

the WACKY
MISADVENTURES
of WARBLE
MCGORKLE

(Book I of a Trilogy)

by Blackbird Crow Raven

NOTICE

Anyone trying to find logic in this tome will be mercilessly teased. Anyone looking for hidden meanings in this book will be banished to an asylum. Anyone searching for sense and/or sensibility in this novel will be suspended by their left ankle until they cry 'uncle.'

DISCLAIMER

No poodles were maimed, much less flattened, during the extensive research carried out in preparation for this scholarly work. Additionally, no puppies were kicked, no old ladies were tripped, no geese were anesthetized and diapered, and no short-timers were terminated. Reverse osmosis is not mentioned once in this entire book.

CHAPTER 0

Growing nervous due to the lateness of the hour, and not having heard any sounds emanating from the room, the secret service agents rap on the door of the presidential suite. No answer. They wait a few seconds, and knock again, louder this time. Still no answer. "Mr. President!" the lead agent yells, his ear to the door. Even still, there is no answer.

The two agents look at each other, silently agree on the necessary course of action, and take three steps back. Counting down together--3, 2, 1--they rush the door, battering it down with their iron-pumped shoulders. Bursting into the room, they call out again for the President. As before, there is no reply. While one agent looks under the bed, the other inspects the bathroom. No one is there.

"Sound the alarm!" the lead agent barks, and his partner runs out to the hallway and flips the switch. The pair then rush into the Oval Office. But the President is not there, either. They do discover an unusual sight, though: a video camera is set up in the middle of the room, aimed at the President's favorite chair. On the stand next to the chair sits an empty beer bottle and a plate.

CHAPTER 1

"This purports to be a muffin," Warble says, as he trains his video camera at the object on his plate. "You know, these fancy-schmanzy, high-toned restaurants have been known to trick people by reverse-engineering all types of foods and then introducing them in 'stealth' varieties, decked out to look like something else altogether. Take this so-called muffin, for instance. How do we know it's not really a bagel? Or a donut? Or even a filet mignon?"

Warble's wife Mary looks at him wearily, slowly and ever so slightly shaking her head from side to side. It isn't palsy that causes this rocking of her cranium--it is a mixture of exasperation and resignation that Warble, even on this special occasion at this gourmet restaurant attached to Bayfield, Wisconsin's renowned Rittenhouse Inn, won't let up on his wild theorizing.

Warble sees conspiracies in everything: from the birds flying south in the winter to the Yankees winning the World Series. Warble claims the migration of the winged creatures to the south causes the worm population in the areas they had abandoned to multiply exponentially, which eventually leads to worms eating all the vegetation in the north, which leads (naturally) to the inhabitants of the northland pulling up stakes and moving south--with a decided 'Yankee-ization' of southern culture, which, for some reason known only to Warble--is a plot perpetrated by the federal government.

As for the Yankees winning the World Series, Warble feels that the feds consider it better for America in the long run that baseball be displaced by football in the hearts and minds of sports fans. For that reason, government infiltrators--agent provocateurs--have not only been busy 'on the inside' manipulating both sides to provoke labor disagreements--resulting in strikes and lockouts--but also in ensuring that the Yankees win an inordinate number of the World Series matchups. This sameness leads to boredom, resulting in fan abandonment of baseball for a less predictable sport, football. And becoming football fans leads to the aggressivization, as Warble puts it, of the American male (which is, he claims, precisely the intention of the Washington crowd).

Warble continues with his diatribe: "Yes, I think they pulled the old bait-

and-switch on me, Mary. This 'muffin,' as they would have us think it is, is in actuality no doubt a filet mignon that has been prepared so as to resemble a muffin in contour and aroma. Indubitably it has been cooked rare, in the hopes that I will contract some disease from the uncooked meat and die a horrible, agonizing death. Then, they can steal into our room while you're away attending to the funeral arrangements and steal all my stuff.

"Once they abscond with all of our worldly goods, they will search through them until they find my notes, and then--having the wherewithal and connections needed to bring all my ideas to fruition--will amass a fortune so huge they will be able to afford to feed everyone here in Bayfield every day of the year, every year, from here into eternity, free of charge.

"And they would do it, too! Not out of the goodness of their hearts, oh no!--but for the PR value! What a coup! It is a rather ingenious idea; I must give them that, at least. While robbing valiant men like me of their treasures--the blood-sweat-and-tears-won ideas wrested from the writhing depths of their tortured souls--they put on a pretense of being philanthropic, and no judge or jury in the land would ever find them guilty of anything."

Mary defiantly picks up her muffin and bites into it. Warble records this 'foolish and daring act' through the video camera lens. Without taking his eye from the viewfinder, he continues to provide commentary on the gastronomic scene he is recording.

"It tastes like a muffin to *me*," Mary says, gazing directly into the camera with a challenging and even downright surly expression. She gives the camera a swift slap. "Would you put that thing down, Warble? You're causing a scene."

It is true that several of the other guests are absorbed in the goings-on at the McGorkle table. Some are attempting to appear oblivious to Warble's ramblings but are, nevertheless, watching the McGorkles out of the corners of their eyes and whispering to each other while furtively gesturing toward the man who is videotaping his breakfast. Others are openly gawking. A man breakfasting alone has completely forgotten his food and has turned his chair to face the action. He is grinning broadly, seemingly lost in reverie.

"Well, of course--*yours* really *is* a muffin--it's me they have a motive to kill, remember, not *you*," Warble says to Mary as he raises the video camera above his plate. "And do you see that so-called glass of water there? *That*, indubitably, is a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon--but not just your ordinary, garden-variety Cabernet. Oh, no! It is the same exact variety of varietal served to the political dissenters in Spain that induces them to lose their sanity and commit suicide by running out into the paths of raging bulls.

"If I drink that 'water' and commit hara-kiri, my enemies are saved the trouble of eliminating me themselves. And when the police come to investigate our room, these rascallions will easily bribe the 'peace' officers with a lifetime supply of jelly-filled donuts to snatch away the meticulous and detailed notes I have taken for all of my upcoming wonderful and ingenious inventions."

Mary thrusts out her hand, as a frog does its tongue to capture a fly, making a grab for Warble's muffin. She wants to take a bite of it to prove once and for all that it is just a normal, everyday, run-of-the-mill muffin and put an end to all this tomfoolery. Warble is too quick for her, though--he grabs the tips of her fingers just as she is about to retract the baked good to her mouth.

Mary then tries to grab the muffin with her other hand, but Warble encompasses the whole thing with *his* hand and crushes it (the muffin, not her hand). Mary angrily yanks her hand loose and, in so doing, the crumbled-to-smithereens muffin flies in what seems like millions of tiny globules all over the Rittenhouse Inn's ornate carpet.

At this turn of events, the solitary breakfaster guffaws, and the other onlookers gasp. As the server, unable to ignore the untoward proceedings any longer, approaches, Warble turns and addresses him in all gravity: "My good man," he says in his best stuffy British accent (not to be confused with the rough-and-tumble cockney accent preferred by coal miners and the like), "my wife seems to be quite fond of your muffins. Would you kindly bring her another one of *her* kind of muffins?" When Warble says '*her*,' he arches an eyebrow to further emphasize the implication.

The server opts to ignore the provocation and simply responds, "Certainly,

sir. And which type do you prefer, ma'am," he continues, turning to Mary, "the apple cranberry or the banana nut?"

Mary buries her head in her hands, but spreads her fingers just far enough apart to peep through them and glares out at Warble. Without looking at the server, she replies, "The apple cranberry, *please*."

As the server turns away, Warble grabs him by the arm. "Remember, one of *her* types of muffin, not one of *my* muffins." Again, the arched eyebrow. The server assures Warble that he knows exactly what to do.

Warble returns again to his theme. "Places like this are always pulling shenanigans on people like me. An innocent-looking muffin becomes a death-dealing slab of putrefied meat. A glass of pure, wholesome, unadulterated H²O gets swapped out with a potion of poisoned fruit-of-the-vine."

An idea--a brainstorm, he would term it--occurs to Warble. He leans and whispers into his wife's ear, "If I can record a testimony that this food and drink is untainted, we will have them cornered, my dear." He is about to continue explaining his plan when he notices the server approaching their table, and holds his tongue (not literally—he just stops whispering).

Warble quickly straightens up and fixes the server in the camera's viewfinder. In a tone of warning Warble asks him: "Will you swear on a stack of pancakes that this," he points down with his free hand to the second, unmolested, muffin on his plate, "is in reality a muffin, and nothing but a muffin, so help you God?"

The server is at a loss as to how to respond to this bizarre interrogation. He looks around to locate the restaurant manager, hoping he will notice his awkward predicament and come to his aid.

The manager *is* observing the unusual goings-on from around the corner. When the server and manager establish eye contact, though, the manager just shrugs, as if to say, 'You deal with it. It'll be good practice for you.'

CHAPTER 2

The server finally turns to Warble and responds, in a neutral voice, "Yes, sir, that most certainly *is* a muffin." He wants to say, 'What else would it be? What does it look like? What does it smell like? If it smells like a muffin, looks like a muffin, tastes like a muffin, crumbles like a muffin...'

Warble interrupts the server's contemplations. "OK, then, if you *really* believe that, I'd like to see you give it the old taste test."

Warble scoops up the muffin in his free hand and proffers it to the server, practically cramming the muffin into the server's mouth. After a stunned silence, the man replies, "Sir, that is *your* muffin. Besides, I am not allowed to eat in front of the guests. If you would like, I will gladly replace that muffin with another."

"Another *what?*" Warble practically shrieks, half rising up out of his chair. "See! You didn't say another *muffin*; you just said *another*--because you have no intention of bringing me a *muffin* at all. And you are not willing to sample my 'muffin'--because you *know*. You are in on it, sir; yes you are. Before you committed the faux pas of not specifying precisely what it was you intended to bring me from the kitchen, you even said '*your* muffin'."

"You said, and I quote, 'That is *your* muffin,' knowing full well that *my* muffin is decidedly and distinctly different from all the other muffins being served at this establishment this morning."

"Without a shadow of a doubt, I've caught you red-handed. *My* muffin. And you refuse to taste it. *And* you declined to swear on a stack of pancakes."

Just as the manager approaches the table, with the intention of removing the McGorkles with as little fuss as possible, Warble stands up, flapping his burgundy-colored napkin in melodramatic fashion. "Come, my dear," he tells his wife. "We don't have to remain here to be put upon by these dastardly would-be thieves."

Mary resignedly gets up, sighing, and grabs her purse. Eyes cast down, she

follows her husband out the door and onto the street.

"Did I foil them, or what?!" Warble rejoices, as they walk away from the dreaded establishment. "That will teach them to try to pull the wool over old Warble's peepers."

Mary says nothing, and tries to change the subject in her mind as she and Warble head toward the boat landing.

CHAPTER 3

After the short stroll to the wharf, Warble and Mary are about to board the ferry that will take them across Lake Superior to Madeline Island. Walking on the pier, deep in thought, Warble all of a sudden stops dead in his tracks, as if his shoes have been superglued to the wharf.

He allows Mary to continue walking until he thinks she is out of earshot. He then switches the video camera back on, and pans the horizon. He records boats; quaint homes perched on the hillsides above town, punctuated now and then by the odd mansion here or there; the massive lake; and the islands visible from the dock.

In a subdued voice, Warble begins narrating the scene: "Mary has been shanghaied and placed on a slave ship bound for some sweat shop somewhere in the interior of China, that vast and inscrutable country, where she will work seventeen hours a day, seven days a week, for the approximate equivalent of around twelve and-a-half cents per hour. Of course, they will deduct 'room and board' from her paltry wages, and she will end up with absolutely nothing for her toil and trouble. She will 'owe her soul to the company store,' as the old Kentucky Bert Mustang song says.

"Her only form of respite and recreation, her only escape from the tedium, will be the odd cricket fight. Actually, I could refer to them as the odd odd cricket fight, because they will be not only 'odd' as in occasional or here-and-there, but also 'odd' as in strange.

"If one or more of the participating crickets is him- or herself odd, to boot, one could even term these contests in that case an odd odd *odd* cricket fight.

"And if *three* crickets were involved, instead of the customary two--for example if the fight promoters were to pit the Shaquille O'Neal of crickets against a pair more closely resembling Andrew Bogut and Charlie Villeneuve--they could call it the odd odd *odd* odd cricket fight, as an odd number (three) of crickets would be involved in the feat of strength, endurance, cunning and all that rot. That would be *really* odd.

"But enough of that. So who is this walking ahead of me, you ask? It is either a robot, built to look *somewhat* like Mary (after all, they didn't do *that* good a job; it doesn't look *exactly* like her), or an actress working on a pro bono basis. Once they get my stash of ideas, they will cash in and live like royalty for the rest of their born days."

Warble squints at 'Mary,' trying to ascertain who it really is, exactly, that is masquerading as his wife.

Somewhat to his consternation, she has been able to hear his running commentary, and confronts him about it.

"Don't give me that malarkey," Warble replies as she protests against his suppositions. "Those robot-makers or makeup-artists will have to get up a little earlier in the morning than what they did to get the better of me."

"*You*," he jabs his index finger at her, "aren't Mary, and you know it. You resemble Mary to a certain extent, but a half-crazed, blind-in-one-eye duck-billed platypus would know you're not really her."

Warble cocks his head, squints at Mary, and says, "I think you're either Hilary Duff, wearing makeup, or Phyllis Diller without."

"Oh, Warble," Mary sighs, exasperated.

"Aha! I've got you now, you wannabe-silver-tongued-devilette! Mary never calls me 'Warble'. She calls me 'sugar pie honey bunch,'" Warble retorts.

"I do not!" Mary replies incredulously.

Warble glares at her, and then frowns, shrugging his shoulders. "All right, *she* doesn't. Apparently they briefed you well. I was trying to trap you, and I must admit that *this* time I failed.

"But I will find a way, this I promise you, Ms. Duff or Diller or whatever your name is," Warble threatens, wagging his finger in her face. "I will secure my belongings, you will have gone to all this trouble for nothing, and I will

recapture and reclaim my rightful spouse from the clutches of your diabolical organization."

Mary spins around and stalks up the plank and on to the ferry. Warble follows at a distance, keeping a suspicious eye on her every move.

CHAPTER 4

On the ride over to the island, Warble watches Mary from the corner of his eye as he pretends to be absorbed in reading a newspaper. He has taken a seat across from her so that he can monitor her from a distance while he tries to puzzle out who she really is and whether she is an actress or an automaton.

After disembarking on Madeline Island, Warble gives Mary the slip. He wants to spy on her from a distance and see what she will do when he isn't at her side, monitoring her every move. Warble is thinking that "Mary" will probably telephone her employer, or mad scientist inventor, to report on how things are going.

After a few minutes of looking around for her husband (who is hiding behind a dumpster a hundred yards from the dock), Mary does make a beeline for a telephone booth. After she enters the number and turns her back to Warble, he emerges from his place of concealment and rapidly approaches her, speed-walking, but keeping his upper body as low to the ground as he can.

Just as she begins the telephone conversation, Mary turns halfway around and spots Warble coming toward her, arms pumping frenetically and head down to the ground. When he reaches the telephone booth, Warble looks up and sees his wife glaring at him. Her eyes blaze as she whirls around, hangs up the phone, and flings open the phone booth door.

"Warble, will you cut out this nonsense?! You're ruining our anniversary trip!" Mary complains.

"That's where you're wrong, Hilary, Phyllis, C3PO-etta, or whatever your name is. Warble P. McGorkle has no time for this monkey business, and *you* are the one who's ruined *our* anniversary trip--Mary's and mine, that is.

"Now I want you to tell me what you've done with my wife! If you've hurt her in any way..." Warble threatens.

"This has gone far enough!" Mary interrupts. "Too far, in fact. You've really gone too far this time, Warble. Now look; I can prove to you that I am your wife."

Warble straightens up, slowly exhales, and smirks. With an air of impending victory, he slowly folds his arms across his chest. "All right, then, prove it." He is certain that she--or it--will not be able to. Not in a million years.

"Think about it, Warble," Mary says. "What is something that only you and I know--something that no imposter could possibly know?"

Warble is puzzled. He doesn't know what Mary could be driving at. Putting his hand to the side of his face, Warble taps his temple several times with his index finger, imploring himself in a hushed tone, "Think, think, think."

What could it be that an imposter would *think* was only known by he and his wife, but which could actually be known by someone else? After a few seconds of vigorous mental exertion, Warble gives up.

"I don't believe you know anything that could prove to me that you are the real Mary," Warble says. "But I'll make a deal with you--if you can prove to me beyond the shadow of a doubt that you are my wife Mary and not Hilary Duff, Phyllis Diller or some other actress--or an automaton—fine! If not, though, you must tell me where Mary is."

"Warble, I am Mary, so I do know where she is--I mean I do know where I am."

Warble's eyes narrow. Mary's initial reference to herself as 'she' instead of 'I' had not gone unnoticed by him.

He lets it go, though, because he thinks he has her right where he wants her now. "But if you're *not* Mary--which I don't think you are--then you also know where she is--or you know someone who knows. So the deal is: if you don't prove that you're Mary, you tell me where she is, or find out where she is. Deal?"

Mary agrees and they shake hands on it. "So... lay it on me, 'Duffler.' Give it

your best shot: what do you supposedly know that only Mary and I would know?"

"You always put on your left sock inside-out."

Warble is dumbfounded--which doesn't really mean that he is found to be dumb, in the sense of being utterly lacking in intelligence, but rather that he is speechless. That blessed state is, alas, only a temporary one.

"Then there's only one logical conclusion--you've been cloned!"

Mary rolls her eyes. "Warble, what would be the purpose of that? If I had been cloned--an exact replica of me had been produced, complete with every last shred of memory--how would that serve the cause of any conspirators? The clone would act in exactly the same way as the real Mary--me."

"You've got a point there," Warble answers, rubbing his chin.

"Nevertheless, I refuse to wear a hat," Mary responds, beating Warble to the punch (line).

Warble grabs Mary, pulls her close, and puts his mouth against her ear. "Don't look now," he whispers, "but I think we're being watched. I saw that old lady across the street looking at us."

"What do you expect, Warble? Wouldn't you look at us if you were her?"

"There's no way of knowing that--I've never been her, and I doubt very much that I ever will be. Look, in case we get separated somehow, let's synchronize our watches."

Warble keeps one eye on the old lady across the street, who (as he sees it) is now feigning a lack of interest in them, and with the other eye checks the time on his watch. "It is exact-act-actly 9:42 a.m. Central Time. Are you synchronized?"

Mary pretends to set her watch to "Warble time." Hers reads 9:43, but she doesn't think a minute here or there will make any difference.

CHAPTER 5

"All right, then, Mary, here's what we've got to do: They're obviously after us. We've got to give them the slip, and pronto."

"What do you mean? *Who* is after us?"

"Whoever it is that wants to purloin my ingenious notes. They are ruthless and desperate and will stop at nothing in order to cash in on the fame and fortune, the glory and gain, that is rightfully mine."

Mary gives Warble a look as if she has just taken a bite of rancid Lima beans. "Warble, wouldn't they just buy you out if they were that interested in your ideas?"

"That's exact-act-actly what they *want* us to think, Mary," Warble answers, poking his index finger into the air, "to get us off our guard. But why would they pay me the millions I would demand--which would be cheap at twice the price, nay ten thousandfold the price--when they can eliminate me and then pilfer my amazingly complex and yet simple inventions--without nearly as much monetary outlay?"

"No, my dear, mark my words and heed my admonition: their intentions toward us are not at all honorable--they mean to kill us (and that *is* mean)!"

"Warble," Mary warily asks, "what are you planning to do?" She knows it will be something unpleasant, or at least unsettling, unnerving, and inconvenient.

"They expect us to stay here and enjoy ourselves for three more days. But we will *not*!"

"Enjoy ourselves?"

"Stay here," Warble answers, dismissing her barb with an impatient wave of the hand. "It's a trap. They expect to be able to keep their eyes on us here, or back home in Oconomowoc. We will have to go into hiding."

"Oh, Warble, do we have to?" Mary whines, exasperated. Her begonias will die if she leaves them unattended.

"Yes, I'm afraid so, my dear--it's a matter of life or death."

"Are you sure? What if all they want to do is just beat you to a pulp, within an inch or so of your life? Maybe we could stay." Mary is distraught enough that she almost means it.

"Impossible, my dear. If such were the case, fine--but I know this sort, and they will stop at nothing. This beating-to-a-pulp-within-an-inch-or-so-of-life business is too tame for them. They want closure. Every time. They're closure-fanatics, I tell you!"

"But how do you *know*, Warble?" Mary pleads. "How do you *know* that they're out to get you and your cr--, your ideas?"

Warble gently grabs his wife's shoulders and peers deeply into her eyes. "Mary, have you ever known me to be wrong?" he challenges.

Mary doesn't know where to begin. There have been so many times, she thinks. She also knows it is best to be a little circumspect and not be over-hasty in providing an example. "Well," she says, and then hesitates, pretending to be having a difficult time remembering a specific instance, "what about the time you thought that golf was a Scottish plot for world domination?"

Note: For the edification of the reader, Mary is referring to the following article, which Warble had written for the local newspaper:

<><><><><> The OCONOMOWOC News Service <><><><><>

Edition : 7209 Wednesday 25-July-2001 Circulation : 157,122

BREAKING STORY: [Warble McGorkle, Oconomowoc Correspondent]
===== [Oconomowoc, WI, USA]

GLASGOW HERALD 24 July

KING ADMITS GOLF HOAX

In an announcement that has stunned the world, Angus MacAtak, King of Scotland, admitted that golf is an elaborate hoax that his country originated in order to achieve world domination--a hoax that has been kept alive for hundreds of years.

Speaking at a recent meeting of the UN, MacAtak revealed the following:

"Four scores of four years ago (or so), our forefathers plotted eventual world domination through the dissemination of the activity which some in error refer to as a sport. Golf was invented in order to gradually bring into subjugation all other nations of the earth. Our intrigue has been very successful. Formerly productive farmland has been replaced by golf courses in community after community, water needed for basic necessities has been squandered in keeping these courses green, and the courses themselves present dangers to livestock in the event people were to try to reverse the diabolical trend and turn the golf courses back into grazing land. This danger is caused by the holes, which are strategically placed as "booby traps" for the unsuspecting animals, most especially bovines and such.

Unaware of the presence of these holes, which resemble those inhabited by prairie dogs, said livestock step into them and break their legs, which results in their untimely demise. The ultimate result is that the food supply of golfing nations is disrupted, and its peoples suffer hardship, malnutrition, and even starvation. Engaging in golf instead of more traditional sports such as football, basketball, baseball, tennis, and even dodge ball has also led to the gradual disintegration of the general health of entire populations throughout the earth. Moreover," added the King with a grin, "it is not a coincidence that the word golf is 'flog' spelled backwards."

"Our stratagem has actually been too successful," the King lamented. "It has gone far enough--the world's supplies of rye are now being affected. To think that modern 'sophisticated' peoples would flock to such an activity in ever-increasing numbers is almost inconceivable, anyway. The fault is not completely ours--the subscribed clothing alone should have been enough to make it clear to anyone with half a brain that the whole matter was a joke. Doesn't anybody pay attention to what people in Scotland themselves do? Nobody in Scotland ever played golf. Nevertheless, we feel really guilty about the chaos, confusion and truly ugly clothing styles that have resulted from our misguided megalomaniacal deeds of so long ago."

Major golfers and vendors, including Tiger Woods, Arnold Palmer, Lee Trevino, Titleist, Wilson and Spalding have refused comment at this time. Your humble correspondent stated that he had suspected this for a number of years and will bravely continue to expose other tricks foisted on a gullible public.

In a related late-breaking story, usually reliable sources are stating that a similar confession may be forthcoming from Mia Hamm and Pele concerning soccer. And Hackysack spokesmen have begun denying that their product is an internal prank gone awry.

Now that this information has come to light, American author Mark Twain has been vindicated. Twain was one of the very few to see through Scotland's stratagem, noting perceptibly that "golf is a good walk...ruined."

{GLASGOW HERALD 24 July}
{contributed by Warble McGorkle}

"Mary, Mary," Warble says with a tone of exasperation, "haven't we discussed this before to your complete and utter satisfaction? As I told you, my theory has never been disproved!"

"But Warble, it isn't true!"

"And how do you know that it isn't? Can you prove it? No! And why can't you prove it? Because it *is* true."

"Warble honey, can you prove that it *is* true?" Mary asks, as tactfully as possible.

"What?" Warble asks incredulously. "Why are you trying to twist things around, Mary? It was *you* who accused me of being wrong--the burden of proof is on you, the accuser. I don't have to prove a thing. The *nerve*! To accuse me of being wrong and then demand proof that I am right. Ha! I'm not falling for that old barrister's trick!"

Mary sees that it is senseless to continue the struggle. "All right, then, Warble, what do you propose we do?"

"As I said, Mary, we must go into seclusion. We need to lay low for awhile--until the dust settles, anyway."

'Goodbye begonias, hello road trip,' Mary tells herself. 'Life with Warble is seldom boring, but sometimes I wonder if I should have married Mike Rocosm, the slap-happy vacuum cleaner salesman--at least I could tend my begonias and not have to go traipsing all over creation, fleeing from who-knows-who who-knows-why.'

"So what's your plan, Warble? What have you got up your sleeve?"

CHAPTER 6

"I have a friend in Looz-e-anna we can hole up with--H.R. Brooks," Warble turns and tells Mary with a grin, as they travel south out of Bayfield. He keeps the speedometer of their cranberry PT Cruiser pegged right at the speed limit, to avoid giving the cops any reason to stop him.

Warble knows that some law enforcement officers are easily bribed with visions of free lifetime supplies of donuts; others, he feels, are frustrated inventors with sour-grapes attitudes toward geniuses like himself--whose envy and jealousy could quite conceivably be manifested in a willingness to cooperate in a plot against him and his invaluable inventions.

"Looz-e-anna? Where's that?" Mary wonders.

"What?" Warble asks, exasperated. "Sometimes your lack of knowledge of fundamental geography baffles and confounds me, woman! Don't you know where Looz-e-anna is? It's the home of Cajun and Creole cooking, the great relief pitcher Marty Graw, Dixieland jazz, zydeco, Doug Kershaw, the Neville Brothers, the Superdome, gangrene-colored--"

"Oh, you mean Loo-weez-e-anna," Mary interjects.

"No, dad-burn it, woman! It's *Looz-e-anna*! We've got to pronounce it the way the natives do. We must look like, talk like, and act like southerners when we're down there. We don't want to raise any suspicions whatsoever; just blend in with the crowd."

"Why do they pronounce it that way?" Mary asks. "It sounds ignorant."

"Ignorant? It's the proper way, actually. After all, the original spelling was capital L, o, u, apostrophe, s, new word, capital E, a, n, n, a."

"Who was this Lou fella?" Mary inquires. "Paul's brother?"

"Wench, you're going to drive me to drinkin' if you don't stop--"

"Wench?!" Mary interrupts. "What's with this 'wench' stuff?"

"I told you, Mary--we have to fit in. 'When in the South, do as the rebels do.' Isn't that what they say? It hearkens back to the old pirate days, when--"

"Warble!" Mary interrupts again.

"What?"

"*Who is this Lou guy?*" Mary demands.

"Don't you know *anything* about history, Mary? What did you do while you were in school--write love letters to Johnny Mathis all day long? Come on! Everybody knows that 'Lou' is the Southerner's affectionate name for Louis Pasteur.

"Remember the Looz-e-anna purchase? We bought the region from the frog-eaters for a pittance. The noble Southerners, realizing how they had gypped the Frenchies, decided to show their respects by naming the state after Monsieur Pasteur. It was a kind of 'consolation prize'."

"Why didn't they name it after Bonaparte, or Matisse, or Chef Boyardee?" Mary asks.

"Mary! I'm shocked at your ignorance!" Warble says, shaking his head in disbelief. "Chef Boyardi was an Italian!"

"I was just joking, Warble," Mary mutters out of the side of her mouth, slapping Warble's knee.

"This is no laughing matter, Mary. There's a time and a place for everything, but this is neither the time," (he glances at his watch, ignoring the one on the dashboard of their PT Cruiser, thinking it may have been 'sabotaged') "nor the place," (looking up at the sign along the highway, he makes a mental note that they are 17 miles from Minocqua) "for mirth!"

Warble practically 'harummphs' as he takes a renewed firm grip on the

steering wheel and gazes at the road ahead with his best steely-eyed Clint Eastwood-staring-into-the-distance imitation.

"Anyway," Warble finally says after stewing in his own juices for several seconds, "Looz-e-anna was named after Louis Pasteur--"

"I thought it was named after King Louis," Mary says softly.

"Are you kidding, Mary? That's an old wives tale, at best. Why would they name their state after a character from *The Jungle Book*? It's named after Louis Pasteur--for proving that fruit flies don't like mason jars, thus opening up the moonshine business, which played a pivotal role in financing the Civil War. Not to mention--"

"Warble! Slow down!"

"Why? Did you spot danger up ahead?" Warble asks, his head on a swivel.

"No, there's a fruit stand up ahead. I want to stop and get some cherries."

Warble expels a long, loud sigh. How can Mary think about puny pitted produce at a time like this? Nevertheless, he pulls onto the dirt road leading to the roadside fruit stand.

Warble thinks he smells a rat. "Mary, I believe this fruit stand was erected here very recently," he says, suspiciously scanning the horizon. "I don't remember it when we drove up yesterday."

"That's because you were asleep, Warble. I drove through this area."

"Nevertheless... Do *you* remember it?"

"Not specifically; but I wasn't looking for a fruit stand at the time."

"Aha! You see? It wasn't here yesterday--it was built overnight, and they put up that sign with 'Cherries' prominently displayed, knowing that you're a fool for fresh cherries and would beg me to stop."

CHAPTER 7

"Beg you to stop? I beg you to stop."

"You see? It worked," concludes Warble. "They are quite clever. But we're not going to let them get the better of us. They want us to fork over some of our hard-earned cash, and then they'll be able to lift my fingerprints off the coins or bills I use to pay for your beloved cherries, transfer my prints to some other item, and then frame me for some heinous crime that will land me in the calaboose. You will then be forced to sell them my inventions at a cut-rate price in order to pay the attorney's fees, and then you'll be left holding the bag."

"Of cherries? Good, that's what I want. Come on, let's go."

"Wait a minute, Mary. I have a plan (as usual). You *will* get your cherries, I promise you. But they will *not* get my fingerprints, that I also gar-on-tee."

"Why did you say 'guarantee' like that?"

"It's the way they say it in Looz-e-anna. Don't you ever watch public television? Anyway, this is what we're going to have to do: We're going to steal the cherries--and a watermelon, too (all this talk about the South gives me a craving for watermelon)."

"But that's dishonest, Warble!"

"No, it's not. Remember, this is a trap! They probably stole all those produce items themselves. When I'm able to get the pseudo fruit clerk to turn his head, grab a hunk of cherries and make a dash for the getaway car."

"What, our car?"

"Do you see any other getaway cars around here, Mary?"

"No."

"Then why did you ask? Anyway, don't worry about procuring the watermelon--I've got that covered."

Mary looks at Warble skeptically but resignedly opens the passenger door and steps out. She knows where any argument with Warble will end--with her more confused than ever, and Warble getting his way.

Thumbs in his pants pockets, Warble ambles up to the fruit stand, trying to look as nonchalant as possible. "Howdy," he says, addressing the clerk.

"Afternoon," the man responds. "Anything in particular I can help you with?"

Warble engages the man in small talk for awhile and then suddenly stiffens, opens his eyes wide, raises himself to his full height (which happens to be 6'3 1/2'') and points off into the distance behind the fruit stand.

"Look! There's Elvis shaking hands with The Hunchback of Notre Dame in the pumpkin patch!" Warble yells out.

Marvin, the fruit stand attendant, squints his eyes, jerks his head back in disbelief, and stares at Warble.

But Warble continues staring and pointing, seemingly mesmerized by the goings-on in the field. Finally, Marvin is unable to resist the temptation any longer. After all, the customer may have seen *something*--a deer in his orchard, or...who knows what?

In the split second it takes Marvin to turn around and look, Warble scoops up the biggest and juiciest-looking watermelon and stuffs it under his shirt. He wheels around to make his getaway, looking backwards toward Mary and urging her on. "Make haste, my dearest lover of stonefruit! Make a beeline for the chariot! Do not pass go, and do not collect any moss whatsoever!"

Mary overcomes her astonishment at Warble's audacity in stealing a watermelon in broad daylight, right under the nose of the friendly neighborhood fruit stand attendant, and takes to her heels.

In fact, Mary beats Warble to the car, because he has tripped over a

skateboard some rotten teenager has left near the cranberries, falling flat on his face.

Fortunately for Warble, the pilfered melon breaks his fall. Nevertheless, the watermelon sandwich that was bookended by terra firma at the bottom and Warble's belly at the top knocks the wind out of Warble's sails as he falls with a thud and an 'oof'.

A lady named Kit with a bouffant hairdo--who is packing a pink poodle--faints when she hears the watermelon burst and sees the reddish fluid emanating (or so it seems) from Warble's midsection. She sprawls backwards--which turns out to be a serendipitous turn of events for her, as her prodigious backside breaks her fall quite nicely.

Sadly, though, it is a tragic happenstance for her poor canine (named Caboodle), who had managed to squirm out of her grasp as she began to fall but had inexplicably and perhaps inadvertently positioned himself right beneath his mistress' aforementioned derrière.

There will be no joy in that burg when Kit comes to, for there is little or no market for sailpoodles there.

As Mary hears the pop and crack of the watermelon bursting, and the rush of air being expelled from Warble's diaphragm, she whirls around. Warble is gasping for breath but nevertheless crawling towards the car as fast as he can slither--which really isn't very fast at all, and certainly not fast enough to outpace Marvin, who has overcome his consternation over the bogus Elvis sighting and is rushing headlong toward Warble, bent on detaining the produce-pilferer.

CHAPTER 8

Mary flings open the back door of the car, scurries back to grab onto Warble's outstretched hand and, with nary a how-do-you-do, drags him with all her might and main across the dirt and gravel to the car. Warble stumbles to his feet as they reach the car, and Mary facilitates his entry into the back seat with a swift kick to his backside.

Marvin is gaining ground--he is within a few dozen yards now. Mary runs around to the driver's side door, yanks it open, propels herself sideways onto the seat, cranks the engine, jams the car into first gear, and stamps on the gas pedal. Marvin has just reached the car. He makes a dive for the back seat, but as the car lunges forward he--instead of diving into the back seat and tackling Warble as he had planned--slides across the trunk, falls off the far side, and skids over the ground for a few feet before flipping over and then coming to a halt in a heap.

Marvin is not seriously hurt, but nevertheless immediately begins bellowing out for a medal. "I have gone above and beyond the call of duty. I'm not paid to apprehend desperadoes! I put my life on the line; I gave my all. I deserve a raise, demand a bonus, and apply herewith officially and unconditionally for a Purple Heart!"

Mary speeds out of the fruit stand parking lot, jerking the steering wheel violently to the right as she enters the highway. The right rear door, which had been standing open, slams shut--a microsecond after Warble had pulled his legs all the way into the car (and under his chin).

After Mary has stabilized the car--and her respiration to some extent--she turns around to see if Warble is all right. He, too, has now regained his breath, but is still a little dazed. Lying on his side, he props himself up with his left elbow.

"Good work, Mary. We made a clean getaway. I guess you noticed I experienced technical difficulties getting the watermelon back to the car--do you mind if I have a few of your cherries?"

"Help yourself, Warble," Mary responds, and picks up a carton of the shiny red fruit and starts to hand them back to him.

"Oh, no, leave them where they are--I'm coming up."

And so he does--by turning around and placing his back to the back of the front passenger seat (so that he's facing out the rear window), and pushing himself over the seat backwards. When his head comes down and touches the front seat, he twists his body around, using his head as a swivel, somewhat reminiscent of a break-dancer in slow motion, until he is sitting in the passenger seat in the normal fashion.

"Now why did you do it that way?" Mary wants to know.

"Do what what way, Mary?" Warble counters.

Mary sighs. "*Why* did you climb over the seat backwards?"

"Backwards? Do you mean literally backwards or backwards as in the opposite of the 'normal' way?"

"Both!"

"Well, I did climb over backwards in the literal sense, it's true, but I didn't climb over backwards, in the latter sense, despite what you think."

"All right, Warble, let me put it to you this way: Why didn't you climb over like a normal person?"

"A normal person? What do you mean by that phrase 'normal person,' Mary? How would you define such an animal, and if you could--if you could identify someone that could be classified as *normal*, just how would he (or I guess you would say it would be a *she*) go about climbing over an automobile seat?"

"I've been trying to tell you: Forwards! Frontwards! Head first! She would use her arms to pull herself over head first."

"Ah, but you see you said 'she.' Maybe it's a 'woman thing'--women climb

over forwards, men backwards. Thus, custom on Venus is to go head first, but the custom on Mars is 'DeVille take the hindmost'."

"DeVille? Cruella, you mean?"

"No, not *Cruella*! Coup! Coup! *Coup* DeVille. It's a car--we're talking about climbing around in a car, Mary, don't you--"

"Warble."

"realize--"

"Warble."

"what I'm trying to--"

"Warble."

"tell you--"

"Warble."

"Warble, Warble, Warble. Enough with the warbling already. What? What?"

"It's not a woman thing. It's a normal everyday average person thing."

"All right then--if you're so sure of it, then prove it."

"OK, I will. Do you remember when you were a kid and you climbed over from the back seat to the front?"

"I was never a kid, so I haven't the foggiest idea what you're driving at."

"You were never a kid?"

"Most definitely not. I have never in my entire life been a goat."

"Oh, Warble, for cryin' out loud. When you were a *child*, and you climbed

over the seat, did you go over forward or backward?"

"Forward."

"See?"

"See nothing--I was a kid. It's a 'kid thing'--I mean, 'child thing.' Children go over forwards, adults backwards."

"What makes you think that?"

"Well, you just witnessed it--I went over backwards, didn't I?"

"Yes, you most certainly did."

"Have you seen any *adults* climb over forwards?"

Mary sees that Warble has her dead to rights there. She hasn't seen any adults climb over either forwards or backwards, except for Warble. She throws her hands into the air, sighs, and shakes her head in exasperation. Warble thinks she is shaking her head 'no,' though, and thus admitting that he is right.

Warble doesn't rub it in, though. He lets silence reign for a few minutes, then says, "Once we get to Looz-e-anna, call me 'Colonel' and talk real slow. As much as possible, add a syllable to words to draw them out."

"Warble, what on earth are you talking about? What sort of syllable, exactly, would you want me to add?"

Warble turns in his seat to explain it to Mary. "It depends on the word--based on the vowel you are elongating. For example, notice how I say 'please pass the corn' in southern: *Pleez pay-ess the co-wern*. Notice that? Six syllables for the price of four! No wonder the rebs lost the Civil War! By the time orders were relayed, those fast-talking, no-nonsense Yankees had already attacked and sacked Atlanta, Antietam, Asheville, Montgomery, Shiloh, Chickahominy, Gettysburg, Vicksburg, and lots of other burgs. The southerners hadn't gotten through their 'howdy-dos' by the time the Yanks

were in the saddle, ridin' hard and furious, swift as the wind."

"Colonel Kernel, you're waxing poetic again," Mary warns.

"Sorry, my dear," Warble replies, ignoring Mary's little joke. "Anyway, always break up vowels into two syllables. And since you're in the womenfolk's camp, it wouldn't hurt to bat your eyelashes and act coquettish in any way possible and every way imaginable. And say *y'all* as much as possible. You see, it's like this, Miss Mary--"

"*Miss* Mary? Warble, honey, you're not Abraham and I'm not Sarah. Are you saying we have to pretend we're not married?"

"No, no," Warble says, with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Why are you always jumping to conclusions, Mary? Don't you know that all the women in the South are referred to as *Miss* so-and-so, and all the men are *Colonel* what's-his-face? You're Miss Mary Betty Lou Thelma Liz Nieto, and I'll be Colonel Nieto--Colonel N. Cogg Nieto, to be precise."

"Don't tell me you're going to start walking with a cane and cultivating a goatee now."

"I may do that, my dear, I may just do that."

"Oh, brother."

"Now Mary, I told you, just because you will be bearing the appellation '*Miss*' and I the nobiliary particle '*Colonel*' doesn't mean that you are to pose as my sister or some such."

Mary rolls her eyes and lets out an inner sigh, a sigh of the spirit. "Yes, Colonel, anything you say, Colonel," she says, her eyes on the distant horizon and her jaws set.

"Oh, and another thing, Miss Mary: When in the South, never turn down pralines, pecan pie, moon pies, mint juleps, RC Cola, hush puppies, grits, jambalaya, lemonade, or iced tea. That would be a dead giveaway that you're not a gen-yoo-wine southern Belle."

CHAPTER 9

After the McGorkles have driven a few miles, Warble turns to Mary and asks, "Jeet jet?"

"What?" Mary asks, frowning her incomprehension.

"Jeet jet?!"

"What in the world are you trying to say, Warble? Speak English!"

"Miss Mary, you've got to get with the lingo--the dialect. Dialectics are the key to our success. Jeet jet--*did you eat yet?*"

"Did I eat yet? Warble, if that's what you wanted to know, why didn't you ask that in the first place? And you know as well as I do whether I've eaten yet--you've been with me all day."

"Oh, yeah. Well, in that case I guess I *do* know the answer. You have not. And that brings up a supplemental question: hongry?"

"Am I hungry, you'd like to know," Mary deduces.

"Yes, that's what I said, Miss Mary--'rya hongry?"

"I could stand to have a bite or two," Mary responds.

"Now you're getting with the program, Mary. If we play our cards right, we are *gar-on-teed* to have success."

Mary sighs. "You mean 'guaranteed,' I take it, Warble. Why, pray tell, do you keep saying it that way?"

"Miss Mary, Miss Mary, Miss Mary," Warble chides in his best southern drawl. "What am I to do with the likes of you? Why did I pronounce it that-a-way, you ask? I told you: they all say 'gar-on-teed' away down yonder in

the land of cotton. It's like 'sure' or 'you betcha'. The soul bands in Looz-e-anna sing *Gar-on-teed by Golly Wow*."

"They do, huh?" Mary asks, not having the foggiest notion what Warble is talking about.

"You betcha. I mean, *gar-on-teed* they do, Miss Mary--every chance they get. They wouldn't have it any other way."

Mary spots a Citizen Page (Warble's favorite fast-food chain) in Minocqua, and they pull in for cheeseburgers and fries.

Following their repast, the McGorkles drive through the night. Through Illinois and Missouri, Warble lectures Mary on southern ways. He tells her everything he has learned over the years about the South, knowledge he has gleaned from *Gone With the Wind*, *Dukes of Hazzard*, *Southern Nights*, and a variety of other novels, movies, and songs.

Mary sleeps through the monologue, but Warble doesn't notice, partly because she is wearing sunglasses and nods her head every once in awhile (which Warble interprets as signals of agreement or comprehension), and partly because it is dark and he just assumes that Mary would not be able to sleep while listening to such scintillating conversation. Another reason is that Mary snores *very* softly.

When the dawn ascends, Mary awakes, and is surprised to see that she and Warble are in Arkansas. She thought that Warble was going to stop at a motel during the night, but he obviously had not.

Now that Warble notices Mary is awake, he asks her if she could 'bear to face a plate of vittles,' and if she wouldn't mind driving after they eat so he can 'catch 40 winks.' She could, and she won't mind.

Mary soon spots a roadside diner which, based on the number of cars surrounding it, seems to be quite popular. She is hungry, and succeeds in talking Warble into stopping there rather than holding out for a Citizen Page.

"Lou & Lulu's," Warble reads. "Sounds interesting enough, I guess. Remember, Mary, we are southern through and through. If you don't know what something on the menu is, *don't* ask about it. We don't want to leave behind the slightest clue for our pursuers."

Warble pulls a piece of grass from alongside the USA Today rack outside the eatery and sticks it in his mouth, rolling it back and forth between his teeth, somewhat reminiscent of a log in an Oregon lumberjacks log-rolling contest. He makes sure to hold the door open for Mary and, with a sweeping bow, escorts her inside the roadhouse.

A plastic sign that is made to look as if it's made of wood reads 'Please Wait to be Seated.' Warble makes his best effort to look Southern. He stuffs his thumbs in his pockets and stands nonchalantly, with his legs bowed.

By and by a pert young lady appears to seat the McGorkles. "Table for two?" she asks.

"Yes, ma'am," Warble drawls. The waitress, who looks like a 7/8th size version of Dolly Parton--without the top-heaviness--hands menus to Warble and Mary on seating them, and informs them that she will be back soon to take their orders.

After a cursory glance at the menu, Warble whispers, "Mary, would you look at the items on this menu--everything is 'chicken-fried.' Chicken-fried this and chicken-fried that."

"What are you talking about, Warble? The only chicken-fried thing *I* see on the menu is chicken-fried steak."

"Look a little closer, then. There's not only chicken-fried steak, but also chicken-fried buffalo wings, chicken-fried fries, chicken-fried ice cream, chicken-fried chicken tenders, and chicken-fried RC Cola.

"Don't look now, but I think this may be a trap. They're testing us to see whether we are the gen-yoo-wine article. The traditional Southern dishes are not even on the menu, but I'll order them all anyway. You know they've got them; they just want to see if *we* know they've got them."

Before long the waitress returns. "Are you ready to order?"

"Yes, miss, I believe we are."

"All right then; shall I start with you, sir?"

"You betcha," Warble replies, eager to display that he knows a thing or two about the culinary delights of the South.

"Miss, I'll have a heaping plate of those good ol' grits y'all got back there yonder, some hush puppies, a slice of pecan pie, a few pralines, some jambalaya, a plate of shrimp gumbo, and a large iced tea. Oh, and a glass of Southern Comfort."

"Well, sir, I reckon we *could* accommodate you on most of your wishes, but we don't serve alcohol here."

"*What?* Don't serve alcohol? What is this, are you trying to tell me this is a dry county? No Southern gentleman would even think of sinking his teeth into a generous helping of good ol' grits and suchlike without a drop or two of corn squeezin's or some such to keep it all company."

"Well, I wouldn't know about *that*, sir, but as I said, we don't serve alcohol here--we haven't got a liquor license."

"Liquor license? Liquor license schmicker license. Are y'all afeard of the revenueurs or somethin'? I won't say nothin.' I won't let out a peep. Just give me a taste of that sweet heat."

The waitress just stares at Warble, perplexed.

In his pseudo righteous indignation Warble stands up, simultaneously raises his right forefinger and his voice and proclaims, "This is an outrage! A true son of the South cannot get a smidgen of Southern Comfort to wet his whistle in this establishment!

"As a Southern gentleman who can trace his lineage back to Jefferson Davis

and Glen Campbell, I *can* not, and *will* not, suffer this indignity. We're leaving! Come on, Miss Mary," Warble concludes, standing up and reaching for his wife's hand.

Mary, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, gets up from her seat and heads toward the door with her husband. Just before closing the door behind himself, Warble whirls around and offers a parting shot across the bow to the dumbfounded diners: "The South will rise again!"

Mary walks wordlessly toward the car. She knows it is futile to argue, senseless to question.

"That should throw them off our trail for awhile, Mary. Doubtless they are applauding me now in that eatery. I have passed the test with flying colors. When they write my biography, that episode is bound to be remembered as 'The Chicken-Fried Diner Incident.' Now we will enter into southern society with the greatest of ease."

"If you say so, Warble. I'm still hungry, though."

"We're a little behind schedule now, Miss Mary. How about if we just pop in to the Piggly Wiggly and pick up a few things to snack on?"

"Whatever, Warble," Mary replies, feeling more than a little cranky.

After getting a pecan pie and some iced tea from the Piggly Wiggly (even though Warble hates both pecan pie *and* tea at any temperature, he wants to prove to any spies who may yet be monitoring their every move just how deep-down Southern he truly is), Warble realizes they may have a problem.

CHAPTER 10

"Miss Mary, I just thought of something."

"I thought I heard a strange noise."

"Hardy har har. Very funny," Warble retorts impatiently. Actually, he wishes he had thought of that one himself; he stores it away for future use.

"Seriously, now, Miss Mary. We still have Wisconsin plates on our little jewel here," he says, patting the dashboard of the PT Cruiser affectionately. "We can't go driving around the South with 'America's Dairyland' plastered all over our car's backside."

"We can't?"

"Heck no! We need some local plates. When we get to Looz-e-anna, we'll remove our plates, hide them under the carpet in the trunk of the car, and borrow some from somebody."

"Borrow? So you *do* plan on giving them back?"

"Oh, sure, eventually."

"Are you going to *ask* before borrowing these plates?"

"Mary, what do you think I am, insane? Always remember--it's easier to ask forgiveness than permission. And if you don't get caught, it's even easier."

The McGorkles drive through Mississippi without incident. Warble daydreams about the trip made in 1814 down 'the mighty Mississipp' as made famous by Johnny Horton in his song *The Battle of New Orleans*; also about grade school spelling bees, as made intolerable by Mrs. Buchstabieren, his 6th grade teacher, who had the most irritating way of speed-spelling the name of the state. Tupelo makes him think of Van Morrison, and honey; Pascagoula conjures up thoughts of Ray Stevens, streakers, and squirrels; and Hattiesburg of Green Bay Packers quarterback Brett Favre.

Warble is lost in a reverie filled with corncob pipes, island getaways, river rats, rafts, buried treasure, and caves when he is jolted out of his semi-trance by a giant billboard:

WELCOME TO LOUISIANA

After stopping for supper at Citizen Page and filling up on cheeseburgers and fries, the McGorkles hit the road again. It won't be long, and they'll be in the New Orleans suburb of Westwego, where Warble knows he can 'hole up awhile' with his old friend H.R. Brooks.

Warble's head is on a swivel. He begins to get impatient, frantic almost, about snagging a Louisiana license plate. A car dealership? Nah, too many glad-handing, fake-smiling phonies always nosing around, looking for a sucker.

All of a sudden Warble spots the perfect place to pull in and make a quick switcheroo: the Slidell Police Station. Several of the police officers' private vehicles are parked out back. Warble doesn't see anybody around; there aren't even any windows facing the parking lot. Who would patrol the police parking lot? It's the safest place of all to 'borrow' a license plate.

As Mary realizes what Warble's intentions are, she objects, "Warble, the police station? Can't you find a safer place to pilfer a plate? How about some roadhouse or saloon? At least then you could swap plates with some town drunk or dim-witted truck driver."

"Mary, watch what you say! Some of those 'dim-witted truck drivers,' as you so ignorantly and rudely refer to them, are the sagest philosophers of our time. Didn't I ever tell you about Dipstick, the trucker I once met--"

"Yes, I remember you telling me something about Dipstick, Warble. Tell me, can you really take a person who goes by that nickname seriously?"

"I don't think it was a nickname, Mary. Anyway, I have respect for that profession, and not just because they all have tire irons. Police, on the other hand, are afraid to fire off their guns, because if they do, they have to fill out reams of paperwork.

"Not only that, don't you know that all Southern cops are inept buffoons? Didn't you pay attention when we watched *Smokey and the Bandit*? I hate to say it, Miss Mary, but I'm afraid you really need to improve in your skills of data detection, deduction, extraction, and extrapolation. A po-lice station is far and away the best place to swipe a license plate."

As is usually the case, Mary sees that further debate is futile. She wonders why she didn't marry Otto the sausage maker. He was born boring, got fat at 25, and was bald by 30, but at the moment those attributes don't seem so bad to her.

As Warble parks his PT Cruiser between a couple of cars, he notices a pickup parked nearby that has a confederate flag license plate holder. As he springs out of his car, snatching a screwdriver from underneath the seat as he does, Warble tells Mary to keep a lookout and, if she doesn't see anybody by the time he gets the plate off the car they are parked next to, he'll scramble over to the pickup and grab its license plate holder while he's at it.

Mary considers arguing with Warble, but knows that resistance would be hopeless and only prolong the misery. She tries to appear as nonchalant as possible while gazing in all directions to try to detect any suspicious-looking people (that is to say, any people who are looking at Warble and herself as if *they* are suspicious).

Monitoring the proceedings in her passenger-side mirror, Mary can see Warble twisting the screwdriver as fast as he can. The rotations seem interminable. When Warble finishes unscrewing the license plate from the police car, he looks up at Mary to see if it's safe to go for the confederate license plate holder on the pickup. Mary wants to motion to him to get back in the car. She just wants to get away from there, and the sooner the better.

Mary hesitates, though, because she hasn't spotted anybody watching them. Warble reads the hesitation correctly and is over at the pickup before Mary can decide whether to gesture him back to the car.

It seems an eternity before Mary finally sees Warble crawling along the ground, with his screwdriver clamped between his teeth, and wearing the

holder on his head. He's trying to look military, or at least para-military, but in actuality looks more like a horseshoe crab with a hitch in his getalong.

Warble opens the door quickly but silently and slides into the seat as if nothing untoward is happening. "Nice job, Moll...I mean Miss Mary," he says. As they pull back onto the road, past the police station and out of town, Warble slaps the dashboard all-of-a-sudden, startling Mary.

"Now all we need is a gun rack, with a shotgun in it!" he cries.

"In a PT Cruiser?"

"Sure; why not?"

Mary knows that Warble won't give up his PTC--it's his pride and joy--and won't be able to understand how ridiculous a gun rack would look in one. She objects vociferously to his idea of storing a firearm in their vehicle.

"No guns, Warble! No guns! No gun racks, and no guns!"

Making off with watermelons and 'borrowing' license plates is one thing, but Mary knows that Warble and guns wouldn't mix well at all--somebody, somehow, would get hurt, either intentionally or otherwise.

Warning bells go off in Warble's mind--he recognizes the tone Mary used and realizes, at some submerged level of consciousness, just how infrequently her objections reach that magnitude of intensity, and intuits that this is a situation in which he would do well to sue for peace.

Warble searches his mind for a graceful way out. After all, he doesn't want to appear to be capitulating, for what might that lead to?

CHAPTER 11

Finally Warble shrugs and says, "I guess a gun and gun rack *would* look kind of out of place in this little beauty after all and anyway, Mary."

Mary breathes a sigh of relief and says, seemingly nonchalantly, "Yes, I think you're right, dear." Looking out the window and rolling her eyes, she adds, "You have *such* good taste about these things."

After a dead space in the conversation, followed by a lull and then a pregnant pause, Warble asks as they near Westwego, "Are you ready for your next lesson in Southern speech patterns, conundrums, and anomalies, my dear Miss Mary?"

Mary has been daydreaming about her begonias. Warble's inquiry jerks her out of her muse like Bullwinkle being yanked off stage with the shepherd staff that the seemingly kind-hearted and possibly even somewhat effeminate (based on his voice more than anything else, although that shouldn't be held against him, as it is indubitably a hereditary, and not a chosen, manner of speaking) flying squirrel 'Rocky' (imagine a creature with such a high voice being named 'Rocky' of all things) wields so expertly.

"Southern speech patterns? What on earth are you talking about, Warble?" Mary asks, a little impatiently.

"The idiosyncrasies of the vanquished hordes at the bottom half of the nation's map, Miss Mary--that is the subject of which I speak so eloquently (if I do say so myself--since nobody else will--credit must be given where credit is due, by hook or by Warble)."

"Go on, then, Mr. Eloquence," Mary responds flatly.

"Remember, Miss Mary, that you need to get into the habit of calling me 'Colonel,' lest you slip whilst we're amongst our genteel 'compatriots' and call me by my given name, or 'sugar pie honey bunch,' or some other such term of endearment which you can barely suppress yourself from and which is your wont."

Mary's jaw starts to drop, but she catches it in mid-fall, clamps her mouth shut and sighs heavily. "I *want* to suppress you," she mumbles under her breath, and then turns her head toward Warble and adds, sarcastically, "*Colonel*."

Warble glances over at his wife, a little startled at the vitriol in her voice. All he had heard her say was 'Colonel.' He furrows his brow, shakes his head, and proceeds with his supposedly edifying ramblings.

"Don't ever say 'press' or 'push' while we're in the South, Mary. Instead say 'mash'--any time you would normally say the former, replace it with the latter. For example, if we're in an elevator, you might ask me, 'Colonel, will you ask that man to mash thirteen?', to which I'll reply, 'Certainly, Miss Mary. My good man, will you puh-leese mash thirteen,' to which request he will indubitably wordlessly respond by pressing the corresponding button."

"You've got to be kidding me, Warble."

"Ah ah!" Warble scolds, waving his index finger in the air. "Remember, Miss Mary--it's *Colonel*."

"*Colonel* Warble, then," Mary responds, glaring.

Warble is getting exasperated. He emphasizes every other word of his response with a slap of the dashboard. "*Colonel Nieto*, Mary, *not* Colonel Warble."

"Fine, have it your way, Colonel Nieto. At any rate, this 'mash' stuff seems kind of silly to me. If they say 'mash' for 'press' and 'push,' then instead of watching 'Mash' on TV they watched 'Push,' and instead of 'Meet the Press,' they watched 'Meet the Mash.' Do they call pushers 'mashers' and mashers 'pushers'?"

"Miss Mary, I'm shocked! Those aren't proper subjects for a Southern belle like you to be discussing. Besides, Southerners are bilingual--they understand Yankee as well as Southern speech.

"Verily, they can watch Yankee TV shows without being in the least mentally overtaxed. They just don't *speak* Yankee--at least not to one another. Now to proceed with my most marvelous explanation:

"Since the word 'mash' is used as a replacement for 'press' and 'push,' they don't call mashed potatoes mashed potatoes. On the other hand, they don't call them *pushed* potatoes, either, because that would make it sound as if the grocer had used hard-sell tactics on them, which would be considered uncouth in the suave, debonair, and genteel South."

"Then what *do* they call them?" Mary asks, curious in spite of herself.

"*Smashed* potatoes."

"Now that's silly."

"Silly? In what way is it silly, Miss Mary? They *are* smashed, aren't they?"

"Who?"

"The taters; the spuds."

"I suppose."

"Honestly, Miss Mary, sometimes I wonder why I bother."

"Me? So do I."

"What?"

"Never mind."

"Right," Warble responds, raising his eyebrows. He sometimes wonders if Mary is 'losing it.' "Anyway, one more thing: What do you think of when you hear the word 'palette'?"

"Palate? It depends on whether I'm hungry or not."

"Whether you're hungry or not? Why so?"

"If I'm *not* hungry, the word 'palette' brings to mind a painter's palette," Mary explains. "I picture Dali, Picasso, DaVinci, Van Gogh, or Michelangelo holding the palette in their left hand, leaning back from the canvas, examining their work with a critical and quizzical, yet satisfied expression, perhaps while absent-mindedly twirling a mustache-end between thumb and forefinger.

"If I *am* hungry, on the other hand, the word 'palate' brings to mind food."

"That way of thinking, Miss Mary, has got to go now that we've crossed the Mason-Dixon Line and are firmly entrenched in Dixonia."

"Dixonia?" Mary wonders aloud.

"Yes; It revolves around the Mason/Dixon line. People in the know call the North Masonia and the South Dixonia--Dixie for short. Masonians drink from mason jars, whereas Dixonians drink from dixie cups."

"Hmmm," is all Mary says in reply to that.

"And in Dixie, a palette is a jerry-rigged, slap-dashed sleeping area."

"What is it in English?" Mary wants to know.

"Just what I said--it's an improvised conglomeration of sleeping paraphernalia. As an example, if Johnny shows up at his Uncle Remus' house, and it gets to be too late for Johnny to walk home alone, Uncle Remus may grab a sleeping bag and throw it on the sofa for Johnny to sleep on--or he might simply take an extra pair of blankets and drop them on the floor, one for Johnny to sleep on and the other one for him to sleep *under*, in some semi-out-of-the-way place where Johnny won't get stepped on by Uncle when Uncle inevitably gets up in the middle of the night due to being over-saturated from generous helpings of moonshine liquor with which he washed down his cornbread and grits.

"So, if the Brooks' don't happen to have a spare bedroom, and say they're

going to put a palette on the floor for us, don't get offended thinking that they are intimating that we look like a couple of lift trucks or something--it just means they're going to put some blankets down on the floor for us."

"Why didn't you just say so?"

"I did. Weren't you listening, Miss Mary? And by the way, speaking about sleeping accoutrements, don't be surprised if they call a pillow a 'pillar'--and if they do, don't think that they're referring in any way, shape, or form to Greco-Roman architecture."

"Why would I?"

"Why would you what?"

"Warble...I mean *Colonel*," Mary begins to clarify her inquiry--but is interrupted:

"Here we are, Mary! 157 Riverside Avenue in Westwego, Looz-e-anna--the home of the first, last, only and best H.R. Brooks, my old buddy and pal."

Warble parks the PT Cruiser behind H.R.'s brand new Mercury Mellencamp and, with an air of excitement mingled with reserved dignity, crosses to the passenger side to emancipate Miss Mary from the metallic chariot.

In his best Clark Gable imitation, Warble--all the while imagining he has a pencil-thin mustache--proffers his arm, bent at the elbow, for his wife to use as a sort of handrail. Mary plays along; after all, in this attitude, she can give his humerus a tweak if he does anything worthy thereof.

In an affected gait which somehow mixes a bit of Walter Brennan in *The Real McCoys* with a little of John Gielgud as Dudley Moore's butler in *Arthur*, Warble, with Mary in tow, strides up to H.R.'s front door.

Lifting the brass doorknob (a miniature replica of a New Orleans Saints helmet) somewhat daintily between thumb and forefinger--pinky akimbo--Warble raps out a Morse Code message to his old merchant marine shipmate H.R. Brooks.

In a few seconds, the McGorkles can see a figure approaching through the curved-glass at the sides of the door. As soon as the door opens and he sees the tall, mustachioed, curly-haired, stately figure in the Jerry Lewis-type robe, Warble grins broadly.

Before our hero (or anti-hero, however you may view him) can get a word out, though, H.R.'s eyes light up, and he cries out "War-!", but the object of his surfection (surprise mingled with affection) clamps his hand over his old friend's mouth.

"Shhh, H.R. Don't use that name. I'm N. Cogg Nieto. Colonel.."

"All right, War--, I mean... what name are you going by, then? And please don't call me 'Colonel,'" H.R. whispers.

"I told you: N. Cogg Nieto. Colonel N. Cogg Nieto."

"Oh, I get it--*you're* the Colonel."

"Precisely, old chum. And this is Miss Mary Betty Lou Thelma Liz," he says, introducing his wife. "You can call her 'Miss Mary' for short."

Hearing a strange rattling sound, the McGorkles turn around. H.R.'s neighbor is running across the Brooks' driveway toward them, with a saber in one hand and a musket in the other. He has only run a few yards, but is already out of breath--and his white mustache is looking a little droopy, to boot.

"War? Did somebody say war? Is it the Yankees, returning to the scene of the crime?" the old man wheezes out wonderingly, barely able to catch his breath. "Because I'm ready for them. Bring it on! The South's gonna rise again, and remember the Alamo!"

CHAPTER 12

"Calm down, neighbor, calm down," H.R. admonishes. "Nobody said anything about war. My friend here was simply asking me who the 29th President of the United States was, and I--"

"Ah, phooey," H.R.'s neighbor interjects, waving his hand in a dismissive gesture. "President of the U-nited States my chicken-fried Sycamore! President of the *Yankee* States, maybe! Jefferson Davis is *my* president, don'tcha know, and Robert E. Lee my Vice."

With that, the disappointed man leaves, dragging his saber and musket on the ground behind him in a manner strikingly reminiscent of a cave man, club in hand, returning home from an unsuccessful wife- or mastadon-hunting expedition.

After the McGorkles have been escorted into the Brooks' parlor, Warble congratulates his old workmate on his quick thinking. "Nice one, H.R.! Beautiful, in fact! You haven't lost it; nosirree, Bob, you certainly haven't lost it. Just as smooth as ever!"

"Don't mention it, old salt. Tell me, though: why all the intrigue?"

Warble explains to H.R. all about the plots and schemes to wrest his world-beating inventions from him and how he needs to 'lie low' for awhile, and asks if he can 'hole up' with H.R. and his family for a spell.

"Any time, pard; any time. Mi casa su casa."

"Err...Thanks, H.R. Uh,...Thanks," Warble replies, a look of confusion clouding his face.

H.R. explains that his wife isn't home from shopping yet (she went to the SuperMall), and retreats into the kitchen to grab some liquid refreshments for his guests.

As soon as H.R. is out of earshot, Warble turns to Mary and says, "Did you

hear that, Miss Mary?"

"Hear what, Colonel? About the SuperMall?"

"No, before that; H.R. was speaking Latin--the language of priests, lawyers, and other crooks. He said 'Mi casa su casa.' That means, when translated, 'If it costs me a lot, I will sue you'. The nerve of that guy!"

"Oh, Colonel, dear, I'm sure it was all a joke. You said H.R. didn't have a serious bone in his body."

"Hmmm. Yes, you're right, Miss Mary; it *must* have been meant in jest. An old shipmate would never do that to a friend."

"By the way, Warble, why was H.R.'s neighbor getting so excited about car rental agencies and dog food?"

"What in tarnation are you talking about, Miss Mary? Are you feeling all right? Were you out in the sun too long?"

"Don't give me that line, Colonel. You heard him talk about Alamo, too; I know you did! He said 'the South's gonna rise and shine, and don't forget the Alamo' or something like that."

"Oh, that! Don't you know *anything* about Southern mythory, Miss Mary?"

"Mythory? What's mythory?"

"What's mythory? What's mythory, you so ignorantly ask? Why, the South would be *nothing* without its mythory. It's a real mythory--I mean mystery--that you don't even know the *term*, Miss Mary! Shameful! Absolutely shameful."

Warble makes a sound with his tongue on the roof of his mouth that is supposed to be shame-inducing.

"Oh, come off it, Colonel," Mary says, tapping her foot impatiently. "What is mythory, then, if you're so smart?"

"As everybody knows, Miss Mary, mythory is the combination of mythology and history that defines the South. For example, H.R.'s friendly neighborhood neighbor, over there--old what's-his-face--mentioned two chief elements of Southern mythory: The South rising again, and the Alamo.

"True dyed-in-the-wool, way-down-yonder-in-the-land-of-cotton types believe that the Blue Ridge Mountains are going to get taller as the Rockies recede in elevation. Eventually the South will be taller, elevation-wise, than the North. They will then build forts on every mountain ridge, where they can look down on and monitor everything the Yankees do."

"Why don't they just move to the Bronx and buy a season ticket?" Mary inquires skeptically.

"Miss Mary, you're drifting on me here! Come on--concentrate! Focus! You'll never learn anything if you don't pay attention to me. Ready?"

Warble fixes Mary with an intense and challenging look. Mary simply stares back at Warble, arms crossed, right foot beating time on the parquet floor to the rhythm of her heart.

"Now," Warble proceeds, "the Alamo is a hard-shelled animal that lives in the Texas desert. If not for the Alamos, the early Texicans would have starved to death. No surviving Texicans, no Texas. No Texas, no South. So, the Alamo is the official animal of the South.

"Incidentally or coincidentally--whichever you prefer--the Alamo's unique protective skin layers were the inspiration for a certain type of automobile tire," Warble smiles smugly, proud of his almost limitless knowledge of things both arcane and obscure.

"Priceless, Colonel; simply priceless," H.R. says as he returns to the room, lemonades in hand. He had taken the words right out of Mary's mouth.

The McGorkles, without even having given it any advance thought, have 'planned' their trip to Looz-e-anna perfectly: H.R. happens to have just returned home from a long voyage as Captain of the merchant vessel

Freedom of the Seas and will be, for a full month, a man of leisure.

At first, the days pass pleasantly. The two couples pay a visit to the French Quarter, where Warble expounds and expands on:

- 1) The history of Dixieland Jazz: "It was inspired by the sound that the crickets, bullfrogs, and manatees make in the swamps at night. Satchmo Armstrong lived there, along with his best friend Satchel Paige, and converted the sounds of the swamp to bugle noises-- Satchmo had been a bugler in the War Between the States, you know."
- 2) Bourbon Street: "The locals got up in arms about a tax on whiskey that the British were imposing and whacked the bung holes out of all the barrels of Bourbon the Brits had ported up the hill to the top of the street. They wouldn't have minded being taxed *after* drinking the bourbon; it was being taxed *prior* to drinking it that got their dander up. Their battle cry of freedom was *No taxation without intoxication*. Spurred on by this snappy slogan, rivers of the golden fluid were wasted, soaking the wooden sidewalks, which thereafter warped into a curlicue shape, somewhat akin to the look of cuticles that have never been trimmed."
- 3) The French Quarter itself: "The original French Quarter was a twenty-five cent piece commissioned by Madame Bovary of and for Napoleon. On the 'heads' side Mr. Bonaparte is depicted eating a bowl of the ice-cream flavor named after him, and on the 'tails' side he is applying Desenex to the up-until-then-incurable itch he had just below his left nipple."

Warble is explaining to Mary about the great New Orleans hero Marty Graw, for whom the residents of the city hold a large soccer match each year--to wit, how Mr. Graw was a pitcher for the Philadelphia Phillies when they won the World Series, and how he made New Orleans famous by singing *When the Saints Go Marching In* under his breath while beating out time with his mitt on his thigh as he walked off the mound to the dugout after each successful inning/outing--when a policeman knocks at the door.

CHAPTER 13

H.R. opens the door. "Good morning, sir," the officer greets him.

"Good morning to you, officer," H.R. replies, curious about the purpose of the visit. "What can I do for you?"

"Is that your car in the driveway--the PT Cruiser, that is?"

Warble has been listening to the conversation from around the corner. Hearing the officer's question about his car, Warble knows the gig is up. The borrowed license plate has been traced, and he and Mary are about to be arrested if he doesn't think of something *pronto*. He grabs a pillow from the sofa and pulls Mary close to him. He whispers in her ear, "Mary, stuff this under your blouse. You're pregnant."

"I'm what?!" Mary asks, incredulously.

"You," Warble says, pointing at his wife, "are pregnant." He looks imploringly into his wife's eyes. With a little 'help' from her husband, Mary pushes the pillow up her blouse. Warble examines his handiwork. "Not bulky enough, I reckon," Warble mutters under his breath. He turns on his heels, looking for some type of 'filler' to enhance the overall effect. In desperation, he grabs a volume from the bookshelf, *Ocean Steamships*. "There, perfect; let's go," he says to Mary, pushing her ahead of him toward the front door.

After determining that H.R. Brooks is not, indeed, the registered owner of the car in question, the officer asks if the owner of the vehicle is currently within the residence. The McGorkles rush toward the door at that very moment. Warble practically shoves Mary right into the officer and yells: "Orifice! Orifice! My wife is pregnant! She's about to give birth! We need an escort to the hospital right away!"

H.R. takes a step backwards and stares at his house guests, mouth agape. While he and the officer exchange quizzical glances, Warble presses his mouth against Mary's ear. "Come on, start moaning pitifully, Mary," he says under his breath.

Mary lets out a moan which makes up for in effort what it lacks in believability. Frantic now, Warble yanks open the door and half pulls, half carries Mary outside. "Orifice, please! There's no time to lose! The doctor said that it is *imperative* that my wife make it to the delivery ward *as soon as* the contractions start--and they have."

Warble finishes his sentence looking over his shoulder at the officer and his old friend H.R. as he shoves Mary into the back seat of their car. As the officer seems unconvinced of the urgency of the situation, Warble pulls out all the stops.

"Orifice, if you don't escort us to the hospital *right now*, I'm going to sue the city, the police department, and you personally."

The officer shakes his head and starts walking toward his vehicle. "All right, sir, but afterwards we have another matter to discuss."

"No problem, orifice. Don't worry about that. It's all a big misunderstanding, I'm sure. Probably a case of mistaken identity or finders keepers or whatever."

"We'll see," the officer responds. "All right, follow me," he says, as he gets into his patrol car.

Warble waves good-bye to H.R., who is standing on his lawn, simultaneously shaking and scratching his head. At the bottom of the driveway Warble slams on the brakes, leaps out of the car and flings open the back door. He reaches under his wife's blouse and removes the pillow and *Ocean Steamships* and tosses them, one after another, onto the lawn with a "frisbee" wrist motion. "Gotta go, H.R. Thanks for everything. I'll explain some day. Watch for me on *Letterman*."

With that, Warble screeches out of the driveway and follows his escort for a couple of turns until he sees the sign for the expressway leading out of town. He turns down a side street to 'ditch the fuzz' and is on the road to freedom before the policeman realizes what has happened.

"Ha ha! So long, copper," Warble says when he gleefully discovers there are no black & white cars in his rear-view mirror as he reaches top speed on the expressway.

Mary scrambles her way (forwards) into the front seat. Warble starts singing *Leavin' Looz-e-anna in the Broad Daylight*. "Maybe I should have stayed back there," Mary mutters, gesturing toward the back seat. "Or at least we could have kept the pillow a little longer."

"Miss Mary, that would be stealing! That was H.R.'s pillow, you know!"

"Couldn't we consider it *borrowing*, Colonel?"

Warble wags his finger at his wife and says in an authoritarian voice--the one he always adopts when he is quoting some well-known and well-nigh indisputable figure: "Remember what the Arabian tribal leader and wise man Sheik Spear said: *Neither a borrower nor a lender be.*"

"What about the license plate--and the license plate holder--that you *borrowed*, Colonel?" Mary inquires.

"Miss Mary, sometimes, in compromising situations, compromises must be made. You know the old adage, 'Necessity is the mother of retention.' We needed those things, so we retained them."

"You mean *you* retained them, Colonel," Mary points out.

"Yeah, but you were the lookout man...woman...belle. You, my lovely and charming wife, are in cahoots with me--you are my accomplice, my partner in crime. In a word--give or take a few--our fates are intertwined."

"*Intertwined?*"

"Haven't you been keeping up with *Word Power* in *Readers Digest*, Miss Mary? *Intertwined*: a situation in which two people's lot in life are both intertwined and mingled with that of the other. It's sort of like symbiosis--and then again, it's not."

"Oh, brother, now I've heard everything," is all Mary says to that.

"Miss Mary, what is it with you and this Abraham & Sarah complex? I told you: I am not your brother, nor do you have to pretend that I am. Besides, who would believe it? We look nothing alike. I'm tall and you're short. I have short hair and you have long hair. I have a mustache and you...well, that doesn't mean anything, we still don't look alike."

"Colonel, I have no idea what you're talking about," Mary says flatly. She is about to ask her 'partner in crime' a question about their destination when he says:

"Miss Mary, look!" and points to the city limit sign. "We are about to enter one of the most culturally significant cities in America: Baton Rouge."

CHAPTER 14

Mary looks at her husband dubiously. She really couldn't care less about Baton Rouge and its supposed cultural significance, but she knows the inevitable is coming: an in-depth lecture from her husband about the whole shebang.

"Mary, imagine our country without sports--no football, no baseball, no basketball. You can't, can you?"

"Well," Mary begins to respond, but Warble did not really mean the question in anything but a rhetorical way, and proceeds:

"Without sports, this country would be nothing. Without a drive and a fervor to *win*, how could we have won World Wars I and II? We wouldn't even have had a concept of what winning *means*. So, to make a long story less long, the free world can thank sports for saving their culture, their institutions--their very lives, even."

"That's all very logical," Mary says sarcastically.

"Well, it's pretty obvious when you think about it, isn't it?" Warble continues. "Anyway, I said that to say this: Sports would not have been possible without eye black."

Warble pauses dramatically to let his 'bombshell' sink in. He looks at Mary expectantly. After a few seconds of bewildered attempts to make sense of what he's trying to tell her, Mary finally gives up. "I. Black? Who was I. Black?"

"Who? Who? Who was eye black?" Warble replies, practically beside himself in disbelief at his wife's ignorance.

"Nice owl imitation, Colonel. Now who was he?" Mary demands, irritated.

"He? He? He?!" Warble repeats, still incredulous.

"That's the most monotonic laugh I've ever heard, Colonel. It makes Marlon Brando sound like Andy Griffith in 'Face in the Crowd'."

"Merle and who?" Warble asks, total consternation written all over his face.

"All right, then: it makes Pat Paulsen sound like Charro."

Warble frowns at his wife and shakes his head. "Hardy har har--very funny. Now, I feel it is my duty to inform you that eye black is not a man, nor any gender of human, for that matter."

"What is it then?" Mary is now, in spite of herself, genuinely a little curious.

"Eye black is that charcoal-like stuff that athletes put under their eyes to keep opposing players from looking into their eyes and seeing which direction they're going to run."

"That's what it's for?"

"Sure; what else? When you look at someone, and they are wearing that stuff, that's what your eye gravitates towards--you focus on the eye black. Then, you are distracted and by the time you think to look in their eyes to see where they're looking so you can guess where they're going, they're already gone--they're there already."

It's all too much for Mary. She expels a sigh of exasperation and tries to change the subject in her mind, but her focus keeps homing back in on Warble's explanation about eye black.

"All right, I'll bite: What does all that have to do with Baton Rouge?"

"Elementary, my dear spouse; what is America's sport?"

"Soccer," Mary answers, in the mood to beat Warble at his own game.

"*Soccer!* Are you bonkers? Soccer..."

"...is the most popular sport all over *Central* and *South* America," Mary

finishes the sentence, with a sweet lilt to her voice, batting her eyelashes.

"Miss Mary," Warble explains, exasperated but trying to remain calm and sound patient. "When I say 'America,' I'm talking about the United *States* of America."

"Ohhhh..." Mary says, knowing, of course, what Warble had meant all along, but enjoying her technical victory.

"Now Miss Mary, answer me this: What is *the sport* of these hyar U-nited States of America?"

"Football."

"Football? Come on, now, Miss Mary, get serious. When you think of the USA and its signature sport; when you think of the rest of the world thinking about the USA and its number one sport, what sport comes to mind?"

"Football. Football is more popular than baseball," Mary explains, knowing what Warble wants her to say, but, being in a cantankerous mood, refusing to say it.

"Maybe more people swim in football pools than baseball pools," Warble grudgingly admits, "but that doesn't prove football is really more popular. Star Trek and Love Boat are no longer on TV, but the news is. Does that make the news more popular than those two classic shows?"

Before Mary can answer, Warble pushes his argument forward another step: "What sport is called 'America's Pastime'? Everyone's heard of Abner Tripleday and Baby Ruth, but nobody has ever heard of Brett Favre or O.J. Simpson--case closed!"

"Have it your way, Colonel."

"Thank you, Miss Mary, but I'm not hungry yet. Right now, you need to find out about America, baseball, eye black, Baton Rouge, and how they are all interconnected."

"Lay it on me, Colonel," Mary says, sarcastically feigning a sitting-on-the-edge-of-her-seat level of anticipation.

"Although eye black is used in both baseball *and* football," Warble explains, "its use in baseball reaches further back into antiquity and is more important in a cultural context, due to the aforementioned reasons. This city, through which we are passing at this very moment in time, is where eye black was invented--following which, the name of the town was changed from Maybelline to Baton Rouge. And the name change is proof positive that baseball is America's sport, not football."

"How so?" Mary asks.

"Well, you'll notice that the city wasn't named Puntin' Rouge, Passin' Rouge, Kickin' Rouge, Blockin' Rouge, Tacklin' Rouge, Defensive Coordinatorin' Rouge, or any other Whateverin' Rouge.

"You see, my dear, this city was named for our national pastime: Battin' Rouge--battin' rouge is rouge for batters. In other words, it's makeup for baseball players--eye black, to be specific."

"Then why is the name of the city spelled B, a, t, o, n instead of B, a, t, t, i, n, apostrophe?" Mary asks; she thinks she has Warble dead to rights.

"Miss Mary, everyone knows that people from Looz-e-anna are very...let's say, *casual* about spelling. Who has time to learn how to spell with all the cotton to be picked, crawdads to be caught, alligators to be wrestled, accordians to be squeezed, banjos to be picked, plucked, strummed, and otherwise manhandled in the kitchen with Dinah while grinning to beat the band, and fiddles to be sawed and scraped?" Warble reasons.

"Perhaps it's not a misspelling at all," Mary suggests. "Perhaps eye black was originally used by the girls in the marching bands who twirl and toss batons."

"Yeah, right, Miss Mary," Warble guffaws. "What a preposterous hypothesis! Why would *they* need to intimidate an opponent? Have you ever seen a baton twirler wearing eye black? After all," he concludes his argument, "the Baton Toss/Twirl is not an Olympic event, so no hopeful representative is likely to

assault another to get a leg up on her competition. Women are just not competitive. That's why they don't run countries and start wars and wear eye black."

CHAPTER 15

"I have a question to ask you, Colonel," Mary says as she and Warble head back onto the expressway after stopping for lunch at the Citizen Page on the outskirts of Jackson, Mississippi.

"Shoot," Warble shoots back.

"You should be glad I talked you out of getting a gun, Colonel," Mary teases. Her stomach is full, the sun is shining, and she is--for the moment, at least--enjoying herself.

"I *am* glad about that, Miss Mary--that copper back in Westwego may have acted a little differently if he would have espied a firearm in our little beauty here," Warble says, giving the PT Cruiser's dashboard an affectionate pat. "And by the way, you won't have to call me 'Colonel' much longer."

"Thank goodness. That's what I was going to ask you about. Does that mean we're leaving the South?"

"Yes, ma'am. We're heading for Dayton, Ohio, to the domicile of my old compadres Wayne Wax and Bob Shiska."

"More old shipmates?"

"Yes, indeedy. They both live in that city. After tiring of the sea, Wayne went into some sort of service-oriented business and Bob plies his trade as an electronics technician."

"Do they know we're coming?"

"Of course! I told them I'd look them up some time. And this *is* some time, wouldn't you agree?"

Mary remains silent. It is sometimes embarrassing being Warble's wife; on the other hand, she has to admit that it *is* more interesting than being

married to some old predictable, steady and dependable 'normal' person.

Mobile, Alabama provokes a monologue from Warble about Big Jack's, the club Elvis made famous in his song *Guitar Man*. Montgomery, on the other hand, conjures up images of Rosa Parks, who, according to Warble, once hijacked a bus and forced the driver to take her to Woodstock, where she led the crowd in a Sly and the Family Stone sing-a-long of the old Andy Williams spiritual, *Born Free at Last*.

Montgomery also makes Warble think of--and talk about--Martin Luther King who (again, according to Warble) was the great-grandson of Martin Luther, elder brother of B.B., and who became famous for smashing his guitar over the head of a catholic priest while singing, 'You picked a fine time to leave me Lucille, with four hundred children and a crop in the field.'

When they arrive in Nashville (Warble has already informed Mary that she should pronounce it *Naysh-v'l*), Warble's eyes light up. "Mary, I've always wanted to try my hand at being a country music singing sensation. I've got an idea--I'll start a band and get rich and famous here in Naysh-v'l. I'll call my combo 'Cowboy Warble McGorkle and his Warbling Warblemen'."

"What do you know about being a cowboy, Warble? I'll bet you don't even know the difference between a cow and a cowlick."

"Oh, yes I do--a cow is a large dairy animal that says 'moo,' and cowlicks are those squarish white things that grow in cow pastures.

"All I've got to do to become Cowboy Warble is to dress the part--buy a cowboy hat, cowboy boots, one of those oval belt buckles with my name on it, and say 'yahoo' a lot."

"But Warble, honey, you can't sing."

"I won't need to," Warble replies. "I'll cover all the 'talking' cowboy songs: *Sixteen Tons*, *I Got Stripes*, *Up Against the Wall*, *Redneck*, and *These Boots Are Made for Walkin'*. I can talk, you know."

"Yes, you can," Mary agrees, rolling her eyes and shaking her head. "You

certainly *can* talk. All right, fine; but where are you going to get the Warblemen?"

"Are you kidding, Mary? Didn't you see all the derelicts around these hyar parts? All I've got to do is offer a few of them a bottle of booze a day and the odd pretzel and I'll be all set."

"You're going to have a band of derelicts?"

"Sure, why not? That's the customary way of doing it, isn't it? They'll pretend they're playing instruments (some cheap ones we'll rent from some broken-down old music store), but the real music will be coming from a karaoke machine hidden backstage behind the curtain."

"So your band of booze-and-cheeseburger derelicts will be faking it?"

"Sure; they'll play air steel guitar, air bass, air banjo, air mountain dulcimer, air drum sets, and air cowbell. Wait a minute--I just thought of something," Warble says, his countenance darkening.

"I thought I heard a strange sound."

"Hardy har har--very funny, Mary. You're a real card. But I just realized--I can't go through with this."

"Warble, are you getting a conscience after all?" Mary asks, unable to mask the tone of hopefulness in her voice.

"No, it's not *that*," Warble replies, dismissively waving his hand. "For me to follow through with this plan, I would have to chew tobacco--in order to play the part of a gen-yoo-wine cowboy--and I can't do that. All the teeth would rot out of my head, and where would we be then? Can you imagine me up there sing-talking like this (Warble curls his lips over his teeth and talks while exaggeratedly moving his mouth up and down like Kermit the Frog giving Bert and/or Ernie a piece of his mind) 'If you see me coming, you'd better step aside; a lotta men didn't, and a lotta men died'?"

"I would be the laughingstock of the entire country music industry! No, my

illustrious career, which would most certainly have garnered me a spot in the country music hall of fame before all was said and done, is over before it even began.

"Oh, well; let's get out of this berg. I don't really like country music anyway. Besides, we've got more important business on our agenda."

The McGorkles watch Nashville gradually recede from sight in their rear-view mirror. The next stop is Frankfort, Kentucky, where the name of the city inspires Warble to gorge himself on frankfurters at a deli on the outskirts of town.

After a good night's rest in a room at the Motel 62.8, the McGorkles head towards Cincinnati the next morning--after a quick breakfast of cinnamon rolls, coffee, hash browns, and scrambled eggs at the Citizen Page nearest their motel.

Shortly after crossing the Ohio State line, Mary asks Warble, "How much further is it to your old crony's homes in Dayton, Colonel?"

"You can cut that 'Colonel' crap now, Mary," Warble says, a little irritated. "We're not in Kain-tuck anymore; we're out of the South. People here would think I was some sort of a dope if you called me that here."

"And how would that be any different from usual, Warble?" Mary asks, smiling sweetly and innocently.

Warble just frowns, shakes his head and mumbles something incoherent in reply. He turns off onto a gravel road, finds a secluded spot, and stops the car.

CHAPTER 16

"Warble, what's up?" Mary inquires. Warble doesn't even look at her. He just reaches under the seat, grabs the screwdriver, and gets out of the car.

Within a couple of minutes Warble has their old license plate back on. He tosses the Louisiana plate into the bushes. "We're cheese-heads again, Mary," Warble says as he gets back in the car, having seemingly regained his cheerful disposition.

The McGorkles arrive in Dayton in the early evening. They take the first exit into town and pull into a gas station. While Mary fills the car, Warble walks over to the phone booth at the side of the building and calls his old friend Wayne Wax. No answer. He then tries Bob Shiska's house. Warble hears a weary voice on the other end of the line after the fourth ring.

The monotonic, bored-sounding voice makes Warble think he's listening to Bob's 'I'm not home, leave a message' recording. "Oh, great," Warble mutters.

"What's great?" Bob answers, not recognizing Warble's voice.

"Bob, is that you?" Warble says, standing up straighter and clutching the phone more firmly.

"Yeah, it's me," he answers. *Of course it's me, you buffoon*, he thinks. *Who else would it be--Grandma Moses?*

Bob suppresses his vexation, though, and simply asks, "Who's *this*?"

"It's Warble, bud."

"Warble? Warble McGorkle? What the heck? Where are you?"

"I'm down here at...I don't know where I am exact-act-actly, to tell you the truth. I mean, I'm here in town; I'm in Dayton."

"No kiddin'! What're ya doin' here, you old rascal?"

"I came here to see you...and Wayne Wax," Warble answers. He doesn't mention that he had called Wayne first. He figures that what Bob doesn't know won't hurt him.

"Ol' Wayne's prob'ly out cleanin' somebody's rug," Bob says.

"He's in the toupee business?" Warble asks, surprised. He can't quite picture it.

"Toupee business? No, no--he's a carpet cleaner."

"Oh, I gotcha now; OK, enough of this small talk--are you up to some company?"

Bob is tired. He was up late the night before looking at oscilloscopes and testing circuits. He's an electronics nerd, who finds things fascinating that most people would consider dull as a doorknob. Nevertheless, he's always ready for a little craziness, which, based on his merchant marine memories, are synonymous with the name Warble McGorkle. After all, the fatigue Bob is suffering from isn't so severe it can't be taken care of with a pot or two of coffee.

"Are you kiddin' me, ol' pal? You get right on over here. We'll get a pizza, and some beer, and it'll be just like ol' times."

"You know I'm married now, Bob."

"Yeah? Yeah, that's right--so I heard. You married Page Turner, didn't you?"

"Uh, no. We *were* engaged, all right, but I actually ended up marrying her sister Mary."

"No kidding? Mary?"

"Yes. Why? What's so surprising about that?"

"I didn't even know Page had a sister Mary."

"She does. I mean she did. I mean she does, yes. But I married Mary, so Mary is married now; so she (Mary, that is) changed from being my fiancé's sister to my ex-fiancé's sister when my ex-fiancé (Page, that is) changed from being my fiancé to my ex-fiancé. Nevertheless, they're still sisters, I suppose...although Page is probably really jealous of Mary, now, whereas it used to be the other way around."

Warble goes on in this vein for quite awhile, but finally ends the conversation (monologue) and gets directions from Bob on how to get to his house. When the McGorkles arrive--following the obligatory introductions, small talk and exaggerated compliments--Bob orders some pizza and leaves a message on Wayne's cell phone to bring his family on over and join them as soon as he can--and to bring some beer, too, if he wouldn't mind.

Warble and Bob catch up on what's happened in each other's lives since their years working together in the merchant marines. After a few minutes of being primarily a listener to the conversation, Mary gets bored with the 'guy talk' and gravitates toward the living room and turns on the television.

Bob apologizes that he doesn't have any wine coolers in the house (Mary doesn't normally drink beer). He calls Wayne back and leaves another message, requesting that he pick up some of those, too.

Bob and Wayne grew up together in Dayton, attending the same grade school, middle school, high school, and even trade school together until they finally joined the merchant marines together on an unofficial 'buddy system.'

The two beers that Bob has in the house and the conversation are both depleted at about the same time. Warble and Bob look at each other, a little embarrassed that the conversation has subsided so quickly into awkward silences and that the tone of their conversation is a little stilted. The easy camaraderie they used to enjoy when they were in the same boat together (literally and figuratively) has faded in the intervening years. Maybe once Wayne shows up, and the trio relive a few of their glory days—embellished via the lubrication a few more beers will provide--they will loosen up.

For now, Bob suggests that they join Mary in the living room. He begins to explain to Warble all about his new stereo system, all its specifications and features, when Wayne returns Bob's call. Warble can tell, more or less, what Wayne is saying based on Bob's end of the conversation:

"Hello?...Wayne, how goes it?...You won't believe who's here at the house... No, it's not Barry Bonds...No, it's not him, either. And no, it's not *her*. Come on, now, get serious...OK, enough with the guessing, I'll just tell you: it's 'Radicalia'."

Radicalia was the nickname Bob and Wayne had given Warble in the merchant marines. Warble pretended to be engrossed in the used car commercial on TV, but in actuality was listening intently to the conversation. He hoped, of course, that Wayne would seem excited about he and Mary being in town.

"Yeah! Just now, a few minutes ago. They just arrived...His wife, Mary..." Bob turns his face away from the McGorkles and cups his hand over his mouth and the phone, but they can still hear him say, "No, it's her sister, Mary...I didn't, either...Yeah, yeah..."

Bob then resumes his prior relaxed pose, self-consciously removing his hand from over his mouth and the telephone's mouthpiece and glancing over sheepishly at Warble and Mary, hoping they hadn't been paying attention to the call.

They had, of course, but Mary pretends to ignore the whole conversation; she has a bemused expression on her face, while Warble's is non-committal. Bob continues the conversation with Wayne in an overly loud voice:

"When can you come? Are you on your way?...All right, good. What're you talkin' about? Sure, bring the kids, whaddaya think?... All right...Don't forget the beer."

The phone clicks. Bob realizes he forgot to also remind Wayne about the wine coolers. "Ah, dad-blast it! I forgot to remind him about the wine coolers, too," Bob says, embarrassed at his lack of consideration for Mary. "I'll call him right back," he says, while beginning to enter Wayne's number.

"Don't bother, Bob, please," Mary says. "It's not a big deal. If he doesn't remember, I'll have a beer--or water. Don't worry about it."

Mary was adamant enough, but Bob persists with the almost obligatory confirmation, "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure, Bob; thank you, anyway."

The Wax family shows up thirty-one minutes and twenty-four seconds later (give or take a few milliseconds). After the introductions and friendly but politely wary figurative 'circling' of one another has died down (this time the awkwardness is more between Mary and Janet, Wayne's wife), the two couples and the bachelor Bob begin to 'settle' socially as each gradually takes stock of the others and finds their relative place in the group's pecking order.

The pizza and beer help, as the men quickly revert to their old merchant marine personas. They recount old stories, exaggerated in the retelling for the benefit of the women, who the men think are listening but really are not. The mood of the women seems to mirror that of the men, even though they, for the most part, refrain from drinking.

Wayne's business is going well, and his summary of how it began and evolved only takes a few minutes. Bob could go on forever about his electronics business/hobby, but Wayne already knows all about it, and Warble tires of it quickly, so they change the subject.

"So, Warble," Wayne ventures. "What have you been up to?" He hopes Warble is doing well enough, but not so good as to make him look bad by comparison.

"This and that," Warble mysteriously replies. Then he deflects the curiosity by joking, "I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you."

The obligatory fake laughter is short-lived. The ensuing silence embarrasses Warble. After all, these *are* his old buddies, and they are hospitably hosting he and Mary. He owes them more than a curt brush-off. "What I *can* tell

you, fellas, is that I've got several irons in the fire. Several *big* inventions and ideas. But I'm being pursued by somebody, or some organization, who wants to steal my ideas."

"Really?" Bob says, perking up. He's simultaneously curious, a little skeptical, and a bit worried as--if this is true--it could mean a little danger for himself. He *is* harboring Warble, after all.

CHAPTER 17

When Warble wakes up in the morning, he stumbles into the kitchen to see if he can track down some coffee. Bob has already left for the day. A note on the kitchen counter says that he and Mary should make themselves at home and that he'll be back sometime that night--he doesn't know exactly when, but they'll figure out something for dinner when he does get back. If they don't want to wait for him, they can help themselves to anything in the fridge.

After opening every cupboard but one, Warble finds the coffee. In a few minutes, he's sitting at the table, sipping java and reading the Dayton Daily News. By the time he's through with the paper and awake enough to start feeling restless, Warble hears Mary stirring. He pours himself another cup of coffee and waits for his wife to join him.

After Mary eats a little, and has a glass of orange juice (she doesn't drink coffee), she says that if they're going to stay another day with Bob, they'll need to do some shopping. Warble hates grocery shopping, but even shopping is better than sitting around an empty house with nothing to do. So, the McGorkles arrive at the mall a few blocks from Bob's house just as it opens for the day.

As Mary picks up shampoo and hairspray and other such things, Warble wanders around the mall, from store to store, trying to find something that will catch his eye. He has no interest in approximately 94.2% of the items for sale at the mall: Knick-knacks; clothes; books about how to lose weight and get out of debt; stuffed animals; cookies.

Warble is a little hungry, but not for something sweet--not at the moment, anyway. He wants something that will stick to his ribs. He would really like to have a cheeseburger from Citizen Page--but then he would have to track down Mary, since she would be irritated with him if he ate without her. Just a little snack, something salty preferably, would tide him over for awhile.

Warble spots some vending machines and walks over to them to see if there's anything that strikes his fancy.

Candy bars. Soft drinks. Potato chips. Nuts. The nuts don't look too bad; they seem like the best thing available. Warble drops in three quarters and selects the peanuts. As he wanders around the mall, slowly eating the nuts, Warble notices the guarantee printed on the package:

If for any reason you are not completely satisfied with this International Nut product, please retain this package and contact us. We will cheerfully refund double the amount you paid for it.

Warble smiles to himself and, after emptying the rest of the contents of the package into his hand and tossing them down his gullet, flattens out the package, folds it in half, and stuffs his "find" deep into his pocket.

When Warble locates Mary, she is bordering on ecstasy over the bargain she has found at some boutique or other. Warble feigns interest and attention as Mary drones on and on about how much she has saved. It doesn't sound like such a bargain to Warble, but then again he doesn't exactly keep current with the price of things—he hasn't purchased any new clothes for himself since he was in High School.

"Mary, I've got to make some money quick to satisfy that makeup mania, that accessory addiction of yours," Warble asserts.

Mary ignores Warble's ever-so-slightly-veiled complaint. She's hungry, and doesn't want to reason with Warble, or try to reason, or argue, or discuss, or anything else you might call it. She wants to eat, and she wants to eat *now*.

"Let's go get an early lunch, Warble. There's a food court around the corner."

Mary orders tacos, and Warble procures for himself a couple of cheeseburgers from Citizen Page. After she has eaten enough for her mind to switch from her stomach to what Warble had said, Mary asks her husband, not a little warily, "What did you mean by 'making money quick,' Warble? What do you have up your sleeve now?"

"It's not up my sleeve, sugar pie, it's in my pocket."

"*What* is in your pocket?" Mary asks.

"*This*," Warble says, reaching deep into his pocket and proudly presenting his prize, the peanut package.

"What's this?" Mary asks, understandably confused about the significance of an empty nut wrapper.

"Read it," Warble directs.

Mary exhales, in a mixture of exasperation and slight trepidation. "Just what I always wanted to do--read the prose on a package of peanuts," Mary says sarcastically. Nevertheless, she shakes her head, rolls her eyes, and reads in a monotone, "Peanuts. International Nut Company Peanuts."

Mary does not want to read any more. She doesn't have to, as Warble is too excited and impatient to wait for Mary to get around to reading what he considers to be 'the juicy part.' He snatches the package out of her hand, and pointing to the guarantee, reads it aloud, gesturing animatedly all the while: "If for *any reason* you are not *completely* satisfied with this International Nut product, please retain this package and contact us. We will *cheerfully* refund *double* the amount you paid for it.' *Double*, Mary, *double*. This insanely rich company will pay me *double* the amount if I am not completely satisfied."

"You didn't like the peanuts, Warble?" Mary intones skeptically, cognizant that Warble is no connoisseur.

"I didn't say that, Mary; they were fine. But that's not what the guarantee says. It says that if you are not *completely* satisfied they will refund *double* the amount you paid for them."

"How much did you pay for the peanuts, Warble?" Mary asks, doubtful that Warble's scam/scheme is even worth pursuing, regardless of how unsatisfied Warble may claim to be.

"That's irrelevant, Mary. I'm not thinking peanuts, here--I mean, I *am* thinking about *literal* peanuts, of course, but I'm not thinking *small amounts* here."

"But Warble, you only bought one package."

"So far, Mary, so far. I'll find some place where I can buy crates and crates of this stuff--thousands of dollars worth--open one package, eat a few, decide I'm not completely satisfied--and believe me, I *won't* be completely satisfied until I get the double-or-nothing damages."

"Oh, Warble, you want to bilk a poor old unsuspecting nut company?"

"What's that you say there, Mary? 'Poor old unsuspecting nut company'!? Have you gone nuts? They probably pay the peanut pickers a pittance! Imagine those poor pitiful palookas out there in the blazing sun, toting that barge and lifting that bale all the live-long day, with nary a break and barely a pretty penny to show for it. I'll be a hero to those people! I'll be the Robin Hood of the goober gatherers, the Spartacus of the peanut pickers!"

"So you're going to divide the money with the workers?" Mary asks, although she knows better.

"One thing at a time, Mary, one thing at a time. I've got to rob the rich first, then we'll go from there."

"I see."

"Good; then you'll help me?"

"I didn't say that, Warble."

"Then you're going to leave me in the lurch, Mary? You expect me to work my fingers to the bone providing for you, while you just sit back and watch serial dramas while downing bucketloads of caviar and munching on artichoke hearts all day long? I'm not just a hero of the working man, I'm a martyr!"

"Yes, dear," Mary says, and shuffles off toward the car. Her shopping spree

is over.

Warble catches up with her; he wants to convince her of his rightness in this affair. "Besides, Mary, this is my duty as a red-blooded American. It's my opportunity to demonstrate my Yankee ingenuity. Come to think of it, I'll also be providing a priceless service to the International Nut Company, because I'll be exposing the hole in their guarantee, which they can subsequently close (after I make my loot, that is). I'll end up saving them millions--no billions--of dollars! They should, in addition to my double refund, give me a large reward for pointing out their faulty guarantee."

CHAPTER 18

Warble rises from bed chipper as all get-out the next morning. He has a plan, and is confident of its success. He had felt so effusive, expansive and generous the night before that he had treated his host Bob and the Wax family to dinner at *Jambe de Grenouille*, an expensive French restaurant. It is Saturday morning, and Warble is the first one up and around. He puts on a large pot of coffee and sits down at Bob's computer to compose his letter to the International Nut Company.

Of course, certain of the details will have to be filled in later, such as when and where he will buy the crates of peanuts, his specific experience in being not-quite-completely satisfied--and, of course, he will have to include the receipt.

By the time Bob rises and drags himself to the coffeepot, Warble has completed the draft:

To Whom It May Concern,

Good day. Let me get right to the point. I purchased <fill in the number here after I see how many I can acquire> cartons of your double-refund-guaranteed peanuts.

I regret to inform you that I am not completely satisfied with your product. May I remind you that your guarantee explicitly states that if I am not *completely* satisfied I am due a 200% refund. Well, I'm here to tell you, I am not completely satisfied, no sir! (Or ma'am--sorry about that, I don't mean to sound like a male chauvinist or anything like that if it's a chick who receives this missive).

As a point of order (I learned this from Perry Mason, so I want you to know you're not dealing with some wet-behind-the-ears greenhorn tinhorn here), I would like to take the liberty to quote, in full, your guarantee as printed on your product's packaging. It says, to wit:

If for any reason you are not completely satisfied with this International Nut product, please retain this package and contact us. We will cheerfully refund

double the amount you paid for it.

So you see I have you over a barrel and have caught your overly generous guarantee writers or overly careless lawyers, whichever it is, red-handed (because I am not completely satisfied). I would gauge the degree of my satisfaction with your product at approximately 94.2%. Since that manifestly does not denote *complete* satisfaction (which would require 100% satisfaction, a degree of satisfaction your peanuts definitely didn't achieve with me), I must sadly and regretfully request--post haste, if you please--the double refund due me.

Enclosed you will please find (you see, just because I have outsmarted your lawyers or whoever doesn't mean I can't be dignified, professional, and polite) a photocopy (my momma didn't raise no fools!) of my receipt for your faulty product in the amount of <put in the amount here, once it's known>.

You can make out the check (from your oodles of moolah which you have extorted from the poor and oppressed workers and hungry folks of the world, who waste their money on your less-than-completely-satisfying product) to the order of:

Warble P. McGorkle

And send it to the following address:

Warble McGorkle
c/o Bob Shiska
157 Riverside Avenue
Dayton, Ohio 31415-9265

P.S. Fork over the dough, but quick! Otherwise, I will unleash a legion of lawyers, an array of attorneys, an army of advocates, a battery of barristers, on you.

P.S. Revisited: Hopefully a word to the wise (or at least those who know what's good for them, which side of their bread is buttered, etc.) is sufficient.

P.S. Revisited Addendum: If not (although I hate to be a name-dropper), I must confess that I do have a certain business 'arrangement' with a certain 'gentleman' named Guido who is, let's say, not normally prone to being

gentle, delicate, and dainty in matters of this sort.

Sincerely,

Warble P. McGorkle

Warble is enormously satisfied with himself--definitely more satisfied with himself than he was with the peanuts, although, to tell you the truth, they were just as good as any other peanuts he had ever had the pleasure of masticating.

After Bob goes to work, Warble impatiently waits for Mary to wake up. After a few minutes of pacing back and forth between the kitchen, the living room, and the door of the guest bedroom (the five cups of coffee are probably playing a role here), Warble's impatience to get his business consummated overwhelms him. He rustles through Bob's kitchen drawers until he finds a pen and pad. He scratches out a note to his wife:

Mary,

I'm at PriceBiz buying peanuts. Be back soon.

Warble

CHAPTER 19

Warble marches into the PriceBiz mega-warehouse store and makes a beeline towards the first 'associate' (PriceBiz's democratic-sounding-moniker for a poor working stiff) he sees. "Say, bud, do you have cartons of International Nut Company Peanuts?" he asks.

"Peanuts? Peanuts are on aisle 11. We have Planters, we have--"

"I don't want Planters. I want International Nut Company."

"No problem. I think we've got them, too. I think the Planters are on sale right now, though."

"I don't care about that. I don't want Planters at any price. I'm a loyal fan, advocate, and customer of the International Nut Company--best in the business! I do all my peanut trade with I.N.C."

The PriceBiz associate eyes Warble warily. "OK, whatever you say, sir," he says, pointing him in the direction of aisle 11.

In a scant few seconds, Warble spots the I.N.C. peanut boxes. Most of them are on the top shelf, out of reach of just about anybody not employed by the NBA. Warble considers whether to call one of the PriceBiz associates to help him, but quickly decides against it--he can scramble up there himself and get the nuts in the time it would take him to track down one of those sorry rascals.

Just as he's about to climb up onto the shelves to shove the boxes down to the floor, Warble catches himself in a tactical blunder. He realizes he had better make an account of his cash cache first to see how many boxes he can afford. After a quick inventory of his liquid assets, Warble sees that he's only got \$314 cash on him. He could use his credit card, but he doesn't know how far he is from his credit limit, and doesn't want to go to the hassle of finding out (he would have to either call the credit card company--which would take longer than Warble's patience would allow--or call Mary, who would not be happy about him spending the last of their remaining assets on

what she views as a scam).

Warble decides to buy as much as he can with the cash on hand; once he doubles his investment (when the I.N.C. pays up) and finds out how much credit is left on the card, he can make a bigger purchase the next time.

Calculating how many boxes he can buy, Warble jumps up as high as he can, trying to tip the end of the box with his fingers enough so that it will fall off the shelf. After a couple of unsuccessful attempts, Warble mutters under his breath, "Dad-blast my European-American blood!"

Irritated, Warble scales the giant shelf. On the way up, he knocks over some boxes of Pop Tarts and crushes some humongous packages of marshmallows with his foot.

Warble finally reaches his goal, and slaps down seven boxes with his right hand, while holding onto a vertical support on the shelf with his left. One after another, the boxes hit the floor. Bft! Bft!Bft!Bft!Bft!Bft!Bft!

A couple of curious shoppers look over, a little taken aback at Warble's quick-fire box-dropping technique and apparent obsession with peanuts. Just as a PriceBiz associate arrives on the scene to investigate the unusual goings-on, Warble leaps, catlike, to the floor.

The associate looks as if he's about to ask Warble what he's doing, but a look from Warble that falls somewhere between slightly surly to downright menacing (depending on your skill at interpreting such facial gestures) stops him in his tracks. As Warble stares him down and stacks the peanut boxes on the floor, the associate backs off and turns on his heels, returning to whatever it was he was doing (or not doing) prior to the commotion.

Warble sees he has the young man cowed. "Boy!" Warble barks out. "I say boy! Bring me a cart for these cartons."

Out of a mixture of fear of what Warble might do or say next and irritation from being yelled at and called 'boy,' the associate hesitates for only a fraction of a second and then takes off in the opposite direction, running like a bat out of Dallas (if bats could, in fact, run, that is).

Warble is like a bear when it comes to people running from him. His natural instinct is to chase them down, slap them upside the head, turn them upside-down, and then shake them like a rag doll until all their change falls out of their pockets.

Warble spins around and dashes to the opposite end of the aisle, which is closer. He then turns left, running parallel to the direction of travel of the wayward associate. As he comes to each aisle, he looks down it to see if he can get a glimpse of the fleeing PriceBiz employee. "You can't get good help nowadays," Warble grumbles as he continues the pursuit.

One of the associate's associates (that is to say, one of the other store employees) hears Warble's complaint. Without missing a beat while she stamps prices on a crate of bread-and-butter pickles, she shakes her fist at him and yells, "You get what you pay for, you know!"

A third associate, who also hears the discouraging words pass Warble's lips, picks up a can of dog food and heaves it at him with all her might. The dog food canister misses its mark and, instead of beaming Warble in the head, as was her intention, knocks over an economy-sized jug of anti-freeze two aisles beyond him and to his right. The anti-freeze jug hits the floor with a mighty thud, bursts open, and gushes its iridescent cyan-colored fluid all over the floor.

Warble is just about to catch up with the fleeing associate when there is a juxtaposition of his path and that of the newly arisen river of anti-freeze. It is a wonder that bananas have such a reputation as slip-inducers when anti-freeze works so much better.

Warble is on his back in an instant, sliding forwards and spinning around counterclockwise at approximately equal speeds. Warble finally comes to rest--so to speak--when he slams into a bank of tires.

It could have been worse; the tires cushion the blow of the impact for Warble as he smashes into them, and the tires fall--to port, starboard, larboard, aft, and every which way. Besides Warble, two hillbillies and somebody's grandma are buried beneath the anarchy of rubber.

Warble looks around at the aftermath. He's glad to be alive. He *is* lucky, too: he just missed hitting a long, red, metal contraption that would surely have done him serious bodily injury had he smashed into it rather than the wall of tires.

The associate Warble had been pursuing, who has now apparently regained his courage, stands over the prone potential purchaser of piles of peanut packages, smiles broadly and points at the metal contraption. "There's your cart, sir; Have a nice day!" he says, and struts away, not even bothering to help his poor beleaguered fellow associate in the tire department extricate the 'guests' buried beneath and amongst the scattered steel-belted radials.

Wordlessly, Warble rolls over, inspects the damage, is disappointed to find he has no superficial marks which could lead to a windfall in a personal-injury-lawsuit case, and resigns himself to sticking with his original plan, the relatively small-time and tedious peanut double-refund opportunity.

Warble drags the cart behind himself with one hand and returns to the aisle where he left his cartons of peanuts stacked. Warble desultorily loads the cartons onto the cart and heads to the checkout line.

"What was that big commotion back there--did you see it?" the associate at the checkout stand asks Warble as she rings up his sale.

Warble glances at her and shrugs. "I don't know, for sure. I heard that two skateboarders and somebody's personal fitness trainer got into a big heated argument over tires, dog food, and anti-freeze. I didn't pay much attention; I try to stay out of other people's business."

The associate, disappointed with the man she considers a boring old fuddy-duddy, and angered at the oblique rebuke, silently finishes ringing up the sale. Efficiently, coldly, in a workwomanlike fashion, she informs Warble of his total, accepts his money, and hands him his change.

As Warble pulls his cart away from the checkout counter, the clerk follows his progress with her eyes, a scowl on her face. She looks around at the associates and guests in the vicinity and, when she is certain nobody is

watching her, sticks out her tongue at Warble as he walks away. He is, of course, oblivious to her disrespectful gesture.

Warble is about to step into the automatic-door-opening-zone at the store's exit when he notices a sign hung from the ceiling above the customer service desk. He parks his carton of peanuts next to said counter and approaches it.

CHAPTER 20

The process of obtaining a PriceBiz credit card only takes a few minutes. Warble falsifies most of the information on the application, such as race, religion, color, creed, national origin, and political party. He claims to be an African-American member of the Aryan Nations from Iceland. For 'political party,' he divulges only 'If you provide door-to-door limousine service and all the booze I can drink, I'll consider gracing you with my presence.'

The obviously painfully bored associate quickly scans Warble's application, sets it aside, and asks him to 'toe the mark' in order to have his photograph taken. Warble objects, "I don't allow people to take my photograph. I believe that if I allowed you to photograph me, you would capture my spirit--and then where would I be, spiritless--huh? Answer me that, if you can."

The bored associate, instead of being grateful for the change to her routine, no matter how minuscule or insignificant, exhales exasperatedly and pops her gum. "Look, mister, you wanna PriceBiz credit card (which is good in all 314,159 of our stores in this entire country as well as some yet to come in Canada, Mexico, Guatemala, Guam, and East Timor), you gotta lemme take your pitcher."

"Well, in that case..." Warble replies, and places his feet directly on the outline of the shoes painted on the store's floor.

When the mug shot has been transferred to a laminated card, the associate hands it to Warble and smiles as insincerely as is humanly possible and repeats the spiel about all the stores in which the card is valid. Warble snatches the card from her hand in mid-sentence, says, "Yeah, yeah, yeah," and pushes his cart out of the store.

As the automatic door closes behind Warble, yet another associate, who had overheard Warble's last remark, rushes up and asks the customer service associate, "Was that Paul McCartney?"

The bored gum-popper glances at the application, having forgotten Warble's name already. "No," she answers. "Who's Paul McCartney?" she adds, looking

at her co-worker as if she had just arrived from Venus.

I won't bore you with the details of Warble driving home, finishing his letter to the International Nut Company by filling in the number of cartons he purchased and their total price and so on, and mailing the letter.

In fact, the next few days go by in a rather humdrum fashion. Bob goes off to work, Mary establishes a routine in her temporary home, and Warble sits around all day impatiently waiting for the mail to arrive.

Each afternoon, Warble expects a letter from the International Nut Company accompanied by a check, a profuse apology for their failure to satisfy him completely, and effusive thanks for pointing out to them the error of their ways (their erroneous ways being the wording of their guarantee in such a litigiously porous manner).

Finally, the day Warble has been eagerly and anxiously awaiting arrives (and none too soon, for, like fish, after several days at his house the McGorkles have begun to stink a little in Bob Shiska's estimation). The letter arrives.

CHAPTER 21

Warble rips open the envelope and pulls out the letter. He sets it aside for the moment and looks at the check. It is made out to him, exactly as he directed, and in the expected amount (\$628.32). Warble pumps his fist in the air.

"I did it! I'm a genius, I tell ya, Mary!"

"Yes, dear," Mary says, and turns away. She returns to the kitchen, where she is preparing dinner.

Warble folds the check in half and places it--not without a certain elan, a veritable flourish--into his wallet. He then picks up the letter to savor the kudos and words of praise he is certain will be found therein. When he finishes reading the letter, though, he bolts into the kitchen. "Mary, Mary, listen to this," Warble begins, so upset that he is panting. "Not only does the I.N.C. fail to thank me and praise me for my selfless and altruistic efforts in their behalf, they tell me not to buy any more of their product! Check this out:

'Mr. McGorkle, ...bla bla bla...although we were somewhat amused by your letter's content and presentation, we must warn you that this check, issued as a gesture of goodwill and...bla bla bla...as a recompense for the moment of mirth-respite you provided this dour old...bla bla bla...request that you purchase no more of our product.'

"Imagine their nerve, Mary! They don't want *me*, one of their best and most loyal customers, who passed over the more popular and even a trifle less expensive brand so as to purchase their wares, to discontinue my trade with them! Dagnab it, I won't do it! Sometimes you have to stand up for your rights, Mary, and this is one of those times. I will purchase whatever brand of peanuts I darn well please to!"

Mary, working at the kitchen sink, looks over her shoulder at Warble. "But Warble, I thought you weren't satisfied with their peanuts. Why would you *want* to purchase more of them?"

"Whose side are you on, Mary?" Warble says, in a plaintive voice. "You vowed to stand by me no matter what--through sickness and health, for richer, for poorer--and now you side with the International Nut Company over me?"

Mary drops what she's doing and turns around to face Warble. "Honey, don't look at it that way. I was just asking a question."

Warble realizes that he may have been a little too hasty in launching the attack on his wife, especially since it's getting near supper time and he wants to eat--without fear of being poisoned.

"All right, sugar-pie, I'm sorry I jumped all over you. I apologize from the heart of my bottom."

"From the *heart* of your *bottom*, Warble?" Mary asks, hands on hips, body tensed for action--in battle formation, as it were.

"I meant 'from the bottom of my heart,' you know that, Mary," Warble replies. "From the *bottom* of my *heart*. Anyway, to get back to the salient point: I will not take this lying down, standing up, sitting on my haunches, in an angle of repose, or in any other bodily attitude--I will not be deterred from purchasing as many International Nut Company peanut packages as I darn well choose to! If those peanut mavens in their ivory tower (probably constructed from the bills of near-extinct woodpeckers) think they can stop Warble Poundcake McGorkle from exercising his freedom of purchasing power, they've got another think coming!"

"And what 'think' is that?" Mary asks.

"What the Dallas are you *talking* about, Mary?"

"You said they've got another *think* coming--what sort of 'think' do you imagine it to be--the one you think they have coming, I mean."

"Don't even think about it, my darling wife--it's unthinkable."

"If you say so, Warble."

"I did, I do, and I will continue to, forevermore," quoth the Warble.

Our broken-down hero of the Ohio afternoon strides resolutely to Bob's computer and launches his favorite word processor (Bob's favorite, that is, not Warble's, as Bob does not have Warble's favorite word processor installed--something that irritates Warble to no end, as the keyboard shortcuts he relies on so heavily are not available).

Warble is going to draft another letter to the International Nut Company, and fight fire with fire: their demand for a cease-and-desist in the purchase of their product is going to be met with a counter-demand from Warble for a very large settlement--or else!

Thirty-one minutes and change later, Warble has finished his letter:

Mr. Otto Deidacht,

Good day. As on the previous occasion of my earlier epistle to you, allow me to get right to the point, straightaway (as the Brits say). In your corresponding correspondence with me, you ordered me (quite rudely, I might add) to discontinue my trade with you in your less-than-completely-satisfactory product.

Here is my response to you, Mr. Deidacht (hold on to your hat, and take a seat if there is any history of heart problems in your family):

1. Go jump in the lake.
2. You might as well follow #1 above, because after I'm through with you and your amateurish attempts to intimidate me and "shut me down," you'll be all washed up, anyway.
3. It is my duty to inform you that it is my intention to purchase hundreds of thousands of cartons of International Nut Company peanuts. I now have the wherewithal to buy your entire supply of said product.
4. Why not save me (and yourself) a lot of hassle, wasted time and energy, and simply cut me a check for, oh, let's say, \$3,141,592.65? In exchange for the aforementioned modest check (I could hold out for more, you know, but in the interest of expediency and because

of my personal affection for you, Otto baby, I will graciously sign a legal document assuring you that I will never again seek redress from you for another dime--or any amount, for that matter), I agree to cease and desist forevermore.

5. Add another \$628.32 to that check (or make out a separate check, I don't care), because my earlier refund was not made *cheerfully*. It is with great sadness of heart that I am compelled, forced, driven by sheer weight of conscience and duty, to remind you that your guarantee says, and I quote, 'We will *cheerfully* refund double the amount you paid for it'--that was not done, I'm sure you would have to, with head hung in dejection, admit. Your mistake, Mr. Deidacht, has cost your company dearly, and may cost you your job.

Have a nice day!

Sincerely,

Warble P. McGorkle

If necessary (that is, if Mr. Deidacht does not respond in a positive way to Warble's letter in a timely manner), Warble plans on traveling throughout the United States, visiting all the PriceBiz warehouse stores, and purchasing all the International Nut Company peanut cartons they have, using his PriceBiz credit card to do so. He will then pay for the purchases from the check he will receive from I.N.C. when he receives his double-refund--and will still be ahead millions of dollars.

The response to Warble's latest letter comes even more quickly than the first one had. During the three days prior to its arrival, Warble had spent his time planning a world vacation, a new mansion for Mary and himself, contemplating how many servants he will need to hire (and how he can get out of paying them), which tax accountant to engage, and all the other stressful things a person of Warble's imminent stature needs to do.

Most importantly, Warble is planning what exactly to say and do on the full hour of television time he's going to book to explain to the world his manifold inventions. Nobody will be able to steal his ideas then! He'll have gone on record, publicly, as their originator.

When the long-awaited message from the International Nut Company finally arrives, Warble practically suffers an apoplectic fit in his rush to open it and kiss the wonderful, beautiful check made out to him, in an amount that will ensure his comfort--and more--for the rest of his natural born days.

Warble rips the envelope to shreds in his haste to extract its contents. The white strips of confetti-like envelope remnants rain down on Bob's carpet. But there is no check within. Warble can't understand it. Why would they send the letter without the check? Maybe the check is coming by certified mail? Or is going to be electronically transferred into his account, or...?

All these conjectures are racing through Warble's mind as he fumbles with the letter and finally manages, with shaking hands, to get it open.

CHAPTER 22

"Oh, no!" Warble exclaims. "Say it ain't so, Otto, say it ain't so," he moans, his right hand on his forehead as his left tremblingly holds the letter.

"Mary, come quick! I'm about to faint, and I think you should catch me--unless you want a husband with a broken neck, which injury may be inflicted if I fall unimpeded onto the brick surrounding Bob's fireplace there," he points.

As soon as Warble sees Mary standing between him and the fireplace, arms outstretched and braced to catch him, he slumps groaning into her arms.

About an hour later Warble wakes up in the arms of his loving wife, who is swabbing his feverish brow with a wet washcloth as he babbles on about the unfairness of life and the vagaries of false friends. "Oh, woe is me! I trusted you, Otto, like a brother," Warble groans, staring dejectedly at the ceiling. "I was nice and friendly and polite to you, and this is how you repay me? Oh, how difficult it is to endure such hardships! To be reviled, rejected, repulsed and rebuked by someone I considered a true and faithful friend. Oh, how bitter life is--how utterly, heartbreakingly--"

"Radicalia, snap out of it," Bob says, snapping his fingers.

Bob's urgent attempts to rouse Warble are fruitless. The prone and hysterical would-be millionaire continues on with his rambling dirge.

"Well, there's only one thing for him, Mary," Bob says, shaking his head. "Help me drag him out to the front lawn."

After laying his semi-conscious friend on the grass, Bob goes into his garage and returns with a bucket. He fills it with water and, in a sweeping motion quite graceful for a big clumsy man like Bob, empties the entire contents onto Warble's head.

Bolting upright on the lawn and flailing his arms all around, Warble yells out, "Man overboard!" His eyes are clenched tightly shut. "It's me! Man overboard! Throw me a line! I'm drowning! Get the lead out, you landlubbers!"

Yo-ho, yo-ho, a lifesaver for me, it is--but quick! Throw me a lifesaver, or I'll have you all keel-hauled, by the order of Captains Ahab, America, Blood, Kidd, Cook, Columbus, Cabot, Cortez, Kangaroo, Kirk, Crunch, Hook, Nemo, Queeg, Sinbad, and the whole bloody lot of 'em!"

Bob reaches into his pocket, removes a roll of candies, scrapes away the silver foil on the top with his thumbnail (Bob has something against the red, waxy, string-like thingy that's supplied for the purpose--possibly something going back to an early childhood experience, pertaining perhaps to having his umbilical cord wrapped around his neck as he was born), peels away a good quarter inch of wrapper, bends down, and thrusts it Warble-ward. "Here ya go, old buddy," Bob says, waving the holey candy in front of Warble's face.

Warble opens his eyes. He sees Mary looking down at him, hands on hips. He sees the neighborhood youngsters pointing at him and laughing. Then he finally notices the proffered candy.

"Oh, thanks, Bob," Warble says and, after stuffing the candy in his mouth and immediately biting on it as hard as he can (causing a crunching, grinding sound that irritates Mary to no end), gets up, brushes the grass off the seat of his pants and, without hesitation or a look backwards, marches into the house.

Mary and Bob follow at his heels. "Warble, what are we going to do now?" Mary asks as she sits down next to Warble on the sofa, turning to face him. Bob feels he may be intruding, but finds the event so fascinating that he remains there watching, transfixed by the seemingly surreal scene unfolding in his living room.

"Mary," Warble begins, "We have got to follow the advice of the great philosopher Willie Nelson and get 'on the road again.' It seems the International Nut Company has no sense of humor--or at least that imbecile Otto Deidacht doesn't--and they have sued me for some alleged misconduct or another. We can't afford the time it would take to lollygag around in court for weeks or months, playing footsies with high-priced, pretty-boy lawyers--I've got more important things to do. So, in the interest of mankind's future viability and the viability of their future--which I cannot guarantee if my mobility is curtailed--, we have got to scam, skedaddle and

make tracks. We are compelled by circumstances beyond our control to 'light out for the territory'."

"Which territory is that, Warble? You don't mean the Yukon Territory, do you?" (Mary doesn't like cold weather).

"No, ma'am. Nor do I mean the Northwest Territory. No white horses or yellow knives for us. In fact, we're going to a place just about as different from the Yukon Territory as we could go and still be in the United States."

"Hawaii?"

"No, not Hawaii. Think alligators, everglades, Seminoles, orange juice, Jimmy Buffett, octogenarians, dimpled chads, hurricanes, and Disney World."

"Florida!"

"Quite right, Mary. You'll never guess the treat I have up my sleeve for those sun-baked old geezers down there."

CHAPTER 23

Lexington, Kentucky; Knoxville, Tennessee; Columbia, South Carolina; Savannah, Georgia. These are the cities that lend some flavor to the McGorkles' otherwise rather uneventful trip from Ohio to Florida.

"Shouldn't you put the Louisiana plate back on the car, 'Colonel,'" Mary asks as they cross the Florida state line.

Warble doesn't tell Mary that he discarded the 'borrowed' license plate long ago. Not only might she use that against him as evidence that he wasn't really 'borrowing' it, but it was also an ill-advised move in case they should ever need it again--say, if they head down into Mississippi or Alabama or some such place. "No, that won't be necessary, Mary," Warble improvises. "Floridians aren't really Southerners. They're just a bunch of old geezers from Michigan and New York--the Geritol bunch; the polyester set. And so, you don't have to call me 'Colonel' here."

"So they don't talk funny in Florida?"

"Sure they talk funny; it's expected--but all the accents are fake. The tourism industry would collapse if people came here and all the locals sounded like Al Michaels or George Clooney. Tourists want to experience a piece of the South when they come down here--hear that Southern drawl, drive by a chain gang working along the highway, and all that stuff."

"You don't say," Mary says.

Warble slaps the steering wheel. "Mary, I detect a note of disbelief in your tone. I'll prove it to you. We'll go into a restaurant, and when you hear one of those fakers forget their southern accent, call them on it, and then they'll respond with the thickest, hokiest-sounding pseudo-Southern accent you ever done heard in all your born days."

"Who's faking it now, Mr. Phony Baloney?"

"What are you talking about? I wasn't using a Southern accent, just

Southern diction."

"Whatever, Warble."

"Well, there's a big difference, Mary. Accent is accent and diction is diction, and never the twain shall meet. We've got to fit in, you know. As the old saying goes, 'When in Rome (Georgia, that is) do as them funky old Romans do.'"

"But we're not going to Georgia."

"Georgia, Florida, what's the difference? They're like North and South Dakota, or North and South Carolina."

"What do the Dakotas and Carolinas have to do with it?"

"The Dakotas are both really the same state. After all, there's no vehicle called a North Dakota or a South Dakota--it's just a Dakota. And there's no football team called the North Carolina Panthers or the South Carolina Panthers--because it's really the same state, with an arbitrary division in the center. And that's why Peach is the most popular flavor of Gatorade in the sunshine state--because Georgia and Florida are like two peas in a pod."

"Peach Gatorade?"

"You betcha...By golly! Wow! All this talk about peaches is really making me hungry. I feel like having a cheeseburger--maybe with a peach-flavored pickle on the side. Mary, keep a lookout for a Citizen Page or a Turny's, or even a McDaffy's."

Before they spy one of their more oft-visited fast-food joints, Warble spots a McLaine's restaurant just in time to wheel into the parking lot before passing it by. Mary screams, and the driver behind them has to slam on his brakes to avoid hitting the McGorkles.

"Warble, you were on two wheels!" Mary scolds.

"Was not."

"Was, too."

"That's bad grammar."

"*You* said 'was'."

"Did not."

"Did too."

"How do you know? You couldn't hear me; the tires were squeeching,"
Warble reasons.

"Squeeching?"

"Yes--they were simultaneously screeching and squealing."

"Is that word in the dictionary?"

"Of course."

"Yeah, in *Warble's Unabridged*, maybe."

"Mary, Mary, quite contrary...No wonder all you had to play with when you were a little girl was a little lamb with fleece white as snow. And after all I did for you--risking life and limb to come here because you were starving to death."

"Whatever."

"Whatever? Is that all you can say: 'Whatever'? You think you're so hot just because the wind cries your name at times."

"Whatever, Warble."

After expelling an air-brake worthy sigh, Warble says, "Whatever you say *now*, Mary, I say let's eat."

"Sometimes it *whispers* my name," Mary whispers. But Warble doesn't hear her; he's already at the plastic wannabe wood sign that says 'Please wait to be seated.'

"I was *born* seated," Warble says to nobody in particular. "I don't need to wait for that." A waitress steps up to the McGorkles, smiling so broadly and brightly that Warble thinks she might be about to bust.

"Please follow me," she says, and turns on her heels.

In less than an hour, the McGorkles are finishing their meal. To Warble's astonishment, the establishment had no Peach Gatorade on hand. He solaced himself--his mouth was set for Peach Gatorade and it irritated him to no end that they didn't have any--by having 3.14 pieces of peach pie a la mode (he ordered three pieces for himself, and ate approximately 1/7 of Mary's piece, too).

Leaving the bright orange and chocolate brown-bedecked eatery, Warble turns to Mary and exclaims in an offended tone of voice, "Imagine the nerve of that woman, Mary!"

"To what are you referring, my dear husband?" Mary responds, only half-listening, as she is satisfied with food and about ready for a nap.

"That smile-o-matic waitress! Did you hear what she said to us as we were leaving?"

"I can't say I really paid that much attention."

"As a parting shot--*after* I had left her a quite generous tip, and it was too late to reassess her waitressing effort and ability--she ordered us to have a nice day! How rude! How bossy! How presumptuous! What if I prefer to have a crummy day? In fact, I think I will. I insist on my inalienable right to have a no good, lousy, crummy day, and I *will*."

"Suit yourself, Warble. Just don't bring me down with you."

"Are you telling me you're going to go along with that phony-faced waitress? Just because she *tells* you to have a nice day, you're going to do it, no questions asked?"

"I'm going to try my best."

Warble is so flabbergasted by Mary's blind obedience to the pushy stranger that he forces himself to take three breaths before responding.

"I hate to say this, Mary, but I think you would have made a good Nazi."

"What a thing to say, Warble!" Mary says, her eyes searing into Warble's.

"Well, you leave me no recourse, Mary--you simply follow any order or directive given, no matter what the source or how outrageous it is."

"I don't see how having a nice day is so out...Wait a minute! Didn't you add that phrase to your letters to the International Nut Company?"

"What phrase might that be, perchance?"

"'Have a nice day!'"

"I will not! You can't make me!"

"You did!"

"I did? Already?"

"Yes, you told those nut-guys to have a nice day, in that letter you wrote them. How *rude*, Warble," Mary teases.

"Oh. Yes. That. Well. You see, I did that to show them who was boss. It was my intimidation tactic. Apparently the fear it was meant to inspire in their bosoms will take awhile to hit them--a delayed reaction, no doubt."

"Right," Mary responds dubiously.

"Why is everybody trying to boss me around today?" Warble complains bitterly. "Just for that, Mary, I'm turning *left*. I *was* going to turn right, but not any more!"

Mary is already snoring. "Women!" Warble loudly laments. "Can't live with 'em, can't die with 'em, either--they always live longer. Probably all that quiche and tofu they eat."

CHAPTER 24

Mary wakes up from her nap as Warble is pulling into the Kenwood Inn bed & breakfast in St. Augustine. The oldest city in the United States, St. Augustine retains a heavy colonial flavor. There are Spanish style buildings everywhere, and even a fort that was built by the French before being confiscated first by the Spaniards, then taken from them by the British, and finally wrested from the Brits by the American revolutionaries. Architecture and history don't interest Warble, though, because he thinks he already knows all there is to know about both subjects.

There are two things in St. Augustine that *do* interest Warble, though: Ponce de Leon's Fountain of Youth, and the Ripley's Believe It Or Not museum.

So Warble walks the few blocks in to town. After a couple of hours spent searching, Warble is no wiser as to the Fountain's whereabouts as he was on the day he was born.

Darn that ol' Pancho the Lion fella, Warble says to himself, as he scours the outskirts of St. Augustine for some sign of the French explorer's fountain. You'd think any self-respecting gentleman would leave behind some clear marks as to where his treasure was hid. After all, he's not the only one who wants to be young. Why be so selfish and hog the whole batch of juvenescent elixir for himself? After all, he's dead by now anyway, why would he care if somebody else benefited from his bonanza, too? What a shortsighted, greedy cad--not to mention scamp, tramp, and scalawag--he must have been!

The frustration, heat, and humidity finally get the better of Warble. *Dad-blast that dad-burned metal-hatted ignoramus! I've had it with him and his gol-durned Cistern of Vim and Vigor! Who wants to quench their thirst at his stinkin' old waterhole, anyway!*

Warble stomps off, trampling over some flower beds and absent-mindedly kicking a puppy out of the way as he makes his way back toward the main part of town.

Warble enters the first store he comes to (a Super Speedy One-Stop) like a cowboy from the olden days in the Wild West: he pushes both doors open, pretending they are the swinging doors of a saloon.

"A Coke, a Coke, my kingdom for a Coke!" Warble sings out, as the glass doors close behind him, hitting him in the butt.

The clerk, who in Warble's eyes bears a striking resemblance to Wilford Brimley (the crusty old geezer with the walrus mustache who was in *The Stone Boy* and that wholesome-as-all-get-out television show with Karl Malden (who played in *The Streets of San Francisco* and also happened to play the no-good, dirty, double-crossing lout of a so-called friend in *One-Eyed Jacks* with Marlon Brando)) looks at him with a deadpan expression and responds, "Coin of the realm is the only tender accepted here, young fella. No realms themselves."

"That works for me," Warble wheezes, out of breath and dry of mouth from traipsing through people's yards looking for the Fountain of Youth. He grabs a decaffeinated Diet Lite Cherry Coke and slams it down on the counter, along with a \$5 bill.

While the Wilford Brimley-lookalike fellow makes change, Warble asks him for directions to Ripley's Believe It Or Not museum. Without looking up from the cash register, the clerk responds with a question of his own: "Have you tried looking across the street, young fella?"

This guy even talks like Wilford Brimley, Warble reflects. He masks his embarrassment by making a joke of his failure to observe the obvious. "Ha! Ha! I was just testing you, old fella!"

Warble takes his change without looking at it, as if he doesn't know how much he should be getting in return and it matters to him not a whit. He fingers the coins ('of the realm') in his pocket, though, as he's walking out the door, to verify that it is, indeed, the correct amount. Warble can more or less tell from the size of the coins which denomination they are (not which religious affiliation they profess, but rather whether they are nickels, quarters, Susan B. Anthony or Sacajawea dollars, etc.).

The change seems to be right, but Warble can't tell for sure, as the pennies and dimes are too alike in circumference and thickness for him to be completely confident. He doesn't trust the smoothness of the pennies' edges, reasoning that they could be dimes worn thin through long and hard usage.

Warble stops on the sidewalk and looks across the street at Mr. Ripley's museum of arcana. He tries to imitate the models in the old Montgomery Ward catalogs, staring into the distance, jaw jutting forward. He adds a Clint Eastwood squint. Finally he pictures himself as a denim-clad youth, long hair blowing in the breeze, wearing a faded beefy sky blue Tee under a lumberjack shirt, his thumbs in his pockets.

Warble imagines he's in Winslow, Arizona, and is 'such a fine sight to see.' But when a blond in a flatbed Ford pulls up alongside him and makes eye contact, he practically jumps out of his skin and retreats back into the store. "Uh, do you have a pay phone I can use, Wilf..I mean gramp...I mean sir?"

"What have you been smokin,' young fella? There's a pay phone right outside the door," the clerk fairly sputters, pointing a big stubby finger at a spot just outside the door.

"Ha! I gotcha again, didn't I, you old geezer?" Warble says, as he turns to walk out the door.

"What did you call me, young fella?" the Wilford Brimley-lookalike wants to know, stepping out from behind the counter and wiping his hands on his apron.

"Mr. Geezer?" Warble offers.

"Out! Get out with you! And don't bring your trade back here again. We don't want the likes of you in here."

"I guess that old fossil forgot to take his Geritol this morning," Warble mutters to himself as he heads out of the store and towards the pay phone.

"What was that, young fella?" the old clerk yells, stepping to the threshold in a more lively fashion than Warble would have given him credit for had he not witnessed it with his own two eyes.

"I said, 'I wish that old gentleman top of the morning!'"

"Yeah, *sure* ya did," the Wilford Brimley lookalike says sarcastically, his fists seeming to grind themselves into his hips (his own hips, that is, not Warble's). He doesn't know exactly what Warble originally said, but he doubts the revised version bears much similarity to the original one. "Out! Out!" he points, glaring, "And don't come back!"

The clerk shoots Warble a disdainful look, twitches his mustache, turns his back, returns to his throne behind the counter, and picks up the *Florida Times-Union*, snapping the pages as he makes a show of being deeply absorbed in some news report or other.

Warble slinks into the phone booth and, while digging in his pocket for some change, furtively glances over at the street corner where he had been standing to make sure the blond got the message and left.

CHAPTER 25

The blond in the flatbed Ford is still there! And she's giving Warble a very seductive look. In a reprise of his sped-up imitation of a shedding snake, Warble practically jumps out of his skin again. He turns his back on the mystery woman and dials the number of the Kenwood Inn.

"Yes, this is Warble McGorkle. I'd like to speak with my wife...What?...Oh, room 5... All right, thank you."

When he hears Mary's voice on the other end of the line, Warble swings the door of the phone booth open and cranes his head out. "Mary, my beautiful darling wonderful and not-to-mention *sexy* and *affectionate* wife, are you on your way?"

"Warble, where have you been? You missed breakfast... bran muffins with homemade marmalade and...oh, never mind... and why are you yelling? Come to think of it, why are you talking so funny?"

Warble ducks back into the phone booth, slamming the door shut. He looks over at the blond. She's *still* there! Can't she take a subtle hint? The Florida sun must have fried her brain. Warble gestures at her wildly to go away. After giving him a look that would kill a man of a lesser constitution, she jams her truck into gear and screeches off down the boulevard.

"Finally!" Warble says, and lets out a sigh of relief.

"Warble, are you okay?"

"Couldn't be better, honey, couldn't be better. I found the Fountain of Youth, and I do believe it's spiked with Viagra."

"What?!"

"Never mind; just meet me down here at Ripley's."

"What's that, a bar? Warble, have you been drinking already?"

"No, no. Mary, Mary, Mary," Warble says slowly, monotonically. Then he picks up the pace and quickly repeats it: "Mary Mary Mary Mary Mary Mary Mary. Come *on* now, don't tell me you've never heard of Ripley's Believe It Or Not."

"Believe it or not, I haven't."

"Oh, you're killing me, Mary. *Ripley's Believe It Or Not*, the most amazing conglomeration and amalgamation of weird and fantastic facts and exhibits."

"That's what you said about the Smithsonian."

"That was then, this is now. Just drive a couple of blocks downtown, and you'll see it on your right--can't miss it. I'll meet you there--I'm right across the street from it now."

"OK, give me a few minutes," Mary says, and hangs up.

Warble crosses the street and, while waiting for Mary, examines some of the curiosities strategically placed around the parking area. There's a giant log from Eureka, California that somebody hollowed out and converted into a dwelling. Warble climbs the steps into it and walks through. *This is amazing, Warble thinks. From the inside, it looks like any other small trailer. It's quite livable, actually. Imagine living in a hollowed-out log, like a bear. Man, oh, man, what a nifty idea! This gives a new meaning to 'log house.' A log house made out of one, single, solitary log. You could park this thing anywhere; if you ever got in a flood, you could just 'batten down the hatches,' float on down the river to a Cajun hideaway, and wait in comfort--high and dry, snug as a bug in a rug--until the waters recede.*

Warble is standing outside the log, admiring it for all he's worth, when Mary pulls up in their PT Cruiser. She gets out and joins him. Warble tells Mary all about the log/trailer, but she isn't the least bit interested. She *would* be, but she's afraid Warble will take a notion to carving out a home for them just like it, or--what would be more likely--deciding to 'borrow it' from the museum and hitching it to the back of their car. She grabs Warble's arm and pulls. "Come on, Warble, let's go inside. It's getting hot out here."

In every wing of the museum, Mary glances at the exhibits and then sits on the bench waiting for her husband. Warble is mesmerized, fully absorbed in every detail. He chooses to believe it *all*; as far as he's concerned, there is no doubt whatsoever that every exhibit is genuine, every fact fully corroborated, verified, and, so to speak, 'notarized.'

As Warble practically pleads with Mary to take advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to edify herself on matters varied and splendid, she mentions her lack of complete faith in the veracity of it all.

"Mary, it's as plain as the nose on Cyrano de Bergerac's face that these are all certified facts. How can you doubt them?"

"Why not Jimmy Durante?"

"Jimmy Durante? He's dead! How can he prove anything?" Warble asks, bewildered. "Besides, Mary, these non-sequiters of yours are starting to drive me bonkers."

"That would be a short ride."

"There you go again--What would be a short ride? To where?"

"Back to the bed and breakfast," Mary simultaneously and deftly answers the question and changes the subject. "Or better yet..."

CHAPTER 26

Mary's 'better yet' idea is to go out to eat. So, the McGorkles have lunch. After that, they go back to their room and rest for a while, then walk around St. Augustine, eat dinner, walk back to their room, and go to bed.

Warble has a hard time sleeping. He tosses and turns all night, thinking about the fascinatingly macabre curiosities presented and preserved at Ripley's B.I.O.N., as he has taken to calling it.

He finally falls asleep at 3:14 a.m. Like a dog dreaming about the hunt, Warble's legs jerk spasmodically, and he mumbles incoherently from time to time. Mary finally gets tired of being awakened just as she is about to drift off to sleep. She gets out of bed, grabs her pillow and the extra blanket from the top shelf of the closet, and curls up in the rocking chair.

Due to the late start to his sleeping session and the restless nature of his slumber, Warble doesn't wake up until almost 10. He is angry with Mary (who is already dressed and ready to go out) for not waking him sooner.

"Mary, we are in the land of Hemingway--he lived in Key West, in this very state of Florida, you know--and he *never* missed a sunrise."

"Probably because he was a drunk," Mary says in an unexpectedly harsh and bitter tone.

"A drunk? A drunkard? How can you say that? Ernest Hemingway was one of the greatest writers of all time! And he was a *man's* man. He saw every sunrise because he lived life to the *full*. He was no couch potato, nosirree Bob."

"I still say he was a drunk," Mary persists.

"Mary, let me be frank with you. Don't talk about Ernest that way. He could out-hike, out-hunt, out-fish, out-fight, out-write any of *your* friends--outright!"

"Whoop-te-doo," is all Mary has to say to that.

Warble begins to explode in a paroxysm of disbelief and indignation when he suddenly realizes how hungry he is. It would take too long to convince Mary of the wrongness of her thinking. He makes a gesture with his hands as if he's telling a dog to stay, inhales deeply, and silently counts to ten.

"Mary," he says (and silently adds 'Mary, quite contrary'), "will you be so kind as to accompany me to breakfast?"

"I would be delighted," Mary says in response.

Over breakfast Warble tells his long-suffering wife about his sure-fire idea for achieving fame and fortune here in Florida.

"Mary, I had a nightm... I mean I had a dream last night that gave me the perfect idea for an income-generating opportunity."

"I hope it works, Warble," Mary says. "The peanut money is running out."

Warble waves his hand dismissively. "That was small potatoes, Mary. This will catapult me to worldwide fame, fortune, adoration, adulation, and all that good stuff."

"This isn't something illegal is it, Warble?" Mary asks skeptically. "You're not going to commit some heinous crime and then write a book about it, are you?"

"Not even close, Mary. I'm going to start a band."

"A band? You don't even play an instrument."

"I will soon--the accordion."

"The accordion? What, are you going to go head-to-head with Lawrence Welk and his orchestra in a battle-of-the-old-fogy bands?"

"Nope. Mary, check this out: I'm going to start a polka punk band!"

"Polka punk?"

"That's what I said."

Mary is silent for awhile. She tries to let it sink in, but the thought runs off her brain like water off a duck's feathers.

"How long will it take you to get a group together, and get good enough to make money at it?"

"No time at all. After all, how hard can it be? If a bunch of lame-brained midgets can learn to play instruments, I'm sure that I can do it, too."

"To which lame-brained midgets, in particular, are you referring, Warble?" Mary is on the defensive, ready to attack. She thinks Warble is talking about her cousins in West Virginia.

She relaxes when he tells her, "All those little fellers at Willy Wonka's factory played the tuba."

"Oh...they did?"

"Sure; don't you remember what they were called--collectively, I mean?"

Mary racks her brain. After a few seconds, she's about to retort, 'How am I supposed to remember things like that? I've got more important things to think about' when she, to her own surprise, does remember what they were called.

"As a matter of fact I do--Oompa Loompas."

"Right! And Oompa Loompa is another name for a tuba player."

"It is?"

"You don't know *anything* about jazz slang, do you, Mary? Just as a clarinet is called a 'licorice stick,' a tuba player is called an 'Oompa Loompa,' because

that's the sound they make with their tubas--oompa on the front beats, loompa on the back beats. Remember that song they used to serenade each other with? It went: 'Oompa Loompa, oompity-do; I play the tuba, and you do, too'?"

Mary ignores the question, but has one of her own. "So let me get this straight, Warble. Because the Oompa Loompas all played tuba--and for all you know, they started tuba lessons very early in life and practiced for hours each day--you think that you can just pick up an accordion, round up a few guys, and--voila! You're an overnight sensation?"

"That's logical, isn't it?" Warble asks. "After all, would McGuinn and McGuire--not to mention Hillman, et al, lie to everyone?"

"McCarthy...and the Hilltoppers...and who-all?" Mary asks, shaking her head.

"The Byrds! The Byrds! Mary, oh Mary! Don't tell me...oh, never mind. Look, don't you remember what they said: all you need is tight britches, and to take some time and learn how to play, and you can be a rock 'n' roll star--which, when extrapolated, should work equally well with polka punk, right? Right. And how about Bachman-Turner Overdrive: 'easy as fishin', you can be a musician, if you can make sounds loud or mellow' --and we will only make half of those kinds of sounds. And then there's Dire Straits: 'money for nothin', and chicks for free'."

"Chicks?" Mary challenges, her hackles raised.

Warble gulps. He looks around the room, then up at the ceiling, and finally improvises, "You know, chicks--baby chickens. You can make enough money making music that you won't eat just ordinary food, like full-grown fish, cattle and chickens; instead, you'll be living the high life, eating baby fish, cattle, and chickens--otherwise known as caviar, veal, and...chicks."

"Uh huh," Mary retorts skeptically. She begins to continue her objections against her husband's latest brainstorm, but catches herself as she realizes it would just be a waste of her breath and time. She's been down that road before. So many times, in fact, that she's got every twist and turn—and dip--memorized.

You can't stop the inevitable. And Warble is bound, come Dallas or high water, to embark on his musical venture--she certainly knows him well enough to know that.

CHAPTER 27

Returning upstairs to their room following breakfast, Mary soon hears Warble say into the phone, "I recollect you used to pick the git-fiddle fairly tolerable, Earlybird."

Mary had been trying to concentrate on an article in *Better Homes and Gardens* about begonias when Warble began talking to his old friend. Earlybird Fortitude is another of Warble's old merchant marine buddies. Earlybird had been a cook on the ship, and most evenings entertained the crew with his singing and guitar playing.

"I've got a great idea, Early, my boy," Warble continues, gesticulating wildly as he acts out his enthusiasm for and confidence in his music plans. "Come on down here to St. Augustine if you want to get in on the ground floor. The slots are going fast. I've already got a bass player, drummer, and another guitar player--but you can play lead, if you want. And I'm going to be the accordionist. All we need is an Oompa Loompa and we're set...No, an Oompa Loompa--*you know*, a tuba player. Yes, yes; fine, I'll see you then."

Warble hangs up the phone and lets out a whoop and a holler. "We're destined for stardom for sure now, Mary! We're bound for glory! The best guitarist in the Western Hemisphere is on his way to join us."

Mary looks up from her magazine. "You already have a bass player, drummer, and guitarist? Who?"

"Well, I don't yet, but all I've got to do is cruise around town and find some skaters. They're bound to know some punk musicians."

And so it happens, just as Warble had said--much to Mary's chagrin. Warble pulls up to a group of teenagers on skateboards and asks them if they know any punk musicians. Sure enough, they do--themselves. The three young men are NFN (No First Name) Kat Atomic, a drummer; Comma Cozzi, a bass player; and Plaster O'Paris, a guitarist. Warble tells the teenagers about his plans for the band, and they are, to put it mildly, quite enthused with the idea. At any rate, they're willing to give it a shot.

All they need now is a tuba player (or an Oompa Loompa, as Warble calls it). After searching in vain at the local musician's union hall, Warble despairs of seeing his dream come to fruition. He sits on the sidewalk and mopes. "For the want of an Oompa Loompa the band wasn't formed. For the want of the band formation, fame and fortune weren't won. For the lack of fame and fortune, my ingenious inventions were not secured. For lack of procurement of same and such, they were purloined, I was maligned, and poor, poor, pitiful me will wind up in the poorhouse, sleeping in a flophouse," Warble whines to Mary.

"Oh, Warble, snap out of it. Something's bound to turn up. Besides, being a musician isn't the only thing in the world."

"That's easy for you to say, Mary. I had my heart set on it," Warble sighs, and, with his elbows on his knees, buries his head in his hands.

Within a few seconds, though, a somewhat portly, or shall we say pleasantly plump--ah, what the heck, a guy fatter than Dallas--sees Warble and approaches him.

"Say, mister, why so blue?"

"I don't have an Oompa Loompa to round out my polka punk ensemble," Warble says flatly, without even looking up at the young man.

The fatter-than-Dallas fellow's eyes light up, and he practically screams, "Gee whiz, Mister! I play the tuba myself--quite well, if I may say so without seeming overly egotistical and conceited--and I'd just love to join your band!"

"You do?! And you would?!" Warble says, jumping up and grasping the fat teen's outstretched hand. "Hot diggity dog! We're back in business, Mary!"

"Say, kid, what's your name, anyway?" Warble asks.

"Plumpo Tiddlywink."

Warble is lost in thought for a few seconds. As he remembers where he heard that name before, he juts his right index finger into the air. "Not the same Plumpo Tiddlywink that was married to Burt Reynolds' ex-wife's third cousin-twice-removed hairdresser's neighbor?"

"No, sorry," the obese youth responds, shaking his head, "that was a different Plumpo Tiddlywink--no relation."

CHAPTER 28

That night The Cascading Upd8s (the name Warble has chosen for his musical combo) get together at Plumpo Tiddlywink's parents' house for their first practice session. Before they actually get down to rehearsing, Warble gets the whole group together--except for Earlybird Fortitude, who won't show up for another day or two--to go over his grandiose designs for the group.

"It's not just the music, fellas, we've got to have the right 'look,' too. I'll be the front man, naturally, since I'm the best looking and most charismatic of us all. You guys," he continues, pointing to each one in turn, "make sure to dress the part. We're rough, we're tough, we won't take no guff from nobody. As the great philosopher Elvis said, 'Don't step on my blue suede boxer shorts.'"

The skaters look at each other in confusion and make gestures as if to say, 'What kind of a mess have we gotten ourselves into with this guy?'

"And to top it all off," Warble goes on, "we've got the best agent/costume designer/seamstress in the business--my wife, Mary."

"Who, me?" Mary says, looking up from the Tiddlywinks' prize LazyBoy recliner, where she is comfortably ensconced (truth be told, she was about to fall asleep in it).

"Yes, you, Mary. None other than you. We are going to burst onto the scene like awesome ice, like the glow of electrum and chrysolite."

Everybody ignores the nonsensical similes.

"What do you plan on doing that's going to be so dramatic and exciting, Warble?" the new manager/just about everything else asks.

"I'll get the mother of all safety pins and put it in my cheek."

"Won't that hurt?" Mary asks.

"Only when I sit down."

"Ouch! Well, they're your cheeks, I guess."

"Yes, the last time I looked they were, anyway. Just don't tell the IRS that. But getting back to my stage persona: I'll dye my hair invisible."

"Dye your hair invisible? What's the point of that?"

"It'll be ultra-cool. And nobody will know when I forget to not comb it."

"Why don't you just shave it all off?"

"What? And be bald? Get serious, Mary. I'll need a tattoo also--how about this in big bold letters on my chest:

*Nuthin' Matters
And Even If It Did
It Wouldn't*

"Marvelous," Mary opines sarcastically.

"Now you're getting into the spirit of things, Mary," Warble nods. "And here's the best news: I've already written our first song--I wrote it in the bathroom last night, while you were asleep. It will be a mega hit single, propelling us to stardom practically instantaneously."

"You don't say," Mary says dubiously.

"Yes, I did. Weren't you listening?" Warble looks at Mary wonderingly. He's concerned about her nonsensical statements. "Have you been hitting the Pepto-Bismol a little too hard lately, Mary?" He doesn't allow Mary time to answer, just shakes his head and rambles on: "Imagine this: guitar, bass, drums, tuba, and me on accordion and lead vocals. Here goes--first the punk part, where I growl out the first verse over a wall of bashing, crashing guitar, bass, and drums:

I hate everything

*I hate my life
If I was married
I'd hate my wife*

*I hate everyone
I hate you
If I had a fairy godmother
I'd hate her too*

Warble turns to Mary, raises his right index finger and says, "and then comes the polka part, where the tuba and accordion kick in:

*Roll out the barrel
And we'll have a barrel of fun
While you're at it
Why not have a honey bun?*

...and then back to the punk part, and so forth, back and forth, like that."

Warble looks over at Mary, expecting her to be enthralled with the genius of his musical creation. She's glaring at him and tapping her foot. "What's this about hating your wife, Warble?"

"Mary, it's just a song--artistic license and all that rot, you know. I'm playing the role of an angst-ridden youth."

"As opposed to?"

"The super-cool hep cat that I really am."

"Mm-hmm."

"We're even going to throw in a little hip-hop. How do you like my version of Fuzzy Wuzzy set to music--picture in your mind's ear an insistent drum beat, bopping bass, maybe an organ droning on in the background--and me rapping:

*Fuzzy Wuzzy was a bear
Fuzzy Wuzzy had no hair
Fuzzy Wuzzy wasn't all that fuzzy
Now was he...was he?*

"The penultimate 'he' is to be sung in middle C, and the final 'he' in high C (the musical note, not the fruit drink).

"At the end of the concert we'll smash up our instruments. First, the Oompa Loompa will use his tuba to dismantle the drum set, then the bass player will dent the tuba to near-uselessness with his axe, then the guitar player and bass player will smash their instruments together in a cataclysm of sparks, splintered wood, plastic, and metal--and finally, as the high point of it all, I'll chuck my accordion as far as I can out into the audience while jumping up and down and frothing at the mouth.

"After exiting stage left and waiting a couple of minutes, me and the boys will come back out, smiling like the Osmonds only wished they could have--they'll be *so* envious--and, arms around one another, we'll take a bow. It'll knock their socks off, Mary!

The skaters are into it now. They like Warble's style--they consider it so 'way hokey' as to be cool.

CHAPTER 29

The second night after Earlybird Fortitude's arrival, The Cascading Upd8s are to give their first concert at the VFW hall downtown. Warble had wanted to make their debut right away, the night his talented pal arrived, but Earlybird had insisted on at least one solid rehearsal first.

"We can't have these generation-Yers," Earlybird had said, referring to the skaters, "start playing some *Me First and the Gimme Gimmes* song while Plumpo and you and I play *Too Fat Polka*," he had reasoned. "Besides," he had added, "we've got to get your song, *The Honey Barrel Bun Hating Polka* down pat before we play it before a live audience."

In reply to that, Warble had considered suggesting playing first before a dead audience (up at the bone yard outside of town, or at the mortuary in town), but thought better of it when he remembered what a sweet, gentle, sentimental, and sensitive soul Earlybird was. His old shipmate might get offended at such a suggestion--even though made in jest--and up and quit the combo (leaving him with only one guitarist--and one that only knows three chords, at that). Artistic types can be like that at times (actually, almost everyone has a bent in that direction, but non-artists have no 'excuse' and can't usually get away with such behavior).

While Warble remains secluded in their room at the bed & breakfast, meditating and trying to focus his energy so as to give the performance of his career that night (which it *will* be by definition, one way or the other, as it will be his first), Mary runs herself ragged putting up posters all over town--in fact all over St. Johns County--advertising the world premiere of the 'Next Big Thing,' The Cascading Upd8s. She accosts everyone she meets, telling them they will be kicking themselves from now and into infinity and beyond if they miss the chance of a lifetime that is now laid before them, namely that of seeing the very first public performance of *The Honey Barrel Bun Hating Polka*, written and sung by the incomparable and inimitable Warble Poundcake McGorkle and his cast of musical impresarios and Wunderkinds--nary a derelict in the bunch.

The afternoon finds Warble and company rehearsing at the VFW hall. By the

time the first spectator arrives, Warble's accordion is already soaked with sweat.

The Cascading Upd8s take the arrival of the first paying customer as a cue to stop rehearsing and relax before the big show. They don't want anybody to hear their new song until the entire crowd has assembled. The boys in the band stand off to the side, watching the crowd slowly filter in and drinking Mr. Pibb, which has been graciously donated to the aspiring musicians by Plumpo's parents, who are grateful to Warble for finally giving their son an outlet for his boundless energy and a chance to showcase his musical prowess. Actually, they just wanted to get Plumpo out of the house; they haven't had an evening alone for seventeen years--ever since the stork brought Plumpo to their door.

As the news team from WYFF (channel 4) wheels in their equipment to film the band's first performance, Warble is practically overcome with jubilation. "Boys, this will catapult us to the top of the entertainment world instantaneously. I knew we were a shoe-in for stardom, but this puts us on the fast track. Who needs Ed Sullivan? When our electrifying performance is beamed via satellite to the far corners of the world tonight, our infectious rhythm and irresistible beat will set all mankind on their ear," he tells his band mates, as they continue draining their cans of Mr. Pibb.

Warble lets out a victory whoop and runs over to Mary. "You did it, Mary, you did it! You are the most magnificent manager in the history of managerialism! How'd you swing it? How'd you get the tv station to show up?"

"I just told them a polka punk band would be playing here tonight, and--"

"You didn't mention my name?"

"Well, sure, but I don't think that was really the drawing card, Warble--after all, you're not famous *yet*. As soon as I mentioned *polka punk*, though, they said they would be here--that is, if there were no emergencies requiring their presence, or other hot news such as the opening of a new restaurant or--"

Mary doesn't finish her sentence, because Warble has already rushed off. He is cartwheeling across the floor. As he reaches his band mates, he begins his harangue anew: "In just a few minutes, we will unleash a whirlwind upon this nation--and others, but this is the one I care about the most, because here is where the polka punk hall of fame will be situated, and we will be forever recognized and revered as the founders of this most important of all musical genres. Nobody will be able to resist snapping their fingers, tapping their toes, shaking their booty, and just generally movin' to the groovin'. They'll be dancing in Chicago, down in New Orleans, Philadelphia PA, Baltimore and D.C. Now,--"

"Don't forget the motor city!" Earlybird chimes in, not wanting Warble to disremember his hometown of Detroit.

"All we need is music! Sweet music!" the crowd begins to chant. The television reporters, who seem a little restless, had broken a cardinal rule of reportage by initiating the chant.

Warble turns to the rest of the Cascading Upd8s and says, "Do you hear that, boys? They can't wait for us to begin. Let's play it cool, though--we don't want them to think we're over-anxious. Go ahead and finish your carbonated prune juice, and--wait a minute, give me that stuff!" he yells, and yanks the cans from the hands of all the imbibers, one by one. He pours the remainders of the liquid into the nearest receptacle at hand (a punch bowl), and pushes his band mates stage-ward. "Let's go, fellas; can't keep our fans waiting."

Warble runs onto the stage and snatches the microphone from the stand. "There'll be music! Sweet music! There'll be music everywhere! Hey you guys--grab a girl. Hey you girls--if you are as yet ungrabbed, turn the tables and grab a guy."

On the spur of the moment, Warble breaks out into an unrehearsed song, *Have You Heard the News, There's Good Polka Punkin' Tonight*. The band follows him as best they can. Earlybird does a credible job of following Warble's lead and quickly informs the other band members of the song's key and turns to face his band mates so that they can watch him and note the song's chord changes.

Once the skater dudes have the chord progression down and are frenetically flailing away at their instruments, Earlybird spins around and faces the audience again. When the chorus comes around (a repetition of the song's title), Earlybird joins Warble at the microphone, a la Miami Steve Van Zandt sharing the mic with Bruce Springsteen (forget those old fossils Keith Richards and Mick Jagger--they're hardly worth mentioning).

After the second verse and chorus, the band members each, in turn, take a solo. First is a supersonic, histrionic, Eddie-Van-Halen-eat-your-heart-out solo by Earlybird Fortitude; then fellow guitarist Plaster O'Paris bangs away at some power chords throughout his chance to shine; Comma Cozzi blows all his cookies in the first bar, and then repeats the riff over and over; NFN (No First Name) Kat Atomic impresses with a furiously energetic drum solo whose power, if tapped, could supply all St. Augustine's energy needs for months to come. Warble follows Kat with an accordion solo that sounds like a blending of *Tiny Bubbles* and *Bad Motor Scooter*.

Last but not least, Plumpo Tiddlywink is in the spotlight. His parents would be proud of him, if only they were here to see him (they are taping the broadcast and will, believe me, watch it more than just a few times in the years to come). Warble blares out, "And on the tuba, St. Augustine, Florida's very own Plumpo Tiddlywink! Hit it, Plumpo!"

It is then that a minor oversight becomes apparent--they didn't think to mic Plumpo's instrument. Even with the other instruments playing at a relatively subdued volume, Plumpo's tuba is barely audible above the din. Warble, ever the paragon of American ingenuity, dives headfirst to the floor and shoves the microphone up the tuba's cavernous recess.

In between the 'oompa loompa' sounds, Warble punctuates Plumpo's fifteen seconds or so (so far) of fame with ejaculations such as, "Yeah!," "Oh, yeah!," "That's what I'm talkin' about!," "Get it!," "Willy Wonka's indentured servants ain't got nothin' on this guy," "He's only seventeen, ladies and gentlemen, can you believe it?" and, "Honk that thing, Plumpo baby!"

By the time Plumpo's solo is over, the rather portly (what the heck, fat as Dallas) Oompa Loompa is sweating like a...well, he's sweating quite profusely,

let's put it that way.

Warble springs to his feet and hurtles into the next and final verse of The Cascading Upd8s' off-the-cuff rendition of *Good Polka Punkin' Tonight*. The ecstatic, albeit somewhat irrational, exuberance of the crowd, as well as the dance-inducing sounds emanating from the hall, draw ever more onlisteners.

The SRO crowd is augmented by a large group in the streets, who are straining at a chance to see this brave new band with their bold new style of music--besides, there's nothing much else going on in St. Augustine on this night; it's what the powers-that-be at WYFF call 'a slow news day.'

Impatiently, the crowd waits for the next tune. Warble and the Cascading Upd8s don't keep them in anticipation long. After a brief consultation with his band mates, Warble struts up to the microphone, envelops it in his left hand, and announces, "And now, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, devotees of the polka punk craze which is now sweeping the nation, all you serendipitous participators in this radical, beaudacious, history-in-the-making moment, we are going to unleash upon you, without further ado--hey, that rhymed!--our soon-to-be with-a-bullet record-breaking smash single *The Honey Barrel Bun Hating Polka*."

A stentorian voice rings out from the crowd, "Get on with it! More music and less rhetoric!"

Warble immediately reacts with a counter-attack. "Who said that?!" No response. "Who said that!?!!" he repeats, more angrily, more insistently. As if on cue, all those near the culprit take a step away and point at him accusingly.

"Grab him, and make him drink the rest of that punch over there!" Warble orders.

"Make him drink the rest of that punch, and then throw him outside! And you, sir," Warble addresses the miscreant directly, "There ain't room enough in this hyar town for the both of us--I want you out of here within fifteen minutes of your well-deserved ejection. If I ever see your face in this town again, I will have you arrested for the crime you committed here

tonight."

"What crime?" the rattled young man wants to know.

"Sedition! You have attempted to subvert the lawful gathering of a polka punk assembly! You should be tarred and feathered and ridden out of town on a rail! However, being the nice guy that I am--and seeing that I can't be bothered with the paperwork involved in your arrest, as I've got bigger fish to fry just now--I'm letting you go with a warning. Take your medicine," Warble advises, while the more obsequious and/or sadistic in the crowd are forcing the hapless young man to down the rest of the Mr. Pibb-spiked punch, "and be gone with you!"

CHAPTER 30

An awkward silence reigns in the VFW hall during the ejection of the impatient music aficionado. A few seconds after the troublemaker has been unceremoniously expelled from the premises, though, Kat starts off *The Honey Barrel Bun Hating Polka* with a resounding assault on the drums, and the incident is immediately forgotten.

Warble is euphoric. Tomorrow the entire world will know about The Cascading Upd8s and their new hit song. Thinking back on his opening remarks prior to the song, he can't quite recall if he emphasized strongly enough that he was the composer of the piece. The Cascading Upd8s is *his* band; they would be nothing without him.

Warble sees that the crew from WYFF has their camera trained on Earlybird. He deftly steps between the camera and the lead guitarist. The camera shifts to Plaster; Warble slides over in that direction so as to remain the center of attention. Once again, the camera's angle changes, this time to Plumpo's position. Warble duck walks across the stage, directly in front of Plumpo, smiling 'to beat the band' all the while.

Earlybird sees what Warble is up to, and, as the camera's subject changes once more, this time to Kat Atomic and his relentless drumming, Earlybird trips Warble as he duck-walks by.

Gamer that he is, Warble keeps a firm grip on his accordion and continues squeezing it all the while. Now the camera *is* trained on him, and he beams. Getting up, he momentarily glares at Earlybird while wagging his right index finger at him, shielding the gesture from the camera by turning sideways. Turning back to the camera, Warble is irritated to see that it has again strayed off course--now it is focused on Comma Cozzi, who is bouncing up and down as he thumps away on his bass guitar.

Just as Warble is about to body slam Comma out of the way, he notices an intimidating-looking fellow in the crowd, staring at him and pounding his right fist into his left, over and over again. The big, mean-looking man's face is expressionless. The 250-lbs-if-he-is-90 bundle of brawn is coldly staring at

Warble, inexorably pounding, pounding.

Warble fears the worst. *It's the music Mafia*, he theorizes. *They know that this song is so good that nobody will ever buy any other record from any other artist ever again--this is the only song anybody, anywhere, anytime would ever even dream of listening to, dancing to, singing along with, etc. They've put out a contract out on on me. Now I know what they mean when they say , 'It's lonely at the top'. This hired thug has his sights on me, and me alone--which is only logical, when you think about it, because these other guys are just a bunch of dim-witted galoots in comparison to me. It's true, Earlybird is a fairly tolerable git-fiddle picker, but he doesn't have the genius to write a song like mine--he's in no danger. Mediocrity has assured him safe passage! While I--poor, pitiful, misunderstood Warble Poundcake McGorkle, Esquire, have to suffer the consequences of my monumental and well-nigh immeasurable genius!*

Wallowing in grief and self-pity, Warble loses his place in the song. He is supposed to be singing, but that's the furthest thing from his mind at the moment. When Earlybird nudges him, he catches up to the music by singing the words he left out as fast as he can, auctioneer style.

At the end of the world premiere of their signature tune, Warble explains to the audience that the band needs to take five. He looks into the camera and says, "Don't touch that remote, folks! We'll be right back, after a word or two from our sponsors."

Warble quickly assembles the Upd8s. Plumpo has slipped away, over to the counter where the storied Mr. Pibb-fortified punch Incident unfolded, seeing if there are any remaining drops of the delectable liquid that he can scavenge. Warble dismisses Plumpo's temporary absence with a wave of the hand and, trying to be as casual as possible, gestures to Mary to come over and join the impromptu conference.

"Look, fellas, there's no time to explain, but I have to quit this town, this state, this band, even this industry, pronto." He turns to his old shipmate Earlybird Fortitude and addresses him in a formal tone. "Mr. Fortitude, I'm putting you in command of this passel of landlubbers. You can take it from here, on the strength of my song and our historic debut, of which you all

have just been witnesses--I mean, in which you have all participated.

"I am turning over to you all," he continues, scanning the other band members with his eyes, "the name of my band and the right to use my composition. All I ask in return is a measly, cheap-at-twice-the-price 6/11ths share in the band's monetary fortunes. I will forward to you an address to which you can send my share of the loot...I meant to say, hard-earned profit."

"That's mighty generous of you, Warble," Earlybird intones. "Tell me, though, how did you come up with 6/11ths as being your fair share of the band's income?"

"It's plain mathematics, my good friend and now-successor as leader and front man of The Cascading Upd8s. Each of us gets one share for being a member of the band, playing an instrument, posing for album covers after eating something tart, etc. I get additional shares for the following:

- 1) Coming up with the band's name.
- 2) Writing our mega hit single.
- 3) Assembling the band.
- 4) Because Mary was the manager--and she is my wife, as you all know--and
- 5) Just because. Satisfied?"

In unison, all of the band members open their mouths to question, or object to, the arrangements. We'll never know which, because Warble heads them off at the pass by grabbing Mary's wrist and pulling her out the side door, using his former band mates as a shield so that the supposed Mafia hit man (who is, in actuality, the mentally deficient and utterly harmless son of a former mayor of St. Augustine) won't see them depart.

Just before he closes the door behind him (having pushed Mary out the door ahead of him, as a human shield, in case the 'hit man' got wise to their getaway), Warble addresses his old band mates one final time. "A word of advice--freely given, no charge: Get some backup singers and dancers--perhaps some of the grandchildren of the original Mouseketeers--and call them the Deletes, to mark a clear demarcation between the band when *I* was a member (its glory days) and afterwards (its inevitable decline). Verily, your new name will be *The Cascading Upd8s and Deletes*.

This is the last St. Augustine is likely to see of Warble and Mary McGorkle. They ride off at a right angle to the sunset in their PT Cruiser, heading north, for an old port of call of Warble's: Brooklyn, New York.

CHAPTER 31

On crossing into Maryland, Warble decides that it is imperative that he and Mary visit Camden Yards, the home of his favorite baseball team, the Baltimore Orioles.

The most enjoyable part of the trip to Camden Yards for Mary are the ribs served at Boog Powell's booth. Warble explains to Mary, in earshot of the former Oriole slugger, how Boog is one of three famous brothers--Boog's older brother Cozy was a rock drummer who played with Ted Nugent and Rainbow, among others; and Colin, the baby of the family, is 'some bigwig in the military.' In both cases, Warble explains, Boog's brothers owe their success to him. The big firstbaseman taught his brothers how to use a bat, and both of them adapted this acquired skill to their chosen professions. In Cozy's case, drumsticks became for him a pair of slim baseball bats (he hit the snare drum as if a curve had been thrown his way, the tom-tom as if he was hitting a knuckleball, etc.; in Colin's case, the man learned early from big brother Boog to 'walk softly and carry a big stick.'

Boog pays no attention to Warble's ramblings; he's worked with the public long enough to recognize a birdbrain when he sees one, and just lets Warble be.

After the Orioles defeat the Yankees 13-0 in extra innings, Warble is feeling so content that he lets Mary drive for awhile. It might be that Warble is feeling expansive due to the several beers he drank during the seventh inning stretch. During that break in the action, the beer vendor in their section set his tray down for a few seconds to assist an elderly lady who had tripped and fallen down the steps (she tripped right after walking past Warble, but there's no hard and fast evidence that he had stuck his foot out). Warble was able to quaff the remainder of the vendor's supply of beer before the good Samaritan returned to retrieve his tray. Warble, of course, had feigned ignorance of any knowledge regarding any untoward happenings with respect to either the sprawling octogenarian or the missing beer.

Warble dozes off right after his last glimpse of Camden Yards in the rear-view mirror. Seldom has a man had such a goofily-contented look on his face as Warble does now.

A few hours later, Warble begins to stir awake as the McGorkles enter Asbury Park, New Jersey. As he gradually regains full consciousness, Warble comes to realize the significance of the location.

"Mary! This is an historic place! You were going to just drive right on through it without waking me, weren't you?"

Mary glances over at Warble for a second, and then returns her gaze to the road. "What, this dump? What do you mean by 'historic,' Warble? Do you mean *pre-historic*?"

"Mary, don't do me like that. This town is like Memphis. You know-- Graceland? Or like Waterloo, where General Custer lost his life to a bunch of French chefs who had gone on the rampage after they discovered he had greedily eaten all of the escargot (which Custer had stealthily--or so he thought, anyway--purloined from the hors d'oeuvre plate)."

Mary holds up her hand to halt Warble's forward 'progress'; she had been enjoying the peace and quiet while he slept (well, *relative* peace and quiet, since Warble does snore just a tad) and was in no mood for a Warble filibuster right at the moment. "All right, Warble, I get the picture; just tell me: how is this burg like Graceland and Waterloo? What historic event took place here?"

"Why, Mary, I do declare that if it weren't for the occasional Yoplait you would have no culture whatsoever. *This* town--this very town through which we are now driving--along with all the other towns around these here parts (Freehave, Matewan, Shortbranch, etc.)--are the old stomping grounds of that legendary Hollywood actor Bruce Boxleitner."

"You mean the guy who was in *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*?"

"The very same; and that's just for starters. He wrote, produced, co-

produced, directed, and starred in *On the Waterfront*, which was filmed right here in Asbury Park, his hometown--and he was the stunt man, too. He even played both parts in the famous fight scene, and beat himself up--which is no mean trick."

"I'll be darned," Mary says, trying half-heartedly to mask her total disbelief and complete lack of interest.

Warble leans back in his seat and lets out a deep sigh. What an exciting day it has been for him: First, to see his beloved Orioles defeat the despised Yankees in extra innings, and now to cruise through the home town of that most revered of all of Hollywood's leading men, Bruce Boxleitner.

"You know, he's respected to such an extent in Hollywood that they have a nickname for him. Everybody in the industry knows exact-act-actly who you are talking about when you mention 'The Box'."

"'The Box'?" Mary questions. "That's an odd nickname."

"Maybe, Mary, maybe; but you'll have to admit: 'Boxleitner' isn't exact-act-actly an orthodox name, either. Anyway, the moguls and starlets and stogie-puffin' high-powered agents all just call him 'The Box.' 'The Box did this,' they say, or 'The Box did that'; or 'It must be a cool movie to be affiliated with if 'The Box' is starring in it, etc."

"Well, give me Tom Selleck any day," Mary says, shaking her head.

"Mary, bite your tongue! To even mention Bruce Boxleitner's name in the same breath as that phony baloney Hawaiian cowpoke! The only good thing he ever did was invent Canadian bacon-and-pineapple pizza. I'd like to give him a Hawaiian punch--pow, right in the kisser!" Warble folds his arms across his chest and stares out the window, ignoring Mary and sulking.

Warble refuses to even talk to Mary again until they reach the 'Big Apple.'

CHAPTER 32

Entering the Holland tunnel reminds Warble of an historical trivia tidbit. He deigns to address Mary again, uncouth though he considers her to be (based on her ignorance of the Asbury Park-Bruce Boxleitner connection and her preference for Tom Selleck over 'The Box').

"Before the ice age," Warble says, pointing at the tunnel, "when the American and European continents were connected, this tunnel reached all the way from here to Holland (also known as the Netherlands, also known as 'that country where the Dutch people live')--hence its name, which it still bears to this day.

"In fact," Warble continues, "New York and Amsterdam used to border each other. Vincent Van Gogh used to walk over to Coney Island from his studio apartment in Greenwich Village with his good buddy Phil Gaugin to feast on hot dogs."

"All the way from Greenwich Village to Coney Island just for a hot dog?"

Warble gasps. "Mary, you're killing me here! 'Just for a hot dog,' you say. You won't say 'just for a hot dog' after you've had a *Nathan's* hot dog."

Warble begins talking to himself, in true New Yorker fashion. "'Just for a hot dog,' she says. This woman wouldn't know a hot dog if one came up and bit her on the gluteus maximus. The greatest plumber of all time and his girl-watching landlord hoofed it to Coney Island for a *good reason*. There was a method to their--"

"Wait a minute. Warble?" Mary interjects.

"Yes, my darling companion and temporary chauffeur?"

"Warble, what's this about Van Gogh being a plumber? I thought he was a--"

"Finish carpenter, mason, or an electrician? Oh, no! Many people think that. It's a common misconception, an old wives tale, I must say--no offense,

Mary, you're not *that* old-- , but the most ancient and trustworthy manuscripts show that--without a single solitary doubt--Vincent Van Gogh was a *plumber*. And a good one, too. He had a steady job at a resort where he laid pipes all through the sunflower patch."

Warble doesn't notice the quizzical expression on Mary's face, and plows onward. "He was not good at managing his finances, though. When Vince was suffering a temporary cash-flow problem, Phil would let him pay off his rent in ears of corn. This was not a problem for Vincent, because there was a cornfield behind his house. He would steal some of the corn at night when the farmer (whose name was 'Old McDonald') was at the tavern drinking up his profit and, if questioned later about what had happened to the missing corn, Vince would blame it on some crows he had seen loitering around the neighborhood...Hey, wait a minute! Are you trying to distract me so we don't have *Nathan's* for lunch? You probably want me to take you to the Copacabana or the Cotton Club or Toots Shor's."

"Tutu who?"

"You know, Toots Shor's--where Joltin' Joe Namath used to go until he stopped going there because Yogi Berra told him that nobody went there anymore because it was too crowded."

"Oh, *that* Toots Shor's," Mary replies, rolling her eyes. "If Yogi Bear won't go there, I don't care to patronize the establishment, either," Mary jokes. "It's Nathan's hot dogs or bust for me. If we don't patronize Nathan's, it'll be a big boo-boo."

Warble thinks Mary is serious, and doesn't notice--or disregards--the minor name mangling. In his eyes, Mary has regained some of the respect that she had lost as a result of the Boxleitner/Selleck controversy.

"Now you're talking some sense, Mary. One taste of those super-fine delicacies and you'll know why the world's greatest plumber and his buddy walked to Coney Island every day for a last-man-standing, winner-take-all and loser-take-the-hindmost hot dog eating contest.

"And we don't have to walk to Coney Island to get Nathan's hot dogs, like

Vince and Phil did; we don't even have to *drive* to Coney Island to get Nathan's hot dogs; in modern times they are available all over New York from those great and selfless benefactors of hungry folks everywhere: the street vendors who indefatigably shove their hot dog carts all over the Big Apple--all day, every day, providing their wares at cost as a public service.

"Eat up, Mary," Warble advises, after locating the object of his culinary affection in the form of a Nathan's hot dog cart. "We've got a big day ahead of us tomorrow: First, we'll go pay our respects to Lady Liberty, and then drop in on 'The Terror of the Seven Seas'."

CHAPTER 33

Following their 'gourmet' dinner, the McGorkles find accommodations at the Hotel Bossert, just across the East River from Manhattan, on the Brooklyn side of the bridge named for that borough.

The following morn the McGorkles break their fast at the storied Cadman Plaza Restaurant (actually, it has only one story, but that's neither here nor there). Warble, deprived of his customary cinnamon rolls from Citizen Page, combats his exasperation at this irritating turn of events by ordering a foot-high stack of French Toast, which he promptly drenches with Aunt Jemima's maple syrup.

After Warble has not only cleaned his plate, but Mary's as well (he's mad at her because all she ordered was a bowl of fruit, a muffin, and a cup of tea--and thus had no leftovers to speak of for him to scavenge), the McGorkles walk two blocks to the High Street subway station and board the A Train bound for Manhattan.

Mary has never been to New York before, and so all this is new to her--the hustle, the bustle, the chaotic and even seemingly anarchistic traffic, and the noisy and squalid subways. Having descended into the subterranean depths, Warble pushes his way onto the crowded train. Mary, although embarrassed at her husband's rude behavior, doesn't want to be left behind in the rabble and so latches on to the back of Warble's shirt. Head down, she follows him into the car.

There are no seats to be had, at least not two together, so Warble and Mary stand, holding onto one of the poles near a door. "Why is it so dark?" Mary asks after a couple of minutes.

"Because we're underground--under the East River, in fact," Warble responds blandly.

"We're *under* the river?" Mary asks, with a look of worry darkening her countenance.

Warble looks at Mary blankly, and raises an eyebrow. He doesn't understand her concern. "Mary, why do you think it's called a *subway*? Did you think a porter was going to come around with complimentary sandwiches? *Subway*. Sub means 'under.' It's an *underway*--it goes *under* things, like the ground and the river. Besides, people don't even call subway sandwiches subway sandwiches here--they call them hoagies."

Before long Warble nudges Mary and tells her it's time to disembark. They get off in downtown Manhattan. After wandering around Canal Street for awhile (Warble collects 8-track players, and is hoping some of the electronic shops still have some--preferably dirt cheap--but his desire goes unfulfilled), the McGorkles find some Nathan's hot dogs for lunch. After satisfying their hunger, they head to the Battery to take the ferry to the Statue of Liberty.

Thinking it's just a hop, skip and a jump to the top of the statue (after all, it looks so small from their hotel room in Brooklyn), Warble eschews the elevator and harangues Mary into taking the stairs.

The stairway is narrow and somewhat dark and dingy; by the time they have ascended 39 steps, Warble tires out and tells Mary that, although he is full of vim and vigor and really feels like walking the whole thing ('for posterity') he, out of consideration for her considerably lower level of stamina, is willing to sacrifice his own personal glory and satisfaction for her comfort.

They descend the steps back to the base and take the elevator. Warble is surprised at how high they seem to be once they get to the lady's 'visor.' He secretly congratulates himself on the way he weaseled out of climbing the stairs all the way up.

In comparison to the great skyscrapers of downtown Manhattan, the Statue of Liberty is short, but in an absolute sense it is quite lofty--it's not a height from which you could fall or jump and hope to survive, that's for sure—unless maybe you landed on a giant bag of marshmallows or some such.

After watching the ships come in to New York harbor for awhile (Warble hopes at least one of them is 'his') and enjoying the view of not only the Manhattan skyline but also of Brooklyn, Staten Island, and Queens, the

McGorkles take the elevator down and then the ferry back across to Manhattan.

Now they go on to bigger, if not necessarily better, things--most specifically the Empire State Building. Warble keeps a lookout for King Kong but, after searching for a time and a season in vain, tries to console himself (disappointed as he is in the big ape's no-show--not to mention missing out on seeing Faye Wray, or at least her brother Link) with the sugar rush a box of Pop Tarts provides.

They never do put enough fruit filling in these things, Warble thinks as he contemplates the wafer-thin center of the tasty treat.

Warble is silent as they get back on the subway headed towards Brooklyn. Instead of getting off at High Street, though, to return to the Hotel Bossert (Mary doesn't even notice that they 'miss their stop,' being completely overwhelmed with the Big Apple and all its worms), they change to the F train and head into South Brooklyn, more specifically to Kings Highway.

At Avenue O, they disembark again, and only then does Mary realize that this part of town doesn't look like Brooklyn Heights. "Are we lost, Warble? This street doesn't look familiar."

"Do I look lost?" is all that Warble says in reply as they descend the stairs to the street. Kings Highway is a long, wide and (by New York City standards) not overly busy street. A couple of blocks later Warble stops in front of a house, looks at it for several seconds with what seems to Mary like a partially concerned, partially confused expression, and then decisively turns up the walkway, looking behind and waving her on impatiently. "Come on; this is it."

"This is what?" Mary wants to know.

"The house of my old ship captain, Morley Moore, 'The Terror of the Seven Seas.' After the Edmund Fitzgerald sank, he gave up the seafaring life and became a captain of commerce--he's the President, CEO, and CFO of some outfit around here that he founded."

"Why did the wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald cause him to quit the sea--did he have some good friends aboard?"

"No, he didn't know a soul in the ore trade; he just didn't want to give Gordon Lightfoot the opportunity to write a song about him and his ship. He couldn't bear the thought of Gordon singing 'Morley Moore went down in 2004, and now you won't see Morley no mo-ore' or something like that."

"Morley sounds like your kind of guy, all right, Warble."

"Oh, yes, we got along famously," Warble says as he rings the doorbell, which imitates the sound of a ship's horn. "You'll like his wife Leslie, too, Mary--she's a swell gal."

"I can't wait," Mary replies in a deadpan voice. *If Morley is half as strange as Warble, and Leslie is half as strange as Morley, I'm in for quite an interesting visit. If I ever go to work in a mental hospital, I'll have plenty of on-the-job training, that's for sure.*

CHAPTER 34

Mary is pleasantly surprised--almost shocked--when Morley opens the door. He's a very distinguished and prosperous-looking man.

"Well shiver me timbers, it's Warble McGorkle and some dame! How are you doing, you old salt? You finally came to see your old captain--I'd just about given up on you."

"Morley, this is my wife, Mary," is all Warble says in response, a little nervous and perhaps even a tad deferentially.

"Nice to meet you, young lady," Morley says, extending his hand. After shaking hands with Mary, he turns to Warble and says in a stage whisper, "That's a fine-looking catch you've got there, Warble, old salt. I bet you were merry when you married Mary, weren't you?"

"What? Oh...yes, captain, indeed I was."

"Well, don't just stand out there on the deck," Morley teases and steps aside. "Come on in; the little woman is around here somewhere. I want you to meet her, Mary."

Leslie comes into the room when she hears the voices in the vestibule. After a quick introduction, the two couples go into the living room and sit on the couch. Soon, two separate conversations are in progress: Warble and Morley reminisce about their days at sea, while Mary and Leslie discuss the relative merits of Butterick vs. Simplicity and whether the Fed should raise, lower, or stand pat on the interest rate.

After a couple of hours, Warble notices the time and tells Mary they should be going; she nods to him but continues her conversation with Leslie. As Warble rises to leave, Morley jumps to his feet and exclaims, "I've got it! I just thought of something, Warble, old salt. I need someone down at the office to be my first mate, to man the Hurricane Deck as well as the Crow's Nest, so to speak...to get things all ship shape and Bristol fashion."

"Doing what?" Warble asks. He's a little leery, but at the same time curious.

"Just this and that. Facilitating things for me. Interviewing potential new-hires. Firing the deadwood and the old people getting near retirement age--we can't have their pensions on the books, you know--the stockholders don't like things like that.

"I need someone like you, Warble; someone I can rely on to do whatever needs doing. Your title will be 'Special Assistant to Mr. Morley'."

"Well..." Warble says, not overly enthused, but a little intrigued at the prospect of being able to fire people.

Mary shoots Warble a very--how to describe it--*intense* look, and Warble knows his life will be Dallas all the way home if he doesn't accept the job. He turns to his old captain, trying his best to look as go-getterish as possible, and says resolutely, "You've got your man, captain! I'll take the job, and thanks to ye--I'm beholden to ya."

"Fine! It's settled then, old salt. Meet me here at 730 hours sharp, and you can ride with me into the office--I'll take you around, introduce you to people, and show you the ropes. Now go home and get some rest--we've got a big day ahead of us tomorrow."

"Yes, sir; thank you, sir," Warble says, as he and Mary take their leave. The women part on equal terms. The men had been more or less on equal terms at the start of the visit--Morley *had* been Warble's captain on ship, but that was a thing and relationship of the past--but are on equal terms no longer: Morley is Warble's boss again, and so Warble reverts to being his subordinate.

Warble is of two minds about his change of circumstance. On the one hand, he's happy to have a reliable and steady source of income, albeit probably not an overly large one, but on the other hand it grates on him to be no longer his own master, but, rather, under the thumb of another man. Oh, well. He can take his frustrations out on the poor saps he will get to fire. Now that's something to look forward to!

Warble is again silent on the train--silent by Warble standards, anyway. He can't see himself as Morley's 'right-hand man' twenty years down the road--or even ten, or five--but he doesn't have another plan at the moment, so he will just have to accept his lot and make the best of it.

Warble decides to just take it a day at a time and have as much fun with it as possible, while keeping an eye open and an ear close to the ground.

Another great opportunity will surely come his way, sooner or later, and perhaps (like Allen Funt's victims on *Candid Camera*) when he least expects it.

By the time the McGorkles get back to Brooklyn Heights and disembark at High Street, Warble is resigned to his situation and resolved to play it for all its worth.

"Let's celebrate," he suggests to Mary, as they walk the few blocks toward their hotel. "There's a good pizza place just around the corner on Henry Street--can you smell it?"

She can. It smells good--enticing. In fact, almost irresistible.

Fascati Pizza makes their product the old-fashioned way--they throw the dough in the air, knead it with their fists as they move it along counter-clockwise in their hands, hurl it again into the air, then whirl it around in the other direction, again and again, until it's ready to go into the oven.

There's nothing like good pizza washed down with beer to cap off an exhilarating and exhausting day. Warble had wanted to show Mary the promenade adjacent to Columbia Heights, with a view of the Manhattan skyline and the Brooklyn Bridge (not to mention the less-picturesque Manhattan and Verazzano Narrows Bridges), but is now too tired to do so and is barely able to drag himself back to the Hotel Bossert (the five and a half beers he drank may be partly responsible for this).

When they get to their room, Warble and Mary quickly fall into a deep sleep--undisturbed by worries, misgivings, or a guilty conscience. Well, collectively that can be said of them, anyway, for Warble has neither of the first two maladies mentioned, and Mary isn't suffering from the last one.

CHAPTER 35

When Warble arrives at the Moore house the next morning, he's raring to go. He had forgotten to set the alarm the night before and so had overslept. Warble then had to shower at ultra-warp speed, and had had no time for breakfast. He stopped at a bagel shop on the way to the subway station, but the purchase had slowed him down just enough to make him late for the train--one left just as he arrived, and the next one was late.

By the time Warble finally arrives at his old captain's house, he's almost fifteen minutes late. Warble is feeling surly due to the way his morning has begun, and embarrassed for being late. But he is, indeed, fired up about starting work. That is to say, he's looking forward to firing somebody--anybody, and quick.

Warble's first few days at his new job go by rather routinely. Warble especially enjoys canning people (he gets 50 shares of stock for every working stiff he cans, and twice that amount--plus a \$500 cash bonus--if he fires someone who is within two years of retirement).

Warble enjoys hiring, too. Well, he doesn't so much enjoy *hiring* as he enjoys the hiring *process*, most particularly interviewing the job seekers. Warble demands of all applicants that they sing, dance, tell about their most embarrassing moment, and explain what they would do if they heard a co-worker utter a discouraging word about the company or one of their supervisors.

Warble can't decide which is more fun--watching the applicants who are desperate for a job squirm (especially when he can see they really would prefer to punch him in the nose)--or watching the old fogies sweat and fret as he tells them how valuable their services were and all that, but then 'regretfully' informs them, with hang-dog mien, that times are hard everywhere, the company is having to tighten its belt--even the directors had to limit themselves to two gold-flakes in each glass of Dom Perignon at their last board meeting--and so they surely see the necessity of being willing now to 'take one for the club,' to 'suck it up and take it like a man' (or a woman) and admit that they just don't 'cut the mustard' anymore.

As fun as it is to watch those less fortunate than him suffer, and to gloat over his position of authority over them, Warble gradually tires of the same old routine day in and day out.

One day, shortly after listening to an eager (more to the point, desperate) job applicant stumble through a medley comprised of *The Good Ship Lollypop*, *Wild Thing*, *Delta Dawn*, and *Tiptoe Through the Tulips* (songs selected, of course, by Warble), watching him do his best at dancing *The Twist* (while singing the aforementioned songs), hearing about the time he ripped his pants while showing off for a girl as he climbed up the side of his house pretending to be Spider-Man (the most embarrassing part of which being that he was 32 years old at the time), and finally witnessing his lame attempt at a show of sincerity in claiming that he would immediately and without compunction report any fellow worker who in any way gave indication of a bad attitude, at the first sign of dereliction of duty, or on any evidence of lack of respect for his superiors, Warble informs the man that actually there are no job openings at the moment.

Feeling his oats and groovy to boot, Warble prances down the hall to the vending machine. He has dropped coins here many times before to procure from the metal purveyor of snacks his daily ration of Tootsie Rolls, Pop Tarts, and Diet Lite Decaffeinated Soda. This time, though, he notices something for the first time: there is a sign on the vending machine which reads *Please see rotunda receptionist for refund*.

Warble deciphers the legalistic jargon, thinking to himself: *Aha! That is the politically correct way of saying, 'If you find that the food in this overgrown lunch bucket has not contributed to your health and welfare and made you happy as a clam, look up the fat receptionist in the lobby and she'll pony up big time. After all, 'rotunda' is the Latin (and probably French, Italian, Spanish, Romansh, Portuguese, and Swahili) word for 'fat.'*

If they just came right out and said 'Please see the fat receptionist for refund,' then Fat Albert, Minnesota Fats, Fats Domino, Fats Waller, and Fat Mike would surely sue them for all they're worth.

Warble surveys the available items in the vending machine. He decides on a

package of peanut M&M's and drops in three quarters. He snatches the bag before it hits the bottom of the vending machine, yanks his hand out from the flap-like opening, and rips open the package. Scurrying back to his office, he closes the door, locking it behind him. Warble doesn't want to be disturbed by any co-workers, wannabe co-workers, or soon-to-be-ex-co-workers just now.

He upends the candy wrapper on his desk and inspects the colorful oval-shaped candies that tumble out. If he were wearing a monocle, Warble would look strikingly similar to a jeweler examining a collection of rare rubies. But he's not, so he doesn't, really. Well, sort of—in a way and after a fashion.

After moving his head back and forth across the items freshly scattered across his desk, investigating each and every candy from a very close vantage point, Warble finally snags one specimen away from its brethren and leaps for joy.

"Eureka!" he cries out, "I've found it!" Warble rushes out the door, flinging it open and dashing down the hallway. He almost runs over a messenger boy who is so alarmed at seeing the frantic exodus that he stands rooted to his spot in the middle of the hallway.

"Don't just stand there, boy," Warble says, and grabs the slight youth by his shoulders and shoves him over to one side of the aisle. "Stand *there*, if you're just going to stand around."

By the time the young man has regained his composure enough to look back around at Warble, the former merchant marine and polka punk band leader has entered the elevator and is about to descend. "And don't stand around long," Warble adds. "You can be replaced, you know. There are a million people a million times sharper than you who are dying to have your job!"

Warble forgets the incident as soon as the elevator door closes. He didn't even recognize Woody Shoulda-Coulda, whom he had hired just last week after Woody's rousing rendition of *Delta Dawn* (in particular) and an energy-infused, albeit clumsy, demonstration of *The Twist*.

Woody, on the other hand, will remember the confrontation for months,

oftentimes having nightmares about it. It will always turn out differently in his dreams, though: Sometimes Woody has his wits about him and deftly leaps to the side of the aisle so as not to be in Mr. McGorkle's way as he comes hurtling headlong toward him. Other times he and his boss engage in fisticuffs or a wrestling match. When it is a fistfight of which he dreams, Woody wins, and in the end hangs Mr. McGorkle out the window by his ankles until he pleads for his life--in which case Woody doesn't let him up until he sings *Wipeout* backwards in slow motion and promises to be polite and say 'good morning, Woody' at the beginning of each workday. If it is a wrestling match Woody dreams of, though, his boss always gets the upper hand and pins him to the carpet--which, he then notices, exudes a strong chemical/rodent hair odor. He feels as if he is choking, and his neck is being twisted--and then he wakes up, shaking and drenched with sweat.

Meanwhile, down in the lobby, Warble is running around like a decapitated chicken, trying to locate the fat receptionist. Finally, he approaches the lone receptionist on duty, although she is a lithe, sleek and beautiful creature--certainly not fat by any stretch of the imagination.

"Say, Miss," he begins, "you're not the regular receptionist, are you?"

"Why, Mr. McGorkle, you must be pulling my leg," the blond bombshell replies in a soft, sweet and sexy southern accent. "I've been the only receptionist since you've been working here--and well before then, too. Surely you noticed me before?" she asks, batting her eyelashes coquettishly.

Warble blushes. "Of course," he lies, "What I meant to ask was: Are you the *only* receptionist that works here? I have reason to believe you have a counterpart who is, shall we say, a little fonder of the festive board than you appear to be."

The receptionist's demeanor changes instantaneously. "You mean a fat chick?" she counter-questions (she is not as dense as her hair-hue might lead a person to conclude). Her tone has taken on a hard edge, and her accent is sliding from Mississippi molasses to brash and Brooklynesque. She thinks Mr. McGorkle must have a 'thing' for 'full-figured gals,' as they are sometimes euphemistically called (or, as Warble calls them, 'economy-sized women').

Being a gold-digger of long standing who had seen in Warble an up-and-coming star of the firm, and because she has to work very hard to maintain her trim figure, the receptionist is downright furious at what she perceives as a spurn. "There ain't no fat chicks manning this post, you strange, sad, little man!" she hisses. "I didn't want to go out with you, *anyway*," she informs him, practically spitting in his face.

Warble is taken aback. The sticker on the vending machine says (in so many words, as near as he can make it out), 'Go see the fat receptionist for a refund.' But there is no fat receptionist. The only receptionist in the building is far from fat.

"It's a trick! I've been duped! It's a trap!" Warble yelps. He spins around, looking to see if he's about to be tackled by whoever it is that has tricked him. He sees no one. *Aha! My steel trap-like mind worked too quickly for them. They thought it would take me longer than it did to recognize the opportunity inherent in the vending machine. Due to my unparalleled intellect and razor-sharp observation skills, though, I discovered the key to fortunes practically instantaneously: Purchase a defective item from the machine, and cash in on the untold millions greedily hoarded by the purveyors of junk food.*

Not willing to run the risk of returning to his office, as his pursuers could be on him at any second, Warble exits the building without returning to give his notice, leave any messages, or even to swipe any paper clips from the supply closet. Within fifteen minutes of his uncovering the plot to kidnap him (doubtless to coerce out of him, by tortures unimaginable, the ideas locked up within his inestimable and incomparable cranium), Warble is on the subway heading towards Brooklyn Heights.

CHAPTER 36

Ascending the stairs at the High Street subway station, Warble pulls his coat up over his ears as he joins the flow of foot traffic on the street. He shifts his eyes from side to side, on the lookout for any would-be kidnappers. Doing his best turtle imitation, Warble shrinks his head as far as he can down into his coat, and whistles *Happy Together* under his breath (he want to appear calm, cavalier, and carefree).

Warble slips quietly into his hotel room, inadvertently startling Mary. Until Warble's sudden appearance, she had been totally engrossed in the television special *Wheeling In The Years*, a 90-minute recap of the most memorable moments from *Wheel of Fortune*.

"Why home so early, dear?" Mary gasps, recovering from the minor shock.

"Pack your things, Mary, we've got to rip this joint. I was cheated out of a fortune today, and those who bilked me want to kidnap me. We may have only minutes! Hurry! Grab your slippers, your robe, and your make-up case. I'll get my shaving kit and my notes."

In scarcely eight seconds, Warble is ready to go. "Come on, Mary, there's no time for dilly-dallying around. Leave those papers and that old box of vanilla wafers."

Mary is standing in the middle of the room, looking around in confusion, wondering if she is forgetting something important. Warble grabs Mary by the hand. "Don't look back, Mary. It's time for me to fly. New York's not my home, and it's hard to be a saint in this city, anyway."

The McGorkles take the stairs instead of the elevator, for two reasons: First, Warble wants to prevent a potential kidnapping (of himself), and second, he wants to avoid walking past the Hotel's front desk, as the clerks might deduce that their most illustrious guests are leaving and ask to be remunerated for the stay.

Warble will gladly pay--sometime--but not today. 'Today is never a good day

to pay,' Warble is fond of saying, as well as, 'Why pay today when you can easily postpone payment until tomorrow? and, as the great philosopher John Fogerty said, 'Tomorrow Never Comes'.'

As the McGorkles hurry down the side street to where they've parked their PT Cruiser, Warble turns to look at a 'street person' who is sitting against the side of a building, tin cup in hand. Warble is hoping the man is sound asleep or drunk so that he can quickly and quietly spirit away any bills he may have in his cup. To Warble's dismay, though, the man is wide-awake and fully alert.

Warble's eyes practically bulge right out of his head when he takes a close look at the man's face. He turns away as quickly as possible and whispers to Mary, "Hey! I recognize that guy dressed up like a bum! He used to be a nose tackle for the Denver Broncos!"

Mary's eyebrows gather. "He tackled noses?" she asks. "Whatever for?"

"You're the one that claims that football is America's number one sport, and you don't know the first thing about it, do you, Mary? There are two reasons a nose tackle is called a nose tackle (besides the fact that it sounds so suave and debonair, that is), namely these:

- 1) These highly-skilled professionals are trained to tackle the ball carrier's nose, because when they do that, generally the whole head gets tackled, and the rest of the body normally comes down along with the head.
- 2) If unable to tackle the ball-carrier via conventional means, they are trained to punch him in the nose--a couple of wiry defensive backs and a linebacker or two hold the hapless opponent until the nose tackle comes up and pops him one.

"The nose tackle is the only player who, by rules, is allowed to do that without being penalized. It's not exact-act-actly expressly and explicitly *encouraged* by the NFL's rules committee, but it *is* certainly condoned--the refs will look the other way if it's a nose tackle on the giving end of a nose-punch.

"But enough of that--this is no time for a course in fundamental football whys and wherefores. That very gentleman, around whom our conversation

has been revolving, has been hired to nab me and throw me in the East River--or worse yet, the Hudson! We've got to skedaddle--vamoose--make like a tree and leaf. If I stay here any longer, I'll end up adding to the pollution at the bottom of the East River along with the tennis balls, pop-tops, and American cheese.

"So, in the interest of public health and safety, so as not to inadvertently contaminate the water supply (not that I'm concerned in the least with my personal welfare), I will make the ultimate sacrifice of vacating the premises and 'move on down the road.' Yikes! I just realized--it's more likely that his designs are to overpower me and heave me into the sewer with all the giant, steroid-fed crocodiles, for which New York City's sewers are famous!"

The McGorkles manage to make it to their PT Cruiser unmolested. Warble squeeches his tires leaving the parking lot, barely missing the homeless man Warble thought he had recognized.

Warble breathes a sigh of relief as the McGorkles exit the Holland Tunnel heading out of the city. He's about to tell Mary more about the origins of the Tunnel, how it was used in the Civil War to transport tulips to the Union army, which they used both as food and ammunition against the hordes of the insurrection, but he sees--and hears--that she is already sound asleep.

Warble reaches into his shirt pocket and smiles as he feels the bulbous M&M. "This grotesque little thing is worth a fortune, Mary," he tells her, although he knows she's in slumberland. "If I hadn't found this misshapen, deformed candylet, my adversaries may have caught me. I could have cashed it in for a fortune, but I've ended up getting something even better from it," he says, taking it out and holding it up in front of his face, turning it around and around in his fingers and eyeing it lovingly.

"This scrumptious little tidbit saved my life. From now on, little M&M," he continues, addressing the oddly shaped piece of chocolate, "you are my special buddy and my good luck charm. I will never abandon you--just as you didn't let me down, I won't let you down, either."

Warble gives the green M&M a tender kiss, drops it carefully back into his shirt pocket, and gives the slight bulge at his breast a couple of gentle taps.

After several minutes of distracted driving, during which he alternates between yelling at the other drivers (who keep honking their horns and shaking their fists at him just because he occasionally wanders a little into their lane), and fishing around in his wife's purse with his right hand, Warble finally finds that for which he has so eagerly sought.

Warble flips the device open, presses a few buttons, waits a few seconds, and then, as the callee picks up, informs Morley that he has to 'give up his berth.'

The voice on the other end sounds uncannily like that of Mr. Slate, Fred Flintstone's boss. "Mutiny!" Morley shrieks. "Mutiny! If I ever get my hands on you, Warble Poundcake McGorkle--yes, I know your middle name, you old rascal--I'll have you keel-hauled!"

Warble just smiles and turns the cell phone off. He is in his element now. He is again footloose and fancy free; On the road again, and heading West--to Bethany, Oklahoma.

CHAPTER 37

On the way to Oklahoma, Warble alternates between explaining facts and history relative to places through which they pass and singing the song named for the state. While driving through Pennsylvania, he expounds on how the Little League was formed in Williamsport (which is true), but then adds that the original name of the town was Keystone Cop City, and was changed to Williamsport after Little League began there, because baseball is 'Williams' sport,' referring to Ted Williams, who was batting 1.000 at the time (probably not true).

Then Warble sees a sign for Oklahoma City and bursts into song:
"Oooooooooooooooooooooo-klahoma, where the wind comes sweeping down the plains..."

Later they pass through Columbus, Ohio, which causes Warble to cease singing and explain to Mary how Columbus is a 'tweener city'--too small to have a professional baseball, football, or basketball team ('professional' meaning here MLB, NFL, or NBA, you nit-pickers out there in reader-land), but too big to qualify as small--and 'small is big nowadays,' Warble adds.

In Huntingburg, Indiana, the singing again stops. This time the cessation of Warble's vocalizing is caused by the McGorkles stopping at *Barn & Mindy's Diner* for lunch. As he and Mary sit down at the quaint eatery, Warble says, "You would never know from looking at this town that this was the very spot where the infamous confrontation between Charlemagne and Genghis Khan took place, away back in Civil War days."

"Sharla Maine and Genga's con?" Mary asks.

"That's right," Warble affirms. "They settled their differences in a unique way. They didn't fight a conventional battle, because they didn't want to destroy any of the apple trees in the area--after all, why should trees be cannon fodder?"

"That sounds sensible," Mary agrees.

"You don't really believe Charlemagne and Genghis Khan cared one whit about apple trees, do you, Mary?" Warble responds in disbelief. "They only made that concession out of fear of what John Chapman--AKA Johnny Appleseed--would do to them if they molested a single bud on one of his precious seedlings.

"The Appleseed gang--led by Don Knotts, Jack Elam, and Slim Pickens--were so notorious for their ferocity in warfare (not to mention their expert use of cyanide-tipped blow darts, made from the extract of apple seeds), that even the mighty Khan and his opposite number were petrified of them.

"Anyway, this drowsy white town got its name from the way they settled their conflict: one man from each army was selected out from their ranks (volunteers were requested, but *everyone* volunteered, so a representative from each camp had to be selected) and they engaged in a mutual search-and-destroy mission."

"What were they to search out and then destroy?" Mary is curious.

"Each other! They blindfolded the two men, and started off one man from this side of that hill over yonder, and one from the other yonder, and they tried to find each other."

"So what happened?" Mary asks, before inserting a couple of French fries into her mouth.

"One guy caught the other at the top of the mountain, bent him over his knee, and spanked him in front of both armies, as well as other onlookers (the residents of the town, mostly). The victor/spanker declared himself King of the Hill. The defeated army left the field in shame, disgrace, and embarrassment."

"Yes, I'll bet the losing combatant's cheeks were really red. But which army was it--who lost?"

"Huh? I don't know! You can't expect me to know *everything*, Mary," Warble retorts, feigning indignation. Inwardly he is gloating that Mary really does seem to believe that his knowledge is boundless--whereas in reality he knows

there are a few minor gaps in it here and there. Warble figures he only knows approximately 94.2% of all that there is to be known. It just so happens that this one little meaningless and inconsequential factoid about who won *The Charlemagne-Khan Tree-Friendly Spanking-Battle* is one of those few-and-far-between facts that he lacks.

"Anyway, Mary," Warble continues, "the point of the whole story is, that is how this sleepy little town got its name."

"I don't get it--how did they get *Huntingburg* from that incident--or is Huntingburg an even newer name than the one it took on after that event?"

"Mary, you need to bone up on your entomology a little bit," Warble suggests.

"Why? I don't like bugs," Mary replies.

"*Entomology*, not *Etymology*, Mary--word roots, stems, and origins. Huntingburg is a contraction of the original name *Place Where the Hunting of Burghers Transpired*. In those days, people had more time for small talk, and so the place names were longer. But that's neither here nor there--eventually the name *Place Where the Hunting of Burghers Transpired* was reduced to *Huntingburgh* and, finally, *Huntingburg* (without the 'h' on the end, that is)."

"Why does the name indicate, then, that they hunted burgers? If they wanted a burger, they could have just come here to *Barn and Mindy's Diner*," Mary reasons.

"Not that kind of burger, Mary!" Warble sputters. "Burgher, with an 'H'; in other words, a citizen. Most of the soldiers were draftees at that time. Due to the great quaking and fear due to the ascendancy of the Appleseed gang, as well as the general malaise caused by the invention of mayonnaise (a barbiturate), the great armies of Europe could not get enough volunteers. So, they were forced to institute a draft, which caused the armies to become filled with burghers (citizens), instead of professional soldiers.

"And so, thanks to the Appleseed gang and mayonnaise, this town is named, not *Huntingsoldier*, but *Huntingburg*."

After this harangue, Mary is thinking that Warble singing *Oklahoma* isn't so bad after all--in comparison to his 'history lessons,' that is.

But she hasn't heard anything yet.

CHAPTER 38

In Oak Lawn, Illinois, that evening, Warble gorges himself on so many Chicago dogs (hot dogs with onions, pickles, fluorescent-green relish, tomatoes, hot peppers, celery salt and mustard--known simply as 'dogs' or 'red hots' in the greater Chicago area) that he becomes drowsy and Mary takes over the driving duties.

When Warble regains a certain semblance of consciousness, the McGorkles are approaching Hannibal, Missouri. As Warble in his semi-comatose state realizes where they are, he starts awake as if bitten by a horsefly. "Mary, do you know where we are?!" he asks excitedly.

"We're about to cross over from Illinois into Missouri," Mary answers flatly, sad to see that her husband has awakened out of his slumber.

"Yes, but I mean, do you know where we *are*? The first town we'll hit in Missouri is Hannibal, one of the most historic towns in this entire nation. This is where Becky Ross designed the confederate flag (and then outsourced the actual sewing of the thing to some of Pancho Villa's soldiers' wives) before she started her instant-cake company."

"Becky Ross? Wasn't it Betsy Ross, and wasn't it--" Mary asks, confused.

"Becky, Betsy, Betty, what's the diff?" Warble asks. "The names are interchangeable, Mary--like John and Jack. You know: John Kennedy, Jack Kennedy; John Brown, Jack Brown; Jack Nicholson, John Nicholson; Jack B. Nimble, John B. Nimble; Jack London, John London; and of course everyone knows all about John and the Beanstalk.

"In other words, Becky Ross *is* Betsy Ross. After the Civil War she married the mountain man Davy Crocker and, since he was always out hunting raccoons and just generally fooling around, she had to be the breadwinner in the family. Her Yankee ingenuity (after the Civil War she considered herself a Yankee) resulted in the formation of her famous cake-mix conglomerate, and the rest is history."

"It was Davy Crockett, not Davy Crocker," Mary contends.

Warble pays no heed or mind, though; he's on a roll now. "The Lewis & Clark Expedition also came through here. One of the members of their entourage, Sacajawea, liked the place so much that after they returned from their road trip to Portland she started the Indian Motorcycle Company with her friend Joe McCarthy.

"As if that is not enough history for one town--for one state, even--that isn't the end of it--no, not by any means or by a long shot. The great American author Jack Steinbeck hails from here, too. He wrote *Travels with Jim*, *Life on the Illinois/Missouri Border*, *West of Hannibal*, and *Huckleberries of Wrath*.

Mary scratches her head.

"And of course," Warble continues, "as everybody knows, country artiste Shania Twain and baseball player Roger Clemens hail from here, also. This town is *steeped* in history, Mary--*steeped*!" Warble concludes, shaking his head in wonderment and admiration.

Noticing that Warble is on the verge of a nostalgia-induced conniption fit, Mary changes the subject. "Warble, do you remember the time Martha Stewart demonstrated how to prepare a quiche omelet casserole?"

"Mary, let me drive," Warble grunts. "You're over-tired. You must have overtaxed your stamina behind the wheel."

"Yes, dear," Mary says, pulling over to the side of the road. By the time Warble has gotten into the driver's seat, Mary is sound asleep.

"Exhaustive history *is* exhausting," Warble admits, glancing over at Mary. "There's only so much of it a body can take at any given time without getting over-stimulated."

Warble points the nose of the PT Cruiser westward, and crosses the bridge that spans the mile-wide tide of the 'mighty Mississip'.

Warble's internal, infernal homing device is pointing directly to the Oklahoma City suburb of Bethany.

CHAPTER 39

As the unlikely duo cross the border from Missouri into Oklahoma, Mary asks, "Warble, I've been wondering: who's in Bethany? What old shipmate of yours settled there?"

"None that I know of," Warble replies, enjoying the look of confusion on his wife's face that this statement induces.

"Then why in the world are we going there? I've never even heard of the place."

"That's exact-act-act/ly why we're going there, Mary. You should've been a carpenter--or perhaps a furrier--because you've hit the nail right on the head. Who would ever look for me in Bethany, Oklahoma, of all places? There's nothing there but nothing there--certainly nothing there that would give anyone, anywhere, any time the slightest inkling that I, the inventive genius of the era, the man born with perfect brain-pitch, would be there ensconced."

"Sometimes I do think you have pitch on your brain, Warble," is Mary's response.

"Thank you, Mary," Warble replies, misunderstanding Mary's meaning. "I could have been a pitcher; and I could've been in pictures; and above and beyond all that, I enjoy drinking beer from a pitcher. So, in short, you are correct, madam, you are correct--pitch and many of its derivatives *is* on my brain--often, in fact (along with gazillions of other things), many of them simultaneously."

"Where will we stay, and for how long?" Mary wants to know. "What will we do? What's your plan?" She isn't fond of uncertainty. Unfortunately for her (being married to Warble) she likes a steady, predictable routine.

"Someplace, I don't know, and--I've got a sure-fire plan," replies Warble.

"Someplace? You don't know? What kind of sure-fire plan?" asks Mary, a little perturbed.

"Don't worry about it, Mary," Warble replies. "Have I ever let you down?" Warble doesn't allow Mary an opportunity to respond to that--it was meant as a rhetorical question.

"We'll find some cute little abode somewhere, that's nothing; I don't know how long we'll stay, because I don't know how long it will take for me to make my fortune with my indescribably ingenious idea, after which I can sell off the whole operation for a cool billion or so, and then we'll be safe and can move on."

"All right, Warble," Mary sighs. "What plan?"

"First things first, Mary," Warble responds. "After we rent a pad and buy some grub, I'll spill the beans. Let's get filet mignon, Cabernet sauvignon, and cheesecake--the whole shebang. After dessert, I'll tell you all about my unbelievably awesome idea."

CHAPTER 40

The McGorkles find an apartment in the middle of town, amongst those that are, for the most part, rented out to Air Traffic Control cadets attending the academy in Oklahoma City. This suits Warble fine, thinking that his neighbors will be quiet, spending most of their time studying for their exams.

After stowing the minimal possessions with which they've been traveling in their apartment (mostly clothes, which easily fit in the rear compartment of their PT Cruiser but also, of course, the priceless notebook), Warble and Mary drive to the Piggly Wiggly down the street to get some groceries.

On finding the last item on their shopping list, Warble wheels the cart towards the checkout area. Another couple shopping together stop to talk with the McGorkles.

The masculine half of the duo is intrigued by the items in the McGorkles' cart. He thinks the McGorkles must have a *little* money, anyway, to be purchasing these particular items.

"Howdy, Pard!" the big, fleshy stranger says, voice like a foghorn. He's wearing a wide-brimmed white cowboy hat and cowboy boots. Judging by the softness of his hands, though, he has probably never had a rope burn in his life.

"Excuse me?" Warble replies, a little warily. *Does this guy know me?* Warble looks intently at the man's face. He doesn't recognize the man, so figures he must just be the friendly sort. *Probably just a used-car salesman or something like that.*

The man notices Warble's suspicion and tries to allay his fears. "Pahdon mah nosiness and nossness; it's jist paht of mah nigh-chur. Ah don't recanize yew folks. Whah ah y'all from?"

Warble is still leery. "Everywhere and nowhere," he responds, noncommittally.

The man sees he can't push things too far with Warble, and makes as if he's about to proceed down the aisle. "Awright then, pard. Ah'll leave y'all alone nah. Ah jist thought ah maht could be uv some assistance to y'all. Aftah all, ah was born and raised right cheer in Bethany, and know her lahk the back of mah hay-end. Ah figgered y'all wuz nyoo-comers hyar, and--"

Warble decides he may as well divulge a *little* information. It surely won't hurt anything. "Wait a minute there, mister; we *are* newcomers, and I do plan on going into business here..." Warble waits for a response from the man.

"Way-el, whah didn't y'all say so raht fum the git-go," the man beams. He pushes his hat further back on his head with his right index finger and thrusts his hand out. "Dokie Sister; pleased tah meetcha. This hyar is mah wahf, Salvia."

"Saliva?" Warble asks, perplexed.

"*Salvia*," Dokie repeats.

Warble is still bewildered. "Can you spell that?" he requests.

"A course ah can," Dokie responds, a little miffed at what he perceives to be an insult.

Warble hesitates, waiting for Dokie to spell his wife's name. "I mean, *will* you spell her name?"

"Oh!" Dokie says, pleasantly surprised. He's only too glad to show off his orthographic prowess. "Yew betcha-- ess, whah, ayl, vee, ah, ay."

Dokie's wife, who hasn't said a word until now, comes to the rescue. Her accent isn't nearly as exaggerated as her husband's, and so she is able to get Warble to understand her name.

"Oh, *Sylvia*! Nice to meet you, Dokie and Sylvia. My name is Warble McGorkle, and this is my wonderful wedded woman Mary."

The women nod and smile at each other. Camaraderie born of mutual sympathy is already starting to build between them, because each one realizes (female intuition, no doubt) that the other's husband is a bit of a "character"--whereas they themselves are nice, normal women who just happen to be married to these weirdos.

Warble's stomach growls, and all of a sudden he's in a hurry to get back to the apartment so he and Mary can start preparing dinner. "Well, it was nice to meet you, Dokie and Sylvia," he says, and bends to the task of guiding the cart up the aisle.

"Whoa! Hold yore hosses thar a minnit, Wahble," Dokie pleads. "Yew said yew wuz a wantin' tew go into business hyar. Ah maht could hep ya wif sump'n lahk thay-et."

Warble doesn't want to seem rude, but doesn't really think much of Dokie's business acumen, based on what he can deduce of the man's intelligence and sophistication--or lack thereof. Dokie may know somebody who it would be advantageous to meet, though, Warble reasons. After exchanging some quick sign language and body English with his wife (using his eyes and fingers), Warble somewhat reluctantly invites Dokie and Sylvia to join them for dinner.

Dokie readily accepts and, after getting the address of their apartment (he knows exactly where it is, no need for directions, he tells Warble), offers to bring some beer. They plan to meet there in an hour; the Sisters will finish their purchases, go home and change, and then meet the McGorkles at their new digs.

After dinner, Warble will unveil his wackiest plan yet.

CHAPTER 41

When the Sisters arrive at the McGorkle apartment, they are greeted not only by Warble but also by the mouth-watering aroma of filet mignon and baked potatoes. Dokie is now wearing a brightly-colored cowboy shirt and a bolo tie, in addition to his cowboy hat and boots--he has doubled his cowboy quotient during the course of the past hour.

"You didn't have to get all gussied up," Warble says, half-teasing.

Dokie's face turns serious. "Wahble, we're a-mixin' mah tew fiv'rite thangs hyar ta-naht," he says. "Beer and biz-ness. Ah always git mahself fixed up raht wherever beer and biz-ness 'r concerned."

During the small talk over dinner, the McGorkles learn that Dokie and Sylvia had met at the Piggly Wiggly down the street 22 years previously. They had bumped into each other--literally--as Dokie was buying some Billy Beer and Sylvia a bottle of Chardonnay.

Sylvia's maiden name had been Sylvia Mister, and she was at the time a nun in the convent downtown. On their first date, Sylvia called Dokie 'Mister Sister,' and he called her 'Sister Mister.' That didn't last long, though, because Sylvia soon thereafter left the convent, and Dokie and Sylvia were married a few months later.

If Sylvia had been able to remain a nun after their wedding, she would've been Sister Sister; if, on the other hand, Dokie had taken Sylvia's maiden name as his surname (perhaps so that she *could* remain a nun, hiding her marital status), he would be Mister Mister; or if they used the hyphenated style of combining surnames, she could have been Sister Mister-Sister and he Mister Sister-Mister--but they had done none of those things.

Over dessert (cheesecake and coffee), the two couples get down to business. Mary wants to leave the men to their ramblings and rumblings and see what's playing on television, but Sylvia has to stay at the table, as she is to play an integral part in the discussion. Seeing this, Mary also stays behind. She *is* a little curious about Warble's new plan, although her hopes for its

success are not, shall we say, overwhelming.

The beer they drank before the meal and the wine that was imbibed along with it--as hoped for by Dokie and Sylvia--have loosened Warble's tongue considerably. He divulges his business plan without further ado. He is so proud of his fail-proof plan that he simply cannot hold back a smug and self-satisfied smirk as he tells them all about it.

"Reality TV is all the rage these days; outrageousness is all the rage; tough guys are all the rage; the deep, dark, dank, dastardly, dungeony elements of society have taken on a mystique among the masses--" Warble is beginning to get expansive, gesticulating wildly, his eyes getting wider the longer he speaks.

Dokie interrupts him. "'Dungeony,' Wahble? Ain't thet sum kahnd uh cray-eb?"

"No, Dokie," Warble responds, standing up from the table, right index finger pointing toward the sky (well, the ceiling, anyway), switching into his teaching mode. "'Dungeony' refers to the denizens of our modern-day dungeons: jails, prisons, vocational institutes, correctional facilities, sweat shops, etc. Here's my plan," Warble says, lowering his voice and sitting back down in his chair, pausing for full effect until all eyes are on him.

"24X7 videotaping of life in prisons!" he exults. "In the yards, the mess halls, the cells themselves, maybe even in the showers. We'll call the show *Bad Boyz Behind Barz* or *Lifestyles of the Captured and Incarcerated*."

Dokie is the first to 'get it.' "Wahble, mah friend, yew *are* a jine-yus, ah've got tah hand it tew ya," he says. Mary looks confused; she doesn't see the attraction of watching a bunch of tattooed body builders yank tufts of each other's hair out while complaining about the quality of the grub and the quantity of the beatings. Sylvia seems pensive. By looking at the expression on her face, you might think she is undecided as to the merits of this program, but her response shows clearly that she, like her husband, has already 'bought in' to the idea:

"After a season or two, once the novelty has worn off, we can move on to

other venues, such as convents, monasteries, board meetings of Fortune 500 companies, Mafia conventions, and so forth."

Warble and Dokie look at each other and nod, visibly impressed by Sylvia's visionary skills. "Well," Warble suddenly says, his eyes narrowing as the effects of the beer and wine start to wane, "that's my plan, and I've got the whole thing authorized, notarized, and stored in a safe location. So don't try to beat me to the punch here, or I'll have you in court so fast you won't know what hit you."

"Wahble, mah friend," Dokie pleads, "Salvia and ah wouldn't *dream uv* doin' sumfin' lahk thay-et. We jis wanna hep ya wif yore play-en. Et *is* a good'n, and it's sarten tew brang in enuf munny fuh *all* uv us'ns. But they's a lotta work tew be done, and we kin smooth the way for y'all bah means of mah connections and Salvia's legal expertise."

It turns out that Dokie does have connections within the Oklahoma prison system, as he is involved in the supplying of these institutions with pork, beans, and computer printer paper, among other things. And Sylvia, upon leaving the convent, was able to be retrained at government (taxpayer) expense. She went to law school and happens to be a corporate attorney now. She will be of invaluable service to the company in drafting and approving contracts with the prison system, the television companies, and all the other myriad and sundry related business entities that will be involved, either directly or tangentially, in the prison television series.

"There's no limit to how much money we can make here," Warble says. "And the moolah we get from the television stations is just the beginning. Think of the possibilities: Viewers will each 'adopt' their own favorite convict, and watch the show each week just to see what *he's* been up to. For example, an accountant may key in on someone who is in the big house for embezzlement; a pharmaceutical company executive may focus on a man who's been locked up for drug-dealing; and so forth."

"I can see that, Warble," Sylvia says. "But how will these fixations bring in additional money for us? I don't see the connection."

"Connect the dots, Sylvia: As some of our 'stars' begin to build up a

following," Warble explains, "sponsors will be willing to pay big bucks to get these gents to advertise for them."

Dokie slams his hand on the table, which startles Mary, who has long since retired to the living room to watch *Mayberry RFD* re-runs. "In-jine-yus, Wahble, mah boy!" Dokie yells. "Go on, man, go on!"

"Okey dokey, Dokie," Warble says, nodding his head in acknowledgment of the praise. "Anyway, we'll get these jailbirds to sign contracts in advance so that we get the lion's share of the loot--I mean, the profit. We'll give them a few bucks to use the sponsor's product while they're on camera, or if they recommend it to a fellow inmate or guard, or perhaps even wear T-shirts with the sponsor's logo on it.

"It wouldn't be responsible on our part to give the convicts very much of the money. They would just waste it, anyway. Actually, we'll be doing them a favor by shielding them from the temptations that come with having money, and the stress that naturally accompanies a change in circumstances."

"Wahble McGorkle," Dokie beams, "yew trooly ah uh jynt amung min. Wif our prossless assistance in gettin' all this set up an' runnin' all legal and above board--so tew speak," he winks, "we're all a-goin' to be as rich as Rockefeller in *no* tahm!"

CHAPTER 42

And so it, indeed, turns out. The prison reality-TV venture is wildly successful, even beyond their irrationally (or so it had seemed) exuberant speculations.

Warble is interviewed by *Time* magazine. One of his quotes is soon re-printed worldwide, garnering Warble his first taste of both fame and infamy.

In response to the interviewer's question about the ethics of television cameras in prison, the privacy issues involved, and so forth, Warble had stated, "Now you know why good-time Charley's got the blues. Charley was a fool, as it turns out. I'm referring, of course, to the once-highly-respected philosopher Charley Rich, who claimed that 'no one knows what goes on behind closed doors.'

"He was perhaps regarded as a great philosopher in his day, but that day has passed. Charley was a perniciously and perilously poor prognosticator. I'm sorry to be so blunt, but everyone knows, now, what goes on behind closed doors--and locked cells.

"And soon, we will all know what goes on inside the Oval office and even the seldom-mentioned, super secret Trapezoidal office. Formerly private discussions in the Supreme Court chambers will be broadcast for all to see. This is the beginning of a revolution, and you will one day look back on me as a great hero of this nation. There will be statues of me in Washington that dwarf those of Washington. Washington Square will be re-named McGorkle Park; in fact, the name of that burg will indubitably inevitably be Warbletown."

And so on and so forth. Some people know the entire rant by heart. School children begin reciting it along with the Preamble to the Constitution and The Gettysburg Address.

Shortly after the first big check comes in, though, Warble receives disturbing news: some of the inmates have 'struck out on their own,' forming

wildcat ventures. Specifically, many of those who are photogenic and possess pleasant voices have become prison televangelists, soliciting funds to be sent directly to them, 'bypassing the middle man' (which, Warble knows, is he himself) so that they 'can continue to pursue and expand their prison ministry,' or so they promise the viewers.

Warble is livid. "These low-lifes wouldn't be anybody without me! I've made them what they are! They can't do this to me!"

But they have, and they continue to. Within days Warble, in an attempt to calm his frazzled nerves, is knocking back upwards of 3 bottles of Pepto-Bismol per day. And then the straw that breaks the camel's back occurs: On his way out of the bank one day, Warble spots a man with an uncanny resemblance to Geraldo Rivera staring at him.

In actuality, it is a blind man who, of course, has no idea of what or who it is he is 'staring' at, and it's only by coincidence that the man resembles, in Warble's estimation anyway, Geraldo.

Warble's imagination, as is its wont, runs away with itself. *Geraldo has been dispatched to kill me! He's got connections with Al Capone. They want me out of this racket--I mean, honorable business venture--so they can take over my turf. Well, they can have it; I'm a genius, and I can make money anywhere. I'm no use to Mary dead. As the old saying goes, 'A live genius is better off than a dead entrepreneur.'*

Warble races home, throws the possessions that will fit into the PT Cruiser (the McGorkles had been in the process of moving into a mansion they had just purchased on the outskirts of town, but are still in the apartment), rushes Mary out the door and into the passenger seat and high-tails it out of town.

By the time they cross the Oklahoma/Kansas border, Warble has filled Mary in on what has provoked their sudden departure from Oklahoma, and Mary is drifting off to sleep, head resting against the door. She knew they would have to leave Oklahoma sooner or later, anyway.

Next stop: East Helena, Montana, where Warble's old high school buddy Jim

Gnastix lives along with his wife 'Half-Pint' (Warble had never learned her real name) and their sons Rock and Wynn.

CHAPTER 43

Mary wakes up in time for Warble's history lesson as they pass through Dodge City, Kansas.

"This is where the great sport of Dodge Ball was invented, Mary," Warble informs his wife in his most serious and somber voice. "If Dodge Ball had been an Olympic sport, and there was no age or weight limit, I could've won a gold for the USA when I was in the 3rd grade."

"Yes, dear," Mary answers, and asks if they can stop to have lunch.

After eating their fill of corn dodgers in Dodge City, the McGorkles climb back into their PT Cruiser and follow the suggestion of John Soule (Mary, of course, is not a young man--and even in Warble's case it's a matter of opinion whether 39 is included in the age range considered 'young'--but, had Mr. Soule been alive today he doubtless would have added 'and young lady' to his famous advice about young men going west and growing up with the country).

Eventually, the McGorkles stop for the night in Longmont, Colorado. They make it to Newcastle, Wyoming by the next evening. By noon the following day, the McGorkles enter Butte, Montana.

Butte is, to put it mildly, an unusual town. It is a mining town. The houses are located on the perimeter of the giant pit. More than once in Butte's history, the houses have had to be torn down and rebuilt further out from the center of the pit as the perimeter has expanded outwards.

Driving into the odd little city, Warble gradually gets the feeling that he has traveled back in time. He gets the impression that Butte is stuck in the World War II era. It seems as if all the men in town wear hats--not the cowboy hats that are so common everywhere else in Montana, but the kind of hats that were common in the 1930s and -40s, like something you'd expect to see on James Cagney or Spencer Tracy.

Warble mentions these impressions to Mary, and adds, "It is almost as if we've driven right into a 1940s movie set. The colors don't even look quite right; the hues just don't appear quite natural. Everywhere I look, I can't help but thinking I'm watching a black and white movie that has been--in spots, anyway--colorized.

"Butte's natural state seems to be a black & white one. I wouldn't be surprised to see Ernest Hemingway's character Nick Adams, or a Raymond Chandler protagonist, such as one of those hard-boiled detectives played by Humphrey Bogart, come waltzing around the corner at any time."

"I think *you're* the one stuck in the past, Warble," Mary replies. "You should update your reading and viewing choices."

"And give up Hemingway and Bogart for Henry Porter and Amarillo Powers? No thank you, Ma'am," Warble resolutely objects.

"That's *Harry Potter* and *Austin Powers*, Warble."

"Whatever; whoever; Harry and Henry are really the same name, you know that--Harry Aaron, Henry Truman, Henrietta Tubman, etc.?" Warble conveniently omits mentioning any excuse for the other mix-up.

Fearful of getting involved in a more serious time warp, Warble turns the PT Cruiser around and high-tails it out of Butte. He had wanted to visit the Evel Knievel museum there, but the strange nature of the town has him spooked.

The McGorkles arrive at the Gnastix residence early in the evening, just around supper time. Jim is away on an emergency job, filling in for one of the people on his cleaning crew who had called in sick at the last minute. Normally, Jim just finds the jobs, negotiates the terms, and manages the business, but when a worker calls in sick, or just simply fails to show up, Jim has to do whatever it takes to keep the customer satisfied--which means going out and manning a mop and a pail from time to time. It's a good life, though, all in all. Jim avoids the stresses of the corporate world, and earns enough money with his business to provide a comfortable enough life for himself and his family.

Jim's wife 'Half-Pint' (it turns out that her real name is Melissa) invites them in and says that Jim has told her all about Warble and his high-school antics. Warble denies all knowledge of such, and claims that he was a model citizen all throughout his school years. Mary has heard plenty of stories herself about Warble in those days, but they have been related to her by Warble himself, and so she doesn't quite know whether to believe them or not.

The Gnastix's oldest son Rock is off skateboarding with some friends, but their younger son, Wynn, is at home. After being introduced to Warble and Mary and being told that Warble is one of his father's old high school buddies, Wynn wants to know what his father was like in school. Wynn wants all the ammunition he can get so that anytime he asks his father for permission to do something, or is caught doing something of which his father does not approve, he can say, 'Why can't I do it? You did it when you were my age?' He is a smart kid, and will go far in this world.

Warble gladly supplies Wynn with plenty of useful information, and even stretches things a little with regard to Jim's shenanigans, irresponsible pranks, and general lack of interest in anything remotely resembling a formal education. This makes Wynn happy, and he returns to the living room to play video games.

Since Warble hadn't informed (warned) the Gnastix's of his arrival, they, of course, had no way of knowing he was coming. Nevertheless Jim is genuinely glad to see Warble there when he arrives home, or at least acts as if he is. "Warble old buddy old pal," he says. "Long time no see. How are things? I see you've gotten yourself hitched."

The usual conversation between two couples connected by former school friendships on the part of the husbands ensues: The husbands try to recapture the old easy camaraderie they once enjoyed, and the wives attempt a mutual truce of sorts, as neither one is willing to acquiesce that the other is married to the "Alpha male" of the pair. The result is a politely inquisitive and somewhat disjointed and bland conversation. And so we will not delve further into the events of that night or the following morning, where the same basic pattern is re-played around the breakfast table.

That afternoon, though, Warble finds inspiration in a place that is becoming for him somewhat of a breeding ground for ideas and serendipitous meetings--a grocery store, this time the Safeway on South Davis Street in Helena.

CHAPTER 44

Warble's next 'brainstorm' blows in while he's shopping for food to replenish the *Gnastix*' refrigerator and cupboards. He still has a huge wad of cash from the last *Bad Boyz Behind Barz* royalty check. Warble can't stand it when his wallet is so bulging full that it won't close, and so is trying to spend enough of it to reduce the bulge to a manageable size (he doesn't trust banks, so always keeps his money in cash).

Cruising the aisles for appetite-whetting items, Warble's attention is arrested by a 'fun-size' package of what are labeled as 'homestyle' cookies.

Warble picks up the package, flabbergasted by the gross and wild exaggeration.

"Homestyle!?" Warble exclaims incredulously. "Homestyle?! That is patently ridiculous. Can you imagine some kid going over to a friend's house, and his mother pulls a plate of *these* cookies fresh out of the oven--half-dollar-sized, hard as a rock, and full of chemicals? What a crock! How do they have the *nerve* to claim such a thing? It's an outrage! 'Homestyle' my donkey Hody! If these cookies are homestyle, the home in question must either be a home for the criminally insane, or one for the pathetically, chronically phony."

Warble buys all 314 remaining packages of the cookies in question and leaves the store gloating. That night he recounts the tale to his hosts and his wife; Rock and Wynn also listen in.

"I am going to sue the manufacturer--notice I say manufacturer, and not baker, because one cursory glance at the ingredients list tells you that the environment in which these so-called cookies were made is more like a drug lab than a bakery--also the store, and the clerk who sold me these cookies.

"They are all in collusion, one with the other. The manufacturer lied in the way it packaged the product, calling it 'Homestyle'; the store should not have stocked such an item, when they should know--they *do* know, those people weren't born yesterday--that these so-called cookies are not only *not*

homemade, but do not in any way, shape, or form remotely *resemble* genuine homestyle cookies; last but not least I will sue the clerk, because she probably also knew that these cookies are not truly homestyle."

Jim doesn't understand what the big to-do is all about; he especially doesn't agree with involving the store clerk in the lawsuit. "What do you expect her to do, Warble? After all, it's her job to ring up whatever the customer *selects* from the shelves and places in his cart or basket. Is it *her* responsibility to examine each and every item she sells as to whether its manufacturer's claims are true, and then inform the customer if she believes they are not?"

"Jim," Warble reprimands, "you must not forget what the great philosophers Cool Hand Luke and John Mellencamp (the artist formerly known as John Cougar) said: 'Calling it your job sure don't make it right.' Remember, that was the defense the Nazis used: 'We were just following orders,' they claimed. Each man--and woman, and even slip of a girl like that store clerk--is responsible for his or her own actions, and must in every case make the right decision, the decision of integrity--or bear the consequences."

Jim looks down at the dining room table and shakes his head; Half-Pint follows her husband's lead and holds her tongue. Inwardly, though, she is fuming that Warble would try to financially ruin a poor innocent girl like that.

Just when she can't hold in her rage any longer and is about to give her irritating guest a piece of her mind, Warble turns to his own wife and says, "Mary, go down to the county courthouse tomorrow and have your name legally changed to 'Charity.' That way I can tell everyone in court that I'm donating the proceeds of the lawsuit to Charity. I'll give the proceeds of the lawsuit to you, everyone will think I'm the philanthropist of the century, and you will then--naturally--give the money back to me."

Both Jim and Half-Pint try to object now, but Warble is having none of it. He retires from the field (the dining room table, that is) and starts working the phone. He books the Convention Center for the following Wednesday, places a large order with the local printery, and has an ad inserted in the next edition of the *Helena Gazette* announcing the event.

CHAPTER 45

The *Taking Back the Cookies* rally begins at 7:30 on Wednesday evening. The trouble starts at 8, when Warble finally takes the stage, after making the audience wait half an hour while the sound system plays songs he hopes will fire them up into a state of reactionary frenzy: *This Land Is Your Land*, *Thank God I'm a Country Boy*, *A Boy Named Sue*, *Harper Valley PTA*, *Attitude Adjustment*, *Eve of Destruction*, and *The Muppet Song*.

The music abruptly stops. The lights dim, and then fade away completely. After a few seconds, a spotlight searches high and low--but seems to search in vain. Finally, the opening strains of *Another One Bites the Dust* are heard, the spotlight focuses on center stage, and Warble comes bounding out from behind the curtain, decked out in farmer's coveralls and straw hat. He heaves a tambourine high in the air and steps to the podium, which is now bathed in a bluish-green light. He deftly catches the tambourine behind his back nonchalantly, as if it's an afterthought, and begins his speech.

First he relates stories about his grandmother and her almost incomprehensibly awesome cinnamon rolls. Then he tells of his mother, and the pies she would make—mmm mmm good? That's not the half of it! He tells of cookies, shortbreads, donuts and fudge, describing the appearance, aroma, and taste of these near-sacred delicacies that were produced with love, sugar, spices, and a few other natural ingredients.

The audience is enthralled. They feel it. They know what Warble is talking about. He has struck a common chord with those in attendance. Then, with a sneer, Warble rips the tambourine apart and yanks out a package of the 'Homestyle' cookies that he has hidden inside. Holding the cookies up as David held aloft the severed head of the defeated Philistine giant Goliath, Warble relates his tale of deception and subterfuge in the supermarket.

Working his followers--for this, by now, they can rightly be called, as outraged as they are over the mere existence of this item under this name--to a fever pitch, Warble yells out, in his best righteous-indignation voice, "We're mad as Dallas and we're not gonna take it anymore! The 'Homestyle'

cookies must go! These huge mega corporations only understand one language--money. There is only one thing that will make them stand up and take notice--a blow to the pocketbook.

"For this reason, friends, I, Warble Poundcake McGorkle the First, invite you to be a participant in this great uprising against the hucksters of this world--those with the audacity to claim that these chemical-filled briquettes are the equal of what your mother, and my mother, baked."

The crowd roars its enthusiasm. They want blood. If the executive who had made the decision to name the cookies of interest 'Homestyle' were in their midst, it would go bad for him, to say the least--the audience would doubtless rip him to shreds and feed him to the grizzly bears in Glacier Park.

"Yes, friends and neighbors," Warble continues, "you can be a part of this historic event by contributing to defray the expenses of this lawsuit (which, because it will be brought against such a huge and deep-pockets company, will indubitably be very expensive).

"Please, friends, fellow sons and daughters of mothers, reach into your wallets, reach into your pockets and fork over--I mean, give, from the bottom of your heart and the depths of your soul--however much *you* feel home and hearth and mother are worth.

"If your mother is only worth \$20 to you, give that. If she is only worth \$50, contribute that. If your mother, friends and neighbors, is only worth \$100 to you, after all the times she changed your diapers and cleaned up after you, give that. If your mother, who gave birth to you and sacrificed for you, and probably still does, means *more to you* than that, *much more*, sacrifice *that*.

"Collection plates have been placed conveniently throughout the auditorium. Please, friends, give until it *hurts*--only then can we hit the 'Homestyle' phonies where it hurts *them*.

"As I know that is what all of you would want--and it would take too long and delay our cause unnecessarily to keep track of how much each of you give--instead of distributing the money amongst all of us, my fellow sufferers of

false advertisement, I will immediately contribute all the proceeds from this lawsuit to Charity."

On saying that, Warble hopes that Mary remembered to change her name.
Oh, well, It's the thought that counts. Even if she didn't do it, I'll proceed as if she had, and nobody will be the wiser.

As his coup d'etat, Warble pulls out a book and holds it up for the audience to see. The book is several inches thick, but all the pages are blank (of course, no one in the audience knows that).

Pausing to arouse anticipation, Warble finally bellows out triumphantly, "Eat your heart out, Ralph Nader! I have written a scathing denunciation of the phony food industry named *Unwholesome In Any Quantity*, as those of you in the front row can see (and those of you in some of the other rows who are blessed with very good eyesight--no doubt as a result of genuine home cooking, including fresh cookies galore)."

Cheering wildly and fired up with enthusiasm, the crowd heads for the exits, emptying their wallets of all their cash on their way out.

CHAPTER 46

Feeling ebullient about his unprecedented success, and both a little perplexed as well as overjoyed at how easy it was to bend a mob to his wishes, Warble leaves the building by a side door (relying on Rock and Wynn--whom he has, unbeknownst to their parents, hired for this very duty--to collect, collate, and sort the money).

As he is about to climb into his PT Cruiser, Warble is tackled from behind. Two men drag him into the alleyway behind the convention center and, after wresting the false-bottomed tambourine away from him, bludgeon him with it.

"Stop it!" Warble cries out. "What do you want?" he then asks, in fear for his life. He doesn't know who these men are, and presume they intend to rob him.

"I'll give you all the money. Just leave me enough to buy a cheeseburger and fries--huckstering is hungry work, you know."

The two cowboys bend over Warble, right in his face. "Look, *McDorkle*," the more talkative one says, "our mothers work for the Homestyle company. They make those cookies on the night shift. If you know what's good for you, birdbrain, you'll forget all about this cockamamie lawsuit of yours."

"What lawsuit?" Warble replies, quick study that he is.

"Attaboy," the talkative one says, standing up and dropping a bag of Homestyle cookies in Warble's lap. "Just to show you there's no hard feelings, here's some cookies."

"Thank you," Warble says, just wanting the two cowpokes to go away.

"Now eat them," the other cowboy growls, stepping close to Warble, pulling one leg back, as if ready to kick. Warble is indeed intimidated, and not just by the fact that the man appears to be very mean and his boot tip is sharp and hard, but also because the boot seems to be the carrier of a distinct

barnyard odor, one with which Warble does not want to make closer acquaintance.

He eats the cookies.

"Now say you like them," the more talkative of the two cowboys orders.

Warble does. He really does; that is to say, he really does say it, and he really does like them--in fact, Warble likes the Homestyle cookies better than the cookies his mother used to make.

This maltreatment goes on for a few minutes, with the cowboys extracting from Warble promises as to how he will no longer utter any discouraging words about 'Homestyle' cookies, will always praise them on every appropriate occasion, and will, wherever possible, order them for dessert in restaurants and buy as many packages as are available every time he shops.

Satisfied with their evening's work, and full of pride and a sense of accomplishment for having defended their mothers' honor, the two cowboys leave Warble in the dark alley. The would-be leader of a class action lawsuit justifiably feels like a broken-down hero of the Western night.

The next morning, after sleeping off most of his feelings of broken-down-ness, Warble is alarmed to learn that Rock and Wynn have donated the entire take from the previous evening's rally to PETA.

Within an hour of hearing this depressing news, Warble and Mary are on the road again, this time headed south, towards the gold rush country of northern California.

CHAPTER 47

By midday the McGorkles cross the Idaho border. During twilight, they pass through Idaho Falls, then Rupert, Burley, Pocatello, and Twin Falls. At midnight they stop for the night in Wells, Nevada.

As Mary is drifting off to sleep, Warble is on his elbow facing his wife, telling her all about the history of the town. He begins by telling her how it was the western terminus of the original Pony Express trail (the eastern terminus being, of course, Fargo, North Dakota). The company that ran the Pony Express, Wells Fargo, named itself after these original bookends. The founders became so wealthy so fast that they had had to form their own bank in which to store their immense profits. The financial institution is still a going concern today, although the Pony Express is--sadly--defunct (put out of business by e-mail and the Internet).

Mary falls asleep long before Warble finishes his lecture on the exigencies of the Pony Express and how they advertised for 98-lb. weaklings who hated their parents but loved saddle sores to join their fledgling corporation. Riding in the rain was required; sleeping at the reins was strongly discouraged and, in fact, punished with the greatest severity (the rider caught in this state of consciousness, or lack thereof, was sentenced to 3 years of mucking out Wells Fargo's central corral in Dead Horse, Montana--at half pay).

That night Warble dreams fitfully of traversing the United States in a stagecoach on Route 66. Along the way they continually "whoa" the team of horses to pick up hitchhikers.

First, they pick up Daniel Boone and Abraham Lincoln, then Mark Twain, followed by Nellie Bly, Mother Jones, Will Rogers, Mae West, Walt Disney, Jim Thorpe, John Wayne, Elvis, Lucille Ball, Fess Parker, Johnny Carson, Frank Zappa, and Dennis Rodman. Finally, as the stagecoach slows to pick up Madonna (who for some reason is dressed in a kilt and is playing *Loch Lomond* on the bagpipes), Warble falls into a deep sleep.

After a hearty breakfast of cinnamon rolls and coffee at Citizen Page the

next morning, Warble and Mary head out onto the highway once again. Winnemucca first grows larger and larger in the windshield, and then gradually recedes in the rear-view mirror. Later the same phenomenon transpires with the desert towns of Jackpot and Sparks.

In 'The Biggest Little City in the World,' Reno, the McGorkles stop for the night. As Mary sleeps, Warble gambles away practically their entire fortune, most of it at the blackjack and craps tables. Sheepishly, Warble climbs into bed at 3:14 a.m., quiet as a mouse.

Lying in bed, Warble is so distraught over the stupid squandering of his life savings that he can't sleep. Something besides just the loss of the money--because he knows there's more where that came from--is bothering him. In a flash of enlightenment it comes to him--he realizes that his lucky M&M has failed him! He has kept it faithfully in his shirt pocket, carefully moving it from one shirt to the next, occasionally rubbing it for good luck, shining it on his shirt front or even on his cheek (one of the cheeks on his face, that is), and now it has proven worthless.

"Where were you when I needed you, you...you phony, you fakeroo, you charlatan, quack, and mountebank?" he asks aloud, tears welling up in his eyes. Mary moans in her sleep and turns over restlessly. That startles Warble, as he doesn't want Mary to wake up and inquire why he's talking to a little piece of chocolate.

Warble raises the M&M up to eye level and whispers, "I did everything for you--you've done nothin' for me." He flings the covers back; he is angry and resolute. Warble is about to take drastic action, and there's no stopping him now.

Sliding open the glass door, Warble steps out onto the veranda and, reaching his right hand back as far as he can, is about to fling the lone green M&M out into the vast voids of space. Suddenly, though, he stops, lowers his arm, opens his hand, looks at the candy with a quizzical expression on his face, rolls it back and forth in the palm of his hand, shrugs his shoulders, and pops it into his mouth. Three crunches and a swallow later, the M&M is history. Without even brushing or flossing first, Warble climbs back into bed, fluffs up his pillow, and snuggles up to Mary. Within seconds he is snoring like a

sawmill.

The next morning Warble pretends everything is fine, and that nothing is amiss (specifically, their money). Of course, he will think of some new moneymaking venture before long and the money won't be an issue--once his next ship comes in, the one laden with his next fortune.

To take his mind off his troubles, Warble, as soon as he and Mary get on the road, bursts out into song.

"California here we come, right back where we started from, open up your pearly gates, and don't forget to pack your crate--"

"Warble, what are you talking about? You've never been to California in your life!"

"Haven't you ever heard of poetic license, Mary? Poets can say anything they want, without fear of being sued for libel, slander, or perjury. And anytime you sing, you become (while you're singing) a card-carrying, bona fide, dyed-in-the-wool, sure-as-you're-born, honorary poet."

Mary just rolls her eyes.

The McGorkles travel in silence through much of the Alpine area from Lake Tahoe at the Nevada/California border onward, over Highways 89 and then 88. But when they reach the summit at Donner Pass, Warble begins to wax historic: "Mary, away back in 1492, one of the most serendipitous events in all of history occurred in this very vicinity. A little Dutch boy herded 99 reindeer over that pass over there," he points out the window of the PT Cruiser to a pine-and-fir-tree-covered mountain slope. "A thunder storm came up, and the boy was tragically struck dead by a bluish-green bolt of lightning. His herd of reindeer stayed on the mountaintop, feeding on wild honey and locusts, and gradually increasing in number and making themselves at home in the abandoned hunting lodges in the area.

"One season the 49ers came trudging over the hill, looking for the golden trophy. They got lost near the summit after their coach--the only one with a map--fell down a mineshaft.

"Just as the Gatorade and PowerBars gave out, Joe Montana (or was it Steve Young?) spied the herd of reindeer relaxing in the lodge. Needless to say, the Dutch boy inadvertently and indirectly provided a feast for the 49ers that night--reindeer steak, reindeer stew, and reindeer jerky were the salvation of that troop. Which reminds me..."

"Warble! Get back on your side of the road," Mary shrieks. Warble has been so engrossed in his own tale that he has drifted into the opposite lane, and they are going around a blind corner with a sheer cliff on their starboard side.

Warble is momentarily frightened, but embarrassment overrides fear, and he forces himself to speak slowly and calmly, as he gradually edges the car over to the right side of the road.

"*Both* sides of the road are mine, Mary, both sides. After all, I paid enough money in taxes from my hard, back-breaking, wearing-my-fingers-to-the-bone work on *Bad Boyz Behind Barz* to pay for every highway in the United States, I do believe."

"Tell that to a car coming the opposite way--or a semi!" Mary replies indignantly.

Warble, unable to think of anything to say in response, scratches his cheek (yes, on his face). After a few seconds, Mary breaks the silence. "Speaking of money, though: how much do we have left?"

Warble is struck by a sudden coughing fit. He coughs and coughs, and begins beating his chest with his right fist, while deftly guiding the PT Cruiser down the mountain grade with his left hand. Mary recognizes a diversionary tactic when she sees one.

"Cut it out, Warble, you don't even smoke," Mary says, crossing her arms. A sickening thought floods into Mary's consciousness. "Warble, you didn't!" she gasps. "You gambled our money away!"

"First you say I didn't, then you say I did. Make up your mind, woman!"

Warble says, feigning exasperation, but somewhat glad in spite of himself that the "cat is out of the bag."

Mary expertly ignores the lame ploy to plop the guilt into her lap. "Well, which was it: did you or didn't you?" she prods.

Warble sighs, gulps, and looks away. "The former," he sheepishly admits.

This is Warble at his most contrite. But before Mary can even begin to berate him, or wail in agony, he plasters his best fake smile across his mug and announces, "Don't you worry your pretty little head over it, honey pie sugar cakes huggly snuggly wuggly bun. I've got a plan. We'll be rolling in clover before you can say the capitol of Delaware."

"What's Delaware got to do with anything?" Mary asks, irritated.

Warble sees Mary is really on the warpath now. He tries to cheer her up, or at least change the subject, by breaking out into song. "What did Della wear, boys, what did Della wear?"

Mary is staring stonily at Warble and tapping her foot. Warble hates it when she looks at him like this. It reminds him of his old music teacher, Ms. Bitternote. But he has another trick up his sleeve--a 'secret weapon' of sorts. Besides sleeping, there's usually one other thing that he can use to arouse Mary's interest.

"Mary, I don't know about you, but I'm beginning to feel very hungry. In fact, I'm famished--in a word, *starving*! Keep an eye or two open for a place to eat. Anyplace will do, I'm not picky. If we can't find a Citizen Page, I'll settle for a Turny's, or even a McDaffy's."

"Do we have any *money* for food, Warble, you wannabe cardsharp?"

"Are you kidding, Mary? Do you think I would spend every last dime? I'm not a gamblohollic, you know. We've got *plenty* of money left," Warble exaggerates. "Hang the cost! We've got dough to spare and burn."

This, of course, is false bravado on Warble's part--he's only got a few

twenties and some spare change to his name. On the one hand, he hopes the first restaurant they come across will be an inexpensive one; on the other hand, he doesn't really care, because he truly believes that his fortune is just waiting to be made in the golden state.

CHAPTER 48

After their repast of cheeseburgers, French fries and milk shakes, Mary is too full to yell at Warble any longer, but still too aggravated to sleep. For about an hour, she gives Warble the silent treatment, and tries her best to enjoy the scenery as they descend the western slope of the Sierra Nevadas.

The McGorkles drive through the small towns of Placerville, Auburn, Grass Valley, Drytown, Sutter Creek, Jackson, Mokelumne Hill, and San Andreas.

In spite of herself, Mary is dwelling on Warble's mention of having another plan. She doesn't want to ask Warble about it, because she doesn't want Warble to think that she is really interested or has faith in his ideas. On the other hand, she *is* genuinely curious about what Warble has in mind. After all, it does concern her, or will soon enough. She has a right to know, she concludes. So, with a sigh and a look of exasperation, she reluctantly asks, her voice saturated with sarcasm and resentment, "So, Warble, you acme, apex, and pinnacle of genius: What is this great plan of yours?"

Warble looks over at his wife, raises an eyebrow, and returns his gaze to the road.

"Well?" Mary asks impatiently. Now that she's asked, he had better tell her, and the sooner, the better.

"I didn't say it was great, Mary," Warble begins calmly. "This plan, this idea, this tactic and stratagem, is not simply great--it is fantastic, stupendous, splendiferous, awesome, mind-boggling, astounding, marvelous, extraordinary, grandiloquent, incredible, spectacular, and wondrous...not to mention pretty nifty."

Warble pauses and looks over at Mary again, waiting for the import of his words to sink in and the anticipation to build.

Mary tries to show no emotion, and responds as nonchalantly as possible, "So what is it?" She hopes his plan is half as good as advertised--but fears, and tries to prepare herself for--the worst.

"Mary," Warble says, in a voice so cavalier, suave, and debonair that he half-expects Mary to swoon away, "I'm afraid to tell you now, because this idea is so ingenious, this plan so magnificent, that I'm afraid that if I tell you while we're driving you'll start bouncing all around the car in glee, and give me such a tight hug that I would lose control of our beloved PT Cruiser and we'd end up in a mangled heap at the bottom of the canyon, in a condition few would consider envious."

Mary crosses her arms again, and remains in that attitude, sulking and pouting, for the next several minutes.

When they get to Angels Camp, nestled at the midpoint of Highway 49 in California's gold rush country, Warble knows he has found the perfect spot for the next chapter in his adventure, the next episode in the epic that is the life of Warble Poundcake McGorkle.

Warble and Mary get a room at the Angels Hotel on Main Street, which is the spot Warble has chosen as the staging point of his great unveiling.

CHAPTER 49

When Mary awakes the next morning, there is a note duct-taped to the pillow on Warble's side of the bed (Warble couldn't find any safety pins, and he always has a roll of duct tape with him, wherever he goes). The note reads:

Mary,

At the tailor's.

Back soon.

Signed,

The Color-Blind Chameleon

Mary lies in bed a while longer, staring at the note. She reads it over again, slowly, but can still make no sense of it. *The Color-Blind Chameleon? Why did Warble sign the note that way? And why would he go to a tailor? I've never known Warble to go to a tailor. He's not exactly the GQ type of man.*

Mary finally gets up, and even though the maid will come in later, makes the bed. She doesn't want the housekeeper to think she's sloppy or lazy. Mary showers and dresses, then descends the single flight of stairs to the hotel restaurant, to have a bite to eat and read the newspaper. After ordering baking powder biscuits and orange juice, Mary opens the *Calaveras Enterprise* to see if there's anything new and interesting.

Just as she begins reading an article about a man falling into an abandoned mineshaft near Copperopolis, Mary's breakfast arrives. As she spreads blackberry jam on a hot fresh biscuit, Warble walks in, carrying a bundle under his arm. He doesn't see Mary at first, and heads for the stairs.

Warble leaps onto the second step, and is about to continue ascending the stairs in that fashion, two at a time, when Mary calls to him.

Seemingly stopping in mid-air mid-leap, Warble hurries down the steps backward, whirling around when he reaches the bottom of the staircase and striding over to Mary's table.

Sitting down across from his wife, Warble sets his package on the chair next to him, and pats it with his hand. "Oh, thanks, Mary," he says, grabbing the biscuit out of her hand and stuffing it in his mouth just as she is about to take a bite of it. He then looks accusingly at the biscuit, sets it down on the plate, and lifts off the top half.

"Aha! Not enough butter! Mary, you never apply enough butter. You would think a resident of the dairy state would show a little pride in her homeland and spread generous helpings of the delectable stuff wherever she had the opportunity--but no! You conserve and scrimp and economize--"

"Warble, that biscuit was meant for me."

"Mary, you're so selfish! Always thinking of yourself! And when you *knew* I would be famished from a strenuous walk all over town and back again. The only reason I'm going to all this trouble is so that I can pay for your biscuit fetish and orange juice addiction."

Mary has two choices: argue, or ignore. She decides to change the subject. "So, Warble, what's in the package--a new dress?"

"Why would I want to wear a dress?" Warble asks, confused.

"For *me*," Mary explains. "I was wondering if it was a new dress for me."

"A new dress for you?" Warble repeats, surprised. "Why would you need a new dress, Mary--did somebody die?"

"Nobody *died*, Warble."

"Whew!" Warble whistles in relief. "*That's* good; I don't have time to attend

anybody's funeral just now. I've got big plans for today, the next day, the next day, and for several more afterwards.

"No, Mary, in this package," he points at it and pats it again, "is the snazzy, jazzy, eye-catching, form-fitting suit to be worn by yours truly as the *you know who*."

That odd remark reminds Mary of Warble's cryptic note. "Do you mean The Color-Blind Chameleon?"

Warble practically jumps out of his chair. He clamps his hand over Mary's mouth and whispers hoarsely (even though there is no one else in the room), "Shhh! Never reveal my secret identity." Warble slowly removes his hand from over his wife's mouth and sits back down.

"The *you-know-who*," Warble says, "will restore mankind's faith in the basic goodness in human nature and make everyone proud of living on the same planet as he. People will swarm to see him, to bask in his glow; women will swoon if he simply smiles at them--"

"Yeah, right, Warble," Mary says sarcastically, unconvinced. "Who's going to take someone with such a crazy name seriously?"

"Crazy name?" Warble repeats, incredulous. "Crazy name? What you call crazy I call evocative. Maybe if I reveal to you the meaning of the name you will understand its import, and appreciate its depth of meaning and significance."

"Lay it on me, Warble," Mary responds, her head in her hands. She knows she's going to hear it all, anyway, so she may as well just get it over with.

"Mary, the--" Warble catches himself, as he almost vocalizes the name in public, within earshot of anyone who happens to be well-hidden and eavesdropping, or possibly listening in on some kind of surveillance apparatus, "--the *you-know-who* is called such because he will even help people wearing color combinations he doesn't care for, such as orange and pink. And!...he's like a chameleon in that he can adapt to any circumstance in order to come to the aid of damsels in distress and other likely rescue candidates."

"That's nice, dear," Mary replies.

Warble stands up and, in his best Yul Brynner/James Earl Jones voice says, "Mary, watch that package. I'll be back shortly."

"I'll guard it with my life," Mary replies sarcastically.

Warble, not detecting the sarcasm, swells up with gratitude and pride. He strides to the door, opens it dramatically, and exits with a flourish--or so he thinks.

Mary shakes her head, calls for the waitress, and orders some more biscuits.

CHAPTER 50

Warble walks to the phone booth outside the Angels Camp police department, calls the local television news station, and tells them there is a robbery in progress outside the Angels Hotel. He then crosses the street (jaywalking, as is his wont), and enters the Employment Office.

He surveys the faces of the men and women in line there. Some seem relaxed enough, even happy-go-lucky. Some look embarrassed, others angry, yet others depressed. Warble selects the man who appears to his trained eye to be the most desperate, and approaches him.

"Tough times, eh, mister?" Warble says, skipping the normal small talk about the weather and such. The man reluctantly looks at him and grunts something in response. Warble moves a little closer to him--too close, really, for the man's comfort. The man stands his ground, but tilts his head backwards a little. "Say fella," Warble says, putting his hands in his pocket and turning to look out the window, "how would you like to earn a few bucks?"

"What are you, some kinda wise guy?" the man responds, wary of Warble's intentions.

"How do you mean that?" Warble asks, curious if the man has already somehow discerned Warble's great sagacity, or if he just has doubts about his sincerity.

"What do you mean 'how do I mean that'? If you're up to some kind of funny business--"

Warble interrupts him. "Do you think this is funny?" he asks, drawing a \$20 bill from his pocket and surreptitiously showing it to the man. The stranger looks at the bill with a certain hunger in his eyes; yet he remains cautious.

"All right--what's your game? You got some sheetrock you need stocked? Some blast holes you need dug? What?"

Warble waves his hand dismissively. "No, no, nothing like that. Nothing that

involved, complicated, time-consuming and downright sweat-inducing. What I've got in mind will only take a minute."

Before the man can ask any more questions or raise any objections, Warble continues: "Don't look now, but there's a lady over there at the Angels Hotel, having breakfast--stuffing her face full of baking powder biscuits and throwing gallons of fresh-squeezed orange juice down her neck. She's a British spy. She's here to infiltrate the area and force us all to switch from coffee to tea."

At this news, the man's eyes bulge and his nostrils flare. He is outraged. It is obvious that he is now more than willing to hear Warble's proposal. Warble considers asking the man if he will do the job for \$10 instead of the original offer of \$20 but, remembering how soon he will be rolling in dough, and wanting to build up a reputation in the community as a big spender, rejects the thought. "All you need to do to earn this 20 spot is to mug her when she comes out of the restaurant," Warble tells the unemployed man. "You'll be doing your country a favor. You'll stop the infidel before it's too late. You might even end up on *60 Minutes*."

"I'm your man," the stranger says, tugging gently on Warble's sleeve, leading him out of the Employment Office and onto Main Street. "What do you want me to do exactly?"

"Just yank her hair a little bit, and take her money," Warble says. "That'll be enough to put an end to her mission."

"OK, buddy, you've got it. I wouldn't even take the money normally, but my wife and kids are all down with the flu. The cotton won't grow, and my bills get bigger each day. I'm busted, Mister. I'm ashamed to say it, but I'm busted. So, although I know it's my patriotic duty to mug that dreadful limey spy lady, I've got to take the money. Here, fork it over!" he says, thrusting out his hand.

"Not so fast, Mr. Down-on-his-luck," Warble says, eyeing the stranger suspiciously. The man has a weak jaw and shifty eyes. Besides, he looks kind of desperate. Warble doesn't know whether to trust him or not.

Warble holds up the \$20 bill and rips it in half. He gives the stranger one half, and shoves the other half back into his pocket. "In this case, the rules of mathematics are turned topsy-turvy," Warble says, explaining his strange actions. "Half of 20 is not 10, it's 0. You do your duty, and I'll give you the other half. And I'll even let you borrow a strip of duct tape to reunite the legal tender with itself, just to show what a nice guy I am."

The man hesitates a moment, shrugs his shoulders, puts the half-bill in his pocket, and crosses the street. Unlike Warble, though, he walks up to the crosswalk, next to the post office, before he crosses. No jaywalker he.

Warble, oblivious to the good example set right before his eyes, jaywalks across the street again. He re-enters the Hotel, rushes up to Mary, snatches the package--which she has left unattended on the seat while she looks at the paintings hanging on the wall around the Hotel lobby--and tells her to wait for him, and that he'll be down in just a minute.

Warble bounds up the stairs, taking them, not two, but three at a time, and, after fumbling for a few seconds with the key and lock, enters their room.

Quick as a flash Warble transforms himself into the Color-Blind Chameleon by changing into his new outfit: skin-tight teal running pants; a fuchsia T-shirt emblazoned with the likeness of a chameleon who slightly resembles Mark McGwire; high-top sneakers bedecked with red flashing lights; a chartreuse hat that resembles a Mohawk; a long, curly, iridescent papier-mâché tail; and cheap sunglasses.

Warble opens the hotel room door and peeks outside. No one there; good. He rushes halfway down the stairs, staying just out of Mary's line of vision, and yells out excitedly, "Mary! There's a sale on at The Studio Annex! They're selling panty hose for a quarter the pair!"

That does the trick; Warble doesn't have to wait long. Mary yells out, "Thanks, Warble!" and rushes toward the door. Warble goes in the opposite direction, taking the stairs to the roof. As always, Warble has impeccable timing: just as he opens the attic window and steps out onto the roof, the television van is arriving. Simultaneously, the hired mugger is approaching Mary.

As Warble reaches the edge of the roof, Mary screams. The cameraman is a credit to his profession and is already filming the scene as it unfolds. Warble sits down on the roof, scoots over until he's just above the stranger, and pushes himself off the roof with his hands.

While dropping the short distance through the air, Warble has only enough time to hope that if he misses the stranger, he will land on Mary so that she breaks his fall.

Alerted by Mary's scream, two officers emerge from the police station, each with a donut in his hand. One is chocolate, and the other one is jelly-filled (the donuts, not the police officers--there are very few chocolate police officers in Angels Camp).

The peace officers are too late to intervene, though. Fortunately for both of the McGorkles, Warble has landed directly on the unemployed stranger. Warble subdues the man by wrapping him in a Full Nelson.

Warble then turns to face the camera and smiles. "Never fear, the Color-Blind Chameleon is here!" he bellows. The hero then returns his attention to the dangerous mugger.

As Warble wrestles the stranger to the ground, he surreptitiously reaches into the man's pocket and extracts the half of the \$20 bill he had given him earlier. The man, screaming in agony because Warble is grinding his kneecap into the sidewalk, doesn't notice that he has been pickpocketed.

Mary's scream attracts not only the police, but also many shopkeepers, shoppers, shoplifters, and other tourists. When the crowd sees what has apparently happened, they break into spontaneous applause for the mysterious masked man.

After handing the would-be mugger and spycatcher over to the police, Warble bows to the crowd. When he straightens up and turns back around to face the news crew, prepared to be interviewed, Mary looks at him and, recognizing her husband, gasps.

Warble sees that she is about to spoil the moment, and quickly covers her mouth with his hand. "Oh, damsel in distress, it's obvious you are distraught. You must rest, and recuperate. Don't try to speak--there's no need to thank me."

Warble sweeps Mary off her feet (literally) and carries her back into the Angels Hotel, laying her on her back on the long, cool, wooden counter. Mary is, perhaps not surprisingly, furious.

"Warble, it's you! You were behind this! I could have been--"

"Shhh, Mary, not now," Warble says. He leans close and whispers in her ear, "I'll explain it all later; believe me, it's for your own good--if you know what I mean," he adds, raising his eyebrows up and down and rapidly rubbing his thumb and middle finger together.

Mary sighs, exasperated, lays her head down on the counter top, and stares up at the ceiling. "What next?" she mutters.

CHAPTER 51

After basking in the accolades that accrue to him on the basis of his courageous and daring rescue action, Warble realizes he needs one more thing to accomplish his purpose of fame and fortune as the Color-Blind Chameleon.

"Mary, I don't know why you didn't think of this before, but I need a sidekick. Every self-respecting super-hero has a sidekick. Batman has Robin; Waylon had Willie; Bert had Ernie; Michael had Scottie; the Color-Blind Chameleon has...who? Nobody, that's who!"

Warble sits down and mopes. Mary glares at him, completely unsympathetic to his plight. For several seconds, they remain in this attitude, Warble so forlorn as to prompt tears of compassion (or not), Mary seething so hotly that you could cook an omelet on the top of her head (albeit a rather hair-infested one it would doubtless turn out to be).

Then Warble springs up, so suddenly that he startles Mary and so high that he almost bumps his head on the ceiling. "I've got it! I'll advertise for one in the paper. People will be scrambling all over each other for this job."

As good as his word, Warble is up and out the door, headed for the newspaper office before Mary can even respond.

Warble places the following ad to run in the next issue of *The Calaveras Prospect*:

WANTED--'BULLFROG' SIDEKICK FOR THE COLOR-BLIND CHAMELEON
Seeking energetic, honest, loyal, halitosis-free sidekick.
Must be good with the public, agile, adept at paperwork
(possess good handwriting and/or typing skills), be
bondable, and look good in green leotards. Decent pay;
irregular hours; on-call 24X7. Dallas Cowboys fans need not
apply.
Call 286-2288 for a confidential interview. Ask for The
Color-Blind Chameleon.

Warble spends the next day interviewing a seemingly endless stream of applicants that range in age from 8 to 80. He wonders why people can't or don't or won't read. He plainly stated in the ad that people must meet certain specific criteria, and yet nobody he interviews meets them all. Some are energetic, but can't type. Others are honest, but admit that they are not loyal. Some claim to be good with the public, but are not halitosis-free.

By lunchtime, nobody has even made it to the uniform-trying-on portion of the interview, and Warble is beginning to despair of finding a suitable sidekick. "It's hard to find good help nowadays, Mary," he laments.

None too soon, there is a rap on the door. "Come in," Warble responds, weariness in his voice, holding out scant hope that this next applicant will be any better qualified than the others were.

The 20-something man walks straight up to Warble, cocky as all get-out, and offers his hand. "Hi! I'm Billy Bufferchunks," the man introduces himself. "You must be the Color-Blind Chameleon."

"Good deduction, Billy," Warble answers sarcastically, rolling his eyes. He gestures to the chair opposite his desk. "Have a seat." Warble grills Billy for several minutes. Billy possesses all the qualities and qualifications Warble is looking for, or at least claims to.

Warble finally walks around the desk and checks the halitosis situation. "Hmmm," Warble muses, "a little catsup-y, but I guess that's OK." (Billy has an inordinate fondness for a particular brand of catsup which is available in 57 varieties).

"Look, Billy, I don't want to pull any punches about this job. There might be punches thrown from time to time--you know, all that *ka-pow* and *ka-blooeey* stuff. For the most part, though, your job will consist of paperwork. The superhero business has really changed from the days of *The Grey Ghost* and *The Lone Ranger*--anything we do, we have to fill out paperwork nowadays. You make the world safe for--whatever it is you're making it safe for--and then the authorities are all over you like ticks on a mule deer: 'Why did you beat up that crook?'; 'Did you try psychotherapy first?'; 'Did you offer him the chance to apologize and enter a center for crimoholics?'; 'Did you allow

him his choice of weapons?'; 'Did you give him a 3-step head start before you attacked?', etc. etc. infinitum ad nauseum. All of it has to be filled out in triplicate and notarized by the Justice League of the NAFTA Alliance.

"So," Warble sighs, "I'll need you to deal with the paperwork in the aftermath of our crime-fighting activities, while I pursue photo ops."

That's all fine with Billy. Any thing's all right with Billy. He seems very eager to be The Bullfrog. Warble gravely rises and crosses to the wardrobe, brings back The Bullfrog costume and hands it to Billy, indicating to him with a nod of the head where he can change.

As Billy closes the bathroom door behind himself, Warble and Mary exchange glances. Warble is hopeful Billy is the one; he likes him well enough, and besides, he's getting tired of interviewing people.

When Billy emerges, dressed in the lime green leotards and T-shirt, swamp green baggy suit over his torso, and burnt-sienna cape, Warble is disappointed. "I'm sorry, Billy, you seem all right otherwise, but you just don't look so hot in that outfit with those chicken legs of yours and that mastiff-on-steroids torso--and that beer belly isn't all that becoming in a superhero, either."

Billy isn't about to take 'take off' for an answer, though. "Hey, you visually impaired reptile, what do you expect in a bullfrog, anyway—Jean Claude van Damme or something? C'mon," he wheedles, changing his tone, "give a guy a break, will ya? After all, as the great philosopher Meat Loaf said, "8 out of 9 ain't bad."

Warble looks up, pleasantly surprised. "Hey Billy, I like your style! I'll overlook the overhang there--consider yourself The Bullfrog."

"You mean it, mister? Gee whiz! You won't be sorry! I won't let you down."

"Beat it, kid. Get out of here before I change my mind."

Billy grabs his street clothes and heads for the door. "Start tomorrow at 8, Billy," Warble says as Billy opens the door to leave. "And don't be late."

CHAPTER 52

By means of skillful PR work on Warble's part, along with some of his signature dirty tricks (not to mention impeccable handling of the paperwork by The Bullfrog), the Color-Blind Chameleon is soon a household name, and is revered, admired, esteemed, and beloved by all (save the unsavory, who fear and loathe him).

Always eager to affiliate themselves with anyone who will help them sell their products, Warble is soon approached by various large corporations who want him to serve as their spokesman and 'mascot.' By means of Billy's impressive phone skills and Warble's negotiation-savvy ways, The Color-Blind Chameleon lands several multi-million dollar endorsement contracts.

The Chameleon's first endorsement is a television commercial for M&Ms chocolate candies. Warble, dressed up in his crime-fighting costume, declares for all the world to hear that M&Ms are the source of his strength--before he takes on any anti-crime activity, he always makes sure to fortify himself with a generous handful (or more) of the gaily colored tasty morsels.

After flexing his muscles at the end of his testimonial (they are, for the most part, 'falsies'--wadded up toilet paper that Warble has stuffed into the upper arms of his shirt), Warble thrusts a fistful of chocolate toward the camera and proclaims: "M&Ms! Don't leave home without 'em. And look at this: even after holding them in my hot little hands for all this time, and under these oppressive lights, they haven't turned sloppy on me. No muss, no fuss."

Then he pops the entire handful in his mouth and, with his mouth full and hand extended toward the camera (proving there are no chocolate streaks there) mumbles, "They melt in your mug...not in your mitt."

The Color-Blind Chameleon's popularity continues to increase. He even gets his own television show. Saturday mornings find children watching action cartoons depicting the Chameleon's dramatic exploits. Interviewed by Larry

King on the radio, rumors begin to circulate that The Color-Blind Chameleon is being considered for *Time* magazine's man of the year, and also for the Nobel and Pulitzer Peace Prizes for his efforts at stemming the rising tide of crime.

At the height of his popularity, The Color-Blind Chameleon signs a multi-year, multi-million dollar endorsement contract with Sproutsager beer. In the commercial he films for their product, Warble proclaims Sproutsager as 'The official beer of me, The Color-Blind Chameleon--and of my peon partner, The Bullfrog.'

Everyone but Billy considers the commercial a smashing success. Warble doesn't realize, though, that some paparazzis continue filming him after Sproutsager's crew have packed up their equipment and left. Warble turns to The Bullfrog and, making a face, pours the rest of the light-golden liquid on the street and says, "I wouldn't drink this swill for all the teacups in China. It tastes like it's made of sugar, tide, and lizard spit--and I'm no cannibal!"

Warble, still spitting--trying to get the taste of Sproutsager out of his mouth and more specifically off his taste buds--crosses the street and enters a tavern. After waiting patiently for a few milliseconds, Warble bellows out to the bartender: "Hey, man! Come down here!"

The barkeep looks up lazily, with a 'who do you think you are?' look on his face. He then recognizes his new customer and scurries on down to the end of the bar. "What choo want?" he inquires, mincing no words on small talk. Warble nods with his head toward Mary and Billy, who have followed him into the drinking establishment. "One bourbon, for the lady," he begins, "one scotch, for The Bullfrog here, and one beer, for me."

Warble is still impervious to the paparazzis, who are standing behind him, recording his every word and gesture. Mary tries to get his attention by pulling on his tail--no response; and then by flicking his Mohawk-shaped hat. This only elicits a "Stop that, Bullfrog, can't you see I'm busy here?" from Warble and, before The Bullfrog can object that it wasn't him doing the flicking, Warble reaches around without looking and clamps his hand over The Bullfrogs mouth.

"What kind of beer do you want?" the bartender asks. "Sproutsager?" He knows about The Chameleon's deal with that brand and its supposed position as 'official beer of The Color-Blind Chameleon.'

"Dallas no!" Warble replies vehemently. "Why would I drink that trash? Give me a *Hop Ottin' IPA*." The bartender raises an eyebrow and dutifully walks off to get the drinks.

The paparazzis are only too happy to play the tape for the people from Sproutsager. Needless to say, it isn't long before the parent company, Arborlowser Tree, hears about it.

Within two days, Warble receives a certified letter in the mail, canceling his endorsement contract and demanding a refund of a portion of the monies already paid him due to a breach of said contract. Reading the fine print (which requires a magnifying glass, as it is in 2-point font, like this: I bet you can't read this), Warble sees that it indeed says that any reference to their product as 'trash' constitutes breach, nulling and voiding the contract, and requiring a return of 94.2% of any monies already paid.

"Now why would they add a clause like that?" Warble wonders aloud. He is livid. After pacing around the room for a few seconds, Warble grabs a calculator and quickly enters some figures.

He can't believe what he sees. "What!? This is an outrage! This is a travesty! And a bummer, too! Can you believe this, Mary--I lowered myself not only to being seen with a can of Sproutsager in my *hand*, but even *drinking* the stuff--yechh!--and all for a measly mere miserly minuscule \$580,000! Chickenfeed!"

"Chickenfeed?" Mary replies. "You told me we couldn't afford for me to get a new wardrobe. I could attire myself quite nicely with just a *fraction* of your leftovers. Now if you'll just give me a few thousand, or even a few hundred--"

"I wish I could, Mary, I really do, but I can't; not now, anyway. In the words of the late great philosophers Johnny Cash and Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown,

'I'm busted'.

Mary gasps in indignation, stomps one high-heeled boot on the floor, puts her hands on her hips, and is about to give Warble a piece of her mind when the phone rings. Warble gratefully rushes to answer it. It's a follow-up call from one of Arborlowser Tree's lawyers, informing him verbally of what the certified letter has already made all too painfully clear.

Warble is a little distracted as he listens, despondent as he is over the loss of revenue and worrying about how he is going to soothe the fuming beast normally known to him as his sweet and charming wife.

The phone connection is not the best, and there is some feedback, hissing and crackling on the line. Warble hears the caller's name, Luigi Ouija Noyes, the word 'contract,' and detects a distinctly threatening tone, all the more intimidating as the voice is calm--steely calm. It comes across as cold and calculating to Warble.

When Warble hangs up, he is white as a sheet (a white sheet that is, one that has just been washed). Mary notices Warble's troubled countenance, and her feminine instincts take over. She approaches Warble to try to comfort him and allay his fears.

But the only cure for Warble's morbid fear is a radical and hasty change of venue. An hour later, the McGorkles are on the road again, this time heading north for the small coastal city of Eureka, where Warble plans to hole up in a giant log.

CHAPTER 53

In Mendocino, Warble stops an 8-year-old boy who is going to the store for his mother and sells him his crime-fighting costume (which could now, Warble reasons, get him killed by the beer Mafia) for all the money the boy has on him.

Warble also makes the boy sign an IOU for \$500, which the lad, according to the document, must pay as soon as he is able to do so.

By twilight the McGorkles are entering Eureka, where Warble plans on getting a motel for the night before going on the great log hunt the next day. Doing his best to deflect Mary's objections (such as 'where will I put the washing machine?'), Warble opines that living in a log is a Dallas-of-a-lot better than involuntarily searching for The Submariner or the site of the fabled Atlantis while wearing cement-dipped wingtips.

Warble notices something, though, that causes him to alter his plans on staying in Eureka: a giant, menacing, statue of a lumberjack--accompanied by a hideous creature that bears more than a passing resemblance to Barney the Dinosaur--towering above him on the right side of the road.

Warble is certain that the macabre statue has been placed in this very spot as a warning to him. After all, if such a statue had always been there, it would certainly be world-famous, and doubtless one of the seven wonders of the modern world--and Warble would know all about it.

Interpreting the warning, Warble explains it to Mary: "Don't look now, but that Paul Bunyan lookalike is a 'word to the wise.' The underlying message is 'Keep on driving, Warble, or tonight you will be chopped in half while slumbering in your bed. You will be sawn asunder, like a fresh-cut log in a lumber mill'."

Needless to say, Warble keeps driving. In fact, he is so upset by the grisly warning that he drives through the night, while Mary sleeps.

At midnight they reach Ashland, Oregon. Far enough away from Eureka, and

from California, to feel relatively safe, Warble pulls into a Motel 62.8, checks in, gallantly carries Mary from the car to the room, and--after brushing and flossing--falls fast asleep.

It must be fear that has made Warble so weary--the fear of being tracked down by the beer Mafia and fed to the sea creatures; the fear of being divided in two by a sharp instrument; the fear of trying to live on a measly \$580,000 for awhile, after growing accustomed to a life in the lap of luxury. The point is, Warble is completely exhausted when he goes to bed that night. The upshot of this circumstance is that an amazing thing happens: Mary wakes up before Warble the next morning.

In fact, Warble sleeps so long that Mary begins to worry about him. He has never slept this long before. Just as Mary is about to wake Warble up, and bends over him to do so, Warble suddenly jolts awakes of his own volition.

"Egads!" Warble yells out, and bolts upright in bed.

Mary springs back. "Warble, what is it?"

Warble rubs his eyes, opens and closes them several times in rapid succession, and then rubs them again. "Oh, it's only you. I thought you were the maid coming in to ravish me."

"Warble! Don't you recognize your own wife?" Mary asks, her feelings hurt.

"Now I do! But the first thing I saw was this big giant face right in mine with that, 'Why are you still sleeping? I need to make the bed' look. So I thought you were the maid.

"That wasn't an 'I need to make the bed' look; it was a look of concern. Do you know how long you slept? It's almost 1 O'Clock in the afternoon."

Warble yells out again, this time more in a tone of agony and frustration than morbid fear. "Mary, why didn't you wake me? Now I have to make up for lost time somehow. The longest you should *ever* let me sleep is 8 hours. Now I'm going to have to drive like a bat out of Dallas to catch up to where we should be by now. Come on! Let's go," he yells, grabbing her by the hand

and hurrying out of the hotel room and into the PT Cruiser.

Southern and central Oregon go by in a blur. At The Dalles, they go through the Citizen Page drive-through. They had gone without breakfast due to Warble's quest to make up the time he had lost in slumberland.

At Kennewick, Washington, they make their last fuel stop before arriving at their next destination. Warble has elected to head for the land of rivers, lakes, mountains, forests, and fog; the narrow strip of real estate that serves as a buffer zone between the cattle ranchers of Montana and the computer nerds of Washington state: the Idaho panhandle.

CHAPTER 54

Warble decides on settling in Coeur d' Alene because, since nobody can spell it or pronounce it, he thinks he will receive neither telemarketing calls nor junk mail there. After all, what telemarketer wants to suffer the embarrassment of being laughed at when saying, 'Let me make sure I've got your address right: bla bla bla, Cowardly Lion, Idaho.'

And what typist wants to have to memorize the spelling aid 'Call Our English Uncle Rathbone, d apostrophe, Alone with an E instead of an O' just to send a flyer for collector-edition life-size Barney the Dinosaur bobble-head dolls to a stranger?

Nobody.

So Warble thinks he can hide in 'The Lake City,' as Coeur d' Alene calls itself, and remain undetectable to his pursuers, until he unveils his next ingenious plan (which he has already hatched, stemming from a dream he had during his extended slumber the night before). Then he will be completely safe, once and for all--due to his unparalleled fame, which will accrue to him as a rightful reward for his world-beating, earth-shattering innovation.

Entering Idaho from Washington, the McGorkles stop to eat at the first Citizen Page they see, next to The Hot Rod Café in Post Falls. Mary lobbies for eating at the café, but Warble won't hear of it. Citizen Page is predictable, and--or so he claims--being predictable is the best thing to which a restaurant can aspire.

While eating his cheeseburger and fries, Warble peruses *The Penny Pincher*, a local advertisement paper. He finds a likely sounding house for rent, on Dragonfly Drive in Coeur d' Alene: a four level, three-bedroom home--with a den, to boot--on .314 acres.

"Warble, why do we want a house with 3 bedrooms? We only need 2, and only then when I'm really mad at you."

"You're failing to take into consideration, Mary, that we will be having

frequent guests--heads of state, celebrities, athletes, American Idol talent scouts, ...in other words, the rich and famous and powerful."

"Why would they be staying with us?" Mary asks.

"Why, you ask?" Warble repeats. "Because we are so generous and hospitable. That is one of our collective traits."

"I see," Mary replies, although not really agreeing with that assessment. "What I meant, though, was: Why would *they* want to spend the night with *us*?"

"You sell me short, my darling wife Mary, and yourself, to boot (although you seldom wear boots). Tell me, Mary, do you trust me?"

"No."

Warble takes another tack. "Mary, what's the opposite of 'No'?"

"Yes."

"Good. You have every reason to. Because I, Warble Poundcake McGorkle, am about to found the Next Big Thing. I will be the sole owner, President, CEO, CFO, CIO, and COO, not to mention Chief Evangelist and personnel manager--a skill I perfected while working for that old wharf rat Morley Moore--of the most important, and more importantly most profitable, business ever to see the light of day (or, in the case of Coeur d' Alene, the fog of day).

Mary is so fed up with Warble's schemes--even when they work, they eventually backfire and disintegrate--that she puts forth her best effort to not be curious about what Warble's proposed business is to be.

She tries to concentrate on other things, to get it out of her mind. She weighs some conundrums, such as, 'What came first, the chicken or the egg?'; 'Is it live or is it Memorex?'; and 'Is it butter--or Parkay?'

As intriguing and involved as these mysteries are, she finally gives in--

Warble's plan keeps invading her mind.

What came first, the chicken or the egg? I wonder what Warble's idea could be?

Is it live or is it Memorex? What does Warble have up his sleeve now?

Is it butter--or Parkay? Is it possible that this time his plan will really succeed--and remain successful?

Mary can't take the suspense any longer. "All right, Warble, you win," she says. "What is it? What is this business of yours that's so all-fired great, important, and lucrative?"

"I thought you'd never ask, Mary. Bio-companies are all the rage nowadays. Cracking the DNA. Unraveling the human genome. Cloning sheep, woolly mammoths, and Elvis.

"But those companies," Warble says, pointing his index finger at Mary, "are run by geeks who just like the challenge of finding all that stuff out. *My* bio-company is going to make practical use of that sort of information.

BIOTRANS will let people be what they want to be; *who* they want to be is a more accurate way of describing it. I already have a slogan for the company: *Change your life--or someone else's--with BioTrans.*"

Mary stares at Warble for a couple of seconds, slurps up the rest of her milkshake, and asks, "And what exactly will BioTrans do that will be so helpful?"

Warble smiles wryly and slyly, and leans across the table. He whispers, "Personality transplants, Mary, personality transplants. The possibilities are endless."

Mary, to her credit, does not experience a myocardial infarction at hearing this bit of news. She kind of hopes, though, that Warble will be his own first customer--if the transplants really work, that is.

CHAPTER 55

The McGorkles rent the house on Dragonfly Drive, and Warble immediately begins work on his business plan. He will finance it himself, and neither seek nor accept business partners--no partners means nobody to share the profits with; and nobody that must be consulted when decisions are made. It also means that word of the undertaking will not leak until he himself is ready to unveil the particulars of the groundbreaking venture in a news conference.

Three days pass. Mary gets to know the town (where the stores are, that is, the only thing about the town that is really important to her) while Warble works feverishly on his speech for the news conference and the pricing structure for the various services BioTrans will offer.

Warble only emerges from the basement den to eat and sleep. He eats his meals as quickly as possible, lost in thought all the while (he wouldn't have even noticed the difference if Reese Witherspoon had been sitting across from him at the table instead of his wife Mary).

Warble is a man obsessed, driven, compelled to get his speech perfect, making people want to--no, feel as if they *need* to--make use of his service. He also spends hours upon hours determining what is the maximum amount 'the market will bear' for his transplants. How much can he charge? What is the cut-off point just a smidgen below where people would say, 'Nah, forget it; I can't afford that much'? Warble, being a good businessman, doesn't want to 'leave any money on the table.'

On the fourth evening after their arrival in Coeur d' Alene, Warble emerges from his den early--9:42 p.m. Since he hasn't been going to bed until after 1 am the last few nights, Mary is surprised to see him as he practically runs into the living room, beaming. She looks at him expectantly.

"I've done it, Mary," Warble cries out jubilantly. "I'm a genius! I'm even more of a genius than I already knew I was. Stop the presses! Batten down the hatches! It's time for the world to bow before its great benefactor--

me!"

Warble calls all the major news networks, and due to the fact that Warble's enthusiasm is contagious and intriguing (it will make a good story, anyway, even if he makes a fool of himself, the news directors think) and because it happens to be an extraordinarily slow news day, all the networks agree to have representatives in the lobby of the Coeur d' Alene resort at 6 p.m. (Pacific Time) the following night--which is the optimal time for simultaneous national exposure, since most people on the west coast will be home from work by then, but it will still be early enough (9 O'Clock) for those in the East to watch Warble's press conference before hitting the sack.

Warble enjoys a deep, dream-filled sleep that night. Satisfied with himself (to put it mildly), he drifts off with a sublime smile of contentment on his face. He dreams of the immense piles of money in which he will soon be frolicking about. Croesus will look like a pauper to comparison shoppers. Warble will have to build large vaults and storehouses in which to horde his stockpile of gold coins. He dreams of eventually having three sons--Sam, Buck, and Mac--who will courageously and loyally defend any offensive perpetrated against their father's cash cache.

In Warble's most vivid dream, his three sons riddle the Beagle Boys full of holes with their sub-machine guns and then fry them Cajun-style with their flame-throwers (leaving the gold unscorched, of course).

Warble awakens in the morning refreshed, revived, and invigorated. "There's nothing like the smell of impending success and inconceivable wealth in the morning," he tells Mary, who groggily mumbles something about letting her rest in peace.

Warble, though, is full of energy and springs out of bed. He showers, brews coffee, prepares breakfast (for himself only, forgetting that Mary too sometimes likes to eat), and scarfs it all down in record time.

Bursting with nervous energy, scarcely able to contain himself in anticipation of the exciting events to occur that evening, Warble, on a whim, runs down the steps, flings open the front door and, without even hesitating long enough to close the door behind himself, races down the street to Wolffie's

to pick up the morning paper, a Hostess fruit pie, and a box of Frosted Pop Tarts.

Warble is out of breath by the time he returns home. He's glad he left the door open, so he doesn't have to expend the energy needed to open it. Warble's sprint on the way to Wolffie's turned to a jog and then a slow-motion power walk on the way back from that convenience store.

Now Warble is wheezing, barely able to drag himself up the stairs. He rips open a package of Pop Tarts and puts them in the toaster.

Sitting down at the dining room table, Warble opens *The Coeur d' Alene Press* and tears open the fruit pie.

Reading the news with a bemused expression on his face, Warble bursts out laughing all of a sudden. 'What a bland and easily-amused world, to print these types of stories,' Warble thinks. 'War, pollution, global warming, diseases, flooding, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, rampant crime, economic collapse. After tonight they will have far more interesting and important subjects to write about.'

CHAPTER 56

Tonight will be Warble's big night on television. This evening's news conference will make any previous television appearance by The Color-Blind Chameleon pale in comparison--whether it was restoring old ladies' stolen purses to them after beating up the purse-snatcher (or someone resembling him, or at least appearing to be a suspicious character) to within an inch of his life, or hawking watered-down beer.

Cognizant of the importance of personal appearance--especially first impressions--Warble considers what to wear in front of the camera. Torn between the desire to honor tradition and his innate contrarianism, Warble finally decides to wear a suit and tie, but not in the conventional fashion.

At a costume store, he picks up a zoot suit at a cut-rate price. At a Western clothing store, he purchases a bolo tie. Augmenting the fashion nightmare (as Mary deems it, who refuses to be seen on camera with Warble, at least as long as he is dressed in this way), Warble adds a pair of snakeskin boots and a Panama hat (which, by the way, happens to have been made in Bolivia). Completing the effect is the jaunty and rakish angle at which he insists on wearing the headpiece.

By the time Warble has assembled his outfit, only a couple of hours remain until the press conference is to begin. He spends the remainder of the time preening in front of the mirror and rehearsing his speech.

The hour finally arrives for the great unveiling of Warble's neoteric business. With an eye still firmly fixed on appearances, he hires a limousine to transport him to the resort hotel.

Mary opts to remain at home, unsure of what the reaction to Warble's speech will be (for that matter, what preposterous claims her husband might make, and what sort of limbs he might climb out on). She explains her decision to Warble by saying that she wants to monitor the television coverage to verify its accuracy.

Warble arrives at the Coeur d' Alene Resort a little more than half an hour

early. He doesn't want to make his appearance just yet, lest he have nothing to do but wander around until 6. Warble doesn't want people to think he doesn't have anything better to do, and he doesn't want to be pestered by newsmen wanting him to divulge in advance the content of his news conference.

At 6 minutes and 28 seconds before 'showtime,' as Warble refers to it, he emerges from the limousine and tells the driver to send the bill to BioTrans.

To appease the perturbed chauffeur, who was expecting cash, Warble flips him a tip as he walks away. The driver catches the dime deftly, bites it to ensure that it's not counterfeit and, with a scowl, squeezes away.

Resplendent in his finery, and cockier than any rooster or cocker spaniel you care to parade forth as a comparison piece, Warble ascends the steps to the podium. A banner with the name of his nascent company and its slogan is suspended from the ceiling.

As the minutes tick down until 'lights, camera, action,' Warble gazes out upon the steadily growing crowd, largesse emanating from his eyes and supreme confidence from his posture.

As the final seconds tick down, Warble signals along with the camera crew with his fingers: nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three point one four, two, one, and then points at the camera man. The camera whirs, the lights blaze, and the action begins.

CHAPTER 57

"Ladies and Gentlemen, and all the rest of you," Warble begins, "tonight you are witnessing a great event in history. Your life will change based on the new business and scientific process which I will unveil and reveal to you tonight. Life on this planet we call Earth gets better as of this hour.

"You will proudly recount all the details of what you will hear here tonight to your grandchildren and great-grandchildren. When these your progeny ask you, 'Who is that man depicted so gloriously in that 314 foot high statue there?', you will be able to proudly reply, 'That is the illustrious Warble P. McGorkle, a great, magnanimous, and selfless philanthropist who made life as we know it today possible by means of the most ingenious invention of all time.'

"Before I reveal to all of you here," Warble gestures toward the curious crowd, "and all of you out there in television land," he points to the camera, "exact-act-actly what it is to which I'm referring, I will first provide you with some background information.

"Many of you have heard it said that 'You are what you eat'. This is true; not, of course, in the sense that if you eat a kumquat, you become a kumquat; not in that the masticating and digesting of a fruit salad turns you into such a tasty dish.

"No, 'you are what you eat' in the sense that the combination of everything you eat determines who you are as a person. Your personality is formed and altered by the DNA in the animals, vegetables, minerals, and chemicals that you consume.

"That is all well and good, you may say, and sounds logical enough, but what does that have to do with the price of coffee in Coffeyville, Kansas?

"Well, friends, the answer is: absolutely nothing. But what we've got here is a failure to communicate, that's all. And I'm going to fix that right now by telling you about the amazing opportunity that you will henceforth have. My new company, BioTrans, will make available to you, dear consumer, the chance

of a lifetime."

Warble pauses, allowing his last statement to sink in and anticipation for the next to build.

"When you were a kid playing basketball, did you ever utter the desire, 'I wish I was Michael Jordan'? When you took piano lessons, did you ever say, 'If only I could tickle the ivories like Jerry Lee Lewis'? And you women out there, tell me you haven't secretly said, 'If only I could make a soufflé like Julia Child.'"

Warble pauses again, surveying the crowd. All eyes in the house are fixed on him. Some of the eyes' owners are seemingly mesmerized; others are apparently dazed and confused. After tantalizing them with his pregnant pause for several seconds, staring at them as still and silent as a statue, Warble presses on with his coup d'etat:

"Friends, Roman-Catholics, and Countrymen as well as Citymen, lend me your ears! You CAN be Jerry Lee Lewis! You CAN be Julia Child. You CAN be like Mike! In fact, through the simple and painless ingesting of a single pill 3.14 times the size of a children's aspirin tablet, you can be anybody you like, living or dead--from Attila the Hun to Zorba the Greek, and everyone in between; from Ann of Green Gables to Zwingli, or anyone else you have ever envied.

"Yes, friends and so forth, it's true. For a price (the details of which will be explained later) you can, through the miracles of the modern science of biometrics, take on the personality of anyone who has ever lived. It's your choice--you make the call. No fear; no limits; no boundaries; just say No to no.

"Now maybe you're wondering: To what other uses can this technology be applied? Well, I'm glad you sort of asked. Here are just a few of the ways BioTrans' product and service can be used to benefit mankind:

1. Police SWAT teams will be able to round up street gangs and force-feed them Gandhi and Mother Theresa pills, which will mean the end to crime and drugs in our streets.
2. Prison wardens will be able to keep jailbirds in line and under their thumb

by grinding up Mr. Rogers pills and putting them in the chow of the problem inmates. Prison riots will thereby be made a thing of the past.

3. Parents will be able to have the child they really want--not some ungrateful, spoiled brat--by purchasing Wally Cleaver or Little Orphan Annie pills.

4. Miss America wannabes can guarantee success in their chosen endeavor by purchasing pills of people with the most pleasing personalities (since everyone knows that it's personality that plays the pivotal role in winning that particular contest).

"Besides these more obvious and dramatic benefits to mankind, even those of you who make use of our service to fulfill a desire to be like someone else will ultimately benefit mankind tremendously.

"How, you ask? Because when you're able to lead the life you always wanted, you'll be happy. A happy populace means a productive populace. A productive populace improves the economy and thus, not only their own lot in life, but also that of everyone else.

"The upshot of this is that eventually everyone everywhere will be able to afford our service. And the happiness and productivity will just continue to increase exponentially. All the no-good jerks in this country will choose to be nice, well-rounded individuals. All the ne'er-do-wells will trade in that trait for a new set of better ones. It's a win-win situation. As the great philosopher Bruce Springsteen said, 'Nobody wins unless everybody wins.' And in this scenario--thanks to me, remember--we all win."

Warble sees he 'has them.' The audience is enthralled, transfixed, mesmerized--or, in the case of some of them anyway, just plain confused.

"Now, without further ado, let me explain the price structure of BioTrans' service. The price for the pill we will custom-manufacture for you depends on two basic factors:

1. Whether the person you choose is currently living or not, and
2. How much it will cost us to purchase the same type and amount of food they ingested in their life--or up to a certain point in their life.

"Let me explain that last point. Say you want to be like Orenthal James

Simpson when he was playing football, running through airports, and drinking orange juice--we would have to pay X amount for the food he had eaten up until then. But if you want to be like O.J. today, in his golf-playing, road-raging, book-writing days, it will cost more because he has eaten a lot more between then and now, and we will have to expend X+N to acquire those foodstuffs."

Warble notices that the eyes of many in the audience are beginning to glaze over, and so he shifts gears.

"That, all you fortunate people, concludes the initial portion of the press conference. How much time remains, Maestro?" Warble asks the lady in charge of the camera crew.

"Five minutes, Mr. McQuirkle," she answers.

Warble snaps. His fingers, that is. "Look, lady, get it right, will you? It's McGorkle," and he spells it out for her. At that all of the reporters in the audience busily scribble into their notepads, grateful for the verification of the spelling of Warble's last name.

"All right," Warble continues, "We have five minutes left for questions from the audience..."

One of the reporters from Coeur d' Alene High School's paper (*Viking Vibes*) raises her hand.

"Yes, miss?" Warble asks.

"When a customer, or client, or subject, or patient--or whatever you call it--"

"*Beneficiary*" Warble interjects, nodding.

"OK, when a *beneficiary* makes use of your service, do they take on the *appearance* of the person they admire?"

"Good question," Warble commends her.

"Bad answer," she shoots back.

"Shut up, you didn't let me finish!" Warble says testily. He clears his throat and straightens his tie. "No, that would be not only very painful (remember that scene from *Inner Space* where Jack turned into 'The Cowboy'?), but also impossible (remember, that was a movie, not real life).

"The beneficiary acquires the *personality* of the person only--not their physical appearance. In other words, their psyche changes, not their physique."

The girl tries to ask another question, but Warble is still miffed at her and shouts her down. "You had your turn, you microphone hog! Give someone else a chance!"

A reporter from the *Coeur d' Alene Press* raises his hand, and Warble calls on him. "Mr. Flowers?"

"Mr. McGorkle, how are you able to ascertain what foods dead people ate, especially those people who lived thousands of years ago, such as Attila the Hun?"

In order to avoid a reprise of the high school girl's rude retort, Warble doesn't commend the quality of the query. Rather, he just answers the question without preamble: "We can ascertain that data from a single strand of the person's hair. All we've got to do is pay some wino to dig the old geezer or geezerette up, snip off a lock of hair, examine it with our super-high-powered microscope, and voila! The beans are, so to speak, spilled."

The reporter follows up with a second question. "Earlier you said that part of the cost is determined by whether the subject was living or not--why is that?"

"It's a legal issue, Mr. Flowers," Warble replies. "I probably shouldn't delve too much into the particulars--I'll leave that to our bean counters and sharks (accountants and lawyers, I mean)--but I *can* tell you this: We don't have to pay license fees to the dead people.

"The living subjects will probably, in most cases, charge us to reproduce their personality. The greedier they are, the more it will cost us, and we will be compelled to pass that cost on to our customers.

"Of course, if the greedy person also happens to be very popular, economies of scale will come into play. What this means is that if enough people pay to take on Arnold Schwarzenegger's personality--for example--he could be cheaper than, for instance, Tom Arnold.

"This is the case because, even though Tom signs up with us for, let's say, just to name an odd figure, \$31.41, and Schwarzenegger charges us, for instance, one hundred times as much, Mr. Arnold may only have one or two admirers. This means that after our charge for shipping and handling (a mere 31.4 per cent of the license charge, pro-rated, plus 62.8 per cent of the foodstuff costs), the Arnold Schwarzenegger pill may be very attractive, price-wise, in comparison with the relatively unpopular gent."

A bright-eyed youngster in the audience shoots up his hand and, so excited is he about asking his question, grunts each time he thrusts his hand into the air. "That young whippersnapper in the Spider-Man costume," Warble says, pointing to him.

"Who are you?" the boy asks.

The question confuses Warble. He hasn't exactly made his name a secret during his presentation. The boy sees that Warble doesn't know what he means and re-phrases the question. "Whose pill did you take? Who are you now?"

Warble now comprehends, but is a little taken aback. Why would *he* want to be someone else? "I, young man, am myself--Warble P. McGorkle. As I am practically perfect in every way--for example completely lacking in avarice, a paragon of politeness, the essence of class, the very picture of good looks, as well as humility personified, there's no reason I would ever need to, or want to, adopt the personality of a lesser mortal.

"In fact, Warble McGorkle pills will be available at a deep discount due to my

strong desire to see a better society. If you purchase tonight, you can receive a pill that will infuse you with my personality for a cheap-at-3.14-times-the-price \$31,415.93."

The camera crew informs Warble there is only one minute remaining before they must pack up.

"There's only time for one more question," Warble informs the assembled crowd. An elderly lady in the audience, who has been watching the entire proceedings with a blank expression (Warble thought she was probably 'simple'), now raises a withered hand.

"Yes, granny?" Warble asks.

"I'll 'granny' you, you menace to society! What's to prevent someone from using these pills for evil ends? For example, kidnappers could purchase Lizzie Borden or Dennis Rodman pills from you and then threaten to feed them to the kids they nap. What's a parent to do but cough up the cash in a situation like that?"

"Let me put you at ease, Ma'am," Warble says with a phony smile on his face, struggling to remain polite. "We will *never* sell to criminals. We will require from each potential customer a completely filled out application form where they must affirm that they are not former convicts, future convicts, IRS agents, or game show hosts."

A look of relief floods the old lady's face. "Well, why didn't you say so from the get-go. Bless you for that, sonny."

Warble beams at the triumphant culmination to the press conference. Looking out of the corner of his eye to make sure the camera is on him, he sets his jaw, plasters his best Gary Cooper look on his face, and turns his best side camera-wards. The lights click off, and the camera stops whirring. So ends the press conference. Warble resumes his natural demeanor, and descends from the platform and into the arms of an adoring public.

How Warble gets home that night is really of no consequence whatsoever in the unfurling of this tale, so the rather mundane details of that particular

circumstance are omitted.

CHAPTER 58

Warble's pill-making lab, which he sets up in his garage, is comprised of three machines: a reverse-osmosis tank, a mini particle accelerator, and a fully functional scale-model replica of a gold-rush era stamp mill.

The foodstuffs are fed into the reverse-osmosis tank, where the necessary chemical reactions take place; then, the particle accelerator accelerates the particles, for no reason in particular other than that it is 'way cool' and will impress people; and finally, the reverse-osmosisized, accelerated foodstuffs are placed under the stamp mill, where they are squashed much, much, *much* flatter than a pancake. The compressed foodstuffs are then pried out of an impression the size and shape of a pill at the bottom of the platform.

BioTrans does well. In fact, BioTrans does *very* well. Knowing a goldmine when he sees one, Warble is unwilling to sell any interest whatsoever in his company. Nevertheless, corporations as diverse as MicroSoft, Ben & Jerry's, and FMC pay millions of dollars just for the right to advertise their products as 'The Official Operating System of BioTrans,' 'The Official Ice Cream of BioTrans,' and 'The Official Armored Personnel Carrier (Tank) of BioTrans.'

Things go so well, in fact, that Mary begins to believe that maybe this time Warble has truly found his niche. No more bilking of snack food companies. No more polka punk bands. No more firing people for fun. No more Color-Blind Chameleon shenanigans.

Hoping against hope, Mary makes a trip to the *Super 1* grocery store to purchase some begonia seedlings. She plants them in a perimeter around the house, and looks forward to cultivating the greatest specimens in the entire Idaho panhandle. They may not turn out to be as big and beautiful as her begonias back home in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, but they will nevertheless serve as a source of satisfaction and contentment to her.

Mary gleans just as much gratification from her horticultural hobby as Warble does from his business venture.

Once again, Warble appears in a cover story in *The Wall Street Journal* as well as countless other journals of various stripes and circulation figures. He is again mentioned favorably when the talk turns to peace prizes and potential *Time* magazine Man of the Year.

Things can change quickly, though. Due to an accident in the lab, Warble falls from grace quicker than you can say 'Old MacDonald had a farm, e-i-e-i-o.'

The blame for Warble's downfall can be laid squarely at the doorstep of the produce for which the state is famous: spuds.

If there weren't so many spuds in Idaho, they wouldn't be so inexpensive there. If they weren't so inexpensive, Warble wouldn't have purchased so many sacks of them as a snack food to give him energy while he was working in his garage/laboratory. If he hadn't purchased so many sacks of them, one of the sacks wouldn't have been sticking out from under his work bench. If not for that, he wouldn't have tripped over it when he was carrying a container full of assorted pills. And if not for the spill, the pills would not have scattered all across the laboratory (garage) floor.

"Dang it to Dallas!" Warble says as he hits the floor and rolls over in a manner reminiscent of Rin-Tin-Tin at his most obsequious. Warble is sore--in more ways than one: His shoulder is sore, and he is sore about having to sweep up all the pills.

Unwilling to put the pills through the rigorous and time-consuming chemical analysis to definitively determine which one is which, and also unwilling to 'eat the cost' of producing the pills, Warble makes one of those tough executive decisions for which CEOs are paid the big bucks: He consults himself for a few seconds (saving himself the time, trouble, and expense of hiring an outside consultant to consult) and then solves the dilemma.

Warble decides to make his best guess as to which pills are which based on hue and aroma. After all, who knows this whole business better than him? And even if he makes a mistake or two, his customers probably won't even notice.

So, Warble labels the pills based on an educated guess and his record of

which pills were in the batch that he spilled, and sends them out to the various customers.

Some of the pills, as is probably not surprising, are mislabeled, and therefore sent to the wrong people.

Warble has a bad feeling gnawing away at his stomach for a few days, but tries to ignore it. After all, what's done is done. What can he do about it now?

CHAPTER 59

Warble should have known. They call it Blue Monday; Stormy Monday; Manic Monday. It was on a Monday that all Dallas broke loose. If BioTrans had been a publicly held company, Wall Street may have been moved to term it 'The BioTrans Monday Meltdown.'

The first call comes from a couple who had given their child what they thought was a Haley Joel Osment pill, but after a dramatic reduction in the bat population in their area, and a tell-tale assemblage of mammal bones in the boy's closet, it became apparent that what they had given their son was in actuality an Ozzie Osbourne pill.

These beside-themselves parents inform Warble that he will be contacted soon by their attorney, Eddie Cochran (who earned enough money to attend law school after the phenomenal success of his hit single 'Summertime Blues').

As if that weren't bad enough, a kidnapper who had identified himself as a mild-mannered boxing promoter in the application he had filled out for BioTrans' services (which data Warble really gathered so that he could sell it to other companies, rather than out of any real concern for the public's health and welfare), writes a note, comprised of cut-out letters from the online newsletter *Kidnapper's Gazette*, complaining that the "Gandhi" pill he gave his victim (after the parents refused to pay the ransom) was apparently a Mike Tyson pill, as the little tyke had bitten both of his ears off. The paster-togetherer of the note threatens to perpetrate the same bodily harm, or even worse, on Warble.

The straw that breaks the camel's back, though, is the communiqué from the Stockton, California, SWAT team, who had unknowingly administered Osama bin Laden pills to one street gang and George W. Bush pills to a rival gang (they thought they were a combination of Mr. Rogers and Mother Theresa pills).

Needless to say, perhaps, the rivalry intensified. Whereas previously their differences were an on-again, off-again, hot-and-cold affair, the street

battles thereafter took on the vehemence of the Hatfields & McCoys feud. The outraged police team also threatens legal action against BioTrans, mentioning that their counsel is the much-feared barrister Efflee 'Beetle' Bailey.

Threats of lawsuits and an involuntary double ear removal (probably without local anesthesia, to add insult to injury) are more than enough to light a fire under Warble's tail feathers. He quickly withdraws as much cash as he can from the bank and transfers the rest to a Swiss account.

Warble then informs Mary of the necessity of pulling up stakes and instructs her to drench her begonias with Roundup. Mary, despondent, dejected, and depressed, does pour fluid over her beautiful beloved begonias, but it's not Roundup: it's water. She hopes that whoever moves into their soon-to-be abandoned home on Dragonfly Drive will appreciate them and take care of them.

That night (after deliberately mixing up the current orders and mailing them out 'just for grins,' now that he's got nothing left to lose) Warble smashes all his laboratory equipment so as to make it unusable by anyone else. "Who knows what harm could be inflicted on an unsuspecting public if these instruments of massively dangerous change were to fall into the wrong hands?" he explains to Mary, who wonders about what seems to her to be wanton vandalism. In reality, Warble just can't bear the thought of someone else plowing in his field. If he can't reap the profits, no one will.

Just as the police arrive--who have been summoned by Warble's next-door neighbor, complaining of the noise caused by Warble's frantic machine-dismantling frenzy--Warble and Mary are turning east onto Highway 90, heading back home to Oconomowoc.

If Mary had known when they were leaving Idaho that they would be returning home to Wisconsin, she wouldn't have been so despondent. In fact, she would have been downright giddy. She had assumed, though, that when Warble said that they had to leave that they would be going to Asheville, North Carolina, or Austin, Texas, or some other place she knew nothing about--possibly even to Mukluk, Alaska. Warble figures they have been gone from home long enough so that nobody will think to look for them there.

All the police find at the house on Dragonfly Drive is a beautiful bed of begonias surrounding the house and an indescribably chaotic scene of mayhem in the garage: metal, plastic, glass, and spuds are scattered all over the floor.

Hanging by one nail at the far end of the garage is a sign. The two police officers, and the neighbor who called them, turn their heads sideways and read it aloud, in unison:

BioTrans

Change your life--or someone else's--with BioTrans

The rookie cop turns to his partner and asks, "Say Hal, what do you make of this?"

"This," his partner responds, left hand on his belt, right hand resting on the butt of his service revolver, "is a classic case of leaving a mess behind. I believe our Mr. McGorkle suffered from a common problem in our society: great learning has driven him to madness."

"Who do you think he was mad at, Hal?" the rookie wants to know.

Hal opens his jacket and removes a cinnamon twist from an inside pocket. He points it at Warble's neighbor. "Him, no doubt. After all, he's the one who rat-finked on him when he was exercising his constitutional right to break his own toys in his own garage."

The officers then arrest the neighbor for provoking a pillar of business and science beyond the breaking point as well as the related charge of failure to mind his own business.

Meanwhile, back on the highway, Warble has sworn off spuds for life as he and Mary hurtle down the asphalt ribbon at 94.2 mph.

CHAPTER 60

Mary falls asleep at the Montana border, 50 miles east of Coeur d' Alene. All through Montana she dreams of begonias. Big, beautiful, bursting with color and fragrance. When the dream focuses on the begonias she left behind in Idaho, she whimpers, like a dog when he has a nightmare about his master forgetting to take him along in the pickup when he goes into town or out hunting. When Mary dreams of her begonias at home in Oconomowoc, her facial expression vacillates between concern ('are they still alive and thriving?') and joy ('I can't wait to see my babies again').

Warble lets Mary sleep as his next idea ever-so-gradually begins to grow in his brain (perhaps somewhat like a virus, spreading through his organism, infecting all his limbs and joints and synapses).

As they cross into North Dakota, Mary awakens, as if on cue. As Warble notices his wife open her eyes and look around, he says, "Mary, you lazybones, you slept through the entire state of Montana!"

Mary rubs her eyes. "Did I miss anything?"

Warble sees his chance to pull Mary's leg. He does.

"Hey, le'go my leg!" Mary objects. She hasn't been awake long enough to tolerate such tomfoolery very well.

Warble revisits Mary's question. "Did you miss anything? We just drove through--or *I* just drove through, I should say--the fourth largest state in the union, and you wonder if you missed anything?"

"Well, did I?" Mary responds testily.

"I'll say you did!" Warble shoots back. "I was involved in a gunfight with Marshall Dillon near Butte, took part in the re-enactment of Custer's Last Stand (I played the role of Custer's horse, Bitbucket), and feasted on Rocky Mountain Oysters at a roadhouse on the outskirts of Missoula."

"Is that all?" Mary replies, feigning disinterest and pretending to go back to sleep.

"Hey, wake up! No more sleeping on the job."

"Job?"

"Yes, I need you to provide feedback on my newest idea as it germinates," Warble explains.

"That's a good way to put it," Mary says.

"Of course. I've got a way with words. It's the Irish gift of gab. My great great grandpappy, Paddy Pubman McGorkle, kissed the blarney stone. I've got his lips, my grandma said. That being the case, I obviously inherited thereby the 'gab' skill."

"Wonderful," Mary mutters.

"Isn't it now, my lass?" Warble responds brightly. "Here's an example for you: see that sign up there?"

"The Burma Shave one?"

"No, not *that* one--the mileage sign. It says 314 miles to Fargo. Do you know how Fargo got its name?"

"I haven't the slightest," Mary says. She tells Warble that she isn't really all that curious about it, anyway, and would prefer to go back to sleep, but he forges onward nevertheless, undeterred.

"Remember the pony express, how it originally went from Wells, Nevada, to Fargo, North Dakota? Fargo was the eastern terminus of the Western frontier at that time--as far as the Pony Express was concerned, anyway. So when the driver got there, he would always tell the passengers: 'This is as *far* as we *go*. You see? Far-go. Fargo. That was as *far* as they would *go*.'"

"I get the picture, Warble," Mary says, wishing he would shut up.

"All right, that's enough history for now," Warble says. "There might be a test tomorrow."

"I'm sure there will be," Mary responds. "There are tests every day."

The McGorkles drive on for a few miles in silence. While Mary enjoys the peace of Warble being quiet, he communes with himself, firming up in his mind the details of his latest and greatest idea.

His next inspiration is bound to outdo the previous one, as clever as that last one indeed was. Even more money from even less work is his goal.

CHAPTER 61

Warble locates a Motel 62.8 alongside the highway near Fargo. "This is as far as we go, Mary. For tonight, anyway--I mean, who would want to stop period--*stop* stop, I mean--in this god-forsaken place."

Mary, ignoring Warble as usual, gets out of the car. She is ready to eat, take a nice, long, hot bath, and follow that up with some scintillating television, such as *The Weakest Link*, a program Warble mistakenly thinks is a documentary about quality-control workers in a sausage factory.

When the next day dawns, Warble rousts Mary out of bed so that they can make it home by nightfall. He wants to be in Minnesota by breakfast time and across the Mississippi River and the Wisconsin border by late afternoon. Mary, spurred on by the thought of being home that night, is 'up and at 'em' without any further prodding from Warble.

Saving time where possible, the McGorkles go through the drive-through to pick up cinnamon rolls, coffee, and French fries at a Citizen Page just across the Minnesota line.

The closer the McGorkles get to the Wisconsin border, the more Mary perks up. She is actually awake, alert, and responsive now. Warble takes advantage of this state of affairs by initiating another 'history lesson.'

"Mary, we are bypassing Winona, Minnesota now. Over yonder, just beyond that hill and in a dale, lies the town. It is named for Winona Ryder, C.C.'s great granddaughter. Winona, you know, was the driving force behind The Judds, a hip-hop group she started here with her twin sisters Loseona and Drawona."

Mary doesn't respond verbally. She just turns to Warble and shakes her head slowly in the affirmative, relaying to him that she heard what he said—message received, if not necessarily decoded. Warble hopes, of course, that she catalogs the information for future reference. Mary, though, doesn't care much for hip-hop and forgets the trivia tidbit practically as soon as she hears it.

With a whoop and a holler, the McGorkles cross the bridge over the Mississippi River into La Crosse, Wisconsin, where, according to Warble, the French sport of lacrosse was invented.

"Jacques-Pierre Marquette," he edifies Mary, "leading a band of Jesuits on a field trip, stumbled across the Heileman brewery. Asking for free samples, the thirsty initiates were turned down by the skinflint brewmaster.

"Marquette came up with a challenge: 'We will have a sword fight. Being peaceable people, though, we have no swords. We will duel instead, then, with our crosses. If we win, you serve us all the free beer we can drink. If we lose, we will boycott your product.

"No roamin' Catholic in the state will buy it in that case, and you'll be ruined. You see, then, that I've out-foxed you and have you over a barrel.

"Outraged at this challenge and threat to his livelihood, the brewmaster quickly fashioned some makeshift crosses for all his employees. The result of the battle is unfortunately lost to antiquity. The important part of it all was, though, that the manly sport of lacrosse was thereby invented."

"Captivating!" Mary says sarcastically. To her credit, she doesn't believe a word of it.

After dinner in La Crosse (where the pizza parlor, much to Warble's chagrin, does not have a single mural depicting the historic Jesuit/Brewery workers battle Warble had described), the McGorkles get back on the road, heading southeast on the last leg of their journey home.

Warble is still struggling with the particulars of his latest idea. Normally his brainstorming comes to him full-blown and all decked out, with ribbons and all the doo-dads, but this time Warble seems to be suffering a type of mental block. Thinking a snack might jump-start the idea-finishing portion of his brain, Warble stops at the *Super America* in Portage and buys half a dozen cartons of Twinkies.

CHAPTER 62

"No wonder they say 'nobody can eat just one,'" Warble says a few minutes later, reaching for his 17th Twinkie. "These puppies are habit-forming. I think it's the creamy filling. Then again, it could be the sponge cake covering thingy."

Mary looks at him and rolls her eyes. Warble has been eating the snack cakes whole, without removing the wrapper, and apparently is none the wiser. Mary doesn't inform him of his faux pas, thinking the dietary supplement might actually be good for him--the plastic and cardboard might rectify the chemical imbalance from which Mary increasingly suspects her husband is suffering.

After his twenty-ninth Twinkie, Warble suddenly blurts out, "I've got it, Mary! The greatest scam of all--I mean, the best opportunity of all to be of service to the people: I'll go into politics! Yes, that's the ticket--I'll run for governor of Wisconsin. And I've got a sure-fire platform."

"Platform? You mean the one you'll be standing on when you get bombarded with eggs and tomatoes? Oh, I see what you mean: it's a 'sure-fire' platform--it's sure to be set on fire."

"Stop kidding around, Mary. Here's my campaign pledge and promise to the residents of the great state of Wisconsin: No employer may require any employee to work during a Green Bay Packers game. And any employer who *requests* an employee to work during such must pay that employee--if said employee is *willing* to work, that is--*quadruple* time. The employer must pay them *four times* their normal rate of pay."

"That would be quite generous on their part," Mary says, not knowing how else to respond.

"Not only that," Warble continues, "to pave the way for this type of legislation, the first step will be to proclaim the day on which every Packers game takes place a High Holy Holiday. It will be illegal to require anyone to work on a High Holy Holiday. No repercussions can come to any who refuse

to work on such--in fact, such refusal will be officially encouraged by the state.

"And we will set up a watchdog agency to look into any allegations of employee intimidation or reprisal related to an employee's denial of work during an HHH--I guess we'll cut to the chase and just call it a triple-H."

"Why not call it H-cubed?" Mary interjects.

"Mary, we're talking about those wonderful, beautiful, unwashed masses here. They may not know what 'cubed' means. They'll get confused and think we're talking about diced ham or something--and some people don't like diced ham. And so if they don't know what 'cubed' means, they won't understand my platform. If they don't understand my platform, I won't get elected. If I don't get elected, *you* won't be able to live in the lap of luxury in the governor's mansion."

"I won't, will I?" Mary asks. "What about you, Warble? Wouldn't *you* miss out on all of that, too?"

"Oh, well, I don't really care about that, Mary. I'm in it to serve the people, not for any temporal and crass material rewards that may happen to--rightfully though they may be--come my way.

"I'll be out in the trenches duking it out with the dastardly denizens of Packers-apathy, fighting for my constituents. No shrimp and caviar for me--I'll be munching on sauerkraut and guzzling down brewskis with my greasy, grimy compadres--your normal, average, everyday, Joe Lunchbucket type of guys. Anyway, how's this for a slogan: 'Force an employee to work on a triple-H, go to jail'?"

"You're a shoe-in, Warble honey," Mary responds, rolling her eyes again. She's afraid she's actually right, though. She feels sorry for the competition, because nobody has a chance in Dallas against that platform in Wisconsin.

CHAPTER 63

The McGorkles arrive home in Oconomowoc at 9:42 p.m. Mary grabs a flashlight and goes outside to check on her begonias.

Warble begins to work the phones. He's got a lot of alliances to forge, coalitions to coalesce, and paperwork to perform. He wishes The Bullfrog were still with him. "That ingrate!" he mutters. "Just because I deferred his salary and haven't paid him yet, he wasn't even loyal enough to stick with me through thick, thin, paper-thin, and sharkskin-thin. You just can't get good help nowadays."

By midnight Warble has acquired a very powerful ally in the State Senate: Whortleberry Dane, the head of the DCCBBFFFSC (Department of Cheese Curds, Beer, Brats, Sauerkraut, Fish Fries, and Frozen Custard), Wisconsin's widest-ranging and most powerful political entity. Dane has had a falling out with the current governor and is willing to use his connections to help Warble unseat the incumbent by any means necessary.

To make a long story short, Warble wins his party's nomination with the greatest of ease. Making the race completely unfair for all comers, Warble even goes beyond his original, failsafe campaign pledge. Besides securing the right of each resident to see all the Packers games he or she wants without being harassed by heartless employers, Warble stacks the deck by also promising to clean up the whole state of the ubiquitous goose dung by which it is plagued.

Warble's solution: Anesthetization of all geese, followed by fitting them with diapers. This will not only make Wisconsin more pleasant for walking barefoot in the parks, it will also make it easier on the nose and provide employment for thousands.

Warble's campaign slogan is: 'You have a right to say no to working on a triple-H, and a more pleasant Wisconsin via a diaper on every goose.' Warble's rallying cry could stand to be catchier, but once his constituents understand the issues, Warble's opponent is only there to make it interesting.

Although supremely confident of his ultimate victory and vindication, Warble doesn't want to rest on his laurels or let sleeping dogs lie. He'll be the one to do the lying, thank you very much.

So, following Whortleberry's advice and his own instincts, Warble goes on the offensive. In accordance with the race for governor being referred to as a gubernatorial race, Warble challenges the incumbent to a goober-eating contest. He explains to Mary, who is confused by the need for such an engagement, that the word 'gubernatorial' is a combination of 'goober' and 'natorial.' A goober is a peanut, and 'natorial' means something that goes on the inside--as opposed to 'equatorial,' which refers to something on the outside, or the surface--such as the equator, which is on the surface, not under the surface, of the earth.

Thus, Warble concludes patiently and--he thinks--logically: "'Goober-natorial' refers to the old political tradition of a peanut-eating contest. The winner of this manly sporting event secures for himself the governor's post, and the loser must sweep up the shells."

"Somehow I can relate to, and thus empathize with, the loser," Mary says.

Warble is not overly or overtly sympathetic. "That's because you need to brush up on your entomological skills," he bluntly reprimands his wife. "If you were able to deduce the meaning of words by breaking them up into their component parts, like I can do so skillfully, you could use this knowledge to get a leg up on your competition--everyone else on earth, that is."

The day of the gubernatorial contest finally arrives. With Whortleberry Dane at his side, playing the part of the disinterested and impartial observer who also happens to be slated to serve as the referee of the conflict, Warble is sitting imperiously on stage as the incumbent arrives--in a hurry, as the seminar on cheese curds and cream puffs he had just attended had run a little overtime.

Warble and the incumbent shake hands. Warble is surprised at how short the current governor is--he looks taller on television. The incumbent is surprised at how tall Warble is--he had, on reading his speeches and

campaign promises, pictured him as a quite small man.

Warble suddenly sits down on his stool next to his barrel of peanuts. At this pre-arranged sign, Whortleberry declares the start of the contest by vigorously ringing a cowbell. The incumbent, taken by surprise, scurries over to his stool and, quite rapidly for a man of his advanced age, begins shelling and eating peanuts.

To again make a long story a little less lengthy, we'll cut to the end of the contest here. Although the currently installed governor acquits himself well, Warble wins by a landslide--literally. The incumbent shells his peanuts so quickly that he cannot see what is happening on the other side of the platform, where Warble, with a little help from his friend Whortleberry, is scarfing down peanuts which have *already been shelled* by a bevy of underfed (self-inflicted) and underpaid (Warble-inflicted) interns.

Additionally, the pre-shelled peanuts Warble eats have been genetically altered to shrink in his stomach. The incumbent gives it his all, but in the end his pile of shells collapses on him, and he is buried under the avalanche.

Seeing that his plan has succeeded beyond his wildest dreams, Warble declares himself the victor of the gubernatorial contest and--after ordering the staff at the governor's mansion to throw all of the incumbent's personal effects onto the lawn--calls the maintenance crew to remove the buried-alive-under-a-pile-of-peanut-shells politician from the premises.

Barely breathing, the broken man (in spirit, that is--after receiving a thorough checkup it is determined that the only thing that is hurt is his pride) retires from politics and returns to the private sector, becoming a Wisconsin Ducks tour guide.

As it turns out, though, even the governorship of the dairy state is not enough to satisfy Warble.

CHAPTER 64

"Mary," Warble announces one morning at the breakfast table of the governor's mansion in Madison, "I've done all I can for this state. I've solved every problem. Every Packers game is watched by all who want to see it. And, although I have instructed the CHU (CheeseHead Underground) to monitor all those who don't watch the games, I have exercised superhuman restraint and have not had any of them arrested, let alone tortured and executed.

"Besides that--as if that weren't enough--every goose in the state has been diapered. And thanks to me--realizing as they do that virtually the whole state is watching them--the Packers have ratcheted their play up to another level. Wisconsinites have to be *very* creative now to find anything to complain about. The other day I was listening to two of our police officers up in Rhinelander--"

"When were you in Rhinelander?" Mary interjects. She doesn't remember him having ever gone up there.

"Who said I was in Rhinelander?" Warble replies, irritated at the interruption. "I said I was *listening* to two of our police officers up there."

"You can hear from here to Rhinelander?" Mary asks, confused.

"Mary, don't be so naïve. All the police cruisers are bugged, naturally. We need to know what our representatives out there on the highways and byways are thinking and talking about... Anyway, as I was saying before I was so rudely and ignorantly interrupted, things are going *so well* here in America's Dairyland that people have to come up with stuff like this to complain about: One of the officers said to the other, 'Did you watch the Packers game last night?' The other officer says, 'No, I had to work.' The first officer replies, 'It was a disgrace; you should've seen it. Favre only had seven touchdown passes. He could have had eight, but he missed Robert Ferguson in the corner of the end zone once.' See what I mean, Mary?"

"Yes, I guess so, Warble, but what is all this leading up to?"

"The next stage in my development; the next step in my career. I can turn over the reins of state government to Whortleberry. He can take it from here. I've got bigger fish to fry."

"And what fish would those be?" Mary asks skeptically. Her begonias are just beginning to recover from the neglect they suffered during the McGorkles' extended absence from their home.

"All the fish in the country, not just the fish here in Wisconsin," Warble answers cryptically. Mary raises an eyebrow questioningly and Warble goes on. "I'm going to run for President of these hyar U-nited States, Mary."

Warble lets his declaration sink in. Mary's face is expressionless, although she seems to have suddenly developed a twitch at the bottom right corner of her mouth. Warble can't tell if she's nervous, shocked, or simply too happy for words. He doesn't know if he should risk telling her the last bit of good and exciting news--she might just suffer a paroxysm of happiness and cause a scene right inside the governor's mansion, a place Warble wants to keep dignified and businesslike.

But he just can't keep it in; he's got to let it out. Although Warble knows he's flirting with disaster, he blurts out, "And *you*, Mary, are to be the first female Vice President of the United States. Yes, you, dear one, are to be my running mate."

CHAPTER 65

It is with a resigned sadness that Mary closes up their house in Oconomowoc. She would rather tend her flowers than be Vice President or even President of the United States. She must, though, accompany her husband. Warble needs her.

Money is no object for Warble's presidential campaign. Realizing what a term as president can do for his future--all the connections he can make, deals he can swing, favors he can grant and, more importantly, have reciprocated later--Warble pulls out all the stops.

Warble's personal fortune is nothing to sneeze at, even in comparison with the average presidential hopeful. He is still receiving royalty checks from *The Cascading Upd8s and Deletes*, and sizable checks for each re-run of *Bad Boyz Behind Barz*--some of which come from foreign countries who have just recently joined the civilized world as regards the owning and watching of television sets. Besides those cash cows, Warble has billions in savings stashed from his insanely successful BioTrans venture. As if that weren't enough greenery to choke a horse--or even a Warble--the Presidential hopeful continues to get kickbacks from various cheese, beer, brat, and frozen custard companies in Wisconsin--through deals engineered by Whortleberry Dane, the new acting governor of that state.

As governor of Wisconsin, Warble had held a weekly 'State of the State' radio address. As president, he plans to upgrade the media involved. "Mary, I'm going to go from radioactive to television-active. Each week I will go before the camera for a full hour, addressing the nation's concerns and informing them of the amazing progress I will have made within that past week."

Warble doesn't particularly care for the two major political parties (which he usually either refers to as 'Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum' or 'kissin' cousins'), so he doesn't affiliate himself with either one. In fact, he knows that his administration will be so fundamentally different from any that came before that he forms his own party (all this takes is an application, filled out in triplicate, along with a \$314 processing fee and two box tops

from any specially-marked container of Post or Kellogg cereal). Self-effacingly enough, Warble designates the new party *Warbletarians*.

Warble's grand plan is as follows: grease the wheels (bribe whomever he can); go on the campaign trail; and finally, the night before the election, as a rousing finale, engage in a debate with the other candidates.

It doesn't take long for word to get out about Warble's agenda. Soon he is approached by a coalition of corporations to carry out the ORRH (Operation Reverse Robin Hood) if they contribute to his campaign. In a nutshell, this operation revolves around the basic idea that Warble will raise corporate revenue by shifting the tax burden from the philanthropic, pitiable, put-upon mega corporations, the benefactors of all mankind, to 'the freeloaders and leeches of our society'--meaning primarily retirees, single-parent families, the sick, and the handicapped.

What Warble will get in return for his promise of cooperation is nothing less than the wholehearted support of these corporations in the upcoming election. A deal is struck in record time, both sides being quite satisfied with the benefits they expect to accrue as a result thereof.

Next, Warble assembles a crack marketing team to help him run his campaign (to be fair, though, not *all* of them are on crack).

After weeks of intense effort, all-night brainstorming sessions, and meticulous demographic surveys, they come up with the following campaign slogans:

Warble & Mary in 2004: What more could you reasonably ask for?

McGorkle & McGorkle: This pair won't cause you to lose your hair!

What would Warble do?

Warble ain't that hor'ble!

Warble likes the last one best, but he can't decide whether they should retain the word 'that' or not. In other words, should it be *Warble ain't*

that hor'ble or simply *Warble ain't hor'ble*? He feels that the first one implies he *is* horrible, but not to such a great extent or degree. On the other hand, he feels it has more of a ring to it than the curt *Warble ain't hor'ble*.

After tossing and turning all night, and thus failing to get his natural rest (which makes Warble quite cranky), he decides to settle the issue once and for all by swarming the country with a veritable army of pollsters.

After an expenditure of \$3,141,592.65, a definitive conclusion is extrapolated from the scientific results assessed: 50.1% of the people choose the version with the 'that' in it for its 'flowing meter and evocative tonal quality,' as many respondents termed it.

Warble is able to sleep like a baby after that, satisfied and content. "Every penny expended was well-spent, necessary, and an investment in our future," he tells Mary, who would like to replace the Rose Garden with the Begonia Garden and doesn't understand why they can't afford the few dollars it would take to do so.

Armed with invisible hands helping him out in various ways and areas, and with a real Jim-Dandy slogan, Warble hits the campaign trail. After paying a certain Jack Reynolds to customize his car so that he can stand up in it and wave as he tours the nation, Warble christens it *The Warblemobile* and makes it all official by tapping it with a bottle of *Stevenot Zinfandel* (he doesn't break the bottle, not wanting to waste any of the crimson fluid, and because he wants to set the proper example of frugality to all those viewing the scene on television).

Starting out from Oconomowoc, Warble goes on a 'whistle stop' tour of America. Standing up in the Warblemobile, he whistles until somebody tells him to stop, signaling--or so Warble thinks, anyway--that they are dying to hear one of his speeches.

Warble's immediate acceptance by the downtrodden of America (which is, of course, a majority) and immense popularity with the trodders as well (the former because he promises to help them, the latter because they know he's fibbing) is unprecedented. So rabid are his backers that a new phrase

is coined: Warblemania.

Signifying the sea change evident among the public, *Time* magazine runs its third cover story of Warble (the first time was as The Color-Blind Chameleon, and the second was as the founder of BioTrans), and entitles that issue *The Warbling of America*.

In Warble's charismatic speeches, he weaves the old with the new, and the borrowed with the blue. He promises to implement sweeping changes in American society in general and politics in particular. Warble calls this 'The New Leaf.' He asserts that the improvements achieved upon his election will be so striking, so fundamental, that even the manner of reckoning time will be re-addressed. All the years prior to his election in 2004 will be termed BW, whereas the time period following 2004 will fall into the AW era ('Before Warble' and 'After Warble').

Even the children get caught up in Warble fever, and the most popular video game of the season is *Where's Warble?*

Although he is so far ahead in the polls as to make any chance of losing seem virtually impossible, Warble's kick-'em-when-they're-down instinct spurs him on. He promises the public that he will pay them \$50 for each vote. All they need to do to receive their payment following his election is to take a photograph of their ballot after selecting his name and, after the inauguration, send it to Accounts Payable c/o the White House.

In a calculated effort to stir up the procrastinators and the avaricious, Warble also offers an extra reward to the first ones in each state that vote for him and provide photographic evidence of such: they will procure for themselves their choice of what Warble calls 'either a fish or a fishing license.'

Warble explains that the 'fish' is, in this case, a government bond for \$10,000; the 'fishing license,' on the other hand, is Warble's personal assistance in becoming the next governor of the state in which they reside.

Never one to be shy, Warble spreads his message everywhere. After being briefed by his campaign handlers on which issues matter the most to the

voting public, Warble explains how he will single-handedly solve all these problems:

Crime and War

"Any time you feel irritated with anybody, give him, her or them a virtual hug (or group hug). Don't *really* hug them, just imagine that you are hugging them (after all, some of the potential huggees may have BO)."

Public Health

"I will ban all staff meetings--thus, staff infections will be prevented. One infection at a time, I will eradicate sickness."

Unemployment and the Economy

"I will pass a law that requires everyone to purchase at least 3 items per day--one from the county in which they reside, one outside the county but within the state where they make their home, and one outside the state but within the United States.

"In this way, I'll fix the economy one nation at a time--ours first. This change to the economy will benefit all in the country, not just those in particular states, as happened in Europe when they introduced the Greek sandwich as the pan-European currency. This edict helped Greece, of course, and the sheep-herding countries, such as Turkey--and even, serendipitously for them, as they are not even in Europe and have no business benefiting from European shenanigans, New Zealand.

"However--which shows just how stupid those Europeans are--all the other countries are hurt by this switch to a Greek-sandwich-based economy. Look at Switzerland, for example: As a direct result of this change (having scarcely any mutton within their borders), they had to license one of their mountains to Disneyland in order to pay off just a portion of the interest on their quickly mounting foreign debt."

Education

"This is not a problem whatsoever, and I don't understand why this wasn't fixed long ago, as the solution is so obvious: There are a lot of know-it-alls in this country, and a lot of bloomin' idiots. All the know-it-alls will be required by law to spend ten hours each month educating the idiots. Before you know

it, we will be a country of know-it-alls."

The Environment

"Heed this tip: no more faxes! Documents faxed each year require the cold-blooded annihilation of more than 31,415,926 trees.

"Just say no to faxes, and all the related problems will be solved: deforestation will stop, the glaciers will re-freeze, global warming will reverse, and with the time we save that we used to spend standing by fax machines, we will have more time to smile--which, as we all know, solves all kinds of mental ills, social problems, and alleviates health concerns to boot."

Both of the major-party candidates (or should I say 'traditional-party candidates,' as the Warbletarian party can certainly be termed 'major' now) fear Warble immensely. They don't think they stand a snowball's chance in Dallas of even remaining standing (in a political sense, that is) after their upcoming debate with Warble. Nevertheless, in this they *underestimate* Warble P. McGorkle.

CHAPTER 66

The underestimation of Warble by his political opponents is that they compare their chance to defeating him in a debate to that of a snowball in Dallas. Much to their chagrin, they come to conclude that a snowball has a much, much, much, much, *much* better chance of surviving in Dallas than they do of prevailing in the debate with gab-gifted Warble.

Warble's tenacity in the debate makes a bulldog look like a newborn lamb. The intensity in Warble's eyes as the showdown begins makes a professional wrestler's stage persona seem like that of Art Linkletter or Mr. Rogers. The ferocity and viciousness of Warble's attacks make those from a cobra or shark seem like a love bite to comparison shoppers.

Warble's first unfair advantage (most people would consider it unfair, anyway; Warble just considers it good planning and the prerogative of those who have the wisdom to think of it and the means to pay for it) is having Jean-Jacques Flambeau in the audience during the debate.

Jean-Jacques is big and intimidating, and has a commanding, resounding voice. Warble's people have seen to it that Jean-Jacques is seated near the front of the stage.

The function of the French Canadian fur trapper and lumberjack is to heckle when Warble is not talking, and to loudly agree with everything when Warble is at the lectern. When Warble makes a point, Jean-Jacques says, 'Yeah!', 'You said it, brother!', 'Now you're talkin'', 'That's what I'm talkin' about,' or, 'You tell 'em, Warbie baby!' When his opponents have the floor, Jean-Jacques boos, hisses, and makes all manner of rude noises. At periodic intervals, whenever Warble's opponents make a point or stop for a breath, Jean-Jacques yells out, 'Yeah? Sez who?' or 'Your momma wears combat boots!' or 'Phooey on you, buster!'

Naturally, the tactic works like gangbusters. Warble's opponents are rattled. And then there's the hum. The sound men are in on it, too, and whenever Warble speaks, they turn up the reverb and the bass; when Warble's opponents speak, they twist the knobs in the opposite direction,

cranking the treble all the way up--causing feedback and the aforementioned unnerving hum.

Not satisfied with having the sound crew in his figurative pocket, Warble has also bribed the cameraman. When the camera is on Warble, the photographer slips a rose-colored filter over the lens. When the camera is on one of Warble's opponents, off comes the rose-colored filter and in its place an olive drab green lens is attached.

Warble's first opponent gives his speech. 'Bla bla bla.' Warble's second opponent takes the podium. 'Yodda yodda yodda.' Warble finally gets the spotlight and rips right into his opponents, with all hands on deck and no holds barred. First he goes after the incumbent:

"Mr. President, why haven't you satisfied the American people? Just look around. Walk down any street in America and observe *the people*. You can tell by the look on their shoulders that they are not content. What have you done, Mr. President, to make them happy? Politics is 'human husbandry'--and that doesn't mean you are supposed to, or allowed to, act as if you are the husband of all the women in the country. Husbandry means *protection*. Have you protected them, Mr. President?"

The incumbent stands up and opens his mouth to address the implied charge leveled against him and in an attempt to answer the question.

"Sit down, Mr. President!" Warble yells, pointing at the beleaguered man. "I paid for the cameraman and the sound crew, as well as the most erudite and influential members of the audience. I paid, I'll talk. I graciously gave you your chance.

"Now, getting back to your deplorable behavior in office, your sins of omission and commission, I have one suggestion for you: Go find a mirror, then look in it and slap the first person that shows up."

The President stands up again to protest. His secret service agents appear discomfited. They don't know whether they should protect the current (outgoing) President, or whether they should play it safe and hopefully preserve their jobs by supporting the incoming chief by doing nothing.

The sitting President, now standing, is red, flushed, and shaking with fury. "This is an outrage! I won't stand for this!"

"Then sit down, Mr. President," Warble interjects, pointing to the President's folding chair. "I'm not finished. Let me explain to everyone, just to make it crystal clear, how you've betrayed the people's trust."

"Power to the People Right On!" Jean-Jacques yells.

"While you were being chauffeured around Washington and traveling the globe in style--dining at the swankiest restaurants, staying in the poshest hotels--there I was, poor li'l old everyman Warble P. McGorkle, deserted on a maroon island.

"While you ate yourself fat and drank yourself silly, I was fighting off 37 of the Viet Cong--all by myself, bare-handed."

The President stands up again, and challenges Warble's claim. "I've caught you in a bald-faced lie, McGorkle! You're not old enough to have been in Nam."

"Who said anything about Viet Nam, Mr. President? The event to which I am referring took place while I was applying for a job at a Wal-Mart in Walla Walla, Washington. Jobs were so scarce after *you* ruined the economy that I had to bite, scratch, and gouge just to get a measly minimum-wage job."

Publicly disgraced and humiliated, the incumbent sinks back into his chair and, putting his head in his hands, begins to weep inconsolably.

Seeing he's got them on the run, Warble dives back into the pack, this time going for the jugular of his other opponent.

The outcome is not much prettier in this case. Warble's opposite number had, in a vain attempt at eloquence, quoted Plato and Socrates (as well as Wolfman Jack) in his earlier speech.

"Play-doh? Soccer tees?" Warble says incredulously. "I think you've got

soccer and golf mixed up in your addled mind, Senator. It's golf that uses tees, not soccer. Or is that a British tradition at soccer games?

"At any rate, not even the great Chinese philosopher Confusion or the equally great and inimitable East Indian philosopher Gondola would dare quote the great American philosopher Wolfman Jack while at the same time holding a personal fortune consisting entirely of South African Krugerrands. Senator, if I may say so, you...are an imbecile."

The Senator doesn't know what to say. He didn't expect such a virulent and personal attack. He hopes to get out of this debate without losing any hair, teeth, or any more of his dignity.

Losing his composure, the Senator stammers, stutters and finally-- inexplicably--blurts out: "That's beside the point."

Warble hesitates, letting his opponent's faux pas sink in. The aggressor smiles wanly, drums his finger lightly on the podium, and shakes his head as if in pity of the poor imbecilic statesman. "Yes, Senator, it *is* beside the point--it's *right beside it*. The American public will not suffer fools, nor will they tolerate imbeciles. Have you no shame, sir? Be gone with you!"

Egged on by Jean-Jacques, the crowd begins chanting. "War-ble, War-ble, War-ble!"

After letting the easily amused crowd work themselves into a frenzy, Warble waves his hand to silence them. "No hysteria, please... I thank you for your support. I count on it in the upcoming election. As the great philosopher Goofy--in his guise as Supergoof--once said, 'I always knew I was somebody special.'

"This specialness of mine is at your service. I will be *your* President. Yes, folks, I'm here to stick my neck out, lay it on the line, and go out on a limb: I *guarantee* (gar-on-tee to all of y'all from Looz-e-anna) that I will win the election."

Realizing that Warble has just delivered the coup d'etat and the sound bite, Jean-Jacques sneaks around the perimeter of the stage until he is at the

back steps which lead up to the podium. Grabbing a 10-gallon container of Gatorade and, slipping up behind Warble undetected, the big galoot pours the entire contents on Warble's head in a celebratory gesture. The fur trapper/lumberjack/heckler/cheerleader then picks Warble up bodily and, lifting the drenched candidate high in the air over his head, carries him triumphantly away from the noisy mass of humanity. Warble continues waving to the crowd until he disappears from sight.

The debate, as planned, is a resounding success for Warble. The crowd, unwilling to be restrained from their irrational exuberance and spontaneous show of support, renew their mantra: "War-*b/le*! War-*b/le*! War-*b/le*!"

CHAPTER 67

When Warble returns home from the trouncing of his out-talked and out-tricked adversaries, Mary, who had seen it all on television, asks her husband how he can be so sure of victory as to absolutely guarantee it.

"Mary, it's elementary," Warble explains. "No former polka punk star, let alone founder of the genre, has ever ran for president and lost. History is on my side. It is both mathematically and logically quite impossible for me to lose."

Unfortunately for just about everyone, Warble is right. As in the gubernatorial election in Wisconsin, Warble wins by a landslide. Many of those--relatively few in number--who see through him and actually prefer one of the other candidates are so discouraged at his overwhelming popularity that they don't even bother to show up at the polling places.

Warble ends up with an unprecedented 94.2% of the votes, and is proclaimed winner before the results from the last twenty-four states are in.

Warble wastes no time in getting down to business as soon as he takes office. His first official act is to track down and arrest all those who were 'after him' in the past: Those who tried to steal his inventions in Bayfield, Wisconsin; The entire police force in Westwego, Louisiana; All the officers and board members of the International Nut Company; The mentally retarded man in St. Augustine, Florida who had been clapping along to the polka punk music; The 'beer Mafia' (not wanting to waste the taxpayer's money on a lengthy investigation, Warble simply incarcerates all the Italians in the country); The unsatisfied BioTrans customers ('the customer is always right,' Warble had said about this, 'unless he's dissatisfied'); All who voted against him in the gubernatorial race, banishing them to Illinois--unless they voted for him in the presidential election and have photographic proof thereof, in which case they can avoid said banishment provided they agree to forgo the \$50 they were to be paid for voting for him for President; And last but not least, all those who voted against him in the presidential race.

To accommodate these aggressive moves, Warble orders 314,159 new

prisons to be built, and the immediate hiring of 31,415,926 new prison employees (at an initial cost of \$314,159,265).

And so it goes for the next several months. Warble implements the plans he spoke of while on his whistle stop tour. The new President performs his duties admirably, which mainly consists of making speeches, playing golf, and signing death warrants.

The citizens, in turn, respond by doing what is expected of them: producing goods and services, consuming goods and services, paying taxes, and preparing themselves to be--if the country is lucky enough to get into a war--cannon fodder.

Now that he has gotten all his adversaries, pursuers, and tormentors out of the way, Warble has a free hand to follow up on all the ideas and inventions he so meticulously and painstakingly preserved in his notebook.

Warble comes to the conclusion, though, that now that he has gained his fame and fortune through other means, it seems rather pointless to pursue those ideas and inventions.

After all, he reasons, I *am* the President, the Commander-In-Chief (whatever the Dallas that means; how could a commander be *in* a chief? Is it like Chicken-in-a-Biscuit, and he's a chief that is shaped like a commander, smells like a commander, or tastes commander-flavored, or what? If he's really Sitting Bull, but looks like Commander Cody, for instance, why did the US government send Custer out to fight the Sioux chief? That would be treason, since Sitting Bull was the President in that case, or the President was Sitting Bull, or...aw, to Dallas with it, it's getting way too complicated).

At any rate, putzing around with novelties and schemes is no occupation for the leader of the cheap-if-not-exactly-free world. He's got more important things to do.

Although realizing from an intellectual standpoint that that *is* indeed the case (he's got more important things to do than tinker around with his inventions), for some reason Warble doesn't quite *feel* satisfied with his circumstances.

His life is pleasant and comfortable enough, and he has many servants constantly at his beck and call, but something is wrong. Something is missing in Warble's life--something he once had but has now somehow lost along the way.

CHAPTER 68

It's the best day of the year, and it's the worst day of the year. It's the hottest day of the year, and it's the coldest day of the year (so far, anyway)--it's January 1st.

After almost a year in office, Warble is bored and unfulfilled. All the nation's problems have been solved (since Warble's plans, and his execution of those plans, are perfect). Or so say the officially sanctioned reports--any who claim otherwise are either incarcerated or sentenced to mental hospitals, where they are given medication to help them 'get their mind right again.'

At any rate, Warble feels there's nothing left for him to do. He feels restless. One night, after his bedtime ritual of beer and ginger snap cookies, Warble engages the Vice President in an unofficial, off-the-record, off-the-cuff conversation.

"Mary, I don't know about you, but I'm tired of this life. Being the President is for the birds. I can't even go into the bathroom without half a dozen spooks checking first to see if all the toilets have been flushed, the rolls freshly stocked with Bounty or Charmin or whatever, and the soft soap dispensers filled to the brim.

"*They won't even let me drive my PT Cruiser anymore!*--they make me ride around in that stuffy old long white Cadillac with a bunch of doddering old men and dour sourpusses.

"I'm told when to wake up, where to go and when, what to say and not say, how to say it or not say it, what to wear, which medication to take and when, where to stand, when to smile, when to wave, when to inhale, when to exhale, and even what to watch on TV-- you know they won't even let me watch the Packers on Sunday anymore? I have to watch those mangy old Redskins.

"*Washington,*" Warble says derisively, "1st in war, 1st in peace, and last in the NFC East. And even *then* I'm not safe--last week the score was tied, with 3 minutes and 14 seconds to go, and when some country or other nuked its

neighbor, my advisers *insisted* I switch from the game to CNN and get all gussied up for a press conference, just to say that I considered the bombing to be uncalled for, impolite, and an outright no-no.

"What kind of life is that? I feel like a marionette...a puppet...an automaton. There's no...what's the word?...*spontaneity* any more. Mary, I long for the days when we were footloose and fancy free, without a care in the world. Don't you?"

Mary doesn't respond, but is watching her husband closely. Warble is silent for a minute, reflecting. He walks over to the big picture window that overlooks the Washington Monument. He stares silently out into the night, his hands clasped behind his back. Warble seems to be in the process of making a pivotal decision. Finally, he turns around.

"All right, then, I'll *go to Dallas*," he says, seemingly apropos of nothing. He looks Mary in the eyes and shrugs. "Sometime, anyway," Warble mumbles, as if to himself. Then he walks up to Mary and takes her hand. He whispers, "I've got a secret to tell you, Mary."

"What is it, Warble?"

"Mary, do you remember when I took the oath of office? During the inauguration it was raining cats and dogs (not literally, as if Persians and Pekingese were falling out of the sky--because then people would've been getting hurt left and right, and I would've had to declare a national emergency--but it was raining *a lot*).

"Anyway--you remember how it was a cold day, and I was wearing my trench coat? I had my left hand behind my back, *under my coat*, while my right hand was up, promising to do who-knows-what (after all, who can pay attention to all that hifalutin legalese with all those cameras and lights, noise and confusion, hubbub, tanks and paratroopers and sirens, anyway?).

"Mary," Warble continues, leaning close to her and pressing his mouth against her ear, "with my left hand *I was crossing my fingers*! So my oath of office was not legitimate! It is null and void. And since your affairs, circumstance, and lot in life, in your dual role as my wife and Vice President

are inextricably tied in with mine--intertwined--the validity of your office is also bogus!"

Mary doesn't know what to think of this revelation. Why would Warble hedge his bets like that--secretly crossing his fingers during his swearing-in ceremony? He's never been one to doubt the complete success of any of his previous ventures *before*. And what does all this mean? What is Warble leading up to?

Warble doesn't keep her wondering long. "Mary, do you know what I'm driving at?" he asks.

Mary is so stunned by what seems to be coming that all she can say in response is, "Huh-uh," and shakes her head no.

"We can annul our Presidency and Vice Presidency forthwith. The Chairman of the Way Mean Committee, Sunza Birch, can take over as President. He won't do as great a job as I have, of course, but I think he'll do in a pinch.

"And this certainly is a pinch and a pickle for the American public, because they're going to have to learn to live without my kind, gentle, and wise guidance and expert handling of matters."

After listening to Warble air his grievances and frustrations, Mary realizes just how bored she is, too, with the staid, stiff, stagnant, stern, stilted, stultified life in Washington in general and the White House in particular.

She and Warble don't have to worry about money now--they have a steady income from the royalties from both *The Cascading Upd8s* and *Bad Boyz Behind Barz*. Not only that, the McGorkles also have an unbelievably huge nest egg from the profits made while BioTrans was a going concern.

Warble sinks down onto his wife's lap. "Mary, let's go back to Oconomowoc, where we're free to be who we want to be."

"Back home? I can go back home to my begonias?" Mary asks, her voice rising in anticipation.

"Yes," Warble grins. "Back to your begonias."

"Oh, thank you, Warble!" Mary says, wrapping her arms around her husband. "Warble, let's go *now*. Let's not wait, I don't want to be late--it's almost planting season."

"Mary, there's one last thing I've got to do, and then we can go. Press my best trousers and my Sunday-go-to-meetin' shirt."

"Why, Warble?"

"I want to record a press conference of myself--my farewell address. My 'Adios Concerto,' you might call it. I want to preserve it on videotape for posterity."

Warble disappears into the presidential (and vice-presidential) suite and rummages frantically through the closet. After overturning half of the contents therein, and throwing the other half out onto the floor, including his notebook, Warble locates his video camera.

He smiles, pats it, and, cradling it in his right arm like a halfback carrying a football, walks back into the Oval Office. After setting up the video camera on a tripod, and flipping it on, Warble takes a seat in the easy chair in front of the fireplace.

Warble clears his throat. He puffs up his chest, lifts his chin, and plasters a fake smile across his face. "Ah, to Dallas with that," Warble mutters, exhaling and leaning back in the chair. "Mary...I mean Mrs. Vice President, will you please bring me some more beer and ginger snaps?"

Wordlessly, Mary disappears into the alcove where Warble keeps his stash of brew and cookies.

"Thank you, my dear," Warble says, receiving the plate of cookies in his left hand and the beer in his right. He takes a bite of cookie and a swallow of beer and then, with a wink to his wife and a nod to the camera, begins his farewell address.

"My fellow Americans! This is the last time I will speak to you from the White House. No, I don't have terminal cancer. No, I'm not about to be assassinated. No, I'm not about to commit suicide."

Warble pauses, and takes another bite of cookie and swig of beer. "Friends," Warble continues, "I'll make this short and sweet: I'm quitting." Another pause, another munch and draw.

Warble looks directly into the camera and explains, "It's lonely at the top. Being the head honcho, the big cheese, the chief cook and bottle washer, isn't all it's cracked up to be. I'm tired of the regimentation, sick of the constant scrutiny. In short, I can't say it any better than the great philosopher Johnny Paycheck did: 'Take this Job and Shove It!'"

Warble smiles sweetly at the camera and hoists his beer to the viewers. Mary appears at the threshold. "Warble, my bags are packed; I'm ready to go; I'm standing here outside the door."

"All right, dear," Warble says. With a vigor he hasn't felt in quite some time, he springs out of his chair, strides over to the video camera, and shuts it off.

Warble takes one last, long look around the Oval Office, where he has spent so much time these last several months.

With a bounce in his step, Warble moves toward the door. Then, just before he reaches the threshold, Warble abruptly stops. He lifts his finger to his chin, hesitates a couple of seconds, and then whirls around and rushes back to the video camera.

The outgoing President flips the camera back on and crouches down on his haunches in front of it. "By the way, folks, I'm taking the Vice President with me, so she will be unable to take over the helm as acting President. The chairman of the Way Mean Committee--you know his name--will take over immediately as acting President. Good night, good luck, and God bless."

Warble and Mary slip out into the darkness. A few minutes later, Warble turns the key in the ignition of his beloved PT Cruiser. It roars to life.

Warble lets out a whoop at the top of his lungs, a combination rebel yell and battle cry of freedom. Mary is smiling from ear to ear. She knows that things will be different now.

At least, that's what *she* thinks.

CHAPTER the LAST

When the secret service knock on the door of the presidential suite the next morning, they find it empty. Entering the Oval Office, they discover a video camera set up in the middle of the room. Its lens is aimed at an empty chair, beer bottle, and plate of gingersnap cookies.

~~~~~

© 2002-2007 Blackbird Crow Raven

[BlackbirdCRaven@aol.com](mailto:BlackbirdCRaven@aol.com)

*Watch for the other two volumes in the Warble trilogy:*

**"the Zany Time Travels of Warble McGorkle"**

(released January 2007)

--in which Warble travels to the past. Warble's attempts to "fix" events he considers detrimental to human progress and the results of these attempts is the theme of the middle volume of the trilogy.

**"Warble McGorkle's Surprising Visit to the Future"**

(depending on response to the first two Warbles, perhaps September 2008)

--in which Warble travels into the future. How things have changed and Warble's reaction to these changes is the theme of the final volume of the trilogy.