

Dazzle Joins the Screenwriter's Guild by Scott Bradfield

In the checkered course of his writing career, Scott Bradfield has done a lot to support his habit of writing short stories ... and that includes some work in Hollywood. Companies like Sony, Universal, Working Title, and even Roger Corman's Concorde Films have benefited from his scripts (both original and rewrites). Mr. Bradfield says that none of those experiences are reflected in this new story, not in the least bit. Uh uh.

Mr. Bradfield's most recent books include the novel *Good Girl Wants It Bad* and the story collection *Hot Animal Love* (which includes two other stories about Dazzle). His recent stories and articles have appeared in *Bookforum*, *thefanzine.com*, and *The New York Ghost*. He also says he recently got a dog, but he hates story notes that tell the readership all about the author's pets.

He did, however, assure us that his new pet is not named Dazzle.

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Dazzle found his first script conference a lot less painful than he expected.

"I see a dog with severe personality disorders," envisioned Syd Fleishman of Sony Tristar, seated in his overstuffed leather armchair with a plastic liter of Evian propped between his knees. "I see a dog with closeness issues, and issues about his dad. I see a dog with lots to say about the terrible problems facing mankind—such as the destruction of the ozone layer and the rainforests, and the tragedy of Native Americans and all that. But I also see a dog that, well. If he spots a human being in trouble? That dog comes running. An all-faithful sort of dog, but an all-faithful sort of dog with *attitude*. You gotta *earn* the respect of a dog like that. But once you earn that respect, he's your buddy for life."

Syd was flanked by the Head of Creative Development and the Vice-Head of Corporate Production. Dazzle couldn't remember the names of either of these high-flying, barely post-graduate executives, but throughout the entire forty-five-minute conference nobody let him forget for one second that the CEO's name was Syd.

"It's a bold new animal movie for a bold new millennium, *Syd*," piped up the Head of Creative Development.

“It’s got heart, *Syd*. It’s got action. And what’s more,” interjected the Vice Head of Corporate Production, “it’s got abstract topicality. Abstract topicality, see, is this term I kind of invented.”

Dazzle was leafing through a telephone-book-sized legal contract. The redacted passages alone were terrifying in their opaqueness.

“Kind of like Capra or Spielberg,” continued the Vice Head, even though everybody had already stopped listening. “You know, like stuff that *seems* to be about current affairs? But once you look closely, it’s not about anything at all.”

This particular lull wasn’t on the morning agenda.

“Any questions?” *Syd* asked, getting to his feet. It was the only appointment that *Syd* was never late for: lunch.

Dazzle took this opportunity to gesture at the as-yet unsigned contract with a flaky forepaw.

“Look, *Syd*. I’ve been reading through this rancid sack of worms, and if you don’t mind my asking, I’m still hazy on a couple details.”

Syd, frozen in an attitude of benign departure, smiled stiffly.

“What a cute little doggy,” whispered the Head of Creative Development. She looked about nineteen years old. “He wants to discuss his contract. He wants to be part of the legal process, too.”

Three sets of executive eyes, Dazzle thought. And once they start exchanging ironic, bemused glances, it’s impossible to tell them apart.

“As I understand it,” Dazzle went on, “you guys *aren’t* trying to produce a major motion picture based on my life. Rather you’re buying the rights, and I quote, ‘to develop a long-running, multi-format entertainment entity based on the [possibly fictive] events and characters inspired by the legally recognized intellectual-commodity-unit known as Dazzle.’ Which leaves me wondering, guys—why so much trouble and expense? Why not just make up your own character and call him, oh, like Harry the dog, or Bozo the cat or something. Then you could ‘develop’ any damn thing you pleased, and you wouldn’t have to pay me anything, or negotiate so many clause-belaboring details with my annoying agent. I may be a dog, guys, but that doesn’t make me stupid. All I’m asking is what could I *possibly*

possess that you guys can't invent for yourselves? Give it to me straight, Syd. I really want to know."

Syd was smiling at the memory of something he had once said, or a person he used to be. It was a self-enclosed, inviolate sort of smile. He didn't have to share it with anybody.

"That's simple, Daz. You got the only thing money can't buy in this town."

Dazzle waited. So did everybody else.

"Authenticity," Syd said.

And left the building.

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According to *The Who's Who Hollywood Guide to Selling Your First Screenplay*, Fred Prescott had won an Oscar during the Eisenhower administration for his collaborative work on some long-forgotten skirt-and-sandal biopic, and his consequent A-list status had kept him going through lean years and fat. But his work habits were rudimentary; he lacked even the crudest of social graces; and most mornings, his biggest achievement seemed to be dragging his sorry butt out of bed for black coffee and a cinnamon bagel.

"You can't make a whore of Lady Inspiration," Fred often said. "You can only leave the front door open and hope she stops by for a while. Never sweat art, Daz-baby. That's rule numero uno at the House of Fred."

Dazzle, who had never stared into the eyes of a looming contract deadline before, couldn't quite adopt Fred's free and easy manner. He knew it made him sound pro-establishment; he just couldn't help himself.

"I'm not saying we should make a whore of Lady Inspiration, Fred," Dazzle explained in his most laid-back, diplomatic manner. "I'm just saying it's been three weeks, and we don't have a title, or a two sentence plot summary. Just that rather vague opening scene in the garbage dump with two topless teenagers, which you say is modeled on Italian what?"

"Post-war existential nouvelle-vague," Fred said sharply, giving Dazzle a slow once over, like a school guard scanning for concealed weaponry. "Are you saying you've never heard of Antonioni, pooch? What

sort of writing partner did they saddle me with, anyway?”

The funniest thing about movie people, Dazzle thought, was that no matter how laid back they *pretended* to be, their fuses were always incredibly short. It was as if Dazzle had to apologize constantly for all the things they *thought* he said.

“I’m not saying I don’t *like* the garbage dump scene, Fred. In fact, I probably like the garbage dump scene a lot. I just don’t think it’s enough material to deliver to Sony after six weeks’ work. It might need, you know. A little embellishment.”

It was like prodding an open wound.

“So you want to *embellish* our natural-birth baby, is that it? Like wrap it up in pretty bows and whatnot and shoot fireworks out its ass? Why don’t *you*, a first-timer who struck it lucky, explain the business to *me*, the Oscar winning sole-credited story-designer of *Solon the Magnificent*, *War Bond Baby*, and the recently rediscovered ‘AMC forgotten comedy-classic,’ *I Can’t Stop Dancing!* Maybe *I* need an introductory scriptwriting lesson from a dickless wonder like yourself.”

By this point, the remains of Fred’s cinnamon bagel were starting to look pretty tempting, causing Dazzle’s tail to thump impatiently at the polished hardwood floor. But then, so did the long blue beach extending beyond the smudgy picture window, and the endless California summer filled with leathery-skinned, once-attractive people playing volleyball and frisbee golf.

In his long and shaggy life, Dazzle had never actually explored Zuma.

But maybe it was high time he did.

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Dazzle was returning from his second or third walk of the morning when it came time to pay that morning’s piper.

“Hi, Daz. Got Syd, Steve, and Becky on the line. Put ‘em through?”

Dazzle wished he had never learned how to work the speaker phone in Fred’s cluttered office. He could feel his heart sinking when he replied, “Sure, I guess.” Then counted to three, four.

“Daz, honey!”

“Dazzy-sweetheart!”

“How’s it hanging, hot stuff! You got our through-line yet? You ready to pitch this mother to the assholes upstairs?”

It was always more enthusiasm—and coming at him from more directions—than Dazzle could handle. Especially since Dazzle had never been what you might call an optimistic or forward-yearning sort of dog.

“It’s, well, yeah,” Dazzle said slowly, as if he were trying to lick a burr from his coat. “We’re, you know. Really making progress and all that.”

At which point, Dazzle permitted himself a hasty glance out the buggy window at Fred, who was sleeping off his third breakfast Margarita in the patio hammock.

“We’re working out a few kinks, and developing the, what-do-you-call-it, the plot or something. And of course the central character—that is, *me*—he’s getting more interesting by the minute. Hell, even *I’m* beginning to like him.”

A long corporate hush emerged from the telephone receiver like a voice from beyond the grave.

“Wow,” it breathed.

“Cool.”

“‘Bitchin’ —I mean, that is, if you don’t mind me using the word ‘bitchin’.’ Is that okay with you, Dazzle-babe?”

There was so little you had to do to please these people, Dazzle thought.

“Absolutely fine,” Dazzle said. “In fact, under these circumstances? ‘Bitchin’ is like the most perfect word there is.”

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“The only freedom you ever really enjoy in this business,” Fred liked to remind Dazzle, “is during the always-blissful period when nobody knows

what you're doing. And the *longer* they don't know, the more freedom you've got. So here's how I interpret this contractual 'delivery calendar' you're so worked up about, Daz, and it goes like this. Sign the contract, get the bucks, and enjoy freedom freedom freedom, birdies singing, tra-la-la-la, la-la-la-*laaah*. Then *deliver* the pages, receive your delivery check, and it goes like this—hassle hassle hassle, mega-hassle mega-hassle, mini-hassles ad infinitum, talk talk talk, hassle hassle hassle. From the moment you give them what they *say* they want—which is the goddamn script they don't know what to do with—they'll be climbing up and down it like they've found themselves a new asshole. They'll turn it upside down and every which way. They'll schedule conference calls and studio meets, and before you know it, you'll have execs calling you from fucking Afghanistan and Tamaleland and places you never even knew existed, and they'll *all* be telling you what to do and how to do it. So stop worrying, my obedient little doggy. Chill out, enjoy the sea-breeze, and share some of these canned martinis. They're better than they look."

It was very annoying of Fred, Dazzle thought, to act as if *he* were some sort of "obedient" little doggy, when all he wanted to do was get the studio execs off his back. It was especially irksome that Fred did it with such eloquence and conviction.

"I'm not trying to sound like Mr. Obedient," Dazzle countered wearily. "I'm just trying to do the right thing. These jokers paid us a bundle, Fred. And we *did* agree to start delivering pages by, well, last month or something. *I* know they're jokers, and *you* know they're jokers, and believe me, I'm hip to the whole 'stop and smell the roses' philosophy. But you're not the guy who answers the phone around here. In case you forgot, these people are incredibly persistent. And to be fair, shouldn't we at least have a title by now? Or some minimal idea of the whaddayoucallit? The narrative arc?"

But of course Fred had already passed out in the hammock, the warm dented can of Make-U-Mix Chilled Martinis cradled against his chest like a begging cup.

It was so Fred, Dazzle thought. You couldn't help but like him.

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Dazzle loved the beach. He loved the salty sand between his toe-pads, and the distant tease and crash of rubber-clad, seal-like surfers frolicking in the waves. He especially loved the air that felt both clean and

astrigent, as if the sea weren't simply providing an alternative to city soot, but was actually scrubbing away its residue, like swarms of hungry, eco-conscious animalculae. It was the perfect place for people without jobs, Dazzle thought.

"Like hey there, doggy-dude! How's the creativity thing going? You should find a wet suit with four little doggy legs and I'll teach you to surf."

Diggy Bop was scrubbing his chapped, freckly face with waxy sun-screen and sucking diet soda from a can. At various times in their conversations, he had claimed to hail from the midwest, the east coast, the Gulf of Mexico, and even the former Republic of Sudan, but most of the local surfers knew him as a native Whittier boy, born and bred. It was one of the few qualities Dazzle had learned to respect in these otherwise-unpalatable human biped types—the capacity to dissemble. The alternative seemed to be human beings who were perfectly happy with who they were.

Yuck, Dazzle thought.

Dazzle sat down to rest beside Diggy Bop's stash of sandy boards and crumpled wet suits. "I'm afraid it's not going well at all," Dazzle conceded. "And to be perfectly frank, I don't think my so-called writing partner's giving it his best shot. All we seem to do is lie around the house watching TV."

Diggy Bop was looking at the vast Pacific. He had just finished his soda.

"Sometimes a guy's gotta wait for weeks to know what he's waiting for," Diggy said softly. "A girl, a wave, an inspiration, you name it. You can't go looking for it. It can only come looking for you."

At which point Diggy scooped up his board and sprinted toward a whitecap forming in the blue distance. Diggy wasn't much of a talker, Dazzle conceded. He was more of a doer.

And thank God for that, Dazzle thought.

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By the time late afternoon came around, Dazzle had usually given up on receiving any help from Oscar-winning screenwriter and former Writer's Guild Assistant Secretary Fred Prescott, so he ventured alone into Fred's

messy office and stared at the antique, dusty Selectric for a while. It was a peculiar, dense little machine with a revolving print-ball that Dazzle found infinitely amusing. What he didn't find amusing, however, was the alert thrum and snap the machine emitted whenever he activated the black power button, as if it had been waiting all morning for Dazzle to show up.

And now it was time for Dazzle to deliver the goods.

ACT I, Dazzle would type clumsily with his stubby, inarticulate fore-paw. SCENE 1. DAZZLE ENTERS. DAZZLE SPEAKS.

It was as far as Dazzle's imagination ever took him. Perhaps because the subject that least interested Dazzle was himself.

Dog meets bitch, Dazzle thought, recalling a notorious Faulknerian parable. Dog loses bitch. Dog finds bitch again.

Coming soon to a theater near you.

But sometimes, things don't tie up in a pretty little bow with appropriate theme music, Dazzle thought. Life just unravels until there's nothing left.

So then Dazzle deployed all of his worst narrative instincts. He thought about stupid movies he'd seen featuring big name stars grimacing in tight close-ups on multi-media-formatable movie posters. Like a grizzly, Bruce Willis sort of dog, with a flamethrower strapped to its back. Or a telegenic dog who plays basketball. He toyed with ideas of a precognitive dog, a flying dog, and a dog who saved children from imminent catastrophes. But try as he might, Dazzle couldn't get his creative juices flowing. And no matter how long he sat there trying to appease the hungry Selectric, he never once progressed beyond the same unhappy phrases:

DAZZLE ENTERS. DAZZLE SPEAKS.

Dazzle wished, Dazzle thought.

"Speak!" he told the Selectric. "Open your stupid maw and let it out!"

But, of course, machines don't talk. And dogs don't talk. Only human beings talk.

And that, in terms of Hollywood-style creative development, was the rub.

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The only time Dazzle actually *liked* to hear the phone ring was when he sat down to do the work he couldn't do. Which was why he was always so quick to activate the desktop speaker—and utter the only word he could usually muster:

“Woof.”

It didn't sound right even to Dazzle.

“Wow, Dad. You just fall out of the hammock or something? It's me, Benny. Your kid. Remember?”

It was the sort of voice Dazzle was accustomed to having directed his way. Short, curt sentences without modifiers. Simple animal expressions of calm and appeasement.

“Woof,” Dazzle replied. “Woof woof.”

“Gotcha, Dad. Know you're busy, just wanted to make sure you hadn't killed yourself with those damn TV dinners you're always stuffing down. Too bad I don't have any Hollywood connections. Maybe then I'd be worth your while for lunch or coffee or something. Or maybe even some minimally polite interpersonal conversation.”

Click.

It was a lot of un-lived life to live with, Dazzle thought, gazing out the window at somnolent Fred in his hammock, hearing the dial tone recommence like an endless, audible ellipsis. Three divorces, four angrily neglected kids, seven undelivered scripts, a pending mega-deal at Paramount, and an irate Colombian lover with her own dry-cleaning service in Sepulveda. No wonder Fred got up so early each morning. It took a lot of time to get your head around doing so little.

You can't outlive bad karma like this guy's got, Dazzle thought.

You could only arrange to fall fast asleep before it came knocking.

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Unlike pages, the weeks were mounting up. And whenever Dazzle felt

especially panicky about his contractual responsibilities, he called his agent.

“You got five minutes,” Bunny said, her voice a deep echoing mine of patience with itself. “You speak and I’ll listen. Shoot.”

Bunny started off every conversation as if it were a race between Dazzle and her preconceptions about him. A race, of course, that Dazzle was always destined to lose.

“Oh, well,” Dazzle muttered slowly. “Nothing new, really. I’m just getting nervous. We don’t seem to be making any progress. And I don’t mean to sound judgmental, but it’s all Fred’s fault. I was never born to write, Bunny. I’m just a goddamn dog. But Fred hasn’t lifted a finger, and I think he may be burned out or something. So this is what I was thinking. Maybe we could just, you know, give them their money back, and I could go home to Big Sur. I’d even be willing to surrender all my rights to, you know, my life and identity. Really, I don’t mind. Money’s never mattered to me; basically, I’m happy with a few berries and wild mushrooms and a splash of clear spring water when I need it. I want my old life back, even if I don’t own the rights to it anymore. So what do you say, Bunny? We tear up the contract, Sony brings in another, as they like to call it, ‘creative team.’ And we all go our separate ways.”

Bunny’s silence was potent enough to frost glass.

“Look, Daz-baby. We got you paid, right?”

“Well, yeah,” Dazzle conceded. “But—”

“And now you’re working with one of the most venerable and widely respected scriptwriters in the profession, right?”

“Sure, if you want to call Fred *venerable*, Bunny. It’s just that—”

“So let me say one last thing, and listen to me good. I’d tear off my left tit before I gave Sony back a dime. I’d even tear off *your* balls, if you had any. So get back to work, and call me when you’re ready to deliver. Otherwise, I’ll turn you into the dog pound so fast it’ll make your head spin. No offense, Darling. But I’m making you a Hollywood success story or my name ain’t Bunny Fairchild.”

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It was like living with plutonium, Dazzle thought. The unwritten script emitted black radiance through every room in the house.

“I don’t think you appreciate who you’re working with,” Diggy often told him, as they exchanged lukewarm cans of Coors over a sputtering, illegal campfire. “That’s Fred Prescott on your team. He’s like a filmic genius or something. He’s like the only soulful person in the entire Hollywood community. Why, a list of all the great movies he *could* have made would astound Michelangelo—at least that’s how Fred tells it. Like his totally disrespected seven-hundred-page film treatment for *Finnegans Wake* starring Nick Nolte—*that* got totally dissed by the powers-that-be. Or what about Fred’s genre-bending concept about a boxing promoter on Mars? That got totally crummed on, too. Whenever the suits want to pretend they’re artists, they hire Fred Prescott for a draft or two, and pat themselves on the back all over Rodeo Drive. Then they turn every script he delivers into a vehicle of mush for Hugh Grant and Drew Barrymore. But Fred endures the toil and struggle, Daz. He marches to the beat of his own drum. Give the guy a chance, and before this job’s done? He’s gonna teach you bozos what art is all about.”

Dazzle wanted to believe Diggy—and in Diggy’s vision of Fred. But the only way to believe in Fred was to disregard the daily pageant of shame and desuetude that constituted his “routine.”

Art is never easy, Dazzle conceded. Maybe, just maybe, Fred knew what he was doing.

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“Hey there, Daz baby. Stu Sanderson at Sony. Would you pick up the phone, Daz? We know you’re in there. And we’re totally sympathetic to your creative needs as an artist. But we really *gotta* touch base with you on one or two important concept points before we forget them. Isn’t that what writing’s about, Daz-baby? Writing down every little detail and pawing over it endlessly in high-power executive lunchrooms? Sally, have you got the concept points we discussed at yesterday’s meeting? I need to read them to Daz here ... Okay, point one—we need humor. Got that? It has to have *some* humor, Daz, but not *too much* humor, because comedy’s not our department, but a *little* humor’s okay, and actually pretty necessary, especially when it comes to talking dogs. Get me? Point two—and this is a little something Syd and I developed in our meeting with Roger last week—Daz is a dog, but he acts more like a cat. How do you like that one? Syd and I came up with that by ourselves. He’s sort of a cat-like dog, with all

these feline needs and desires and so forth, the audience will really eat it up. Like he digs catnip or something, or peeing in kitty litter—I'll leave the gory details to you creative types. We did this survey, or somebody heard about this survey, we're pretty sure a survey was done anyway, that says people are either cat people or dog people, and doing a dog movie alienates the cat-viewership and vice versa. So this way, we appeal to *every possible demographic*. We could sign any A-list director with a concept point like this one, Daz. You and Fred need to incorporate it into your treatment right away."

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As Dazzle grew less concerned about their long-broken contract deadlines, Fred slowly awakened from his stupor like a bewitched maiden in a castle. Some days, he even ventured out of his hammock before noon, and could be found browsing yesterday's sun-stained *Los Angeles Times* on the sun deck, or shoveling through a plate of Maria's huevos rancheros while tapping a pencil against a tablet of yellow fine-lined legal stationery. When he felt unusually perky, he cranked up his old LP-player and treated the beach-side sun worshipers to a mega-decibel-blast of Stan Getz being mellow, or Paul Desmond pouring cool hi-fi martinis. It was like watching a space captain emerge from suspended animation, Dazzle thought. He was still groggy and blood-sore. He couldn't quite work his lips.

"Hey, Fred," Dazzle would say as he padded to the kitchen, where Maria would stop brushing cobwebs off the ceiling with a damp mop, waddle to the stove, and happily scoop Dazzle's favorite lunch from a simmering pot: soft-shelled chicken tortillas with extra hot salsa and sour cream.

"Mucho bueno, Señor Perrocito," Maria liked to say, scratching between his ears, just the way Dazzle liked it. "Escribir con Señor Fred es muy difícil, no?"

Meanwhile, Fred examined the tip of his yellow Ticonderoga pencil with a piercing, level-headed gaze.

"The first thing you've got to do is walk away from what the world keeps telling you," Fred announced softly. "Like a penny saved is a penny earned, that sort of crap. Or how better mousetraps are always the rage, and the world will beat a path to your door. You don't need to be human to recognize human turds when you smell them, right, pooch? You just gotta clear your mind of all distractions and think for yourself."

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“We’re not trying to ‘hound’ you, Daz-honey. Get it? We’re not trying to *hound* you?”

“We’re just worried about the, you know, legal implications of all these delays and binding contractual clauses and modifying clauses which, you know, we can’t just keep modifying like this. Unless there’s an act of God or something.”

“Nobody’d *hound* you, Daz-baby. *If* it was an act of God—”

“But we need *words*, sweetheart. We need some—I know you hate this word—but we need some *pages*. Syd isn’t the most patient chief executive in town, but he’s not the *least* patient either. He’s just doing his job, Daz. And whether you like it or not, we’re just doing ours.”

“We’ve got families to support.”

“We’ve got wives, ex-wives, ex-semi-permanent live-in love-mates, and so forth. We’re as human as the next guy. Which isn’t to cast any aspersions on *you*, Daz-baby. It’s just an expression is all.”

“Can we at least drive out and have a little meet at Cross Creek or something. We can watch Goldy play with her grandkids. You could show us some rough thoughts on a napkin and talk us through. You don’t even have to tell Fred. It’ll be *our* little secret.”

“We could buy you a nice big bowl of naturally carbonated spring water. Or maybe a beer.”

“And you could tell us, right, Daz-baby? You could finally tell us what this movie we’re making is all about.”

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Dazzle knew his days of Hollywood fame were numbered, so he tried to close the door securely on his way out. He instructed his accountant to dump his earnings into a series of 501(k)s and offshore investments. He set up a trust fund for his ever-widening (and increasingly errant) canine family back in Big Sur, and arranged a lump sum guaranteed annuity with a Hartford insurance firm. He gave himself a flea bath, had his nails clipped at the canine beautician’s, and even endured what he hoped would be his

last-ever full-body upper and lower GI polyp-palpating exam at the local vet, who turned out to be a well-groomed man in his mid-fifties named Dr. Leroy Ferguson.

“I guess I moved here in the late sixties and never looked back,” Dr. Ferguson confessed, as he gently posed and reposed Dazzle through a panoply of the usual indignities. “Where I came from, back in Ohio? We had nothing more interesting to do all day than go to the Laundromat or visit the bank. Farmers would sit in Bob’s Big Boy complaining about their stock, or some leaky roof. And on your first (and often only) date, you drove to the woods in your third-hand car, got laid, got your girlfriend pregnant, and got unhappily married, not necessarily in that order. Personally, my only viable career choice was to become either a mortgage broker or a vet, and being a vet meant nothing but performing livestock viral exams and animal husbandry. You wouldn’t see a decent doggy or kitty for weeks at a time. You were too busy driving across Farmer Brown’s scrub-strewn land in a truck. But then I got crazy and came to California, where everything was different. Suddenly, I was living with movie stars. I was spaying and neutering full-blooded manxes and Siameses and even, I swear to god, an actual declawed leopard from Borneo once. And now my life is like a beautiful movie. I walk on the beach every morning, my kids go to great schools and get married to entertainment lawyers and software executives, and my third wife, Patty, wow. She’s got tits out to here and they’re almost all hers. I have never felt more fulfilled as a veterinary surgeon and animal health-care worker in my life, and my golf swing, Jesus. I’m knocking seagulls out of the air with my seven iron. I’ve gotten that good.”

Even the doctor’s hands, while they probed Dazzle’s weary orifices, exuded confidence. It was like visiting one of those Shiatsu places at the mall. And when it was over, and he was gently lifted down from the paper-shielded metal table by a pair of bountiful young starlet-like nurses, Dazzle felt like a million bucks.

“I’ve just never met so many happy people in my life,” Dazzle told Diggy over chocolatey cappuccinos at one of the Cross Creek picnic tables. “It’s not like I pictured at all. I’d sort of expected some sunny den of despair, where everybody’s constantly enraged by the bastards who screwed them over on the last project that fell through. But when you look at Malibu for what it is, everybody has so much free time. Their nannies are taking care of the kids, their administrative assistants are answering the phones, and most of the time, all these people do is wander around clothing outlets, drive back and forth to Blockbuster, and eat lunch. In fact, now that I think of it, I hardly see any signs of depravity whatsoever, even from the sixty-year-old guys with twenty-something wives. They seem just

as boring as everybody else. Except, of course, that they have a lot more money to be boring with.”

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But as Dazzle had learned from a lifetime of pissing on the lampposts of polite society, he always spoke way too soon. And the moment Diggy dropped him off at Fred’s, he encountered a fleet of chickens coming home to roost simultaneously. These particular chickens were driving Arnold Schwarzenegger-style “energy-efficient” retooled Humvees, decked out PT Cruisers, and four-wheel-drive off-road vehicles thumping with Wagner, Patti Smith, and mid-seventies progressive rock.

“We know you’re in there, Pop!” shouted a twenty-something version of Fred in a linen sport coat and Levi’s. His features were so well tended that they seemed shellacked. “You shut down, passive-aggressive, family-abandoning old hack! The worst part about hating guys like you, Dad, is that you never even show your face, or give us a chance to make fun of that hypocritical sixties getup you wear! And then to hear you spouting all that outdated bullshit about marching to your own drum and beautifying the muse, Jesus! It makes me want to puke! You practically ruined my life, Dad! And if Mom hadn’t met that property developer in Pasadena, you’d have ruined her life, too!”

The fleet of well-mobilized chickens represented the depth and breadth of middle-aged, middle-income California rage. Some of it, like Fred Junior’s, had been fanned into a hot flame by years of assertiveness training and self-actualization therapy. But some of it had been twisted into bizarrely serene, flowery zen-like shapes by inner tranquility regimens and TM.

(To Dazzle’s way of thinking, this second type of rage was the most frightening type of rage in the world.)

“We just stopped by to see how you’re doing,” Syd Fleishman said gently, flanked by various development heads. “We’re not like these other people. We’re here to *help*. Maybe you’d be so kind as to let us in, Fred, and we could share some of our disillusioning experiences with the corporate entertainment industry. And then, you know, if you felt like it. Maybe you could show us some of the, ahem, you know. Some of the—”

“Chinga tu madre!” shouted the hot little Colombian woman in a low-slung white cotton blouse and tight-fitting lime-green toreador pants. She was shaking a large loose pallet of ironed white shirts on a set of

clattering wire coat hangers. “Take your dry cleaning and shove it straight up your butt, Fred Prescott! Screw you and your creative thought process—you miserable queer without balls!”

It was terrible, Dazzle thought, how bad karma could just come revving into your driveway like this. It always seemed to know exactly where you lived.

“You owe us for five months’ of gardening, Señor Piss-artist!”

“You stole my action concept at a Sizzler restaurant in Tustin, you lazy old ponce!”

“I bore you three children, listened to your endless pronouncements about art and liberty and beauty, and when it came to the settlement, you screwed me so bad I could hardly afford new sprinklers for the yard!”

“We only want to *share* the burden of creative development, Fred! We’re not like all those *other* men in suits! We’re here to help you make the most of your dreams and ambitions!”

Jesus Christ on a crutch, Dazzle thought. If life was a choice between these awful people and that filthy hammock, I’d probably be swinging my flea-bitten haunch into that hammock right now.

Then, as if a tiny displacement had occurred in the atmosphere, the entire crowd of belligerent shouters went totally quiet. And everybody blinked simultaneously at Fred’s snail-tracked blue front door.

And watched the door open slightly—and a pale hand extrude, depositing a yellow foolscap legal pad on the thick brown horsehair doormat.

The door closed again. And like one thinking, feeling organism, everybody looked directly at Dazzle.

* * * *

It took Dazzle a moment to catch up with all the attention. Then, once he caught his breath, he spoke the only word he had in him.

“Woof.” Dazzle shrugged sheepishly. “Like what did you expect me to say?”

As if they were drawing a line with a laser, the crowd's attention moved slowly from Dazzle to the sheet of yellow foolscap paper on the doormat. And when they spoke, they spoke through one individual at a time.

"Who's the dog?"

"El perro es muy exacerbating."

"I told you I smelled something special about that mutt. I don't know what it is exactly, but I'm pretty sure I like it."

"I didn't even know Dad had a dog. All my life, as a kid, I'm begging for a dog. But he never gets one until I'm already grown up."

Feeling self-conscious, Dazzle trotted across the brown lawn, picked up the legal pad with his teeth (he hated when dogs did stuff like this), trotted over with apparent dutifulness to Syd Fleishman of Sony Pictures Tristar, Inc., and laid it down at his feet.

"I think," Dazzle said humbly, "that this may be what you came for."

The suits separated from the crowd like the yolk from an egg.

"What's it say?"

"It's definitely Fred's handwriting. But it's too hard to read."

"That's a t and that's an h and that there—"

"Through-line. It says through-line. And that right after that. It's a date."

Then Syd came forward—pushing everyone out of his way.

"I pay you guys to think and you can't even *read*." He held up the yellow legal pad like Moses carrying tablets down from the mountain. And then he told everybody what it said.

* * * *

Cool dog. Cool guy. Buddy pic. Big shots get thrown out of buildings, set on fire, the works. Politically conscious, eco-wary, funny with a heart. Explosive finale, two week pre-opening ad campaign on VH-1, Family Network and Animal Planet. 60 mill opening— secure.

* * * *

It was as if the entire crowd of gang-haters gasped at once. Everybody waited for somebody to say something. Finally, somebody did.

“You’re the fucking *man*,” Syd whispered under his breath, holding the sheet of yellow foolscap in the air like an Olympic torch.

And slowly, like a chant, the entire crowd began whispering it too.

* * * *

“It’s like I always said,” Dazzle explained to Diggy, on the day he was dropped off at the Burbank Greyhound station. “I’m not cut out for the writerly life. I don’t have creative genes or something. The worrisome part is that I don’t even *recognize* a decent writer when I meet one. Seriously, I had Fred pegged as a tiresome old hack with delusions of grandeur, but what do I know? Now, without any help from me (his supposed *inspiration*) he’s taken our script to ‘the next level,’ as Stu put it. They’re bringing in six-figure rewrite teams. They’re coordinating tri-agency talent deals to develop, cross-market, and cast. And the concept’s so hot it’s being passed around at pool parties and Bar Mitzvahs, and all I ever did was answer the phone, lie to people I didn’t know, and walk on the beach.”

Diggy’s car was littered with fast food wrappers, expired bottles of sunscreen, and yellowing dead-winged pages of the *Los Angeles Times* and *Coast Mall Shopper*. You could perform a fairly accurate sociological survey in this screwy Toyota, Dazzle thought. The ratio of fast-food franchises to miles driven by the average surfer, or something totally useless like that.

“I told you, Daz. Fred doesn’t compromise, dig? He remains like totally faithful to his beautiful muse.”

It was the smoggiest day Dazzle could remember, and the funny thing was? It had never looked more beautiful or benign. Pink and orange and purplish clouds rimmed the horizon, like one of those multi-layer liqueur-cocktails served as lady-drinks in phony, overpriced west side bars.

“Yeah, well, maybe you’re right, Diggy,” Dazzle concluded wistfully. “And I’ll definitely never remember good old Fred without smiling. What a life. What a profession. I guess somebody’s got to do it. I’m just glad it’s

not me.”

“Looks like your bus, dude. You come visit soon and I’ll teach you to boogie board. It’ll be awesome.”

It was the best part about any animal, Dazzle thought. The part that got enthusiastic about things. (Even boogie boards.)

“I’ll do that, Diggy,” Dazzle said sincerely, as he climbed out of the car. “And if you ever make it to Big Sur? I’ll teach you the only thing I know. And that, of course, would be taking really long and meaningful naps.”

“Do what you do best, dude. Or don’t do nothing at all.”

And of course Diggy, as always, was right.