

the sleep of reason

by Michael Swanwick

1. [Plate 43]

The Sleep of Reason Produces Nightmares

Midway in life's journey, a man who might have been Dante or might have been Goya himself (on this the record is not clear) went astray and found himself alone in a dark wood. Never saw he so drear, so rank, so arduous a wilderness! Alas for him that he was an artist, and susceptible to such influences. Alas for us all that he fell asleep!

The Noösphere is the ocean of thought within which we all live, dream, make love, and sometimes aspire. It is purified by reason. It is polluted by war and madness. And, like a river so badly polluted it catches fire, the Noösphere in times of war and madness can be a dangerous thing.

In a time of war and madness, the man who might well have been Goya fell asleep, and his dreams caught fire. They congealed and took form and entered the physical world. As cats and owls and bats and less wholesome creatures, winged, furred and fanged, they leaped into the night, and filled the skies with their keening presence.

One flew off with a child's jacket. Another swooped down and bit a hole in the lord mayor's ear. A third put on a uniform and led the French armies into Russia.

A thousand ills poured from the dreamer's troubled sleep. The Siege of Leningrad and the Trail of Tears. Andersonville and total warfare. The Paraguayan War, the Taiping Rebellion, the Bataan Death March. Pol Pot, Baba Yar, Jack the Ripper. Mercury poisoning, thalidomide babies, mustard gas and trench warfare. Lynchings. Black Thursday, Black Friday, Black 47. September Eleventh. The Rape of Nanking, the occupation of Tibet, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution. Stalin and Beria and the Soviet Terror and the relocations and the gulags. Krystalnacht, and then the camps: Chelmo, Majdanek, Treblinka, Belzec, Sobibor, Auschwitz, Belsen, Buchenwald, Dachau, Maidanek — the names roll by like cattle cars in an endless train. The Jewish Holocaust, the Native American Holocaust, the Romani Holocaust, the Armenian Holocaust... Why go on?

Around the world, men and women of reason do what they can to purify the Noösphere. Poets and writers and artists and philosophers, when they dream, can sometimes see the sleeper. Always they try to rouse him from his sickly sleep. "Wake up!" they cry. "Wake up, arise, banish your nightmare thoughts!" While behind them, all the agonized world adds its screams in their support. "Wake up!"

And still the dreamer sleeps.

2. [Plate 2]

Elena's Heart

Not all mad scientists are men. Not all are young. Some are mad old women, disappointed in life and in love, and determined to wreak their revenge upon the race of Men. Such were Eleanor, Enid, and Annaprudenzia who, old and brilliant and ugly, decided to build the young woman they all wished they had been: Beautiful as the dawn in springtime, lusty as a summer afternoon, and cruel as the harshest winter's night.

The creation of Elena's form and features was but a trifle. Eleanor was a bioengineer and an accomplished graverobber. Enid was a neurosurgeon, chiefly, but capable of a little plastic surgery on the side. Annaprudenzia knew how to sew. She got out the wedding gown she had never found need for, and cut it down to fit their new ward's exquisite shape. Finally, all was ready.

All was ready, save one thing — a heart! What sort of heart must she have? A woman's heart would never do. It was too kind and rational for what they had in mind. The three learned ladies consulted long and hard. Finally, they gave her the heart of a fox.

"Suppose you met a man, a perfect man, one in a million, the only man for you. Suppose you had it in your power to destroy him. Would you let him live?"

"Of course not!" she said. Then, "But, well . . . I can imagine a certain sort of man, one with stiff red hair and a cynical smile. A liar, a thief, and a rogue, and yet faithful to me to the death. Him I might permit to let live a year or three. Just in order to prolong his torment, you understand."

"Too merciful by half!" the three scientists cried. They took out the fox's heart, and put in the heart of a wolf.

Then they asked the question again.

"Preposterous!" she snorted. "Still . . . supposing I were to meet a savage brute of a man, with sleek black hair and a murderous look in his eyes. **Him** I might take decades to kill."

"Not cruel enough, not cruel enough!" the old women wailed.

They gave her the heart of a man.

"Who cares?" Elena said when they asked her the question a third time. "There's plenty of fish in the sea. I could find as many like him as I wanted."

So, joyfully, the three mad scientists introduced their creation to the world.

A man, having decided to destroy everything, would have created something that would do the job all at once. They, being women, were more patient. Their weapon would destroy the world one man at a time.

3. [Plate 59]

The Sentinel

The monolith was discovered not on the Moon, as one might have expected, but in a gravel pit not far from Paris. A steam shovel broke three teeth upon its upper edge. A supervisor ordered the gravel cleared away from it, so he could see what the problem was. Then the French government took over.

It was rectangular, the monolith, and blacker than obsidian. Tougher than obsidian as well — diamonds would not scratch it and bullets bounced off its smooth surface without leaving a scar. It was obviously manufactured, and yet no human being could have created such a thing. Scientists speculated that it was made of collapsed matter. An extrasolar origin was postulated.

In this, the scientists were right. An ancient and benevolent race had passed through the Solar System back when our world was half its present age, left this token of their passage, and then gone on their enigmatic way. It was, though no one knew it yet, a sentinel, an alarm.

Ages passed.

The sentinel was found. And excavated.

On the day the excavation was completed, all of Paris turned out to see this prodigy. The government, bowing to the inevitable, opened the police lines and let the people in. Politicians made speeches. And when they were done, everyone crowded about the monolith, to gawk and wonder and touch.

The first man to touch the monolith froze. A strange light came into his eyes. For a long instant, awareness passed between man and monolith.

Then the monolith **snapped** down, crushing hundreds to death.

Long ages ago, an ancient and benevolent race had scattered monoliths throughout the galaxy in much the same spirit as a prudent homeowner might scatter rat traps in the basement of his house against a possible infestation. Such as had just arisen on Earth.

They were alerted to the problem now, however, so they could take care of it before things got out of hand.

4. [Plate 6] Death and Elena

Death had taken me out of my house and was leading me down the street when I heard the music and bright lights of a masked ball and said, "May I?"

"It's highly irregular," that great man said.

"One evening!" I cried. "What is one evening weighed against all eternity? Less than nothing."

"Very well." Death handed me a mask and said, "I'll wait out here."

I swaggered inside, ready for anything. I had a bright sword, no conscience at all, and nothing left to lose. Eagerly, I scanned the crowd. There were many beautiful women there. But one outshone the rest as the sun does the moon. I made straight for her and bowed.

She said her name was Elena. She said, "Oh, I know what **you** want," when I told her she was beautiful. Then, when I scowled, she said, "You won't get it if you don't fetch me a drink."

I was dazzled and entranced. When I returned with Elena's drink, she was talking with a soldier. She poured the drink down the front of my pants. She sank to her knees and tried to dry me off with a kerchief. She giggled and said, "So big! And so hard."

The soldier grabbed my collar in one meaty hand. He was a hideous brute.

"I don't want any trouble!" I cried, alarmed.

"Don't you?" Elena said scornfully. She put her graceful hands on her magnificent hips and thrust her wonderful breasts almost into my face. "Aren't I worth fighting for?"

And, God help me, she was.

Those were my first three minutes. An hour later, after suffering humiliations I wouldn't relate to the Devil

himself, I literally crawled back out into the street.

"That didn't take long," Death remarked. He helped me to my feet.

"I met a woman named Elena," I gasped. "And she . . . and she . . ."

"Tell me about it," Death said bitterly. "I dated her once, and I haven't been the same man since."

5. [Plate 3]

The Child-Buyer

It's not easy being a mother. The little brats want this, and they break that, and all the time they cry. Only a saint could put up with it. Yet so few mothers are saints! Most are only human women, doing the best they can and trying to remember just how they got into this fix in the first place.

So when the Child-Buyer came to make his offer, Katie was ready to listen.

Oh, what a day that had been. Mathilda had been teething, and Bruno had been drawing on the walls with jam. They each fought with the other from dawn to dusk. Katie had no sooner rescued the cat from Mathilda than she had to snatch away the matches from Bruno. Bruno threw his lunch, plate and all, through a closed window because the crusts on the sandwiches hadn't been trimmed to his liking. Inspired by this, Mathilda decided to flush her doll down the toilet. It clogged, and water poured into the hallway and down the stairs and stained the brand-new carpets.

Outrageous! And the afternoon was even worse.

Katie was trying to put her struggling offspring to bed when the air dimmed, and a sulphurous stench seeped into the room. She turned, and there it was: The Child-Buyer, wrapped in shroud-like sheets with a darkness where he should have a face. There was no way he could have entered the room without her seeing him. And yet there he was.

Anybody else would have been terrified. But Katie was a mother. She'd seen worse things that very day.

"Well?" she said.

A corpse-pale hand emerged from the cloths, with silver coins in its palm. "I wish to buy your children," rasped a hollow voice. "To take them to the Twilight Lands, there to toil forever in the fields of lost souls."

Katie hesitated. "Will they be tormented by demons?"

"No," the specter replied. "They are needed as laborers, nothing more."

"Well," she said, accepting his money, "one can't have everything."

6. [Plate 39]

Prick the Donkey

Prick the Donkey came from a long line of asses. His father was an ass and his mother was an ass and their parents were asses too. His genealogy, in fact, could be traced all the way back to Old Bray, who nuzzled Eve's hand in the Garden and gave young Abel rides on his back when sin was still young.

With such a distinguished pedigree, it was inevitable that he would go into politics. *Noblesse oblige* required nothing less. He wasn't much of a speaker, but his muzzle was as soft as velvet and he had an engaging personality. Which was enough to get the governorship of a not-very-important Southwestern state.

One day, midway through his undistinguished career, the money men came to see Prick in his office. These were the same money men who, as a favor to his father, had set him up in business and then bought him out just before that business collapsed from mismanagement. It had cost them tens of millions of dollars, but they considered it a good investment. For now they wanted him to run for president.

The election was a squeaker. It went right down to the wire. In the closing minutes, it was called both ways. Everything hinged on a single state where the votes were so close that Prick the Donkey's brother (by good fortune the governor) had to call off a recount, lest it turn out he had lost. Prick's opponent got snippy, and the case went to the Supreme Court.

For a giddy instant, everything hung in the balance. But as luck would have it, Prick the Donkey's father had been president before him and had appointed several of the Supreme Court judges. They all voted for Prick, and he became the President of the United States.

He was a Democrat, of course. All donkeys are. If he'd been born an elephant, doubtless he'd have been a Republican. But donkeys are iconic Democrats through and through. Not one has ever been a Republican.

So it's not what you're thinking.

7. [Plate 4] The Children of Utopia

In Utopia, there are no laws. Everyone works for the common good, and the government is so well-integrated into society that most people aren't even aware that one exists. When the people collectively want anything, it simply and by natural processes comes into existence.

One thing the people collectively wanted was eternal youth.

As if by themselves, the gears were set into motion. Medical technicians produced elixirs, friendly truckers distributed them to doctors, and doctors in the course of their regular house calls prescribed them for their patients.

There is of course no education in Utopia. Education is tedious. It takes years. Who would give up years of their blissful lives to acquire skills that no one really needs? The med techs operated machines that knew what to do. The truckers drove machines that were intuitively simple. The doctors received instructions that even an idiot could easily follow.

So of course something went wrong.

A card was placed in a machine backwards. Or was read upside-down. Or somebody fell asleep halfway through explaining to the machines exactly what was needed. It hardly matters **how**. What matters is that instead of making people eternally youthful adults, the elixirs made them eternally youthful children.

Imagine a world run by a children! A world of sudden temper-tantrums and oceanic needs. A world without maturity. A world with no sense of perspective.

Such became Utopia.

Had there been some kind of bureaucratic apparatus, of course, this mistake would have eventually have been sorted out. Hearings would have been held, papers issued, regulations enforced. Only a fraction of the elixirs would have been parceled out on schedule. The rest would have been held up by mismanagement and lawsuits.

But in Utopia, of course, there is no bureaucracy.

8. [Plate 66]

Live! Nude! Witches!

What is so delightful to the male imagination as a witch? Oh, certainly, they personify female wisdom and power — but they have to take their clothes off in order to do so! They are terrifying in their malice, of course. But if one looks at the matter with an unprejudiced eye, one realizes that they are not wearing a stitch. You can see everything!

So they shrivel a crop or cause a cow to stop giving milk. So what? It's worth it.

Then there is the matter of their erotomania. There are things no decent women will ever do — and witches do them all the time! So lecherous are these creatures that even the youngest, sweetest, ripest of them all will couple in mid-air — out in the open! in plain view of everyone! — with the oldest, ugliest and most haggish member of their order. They grind their bodies together shamelessly. They employ various toys. They involve their beastly familiars. Everyone knows what they do with those brooms.

And if these witches are indeed, the male imagination reasons, so lustful, so degraded, so perfectly without discrimination, is it not possible that they would even stoop to doing it with ... me?

But there the male imagination stops, one crucial word short of revelation and the truth. It leaves the question hanging, while it slips out the door, leaps over the gate, and runs down the street with its hat held firmly down over its ears. For it does not want to hear the answer. The answer which is a single word. The word which is "No."

9. [Plate 18]

Spontaneous Human Combustion

The Devil, that old drunkard, likes to nip down into the material world every now and then for a good old-fashioned bender. He doesn't come in person, of course — he is far too vain to abuse his own perfect physique with drink — but chooses rather to possess the body of somebody who is sure to have plenty of the strong stuff at hand. You might know one of his spirit horses personally. Perhaps you've commented, "The devil's in him tonight!"

Perhaps you spoke truer than you knew.

The Devil is no quiet drunk. He staggers about, smashing things. He likes to piss out the window. If you upbraid him for doing so, he'll curse you back with words so foul you won't believe your ears. He gets into fights.

Above all, he sets fires. Cigarettes fall carelessly from his hands onto mattresses, into wastepaper baskets, down the gullets of gas tanks. He shoves unfinished cigars under the cushions of the couch. He lights matches just so he can stare soddently at the flames and when they burn his fingers swears and drops them on his waistcoat.

When the Devil's drunk so much he can no longer move, he falls back into a chair and smolders with the

heat of his own evil. His touch is hot enough to set fire to a newspaper. If the ventilation is poor, the body he inhabits will eventually burst into flame.

That's the true cause of spontaneous human combustion.

When he's sober, of course, the Devil is a hard-working gentleman. He starts wars and riots, invents new and tyrannical forms of government, and perverts the most benevolent of inventions and the most altruistic of intentions to his own vile purposes. His hands are always busy. The angels in Heaven are not half so industrious as he.

It is for this reason that public drunkenness is to be encouraged.

10. [Plate 44]

The Godmothers

The three oldest witches in the world are named Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos. The thread they weave is thin, but not even the Devil can break it. Clotho spins, Lachesis measures, and Atropos **snaps** the thread with her sharp, sharp nails. Men call them "Godmother" to their faces, and believe them to be the Fates.

They are not the Fates.

They are, in fact, only three meddling old women with far too much power. Through long centuries of necromancy, they have accumulated so much forbidden lore that it is nothing for them to twist a man's life into a grotesque shape, to stretch it out too long, or to cut it off far too soon. But they are only human, after all. Malicious beyond imagining, but human. That means there is hope.

They are vulnerable, you see. In the time it would take a dozen men to rush upon them with weapons, they could kill only eleven. Yes, those eleven would die horribly. Yes, they would die wishing they had never been born. But the twelfth could kill the Godmothers, and free us all from their awful oppression.

The time has come. The time is now.

Who is with me? Juan! Take up your cudgel. Marie! Remember what they did to your sister. James! Put down that bottle and join us.

No? Well, surely **you**, David... Suzanne? Gregory, imagine the world as it could be! Manuel, you join in too. Hillary! Why do you turn away? Why do you all turn away? Can't you see?

Everybody! One quick rush and the deed is done. In the time we've hesitated, the Godmothers have killed hundreds, and blighted the lives of a thousand more. Yes, granted, they've saved their worst for last. Granted, eleven of us would regret beyond measure having agreed to this. But eleven lives are simply not that many. Our misery means nothing when held up against the suffering of the world. Surely the prize is worth the price?

To arms! To action. Jennifer? Romano? George? Somebody?

Anybody?

11. [Plate 13]

The All-Devouring

Would you eat a toad? Of course not. But what about **Bufo al Provençal**?

Imagine it: You start with plump legs of toad, gently sauteed and then set aside and kept warm. Into the newly-emptied saucepan add just a touch more olive oil, some freshly minced garlic, and peeled, seeded, and chopped tomatoes. When they have rendered down, add a handful of olives, and a little finely chopped celery. When the celery has turned transparent, return the toad legs to the pan and heat **just** until cooked through. Serve immediately.

Delicious.

Such is the approach of the brotherhood of gourmets known as The All-Devouring. Long, long ago, so fine are their palates, they used up all the possibilities of fresh and wholesome food. Now they have moved on to the delectation of the repugnant. Road-kill skunk, a swath of dirty carpet torn from the floor of a motel waiting room, a hearty glass of urine — such are the primary elements of their exquisite feasts. But by the time they have reached the table, these humble ingredients have been transformed into dishes fit for the gods!

The All-Devouring are Sybarites **par excellence**. Whenever they meet, they expand the horizons of refinement. They lick the wallpaper and chew on the chairs. They egg each other on to greater and greater feats of aestheticism.

At their last meeting, one of their members ate his own hand. It was, he declared, excellent, though it could have used a garnish of slugs.

12. [Plate 5] Concerning Elena and a Certain Mouse

One day a mouse came courting Elena. He was not like other mice at all. He was as tall as a man, to begin with, and walked upright as men do. He wore a sort of uniform with short pants and white gloves, and though he was not particularly articulate neither was he the squeaker and whisker-twitcher one might have expected him to be. Indeed, were it not for his two enormous round ears, he would not have been identifiable as a mouse at all.

Elena was not perfectly convinced that the downfall of a mouse wasn't beneath her dignity. Nevertheless, he was a famous Hollywood film star, and subsequently wealthy. And the wealthy are, as everybody knows, every bit as worthy of destruction as are true men. So she decided she would encompass his ruin anyway.

It wasn't easy. The mouse was a foolish, happy-go-lucky sort of guy. He took every slight and insult with a foolish smile and a guffaw. No indignity could reach him. It drove Elena mad. For a time, it made her doubt her powers.

But at last she found the mouse's Achilles heel: He thought of himself as an artist. So simple a thing as that! So she introduced him to Ingmar Bergman films, French deconstructionist theory, early Fellini, Japanese hantai... She taught him that whatever he was — a buffoon, perhaps, a vaudevillian, even a latter-day Stooze — an artist he was **not**.

The mouse went downhill quickly from there. He accepted a cigarette. He took up drinking. He woke up in a pool hall. He got involved with rough trade. He started dealing crack.

Elena went to the tabloids and told them everything. It was the end of the mouse's career.

Not long after, lawyers for a certain Hollywood studio threatened to sue Elena for defamation of the mouse's character. But since she had very carefully never mentioned the rodent by name, it turned out they didn't have a case.

13. [Plate 54] Silly Old Clown

What is so funny as a silly old clown? He comes creeping from the shadows at sunset with his great big nose and his wide, wide grin. His face is as round as a pancake. His feet make no noise on the ground. For no reason at all, you feel a prickling at the base of your neck. You turn around — and there he is!

Oh, that silly old clown! He's a true democrat, who sups with equal ease from the beggar's bowl and the aristocrat's golden platter. Doors cannot stop him! He laughs at locks! Silently, stealthily, he slips into your bed at night, pulls the covers up to his chin, and waits for you to turn your head on the pillow.

His is the oldest joke there is. Some say it was invented by the Snake in the Garden, which is why snakes still leap at you today — just to see you laugh. Some say Judas, when he snuck up on his Rabbi in Golgotha, was simply making this very same jest with a kiss.

Sooner or later everyone sees that silly old clown. You might be sitting on the toilet in a public stall when he coughs and you discover him squatting atop the tank. Maybe you're sunbathing naked on the roof of your house when something comes between you and the sun. Perhaps you've been driving six hours and reach out blindly to the side, groping for the sunglasses you left on the empty seat beside you, when he places them in your hand.

Tonight, perhaps, you'll come home dog-tired. You'll trudge up to your door. You'll fumble for the key. If you're lucky, it won't be sleeting. You'll enter your house. It'll be empty. It'll be dark. You'll grope for the light switch.

In that sliver of experience between the instant when you flick the switch and the instant the light comes on, you'll think to yourself: **The clown! Suppose he's here! Suppose his leering face is right in front of me! Suppose his claw-like hands are even now reaching for my throat!**

And won't it be funny if you're right?

14. [Plate 37] The Education of Young Prick

Prick the Donkey was, for all his virtues, no great shakes as a scholar. He went to a school for well-bred asses and studied under a famous pedantic ass, but oh, it was hard, it was hard, it was hard! Try though he might, he could **not** memorize his lessons. The instant he opened his school-book, all the answers would flee from his head.

Worse, Prick was terrified of his teacher. At exam time that solemn old ass would glare down at him, wooden spoon ready to descend upon Prick's head should he answer incorrectly, and tears of misery would flood Prick's eyes. The other students laughed and jeered, of course. Youth is so cruel! But though their barbs stung him, Prick fought not to show it. He was brought up believing that an ass is the noblest of beasts. So he always strove to act like one.

At last he went to his father for advice. That venerable ass snorted and said, "Tell me, son — What is the purpose of an education?"

Prick thought. "To learn a skill?"

"Skills are for tradesmen!" his father brayed derisively. "No, the purpose of an education is to get a diploma, so that you may be a lawyer, an arranger, a leader of men!"

Prick the Donkey had never thought of it that way. "But doesn't one need to learn in order to get a

degree?"

"Not necessarily," his father said. "Not if one contributes generously enough to his school."

Overcome by his father's wisdom, Prick the Donkey could only bob his head and bleat his gratitude.

From that day on, education was much simpler for Prick. If a class was too difficult for him, he skipped it. If a teacher refused to give him good grades, that worthy soon found himself transferred elsewhere. School became as easy for Prick as everything else in his life. It was a lesson he never forgot.

In later years, Prick made self-reliance a cornerstone of his political philosophy. He considered himself to be, as he told anybody who would listen, a self-made ass.

15. [Plate 46]

The Nightmare Court

With so many nightmares loose in the world, it was inevitable that some should occasionally be captured and brought to justice. But where could they be tried? Nightmares are no respecters of borders. Their crimes affront the sensibilities of all nations. Ultimately responsibility for them must be global.

So an international court was established at the Hague. All the world's most solemn legal minds were gathered together to deplore, to document, and to pass judgment upon the captive nightmares.

These nightmares were always weak and spent, of course. They had to be. A healthy nightmare engaged in mass murder, systematic rape, and ethnic cleansing has no time for courts of law. It is busy, busy, busy! Only when the supporting government has collapsed, the responsible militia have been put down, and the sponsoring nations have taken their money elsewhere is a nightmare vulnerable enough to be taken into custody by mere policemen.

When it is, however, retribution is stern and comprehensive. The trial takes decades. Witnesses are called in. Murderers are given immunity so that they may relate their crimes in sickening detail.

It is possible that one or two of the judges may bear a strong resemblance to the defendants. It is possible that they have in their day killed many innocent people. Possible too that an unemotional account of their careers would fill any humane listener with loathing and disgust. But they are not themselves nightmares — oh, no! Everything they did was perfectly legal.

Anything is legal, so long as it's done by a standing government.

16. [Plate 69]

The Forge of Witches

Witches do not rule the world — men do that — but in times as disordered as these they can hardly avoid having great influence. With great influence comes great dignity. So you can imagine how the witches feel about the press.

They arrange for a Witches' Sabbath with devil-worship, orgies, and hideous carnage — and the next morning the headlines scream LADIES' NIGHT OUT! They kill and kill and kill and are rewarded with IT COULD ONLY BE CALLED... (WO)MANSLAUGHTER. They initiate a craze for huffing oven cleaner? GIRLS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUMES!

Unforgivable.

Bad artists hide behind their mediocrity. Very few second-rate books are ever burned. The hack who wrote the aforementioned headlines thought that since he wasn't much of a journalist, he was safe.

Famous last words.

The witches swooped down upon the reporter as he was leaving a sheep-shearing contest — A VISIT TO THE BAA-BAA SHOP — and carried him away to their forge.

Stripping the pathetic bastard naked, they handed him over to Lilith, oldest of their tribe, to use as a bellows.

"Fart, little man, fart!" she cried, pumping methane from his bowels. "Inquiring minds want to know!" His flames roasted to a white heat a basket filled with the bones of unbaptised infants — part of an ongoing research project the witches were engaged in — and, not coincidentally, scorched his rectum as well.

"Stop!" the reporter cried. "Wait!" He didn't know which was worse, the torment or the humiliation. "I've seen the error of my ways. I was wrong. I was superficial. Let me go and I swear you'll have good press for the rest of your lives."

"You're full of it," Lilith said with a hint of a smile. She pumped more vigorously and the flames leaped higher. "And quite frankly, so far as we can tell, that's your only virtue."

17. [Plate 11]

Dirt

Say you're out in the field. Hurry up and wait. That's the eternal motto of the Army. You hurried up. Now you wait.

Somebody reaches down and scoops up a pinch of loam. He does it slow and easy. Without haste. The dirt is dark and rich.

Everybody notices, looks, waits.

The soldier places the dirt atop his thumbnail. He brings it to his nose. He snorts.

His eyelids flutter. He sighs.

"Yo, **dick**-wad!" one of the dog-brothers laughs. "Smell like you mamma, do it?"

Surprised, the soldier says, "Eh? Oh! No, I was just getting off on the natural endorphins."

"Natural endor-**what**?"

"Drug precursors, my man. The soil is just swarming with them! Psychotropic drugs are the most natural thing in the world! Why do you think all them drug companies send reasearchers into the Amazon? They gonna cure your Aunt Sophie's bunion? Fuck no. They in it for the **high**."

He takes another sniff of earth. "Try it yourself."

At which you and all the other grunts begin scraping up dirt and shoving it up your honkers. And even though it does nothing for you at all, you don't want to feel left out, so you join in when the other guys

begin laughing and saying things like "Oh, yeah!" and "Great stuff!" and "Oh wow, man, you right!"

The soldier watches you all out of the corner of his eye, with a kind of amused expression. Then he gets out his combat knife and scrapes something up from the ground.

"Try this," he says.

"What is it?" you ask.

"It's shit," he answers. "Really **great** shit."

18. [Plate 14]

The Sorrows of Young Grace

Some women are natural-born victims. Everybody takes advantage of them. Panhandlers cross the street to demand their money, clerks shortchange them, traffic cops write them tickets even though they're on foot, children make rude noises when they walk by, and construction workers make ruder gestures. Just to watch them cringe, you see.

Grace was a victim nonpareil, the sort of person even other victims liked to pick on. It was bad enough when she was a child, but then she sprouted breasts and the suitors showed up! Hunch-backed, frog-legged, condescending... each one worse than the others. They took her out to restaurants and expected her to pay. They came to supper, and they brought their friends. They borrowed money, which they never repaid. They begged and begged and begged for a date and then when, out of pity, she gave in, never asked her out on a second.

Men are just no damned good! They all expected her to have sex with them, and when she wouldn't, they acted affronted. But if she did, they called her a slut to her face. What can you do with people like that?

Grace's mother suffered through several years of this. After each disastrous date, Grace flung herself down on her bed in a torrent of tears and wrung her hands and bemoaned her fate, and prayed to an unheeding Providence for mercy. "Why **me?**" she would wail, "Why?" until it was all the dear old lady could do not to hit her.

Finally, her mother had had enough. "I'm going to sell you to the brothel," she told her stunned daughter. "You'll get better treatment as a whore."

And the sad thing was that she was right.

19. [Plate 58]

The Clyster of San Bernardino

Everybody knows what a clyster is. One day, in the Monastery of—

Eh? You **don't?** Well, it looks like a syringe, only much larger. It's filled with pureed food — beef stew, porridge, beets, whatever, so long as it's nicely liquified. The clyster is used in cases where, for whatever reason, the patient cannot take nourishment by mouth, and is inserted... well, you know where. Down there.

In the rectum.

The monks of San Bernardino employ this device more liberally than most hospitalers, feeling that your average patient, whatever his condition, could use a little more variety in his diet. And it works marvelous well, too. It is astonishing how many patients deemed in serious need of long-term care find the energy to leave the monastery on their own recognizance after only a few days of dorsal feeding!

A particular enthusiast of the Clyster Method was Brother Bruno. He viewed his thrice-daily ministry as not only a piety, but an entertainment as well. When some of his brother monks were at loose ends, they liked to follow him on his rounds, laughing merrily as he cried, "Bend over and smile!" or "Here comes the choo-choo!"

One day a vengeful former patient obtained a clyster of his own and, disguised as a monk, infiltrated the monastery. He lurked in the shadows, waiting, the clyster hidden within his robes. When Brother Bruno passed by at noontime, he fell in silently behind the good monk's entourage.

The first patient of the day was a notorious atheist who had compounded his heinous sin — and this shows how cunning the wicked are — by pretending to lead a virtuous life. As if it were **possible** to do so without the guidance of clergy! It may be that Brother Bruno had been a little rough with him at times. Certainly the godless old devil gibbered in fear at the sight of him now.

But just as Brother Bruno bent over in preparation to insert the clyster, he felt a man step up close behind him and open his robes in the back, exposing his buttocks. Something thick and warm thrust itself a good eight inches into his bowels. His eyes bugged out in horror.

Then the former patient pushed his clyster's plunger, flooding him with pea soup and hot peppers, and Brother Bruno realized exactly what was going on.

He flushed with humiliation and relief.

20. [Plate 10]

True Love

Ah, love! It makes the world go round. In spring, a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of it. Blind it may be, or like a red, red rose, but still it conquers all. It's a funny thing, a many-splendored thing, the one thing that money can't buy.

Ricardo was a jerk, but Mercedes loved him anyway. She loved him for his manly ways — for his swagger and his bluster and the fact that he never backed down from a fight. He didn't take any crap, and he always got the last word, and he never admitted to being in the wrong about anything. He was a mean little shit, and Mercedes admired that in a man.

Sometimes, when they were out on the town, Mercedes would eye other men flirtatiously, silently challenging them to make a pass at her. It always brought out the best in Ricardo. Eyes narrowed, face flushed with blood, he would advance upon his newfound rival and coldly demand an apology. Almost always, he got one. What delight, then, to Mercedes, to see that brawny, handsome man (for she never flirted with less) stammering in fear and groveling before her lover's wrath.

Even better were the times when the man would **not** back down. Ricardo was a demon with a blade. Five exchanges of steel gave him the measure of his opponent. Ten more brought terror into the man's eyes. Another ten — more, if he were feeling cruel — would close those eyes forever.

Afterwards, they would go to Ricardo's squalid little room and make love all night. If his blouse had been bloodied in the fight, Mercedes might tear it open, but she would not let him take it off.

One day, inevitably, Ricardo lost. As simple as that. He had finally run into his equal; or perhaps he was just having an off night — it hardly mattered which. His opponent's steel nicked his heart, he reflexively ran his blade through the man's throat, and then he collapsed, dying, in Mercedes' arms.

Oh, how Mercedes wailed! Life holds no greater pain than the loss of one's true soul-mate. She held his body in her arms as he coughed out a last vulgar curse upon his opponent — dead already, so in a way he had won this fight as well — and died. Her agony was absolute.

The ironic thing was that she could easily have fallen for the other guy. He had a good build, and a fine black mustache. He looked like he was a real jerk. Mercedes admired that in a man.

21. [Plate 79]

The Beer of Eternity

What is so good as freshly-brewed beer? "Country soup," James Joyce called it, because it's rich and dark and full of vitamins. Take a deep swig — you'll not be needing a sandwich today! A pint of the true stuff is a meal in itself.

What is so good as beer shared with friends? It's old friends we're talking here, dear friends, tried and true. They might not be the best of people or the wittiest. But they've proved themselves. They denied knowing you when the police came looking. They burned your papers when you were on the run and could not. Many a time they gave false evidence in court for you. As you, of course, did for them.

Now you're old and so, alas, are your friends. Death looms over you all, smiling in a way that makes one reflect uneasily on how many sins are encompassed in this very room. Murders, rapes, deceptions of all kinds — even a deathbed repentance couldn't get any of you off the hook. Nobody dies slowly enough to repent of all **you've** done.

All the more reason to pour yourself another beer! Forget about Hell and consequences. Focus on all those good memories. The lives despoiled, the fortunes stolen, the virtuous maidens seduced and abandoned... Those were the days, weren't they? Those were the days.

What is so tasty as the beer of life? It's a heady drink indeed.

22. [Plate 72]

Witches and Nightmares

All that most disturbs you and me, keeps us awake at night, makes us sweat with fear, and freezes our blood with dread, bothers witches not a tittle. The world is flooded with nightmares in such number as to make an honest man doubt the benevolence of Providence. But witches are neither men nor honest, and they have no use for benevolence at all. They consort with nightmares for a romp.

As for the nightmares themselves... well! Everybody knows what nightmares want: The instantaneous gratification of their every lust, the sluttish satisfaction of all their fantasies, and the immediate and slavish indulgence of their every whim. In this, they are not unlike men.

There was a young witch who went dancing with nightmares. Light as a feather she spun on the greensward at midnight in the heart of the enchanted woods. All about her swirled the nightmares, clad in their finest feathers and confident of the night's ultimate outcome. If they were none of them particularly tall, they all made up for it by being exceptionally thick.

"Take off your trousers," the young witch told her playmates, "and hang them on yonder tree. Don't worry about your wallets! Think about my body instead. Do as I say, and I'll give you a night that you'll never forget. "

The witch was as good as her word. In less time than you'd like to think it would take, she had the nightmares trussed up like Christmas turkeys, gagged, helpless, covered with maple syrup, and dusted with stinging nettles. Then off she strolled with the contents of their wallets. The nightmares were chagrined. The pain, humiliation, and loss of cash were bad enough. But it took so long for them to free themselves that by the time they reported the incident, their credit cards had long ago been maxed out!

You and I, of course, would not have been so easily gulled. We are rational beings. No witch could make such fools of **us!**

To prove it, I have arranged for us a date with that exact same young lady who so bamboozled the nightmares. We will go dancing tonight at midnight on the greensward at the heart of the enchanted woods. And when the young witch tosses her hair with abandon, and suggests we take off our trousers, we will not. When she fixes us with those entrancing green eyes and murmurs vague promises, we shall rest one hand lightly upon our wallets. Though the promise of sex is in the air, we shall greet it with honest skepticism. We'll think before we act. We'll keep our dignity at all times. We will not be ruled by our dicks.

There's a first time for everything.

23. [Plate 25]

Spanking

Not everything we want is good for us. Consider our perversions. When we were young and beautiful, perhaps, we enjoyed dressing up in latex and leather and being whipped to a fare-thee-well. Which made for a good cardiovascular workout, but left unsightly welts. With the passing decades, we may well have become increasingly reluctant to bare our ever-less-perfect flesh to the judgmental eyes of sadists who, whatever their virtues may be, do tend toward perfectionism.

So perforce we must journey from the receiving of pain to the giving of it. But that too has its use-by date. A certain tendency toward the gaunt and haggard only enhances the dominatrix, of course. But with age one grows a little stooped, a little tired, a little soft around the jowls. What executive, desirous of a refreshing grovel, can honestly fear being slapped around by a woman who looks like his sweet old grandmother? What satisfaction can we derive from fear that is only make-believe?

There comes a time when we're looking at the end of all our illicit pleasures.

Thank God for grandchildren! The little buggers are forever breaking this, stealing that, drawing on the wall with jam. And when they do, we can take a shoe to their little behinds and wallop the bejesus out of them. They wail in terror, and that's satisfying too—knowing that we can still instill fear. It eases that tension that can only be undone by the reception or administration of pain.

Best of all, it's good for the grandchildren! It prepares them for the real world.

24. [Plate 7]

Elena on the Street

Elena, that most rapacious of women, decided to make herself available to any man who desired her. She became a streetwalker. Oh, that fortunate street down whose spine she sauntered in stiletto heels! Oh, those happy dogs who, smelling her from counties away, came running with nostrils flared and tongues lolling! And, oh, oh, oh, the men!

Men flocked to her, whispered crude suggestions in her ear, shared with her the most disgusting fantasies imaginable.

It was almost too easy.

"Talk dirty to me," she said, back in her room, as she hung up her shawl. "Tell me exactly what you want to do." And the poor fool would obey, not knowing that a tape recorder was running. Not knowing that the recording would be sent to his wife.

"Take off my shoe," she commanded, imperiously extending one perfect leg. "Do it slowly. Lick the sole. Rub it all over your naked body." Again, the chump would do so, blissfully ignorant of the hidden cameras, and of the fact that the photographs would be sent to his mother.

"You're under arrest," she declared, after handcuffing the idiot's hands behind his back. Thinking it all a game, he'd be still grinning when the police burst into the room.

It rarely took more than ten minutes, start to finish, and oftentimes it took less. Her personal best, four and a half minutes from first hard-on to abject tears, was a minister who had preached against her personally from the pulpit the Sunday before. There was, Elena had to admit to herself, a special satisfaction in that.

"Be sure to tell your friends you had a good time," she always told her mark as he was being led away by the cops. "If you **don't**, they'll all think there's something wrong with you."

25. [Plate 38]

Prick in Love

Prick, that noblest of asses, came of age without ever experiencing the vicissitudes of love. Poor Prick! Sadder and wiser folk — which is to say, essentially, everyone — knew that he was heading for a fall. The longer those pains, those ecstasies, those astonishingly personal embarrassments are deferred, the harder they hit when they arrive at last.

And so they did. Arrive at last and hit hard, that is.

Prick sighed. He moaned. He wrote bad poems. He rued the day that he was born, and could not wait for the morrow, when he might see his beloved again. He masturbated frequently.

We must be a little vague on the subject of Prick's beloved because, if the truth be told, he was a little vague about her himself. He knew her name, and had some notion of her appearance. He was aware that she was blond, though whether natural or bleached was beyond him. But that was it. Of her thoughts, opinions, and inner life he knew nothing. Love scoffs at details! It cares not for such superficialities as a woman's mind.

Perversely enough, this young lady — whoever she was — did not return Prick's adoration. She cut him dead on the street. She returned his love letters unread. When, for token of his feelings, he secretly manured her garden one night, she latched the gate and let it go to weeds.

There was only one thing for a love-struck swain to do — serenade her at her balcony. Prick set several of his poems to music. Then he hired a monkey to play accompaniment on the guitar. The beast was no looker, but he had a melancholy way with the instrument, and this, together with Prick's dulcet bray, the young ass reckoned should be enough to rouse the woman's emotions while simultaneously bypassing her better judgment.

They began rehearsing.

The more Prick sang, the better it sounded to him. He made a few alterations to the lyrics. The monkey suggested chord changes and a shift in tempo here and there. They added a cover or two to their repertoire, and quietly dropped some songs that weren't quite up to snuff.

Finally, they were ready. Prick rented a production studio, and they cut a demo. One of the smaller labels snatched them up. They put in a season opening for a rockabilly retro band, and another season as headliners. Their first LP — **An Officer and a Gentleman, an Ape and an Ass** — went platinum.

Prick was midway through a sold-out tour of Japan before it occurred to him that he never **had** gotten around to serenading his one true love. By then it was moot, though, for he'd completely forgotten her name. He felt chagrined, of course, but not for long. It's hard to maintain a sense of shame when you're snorting cocaine off a teenaged groupie's tits.

Let this be a lesson to us all. There is no such thing as a bad experience. Everything is grist for the mill. When life hands you a lemon — make lemonade!

Even love can be put to good use.

26. [Plate 27] **Grace in the Bordello**

Was ever a woman less suited to be a whore than poor Grace? Her virtues betrayed her. So modest that she blushed to see two dogs sniffing each other with amorous intent, she was required to perform acts of reckless depravity. By nature meek and submissive, she must now publicly solicit wickedness in the most blatant manner imaginable. Alas, her mother had sold her to a brothel, and she was too dutiful a daughter to disobey.

Worst of all was her discovery of what men were **really** like. Not one of her assignations was sweet and romantic. Blunt and selfish was the best she could wish for. Perverse and weird was what she usually got. Who would have imagined? They all wanted to do disgusting things with leather, rubber, diapers, clothes pins, urine, feces, dead fish... Not a day went by without a new and appalling fetish.

It was disillusioning.

Still, she soldiered on. Like a good little scout, she did her best. She hid her feelings, gave good weight, and never short-changed the house. The other whores despised her for it, but what could she do? It was the way she'd been brought up.

One day a supremely confident woman walked into her little room in the bordello and told her to pack her things. "I paid off your pimp," she said. "You're working for me now."

Grace wailed. To be bought and sold like a piece of merchandise — it was really too much! Her life had reached an absolute nadir. "Could any human being be more miserable than me?" she wondered out loud.

"Easily," the woman said. "Let me teach you how."

Then, almost as an afterthought, she added, "My name is Elena."

27. [Plate 49]

Trolls

Everybody loves trolls! Of course we do. Those little imps are exactly the size of children. They are as fun-loving and capricious as children. Their mobile little faces are as expressive as those of children. In fact, were it not for their murders, dismemberments, and casual cannibalism, they could easily be mistaken for children themselves. What's not to love?

Here's a funny story:

Three trolls walk into a bar. They kill the bartender, rip his head off, and pour his blood into mugs. Then they settle down to drink and to brag.

The first troll — let's call him Borborygmy — says, "I'm the bestest, wickedest troll of all! I fart when I don't have to. I break into the houses of strangers and eat crackers in their beds. I kill prostitutes and mail their livers to the police."

The second troll — Xenophagius, let's say — giggles. "Aw, that's nothing," he says with a comic swat of his hand. "You big silly. I make wee-wee when I'm swimming in the public pool. I spray-paint swastikas on the sides of synagogues. I murder hitchhikers and bury their bodies in shallow unmarked graves in the desert."

The third troll has found some old blankets and is playing at dress-up, so we'll call him Little Red Riding Hood. "Nanny-nanny-boo-boo to both of you!" says Little Red Riding Hood with great dignity. He sticks out his tongue at Borborygmy and Xenophagius. "I always vote Republican. I never brush my teeth. And when you weren't looking, I spat in both your mugs!"

Oh, and that's just one of the many, many funny stories there are about trolls and their hilarious antics. There must be thousands of them, the very least of which brightens our darkest day with a chuckle and a wry grin of recognition.

Trolls do perform a certain amount of damage, of course. They are the third leading cause of death nationwide, after traffic accidents and heart failure. In direct loss of physical property alone, they cost more than tent caterpillars, mudslides, and cyclones combined. So we really ought to do something about them — lock them away, maybe even exterminate them outright.

But we can't bring ourselves to do it. They're just so darn **cute**!

28. [Plate 47]

The Homunculus

The maternal instinct is strong beyond measure. Even witches dance when the hand of their biological clock twitches. So it was that, too old to create a child by natural means, a coven of witches of, as they put it, "a certain age," set out to create a homunculus.

They carved an infant from a mandrake root, and gave it a soul crafted from the scent of broom-flowers,

the cry of a loon, and the breath of a brindle cat. Its skin was as soft and pink as a baby's butt, and its legs were wee and plump. They carved it without arms, for it was their intent that it should never have to do a single thing for itself.

When the spells were done, the object pursed its lips and moved its features uneasily, as if lost in a dream. For the homunculus was neither entirely alive nor fully inanimate. A vague sort of self-awareness it had, but nothing more.

"Oh!" the witches cried, "what a sweetums-wuvvums oo are!" They rubbed their faces against it. They kissed its teensy footsy-wootsies.

From hand to hand the faux-child was passed, and those who weren't privileged to be fussing over it at any given moment, worshiped it from afar. "Oh, best of wee-things!" they cried. "Who's a clever ittle slyboots, then?" They loved it more than God loves a repentant sinner.

Eventually, of course, they tired of the game, and went off to seek another. The homunculus was laid aside, and casually lost. Somebody knocked it to the floor. Somebody else absently kicked it across the room, where a kitten dragged it under the couch. When next it surfaced, a week later, it was so battered that it was mistaken for a stock root and tossed into a cauldron of simmering soup. With an imperceptible sigh, it relinquished that shadow-life the witches had imposed upon it.

There are some people who should never have children. You see what they do to pets, and you cringe. May they never, never, never have babies, you pray in secret. And you're ever so grateful if they don't.

29. [Plate 29] Death in Venice

All the world knows the story of how Gustave Aschenbach, the distinguished German scholar and historian, came to Venice in a time of plague and died. Everybody is familiar with how this repressed and celibate old man, in the autumn of his life, succumbed to an essentially pagan worship of a beautiful young boy. Which obsession drove him to barber shops and beauty parlors to have his hair dyed and permed, and his withered cheeks powdered and painted, in a deluded effort to make himself sexually attractive to his unattainable amour.

Thomas Mann's version of this tale is best, of course. But there have been excellent renditions by Burroughs, Faulkner, and Byatt. If nothing else, you've surely read the comic book or seen the Japanese anime. Everyone's heard the story. Everyone knows its name.

And that's money in the bank.

A small minority of stake-holders have expressed doubts about naming a perfume for men after an incident involving an aging homosexual and unrealized pederasty. For the "homosexual" aspect, we need only refer to virtually all perfume advertising of the past five decades. The pederasty, we emphasize, is "unrealized." It speaks to the aspirational hunger for that which we cannot have. Which is, let's face it, what branding is all about.

Studies show, as detailed above, that consumer familiarity with the brand name is at full saturation. Focus group interviews repeatedly came up with "beauty," "youth," and "pampering" as associational terms, with "pagan," "regret," and "obsession" not far behind.

These concepts are a shot to the heart of our target cluster, which we call Men With Money. These are

the achievers, the CEOs, the men who have made this country what it is and are feeling a little guilty about it. They are corporate **reaganistas** who traded their youth for wealth, and have been left feeling somehow cheated out of something important.

Brand-metaphor analysis of DiV identified mingled hints of beauty, lust, obsession, sexual perversity, criminal guilt, and physical degeneration. Compared to this, Calvin Klein for Men is just a perfume.

The campaign, which launches in the fall, is simplicity itself:

Death in Venice. Because you deserve it.

30. [Plate 31]

Grace and Elena

Only once in her life was Grace, however briefly, happy. That was when she whored in Elena's bordello. Elena had, for her happy end in life, the complete and utter destruction of all men whatsoever. But, realizing that even as omniscient a woman as herself couldn't pull off so great a job alone, she'd decided to create a franchise.

Most bordellos are plain and functional, factory farms for sex. Not Elena's. Hers was a romantic place, filled with roses, fine wine, and soft music. Her whores weren't lined up for the customer's inspection, like so many slabs of meat. Rather, one came upon them as if by chance, opening a door to discover a young and innocent beauty caught in the act of putting on her stockings. She looked up, eyes widening in surprise — and desire.

Okay, okay, it was just a paid performance. So was **Romeo and Juliet**. Rare was the man who could visit Elena's house three times without falling in love once. And after Elena's girls had them by the heartstrings, their mistress knew where to apply the knife.

Of all Elena's whores, the one men fell in love with most consistently was Grace. She was an emotional mess. She smelled like trouble. She was catnip to them.

Every night men fell in love with Grace, and she of course with them. She would agree to elope and specify a time and place, where her suitor would discover not her own pliant self but a well-armed rival for her affections, who also expected her to run away with him. Then, afterwards, she would be overcome with remorse.

"Oh, I am such a bad person!" she'd wail. "How could I betray my one true love?" Though she was never sure which of the two she meant.

Elena would comfort her then, stroking her long, fine hair and making shushing noises. Gently she'd massage Grace's shoulders. With infinite tact, she'd caress Grace's breasts, slide a hand up her skirts and between her legs, and trace a moist tongue through the labyrinth of her ear.

Inevitably, they'd wind up making love. Inevitably, Grace would fall in love with Elena for the seventh time that week. Inevitably, she woke up in the morning joyful and filled with zeal to destroy men for Elena's sake.

It felt strange to Elena to see somebody rendered radiantly happy by having sex with her. But she finally decided that, because it was only a woman, it didn't really count.

After all, **nothing** that women do really counts, does it?

31. [Plate 32]

A Sad Story

There was a woman — a beautiful young woman, to make things worse — who found herself in prison, awaiting trial for a crime so heinous that only women can commit it.

We all know what crime this was. Let's not pretend we don't. So there's no point in actually putting its name down on paper. Bad enough that she **did** it.

Still, it's a crying shame.

Young women have impulses. That's the long and the short, and the sad and the true of it. They want to do things that may feel pleasant at the time, but which inevitably lead to tragedy. That's why we have the laws that we do — to protect them from themselves.

Great evils require great deterrents. That's why the crime she committed carried the death penalty.

The pity is that the weight of deterrence must fall upon women, when so much of the fault lies with men, with their promises, blandishments, and sweet, sweet lies. It would be pointless to punish the men, of course. Boys will be boys. At the slightest hint of a chance, down come their zippers and out come their wild oats. It's a law of nature. Trying to regulate it would be as pointless as trying to shovel back the tide.

Girls, however, are sweet and innocent. That's why society does everything it can to prevent such tragedies from ever occurring.

The only sure way of preventing an unwanted pregnancy, of course, is celibacy. Which is why birth control of any sort is strictly illegal. Because it encourages women to take chances by fostering a false sense of confidence.

Nevertheless, this poor, sweet, uncomplicated soul was caught red-handed with a diaphragm and a tube of spermicide. Now she's in prison, awaiting trial and execution for the heinous crime of attempting to bypass God's natural checks upon her own foul and self-betraying lust.

She's so young, too! Barely more than a child! It really is a pity the laws are as harsh as they are.

But it's all for her own protection.

32. [Plate 48]

Slander

Of all the nightmares that beset the world, the playfulest and least harmful is Slander. This is proof, if any were needed, that nightmares cannot be ordered and ranked. For the damage Slander does is beyond calculation.

Slander in action is a dreadful sight. He sucks in a mouthful of snot and spits it out in a vile green stream. It smells like hell and it's loathsome to the touch. And it clings! Once you get it in your hair, on your skin, down the back of your neck — that's it. You'll never rid yourself of the stench. It's there for good.

Because Slander rides atop whatever other nightmares are handy, there's no predicting just what unsavory reputation might be in store for you. Do you like children? Perhaps you like them a little too well. Are you a ladies' man — or a sexual harasser? Perhaps you simply stay at home alone, watching TV or reading good books. In which case, just **what** are you hiding?

Being innocent is no protection. Neither is guilt. Slander flies in the window. Slander kicks down the door. He's set on your trail by somebody you never met who mistook you for somebody else completely. He's introduced by your own best friend. You yourself may have invited him in with a carelessly-chosen word. However you came to his attention, he's here to stay.

This is playful? I hear you object. This is harmless? Well, relatively speaking, yes.

Consider just a few other nightmares as alternatives: The police state. Racism. Political torture. The hydrogen bomb. Genocide.

Genocide. Hmm. That would explain a lot, wouldn't it? Your polite demeanor, your quiet mannerisms, the way you're so careful never to give offense to anyone... A war criminal would behave exactly like you, wouldn't he? Always careful to smile and say hello on the street, sending a card every Christmas with "holiday greetings" so it won't offend non-Christians, never once in all the years we've known you getting arrested for even the most minor of charges. Not even a speeding ticket.

What could force somebody to lead so craven and fearful a life? What horrible, unspeakable deed could account for it? They say the Nazis hiding in South America were gentle as gentle could be. The mass-murderer is always the last one the neighbors would suspect.

You're not fooling anybody with that Little Miss Goody-Two-Shoes act of yours. Just how stupid did you think we are? We've got our eye on you now.

We know what you've done.

33. [Plate 73]

Wicked Grace

Grace did so love being wicked! It was a revelation to her. The wicked were allowed to have fun, to begin with — or, rather, fun was as forbidden to them as it was to good folk, but they went and had it anyway! They never said anything out of politeness, and if they itched someplace rude, they scratched it right in public.

It was ever so much more pleasant than being virtuous.

All her friends were wicked, and because she was no better than they, they treated her like a pal. They stole small gifts for her, and told her dirty jokes. If somebody mistreated her, they waited for him in a dark alley and broke both his legs. Really, the wicked were nicer friends than the righteous ever were!

Sweet, innocent Grace wasn't truly wicked, of course, only terribly, terribly naughty. And even that was explained away by her profession. One cannot be a drab without naughtiness — the customers would revolt. But the wicked are in no position to be censorious. They accepted her, even though her credentials were weak.

Nobody who knew her believed for an instant that Grace's wickedness would last. It was inevitable that she should fall off the wagon, and one day she did. She fell in love with a young wastrel, who carried her away from the whorehouse before calmer heads could intercede. Off she went to scrub and clean and cook and sew for him. That's when her life went back to normal. That's when her life went straight to hell.

Her lover beat her, of course, and refused to marry her, and told her she was a slut, and slept with other women every chance he got. So miserable did he make her that Grace returned to the Church. She went to Mass each morning and afternoon, took Communion every day, and prayed incessantly for her lover's

salvation. Her confessor made a pass at her, and told her to offer it up to God.

Oftentimes, Grace wistfully thought back to the days when she was wicked. They were for her that lost Garden of Eden that childhood is for the rest of us.

But no fair drawing conclusions! There is no moral to this story. Absolutely none. Life is not like that at all, and don't you dare think for even an instant that it is. We're done now — just move along, okay?. There's nothing to see here, nothing to look at, nothing to learn.

34. [Plate 23] A Sad Story Continued

It had to be one of the dullest trials in the history of jurisprudence. It should have been otherwise. The woman was beautiful, and her crime was juicy. It involved sex. There was no telling what lascivious details might have come out under vigorous cross-examination. But right at the start, the whole affair went sour.

The judge read the charges, pronounced the sentence, and asked the woman how she plead. In a voice that barely lifted into the audible, she mumbled, "Guilty."

Which, of course, she was. The law was clear and her goose was cooked. But it went against all reason that she should submit to the machinery of justice as simply as that. Even a drowning man struggles as he goes down. The burglar with three bullets in him, still struggles to crawl away from the advancing police. The caught fish flops wildly on the shore.

Meek as a saint, she refused to defend herself.

The prosecutor asked for a recess, and went into a huddle with the judge and her public defender. After a series of ritual humiliations designed to enliven the proceedings were rejected by the defense, a compromise was reached and the woman was ordered to wear short cape and a tall and comical dunce's hat.

This she submitted to with so sad and resigned a grace as to convince all involved that further measures would be pointless. The day was a complete wash. In her own sullen and voiceless way, this uncooperative spoilsport seemed determined to rob the trial of all drama whatsoever and render it as tedious as possible for everyone.

Changing out of his robes afterwards, the judge could not help feeling cheated. For all the pleasure he'd gotten out of the proceedings, he might as well have pardoned the dumb ox! Don't think he hadn't been tempted, either.

Only his sense of obligation to his audience, his fellow members of the legal profession, and to the young woman herself, had given him the resolution to actually impose the death penalty upon her.

35. [Plate 65] Witches' Orgies

What is so refreshing as an orgy? Once a year, on Walpurgisnacht, witches gather far from town to couple with one of everything at once. Men, women, nightmares, familiars, inanimate objects... A month's worth of sex is crammed into a single night and a finite number of orifices.

Witches know how this offends the bourgeoisie, so they're always careful to issue press releases and do interviews for the local newspapers during the build-up to the great night. "Oh, yes," they chirp when asked about this, that, or the other perversion, "I'll certainly be doing that. Many times, in fact." The mundanes, as the witches call them, have fertile imaginations, and will sometimes come up with something novel to try. Though, having so little experience with sex, the bulk of their inventions must be discarded as unlikely, uncomfortable, or laughable.

When Walpurgisnacht finally arrives, the witches crank up the boom-boxes and light the bonfires. Then, after a rather perfunctory pledge of obeisance to the Devil (think of that unenthusiastic mumble of prayers in church on Sunday) and the ritual kissing of a goat's behind, they settle down to a good, rowdy evening of fun.

The National Inquirer always sends reporters to spy on the revels, and the witches always catch them, roast them on a spit, and serve them up for refreshments. Their cameras are smashed, and the film thrown into the flames.

It's important that there be no photos.

Come morning the witches will all be in their beds, aching in unfamiliar places. Just getting up to pee will be an agony. "Fucking Beelzebub!" they'll grumble to themselves. "Why did I ever think I could do that at my age? A girl of twenty-three would pull a hamstring, trying." Then they'll hobble out to the stoop to pick up the morning paper, and see what kind of coverage they got.

Which is why there must never be any photos. Witches know what the public expects of them, and they know what the human body can do. One day a year, all the world's fantasies are fixed upon them. Once a year, every clergyman on Earth stays up late, his imagination on fire, working on a sermon condemning them for activities the Scarlet Woman of Babylon herself couldn't live up to.

But then the witches settle gingerly down at the kitchen table with the paper and a cup of tea, to read the scandalized accounts of what everyone assumes they did. (Thinking, perhaps, "I should never have gotten into that contest with Agatha; numbers aren't everything," or "They may be large, but horses are rarely worth the trouble.") Informed speculation posits a scene of debauchery that would have turned the Marquis de Sade's hair white, in settings that Wagner could only have envied.

Then they smile, the witches do. "My public," they think, "where would I be without them?"

36. [Plate 30]

The Miser

Here's a jolly tale for a change. It's about a miser. Not just any miser either, but a flint-hearted, grasping, cinder-souled old curmudgeon, the sort of fellow who is the delight of pranksters everywhere. Because one can do anything at all to them, you see, and nobody minds. All the world laughs when they get their come-uppance.

One day, some merry lads hatched a delightful plot to teach the miser a lesson. First they made the usual elaborate preparations. Then one of their number, the closest thing (and not very close at that) to a friend that the miser had, remarked casually that he'd heard gold was going out of fashion.

"Out of fashion?" the miser cried. "Not likely! Why, gold is as solid an investment, sir, as... as... as gold itself!"; Gold was all he had. It was the wife he never married, the children he never had. Late at night, he stroked it lovingly and crooned softly over it.

"Think what you will," the prankster said with an insouciant shrug, and left.

The hook was set.

Over the next several days, a consortium of practical jokers employed all the classic tricks of a major "sting" on the miser. They separated him from reality. They fed him doctored newspapers. They plonked him down in front of rigged radios. They staged conversations that were meant to be overheard.

GOLD TUMBLES! the headlines read. "There was panic in the markets today, as an precious metals fell to unprecedented lows," the radio reported. "I took my bullion and lashed it together with steel cable," a businessman confided to a friend, as he got up from a nearby table. "At least it can serve as an anchor for my boat."

When the waitress saw that the businessman had left a gold coin as a tip, she threw it after him with a curse.

The miser was devastated. He believed every word. Clutching his gold to him, he sank to his knees. "But gold is all I have!" he cried. "Gold is all I **have!**" That night he hung himself from a rafter, with his bags of gold tied to his belt so their weight would help speed him to his end.

Humor is the great leveler. A pompous man slips on a banana peel! A society woman falls on her prat! A politician is hit in the face with a pie! All humor is rooted in pain, humiliation, and exaggeration. We laugh at extremes of behavior that would horrify us in real life.

That's why this story is so funny.

37. [Plate 24] A Sad Story Concluded

It really was a sad execution. The condemned woman, it had to be admitted, put a bit of a damper on the event. She simply wouldn't rise to the occasion.

The officials did their best. They dressed her in a low-cut push-up gown; it had a lot of va-va-voom. They trussed her up as if she might try to make a daring escape at any instant. Oh, and the funny hat. They kept the funny hat.

Still, what ought to have been a gala event, a carnival for the masses, had an unpleasant undertaste to it. A great execution requires a great victim. One like the Witch of Wolhampton, who went to her death proclaiming her innocence, kissing crucifixes, praying that the Holy Virgin would send her a miracle, shrieking piteously for her baby daughter. There wasn't a dry eye in the crowd. She really had the gift of tears.

Or else a great villain. One-eyed Jack spent an hour hectoring the crowd, regaling them with the sordid details of crimes the prosecutors hadn't known about, utilizing the filthiest possible language. He promised to return from the dead to murder each and every man, woman, and child present. Then, though his hands were firmly bound, he somehow managed to pull his pizzle out of his trousers and spray every unwary soul within fifteen feet of him. He was still laughing when the executioner struck off his head.

Ah, now there was a blackguard. They don't make 'em like that anymore.

This girl was nothing like that. She was quiet. She was unhappy. That was about it. When they lit the pyre, she choked, shrieked, writhed, died.

All too soon it was over.

Still, the day wasn't a **total** loss. For the donkey upon which she rode to her death (none other than our old friend, Prick!) experienced for the first time what life in the public arena was like. The roars of approval, the smell of the crowd, even the half-eaten apples and tomatoes they shied at his burden — all these were a revelation to him. Prick discovered that he liked being down among the people at the center of attention. It was more immediate even than being a rock star had been.

So began (his father's name and appointments, the money men's sponsorship, and his brother's intercession on his behalf having, as we said before, absolutely nothing to do with it) Prick's rapid and distinguished climb to the Oval Office.

Proving once again, that it's an ill wind that blows no good.

38. [Plate 70]

The Nightmares in Concert

"Check out the music."

"Eh?"

"Check out the music!"

"What?"

"Check out the music!"

"Oh. Yeah, it's pretty cool."

"What?"

"It's pretty cool!"

"I like it too."

"What?"

"Never mind."

"What?"

"I said, The lead singer is really cute!"

"You like that stuck-up piece of crap? You must have the brains of a turnip."

"Huh?"

"I said, You look cute too!"

"Oh. You're looking to get laid, are you?"

"What?"

"I said, Thank you!"

"Okay, I'm going to grin like an idiot and then shrug, okay? Maybe that way you'll think I said something clever."

"You just said something stupid, didn't you? I don't suppose you'd be willing to go down on me right here and now and then just disappear."

"What?"

"Do you live around here?"

"Bingo! Mamma's little baby gets dem ashes raked tonight!"

"I can't hear a word you're saying."

"I said, Yeah. Just around the corner. Ya wanna drop by for a drink or something after the concert?"

"Actually, I'd rather you did me in the hallway and I never had to see what kind of squalor you live in. But you'll probably want to talk me half to death first."

"What?"

"That would be nice!"

"Okay, I'm going to smile sweetly at you now. Then I'm going to reel you in, take you home, fuck your brains out, and dump you in the trash."

"You're going to be hard to get rid of, aren't you?"

"What?"

"Let's go! It's kind of loud here!"

"Wow. You noticed."

"What?"

"I'm glad we met!"

"Me too!"

"Don't expect breakfast."

"Eh?"

"I said, I've been looking for you all my life!"

"Great. Don't be surprised when you get the clap."

39. [Plate 17]

Elena By Herself

With Grace gone, Elena was forced to make do by herself. Grace had been the best employee a rapacious woman could hope for — an emotional, vulnerable wreck. One who, with the best intentions in the world, destroyed lives without even knowing how she'd done it. Now Elena had to rethink her methodology.

The first thing Elena did was to sell the whorehouse. She was weary of the fast-food approach to male ruination. She wanted to get back to boutique seduction.

And, holy guacamole, was her comeback a success! Men showered her with flowers, fur coats, Maseratis, jet-copters, summer homes in Acapulco, and **pied-a-terres** in Paris. In return for which she showered them with scorn, neglect, infidelity and indifference. After which they killed themselves with gas, guns, poison, leaps from the tops of bridges and buildings, drink and dissolution, desperate acts of crime, and public confessions of acts best left unmentioned. They died like flies.

A woman with the right attitude and million-dollar legs can have anything she wants.

Somehow, it wasn't enough. Waiting with her local procuress for a major industrialist or powerful politician to walk in on her while she was examining the seams of her stockings (boys like eye-candy best when it's stolen), Elena would be overcome by melancholic thoughts.

It wasn't the sex that she missed (Elena had sex with women at least twice a week; guys

hate it when they catch their mistress sleeping with their wife), but the camaraderie. The girl-talk, the whispered confidences, the giggly trashing of men and their pretensions.

She sighed.

At which moment, somebody whose name you would recognize in a flash would walk in and be entranced by that glimpse of perfect flesh that Elena with horrified modesty would hide away from his eyes, blushing and yet — somehow the famous man would know — not altogether unhappy that he had been the one to blunder in upon her.

In a world-famous restaurant later that night, Elena would stir cream into her coffee in a way that caused her to expose rather a lot of cleavage. The Great Man would offer her some trinket — diamonds, emeralds, her own platinum card — just to elicit a gasp from those ruby lips. Both would anticipate an evening to remember.

Still, even in the midst of the hunt, even as Elena began the degradation, even as a man who had never knelt to God learned what it was like to kneel before a woman, blubbing like a baby... Elena couldn't forget Grace.

It had been fun, having a pal.

Meanwhile, in a dismaying part of town, Grace was miserable, suffering, and sunk in self-pity. The bills were due, she'd been beaten again, and her boyfriend had just chucked her out of the apartment so he could bed down some floozy he'd met in a bar.

She gave Elena not a thought.

40. [Plate 77]

The Picadors' Club

Say what you will about being a matador, it's a blue-collar profession. One sweats, to begin with. Also, the job is performed afoot, rather than mounted. There's a great deal of danger involved, and that too is a hallmark of the laboring class. Finally, there's the slaughter of the bull at the end. One might as well be a common butcher!

No, no, matadors are scarce better than those alley-running louts in Pamplona.

The picador, on the other hand, is a profession for aristocrats. One rides high above the danger on a noble steed. One jabs at the great animal with a long lance, drawing blood, and if the brute turns nasty, why, one's friends are there to distract him and one's horse to take the brunt of his anger. Finally, one does not slaughter — one **antagonizes!** One **provokes!** One **enrages!** It is exactly what the ruling class does best.

As may well be imagined, the Picadors' Club is the most exclusive organization in all Madrid. Here gather the cream of society to relive past triumphs, argue the merits of various lance-making firms, and deplore the sad state to which the younger generation has brought their noble calling.

Occasionally, on a Saturday night when drink has been flowing and emotions run high, there will be an argument over technique, and then there is no recourse but to bring out the carpet bull.

The carpet bull is a primitive sausage of wool upholstered with an old rug with horns to one end, and handles underneath. A manservant operates it, charging and feinting, in imitation of a real bull.

Meanwhile, two picadors, mounted upon the shoulders of friends, will demonstrate their prowess as of old, and dazzle the onlookers with skill such as has not been seen in the public arena for decades.

It is the most genteel and refined entertainment to be found anywhere in Spain.

One gets old, of course. Just last Saturday, Don Ricardo carelessly ran his spear through the eye and into the brain of his valet, killing the poor bugger instantly.

It was bad form, but Don Ricardo, being half-blind and afflicted with the palsy, had to be forgiven. He wasn't even aware at first that the tragedy had occurred. When he was told, great was his horror and chagrin. His face turned pale and his eyes bugged out. "Oh, bloody hell!" he cried. "Not **again?**"

41. [Plate 8]

Grace Violated

Oh, God. Oh, damn. Oh, no. This is just too awful. No kidding, there honestly and truly are some things that man was not meant to know. What your child screaming in pain and terror sounds like. How it feels to lose a part of your body in an industrial accident. The agony of realizing that you've done something unforgivable. The fact that these things happen **all the time** doesn't excuse them. If anything, it only makes them worse.

I'm not going to tell you this story. I'm not!

Grace was raped. You wouldn't think this would happen to a whore. Any sensible villain would order the all-night special and simply not pay afterwards. But rape isn't about sex (read Susan Brownmiller's book if you doubt me), it's about power.

But that's not the worst of it.

True story: Many years ago, a civic group I was involved with had for a guest speaker somebody from Women Organized Against Rape. This organization exists to support the victims of sexual violence, to offer them counsel when they need it most, and to do their best to get the criminals behind bars. After her presentation, one white-haired gent raised his hand. "Can you tell us about a case you were involved in?" he asked.

The woman then told us about an infant — an **infant!** — who had been molested by her sitter.

"Could you tell us about a different case?" the man asked.

So the woman, who admitted she'd had grotesque luck so far, told us about another assault upon another infant.

The man cleared his throat. "How about a case where the victim was a little **older**?"

There are problems with the male gender, granted. But only rarely am I embarrassed to be a man. This creep made me cringe. Because what he was looking for was not insight, but a jolly good rape fantasy to take home with him.

In a strange way this sensitized me. Since then I've noticed that movie and television depictions of rape are always shot in extreme close-up, with fast cuts, sweaty flesh, little grunts, and heavy breathing. Which is to say, they're filmed sexy. The scene in Stanley Kubrick's **A Clockwork Orange** in which Little Alex's rival droogs are interrupted just before gang-raping a large-breasted blonde, whose clothing they've snickeringly cut away from her with their bolshy big knives feels strange and inhuman because it's shot objectively, from a distance, with a fixed camera. It's not shot — as virtually all other media rapes are — from the viewpoint of the rapist.

Susan Brownmiller's book is titled **Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape**. It makes rape out to be a very bad thing. I read as far into it as I could bear to read, and then I set it aside. At that moment, I promised myself that I would not depict a rape in my fiction before finishing the book. And I have not, so I have not.

There! You've been spared the pain of going through a graphic description of exactly what happened to Grace. I know you're grateful. I'm absolutely certain you didn't want to hear the details. You're happier without them, I swear. They were nasty. They were gross. They were nothing you wanted in your mind.

I'm sure you'll find another way to get your rocks off.

42. [Plate 67]

Paint Your Goat

Are you ready for the holidays? Have you carved your pumpkins, set out your corn shocks, crucified a cat or two, and painted the names of your tutelary demons on the walls in pig's blood? Good! But have you painted your goat?

Nothing says Walpurgisnacht like a good ripe goat, tastefully decorated in a manner reminiscent of ruined monasteries, jeweled skulls, impalement, and the sad death of kings. In Europe, of course, they have lackeys to perform such chores for them. We sturdy scions of democracy must make do for ourselves. But there's no reason we can't turn out a goat as good as any in France.

Here's how:

First, take off your clothes. Why? Because it's more amusing that way. Now shave your goat's belly in one long, continual spiral, to represent the descent into death and rebirth. You want to evoke the left-hand path, so don't make the beginner's mistake of curling the spiral wrong way around.

Widdershins, remember! Countersunwise!

Along that spiral, using a goose quill pen, in elegant flowing cursive copy out your pledge to sell your soul to the Devil. If you haven't sold him your soul yet, for goodness sake be sure to do it before the solstice! If you wait, you can't declare it on this year's tax form.

Fennel is the new lavender. Gather up the remaining fur in tufts, and tie them around twigs of fennel with little bows of hand-woven ribbon. Add a light dusting of marjoram. As a rule, anything that would go well with roasted goat flesh is appropriate; this is, after all, the season in which we contemplate our mortality. Give your goat something to think about as well!

Time now to gilt the horns. Rather than simply slathering on the gold paint, why not go for a more sophisticated look? Try sponging on the gilt, or, better yet, applying it with a coarse brush and then dragging a cloth over the horns, so that the highlights are removed and what remains suggests an ancestral goat – one that's been passed down in the family for dozens of generations, kept alive, perhaps, by sacrifices too gruesome to mention.

A touch of clear shellac for the hoofs, and your Walpurgis-goat is done. Enjoy! And don't forget to deck his balls!

43. [Plate 15]

Elena's Day of Rest

Even a man-eater can get tired. There came a time when Elena grew weary of conquest, jaded with intrigue, sick to death of watching faces sag, dicks wilt, and eyes flood with tears. Really, men are so predictable in the ways they despair! When a Nobel-winning poet cries, "You have ruined me! I cannot go on living without you," one realizes that originality is dead.

So Elena retreated from the world. She sat in a chair in an empty room in an empty house in a neighborhood where nothing ever happens. One of her favorite procuresses (she had no friends, now that Grace was gone) kept her company.

For one long, glorious day, Elena did absolutely nothing. She listened to the muted sounds of traffic on the street outside. She watched the slant of sunlight from the window creep from one side of the varnished floor to the other. Dust motes jittered and danced within it, like a tiny galaxy ruled by Brownian motion alone. She felt the breath pass in and out of her body. Occasionally she languidly fanned herself.

The procuress offered no conversation. Elena elicited none. A distant clock monotonously divided time into one-second hacks, but she lacked the initiative to stand up and still its pendulum.

Elena had never known tedium before. In its novelty, it was experienced by her as a kind of ecstasy.

She knew now what a world without men would be like: vast, empty, eventless, still, and very, very slow. It was an existence utterly without excitement. It was a life absolutely devoid of adventure or purpose.

It was good beyond all her expectations.

Renewed by her day of rest, Elena returned to her vocation with fresh vigor.

44. [Plate 63]

Prick Among the Demons

Prick was president at last. Let's skip the sordid details of **how** — he stole the office fair and square. Was ever anything so unlikely? Was ever any outcome so inevitable? Only in America! This could never have happened in a democracy.

But how to actually run the country? Even if Prick could be bothered (he could not), he had promised during the election that he would hand authority over to advisors who would make him look good. Which

was not easy. There weren't many functional human beings who didn't make Prick look pretty punk by contrast.

So he went with demons.

Prick's three chief advisors were the fiends Rainy, Chummy, and Asscloth. They gave up lucrative practices in Hell to serve him, because money isn't everything. Power counts as well. And they came out of the gate running.

"Let's wreck the economy!" said Chummy.

"No, no, no, let's curtail civil rights!" said Asscloth.

"Bugger that," said Rainy. "Let's have a war!"

Decisions, decisions, decisions. In the end Prick went with all three.

"**Things** are in the saddle now," Prick declared in his most successful speech ever, "and they ride mankind! Enjoy the trip."

Wham! Down went the economy, just as he'd promised. Millions of retirement accounts, like so many little ducks, upped tails and dove for the mud. Corporations went bankrupt, and their CEOs looted the pension funds on their way out. Unemployment soared.

"What have you done?" Prick cried in horror. "The electorate is screaming for blood."

"Fuck the electorate," Chummy said. "You don't owe them a thing; they didn't even vote for you. We both know who placed you in office — and you are **not** putting them in jail."

Meanwhile, Asscloth's people set to work dismantling two hundred years of hard-won rights. They jailed foreigners without warrants, and tried their best to do the same to American citizens. Yet for all their zeal, the courts wouldn't cooperate.

"You can't even get the job done," Prick grumbled.

"It's these fucking conservative judges," Asscloth said. "They're not right-wing enough. They don't realize that innocent people don't **need** rights. We're thinking of having them shot."

"But my numbers are plummeting! Nobody loves me!" A great schmaltzy tear ran down Prick's cheek. He did so dearly like being loved. It was, after wealth, his favorite entitlement. "Now I'll never be popular again."

But Rainy leaned over in the saddle and patted Prick reassuringly on the nose. "You poor ass," he said. "You've forgotten the war."

45. [Plate 35] A Close Shave

Salome wasn't her real name of course. It was only an alias, an assumed identity, **a nom de guerre**.

Nor was this her first false name. When she had first gone to work in the brothels, she had called herself Jezebel. It had been good for business, and it protected her family's reputation so well as to allow them to accept financial support from her. Because of these obligations, she had followed the trail of money into sadism and dominance. The notorious Madame Elena herself had taught her the tricks of the trade. Everybody agreed she'd learned them well.

But that was then, and now Salome ran a barber shop. **The Closest Shave in Town**, the sign above the door promised, and that was what she delivered. It was a discreet service, of course. Only the wealthiest young bucks could afford it.

"Go into the dressing room, take off your clothes, and wrap the pink satin sheet about yourself," she would command.

"Everything?" the mark would ask.

"Keep your socks on," Salome said. She had a fine sense of the ridiculous.

Salome never wore any underwear. Her breasts would sway gently in the client's face as she slowly shaved his cheeks and chin with her sharp, sharp razor.

"What about my neck?" the young dandy would ask. "It's still stubbly."

"All in good time, sweet sir," she'd coo. "Now open your sheet so I can shave your chest."

She was standing so close he could feel her breath on his face, and the gentle give of her nether hair against his thigh. Naturally, he did as she told him.

Slowly... lingeringly... Salome swept the hair from his skin. Oh, that exquisite tingle when she rubbed on the aftershave! It brought his nipples erect.

"Open the sheet a little lower. I want to do your abdomen."

He obeyed.

"Lower still, and I'll make your privates as smooth and hairless as a young boy's."

Imagine the client's trepidation! Imagine the fear he experienced when Salome hoisted his fleshy trifles to shave beneath them, and what relief when the blade lifted away, leaving him unnicked. Imagine the exquisite yearning he felt as Salome brushed talcum powder over his freshly denuded crotch.

"Now for your throat." Salome gestured, and one of her barberettes-in-training brought a platter and held it before him. "Does this suggest anything to you?"

"Uh..."

"I didn't think so."

And — lop! drop! plop! — the head fell onto the platter. Later it would be FedExed to his wife. The corpse would be thrown into the marshes, and the wallet in the hip pocket of the trousers still hanging in the dressing room would be despoiled. Thus it was that Salome made her living.

Such a tragic fate! And yet it could have been easily avoided by anybody with a classical education. Alas, the Bible is no longer taught in our once-proud schools! No wonder so many of our young men come to bad ends.

46. [Plate 12]

Grace at the Gallows

Madness and buggery! What evil wind could have blown the ship of Grace's fate to such a foul harbor?

Yet there she was, long past midnight, in the lonely gallows-ground at the edge of town, with her hand in the mouth of the corpse of a hanged murderer, trying to prise out at least two of its teeth.

Grace was superstitious. How not? Her life was a ramshackle structure of disaster piled upon calamity piled upon humiliation. Surely somebody had put a curse on her! The alternative was, for Grace, literally unthinkable.

So she had found a sorcerer who said he could easily undo the curse. First, however, he needed certain items. What exactly? Oh, he was certain she would have no trouble obtaining them...

What a terrible thing it is to stand tiptoe before a dead felon, yanking and yanking at a slippery little nub of bone, all the while its erstwhile owner stares down at you with sad indifference. It's enough to make a girl doubt the essential goodness of life.

Oh, dear God, she could smell his breath! The corpse was beginning to turn and an acrid tang told her that somewhere there were maggots at work. But underneath that was a familiar sourness born of bad teeth and worse digestion. She **knew** this man. He had been one of her regulars. His face wasn't familiar, but who could forget such a stink? This night just kept getting worse and worse!

But Grace was determined. She would do anything to end this lifelong streak of bad luck. Holding a handkerchief to her nose against the stench, she yanked one, then two — that was the minimum — and then, to be safe, a third tooth.

The next day at noon, when the sorcerer unlocked his door, Grace rushed into his den, unknotted her handkerchief, and poured its contents into his outstretched hand. With barely a glance, he threw the teeth into a cigar box that already held pencil stubs, loose change, mismatched cufflinks and the like, and said, "Okay, give me a blow job and twenty bucks, and we can get started. "

Oh, Grace thought. Naive as she was, she'd been scammed, hoaxed, and defrauded so often that she immediately recognized his game for what it was. This so-called "sorcerer" was nothing of the sort. He didn't value the corpse-teeth one whit. Last night's horrors were inflicted upon Grace only to intimidate her. All he really wanted was her money and some cheap sex.

Having seen through him, anybody else would have snatched back the teeth and stormed out of the confidence-trickster's squalid lair. She wouldn't have stayed. She wouldn't have given him money. She would never have taken the lying little weasel's filthy thing into her mouth.

But Grace, alas, was Grace, and so she opened her wallet and sank to her knees. Nothing in her experience had ever taught her that any of her adventures could end any other way.

47. [Plate 50]

The Donkey Method

Dear Aspiring Politician:

Throughout history, it has been self-evident that to get ahead in politics requires that you emulate the most successful politicians and statesmen of the age. An unhurried analysis of the great men of our own era, unfortunately, demonstrates that they are all — President Prick most emphatically included — asses. You, however, are not an ass. To what possible political future, then, can you aspire? Are you condemned by your very virtues to a life of obscurity?

Relax. The Leadership Skills Attainment Foundation of Cherry Hill, New Jersey, is proud to announce its

new six-week leadership seminar and training program, utilizing a radically innovative approach we call the Donkey Method.

Here's how it works:

We begin by sewing shut your eyelids. This sounds painful, but is not. The operation is performed under local anesthesia. For the duration of the course, you will see only vague and indistinct shapes, in soft and lovely pastels.

Then we securely muffle your ears. So vital is this to the program that we then clamp enormous locks over the mufflers. You absolutely must not listen to anything but what we tell you.

Finally, we fit you with a heavy lead jacket, to discourage you from taking any individual actions, and promote the passive, almost helpless stance of the contemporary politico.

It's as simple as that! For six weeks, we tell you what's going on and what to think about it. We plan your day, and we look after your needs. We spoon-feed you your meals, **and** your picture of reality.

By the end of the course, you'll accept anything we put into your mouth.

But wait! you say. What's been described so far sounds like a madhouse. Indeed. And if you were required to sum up the current political scene in a single word, you would say that it was a...?

Exactly so.

This is the beauty of the Donkey Method. Unlike other leadership training courses, it prepares you for a life in politics not as it **should be**, but as it **is**.

Nor does our commitment to our students end in the classroom. Our agents and lobbyists will keep in regular touch with you as you climb the ladder to the highest reaches of the political machine, guiding and directing your every thought and move.

Examine your reactions to what you've read so far. If you have any hesitation whatsoever about the wisdom of committing to our course, then you **need** the Donkey Method!

Sincerely,

John Harken, CEO

The Leadership Skills Attainment Foundation of Cherry Hill, New Jersey.

"Give Us Your Money. Then Do What You're Told."

48. [Plate 20]

The Morning After

Well, last night was fun, but this morning is today. Time to douche, do the laundry, shake out the featherbed, and sweep under the couch for dust-bunnies. Oh, and those men who were feeling so good about themselves eight hours ago? They've got to go too.

"Shoo! Shoo!" the witches cry. "No breakfast for the likes of you! Take your pants with you — you can put them on outside the door."

"But we love you!" the men plead.

"Tell that to your fiancé," the witches reply. "If that's what she still is."

And, weeping, the men leave. If they're not sadder and wiser, at least they're sadder. Not that the witches care much, one way or another. They're practical women, they have things to do. There are wars to be encouraged, courts to be corrupted, governments to be set one against another. Compared to such matters, what importance is the disillusionment of a handful of men? Less than nothing.

Intelligent women can disagree, of course. Those putative fiancés, for example. They may well take their errant lovers back in. Women do foolish things. They let themselves be ruled by their hearts. They gaze deep into those soulful brown eyes. They never have a gun close at hand when they really need one.

So uptown and downtown and over by the sanitary landfill, men are earnestly saying, "Oh, baby, you know how much I love you!" and, "She meant nothing to me, I swear!" and, "I was drunk and I couldn't get it up — that's God's own truth!" None of it **lies**, exactly, for in the cold, harsh light of sobriety, they believe every word of it. And women are frowning and fuming and stamping their little feet in fury, because they secretly know that eventually they're going to end up having to pretend to believe every filthy word. Because this sorry excuse for a man was so hard to get in the first place, and all the others are not one bit better.

Meanwhile, their housework done, the witches are enjoying a cup of tea. The house sparkles, and there are fresh scones with butter. Delicately, they dab at the corners of their mouths with napkins that are crisp and white. Do their thoughts flit lightly over the events of last night? Certainly they look pensive.

At last one clears her throat. "Let's say we get hold of that thermonuclear device..." she begins.

49. [Plate 36]

The Rookie

"It's awful windy," Mystique said. Mystique was new to life on the street, and had no idea how cold it could get.

"Work with it," Elena advised. "Bend over and let it paste your flimsy dress against your butt. Men are suckers for that. They love to think they've seen more than you wanted to show them."

Elena had given up her brothel in order to work solo again, but she was always glad to give a rookie some friendly advice.

"What about my little problem?" Mystique asked.

"Be up-front about it! You've got your period, so he can't stick it **there**. But you can do certain other things. With your hands. Or your mouth. Or even your you-know-what. But that'll cost them extra. You're a lady and you've never done that before. You wouldn't do that now, only you desperately need the money. Got that?"

"Oh, yes."

"If you can cry a little while you're doing it, that'll speed things up. Because it really gets men hot. The more innocent you can seem, the better."

"I'm going for a good-little-girl-gone-bad thing here, then?"

"Exactly."

"So I shouldn't mention that I'm pre-op?"

Elena smiled. "Not until you've got the money in your pocket and the deed is done. You can show them your penis afterwards if you want. The look on their faces is always good for a giggle."

50. [Plate 45]

Nightmares and Witches

Nightmares flock to witches. They can't help it. There they are, flitting through the darkest reaches of the Noosphere, minding their own business, when **blam!** They come upon two witches with a basketful of unbaptized infants, going through their PDAs and trying to find a mutually acceptable date for... what? Intrigued, the nightmares creep closer.

The thing is that nightmares have no imaginations. They're forces of nature, who neither plan nor intend, but simply are and do. Yet, though they cannot define their lack, they feel it. It is for this reason that imaginative evil is so irresistible to them. It is everything they fall short of. It intrigues them.

Witches, meanwhile, have imagination in spades. Want an example? Okay. Every now and then, when they run low on certain supplies, two witches will grab a basket of unbaptized infants, find a high and windy spot, and begin gabbing away excitedly about matters they never quite define. "Oh, it'll **work**, dearie," one says. "Aristocracy and blood-lust? Why, they goes together like toads and ketchup! Just get me there in time and keep the cauldron bubbling."

"Yes, but the plan could use a little you-know-what, eh?" her sister says. "Let's not be cheap here. Penny wise and poison foolish! Only, this time of year, where are we-?"

"Oh, I knows a feller, my sweet, who's no better nor... **Do** be a dear, will ye, and get me that thing from outer the basket?"

By now, the nightmares are as close as close can be. They strain their ears. Their attention is so entirely on what's being said that they don't notice when the one cunning witch brushes the babies aside and casually withdraws a net from the basket. They don't notice when the other cunning witch takes the net's far side. They don't notice how the one winks at the other just before the two of them in unison cast the net.

Then they notice, though!

Tangled in that ensorceled weave of twine, the nightmares struggle wildly to escape. In vain. The witches take out blackjacks from their robes and systematically club the nightmares to death.

Boiled, nightmares can be rendered down into a liquid that induces madness. Mixed with bitter herbs, a pinch of them will dry up a cow. Properly presented with the aid of a first-rate advertising agency, they can swing an election.

Dried, ground, and seasoned, they taste excellent sprinkled on toast.

It could be argued that by removing nightmares from the world, witches perform a valuable and benevolent service for the human race at large. But the witches don't care. "There's more than enough for everybody," they cackle. "There's plenty to go around."

51. [Plate 78]

Capitalism for Dummies

For the rich to get richer, the poor must get poorer. Not because the amount of ambient wealth is fixed — it is not — but because of what is known in economics as a "frontier."

Here's how a frontier works. The total value of all goods, plus the profit that capitalism requires is greater than the total value of everything that can be paid for them. The profit is all paid for by debt. So, to keep the system afloat, next year's profits have to be larger in order to cover this year's debt. Once you stop and total everything up, the whole system collapses.

Similarly, once your wealth outstrips those things you want to buy, the only way to better your lot is by **contrast**. To keep things going, the distinction between rich and poor must constantly grow. This year you're grateful you're not poor. Next year you can be grateful you're not poor and deformed.

This is why the laws regarding kitchen workers are so draconian. Their salaries are pathetic. They have neither health care nor sick leave. If they're ill they must come to work anyway, or lose their jobs.

It doesn't stop there, though — oh, no. In the very poshest restaurants, the dishwasher must scrape the plates clean with his hands; he's not allowed a dishrag, soap, or even water. The scullery-maid is only twenty-three, but decosmetic surgery has made her a hag. The fellow who works the bellows for the charcoal stove (gas would be safer, electricity cleaner; even coal would be cheaper; but this is a **luxury** establishment!) has worked there so long that he's forgotten the outside world exists.

If you tip the chef generously enough, he'll let you in the kitchen to see their misery. You'll be more grateful than ever for the Cote de Veau blanc cuite en cocotte dans son jus, gousses d'ail roties, pommes puree et epinards now so amiably distending your stomach.

For your pleasure, these poor brutes are allowed to neither rest nor eat nor drink in all the sixteen hours a day they're imprisoned in the kitchen. They resent it, of course. But what can they do?

Nor are they allowed toilet breaks. If they really have to go, there's always the stew.

52. [Plate 42]

Prick the Warrior

War at last! All his life, Prick had been waiting for this most ennobling of institutions to arrive.

Oh, certainly there had been a war when he was young and of draft age. But that had been an old-fashioned affair without satellite reconnaissance, AWACS, and smart bombs. A fellow could get hurt in a war like that. So he hadn't gone.

Now, however, Prick was in the saddle, and ready to ride his country to glorious, glorious victory. He'd found the perfect enemy, too. One who (by sheerest of coincidences) his father had fought and defeated before him. Which he figured proved that pretty much anybody could do it.

The Evil One was everything that Prick was not. He despised the poor and cared only for the welfare of a small, privileged oligarchy of hereditary multimillionaires. He maintained an enormous army, though there was no need for it. He felt free to invade other nations without casus belli and in defiance of international opinion law and opinion. He possessed weapons of mass destruction. He hadn't even been democratically elected!

Prick was determined to take the bastard down.

Well... not all the way down. His father had explained to him that there were times when you needed a good enemy to boost your popularity. Besides, it was against all civilized values to target the leader of a nation you were at war with. You could slaughter armies, carpet-bomb cities, even destroy hospitals and orphanages, and as long as you didn't hurt anybody on purpose, it was all just collateral damage. But assassination? That wasn't gentlemanly.

Anyway, the chief thing was that Prick was leading his country into war. How and even whether it all ended was, by comparison, a triviality.

53. [Plate 22]

Poor Little Girls

Savior or predator? Perhaps you're a little of both. Without thought of reimbursement, you go out on the streets to rescue the poor unfortunate waifs who've fetched up there, like so much flotsam on the beach of life. And if you pause to sample - let's say - one in twelve... well, that's only an eight percent commission. Surely the good Lord won't refuse you Heaven for anything under fifteen percent.

It only stands to reason.

Those poor little girls! They're hardly more than children, some of them. It makes one weep to see how badly they are treated. How fearful they are. How vulnerable. How deliciously, wonderfully vulnerable.

Granted, your tastes aren't exactly vanilla. It's the transgressive nature of the encounter that turns you on. You being a church elder only makes it naughtier. Your having sworn to rescue these soiled lambs from exactly the sort of sin and degradation you have in mind only makes the betrayal sweeter. You want it to be nasty. You want to make them whimper.

Tonight, however, you and your best chicken-hawking buddy are in for a surprise. Those two girls shivering in the sleet? They're undercover cops. Clucking your tongue, you approach them. Jangling the change in your pocket, you prepare your come-on line.

Those poor little girls (so frail! so defenseless!) are wired for sound. There are large, heavily armed officers hidden only yards away. They don't like your kind. When they arrest you, they may well use more force than is absolutely necessary.

But that's just the beginning. You're going to prison, and your sentence won't be light. Judges don't like your kind any more than cops do. You'll be locked up with large, brutal men who will employ considerable ingenuity in making your stay there memorable. Because it's not only law-abiding folk who don't like your kind. Even for the worst of us, there are limits, and you crossed them long ago.

Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear! Forgive me if I giggle.

54. [Plate 28]

Elena's Little Secret

Men! Oh, those poor dears! They simply don't know. They haven't got a clue.

Elena likes men. She really does. They're so very easy to crush. They come on so strong and overbearing and pompous, and they crumple just like tissue paper. Sometimes they weep, and Elena enjoys that too. But she knows something about men that they'd never suspect, not in a million years:

Men are every bit as smart as women.

It only makes sense! What possible evolutionary advantage could there be in one sex being smarter than the other? Gender differences are minimal — women can have babies and men can write their names in the snow — and intelligence has nothing to do with them.

Yet when men and women get together, men consistently play the fool. This is a commonly observed phenomenon. When a man leaves the company of women they exchange scandalized whispers: "Did he really say... ever hear such... must be an idiot." When a woman leaves the company of men, however, they mutter under their breaths: "I didn't really say... what was I... must think I'm an idiot."

There is a simple explanation. Elena occasionally demonstrates it to her friends, for a lark. She puts on something flirtatious and goes looking for a group of particularly intelligent men. One that is discussing quantum string theory, perhaps, or the exact chronology of the great vowel shift that occurred in the transition between Middle and Modern English. Eyes flashing, they jab fingers at one another as they drive home abstruse philosophical points.

But then they see Elena, and the blood all rushes from their heads to their dicks. And their thoughts as well.

"Are those your brains in your pants?" she asks. "Or are you just happy to see me?"

"Well, uh, heh-heh, you see..." they stammer. "Say, that's a nice, um, dress you're wearing."

Elena flutters her lashes. "Oh, you clever things!" Anybody with a grain of sense can see that she's mocking them. Anybody, that is, but a man. She can keep this conversation going until every other woman in the room is doubled over with suppressed laughter.

But men really are intelligent as women. This is Elena's secret, and she's never told it to anybody. Except other women. But since they all know it already, no harm is done.

55. [Plate 33] The Stone of Folly

Is this microphone on? Good.

In the Dark Ages, before the advent of modern medicine, our primitive, apelike ancestors fell victim to every manner of folly and superstition. One of the most infamous of which was, appropriately enough, the "stone of folly." This was held to be a growth or calcification inside the brain which was the ultimate cause of ludicrous behavior, impiety, clownishness, and bizarre political affiliations such as Luddism, Stalinism, or libertarianism.

The only cure was (they thought) surgery.

Small children must be removed from the auditorium at this point. Ladies will want to locate their smelling salts. Gentlemen should think of England. For in those untutored times surgery was performed entirely without any painkillers whatsoever.

First slide, please.

This is a picture of the beginning of the first incision. Note how the patient is forcibly held in the chair by two burly attendants. Note also how his look of extreme distress is starting to give way to one of

excruciating pain.

Next slide.

Now that's an unhappy camper! You'll notice that the surgeon — or, more properly, barber - has wisely abandoned his scalpel for a bone saw. That glistening bit you can see there is actually the poor man's brain.

Just one more, please.

Here, finally, we see the triumphant barber holding up god-knows-what. Some bit of brain matter, perhaps, or, if the patient was lucky, a bone fragment driven into the brain by the action of the saw. The patient has, to no one's surprise, passed out. Should he survive, it's doubtful he'll be in any shape to express his gratitude.

Lights, please. You may turn off the projector.

We should be thankful that medicine has moved beyond such crude gropings toward effective treatment. The stone of folly is now understood to be a tumor which expresses itself not in the brain but in the tonsils. Its removal is so simple that it is performed as an outpatient operation and without anesthesia. The surgeon simply reaches into the patient's mouth with a small, sickle-shaped razor, and in one deft motion hooks out the tonsils. It's as simple as that.

Well, that concludes our little talk. As part of Public Health Awareness Week, we're offering free prophylactic removal of the tonsils to everybody present. You may think you don't suffer from the stone of folly - but, really, isn't that a sign that you do? And even if you don't, isn't it better to be safe than sorry? Why give folly a place to start?

Now, don't be like that. It's futile anyway. Our burly assistants have already locked the doors.

56. [Plate 55]

The Empress Herself

Even a witch can be star-struck. Celebrities, after all, are not like you and me. They're... well, you know. Famous. Young Faustina, giddy from years of poring over *Royalty Today* and *Titled People* managed at last to wangle a meeting with the Empress herself.

The Empress was as famous as famous could be. Hers was the very best kind of fame, too, for it was inherited. She didn't have to do a thing for it. In fact, the less she did, the better. Deeds which any subject felt free to perform daily would have landed her on the front page of the tabloids. **EMPRESS CHEATS ON DIET! SYMBOL OF EMPIRE PICKS HER NOSE! 'PRESSIE CURSES ASSHOLE ON FREEWAY!** So she had people to do all those things for her. "Anton," she would say, "be a dear and pick my nose. Gustav, please give that bastard the finger."

Almost swooning, Faustina curtsied before, kissed the ring of, and gushed her admiration upon the old woman. "Oh, I'm such a big fan of yours," she said. "I bought the towels, and the plates, and all the little ceramic castles. I named my Corgis after your children."

The old bat merely nodded. Anyone else would have been flattered. But to her, this sort of behavior was commonplace.

Then Faustina brought out her present. "I saved for months to buy this hat, I know how much you adore

hats, it's from Etienne Sainte-Fromage."

"Oh?" The Empress's eyes lit up. She had a passion for haute couture, hats in particular, and most especially the hats of Etienne Sainte-Fromage. Her tastes had been formed in her youth, when she was renowned as a great beauty, and in all the intervening decades, nobody had dared suggest that she shift over to designers more flattering to the mature woman.

Complacently, she settled the frilly trifle on her head.

"Oh, my!" Faustina gasped. It would be unfair to say that at that instant an imp of the perverse entered her #151;# she **was** an imp of the perverse. So she was merely being true to her own nature when she said, "You're so elegant! So regal! You've got to, got to, got to model clothing professionally."

"Do you really think so?" the daft old thing cooed.

"Oh, really! Absolutely! Any Parisian house would kill to have you! They'd build their show around you! They'd fashion an entire line just for you!" She turned to the Empress's courtiers, all young, all male. "Isn't that so?"

"The nation of men will fall in love with you and despair," said Gustav with a roll of his eyes. Hiding a snicker Anton cried, "Madame, it is your destiny!" They hated the old harridan intensely, as only lackeys and toadies can.

For a long, still moment, the Empress considered the proposition. But in the end, she was saved by her enormous vanity. "No," she decided with a sigh of regret. "It would be Work, and only commoners do that."

So close! Lying in bed that night, Faustina touched herself as she imagined what might have been. Clarions would have sounded. Down the runway the Empress would have come, walking in a stiff and angular manner. How ungainly she would have looked! How the crowd would have hooted and laughed! The things they would have thrown!

Reality and fantasy melted into one warm glow. Oh! Faustina thought, the regal grace with which the Empress would have ignored it all! How effortlessly she would have risen above the indignity! It would have been her greatest moment.

57. [Plate 51]

Grooming Your Nightmares

So you've decided to raise nightmares. Congratulations! Nightmares are hardy, fast-growing, and almost impossible to kill. They thrive on neglect, and in a pinch they'll feed on anything, even themselves. They can't be trained or house-broken, so don't bother trying.

Your nightmares are as close to self-maintaining as makes no difference. There's no need to give them a second thought — though you will. You'll obsess about them. You'll lie awake nights thinking of nothing else. You'll neglect family, friends, and business in order to spend more time with them.

As long as you're going to do all that, a word about their grooming...

People are lamentably hostile to nightmares. So it's important to present your pets to the world in the most favorable possible light. This means cleaning them up considerably. "Jewish Zionist conspiracy" should be rephrased as "certain financial interests." You are not opposed to "integration" but to "reverse

discrimination." Rather than promoting violence against gays, you are in favor of "protecting family values." After all, heterosexuals aren't legally protected from being beaten up as faggots. Why should anybody else be?

After you've trimmed their nails, brushed their wings, and whitened their fangs, you'll be anxious to take your nightmares out in public. Don't forget to dress them up first! The bigger and more brutal they are, the more they require non-threatening garb. Think pastels. Think lace. Think spin. "Neo-bigotry" sounds ever so much more acceptable than mere unadorned racism. "Compassionate social Darwinism" is a circumlocution that will get you into any club in town. And "fascism with a human face" brings you that much closer to being able to step out the door without being shot.

Sooner or later, you are going to want to let your little beauties off the leash, so they can run wild. When you do there'll be no pretending they're anything other than what they are. There'll be blood in the streets and bodies hanging from the lampposts. Governments will topple and cities will burn. It'll be the end of civilization as we know it.

But until that happy day, you have to live in polite society. So remember to keep your nightmares respectable-looking.

Wash them daily. Make sure they use a deodorant.

58. [Plate 40] Prick the Physician

In his lifetime, a man wears many hats. So, too, with Prick. Student, Lover, Musician, Statesman, Warrior, and now... Physician. It takes years of training to become a doctor, unfortunately, and Prick didn't have the years to expend. He was simply looking for a respectable profession to fill his declining years. So he relied upon an honorary degree from Johns Hopkins University, and the good will of his clientele.

This he had in spades. To begin with, Prick accepted only the very best class of patients. Then too, he made house calls. Right to your penthouse he would come, little black bag in hoof. Ducking his head as he passed through the doorway, he would briefly pay his respects and then make straight for the sickroom. Trailed by star-struck relatives of the afflicted, he would gracefully sink down beside the bed.

Prick's bedside manner was a marvel. His steady gaze was empathy itself. His touch was soft and sure. He took a pulse with all the care and attention he had once given to running the country. Rather more, in fact.

Admittedly, Prick had only the faintest idea what he was doing. He had never quite gotten the hang of which thermometer was for the mouth and which was not. There were bottles in his bag he didn't dare open.

But consider his positives. He never got the patient addicted to dangerous drugs through over-prescription of painkillers. He never performed experimental surgery in hopes that a lucky accident might teach him something interesting. Because he believed anything he was told, he never doubted the patient was sick. Thus, not a one of them died after being reassured that nothing was wrong.

Also, he was a celebrity. The social status conferred by his visits far outweighed the purely hypothetical progress that a rich and usually aged relation might have made under other circumstances.

Consider this as well. When, as sometimes happened, a patient died in his care, Prick would calmly sign the death certificate and draw the sheets up over the head of the deceased. He never slid a watch from

the patient's wrist and onto his own. Not once did go through the pockets for spare change. How many doctors in the AMA can say as much?

A man who employed Prick had an ass for a physician. Quite frankly, he could have done worse.

59. [Plate 75] **Grace and Nightmares**

It was only a joke.

But the jokes that are played on whores are a little rougher than the jokes that are played on the likes of you and me. Some of the lads who frequented the brothels learned that a certain puritanical minister was planning to lead a march of decent citizens upon the houses of ill-fame to publicize their existence and thus force the city fathers to shut them down. So one of their number volunteered to show the minister where the foul places were, another slapped an ether-soaked handkerchief over his face, and a third similarly anesthetized Grace.

The joke went off as simple as one-two-three.

When Grace came to, she was bound by the ankles and waist to the crusading minister, and the both of them were tied to a tree on the outskirts of town.

The minister was already awake, and he was furious. "You harlot! You slut! You cesspool of infamy!" he cried. He pulled at the ropes so hard Grace couldn't breathe. "Let me free of your wanton flesh!"

"If you'd just stop yanking so hard," Grace said plaintively, "we could work together and get these ropes untied."

But now, however, the minister was aroused. Grace could tell by the hoarseness of his voice, the redness of his face - and by other signs as well. So he'd stopped listening. One of his hands was tied to the tree, but the other was free. So he began hitting Grace and pinching her, while simultaneously he was also rubbing his buttocks against her in the most lascivious manner imaginable.

"Vile temptress!" he roared. "Chamber-pot of Satan! Cease your loathly blandishments! God will protect me from you!" And all the while he was hitting her, and hurting her, and grabbing at and twisting her flesh in places no woman likes to be roughly handled.

It was a nightmare.

Was ever a woman better designed to attract nightmares than Grace? She believed in things she had never seen the least evidence of, like love and kindness and justice, and lived a life that embodied their exact opposites. In her distress, she was a psychic lightning-rod for the creatures. She drew them down from the ether.

So it was that the first of many nightmares descended upon her. Gleefully it sank its claws deep, deep into Grace's mind.

Almost gratefully, she went mad.

The minister eventually fought himself free of Grace. He hobbled back to the rectory, stripped naked, and scourged himself until blood ran freely and the swelling in a certain member went down. That Sunday, drawing from his experience, he preached a hellfire-and-brimstone sermon that brought his

congregation to their knees in fear and repentance.

So the joke ended happily after all.

60. [Plate 26]

Haute Couture

Ooh-la-la! Last year's underwear-as-outerwear is out. This year, femininity is in.

Not last year's femininity, of course. No, no, no. Maison des Filles has rethought women from the tops of their gorgeous little heads to the tips of their irresistible little toes. This season's line is designed specifically for the confident, unaffected, ravishing creature that is this season's you!

Traditionally, women's clothing has no pockets. Women don't need them! If you want something — a third martini, say, or a mink stole, or an abortion — why, there's always a man around to pay for it, isn't there? You know there is. Well, we've taken that thought one step further, and eliminated the arms altogether. Why should a women need arms? To do things? Don't make us laugh.

Note as well the saucy cut of our new micro-minidress. When you sit, it provides your admirers with a naughty flash of... well, everything, basically. The fact that it's worn without underwear or shoes sends a message that says: I'm flirty, but down-to-earth. I'm natural, but obsessed with fashion. I'm skeptical, but easily misled. And I don't have any pockets.

Examine the needlework. Exquisite! This caliber of craftsmanship can only be done by Third World war widows whose lives probably don't bear thinking about. Run a hand over the fringe surrounding the cowl. So soft! It's made of hand-pieced owl feathers from a bird freshly removed from the endangered species list - so your conscience is clean! - and yet still rare enough that only you will be able to afford it.

And the rattan hats? They're the crowning touch! They create a look that says: Be proud of what you are. If your brains are in your butt and your head is full of shit... Why, then, put your chair where it belongs!

61. [Plate 60]

Elena's Playful Side

All work and no play makes a girl - well, Elena was never dull. Sometimes, however, she just had to let her frisky side out. Sometimes she needed to get naked and romp. Today was one of those days. She called up a certain archbishop of her acquaintance and said, "Get your ass you-know-where, pronto!"

"Y-yes, mistress," quavered the sinner.

"And wear your robes!"

It was a beautiful spring night, so they began with a spot of devil-worship. Not that Elena subscribed to a patristic view of Evil. But there are certain things that it's fun to watch an ordinarily-dignified man do with goats and cats and human skulls.

Then they got down to sex. "Have you ever been fisted?" Elena asked.

"Well, actually, last month you-"

"Through your ear?"

"Good Lord, no!" the archbishop cried in horror.

But protest though he might, Elena would not be gainsaid. She squeezed the tip of her little finger into his ear and tickled his tympanum, making it boom like a drum. Then she slit the membrane with her nail, and pushed the finger in a little deeper.

The archbishop screamed.

"Don't focus on the pain," Elena advised him. "This is nothing compared to what's coming."

She squeezed in a second finger alongside the first. And then a third. Soon enough, she had her entire hand all the way up to the wrist inside the archbishop's brain.

"Ooh!" she giggled. "It's squishy! Like warm mud!"

She wriggled her fingers.

Synapses sparked and misfired within the archbishop's brain like roman candles. One of the cats looked up at him and, in the voice of an altar boy he had once known perhaps too intimately, said, "Well, so much for God."

"T-this is a hallucination," his eminence stuttered.

"You'd best pray it is," said the cat. "After the life you've led, a random and meaningless universe without afterlife or any moral accountability at all is the best you can hope for."

"I can still be forgiven!" that desperate man cried. "God is all-loving and all-merciful!"

"He's also all-just," the cat replied. "And He wasn't born yesterday." Then, turning his back, he settled down to licking his fur clean.

Elena withdrew her hand from the archbishop's brain.

"That was fun!" she cried girlishly. "But I've got work to do." She laved her hand with water from a nearby jug, donned her clothing again, and headed for the limo.

"Same time next month?" she threw over her shoulder.

"Oh, yes," the poor schlub said, weeping and clutching his head with palsied hands. "Please."

62. [Plate 52]

Worshiping the Scarecrow

Armageddon was coming, and the nightmares weren't prepared. They didn't have an Antichrist. Somehow they'd forgotten to budget for one, and then there had been cost overruns, and... well, they simply couldn't afford the prices that the heavy hitters of Hell could command. When they came begging, hat in hand, Beelzebub laughed scornfully. Lucifuge Rofocale slammed the door in their faces. Asmodeus, Rhotomagus, Beliel... Nobody was willing to work pro bono.

Still, the End Times required an Antichrist and so, having no better options, the nightmares built a scarecrow. They lashed some poles together and wrapped cloth about them. They fashioned a face from a blob of wax. They put it up and hoped for the best.

As a scarecrow, it wasn't half bad. As the universal enemy of mankind, last ruler of Earth, and scourge of Christianity, it was a joke. "Oh, come on!" snorted the Pope when he saw it. "Cut me some slack, why don't you?" Even the tabloids wouldn't take it seriously.

So the nightmares hired a consultant.

"It's simple semiotics," he told them. "You have an areferential null-content signifier."

"Huh?"

"It doesn't mean anything. Which means that it means nothing. And that's the message you've got to push!"

So the whispering campaign began. "It's worse than vacuous," the word went out, "it's kitsch. It has neither interior nor exterior significance... it's self-spoofing irony turned upon itself... nihilism gone mad."

The very next day, a woman walking by the scarecrow fell to her knees and vomited up worms. Whether they were real worms in real vomit is irrelevant. It was a shocking thing to do, when the Antichrist wasn't even trying to convince you it wasn't a sham. To be possessed by demons is bad enough. To be possessed by a value-free self-referential icon of postmodern theoretics is just perverse.

People gathered before the scarecrow, muttering and wondering. Inevitably somebody fell to her knees and began to worship it. Inevitably, she was joined by others. Within a week, all the world was in the grips of an antireligious mania.

Everyone knew that nobody believed, and nobody believed that anybody was sincere about it. But that was exactly the point.

Neat, huh?

63. [Plate 74]

Your Family in a Nutshell

Just because you're a witch doesn't mean that you don't have family feelings. The doorbell rings. Who's there? Why, it's Aunt Dementia and Uncle Fart. "Welcome, welcome, welcome!" you cry, and in they float.

Auntie D and Uncle F are witches too, just like you. Only more successful. This doesn't give them the right to criticize, however, because criticism is not a right - it's an obligation.

"You've put on weight," they say. "This place is a sty. No wonder your children are out of control. It's so wonderful to see you again. Are you still a pervert?"

"Gosh, it's great to have you guys here," you lie. "It's been so long. Is that a new car?"

Your aunt tugs on one arm and whispers, "Keep you-know-who here off the sauce," while simultaneously your uncle grabs the other arm and roars, "So where's the booze?" Then they both stare at you meaningfully, their grips tightening as if upon a wishbone

You're only one minute into it, but already you know that it's going to be an extremely long visit.

But don't think of your dear old Auntie and Uncle D and F as a plague. Rather, think of them as the first and mildest wave of relations who will descend upon you this weekend. There's your cousin the insurance salesman who will put his hand where it doesn't belong, and then tell everyone you came on to

him. There's your brother, who once borrowed fourteen thousand dollars from you, never repaid it, and now acts as if you'd borrowed it from him.

There are the unspeakable in-laws, half of them on parole, who nevertheless suspect you of designs upon the nonexistent family fortune. There's your curmudgeonly father who may well be senile, only who can stand listening to him long enough to find out? There's your kid sister, who will throw up at least once and try to boost something on the way out to help underwrite her drug dependency.

And don't forget your mother. Oh, dear God, your mother.

Family! You gotta love 'em. What other options do you have? Ones, that is, that leave the holidays tolerable? The only thing you can do is to take them as they are. Value them and cherish their company for exactly those qualities that make them themselves and nobody else.

"I know you're plotting against me," whispers Auntie Dementia.

"Pull my finger!" cries Uncle Fart.

64. [Plate 53]

The Parrot with a Golden Beak

Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, there lived a parrot with a golden beak. He always hewed to the party line, whatever it was, and if he had any thoughts of his own, he was careful never to give voice to them. So it was that he became a Papal nuncio.

Now at the time this story begins, some priests in a certain city had done something very, very naughty. Like when you punch your kid brother, only worse. This made the moms and dads unhappy, so the Archbishop moved these priests to other parishes, where they did exactly the same naughty things all over again. This happened so many times that the faithful came close to open revolt. Shocked, the local bishops agreed to certain reforms.

But when the Pope heard of these changes, he was outraged. "We cannot be ruled by laymen," he said.

"We cannot be ruled by laymen," the parrot agreed.

"Ecclesiastical trials must be held in secret."

"Ecclesiastical trials must be held in secret."

"Go and tell the bishops we will not put up with this."

"We will not be put up with this."

The parrot with a golden beak met with the synod of bishops. They had what adults call "a free and open exchange of views." That means they yelled at each other.

"You can't tell me there's no need for change!" one cleric shouted angrily.

"There's no need for change," the parrot replied.

"You act as if the Pope speaks with God's own voice."

"The Pope speaks with God's own voice."

"Rubbish! That's like saying that snakes are ducks."

"Snakes are ducks," the parrot said.

"You're being ridiculous!"

"Ridiculous."

On and on went the debate, but because the parrot brought nothing new to it, and yet never shifted his position one inch, eventually the critics got tired and went away. Some quit the Church and went to Hell when they died. Others simply kept their mouths shut and their children away from priests. Those who remained marveled at the parrot's wisdom.

When the parrot went back to Rome, the Pope said, "Tell me that everything's fine now."

"Everything's fine now."

"That's good," said the Pope, "Change is bad."

"I agree," said the parrot.

Now, wasn't that a good story? Yes it was. It has a moral, too. Here it is:

A wise old parrot there was of old;
He only said what he'd been told;
Which he repeated, word for word.
Why can't we all be like that wise old bird?

65. [Plate 34]

Grace in the Madhouse

Grace had led a life that was enough to drive anybody mad. So, Grace being Grace, of course it did. For a time she was still able to function as a prostitute - nobody really listens to a whore, after all. But then one day she climbed to the top of the steps at City Hall, bared her breasts, and preached a sermon on universal love and the brotherhood of man. So she was slung in the madhouse.

Even making allowances for the voices in her head, the madhouse was not a particularly good place to be. To begin with, it was filthy. The food was terrible. The company was no worse than what she was used to, but the jailors - they called themselves "attendants" - were unspeakable. Some forced their charges to perform sexual acts with them. Others were in it for the pain they could inflict. We won't go into details. The very best of them were sarcastic little tyrants.

One might as well be in an old age home, one is treated so badly!

The grimmest and best-known joke Woody Allen ever made comes at the end of *Annie Hall*, and goes something like this: Life is filled with pain and misery and suffering, and then, all too soon, it's over. That's how it was for Grace. Life in the madhouse was unbearable. But just when it seemed things couldn't get any worse, she was released.

66. [Plate 57]

Commedia dell'Arte

The moonstruck lover. The bombastic pedant. The rascally servant. The none-too-bright yet none-too-innocent-either servant maid. What else could it be but commedia dell'arte? Ah, Pantalone! Zanni! Punchinello! Harlequin! And everybody's favorite, Pierrot - lazy, knavish, sometimes cruel, fool and trickster, deceiver and deceived, eternally recurrent seducer of Columbine.

The plays abound with disgraceful love affairs, mad schemes to obtain money, and elaborate deceptions that quickly spiral out of control. What gives them their special flavor is the fact that they are unscripted. Oh, there's a chosen subject and the characters and their relationships to one another have been worked out and the situations broadly outlined beforehand. But all the dialogue is made up on the spot. Depending on how the audience reacts, the plot could go in any of a dozen directions.

Imagine being a commedia dell'arte player. Every night a new performance, a new situation, a new challenge. Sometimes you triumph, but more often you're the butt of the action. You never know what's coming. Your fellow actors will spring the most outrageous surprises on you. A burglar climbs in the window! Your new young wife abandons you for your adult son! A drunkard accidentally sets fire to your house! It takes nerves of steel to climb up on such an uncertain stage over and over and over again.

Consider the masks. The stock characters wear them in part to remind the audience that their motives are essentially mysterious. Nothing is certain. Sometimes Pierrot is the lover, other times the scoundrel or the dupe. When you're on stage, you never know who is who. The priest may be a brigand. Your wife may be deceitful. Your closest friend may be your bitterest enemy. You plunge through the most desperate situations, improvising wildly, trying to keep your balance, and you don't even know for certain what you'll end up as. Hero or buffoon? You could be either.

Thank God it's not like that in real life.

67. [Plate 62]

Dein Kampf

This is your struggle: It's called life.

The way life works is like this: You're born into darkness and chaos, and you want to be good. But this happens and that happens and the next thing you know, you're standing butt-naked in a field at midnight worshipping Satanos Baphomet. But that was just circumstance! You've still got a shot at salvation.

This is your struggle: You want to do what's right. You want to get ahead, spiritually. But there's always some raggedy-ass bitch there ahead of you. Sucking up the karma. Mortifying herself in the service of humanity while you're still struggling to get out of bed and put your makeup on. By the time you manage to catch a ride to the slums, there's nothing worthwhile left.

Mother fucking Teresa! She was the worst. Hogging all the high-profile poor for herself. Just who the hell does she think she is? The fact that she's dead makes it even worse. You'll never catch up to her now.

This is your struggle: You'd walk over your grandmother for Jesus. You'd cap the Buddha dead in the face, if that's what it took. The love of Allah be upon the Prophet, but he'd better not get in your way. Hitler only thought he was ruthless!

Because if only one person in this room is going to achieve spiritual perfection then, goddammit, it's going to be you!

68. [Plate 56]

The Great Wheel of the World

Life is like an enormous wheel, forever spinning. Here's how it works. A young man is ambitious and clever and going nowhere. Then one day some dark chthonic force grabs him by the ankles and shoves him to the top of the pop charts. Everyone treats him like a king. There may be no solid ground underfoot, but it certainly doesn't feel that way! It feels like he's destined to live forever.

That's what happened to Richard. He'd fallen in love with theater - with Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling* and Beckett's *Endgame* - and decided that was where his future lay. Or perhaps, since he could sing as well, in *Oklahoma* or *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. He didn't care. Theater was theater and that was that. Then, overnight, he became a celebrity. He was famous.

For what? It hardly mattered. He didn't even know himself. He was too dazzled by his good fortune to ask. Suddenly he was too big for Hollywood Squares. Barbara Walters interviewed him. His agent told *Saturday Night Live* to go fuck themselves. Richard was as hot as hot. Nothing was forbidden him.

Twin fourteen-year-old hookers? For anyone else, it would be sick. For you, sir, only your due. Heroin? As much as you want. Don't forget to have your blood changed every six months. You want to get drunk and wander into the lobby and piddle on the carpet? We'll keep it out of the papers.

For a brief, blurred season, everything was bright lights, money, and momentum. But then that same momentum plunged Richard downward with sickening speed. He walked off the set midway through Jay Leno. His accountant disappeared the same day he fired his agent, and he was deluged with bills for things he had no memory of buying. Nobody would return his calls. His movie deal collapsed. The public forgot him. His dealer downgraded him to a cheaper line of skag.

Richard hit bottom fast. When the camera crew found him, only two years later, he was living in a trailer camp and eating dog food out of the can. He burst into tears at the thought of being seen like this. But so burnt out, hopeless, and desperate for money was he, that for a pittance Richard let them film his squalor and despair for a documentary on washed-up has-beens.

Which, ironically enough, was how he became famous again.

69. [Plate 16]

Elena the Libertarian

No one could ruin as many men as did Elena without becoming rich in the process. Not that she gave a fig for wealth! So long as there were penises in the world, she would not lack for life's little comforts. But to a rich man, being drained of wealth is exquisitely humiliating. So Elena drained, and prospered, and waxed obscenely wealthy.

Which made her an icon to libertarians.

Libertarianism is not so much a political philosophy as it is a sexual fantasy. It is the doctrine of oddly-dressed men with dead-end civil service jobs and no social graces who couldn't get a date with a beautiful woman to save their lives. "If only," they think, eyeing some statuesque stranger on the subway, "I could reshape our society from top to bottom, so that the only positive value was the acquisition of wealth. Then I could simply offer her money to go out with me — and it'd be immoral for her to turn me down!"

There is nothing a libertarian admires so much as a woman who whores her way to wealth. It validates

their fantasies on so many levels at once! It was, therefore, no surprise that one of their number, misunderstanding Elena's enterprise, should decide to give her an award for what he thought she was up to. It gave him the opportunity to meet her. He harbored certain fantasies of what might ensue.

"You are not much of a libertarian," Elena said, tossing the solid gold street-walker statuette to one side. "You see my example, but you do not follow it."

"But how could I...?"

"It's the simplest thing in the world!" Elena declared. She made the man strip down before her and don one of her dresses and her second-best shawl. "Now you look the part!"

"Will this really appeal to women?" the libertarian asked dubiously.

"Women? Pooh! Women have no money!"

Seizing his hand, Elena led the man to a certain corner. Men coming out of the nearby bars eyed the libertarian with interest. None of them gave Elena a second glance. "This is where the young men sell themselves. Smile and make eye contact. You won't have to wait long."

"But I'm not gay!"

"Be sure to mention that. They'll pay more."

With a cryptic smile, Elena hailed a cab and left.

Though there was nothing in his theoretics to justify rejecting Elena's scheme, the libertarian was about to gather up his skirts and flounce away when he realized that he was penniless. His wallet, with all his money and identification, was in his trousers on the floor of Elena's penthouse. So were the keys to his apartment. Which was, in any event, not even in this town.

He shivered miserably in a way that told the world exactly what his situation — desperate, clueless, and on the street — was. The decent men walked by with averted eyes. The sharks began to circle.

Elena, meanwhile, was sipping a cup of camomile tea. Her heart was untroubled. The sort of men who frequented straight male prostitutes could be trusted to finish up the task of ruining her importunate young libertarian for her.

His wallet she mailed to an AIDS hospice. Not because she was going soft, but because she wouldn't pass by the bank today, and she didn't want the grungy old thing lying about her digs.

Money, after all, wasn't everything.

70. [Plate 19]

How the Witches Love to Pluck!

How the witches love to pluck! Chickens will do, hawks are grand, and eagles are a treat fit for the Empress herself. But the fowls they pluck with the greatest gusto are lovebirds.

Admit it! Lovebirds are annoying little flits. To begin with, they're so happy. So lost in bliss. So free of the petty humiliations of everyday life that make people like you and me want to smash them in the face.

Witches, however, display not the least annoyance with the lovebirds. "How dear," they murmur. "How sweet! So faithful! So perfectly in love!"

The lovebirds preen. All males are prone to vanity, and the vanity of virtue is the least resistible vanity of all. They nod their little heads in self-satisfied agreement.

"Widdle-iddle oo would never cheat on your sweetie, would oo?" they croon. "You wouldn't so much as glance at another woman - even if she leaned forward and gave you a good long look at her breasts the way I'm doing now."

The lovebirds look confused, and then befuddled, as the witches coo to them, and stroke them, and draw them close. They blush and stammer as the witches take them in their firm, capable hands. They looked alarmed and unconvincingly struggle to escape as the witches one by one pluck every feather they have from their scrawny little bodies.

All the above was allegorical. Here's the key:

Plato defined man as an erect featherless biped. The feathered biped he was thinking of was the cock. Emily Dickinson defined hope as the thing with feathers. So when the witches pluck a lovebird...

But I think we can all see where this is headed.

71. [Plate 71]

Tall Tales

Every now and then the witches like to get together, take off their clothes, and let down their hair. They build a campfire and, sitting under the stars, tell each other lies. "The one that got away was sooooo long," one says. "But that's just as well for, tight as I am, I could hardly have crammed it all in."

"Hah! I suckled that little bugger at me own teat," another claims, "and, my, how he did cry! He was never satisfied with nothing, was young Adolph."

"Ebola, bovine spongiform encephalitis, West Nile virus, AIDS," brags a third. "All of them because I neglected my personal hygiene."

The boasting goes into high gear. "I invented the Republican Party."

"Well, I invented Democrats."

"Tories!"

"Labor!"

"The Soviet Union!"

"The French!"

On and on it goes, like a baseball game impossibly prolonged into the eleventh, the twenty-third, the two-hundred-and-fourth innings. Each lie is immediately topped by another, every stretcher eclipsed by a whopper, until the untruths have piled up so high as to have become a verbal Tower of Babel.

The point of this game is to see just how wild a claim can be made before somebody laughs. Every brag has to top what came before, but be presented solemnly enough to allow its auditors to pretend to believe it.

Finally, the oldest witch of all shakes her head sadly. "Alas, we are wicked, wicked women," she says.

"You have to feel sorry for humanity. If it weren't for us and our tricks and traps and temptations, there wouldn't be no wars. Nor misery, nor poverty, nor cruelty, nor hatred neither."

"How do you figure?" asks somebody younger.

"Well... people are fundamentally decent, aren't they?"

There's an instant's astonished silence. Then somebody snorts and somebody else snickers. A third witch throws back her head and howls. Clutching themselves, the witches fall over on their sides and roll about on the ground, laughing hysterically. "Oh! Oh! Oh!" somebody cries. "People! Decent!"

It's good to spend a night out with the girls once in a while. It really cuts the grease. It helps one to get in touch with what's real.

72. [Plate 41]

Prick and Posterity

In his old age, Prick became concerned with how he would be judged by History. His record was, it had to be admitted, a little murky. He'd had a good education, but learned from it nary a thing. He'd made a fortune as a businessman, but the process by which millions had flowed into his pockets even as his businesses went bankrupt scarce bore looking into. His record as a warrior was impeccable, for he had never been so foolish as to go anywhere near conflict, and so had avoided any chance of proving himself a coward. He seemed to remember being President of the United States, but not what it entailed. Mostly he'd just done what people had told him to do, and trusted that there was some point to it.

Now, with mortality hard upon him, Prick decided to burnish his legacy. He hired the foremost portrait painter of his age, a clever monkey with sensitive eyes, who said, "What do you want to look like?"

"Bring out the inner me," Prick said confidently.

"Hmmm - and your second choice?"

After some consultation it was decided that the portrait should combine Prick's fierce determination with his gentleness, insight, and profound wisdom. It should be the portrait of a scholar, a priest, a lawmaker, a defender of the weak, and a scourge of the oppressor - all of those things, essentially, that Prick had meant to get around to being, but never had.

When the portrait was done, the artist whipped it around with a flourish. "Voila!" he cried.

Prick stared. After a time, tears filled his eyes. He wept at the perfect image of his own magnificence. "Oh," he whispered, "if only such a man were alive today!"

The ape threw an arm about his shoulder. "Amen, brother," he fervently said.

It's been years, and Prick hasn't died yet. Feeble he may be, and incontinent too, but these things bother his caretakers more than they do him. Ten years ago, all the world expected him to die at any minute, and with the passage of a decade the world is still waiting. He receives the very best of medical care, and his legendary luck continues unabated. For all anybody knows, he may never die. He may very well live forever.

It is astonishing how well the Pricks of this world make out.

73. [Plate 21]

The Lions of the Law

The lions of the law, noble as the day and impartial as the dawn, make short shrift of the innocent. They snatch them up, and pluck their feathers, and gobble them down like so many juicy little ortolans.

Which is only right. Because what kind of a moron manages to wind up in court when he's not even guilty? Far better that such idiots be eliminated from the gene pool before they can procreate and fill the world with more fools like themselves.

If lions could speak, Wittgenstein tells us, we would not be able to understand them. So it is with the lions of the law. With their *ab initio*s and *in esses* and *in extensos*, they have rendered themselves completely incomprehensible to the innocent. "But we didn't do anything wrong!" the poor saps cry. "If you'd only listen to our side of it!"

"*Ignorantia juris neminem excusat*," replies a lion, and holds out a paw. Another lion hands him the mustard jar. "*Ius naturale*." A third hands him the knife.

No sane man would want to find himself in the clutches of the lions of the law. Still, you have to admire their style. They've got *gravitas*. They've got class. The blood on their muzzles is easily wiped away with a clean lace handkerchief.

74. [Plate 9]

Grace's Final Irony

All her life, Grace kept looking for Mr. Right. Even in the brothel, when a new john smirked at her tits for the first time, she would think to herself: Could this be the one? She was an incurable romantic.

Grace's final irony was that at the last possible instant Mr. Right showed up.

His name was Slobodan, and he'd always been a little defensive about it. Maybe that was why he grew up insecure. He wasn't the handsomest guy in the world, but a gal could do worse. He was sober. He had a job. He knew how to fix things around the house.

When, in an act of thrift disguised as mercy, the government stopped funding the madhouses, Grace was "deinstitutionalized" and released to the loving care of her local community. Within a week, she was living in a box. Soon afterwards, she found a half-quart of cough syrup in a dumpster and, more from hunger than a desire for oblivion, drank it all down.

But Slobodan, who was the kind of guy who frequents whores because he's too shy to approach regular women and then falls in love with them because he's too full of love not to, remembered Grace from before she went mad. He found her unconscious in the snow, and carried her to his parish priest, who agreed to find her a room provided Slobodan paid for it.

He paid, and he also arranged for a local widow to bring her food - nothing fancy, but as good as the widow was eating herself. Then he hired a social worker to look in on Grace once a week and make sure she was taking her meds.

Slobodan didn't let Grace know who her new guardian angel was - he didn't want her to feel obligated - but he watched her from a distance. Sometimes, in his weaker moments, he fantasized about her.

Alas, alas, alas! A regular diet, combined with the proper dosage of antipsychotics returned Grace's mind to her. For months she had been wandering a fantasy land in which all women are beautiful, all men courtly, and all reality impossibly hospitable.

Now she saw the world as it was.

The night she killed herself, Slobodan was watching her apartment from the shadows. He trailed her to the opera house. He found the lock she'd broken. He heard her fall from the catwalk onto the stage.

On the set of *Aida*, he cradled her body. The love of his life was dead.

Had Slobodan declared himself while she was a whore, Grace would have fallen for him. If he'd let her know it was he who had saved her from the snows, she would have been his forever. Had he confronted her even ten minutes ago, there might still have been a chance. But he didn't move fast enough. He thought he wasn't worthy. He was afraid of commitment.

So it goes.

That's the problem with men, though, isn't it? The bold ones are all such shits, and the good ones are all such putzes.

75. [Plate 76]

Veterans of Heroic Wars

Say what you will about combat vets. Give 'em their due, but still. They just don't know how to present themselves. Living with terror, boredom, and sudden death as they must, does something to them. They don't talk about it afterwards, unless it's with each other. They don't think you'd understand. If you ask them to tell you a war story, they'll just shake their heads and say that there's nothing heroic or uplifting about war, that it was just something they tried to get through intact and out of as soon as they could.

Wusses.

We who served behind the lines know what war is really like. We brought in the supplies and typed up the reports, constantly alert, constantly aware that something could happen at any instant. The fact that it didn't invalidates nothing. It could have!

So the stories we tell imply that it did. That slinky Vietnamese chanteuse pulled out a gun just when we were most vulnerable. That Afghani sonofabitch walked into the photocopy room with a flamethrower. We were on the plane to Hong Kong for a little R&R when six of Osama bin Laden's most fanatic whipped out box cutters and...

Real combat vets don't have stories like those. "I was so fucking tired," theirs begin, or, "We were defending this hill, fuck knows why, and I had diarrhea." Then they tell you something pointless and demoralizing. It's never about heroism, unless the hero is some poor sonofabitch who fell on a hand grenade to save their lives, or a second looney who distracted the CO while the whores were hustled out of camp. If it's exciting, it's the kind of exciting that makes you glad you weren't there.

That kind of shit gives war a bad name.

We tell the stories those guys won't. Stories filled with nobility and purpose. Ones where the good guys win and the enemy realizes a fraction of a second too late that they've been tricked. Their eyes go wide and — boom! We grab a handful of magnesium flares and a combat knife and grunt, "I've got an idea. Cover me!" Dodging bullets, we zigzag uphill. Our adventures always end in victory.

Okay, granted, they're lies. But they're good lies, the kind that firm up your resolve, make you brave, and prepare you to lay down your life for God and country. Contrary to what you think, our stories aren't just a pathetic bid for glory. We don't do this for ourselves.

We do it for the children.

76. [Plate 68]

The End of the Witches

There is no place for witches in the modern world. They are a superstitious holdover from the ignorant past. We know better now than to believe in witches, magic, miracles, or counterfactual events of any sort. Prayers go unanswered. A mountain's worth of faith will not move a mustard seed. There is no Santa Claus. A mother's love will only last until she dies, and sometimes not even that long.

The truth is bracing. It sets us free.

So in the waning hours of the night, the witches sadly mount their brooms (Freud taught us what that meant!) and fuck off into the cold, depthless light of false dawn. Since time before remembrance, we've been entertained by tales of their cruelty, of children imprisoned in gingerbread houses, of midnight hag-rides, of huts on chicken legs and wicked spells that cover the land in eternal winter. But now it's good-bye and good riddance! We don't need them any longer.

The modern world has no place for such superstitious, inefficient avatars of evil as witches.

Who needs metaphors? Today we have the real thing. We'll take our evil straight, thank you, without the leavening touch of whimsy.

77. [Plate 61]

The Apotheosis of Elena

Elena was not much of a thinker. She was by nature a doer, a corrupter, and a destroyer. But that doesn't mean she was stupid. Far from it. Her mind (not that anybody had ever noticed) was as bright as a dime.

In an idle hour, she picked up a paperback that was lying around, and started to read. It was **The Second Sex**. From there she moved quickly to **Sexual Politics**, **The Female Eunuch**, and **The Feminine Mystique**. Before she knew it, she was reading MacKinnon, Rich, Morrison, Penelope, Russ, and dozens of feminists more. It was as if somebody had lit a fire in her brain.

Contrary to what most people think, reading a book won't change your life. But reading lots and lots of books will. Elena read and thought and pondered, until finally she came up with one of those truths that are as simple as a bone, and yet always so astounding when they arrive:

Women are people.

So stunning, so true, so hard to accept! Women are people. Which is to say that women are... men. Female men. Nothing more, and nothing less. Which is to say they're no damned good.

Armed with this knowledge, Elena went straight to her backers, the three ancient female scientists who had created her in order to wreak vengeance upon men for their own dry and loveless lives. Eleanor, Enid, and Annaprudenzia had given her a woman's mind and body along with the heart of a man. Now she would give them something in return.

Elena told Eleanor that she was not nearly so old as she thought. She told Enid that a certain handsome grey-haired magnate had a secret passion for her. She put Annaprudenzia to bed with a hot whiskey, and then played "mother-may-I" with her until the foolish old thing no longer knew what her sexual orientation was.

And that was just the beginning.

She set the three to fighting with each other. She forced them into humiliating alliances and bitter rivalries. She elated them with hatred, and then she made them crawl. "How could you do this to us?" they cried piteously to her. "We created you! What kind of monster are you?"

"I am the New Woman," Elena declared. "Everything you gave me - property rights, sexual freedom, the vote - I take for granted. I'm not in the least grateful for them. They were there when I arrived, and they cost me not a cent. You might as well expect me to be grateful for my beauty or my intellect!"

"But we gave you those too!" Eleanor said.

"And money!" Enid added.

Annaprudenzia wept openly. "We sacrificed everything for you!"

"Tough titty," Elena said. And, standing on the backs of her predecessors, she flew into the future.

78. [Plate 64]

The Dark Night of the Soul

Someone wakes up in the middle of the night. A man, or possibly a woman. It hardly matters which. Perhaps it's three a.m. It could as easily be four. The waker doesn't know because the clock has stopped. In any case, it's a long way to dawn.

Perhaps the dawn will never come.

The insomniac may try to dismiss the thought. But it won't go, though it's commanded to do so. It wants to be listened to. It needs to be heard. Perhaps the dawn will never come.

And if it doesn't? What does that mean?

Why, that she - or possibly he - is the only being in all the universe.

All those others? Dreams. Phantasms. The delusions of a diseased imagination. The night is still, and though the insomniac strains to hear the least human noise, there is none. Nor would such a noise prove anything. One thinks, and therefore one knows one is. Anything beyond that is a blind leap of faith into infinite darkness.

There is no way of proving that those schoolyard bullies, that abusive teacher, that first and faithless love, that despised in-law, those hideous politicians, those bores and tyrants and hypocrites one despises so heartily have any external reality at all. The insomniac could have made them all up an infinity ago, and still be carrying them about because he - maybe she - is simply incapable of imagining anything better.

This would mean that the insomniac is God. But it would also mean that, contrary to all reasonable expectations, God doesn't amount to very much.

Oh, it's a terrible, terrible world, all right, filled with cruelty and greed and despair. But suppose it doesn't exist. Would that really be an improvement?

79. [Plate 80]

The Nightmares Awaken

The eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries were horror incarnate. But the evils of the twenty-first were enough to gag a nightmare. Trench warfare, the invasion and subjugation of Africa, terrorism both private and state-sponsored, plantation slavery, nuclear weaponry, charismatic maniacs by the score... They were as nothing compared to what followed. Those airplanes flying into those buildings and turning all those people to smoke? They were just the tocsin-bell announcing that the game had begun.

Who would have dreamed we'd ever grow nostalgic for an era in which world wars, genocide, and the systematic repression of human rights were commonplace? But we did, and sooner than we could have imagined.

All because the Man of Reason (who might or might not have been, remember, Goya himself) fell asleep.

All the anguished world cries for the sleeper to awaken. Even the nightmares join in. "Wake up! Arise!" they cry. "Damn you, pull yourself up out of the darkness! Start using the brain God gave you! Are you planning on wallowing in ignorance for all of eternity?"

And the sleeper moves! The light of a dawning sun is in his eyes. He murmurs something in his sleep, and turns over on his side.

Okay, I think we all get this one. Could it be more obvious? Only if it were written down on paper, wrapped around a brick, and smashed into your gob.

Here's the thing, though: It's not up to you. You're just one person, and you don't have the power to change the world all by yourself. Rather, it's up to all of us. If we all put our shoulders to the wheel, we can make a difference. And we can bring ourselves to make the effort, if only we listen to what our nightmares are telling us:

It doesn't have to be this way.

So the world screams, and the nightmares scream, and the generations unborn scream, and the generations that may never be born scream. "Wake up!" they cry, all of them. "Open your goddamned eyes!" And then, well...

Do we?

80. [Plate 1]

Afterword: The Age of Goya, the Age of Swanwick

The captions that Goya wrote to *The Disasters of War* tug at the heart and chill the soul. They are cries of horror and despair by one who may well have witnessed such atrocities. "No one can look" reads one caption. A field of corpses elicits "Bury them and shut up." An etching showing three soldiers casually, brutally strangling a partisan reads simply *Por qué?* "Why?"

No sane person would attempt to write stories for such images.

Los Caprichos, the etchings in this book, are a different matter. They show climactic moments in larger dramas left unexplained. The captions are oblique and idiomatic. The accompanying "explanations," of uncertain authority, are trivial and frivolous. They put voice to conventional morality. Some seem even to have been misplaced, for they do not describe what the viewer sees printed alongside them.

They reek of complacency, as the etchings do not.

Feeling that the Caprichos deserved better, I wrote the stories you have just read. In some cases I am confident that I discovered Goya's original intent. The oversized syringe in Plate 58, for instance, is surely a clyster, and the monk wielding it has clearly just received a dose of his own medicine. Mostly, however, I imposed my own interpretations upon the etchings. That some of my targets did not exist in Goya's time is a superficiality. The range of human folly has not changed any in the past two centuries.

If you were to ask what right I had to put words to Goya's images, I would reply: As little as Goya had to make them in the first place. Neither Goya nor I was in a position to alter the history of our times. He was but a painter, and I a writer. Look for us a hundred years later, and you will find no record of how we lived or what we thought, other than our work alone. Such is the common lot of humanity.

Each human life defines an age. It begins with a birth and ends with a death. In the interim one lives and loves, suffers and learns, and comes to accept the inevitable losses. Children appear and parents vanish. The world shifts like banks of clouds. The best you can do in the transitory moment is to speak the truth as you see it.

So it was in the age of Goya. So it is in the age of Swanwick.

