

*Paul Di Filippo was custom-made for an anthology like this. With his wit and wild invention, evidenced in wacky books as *The Steampunk Trilogy* and *Lost Pages* (in which a costumed Franz Kafka—yes, I said Kafka—roams the night of Manhattan as the avenger Jackdaw) he's proved himself an able postpunk success the likes of the great Philip Jose Farmer.*

His story for this book is one of those I'd point to when asked what I was looking for for Redshift—it's hilarious, and viciously apt.

If you don't think the media is really heading this way—think again.

Weeping Walls

Paul Di Filippo

"I want those fucking *teddy* bears, and I want them *yesterday*!" Lisa Dutch bellowed into the telephone as if denouncing Trotsky in front of Stalin. Tectonic emotions threatened to fracture the perfect makeup landscaping the compact features of her astoundingly innocent yet vaguely insane face. Eruptions of sweat beaded the cornsilk-fine blond hairs lay alongside her delicate ears.

Seeking her attention, Jake Pasha was waving a folded newspaper under Lisa's charming pert nose and toothpaste-blue eyes, and this impudence from her assistant infuriated her more. She glared at Jake like a wrathful goddess, Kali in a Donna Karan suit, but—aside from swatting the paper away—she chose to vent her evil temper only on the hapless vendor holding down the other end of her conversation.

"Listen, shithead! You promised me those goddamn bears for early-last week, and they're not here *yet*. Do you have any *idea* how many orders I'm holding up for those bears? I run a time-sensitive business here. We're talking thousands of bereaved husbands and wailing mourning parents and red-eyed grandparents, all hanging fire. They can't process their grief thanks to your goddamn *incompetence*. Not to mention the fucking kids! You can't find a goddamn *nose*? Are you fucking *crazy*?" Oh, the *bears'* noses! Well, I don't care if you draw goddamn noses on by hand with a racking pen! Just get me those motherfucking bears!"

Lisa smashed the phone into its plastic cradle, where fractures revealed a history of stresses. Now she was free to concentrate on her assistant.

"Unless you stop shoving that paper into my face this instant, Jake, I will tear your brand-new asshole. And while your boyfriends might well enjoy that feature, I guarantee that I will make wearing your thong at the beach an utter impossibility."

Jake stepped warily back from Lisa's desk and nervously brushed a fall of wheat-colored hair off his broad brow. "My God, Lisa, you don't have to be such a frightening bitch with me. I'm already scared every morning when I walk through the door of this madhouse! Anyways, I was just trying to do my job."

Lisa visibly composed herself, her stormy expression ceding to a professional mask of good-natured calm. She forced out an apology that evidently tasted sour. "I'm sorry. But the vendors drive me nuts. Our whole business relies on them, and they're nothing but a bunch of sleazy asswipes. Balloons, stuffed animals, flowers, wreaths, banners, canopies, and suncatchers—you'd think the people who sold such things would be nice, maybe New York people. But they're not. You know who the most up-front guys are? The construction guys. They have enough manners to fill a thimble, but if they can't deliver a wall, they let you know right away. They don't string you along like these other pricks."

"Be that as it may, dear, you've got something a tad more crucial to worry about now." flourished the newspaper in a less aggressive manner, and Lisa took it from him. Folded to the business section, the paper glibly offered its salient headline:

WEEPING WALLS TO FACE FIRST COMPETITOR

Lisa scanned the article with growing rage that wiped away her mask once again. Reached the end, she exclaimed, "Those scum-sucking bastards! They've ripped off all our trademark features. 'Sadness Fences,' my sweet white ass! Even their name's actionable. Our lawyers will be all over them like ticks on a Connecticut camper by this afternoon."

Jake took the paper back. "I don't know, Lisa. I get a bad feeling over this one. Did you know who's backing them?"

"TimWarDisVia. So what? You're scared of a conglomerate whose name sounds like a neurological disease?"

"That's a lot of money and power to go up against—"

"I don't give a fuck! We have legal precedence on our side. I invented this whole concept five years ago. Everyone knows that. Before me and Weeping Walls, this industry didn't exist. Grief was left to fucking amateurs!"

"Granted. But you had to expect competition sooner or later."

"Maybe you're right. Maybe we've been getting complacent. This could be good for us. Let's use it to kick things up a notch."

"How?"

"I don't know. But I'll think of something. Meanwhile, I've got to keep all the press spinning. What's next on my schedule?"

Jake consulted his Palm Pilot XII. "There's a new wall going up right here in town and starting from now. Did you want to attend the opening ceremonies?"

"What's the occasion?"

"Employee shooting yesterday at the downtown post office."

"That's handy. How many dead?"

"Three."

"Sure, I'll go. With that low number of deaths the media coverage should be thin. I think I could handle the stress from the aftermath of a full-scale massacre today. Plus the school nearby, and I haven't been to one of our openings in a month, since that schoolyard slaughter."

"We could certainly plan your appearances better if we could only remove the random factor from our business—"

Lisa stood up, smoothing her skirt. "No need for you to be cynical, too, Jake. I've got a good angle completely covered."

Following his superior out of her office, Jake asked, "What's Danny doing these days?"

Lisa sighed. "Same as always. Sacrificing himself for his art. It gets mighty old, Jake."

"Is he making any money yet?"

"Not so you could notice."

"Any luck convincing him to come to work here?"

"Not likely. He swears he'd kill himself first. He'd have to get pretty desperate. Or else we'd have to offer him some unbelievable deal."

"You two are such opposites, I'm amazed you're still together."

"I am a pistol in the sack, honey. And Danny's hung more impressively than Abe Lincoln assassins."

"Oh, I don't doubt any of that for one blessed minute, sugar."

'Could I hear from the kazoos again, please?'

Danny Simmons, his gangly limbs poised awkwardly as if he were only minding temporarily until their real owner returned, sat in the front row of the shabby theater, directing his motley troupe on the bare stage. He addressed a quartet of actors situated stage left, like harlequins, and standing with kazoos poised at their lips. Before the kazoo-players could comply with the polite request, however, Danny was interrupted by a large-bosomed young woman, hair colored like autumn acorns, seated several rows back.

"Danny, I've forgotten my cue."

The mild-faced skinny director turned slowly in his seat and said, "You come in with Lester says—"The planet's dying!"—Carol."

"He's going to call me by my real name? I thought I was playing Gaia."

A long-suffering look washed over Danny's lagomorphic features "No, Carol. He'll say, 'The planet's dying!' "

"And then I stand up and face the audience—"

"Correct."

"—and rip open my shirt—"

"Right."

"—and I say—I say—"

"Your line is 'Gaia lactates no more for cuckoos born of horninid greed!' "

Carol's painful expression mimicked that of a pressure-racked semiprofessionalist in a nationally televised sixth-grade spelling bee. " 'Gaia lacks tits for greedy—' Oh, Danny, it's no use!"

"Carol, just calm down. You have another two whole days to practice. I'm sure you'll be fine."

"I've got the shirt-ripping part down pat. Do you want to see?" The males on stage leaned forward eagerly. Danny yelled, "No, no, don't!" but he was much too late.

The rehearsal didn't resume for a confused fifteen minutes spent chasing popped buttons and draping blankets solicitously around Carol's chilly shoulders.

Hardly had the drama—script and music by Danny Simmons, directed and produced by Danny Simmons—gotten once more well under way when another interruption intervened.

One of the set-building crew rocketed onstage, hammer in her hand. "Hey, Danny, there's a guy from the electric company fooling around outside at the meter!"

At that instant, the theater was plunged into darkness. Yelps and shrieks filled the musty air. Feet scuffled in panic across the boards, and the sound of a body tumbling down the three steps leading from the stage was succeeded by grunts and curses.

Eventually Danny Simmons and his troupe found themselves all out in the daylight lobby. There awaited the theater's landlord, a short irascible fellow who resembled a gnome sire, and Rumpelstiltskin on one of Cinderella's ugly stepsisters.

"Haul ass out of here, you losers. Your freeloading days are over." Danny fought back tears of frustration. "But Mr. Semple, we open on Friday! We'll pay all the back rent and the first night's receipts!"

"Not likely, pal. I finally caught a rehearsal of this lamebrained farce yesterday. I was sitting in the back for the whole damn incomprehensible five acts. No one's going to lay down a plugged nickel to see this shit-" Semple paused to ogle the straining safety pin that laborer had used to hold Carol's shirtfront closed. "You do have a couple of good assets, but you can't count on them for everything. No, I figure it's better to cut my losses right now. Clear this place out immediately so's I can padlock it, and my boys will pile your stuff on the sidewalk."

Defeated, the spiritless actors began to shuffle out of the building, and Danny shamefacedly followed them. Out on the sidewalk, he turned to face the confusingly abstract poster for the show hanging by the ticket office:

GAIA'S DAY OFF PRESENTED BY THE DERRIDADAJSTS

The sight of the poster seemed to hearten him. He turned to rally his friends.

"Gang, I won't let these fat-cat bastards break us up! Whatever it takes, I vow, the Derridadaists will go on!"

"I am *so* glad," Carol offered cheerfully, "that I have some extra time to practice my speech!"

"All mourners wearing an official wristband may now step forward." Dewlapped Governor Wittlestoop, suited in enough expensive charcoal wool fabric to clothe a dozen orphans, despite the hot September sunlight beating down, backed away from the microphone and lowered his fat rump onto a creaking folding chair barely up to sustaining its load. Next to the governor on the hastily erected platform sat Lisa Dutch, knees clamped together, primly crossed at the ankles in what Jake Pasha—lingering now obediently close by—referred to as "the boardroom virgin" pose.

Lisa patted the governor's hand. Maintaining her frozen official expression of solemn condoling vicarious grief, she murmured, "Did you get the latest envelope okay?"

Similarly covert, Wittlestoop replied, "It's already in the bank." "Good. Because I see you'll be facing some new challenges, and I don't want to have to worry about protecting my ass on my own backyard."

"Nothing to fear. Weeping Walls has been awfully good to this state, and the state will respond in kind."

"Since when did you and the state become synonymous?" "I believe it was at the start of my fifth term. By the way, I admired your anecdote today about the relatives you lost in the Oklahoma City bombing and how that inspired you years later to found your company.

You had the crowd in tears. Tell me confidentially—any of that horseshit true?"

"Only the part about me having relatives."

Notes of dirgelike classical music sprinkled the air. Among the groundlings, a wavering line had formed: those members of the sniffing audience with the requisite wristbands had arranged themselves in an orderly fashion across the post office parking lot where the memorial service for the recently slain was being held. The head of the line terminated at a row of large black plastic bins much like oversize composters. Beside the bins stood several employees of Weeping Walls, looking in their black habiliments like postmodern undertakers, save for the bright red WW logo stitched in Gothic cursive on their coats.

Now the first mourner was silently and gently urged by a solicitous yet controlling Wee-

Walls employee to make her choice of sympathy-token. The mourner, a red-eyed woman, selected a bouquet of daisies from one of a score of water buckets held on a waist-high stand. The Weeping Walls usher now led the woman expeditiously toward the wall itself.

Erected only hours ago, the fresh planks of the official Weeping Wall, branded subtly with the WW logo, still emanated a piney freshness. At regular intervals staples secured damp plastic ties similar to a policeman's instant handcuffs or an electrician's cable-bundling straps. The usher brought the first woman and her bouquet to the leftmost, uppermost tie, and helped her secure the flowers with a ratcheting plastic zip. Then he led the sobbing woman away as efficiently as an Oscar-ceremonies handler, rejoining his fellow workers to process another person.

Once the mechanized ritual was under way, it proceeded as smoothly as a robotic Japanese assembly line. From the bins mourners plucked various tokens of their public grief: plush teddy bears, miniature sports gear emblazoned with the logos of all the major franchises, religious icons from a dozen faiths, sentimental greeting cards inscribed with such all-purpose designations as "Beloved Son" and "Dearest Daughter." One by one, the bereaved friends, neighbors and relatives—anyone, really, who had paid the appropriate fee to Weeping Walls (family discounts available)—placed their stereotyped fetishes on the official wall and returned to their seats.

Under the cheerful sun, Lisa watched the whole affair with traces of pride and struggling to break through her artificial funereal demeanor like blackbirds out of a pie. Her attention was snagged by an anomalous audience member: some nerdy guy scribbling furiously with a stylus on his PDA.

Lisa leaned toward Governor Wittlestoop. "See the guy taking notes? Is he a reporter I don't recognize?"

Wittlestoop squinted. "No. And he's not accredited national media either. I've never seen him before."

Lisa got determinedly to her feet. All eyes were focused on the ceremony, and no one noticed her swift descent from the stage. Coming up behind the scribbler, Lisa remained practically invisible. She seated herself behind the suspicious fellow and craned for a moment over his shoulder.

The screen of the man's handy machine was scrolling his notes as he entered them:

Offer more choices of victim memorial. Favorite foods of dec'd? Finger food only. More cookies? Call SnackWell's. Sadness Fences line of candy?

Her face savage, Lisa stood. She grabbed the man's folding chair and tipped him out. He stumbled forward, caught himself, and turned to face Lisa with a frightened look.

"You fucking little spy! Give me that!" Lisa grappled with the man for his PDA, but he held it tight. Empty chairs tumbled like jackstraws as they struggled. Suddenly Lisa relinquished her grip. The spy straightened up, smiling and seemingly victorious. Lisa cocked her well-muscled Nautilus-toned arm and socked him across the jaw. The guy went down.

Chaos was now in full sway, screams and shouts and frenzied dashes for cover, as if a post office shooter himself had suddenly returned. Lisa spiked the PDA with the heel of her pump and ground it into the asphalt.

Digital cameras had converged on Lisa from the start of the fight and continued to image her reddened face and disarrayed hair to various news outlets. The Governor's entourage of state troopers finally descended on Lisa and her victim. The spy had regained his feet and, nursing his jaw, sought revenge.

"Arrest her, officers! She assaulted me for no reason!"

The troopers turned to Governor Wittlestoop for direction. The Governor nodded his head at the spy, and the troopers dragged him off.

Lisa sought desperately to explain her actions to the appalled crowd and the invisible media audience. "He was, he was—"

Jake had joined her, and, under pretext of comforting her, whispered close to her ear. "He was a Satanist!"

"TimWarDisVia continues to deny all allegations of Satanic activity by any of its subsidiaries or their employees. Nevertheless, several senators are insisting on a full investigation—"

The well-coiffed CNN talking head inhabiting the small all-purpose monitor on the kitchen counter appeared primed to drone on all night. But Lisa moused him out of existence with her left hand and then carried the dark amber drink in her right hand up to her plum-glossed lips.

"Nice save, Leese."

Danny stood by the sink, peeling potatoes. He sought to create one single long peel for each, and was generally succeeding.

Lisa drained her glass. "Thanks, but I can't take all the credit. Jake doesn't know it yet, but he's in for a fat bonus."

Danny sighed. "The productions I could mount if only I had an assistant as competent as Jake! The kind of people who will work like dogs week after week for no pay generally come equipped with a lot of, ah—call it smarts? But of course, that's all moot now, with the death of our show."

Lisa refilled her glass from a bottle of Scotch, spritzed it, and added fresh rocks before turning to Danny. "I might have made a nice recovery today, but this move will hardly help. Sadness Fences from trying to eat my lunch. It's only a temporary embarrassment for them. I just can't figure out yet how to undercut them! Oh, shit—let's talk about your day again, not sick of mine. Tell me once more why you won't just take a loan from me to pay off your debt."

Danny paused from rinsing vegetables to sip from a small glass of white wine. "We agreed that the loan you made to us last year so that we could stage *Motherfoucaults!* would be the last. If the Derridadaists can't find other backers interested in avant-garde theater, then I'm not running a vanity operation. And I don't want that."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Finish making our supper. After that, I simply don't know. I want to keep the troupe together, but not at the expense of my artistic pride."

Lisa kicked off her shoes. "Artistic pride! Tell me about it! That's what hurts me the worst, you know—that these Sadness Fences bastards are bugging my brainchild."

"A disturbing image, Leese, however apt. Do you want mesclun or spinach in your salad?"

"Spinach. Gotta keep the old punching arm in shape."

After supper, the big flatscreen in the den displayed *Entertainment Hourly* to couch-cushioned, cuddling Danny and Lisa.

Seated at his minimalist desk, hair and teeth Platonically perfect, as if fashioned by some alien probe, the determinedly somber yet oddly effusive host launched into a report on the latest hourly sensation.

"Jax Backman led his own jazz funeral today through the streets of Celebration, Florida. Diagnosed last month with that nasty new in-curable strain of terminal oral herpes, the plucky hornman quickly opted to go out in style. Taking advantage of last year's Supreme Court decision in *Flynt versus United States Government* legalizing assisted suicide and other forms of voluntary euthanasia, Backman received a special, slow-acting lethal injection at the start of the cortege's route. Propped up in his coffin, he was able to enjoy nearly the whole process, which included innumerable celebrity mourners. TimWarDisVia even lent out an animatronic Louis Armstrong to lead the solemn yet oddly joyous wake."

The screen cut to footage of the event: in front of a team of horses, the robotic Louis Armstrong clunked along with stilted steps, mimicking horn-playing while prerecorded music issued from its belly. The human participants enacted their roles more fluidly, weeping, laughing, tossing Mardi Gras beads and giving each other high-fives. Upright on his wheeled bier, a glassy-eyed Backman waved to the watching crowds with steadily diminishing gusto.

Danny clucked his tongue. "What a production. Debord was so right. Our society is not just a spectacle. I wonder if they paid those so-called mourners scale—"

Lisa's shriek nearly blew Danny's closest eardrum out. "This is it! This is the future! Weeping Walls!" She threw herself onto Danny and began frantically unbuckling his belt with one hand while pawing at his crotch with the other.

"Leese, hold on! One minute, please! What's *with* you?"

"You've got *to fuck* me like you've never fucked me *before!*"

"But why?"

"I want to engrave the minute I realized I was a goddamn genius onto my brain forever!"

"Carol—I mean, Zapmama to Deconstructor. Target in sight." The message crackled over the walkie-talkie hung at Danny's belt. Danny snatched up the small device and replied.

"Deconstructor to Zapmama. Is your weapon ready?"

"I think so."

"Well, make sure. We can't risk a screwup on our first kill." "Let me ask Gordon. Gordon is this what I pull—?" A blast of rifle fire filled the neighborhood's air, and was simultaneously replicated in miniature by the communicator's speaker. From his perch on the command atop the flat roof of a ten-story office building Danny could see small figures struggling to control the bulky weapon. At last the automatic rifle ceased firing.

"Dan—I mean, Deconstructor?"

Danny sighed deeply. "Deconstructor to Zapmama. Go ahead."

"My gun works fine."

"Acquire target and await the signal. Over."

Reslinging his walkie-talkie, Danny walked over to the cameraman sharing the roof with him.

"Can we edit out those early shots?"

"No problem, chief."

A bank of *jury-rigged* monitors showed not only this camera's perspective, but also views from other cameras emplaced on the ground. All the lenses were focused on the waddling bus, which bore on its side the legend JERUSALEM TOURS. The bus was now in a broad intersection full of traffic and pedestrians. Suddenly, the cars in front and behind the bus seemed to explode. Curiously, no deadly jagged debris flew, nor did any shock waves propagate. Only melodramatic plumes of smoke poured from the gimmicked vehicles.

The explosion brought the hidden attackers out. Dressed in bur-nooses and raider-style desert-camouflage gear, the very picture of martyr-mad Arabs, they opened fire on the traffic bus. Window glass shattered into a crystal rain, holes pinged open in the bus's chassis, and passengers slumped in contorted postures. One of the terrorists threw a grenade, and the bus rocked like a low-rider's jalopy. Blood began to waterfall out the door.

The assault lasted only ninety seconds, but seemed to go on forever. Mesmerized, Danny nearly forgot his own role. He fumbled with his walkie-talkie and yelled, "Cut! Cut!"

The shooting immediately ceased. Danny hastened down to the street.

A line of ambulances had materialized, directed by a few bored cops. The bus doors opened, and the nonchalant driver jumped awkwardly out, anxious to avoid spotting his shoes with the synthetic blood in the stairwell. The medicos entered the damaged bus—see you later—close, a twenty-year-old antique obviously rescued from the scrap-heap and repainted—began to emerge with the victims on sarcophagus-shaped carry-boards.

None of the dead people exhibited any wounds. Mostly elderly, with a smattering of young adults and even a teenager or two, they all appeared to have passed away peacefully. Many of them had final smiles clinging to their lifeless faces. As the victims were loaded onto the ambulances, the bystanders to the attack watched and commented with mournful pride.

"Uncle Albert went out just the way he imagined."

"I thought Aunt Ruth would flinch, but she never did."

"I saw Harold wave just before the end!"

Danny crunched across the pebbles of safety glass to where the elated mock-terrorists had clumped. Spotting him, they shouted and hooted and applauded their director. Congratulations were exchanged all around.

"Did those charges go off okay, Danny?" asked an earnest techie.

"Just fine."

"I triggered the squibs a little late," confessed another.

"Next time will be perfect, I'm sure."

Stretching her terrorist's shirt to undemocratic proportions, a gloomy Carol approached. "I'm awfully sorry about that screwup earlier, Danny. Even though they were all blanks, I could have frightened the bus away!"

Danny regarded Carol silently while he tried to parse her logic. "You do know all this is fake, don't you, Carol?"

Carol reared back indignantly. "Of course I do! I've never even been to Jerusalem!"

All the ambulances had departed. A DPW truck arrived and discharged workers who began brooming up the glass. A large tow truck engaged the derelict bus and began to winch its wheels up. A car and several vehicles blazoned with the modified WW logo (now read

WW&FE) pulled up, and Lisa and Jake emerged from the lead vehicle.

Clad in a tasteful and modest navy shift, the owner of Weeping Walls took swift stride over to her husband, pecked his cheek, and then turned to address the crowd.

"Thank you, friends, for participating so enthusiastically in the inaugural performance of Fantasy Exits. I'm sure all your loved ones appreciated your attendance today, as we ushered them off this earth in the manner they selected. Incidentally, your DVD mementos will be available within the next three days. As for those of you who have preregistered to commemorate the departure of your loved ones during the accompanying Weeping Walls ceremony, you may now line up in the space indicated by the temporary stanchions."

As the spectators began to herd, Lisa spoke to her crew in lower tones. "Okay, people, shake our butts! Our permits only run until two o'clock."

In a short time the standard Weeping Walls arrangement was set up the prefabricated itself going up quickly on a leased stretch of side-walk where prearranged posthumous funerals awaited—and the friends and relatives of the chemically slaughtered bus riders were being processed through their relatively restrained and somewhat shell-shocked grief.

Lisa and Danny moved off to one side, away from their respective employees.

Lisa's eyes flashed like the display on an IRS auditor's calculator "Not bad, not bad at all. Fifteen hundred dollars per staged suicide times sixty, plus the standard Weeping Walls fee from the survivors.. A nice piece of change. Even after paying your crew and me a good money, there's plenty left for you and me, babe."

Danny pulled at his chin. "I appreciate having steady employment for my people, Leese. I continue to be troubled by the ethics of this hyper-real simulation—"

"Ethics? What ethics? These losers were going to off themselves with or without us. We didn't push them into anything. All we did was provide them with a fantasy exit, a trademarked term already, by the way. They sign the consent and waiver forms, get the juice in their veins, and then sail away into their fondest dreams of public crash-and-burn. We're like the goddamn Make-A-Wish Foundation, only we follow through with our clients right up to the end."

"Okay, granted. Nobody forced these people into our simulation. But some of the scenarios you've got me writing—I just don't know—"

"Aren't your guys up to some real acting?"

Danny grew affronted. "The Derridadaists can handle anything you throw at them!"

Lisa smiled in the manner of a gingerbread-house-ensconced witch with two children snoring in her oven and a third chowing down out in the fattening pen. "Good, good, because we plan to ride this pony to the bank just as fast and hard as I ride you."

"I think you'd better have a look at the deck chairs, Lisa."

Jake Pasha stood tentatively at the door to Lisa's office. His boss had one phone pinched between her neck and her bunched shoulder, and held another in her right hand while she guided a mouse with her left.

Lisa wrapped up her conversations with both callers and toggled shut several windows before turning to Jake.

"This had better be important."

"I think it is."

Jake made a beckoning motion, and a worker in paint-splattered overalls carried an old-fashioned wood-and-canvas deckchair. A legend on its side proclaimed it PROPERTY OF WHYTE STAR LINES TITANICK.

"They're all like this," Jake complained.

Surprisingly, Lisa did not explode, but remained serene. "Oh, I guess I didn't get around telling you. As I might have predicted, the bas-tards at TimWarDisVia wouldn't lease the real name, so I figured we'd get around them this way. They've still got a hair the thickness of a hawser up their asses since we pulled this end run around their pathetic Sadness Festival. Have you seen the price of *their* stock lately? Their shareholders have to use a ladder to kiss the slug's ass. And I hear they're switching to *chain link* to cut costs."

"But won't our customers complain about the inaccuracy?"

"Duh! Our *customers*, Jake, will be a bunch of romantic *idiots* just minutes away from their watery *grave*. If it makes you any happier, we'll just hit them with the hemlock cocktail before they even board our tub, instead of after. They'll be too woozy to recognize their own faces in the mirror, never mind spotting a frigging historical fuckup. Just make sure you round up enough dockside wheelchairs, okay? And don't forget the GPS transponders for the clients. We don't want to lose any of the stiffies once the ship goes down."

"What about the relatives, though? Won't they see the error in their souvenir videos and complain?"

"Those fucking vultures! Most of them are so happy to see their enfeebled parents and aunts and uncles going out in a blaze of glory that they couldn't care less about historical accuracy. Remember, Jake— we're selling fantasy here, not something like a TV docudrama that has to adhere to some rigorous standards."

Jake dismissed the worker with the historically dubious deck chair and closed the door before speaking further.

"Is Danny still talking about pulling out?"

Lisa frowned. "Not for the past couple of days. But I can still sense he's not exactly a happy camper."

"Did you apologize to him about Bonnie and Clyde?"

"Yes, Dear Abby, I apologized—even though it wasn't my fucking fault! Who knew that our suicides were junkies and that the juice would take longer to work on their dope-tolerant bodies? So a blood-gushing Bonnie and Clyde kept staggering around yelling 'Ouch!' and seeming to be hit by about a million bullets and ruined his precious script! God, he is such a fucking perfectionist!"

"He's an artist," said Jake.

"My Christ, what do I hear? Are you hot for him now? I wish I'd never told you about his fucking massive cock."

Jake quelled his irritation. "That's not it at all. I just sympathize with his ambitions."

Lisa stood up huffily. "All right. If it'll make you feel any better, I'll pay Danny a visit now, in the middle of my busy workday, just to show I'm a caring kind of bitch."

"He *is* essential to our continued success, after all."

"Don't kid yourself, sweetie. The only essential one is me."

"It's just no use, Carol. I can't convince myself that helping people die melodramatically is

art."

Perched on the corner of Danny's desk like a concupiscent Kewpie, Carol frowned earnest empathy. "But Danny, what we're doing it's so, it's so—conceptual!"

Danny dismissed this palliative jargon. "Oh, sure, that's what I've kept telling myself three long months. We were pushing the envelope on performance art, subverting cultural expectations, jamming the news machine, highlighting the hypocrisy of the funeral industry. Lord knows, I've tried a dozen formulations of the same excuse. But it all rings hollow to me. I just can't continue with this Fantasy Exit crap anymore. I thought I could sell out, but I'm wrong."

"But, Danny, for the first time in years, we all have regular work in our chosen artistic field. And we're making good money, too."

"That was never what the Derridadaists stood for, Carol! We could have all gone into commercials, for Christ's sake, if steady employment was all we cared about. No, I founded our troupe in order to perform cutting-edge, avant-garde theater. And now we're merely reenacting the most banal scenarios, clichéd skits out of Hollywood's musty vaults, predigesting for suicidal Philistines. And this latest one is the final straw. The *Titanick*. If only that remake hadn't come out last year. Di-Caprio was bad enough in his day, but that Skywalker adolescent—" Danny shivered and mimed nausea. "Uuurrrggg!"

Carol seemed ready to cry. "It's me, isn't it? My performances have sucked! Just say so, Danny, I can take it."

Danny stood to pat Carol's shoulder. "No, no, you've been great."

Carol began to sniffle. "Even when I fell off my horse during the Jesse James bit?"

"Sure. We just cut away from you."

"How about when I knocked down all those buildings before you could even start the San Francisco earthquake?"

"They were going to go down sooner or later, Carol."

"And that accident during the Great Chicago Fire—?"

"Insurance covered everything, Carol."

Carol squealed and hurled herself into Danny's arms. "Oh, you're just the best director anyone could ever ask for!"

Danny gently disentangled Carol's limbs from his and began to pace *the* office. "How to handle Lisa, though? That's what stops me. She has such a temper. I know she loves me—at least pretty sure she does—but the business comes first with her. Oh, Carol, what can I do?"

"Well, I know one thing that generally helps in such situations."

"And what might that be?"

"A boob job."

"Carol, no, please, stop right now. Button yourself right back up."

"I know what I'm doing, Danny. You've been so good to me, and now it's my turn to be good to you. Just sit down—there, that's better. Now let me get this zipper and this snap and this clasp— No, don't move, I've got plenty of room to kneel right here. There, doesn't that look good? Oh I've never seen one that was long enough to pop right out of the top of the groove like that!"

"Oh! Lisa!"

"I don't mind, Danny, you can call me by her name if it helps."

"No! She's right here!"

From the doorway, Lisa said, "She's already cast, you bastard. And you're supposed to be on the fucking couch I bought you!"

"Hit that glacier with more Windex!"

Techies on movable scaffolds, looking like bugs on a windshield, responded to the bullhorned instructions by assiduously polishing the floating Perspex glacier anchored near the harbor. On the dock, a cavalcade of wheelchairs held the semi-stupefied, terminally ill paying customers slated to go down with the fabled luxury liner (an old tugboat with the scaled-down prow and bridge attached that reproduced the famous vessel's foreparts). A flotilla of lesser craft held camera and retrieval crews. Near a warehouse, a standard Weeping Wall and appurtenances awaited the end of the maritime disaster reenactment. Over the whole scene the January sun shed a frosty light.

Lisa moved busily among the WW&FE employees, issuing orders. To the captain of the tug, she reminded, "Remember, get out past the twelve-mile limit before you sink." Finally, she turned to her husband.

Danny stood contritely by, his heart and mind obviously elsewhere. When Lisa rounded on him, he snapped to attention.

'Leese, before I set out on this final charade, I just want to say how grateful I am that you're allowing me to bow out of this whole enterprise. I just couldn't swallow any more."

"I'm sure that's what your girlfriend was just about to say when I barged in."

'Leese, please! I explained all about that."

Lisa laughed, and it sounded like ice floes clinking together. "Oh I'm not angry anymore, I just couldn't resist a little dig. What a rack! She makes me look like Olive Oyl. Tell me—do you ever feel like getting your dick stuck in the sofa cushions?"

Danny made to turn away, but Lisa stopped him. "Okay, I went over the line there. So sorry. But look—I had something made up for you just to show I still care."

Lisa accepted from the hovering Jake a modern orange life vest.

"This is a special vest, Danny, just for you. Look, it's even got your name on it."

"Why, thanks, Leese."

"Let's see how it fits you."

"Gee, do I have to put it on now?"

"Yes, you have to put it on now."

Danny donned the vest, and Lisa snugged the straps tight, like a conscientious mother adjusting her toddler for kindergarten.

"It's very heavy. What's in it? Lead?"

"Not exactly. Oh, look—they're loading the wheelchairs now. You'd better get on board."

Danny aimed a kiss at Lisa's lips, but she offered only her cheek. Danny walked away from the top of the gangplank, he turned and waved, bulky in his life-saving gear.

Within minutes the whole armada was steaming out to sea, including the iceberg, stripped of its scaffolding and under tow by a second tug.

When the fleet disappeared from sight, Lisa said, "Well, that's that."

And then she walked slowly to the Weeping Wall, selected a hot pink teddy bear, and

it tenderly, her eyes dry as teddy's buttons.