the gym!"

"Fine!" the first said.

If not for the obvious differences from the neck down, you couldn't have told Mensh and Pulkie apart. Same-size ears, same toothy grins, same dorky expressions.

"Excuse me," I said, "you were pointed out as the leaders of this, ah, town, so I presume you are the wisest of the wise, and accordingly I would like to ask a question or two."

Bullshit, huh? But I figured it would break the ice.

"Actually, I'm *nnyee-hawww*, a lot wiser than this jackass."

Pulkie said, jerking a thumb in Mensh's direction. "What is your question or two?"

"You're not, *nnyee-hawww*, so wise as you think," Mensh retorted indignantly, "or else why would you call me by the wrong name so many times while we are mating?"

"Perhaps you would like to mate with another permanently," Pulkie said, "because, *nnyee-hawww*, I might ask for a divorce—!"

"Here's what I'd like to know," I interrupted. "The gravity on your world is wreaking havoc with me. Is there a way I can overcome its effect in order to reach a speed in excess of thirty mph, either on a steep downhill grade or by free-fall?"

Mensh and Pulkie looked at each other. Pulkie lifted one of Mensh's big ears and whispered, "What is gravity?"

Mensh lifted one of Pulkie's big ears and whispered, "What is wreaking havoc?"

Pulkie lifted one of Mensh's big ears and whispered, "What is free-fall?"

They looked at me and said, "What is, *nnyee-hawww*, your question or two, stranger?"

The Land of Boobies, huh? I nodded my appreciation and got outta town... slowwwwwwwly.

Okay, no help there. But then, I was still in the *rural* part of this world, right? Maybe there *was* someone of infinite wisdom farther along, in a

bigger, more modern metropolis. Yeah, like the Emerald City, where the Great and Terrible Oz would solve my problem by telling me to tap my bike shoes together three times and wish my way back to Del Mar, or Cedar Rapids.

How about the Wizard of Oz as a rapper?

Yo! you wanna go home now, don't you know,

So tap tap tap and off you go.

But the bruthas you meet along the way

Will carve yo' face and ruin yo' day.

An' if you wear red shoes an' yo' a male,

They throw yo' muthahumpin' ass in jail.

Anyway, the road got smoother in the next three miles, but I didn't encounter a single whoever or whatever on it. To tell the truth, I couldn't see too far ahead anymore, so I wasn't sure who or what might be there. These low ranges of mountains had converged to within a couple of miles on both sides, leaving me right smack down the middle of a valley. It was this continuous run of rolling hills that kept me from knowing what might be coming up, which got kind of frustrating after I'd done the roller-coaster bit for what seemed like an hour.

I'd forgotten to ask about food in the donkey town. Not surprising. By this time I was passing all kinds of trees and bushes, none of which bore fruits or berries. Well, I wasn't going to succumb to malnourishment, but I never cared for the sound of a grumbling stomach.

I had just reached the bottom of a hill. There was no one around as far as I could see... which of course was when I heard a voice, right next to me.

"Are you Mrs. Leona Whippet of Dogbreath, Idaho?"

The Ed McMahon gummi bear-thing was near the bike. Scared me so bad that I fell over. I bounced one way; the Nishiki bounced the other. I caught hold of a bush, righted myself, and chased down the bike...

slowwwwwwly.

"Are you Mrs. Leona Whippet of Dogbreath, Idaho?" the Ed-thing asked again.

"Not a chance," I replied, rather pissedly, at the same time thinking how tasty the gummi bear part of him looked.

He scratched his head. "I could've sworn..." Yeah, he looked at the stupid envelope again. "Are you Jack Miller of Del Mar, California?"

"You got it. Listen, I wanted to ask—"

"Jack Miller of Del Mar, California," he exclaimed, "you may have already won the supergiant double whopperprize of forty million dollars in the Publishers Dumping Ground newer-than-new Grandmother of All Sweepstakes sweepstakes! Return this entry before anytime-in-the-future, and in addition to the double whopperprize we'll give you"—those drums again!—"two homes in the country!"

Whoa, *forty* million dollars and *two* homes! "Uh, listen, Ed, first can you tell me—?"

He disappeared around a hill. Cripes, I *still* hadn't gotten my entry!

It was getting on in the afternoon; you could tell that from the direction in which the sun was headed. I was tired, too. This slowwwwww traveling was not as easy as you might think. Sooner or later I had to stop for the night, and of course that could mean...

Wild beasts.

Sure, I hadn't encountered anything menacing as yet, but you know how nocturnal creatures could be. At least there was plenty of wood to get a fire going. 'Struth, I planned on doing that long before the sun went beddie-bye.

The hills were suddenly behind me; the low mountains angled away, and the valley stretched far and wide ahead. Plenty of foliage, so you couldn't make out a lot.

But one thing was clear: About two hundred yards from where I stood,

the road forked.

Had this become the story of my life, or what! Having to make a decision without any input to base it on. No one around to ask, nothing.

Maybe next time I would tackle the Ed-thing.

Yeah, right, in slowwwwww motion.

Hey, hold the phone, there was a sign at the split. Not a billboard or anything, which was why I hadn't noticed it at first. I pedaled up to it as fast as I could, which of course wasn't fast at all. The writing on the sign was unintelligible. Each letter looked like a squashed cricket holding either a megaphone, a catheter, or a javelin. I touched the sign, and this is how it read:

If you know your destination, then you'll surely want west,

But if you don't know shit, then the east is best.

The road to the east is definitely the thing,

It leads to the hall of the Mountain King.

The Mountain King knows all from soup to nuts,

So you don't have to worry if you're a putz.

Just remember, along either road you'll find

A Ramunzel Inn, to soothe body and mind.

So whichever you choose, the east or the west,

Have a nice day, and a nicer rest.

The sign read like a collaboration between Dr. Seuss, Henrik Ibsen, George Carlin, and Foote, Cone & Belding. Weird.

It wasn't hard figuring out which way was which. An arrow above the word *east* pointed up the left fork; an arrow above the word *west* pointed up the right fork. Even the long-eared folk from the Land of Boobies could've worked that out. I took my hand off the sign, and everything

became squashed crickets again.

Considering I hadn't passed a soul since leaving the donkey town except the Ed-thing, I wondered just *who* was supposed to see this sign. Well, that wasn't a concern. I had a choice to make, one I'm sure you'll agree seemed easy. Right, I didn't know my destination, and I certainly didn't know shit, so the east had to be best. Perhaps the Mountain King was this world's answer to the Great and Terrible Oz. He sounded impressive, if you happened to be awed by titles. And if the Ramunzel Inn showed up before dark I would be spared the dangers of facing any nocturnal beasties.

Decision made: Eastward yo!

(Eastward yo?)

Okay, the graded road was now even more well defined and wider. Don't ask me why, because at this point, two miles after the split, I still hadn't come across a single...

Wait a minute, the road suddenly was intersected on both sides by narrower paths that emerged from nearby hillocks or groves. There were wheel marks, footprints, all kinds of tracks now. Encountering someone had to be a matter of time.

True, because it was a couple of minutes later when I ran into Hubert, Horatio, and Humphrey.

They had just joined the road from a path on the right. All three were of the same stature of anyone who had ever played Friar Tuck, with the appropriate robes. Facially, Hubert looked like Laurence Olivier when he'd played Hamlet. Horatio looked like Orson Welles when he'd played Citizen Kane. Humphrey looked like Ringo Starr when he'd played drums behind three guys named John, Paul, and George.

At the intersection, Horatio had stumbled over the nether hem of his garment and was now on his back, kicking like a cockroach as the others tried to pull him up.

"Stop with the legs, moron," Hubert said in a nasal voice that definitely did not *sound* like Laurence Olivier when he'd played Hamlet. "You're making dust!"

"Get me up, you idiots!" Horatio cried, and nope, he didn't *sound* like Orson Wells when he'd played Citizen Kane, more like Dawn Wells when she'd played Mary Ann on *Gilligan's Island*.

They dragged Horatio to his feet. Humphrey dusted him off. "Are you hurt?" he asked. Yes, he did sound a bit like Ringo.

"Uh-uh," Horatio replied.

Humphrey *whopped* him hard across the back of his head. "Now you are, turdbrian! Don't forget to be careful next time."

"Oh, wise guy, eh?" Horatio replied, gouging Humphrey in the eyes with two fingers.

Hubert cracked their heads together. "How do you like that, jerkoffs?" he asked as they staggered about. "Come on, we gotta go—"

Humphrey threw a punch at Hubert, who ducked, then tripped over the nether hem of *his* garment and fell to the road. The others helped him up and dusted him off. He tweaked both their noses. Hard.

"You two asswipes are—! Hey look, some guy's coming."

"Hiya, fellas," I said, not really sure why.

"Who are you?" Horatio asked.

"I was going to ask that, peckerhead!" Hubert said.

"My name's Jack."

That was when they introduced themselves. Humphrey then said, "Come on, wartfaces, let's shake his hand."

They all started forward, elbowing each other, then tripped simultaneously over the nether hems of their garments and toppled into the Nishiki, which knocked *me* over. I bounced up; so did the bike. The bozos gawked as I floated groundward. They grabbed hold so I wouldn't take off again.

"You really should do something about that," Hubert said.

"I'm trying," I said dryly.

"This is out of our realm of knowledge," Horatio mused.

Really? I wouldn't have guessed. "What about this Mountain King?" I asked.

"That's what I was about to suggest," Humphrey said.

"Why didn't you then, fartbreath?" Hubert asked.

"Oh, wise guy, eh?" Humphrey exclaimed, getting ready with the fingers.

"Hold on, guys," I interrupted, "I need some information. How far is it to the hall of the Mountain King?"

"Real far," Horatio said, "about"—he started counting on his fingers, then tried to use Hubert's, but Hubert *whopped* him across the back of the head—"nineteen miles to the base of the mountain," Horatio went on, rubbing his head, "then a long way up a steep trail. You won't make it today."

"I'd figured that. Are we close to the Ramunzel Inn?"

"Oh, sure," Hubert said. "The Ramunzel Inn sits on the far edge of Vanaduro, which just happens to be our destination. We can easily make that before dark."

"We'll make *nothing* if you keep on being a diarrheemouth!" Humphrey exclaimed. "Hurry now; our business in Vanaduro is quite serious."

Yeah, I can imagine what kind of serious business these guys had in Vanaduro. They bounced off one another a few times, and Humphrey again tripped over the nether hem of his garment. But soon each was standing with a small black suitcase, none of which I'd noticed before.

"You're welcome to travel with us to Vanaduro, Jack," Horatio said.

"I was going to say that, toejamlicker!" Hubert exclaimed.

Toejamlicker? "Thanks, fellas, I'll just follow along." I don't think they heard me mutter *at a safe distance*.

It turned out that no distance was safe from Hubert, Horatio, or Humphrey. They tripped, stumbled, staggered, teetered, poked, lurched, *whopped*, mauled, brutalized, gouged, insulted, demeaned, and otherwise maligned each other all the way to Vanaduro, which turned out to be a loooo-oooong four miles farther on. There were other folks on the road now, most of whom gave the dipshits a wide berth. Actually, I thought they were funny as hell, but with my problem it behooved me to concentrate on not falling down, avoiding potholes, and making sure no one else ran into me.

Humphrey, who had tripped over the nether hem of his garment at least six times since I'd first seen them, was more curious about me than his buddies. Two miles from Vanaduro he came back to walk next to the Nishiki, and let me tell you, that made me extremely nervous.

To tell the truth, he was more curious about my bike than the guy who rode atop it. Well, I'd been humbled enough lately, so that didn't bother me. I tried to explain how it worked, but from the bemused expression on his face I could tell it was like talking particle physics to a hamster.

What was worse was when he asked if he could ride it. "I don't think that would be a good idea," I told him. "It has the same problem—whoops!"

He tripped over the nether hem of his garment again. Well, I sure couldn't help him. A couple of peasant types dragged him to his feet, and he rejoined me.

"As I was saying," I went on, "it has the same problem as me and also needs to be... cured."

Humphrey nodded. "The Mountain King will take care of you."

I probably shouldn't have asked, but I did anyway: "Just who is this Mountain King?"

Humphrey looked at me with his Ringo Starr face as if to say *good lord almighty jack you must be afar greater putz than either of my associates*. "Why, the Mountain King is only the wisest, most all-knowing person in the land! No one, *no single one*, could claim to have the mass of brains as our farseeing and sagacious Mountain King!"

Hey, an awesome testimonial! Yeah, but considering what I'd run into so far, being the smartest one here might not be any big deal.

"No one," Humphrey went on, "could be any more learned than his radiance the Mountain King, or—!"

"Yeah, you made the point. Thanks, pal." Sheesh!

I think he would've kept heaping praises, but Hubert, who had just tripped over the nether hem of *his* garment after an eye gouge duel with Horatio, stumbled back and twisted Humphrey's ear. "Get up here, anuspolisher!" he said as Humphrey yelped in pain.

"Oh, wise guy, eh?" Humphrey retorted, stomping on Hubert's foot. Hubert screamed and hopped but still held on to Humphrey's ear, and in this fashion they managed to rejoin Horatio, who laid a nifty double eye gouge on them.

I slowwwwwwed even more, which was almost impossible.

Anyway, we finally reached Vanaduro, a good thing, considering the sun was close to setting. It was a large, bustling town in the middle of productive-looking farmland, although the houses and shops were not much better constructed than those in the Land of Boobies. Plenty of people around, but surprisingly they showed little interest in an oddly dressed, slowwwwww-moving dude on a mountain bike.

Hubert, Horatio, and Humphrey stopped in front of this one large building and put their heads together, which of course turned out to be a disaster. After knocking themselves unconscious for a few seconds they staggered back up on their feet.

"I'm telling you scabpeelers, *that's* the right place!" Horatio exclaimed.

"Let's go then," Hubert insisted. "We're needed!"

"Good-bye, Jack," Humphrey said. "We'll see you later."

"Is this where you have your serious business to attend to?"

Humphrey nodded. "It's the hospital."

"The hospital?"

"Yeah," Horatio said, "we're brain surgeons."

They started for the building. Hubert tripped over the nether hem of his garment. Horatio and Humphrey began an eye-gouging duel. "Will you two stoolsamples pick me up?" Hubert cried. "If we don't operate soon, it might be bad for the patient!"

Brain surgeons; they were brain surgeons.

Either way I think it was going to be bad for the patient.

It took me a while to find the Ramunzel Inn, having to interpret the squashed cricket signs on the buildings. Let me assure you, as is so often the case the advertisement for the product was far in excess of the product itself. About the best I could say for the Ramunzel Inn was that the accommodations were a notch above the Posada del Fernando.

Not saying much, huh?

At least the stable, where people kept horses, oxen, and some other weird dray animal that looked like a tortoise on emu legs, was separate from the main building. The food, served buffet style in a communal hall, was not as bad as three-week-old ferret stew, but close.

Yeah, then there were the sleeping quarters, with all the amenities of a jail cell, including narrow cots with mattresses the thickness of a Kit Kat bar. No privacy, either. Each of the inn's rooms had a dozen or so cots. Fortunately, by the time I turned in only half the ones in my room were occupied. There was one snoring guy, whom a few of us rolled over, and a humping couple who did it as quietly as possible, until passion overcame them. It was a brief outburst, and we all got to sleep.

Until an hour later, when three weary but successful brain surgeons staggered in.

"That's my cot over there," Humphrey announced, tripping over the nether hem of his garment.

"It is not, puslicker," Hubert said. "I claimed it first." He gouged Horatio's eyes.

"Oh, wise guy, eh?" Horatio cried, *whopping* Hubert across the back of

his head.

"Will you two urinespecimens get me up?" Humphrey shouted.

Hubert bopped Humphrey on top of his head. "What do you need to get up for, pimplesqueezer?" he asked. "You're already on the right cot."

"I want the one over there, fecalfarmer!" Humphrey insisted.

"That one's mine, atheletesfootnibbler!" Horatio cried.

"Sewagetreatmentplantbreath!"

"Mouseturdconnoisseur!"

I went out to the smelly stable, where the Nishiki was chained, curled up on a bed of straw, and slept exceptionally well until morning.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Of Teddy Bear Wars and Alien Visitations

Breakfast at the Ramunzel Inn was pretty much the same stuff that had been served last night. Actually, it might've been sitting there since then. Or longer. I didn't want to know.

I ate quickly (and sparingly) and got out of there, taking some along. Hubert, Horatio, and Humphrey were still asleep, thanks be to God. I could just see a food fight breaking out in the communal hall with them around.

Okay, it was time to begin the balance of my slowwwwww journey to the hall of the Mountain King and find out if he could get me out of here. I'd seen enough of this world already, and I was likely going to see more before I got there, so by then I would be ready for reality time, for a trip to Cedar Rapids...

For the start of a life, maybe, with Holly Dragonette.

But first things first, and the *very* first thing was leaving Vanaduro

behind, which seemed simple enough, until I was accosted at the outskirts of town.

"Are you Mushtar Ibrahim of Upper Legume, Vermont?" the Ed McMahon gummi bear-thing asked.

"Uh, no, definitely not," I replied.

Yeah, he went through the same routine, then said, "Are you Jack Miller of Del Mar, California?"

"That's me."

"Jack Miller of Del Mar, California," he exclaimed even more loudly than before, "you may have already won the extra-supergiant quadruple whopperprize of eighty million dollars in the Publishers Dumping Ground even-newer-than-new Great-Grandmother of All Sweepstakes sweepstakes! Return this entry before Halley's Comet returns, and in addition to the quadruple whopperprize we'll give you"—yeah, right—"three villas along the French Riviera *and* a coupon good for a year's supply of Domino's Pizza!"

Oh, jeez, *Domino's Pizza!* "All right, gimme that damn entry!"

I exclaimed, grabbing for it, but he disappeared in the crowd, and I wound up doing a somersault ten feet up, attracting a few curious stares. I landed on my head, which didn't hurt, but the people couldn't have known that.

"Perhaps we'd better call upon those brain surgeons," one of them suggested.

Uh-huh, I was gone faster-than-slowwwwww.

Vanaduro was likely the hub of this region, because two miles away from it I was again riding through wilderness. Travelers along the road thinned out; soon they were few and far between.

Pedaling along in that blasted slowwwwww motion, which I could not get used to no matter what, I started thinking about how easy it was—or was *not*—going to be to find the Mountain King. Humphrey had said it was fifteen miles from Vanaduro to the base of the mountain, and since

there was this massive range looming ahead, my Vulcan logic banks told me that the one I was looking for was somewhere in there. Great; but was it well marked with another squashed cricket sign? Or was I supposed to *know* where to find the start of the trail leading to the wisest of the wise? I mean, there could be *dozens* of mountain trails! What if I went past it? What if I spent forever—?

Whoa, is ole Jack wallowing in the mire of negativity again, or what! Time out. The universe shall provide, and all that. Affirmation: You'll get there, you'll find it, everything will be wonderful.

There, I felt better.

So, just as I start exuding all this positive energy, the road ends.

Actually, it might've still been there, but I couldn't see it too well, covered as it was with rocks, shrubs, and it-hasn't-been-mowed-in-a-week-tall grass. I slowwwwwwed down, which is to say I stopped, got off the bike, and tried to eyeball the road, but after a while it became impossible.

Okay, back into the Vulcan logic banks. Since I was supposed to be journeying eastward (yo!), and since the sun had risen over the mountain range ahead, and since it was one of these mountains I was looking for, why not just continue in that direction? Wow, was that utilizing the old three percent, or what! Mr. Spock would've been proud.

I got back on the bike and pedaled carefully (notice I didn't say slowwwwwwly; that's a given) over the grass and rocks, around the shrubs, etc. It was impossible to totally avoid being bounced or jarred, but as long as I didn't freak I could land easily on both tires and continue on like nothing had happened. Kind of fun, actually.

It was after three miles of this that I saw the six-foot teddy bear ahead.

One of those real cute, soft ones with close-set button eyes, black nose, and vertical mouth that you wanted to hold on to tightly on those nights when your main squeeze was out bowling or something. He was wearing a bright green headband. His size, of course, rendered him an anomaly from those cute little guys that Mary Mayer or Gund manufactured.

So did the submachine gun in his paws, and the bandoleers

crisscrossed on his chest.

The barrel of the aforementioned submachine gun was currently pointed one inch above the bridge of my nose.

"Okay, asshole, come in slowly, and let me see those hands the whole time," the teddy bear said in a voice that was closer to General Norman Schwarzkopf than Winnie-the-Pooh.

Well, for sure I was going to come in slowwwwwwwly, which was even slower than slowly. I got off the bike, making sure I kept my hands high on the handlebars for this cuddly Rambo to see.

"I'm in no mood for trouble," I told the teddy bear, thinking crazily how I'd just done a line from *Psycho*, the one where Janet Leigh drives into this car dealership... never mind.

"Oh, you're not, huh?" the teddy bear said. "Then why are you riding that... thing in the middle of Green Territory?"

"I didn't know that's where this was. Me and my thing were on our way to the hall of the Mountain King."

"The hall of the... !" The teddy bear lowered the gun and wrinkled its nose, which was kind of cute. "Man, did you get yourself off the main road, or what!"

Yeah, that figures. "It just sort of ran out, so I was following my nose—"

The gun came up again. "You're not a spy for the Reds, are you?" he challenged.

"Oh, definitely not! I'm a Padres fan. I spit on Tony Perez and Marge Schott!"

"Huh?"

"Never mind. No, honestly, I'm not your enemy."

The gun went down again. "Well, I'll believe you, since you don't look like one of *them*. But I gotta say, pal, you wound up in a place you'd rather not be. There's a war going on here, you know."

"Thanks for sharing that. How about if you point me in the right—"

"*Duck, fast!*" the teddy bear cried, jerking up the nasty weapon yet again.

I let go of the Nishiki and fell to the ground. The teddy bear waved the gun menacingly in a wide arc, then eased up.

"It's all right, only our people," he said.

Three other teddy bears, identically armed, emerged from some shrubs and joined the first. Four pairs of eyes then turned skyward, toward where I was hovering fifteen feet above after bouncing off the ground.

"You shouldn't do that," the first teddy bear said after I'd landed. "Might give us away to the Reds."

"Sorry. Like I started to say, just point me in the right direction and I'm outta here."

"What's all this about?" a second teddy bear asked.

"He left the main road and got lost."

"So many assholes do that," a third teddy bear said.

The first teddy bear motioned for them to shut up. He was obviously the honcho. Then he told me, "We'll guide you to the road, but it's not going to be easy. Once out of Green Territory we'll have to cross the Neutral Zone, which is dangerous enough. Then, for about fifty yards we'll be in Red Territory, and *that*, my friend, is hairy! You think you'll be able to skulk along with us well enough to stay out of sight?"

Now normally I could be a pretty good skulker. But with the burden of the bike, and this gravity problem? I don't know.

"Sure, let's go for it," I told the first teddy bear.

Well, the four teddy bears looked at me dubiously, but I didn't back down. We started off by semiskulking across Green Territory, which of course was their home turf, so there were no problems.

Then, utilizing rocks, trees, shrubs, whatever, we skulked across the

Neutral Zone, which I figured might be crawling with bad-assed Romulans in violation of treaty, but there were no problems here, either. I was actually impressing the teddy bears with my skulking ability.

Then, we mega-skulked across Red Territory, where the enemy roamed, and let me tell you, it took a loo-ooong time to cover the first forty-five yards.

"Looks like the rest of the way is clear," the first teddy bear said as the five of us emerged from some dense cover. "Get going now."

"Hey, thanks a million, guys," I told them, starting across the last five yards to what was again a road. "Can't tell you how much I..."

A half-dozen teddy bears in *red* headbands suddenly popped up from the ground between me and the road. Dang, what a great bit of camouflage that was!

"You're in *our* territory now, green scum!" one of them cried as they waved *their* submachine guns. "Surrender or die!"

Hey, considering I was in the crossfire, that sounded like a plan! But you know what that asshole of a green leader said?

"We'll *never* surrender, red dog meat, and if we have to die you can bet we'll take a few of you with us!"

Oh, yeah, bullshit and a half! I reached for the Bukko, not even remotely interested in waiting to see if the Old Guys were going to pull me out.

Then I thought, *Hey, just like Wendy, John, and Michael... I can fly!*

I jumped high in the air as ten submachine guns opened fire simultaneously. From twenty-five feet above—did I get off a good one, or what!—I looked down at the carnage.

The green teddy bears had all been hit and were covered with spreading red stains.

Three of the red teddy bears had been hit and were covered with spreading *green* stains.

Huh?

The green teddy bears threw down their guns disgustedly and took off their headbands. "Shit, you got us," their leader said.

Half the red teddy bears took off *their* headbands. The others danced around happily. "Yeah, we kicked *ass!*" one of them exclaimed.

A paintball war. This had been a frigging *paintball* war! Why couldn't someone have told me that before?

I floated halfway down. A red teddy bear suddenly raised his submachine gun. "Hey, we forgot that one!" he cried, and they opened fire.

"*Wait!*" I screamed.

Too late. A *lot* of paintballs found their mark. My heretofore white and yellow Descente road jersey, my heretofore black Cannondale bike pants, and my heretofore flesh-colored flesh were spattered with red.

"You'd better hope this shit washes off," I said angrily, touching down.

"Whoops, sorry," a red teddy bear said. "But you shouldn't have been here, you know."

"Yeah, thanks for telling me."

"He was just leaving," the green teddy bear leader said.

I looked at him and his defeated band. "Hey, I didn't mean to screw up your war."

"No problem; you win some, you lose some. We'll get another one going."

I walked to the road and almost got on the bike but decided against it, because that red crap was still running down and I didn't want any of it on my chainwheel or whatever. One of the victorious red teddy bears pointed up in the air.

"You really should do something about that," he said.

I walked along slowwwwwly for a while, wondering if that detour

through the war zone had been a shortcut or a setback. With so much semiskulking, skulking, and mega-skulking I'd lost my sense of direction. For all I knew I might've been heading back to Vanaduro. Nope; after curving around the base of a hill I saw that my direction was still east, and the tallest of those mountains—one of which would be an appropriate home for a Mountain King, I figured—was getting closer. Okay, no harm, no foul.

Except for looking like I'd just had a close encounter with a pissed-off Dutch Boy. Fortunately, a pond appeared. I washed my spandex wardrobe, and guess what, the stuff came out easily. Ditto my body. This tended to brighten my day.

Not wanting to wait around, I squeezed out as much water as I could and put the clothes back on. Astride the bike again, I pedaled off... but not slowwwwwly, because for a moment I'd forgotten the situation. A flip, fall, and bounce remedied that.

Guess what, I hadn't asked the teddy bears about how to identify the trail that led to the hall of the Mountain King. Probably had something to do with those submachine guns. Okay, I was determined not to let that happen again. I would ask the next donkey, person, teddy bear, or whatever kind of life-form I ran into along the road.

The next whatever kind of life-form I ran into along the road was a seagull.

It was perched on a boulder (Why did it have to be a boulder?) along the side of the road, staring at me like Poe's raven. Now, considering my experience on the Ultimate Bike Path with one of its brethren, *this* could've been the wisest of the wise here, the Mountain King himself. In my current (and hopefully permanent) state of humility, I wasn't taking a thing for granted. I got off the bike, held up my hand, and approached the seagull.

"Good morning," I called. "Nice day, isn't it? Say, I wonder if you might be able to tell me something." The seagull cocked its head, and I continued: "I understand that the trail leading to the hall of the Mountain King is somewhere ahead. Is it relatively easy to identify? I mean, is there a road sign or something? A billboard? Maybe another Ramunzel Inn?"

The seagull opened its mouth. This was good. You know what came

out?

Skrrrrreeeeewwwaakk.

Horrible sound, really sent my skin to crawling. Then a voice at my ear said, "What kind of doofus is it who talks to seagulls?"

Yep, it scared the shit out of me, and yep, I jumped ten feet in the air, which startled the seagull. It flew up, stuck its beak in my face, *skrrrrreeeeewwwaakked* again, and split.

I floated down next to a little peasant type who bore a curious resemblance to Boris Badinov from *Rocky and Bullwinkle*.

"Might I ask once more, what kind of doofus is it who talks to seagulls?" Boris said, not sounding at all like the nemesis of that indomitable squirrel.

"A doofus who might perform liposuction on your skull if you sneak up on him again!" I exclaimed, rather pissedly.

"No need to have a conniption," he said. (Hey, he knew that word too!) "I just thought it curious. Wouldn't you?"

He was right there. But then, he hadn't had my experience on the *mhuva lun gallee*.

"Yeah, well, let's say I was rehearsing for a part in a play. I do better out here in the country."

"Oh, that makes sense," Boris said. "Sorry to bother you. Well, I'm off to Vanaduro."

He wasn't going my way. "Wait, let me ask you something."

"Yes?"

"How far is it to the trail that leads to the hall of the Mountain King?"

"About two miles, as the seagull flies. That's six miles to you and me."

Great; if I can only hitch a ride on a seagull... "And when I get to this trail, how will I know it? Is there a sign, or a big X to mark the spot, or

what?"

His expression said *now I am most assuredly convinced you are the biggest doofus to have ever lived.*

He said, "Now I am most assuredly convinced you are the biggest doofus to have ever lived. To ask how to find the trail to the hall of the Mountain King! It is the easiest..." He squinted an eye at me. "I have it now: you're still rehearsing that play—which is no doubt a comedy with so foolish a question as that in it—and are using me for a prompt."

"Yeah, that's it," I said wearily.

"Ah, then I'll play along. Yes, it's easier to find than the boulder in the middle of the road just around the bend! There, did I do all right? I had some theatrical training when I was a boy."

"You were fine. Well, I don't want to hold you up."

"Where will you be performing this play?"

"At the Vanaduro Repertory Theater." What the hell else was I supposed to say?

"Yes, of course!" Boris exclaimed. "Fine company. As soon as it opens, you can count on my family being there. We do love a comedy!"

"Thank you."

He started to go, then pointed up at the sky. "You really should do something about that."

The Boris Badinov clone departed. I got back on the Nishiki and pedaled around the bend...

... and ran smack into the boulder (Why did it... never mind) in the middle of the road.

Took a while before I could stop bouncing.

Okay, from what I could interpret of the recent scenario, finding the trail that led to the hall of the Mountain King was going to be a piece of cake. Yeah, but I was still dubious. I mean, there wasn't a sign telling me

where to pick up the road after it ended, or one that said entering paintball war zone, was there? But whatever the case, I decided it might be best not to seek out information from my fellow travelers. I knew it was six miles from where I'd just clobbered the boulder (I'd saved a mile across the war zone, by the way), so at least I could pedal to the general vicinity and worry about it then.

Actually, the next five miles were devoid of travelers. The road was paralleling the base of the mountains now, and I did pass turnoffs for a few steep, winding trails... none of which were marked by *anything*. Once again I started to get a wee bit concerned.

Less than a mile from where I hoped to find what I was looking for, I noticed some activity in a craterlike depression that filled up most of a canyon on the left. Since not a hell of a lot surprised me anymore, I barely raised an eyebrow when I saw a flying saucer hovering there.

Yeah, I swear! It looked like a generic compilation of all the flying saucers in those 1950s science fiction movies, the ones made to jar us into accepting the undeniable truth that before long aliens, or communists, or *something* would be arriving to take over our bodies, suck out our brains, whatever. It was the one that Michael Rennie emerged from in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, the one that—with others—zapped Washington in *Earth Versus the Flying Saucers*, the one that landed in the dunes behind the little kid's house in *Invaders From Mars*. Cool!

Dozens of life-forms were on the floor of the crater, looking up at the saucer and pointing. Not donkeys or teddy bears, but people. They seemed nervous about the proximity of the ship, especially with all the flashing, multicolored lights on the bottom, but in spite of that there were lots of smiles and nods going around.

I took up a place amid some boulders (Jeez!) near the rim of the crater to watch the proceedings. Nope, I wasn't going to pull a Richard Dreyfuss *noodge*, run down there and go *Me, me! Let me see what's going on and be a part of it all!* I had a great view, which was fine.

So here's what happened: The saucer dropped lower; a pillar of pale blue light emerged to touch the floor of the crater and stir up a few tiny dust devils. Then, from an opening in the bottom, a wide ramp angled down, stopping inches above the ground. The people, who had freaked for a moment and backed away, now edged closer, talking excitedly among

themselves.

A figure appeared in the opening. You couldn't make too much out at first, what with the shimmering blue light and all. It started down the ramp slowly, moving with an ingratiatingly awkward gait on two enormous, fuzzy feet. Halfway down you could tell nearly all of it was fuzzy. It had a wide, squat body, and its head, like the feet, was *big*.

Two thirds of the way down you could see all of it clearly. I'm telling you, this alien was not cute, it was *CUTE*. I think it could redefine the word. It had big round endearing eyes, and a sweet big-lipped smile, and affecting pointy ears, and an engaging prune-shaped nose, and adorable stubby-fingered hands. Next to him E.T. was a gargoye, and Gizmo the Mogwai was Freddy Krueger, and the Ewoks were nuclear mutants, and the Care Bears...

You got the picture.

The incredibly *CUTE* alien reached the bottom of the ramp and, still smiling that sweet big-lipped smile, put its fuzzy feet on the ground and faced the people. The ecstatic band edged closer to where he waited, each with a hand outstretched. Its sweet, big-lipped smile growing even wider, the alien held out one of *its* adorable stubby-fingered hands.

Then, in a continuous motion, the *CUTE* alien flipped everyone the bird with its adorable stubby middle finger, whipped a heretofore hidden weapon out from behind its back, and began blasting away.

The weapon was the size and shape of a multipurpose assault weapon but gave off some kind of purplish, crackling energy ray that dispersed in a wide field and immediately fried everyone there. Screaming and sizzling, the unsuspecting folks fell. The alien, his snarling, canine-toothed visage now not even remotely cute, kept on firing as half a dozen more of his kind dropped from the saucer. At this point he ceased the barrage, and together the whole uncute lot of them fell upon the charred people and began feeding—loudly and disgustingly, I might add.

Needless to say, I was a bit put off by this. I hated to see my fellow humans getting devoured like that; but then, what the heck was I supposed to do? Lest you'd forgotten (I hadn't), my mobility was rather limited, and I didn't have much in the way of armament. Yon fuzzy bastards had that phaser or whatever, and a flying saucer to chase down

my ass. As hard as it might be, all I could do was lay hidden amid the boulders and hope they didn't notice me before they finished their snack and headed spaceward to the mother ship or wherever-the-hell they came from.

Still, those poor folks, who had extended their hands in the name of cosmic peace and friendship...

From somewhere on the floor of the crater I heard a voice shout, "All right, cut!"

Huh?

I peered down and saw a guy in a baseball cap and shades— along with a small entourage—storming toward the pukoid scene at the base of the flying saucer, or what I suddenly realized was a very elaborate prop in a movie being filmed! I don't know where these people had been; I sure as hell hadn't noticed them before. The aliens had stopped feeding and were now up on their fuzzy feet, most cringing before the approach of the director. Not so the one who had pulled the weapon.

"What in the shit went wrong now?" he—or rather *she*— exclaimed, pulling off the once-cute-now-snarling-alien mask to reveal a once-cute-now-snarling brunette.

The overcooked "corpses" also rose. Dang, what a great special effect, because they really looked gross! The director walked up to one guy and grabbed him by his (crisped) ear.

"You know what this dipshit did?" he announced. "Fell down and started writhing *before* Angela here even got the death ray over her shoulder!" He let go of the ear and *whapped* the guy across the back of the head, which produced a shower of ashes. "Did you ever hear of a *cue*, schmuck?"

"Sorry, chief," the guy said.

"Oh, shit, Morty again," Angela groaned. "I shoulda known it'd be Morty."

Most of the other aliens, victims, and production crew nodded. Hell, I hadn't noticed the faux pas; but then, what do I know? The director stuck

a finger in poor Morty's face.

"You know what a *budget* is, schmuck? Well, a *budget* is something we have to work within the confines of. And when you're doing a film like *Purple Death Beam of the Cannibal Aliens*, you don't get much of a *budget* to begin with, so when a certain schmuck falls and writhes too soon, that *budget* goes all to shit, and we have *problems*. Do you comprehend *problems*, mate?"

"It won't happen again, chief, I promise!" Morty avered, perspiring through his blackened flesh.

The director looked at one of his crew. "How much of it will we be able to edit out?" he asked.

"We can get rid of the falling, but not the writhing," the guy answered.

"Piss on it, it'll have to stay. If anyone who goes to see this shit notices the fuck-up, the word will get out and make the film more endearing. Okay, we'll pick it up from where the cannibal aliens jump on the international peace pansies and start eating them. Places, everyone!"

The director and his crew left. One of the crisped peace pansies grinned at the gun-toting alien.

"Hey, Angela," he said, "how'd you like to eat me tonight in my trailer?"

"Fuck you and the horse you rode in on, Carl," Angela replied, shoving the alien head back on.

Well, this was interesting, but I got the hell out of there slowwwwwwwly, making sure I wasn't seen, which probably would've opened up another can of worms.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Hall of the Mountain King

Okay, no more diversions. I pedaled along the road briefly, until by my closest estimate I was three quarters of a mile from the road leading to the

hall of the Mountain King.

A sign with squashed cricket letters appeared. I touched it, and it read: you are three quarters of a mile from the road leading to THE HALL OF THE MOUNTAIN KING.

Hey, how's that for accuracy?

A quarter of a mile later another sign appeared. It read: you are HALF A MILE FROM THE ROAD LEADING TO THE HALL OF THE MOUNTAIN KING.

Shortly after that another sign appeared. It read: you are seven SIXTEENTHS OF A MILE FROM THE ROAD LEADING TO THE HALL OF THE MOUNTAIN KING.

I had a hunch it was going to be *real* easy to find the road.

Anyway, the signs increased geometrically, and I'll spare you the play-by-play, because toward the end they were giving the distance in *feet*. Let me tell you, they were necessary, because in the last half a mile at least three dozen roads twisted upward into the looming mountains. And they all looked identical, too.

At least the road leading to the hall of the Mountain King was painted in red.

Not all of it, just the first twenty feet or so. And if you'd seen it from way back you would've realized it was an arrow, pointing up. Yeah, I had a lot of cause for concern.

I finally started up the road leading to the hall of the Mountain King.

The day had gone by quickly. All the slowwwwww miles from Vanaduro, all the skulking across the paintball war zone, had eaten up the hours. The position of the sun told me it was late in the afternoon. If the hall of the Mountain King was *way* up there, I might not be able to reach it before dark. Great. Then what? Wild nocturnal mountain beasts? Things that come out of granitoid crevices and rifts and do things to your flesh that... ?

I have a thing about wild nocturnal beasts, yes?

In case you hadn't figured it out, I was *not* pedaling along the steep, twisting road. (Did I say steep? Make that STEEP.) Walking and pushing the bike was hard enough. And I was starting to wear down, too.

So after an hour or so of this torture I stopped to rest. I had plenty of water, having passed a few ponds along the way; and food, too, the stuff I'd taken from the Ramunzel Inn.

Not wanting to sit on a boulder, I had plopped down in the middle of the road. Why not? I figured... until I nearly got run over.

The thing that nearly ran me over looked like a large version of those strollers you see dedicated joggers pushing their babies along in. I heard it clattering down before I saw it, which was why I was able to move slowwwwwly out of the way with the Nishiki. Even so, it was *rolling* when it did a wheelie around a curve, and the old lady who sat inside waved a fist at me as she passed.

"Outta my way, fool!" she exclaimed. "I'm on one mother of a wild ride! Wheeeeeee!"

At least *she* was going fast enough to effect passage to the Ultimate Bike Path, although I doubt whether her stroller had the necessary extra gear.

On the other hand... who knows?

I stayed away from the middle of the road after that, and a good thing, too, because minutes later a second stroller barreled past. This one contained a balding, forty-something guy who was nowhere near as thrilled as Granny to be doing this. It was an understatement to say he looked scared shitless.

That was it for a while. I resumed the climb, soon working my way back to the middle, although I kept a wary ear tuned to any sound beyond my limited range of vision.

Eventually I heard wheels rolling over the hard, rock-strewn trail. This time it wasn't anyone going down, but up. And there wasn't one stroller, but a dozen or more of them, all nested together, like when the kid at the supermarket goes out in the parking lot to collect the carts. The guy pushing them was stocky and swart, with oily, jet-black hair and a thin

mustache; he looked like the maitre d' at every expensive Italian *ristorante* you've ever been to.

Catching up to the guy I said, "Nice day."

He looked sidelong at me, as if to say *oh christ not another one of those nice day assholes*, then replied, "Cheez, ain't no frikken nice day tuh me." He sounded more southern Brooklyn than southern Italy.

"How come?"

"How come, duh guy wants tuh know! It's cuz the frikken Mountain King has tuh have dese tings up *now*, not tomorra, when I coulda got started oily, but tuhday, which ain't got long tuh go, yuh know. Youse'd tunic we don't have a crappuhload of 'em still up dere or sumpin'. Nyahah, sheese, I'll be pushin' dese frikken tings all troo the frikken night!"

"Then it's still a long way to the hall of the Mountain King?" I asked.

"Hey, whadda you, from Minsk or Pinsk? Yeah, it's frikken far! Slow as yer goin' youse'll be lucky tuh make Halfway Camp before dark... which in case yuh ain't noticed ain't too far off."

He was right, it was late, and I was damn tired. So, forget the hall of the Mountain King today. This Halfway Camp sounded like a plan. Now, since he already thought I was from Minsk or Pinsk I figured another dumb-assed question wouldn't matter, and I would have asked him the distance to Halfway Camp, except for what happened next.

With the clattering of all his wheels there was no way to hear the next jogging stroller on its downhill run. Both of us were off to the side, and there was plenty of room to pass. But this gnarly old man in the go-thing, who looked to be having as much fun as Granny, grinned at us, and with a mischievous glint in his eye he rammed into the strollers, spinning both them and the black-haired guy around. Laughing, the old man continued on down. In his wake followed nearly all of the heretofore nested go-things, other than the one the guy had been holding to push the rest. Some bounced off boulders and rock walls and flipped over. Others bounced off boulders and rock walls and kept on going. I doubted whether any of them would get too far down.

But needless to say, the guy was *really* pissed.

"Duh you buhleeve dat ole fart?" he exclaimed. "Cheeze! Dey goes up dere tuh duh Mountain King tuh get all dere crappoluh taken care of, and den dey get so happy dat dey gotta be assholes on duh way down! Never frikken fails!"

Sounded like the Mountain King had a high success ratio. This was good. I asked the guy, "What now?"

"What now, duh guy wants tuh know! I goes and gets 'em, what else? Cheeze, the boss'll be frikken pissed!"

He climbed into the stroller and set off after the others, muttering all the way. I turned and continued up the trail.

Even motivated by a goal within reach I was still unable to do any better than slowwwwww, so it was already dark when I heard the music.

Yeah, music. It sounded closer than it actually was at first, because every time the trail curved I thought its source would be there, but no way.

Then, topping a ridge, I stepped onto a scrubby plateau and saw Halfway Camp. It wasn't that impressive, just a bunch of tents and campfires surrounding what looked like a roach coach, one of those trucks that bring food to construction sites and other places, perhaps even to the parking lot of *your* company at lunchtime. A dozen or so people were scattered through the camp, some sitting and eating languidly, others talking animatedly, a few dancing. My appearance scarcely warranted a second glance from anyone... except for the guy who ran the roach coach.

Business must've been slow, because he came running up when he spotted me, wearing an oily smile. He looked like Cyrano Jones, the intergalactic shyster who sold Lt. Uhura her first tribble.

"Evening, friend," he said in an oily voice. "Welcome to Halfway Camp. I am Flekka, the proprietor. What can I get for you? Food? Drink? A nice cozy tent or a warm fire?"

My Friend Flekka? Naaah.

Anyway, it sounded like everything was for sale here. This young woman, sitting by a campfire, smiled at me and ran her tongue over her lips. Flekka noticed.

"Perhaps you want someone to keep you warm *inside* the cozy tent, eh?" he said with an oily wink.

"No thanks," I told him. "Something to eat would be nice, and a place to sleep."

"Very well then, but not until I see your coin," he said with an oily smirk.

Coin. Okay, forget paper money. I reached into my seat bag and was going to come out with a whole handful, then decided to play it cool with so oily a businessman.

"Here, coin." I held out a quarter, a nickel, and two pennies.

"It isn't enough," he said, not looking at it.

I dug in the bag again and came out with the same thing. "How's this?"

"Fine, except I would have one more of these." He held up the nickel.

"How about this instead?" I showed him a dime.

"No. Give me the bigger coin or it's no deal."

"You drive an oily bargain." I shrugged, bagging the dime and giving him a nickel.

"Ah, now it's done!" he exclaimed.

"Just what did I buy for such wealth?" I asked.

"Whatever you want from the roach coach"—I *swear* that's what he said!—"and tent number seven over there. But you can forget about the wench, unless you wish to bargain some more!"

"Uh-uh, you're too shrewd for me."

The things in Flekka's roach coach were what you would have expected to find, except for the phenomenon of everything being in blank packages. Since I wasn't *that* hungry I took a bag of potato chips, an apple, a cup of yogurt, and a can of soda... or reasonable facsimiles thereof.

The potato chips tasted like wood shavings.

The apple tasted like a ball of wax.

The yogurt tasted like the barium you have to swallow for your X rays.

The soda tasted like that ipecac stuff they give you to make you throw up... which is just what I did.

Anyway, tent number seven and its campfire turned out to be a better deal than that other crap. I sat there for a while, warming myself against the chill of the night and striking up conversations with whoever wandered by. Eventually I learned a thing or two about Halfway Camp. Some of the folks here were, like me, on their way to the hall of the Mountain King to have the big guy solve their problems. Others had already been there and were on the way down, choosing to walk instead of risking life and limb in one of those strollers. All the happy dancers were in this group.

The music, by the way, was pretty bad. It was played by a three-piece combo, all of whom, I later learned, were kinsmen of the proprietor. One guy tapped on bongos; another squeezed these bagpipe things, producing a sound similar to what a beagle would make after it had been in a microwave oven for eighteen seconds. The third, using a megaphone for amplification, belched the main tune. Weird. But the dancers didn't seem to mind.

Soon the camp hooker, bored with the lack of business, got herself into the dancing. Whoa, could this woman twist and shout! Aware that I was watching, she twisted and shouted over.

"Come on, baby, shake it!" she exclaimed. "Get up and dance with me!"

"Uh, I'd rather not..." I started to say, but she grabbed both my hands and tried to yank me to my feet.

A minute later, when I'd floated back down, she was somewhere else, but Flekka was standing there.

"You really should do something about that," the proprietor said with an oily chuckle.

I climbed into the tent and prayed there would be no further disturbances during the night. In fact there was only one, when the guy who had earlier lost nearly all his strollers clattered into camp. He had again collected them and was on his way up; this brief stop was only to refresh himself with an epicac soda. He was gone right after that, and I slept okay.

At daybreak everyone was getting ready to leave. There was just about an equal split of those going up and down. The latter group said good-bye and started off first; I left with the others.

Actually, I'd already identified most of that bunch last night. Not hard to see who needed the wisdom of the Mountain King. One guy's whole body shook uncontrollably; it was hard as hell to understand a word he said. A woman had a second head growing out of her neck; each one argued that the other was totally unreasonable. Two teenagers in love, disregarding both the warnings of their parents *and* the song by Dion and the Belmonts, had messed around once too often and now had half their bodies covered with slimy green moss. The only one I couldn't figure out was this burly but otherwise ordinary-looking guy, who had slept in tent number six next to me last night. I asked him what his problem was.

"I am going to see the great and wise Mountain King," he answered, "so that he might help me overcome my tendency to heed voices that tell me to murder people in their sleep and cut up their bodies into morsels for the farm animals to dine upon. Thank heavens the voices did not come last night."

Yeah, thank heavens.

Jesus, I'd slept next door to this asshole!

Needless to say, I avoided him like the plague the rest of the way up. I spent most of the time talking to either the slimy teenagers or the woman's two heads, which helped pass the time. In fact, I was surprised when we reached the top of the mountain so quickly...

And even more so when I first set eyes on the hall of the Mountain King.

All this time I'd been expecting to see something that would take my breath away, some totally awesome edifice along the lines of a medieval castle, or a royal palace, or the White House, or anywhere Donald Trump

used to live before his ex-wife went to work on him. So what did I find?

An outhouse.

I *swear* it was! A lot taller and wider than the norm, but an outhouse nonetheless, right down to the half-moon on the door. It extended back quite a distance, so it wasn't like it was a small building or anything. Still, it was kind of unexpected.

Not so for my fellow travelers, who got all excited and ran toward the door. A dozen or so other people with various problems were already there, waiting in a line, which grew longer as the others joined it. I did, too, though with far less speed.

Well, the stroller guy had been right about one thing: There were plenty of them around, even if he hadn't hurried his ass off to get back up here in the middle of the night with his load. At the moment one of them was about to be occupied by an elderly lady with a *huge* grin on her face. Even so, there were more than enough to handle the crowd on line, even if all of them chose that way down, which of course *I* wouldn't.

You know that asshole who heeds the voices to murder people in their sleep? Well, he had been the first to reach the line, and now, each time he whispered something to the person in front, he advanced one spot, until he had worked his way to the door. No one was of a mind to refuse him.

The line inched along slowly; it was like waiting to get on Splash Mountain or whatever at Disneyland. At least two hours passed, or maybe it just felt that way. Before I reached the door a bunch more people joined the line in back of me.

Yeah, well, at least I was now at the door. The two-headed woman had been admitted ten minutes earlier by the stroller guy, or someone who looked like him. My turn next; it was about time.

So, you know what I found when I got in? Yep, this *was* just like Disneyland, because you know the attractions that are *inside* buildings, and you think that when you get to the door, you're done waiting? Then, you find out that the line continues in there, and it's even longer than outside? You got the picture.

At least *thirty* people were in front of me along a lengthy, gloomy

corridor, the lot of them kept in line by four attendants, all of whom *did* look exactly like the stroller guy. There was another door at the far end, which could've led into the hall of the Mountain King, but then again just might be this crap all over again. Either way, I was in for a hell of a long wait.

"Duh Mountain King will get tuh jus' as many of youse as he can tuhday," one of the attendants announced. "Jus' remember, dere's always tomorra."

Tomorra? No way! In the first place, I really didn't want to spend another night as a basketball. And second, the lure of reality time was growing stronger, reaching out to me beyond the portals of the Ultimate Bike Path.

How's that for dramatics?

It didn't seem like many of the other people had been disturbed by the announcement. Good, because I had an idea, and I didn't want to feel like an asshole for what I was about to do. See, I'd been watching that psycho for a while, and he had continued to work his way up, until now he just had a couple of more folks to go. So I thought about it, then tapped the two-headed woman on the shoulder.

"Yes, what do you want?" one of the heads asked.

"I don't know if I mentioned this before," I said, "but in addition to the problem you witnessed last night, I was going to see if the Mountain King can restore the use of my sphincter muscle and bladder."

She stepped aside quickly. I told the same story to the rest of my traveling companions, then cut out the part of what happened at Halfway Camp to those who didn't know me from Adam. I got through most of the line, until one old lady started giving me all her home remedies, guaranteed to solve my problems. It was only when I told her that I felt an attack coming on that she let me by.

Fortunately the psycho had gone through the next door by the time I reached the front of the line. I'd figured out that this definitely *was* the door to the hall of the Mountain King, because each person I'd seen coming out of it so far was the same that had gone in five or ten minutes earlier. For example, one woman, her body all gnarly and arthritic, had

emerged as straight as an arrow. Another guy, in a red T-shirt, had gone in looking like Lon Chaney's *Phantom of the Opera* and reappeared bearing a resemblance to Harrison Ford.

Could the Mountain King make blind men see and lame men walk, too? Just who *was* this guy, anyway?

The last one in had been the nutcase who heeded voices. I wondered how the Mountain King was going to deal with that. Not too well, because he was dragged out, kicking and screaming, by two of the attendants.

"It's not my fault!" he cried. "The voices *told* me to kill him! How could I help it?"

"The frikken joik!" one attendant said. "Tryin' tuh off duh boss! When will youse all loyn dat duh Mountain King is a healer, not a frikken magician!"

"Is the Mountain King all right?" I asked, with more than a bit of concern.

"Yeah, fine; but he's gonna take hisself a break now, so youse'll jus' hafta wait. We gotta take dis asshole down tuh duh proper uhtorities in his boig an' let dem do whatever dey wants. I mean, moiderin' twenty-six people in dere beds ain't such a nice ting, yuh know?"

"No!" the guy screamed. "They won't be nice to me there! I know they won't!"

As they carted him off I started thinking about something the attendant had said: *Duh Mountain King is a healer, not a frikken magician*. If that was true, then how the devil was he going to help me? A magician might've been more along the lines of what I was looking for.

Dang!

Well, no sense getting bent out of shape. To pass the time I chatted with the guy in back of me. He had long white hair growing out of his nose all the way to the floor. I asked him why he didn't trim the blasted stuff. He pulled out a pair of scissors and cut the hank just outside his nostrils. It grew back to the floor in a minute. I wished him the best of luck.

The Mountain King's lunch break or trauma stop or whatever ran into what I guessed was the better part of an hour. Finally an attendant stuck his head out the door and pointed at me.

"Duh boss will see youse now," he announced.

Taking a deep breath, I wheeled the Nishiki into the hall of the Mountain King.

Well, I gotta say, this room was more impressive than either the adjoining corridor or the outside of the building. It was totally done up in purple, black, and wine red, like the covers of most horror novels for the better part of a decade. There was no furniture, only heaps of pillows. And sitting atop one heap was the Mountain King himself, smiling benevolently and all that.

The wisest of the wise, the unparalleled solver of problems, the exalted personage who was going to help me solve *my* problem, wore the uniform of a Texaco service station guy!

No shit, one of the men from Texaco, who worked from Maine to Mexico back in days of yore, when there was no self-service and these guys tripped over themselves trying to see who was going to pump your gas, change your oil, check your water, the whole nine yards. He was young and had a Richie Cunningham freshness about his face.

Playing absently with his bow tie he said, "You don't hear voices or see neon signs that advise you to cut people into fishbait, do you?"

"Huh? Oh, no, nothing like that. You're talking about that last asshole. Glad to see you're okay, your Mountain Kingness." (Jeez, what an idiotic thing to say!)

"Thanks." He stood and adjusted his cap, and his dimpled smile grew. I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd asked to check the air in my tires, but instead he said, "What can I do for you?"

For an answer I put the bike down and hopped up, which was stupid, because the ceiling was only twelve feet above. Groaning in pain, I floated down.

The Mountain King sat down again, chin on hand, contemplating like

Rodin's *Thinker*. Touching the floor I said, "This might not make any sense to you but—"

"Try me."

"—I need to counter the effects of the gravity in order to achieve a downhill speed in excess of thirty mph, or the same in free-fall, to get back to the place where I came from."

The Man from Texaco/Mountain King nodded sagely. He really *did* look like he knew what I was talking about. "It wouldn't be hard to offset our gravity for you."

"Oh, yeah?" I said hopefully.

"But consider this: As soon as you return to where you came from you would weigh considerably more, and the added g forces might squash you like a bug. I doubt if you would want that."

I nodded. "You got that right."

He pondered for another few seconds, then said, "No, I don't see any solution to your problem. Sorry. Next!"

What the hey! I took a step toward the Mountain King. His attendants tried to stop me. I shrugged them off, then had to let them grab hold of my legs when I floated up.

"You're supposed to be hot stuff!" I cried. "That's what folks have been telling me. You wanna make them all liars?"

I think the challenge got to him. He pondered again, then motioned for the attendants to let me go.

"There is one possibility," he said, "but it contains an element of risk."

Gee, what a surprise! "I'm listening."

"I can reduce the dosage of the compound to the most minimal amount. It will last forty seconds. You must wait until the last possible moment before returning, or you know what will happen."

"That doesn't sound as risky as you made it."

"There is a margin of error with that forty seconds."

Uh-oh. "How much?"

"One-point-three seconds either way."

See you Wednesday night, Jack; can't wait. "I'll take it."

The monarch nodded admiringly. "You're a brave fellow."

No, an asshole, but he didn't have to know that. He called over one of the attendants, who I *think* was the stroller guy, and spoke into his ear. The guy's face was all scrunched up as he listened, like that of an orangutan attending a lecture on the purifying qualities of karma yoga. I started to worry.

The guy left but was back quickly with a microscopically small pill in a tiny zipper bag. As I was looking it over the Mountain King said, "Put it on your tongue, then jump up and down... gently." He motioned toward the ceiling, where I'd hit my head. "It will take a bit of time to work. Start counting the instant your feet hit the ground. Remember, you want to wait until as close to forty seconds as you can."

"Got it. Hey, thanks a million, Your Highness. Uh, do I owe you anything."

He chuckled; the attendants cracked up. "Have a good life, friend," said the Man from Texaco, who works from Maine to Mexico, both blessing *and* dismissing me with a wave of his hand.

I returned to the corridor, which made the guy with the nose hair very happy. One of the attendants guided me to a side door. Before he went back in I asked him for the best place to find a sheer drop. That wasn't hard, considering where we were. He pointed me in the right direction.

Okay, it took less than five minutes to reach the summit of a sheer cliff. This was a plummet into oblivion, because you could only see about a mile down to a swirling gray mist, which hid whatever was below. Not that I had any intention of finding out. I planned on being long gone before then.

Forty seconds. A one-point-three-second margin of error. I kept repeating those figures as, stepping back from the edge a safe distance, I

laid the Nishiki on its side. I removed the bike computer from the handlebars and set it on the stopwatch mode. My hand was trembling, which was not good, considering the size of the pill I was about to shake into it. So I took a humongous deep breath, and a moment later I was okay.

I put the microscopic pill on my tongue.

Even hopping up gently, my bike shoes were still eight feet above the ground. I floated down, bounced back up, this time ten feet. Too high. I controlled the next one better, only rising to six feet. Good. I started floating down again...

... then fell like a stone. My feet hit the ground first, then my ass as I toppled backward. The whole thing winded me, but at least I had the presence of mind to start the watch.

one... two... three...

Back on my feet now, actually feeling a little heavier than usual. I'd already decided to hold off my jump till at least thirty seconds. It didn't take much time to reach the desired speed in free-fall, and there was no way I wanted to prolong a plummet if I didn't have to. I walked to the Nishiki, staring intently at the bike computer.

... five... six... seven...

My whole essence was focused upon what was going to occur in the next half a minute. I couldn't recall being more centered upon anything in my life.

... ten... eleven... twelve ...

I started to reach for the Nishiki.

"Are you Manuel Echavarria y Todos Santos of East Las Pulgas, Arizona?"

Oh, shit, the Ed McMahon gummi bear-thing!

"Hey, get out of here!" I exclaimed.

"Are you Manuel Echavarria y Todos Santos of East Las Pulgas,

Arizona?" he persisted.

"No! Come on—!"

... fourteen . . . fifteen... sixteen ...

"Hmmm. Are you Jack Miller of Del Mar, California?"

"Yeah. Beat it!"

"Jack Miller of Del Mar, California, you may have already won the enormously massive extraextrasupergiant quintuple whopper-prize of one hundred million dollars in the Publishers Dumping Ground much-much-more-newer-than-new Ancient Progenitor of All Sweepstakes sweepstakes! Return this entry before the sun cools, and in addition to the quintuple whopperprize we'll give you..."

... nineteen... twenty... twenty-one...

"... seven villas along the Italian Riviera, and a coupon good for a *two* years' supply of Domino's Pizza, *and* a thousand pints of Haagen-Dazs vanilla Swiss almond ice cream!"

Merde! A thousand pints of my favorite ice cream and *two* years worth of Domino's! *I had to have that entry!*

... twenty-three... twenty-four... twenty-five...

The Ed-thing turned and started off, but this time the lack of gravity didn't hinder my movements. I caught up to him and, doing my best imitation of Lawrence Taylor, tackled him to the ground. (*Eeey-yooo*, that gummi bear skin felt gross!) In a moment I had wrestled the entry from his grasp.

"There, got it!" I exclaimed triumphantly, letting the guy up. "This time I'm going to win—!"

... twenty-nine... thirty... thirty-one...

Jesus, I had to get out of here! I tore ass back to the Nishiki, slipped the bike computer back in its holder, shoved the entry in the bag, climbed on the seat, and pedaled like a madman toward the edge of the cliff. *Oh, shit, the Earth-born Nishiki started to sag under the extra weight!* But my

Cycle Pro Mudslinger tires finally lifted off the ground; I hung there briefly, then plummeted down.

... thirty-four ... thirty-five . . . thirty-six...

My thumb trembled on the lever. I wasn't aware of anything weird happening to me yet, but no matter, because...

... thirty-seven... thirty-eight... thirty-nine...

I shifted into the Vurdabrok Gear...

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Pressing Engagements

... and was back on the Ultimate Bike Path.

Where the pressure of the g forces was so great that I felt myself being squashed to the thickness and consistency of a soggy English muffin below the rust-red mist on the tunnel floor.

Oh, jeez, that moment again! All the stages of your life flashing before you. But it wasn't the past I saw. Instead, I had this image of Holly standing in the Cedar Rapids airport Wednesday night, staring at the jet minutes after the last person had gotten off, wondering if I'd locked myself in the toilet or something.

Then I saw Melvin Butterwood, administrator of Galaxyland, and all his family disappearing off the face of the universe.

Would the Bukko help? Uh-uh. It was somewhere in the folds of my flesh, by this time reduced to the thickness of aluminum foil. What about the study group? The Old Guy swore they'd be watching. So what were they waiting for... ?

Ah, sweet fortuitousness! The sensation of being crushed like a beer can lasted only seven hundredths of a second. I stretched out, like Lawrence Welk's accordion on the up-beat. *Awun anna two anna...* normal again.

Yeah, but did my body hurt? You *don't* wanna hear me *kvetch!*

I had emerged from a Florida gate, which now dominated for a while. After that the random pattern resumed, and there were lots of blue doors.

Surprise, Murphy's Law was not in effect, because the one back to the Stuart Mesa hillside showed up within moments. I don't need to tell you how fast I went through...

... and emerged where I'd gone in, halfway down. Almost wistfully I shifted down out of the twenty-second gear.

The Old Guy was waiting on top of the Santa Margarita River bridge. I'd expected that. He was at the far end, motioning for me to follow him down. I chained the bike and descended the rocks.

Hey, guess what! No less than six Old Guys were standing along the muddy bank. Actually, five were standing; the sixth, having fallen in the muck, was being helped up by two others. Once the whole bunch was on their feet they turned and started applauding. My Old Guy was wearing a great smile, and the one on Study Group Old Guy #1 (I think) was good, but the rest were kind of twisty and weird. Didn't matter, though, because their sincerity was evident.

"What's all this?" I asked.

My Old Guy said, "Your last excursion just"—he stuck his finger in his ear—"blew us away, Jack!"

Study Group Old Guy #3 (I think) said, "All of us who witnessed it wanted to see you in person and shake your hand."

Study Group Old Guy #2 (I think) said, "To even undertake the journey to the hall of the Mountain King, when there was an easier way out, was commendable enough!"

Study Group Old Guy #4 (I think) said, "Then, to take the risk you did—!"

"It certainly was a risk," my Old Guy (I'm sure) added. "At the moment you were being squashed like a bug on the *mhuva lun gallee*, we might not have been able to pull you out."

Say what! I wish I would've known that! Maybe I'll stop making like Wyatt Earp and being so brave, courageous, and bold.

Anyway, the Old Guys lined up to pump my hand. The electrical charge I got from each of them invigorated my aching body.

Then, Study Group New Old Guy #2 (I think) said, "I understand you will not be riding the *mhuva lun gallee* for a while."

"This is true. Sorry to disappoint you."

"Oh, we'll make do," my Old Guy (I'm sure) said. "A fascinating study is about to be undertaken, wherein the infected scab shavings of Fuumorian offal flies are mixed with the week-old pus of—"

"Right, I'm sure you'll have a wonderful time with that," I interrupted.

Study Group Old Guy #5 (I think) said, "So, Jack, as one of the"—he stuck his finger in his ear—"honchos of our people, I can safely say that a *lot* more of us will be observing your future excursions. You are quite a subject!"

I thanked him. The six Old Guys then shook my hand again. My Old Guy went last; in addition to the handshake he flashed me a big grin and a wink.

"Good luck with your female, Jack," he said. "I hope to meet her one day."

Yeah, well, I wasn't too sure about that. Whatever. It occurred to me that I hadn't seen any other bikes on the bridge and wondered where the Old Guys were going from here. You know what they did? This was *weird!*

They all walked into the mucky Santa Margarita River and disappeared below!

Maybe *that's* where the mother ship has been all this time.

Anyway, I headed home with the urgent desire to soak this totally sore body. But I took a detour to my answering machine, and... *guess what!*

There was a message from Izzy McCarthy. Yes, the publisher *did* want the sequel to *Tree Man of Quazzak*, and the contract would be on its way

within two weeks (right), so get your ass working, boy, you have an assignment!

Okay, forget the horror novel, or the book on relationships; this was fine. But as far as *getting my ass working*, uh-uh. For the rest of today I would input the last excursion. Tomorrow I would stop the mail delivery, the morning paper, all the things I needed to do for the upcoming loo-ooong stretch of reality time. And Wednesday...

You know.

My Nishiki would be going to the shop for some R&R and a couple slugs of oil. Sure, I still would've liked to make that cross-country ride. But you know what Holly and I will be doing after we get back and she's settled in, before she has to start work and school and all that? This is *cool*, something I always wanted to do, preferably not alone: We're taking our bikes up to northern California on the Amtrak, touring the wine country, then riding back home down the coast, over six hundred miles!

And who knows? By the time I return from the aforementioned trip I might've already won all that Haagen-Dazs and Domino's Pizza, not to mention the hundred million dollars! Yeah, I *definitely* sent that entry in.

Yo, as usual you've been excellent company. I'll miss riding the *mhuva lun gallee*, visiting all the places it takes us to. But hey, I need *and* want this stretch of reality time, and I *know* you understand why. Besides, it's only about half the summer.

You must know by this time that no matter what happens in my life, the lure of the Ultimate Bike Path is irresistible.

See you on the Stuart Mesa hillside... *soon*.