

INVITATION TO A FEAST

Samples from the novels of Paul (Enns) Wiebe

<i>Christian Bride, Muslim Mosque</i>	2
<i>Dead White Male</i>	27
<i>The Church of the Comic Spirit</i>	41
<i>Benedict XVI</i>	60

Ch. 7

An Unidentified Lion

HIGH SCHOOL was just about what I figured it'd be. It was almost as easy as the eighth grade, except for a few piffling differences. For one thing you had five teachers to figure out instead of just one and for another thing they had a different grading system, so instead of getting B's on the old A-B-C-D-F scale you got 3's on a 1-2-3-4-5 scale. Also, they had a bigger library with better books, so instead of trying for 2's by reading my assignments during Study Hall I started to read some very fine literature, like *All-American End* and *On the Thirty Yard Line* and *Touchdown!*

But the biggest difference from grade school was that I finally got the chance to realize my lifelong dream of becoming a football star. Maybe I should just say football *player*, humility being a big part of the family religion.

I have to admit I didn't start out being a football star from the very beginning of high school. The reason for this was that I was planning to ease into it gradually, due to my humility, and besides, they wouldn't let the freshman boys go out for varsity sports, it was against some ridiculous rule. At least I thought

it was ridiculous, though there were those who had different views. Here I'm thinking of Aunt Lena. I overheard her tell Mom, "Little Davids like John and Gary need to be protected against those young Goliaths, Lord knows they're not big enough to protect yourselves and they're sure not smart enough."

To tell the truth I didn't really appreciate that remark. Another thing I didn't appreciate was the story that ran on the front page of the August 28, 1953 edition of *The Inverness Weekly*, which said:

Go Lions!!!

Out at Inverness High School this week, Coach Victor H. "Pork" Andason welcomed back 14 lettermen, 7 seniors (including star end Jose "Buck" Cardenas, (see photo below), and 7 juniors. Filling out the squad, are 7 sophomores, including potential star Bobby Joe Ruiningwater, who has looked good in calisthenics, and wind sprints, and may be pensilled in at taleback.

Coach Andason told this reporter, “We hope to improve on last year’s mark, if Buck Cardenas can only stay healthy, and some of these new men come through.”

This reporter then asked Coach Andason, to comment on the strenths of this years team. He said, “I’ll be in a position to say more about that, at the end of the season. All I can say now is, there’s great spirit, among the men.” This reporter also asked Coach Andason to comment on the weakneses, of the team. He said, “We lack depth and size but other than that, we’re in pretty good shape. Great spirit will often go a long way to make up for a lack of depth, and size, as well as talent.”

Underneath this article there was a picture of Buck Cardenas catching a pass with one hand, except that it looked like he was about to drop it. Underneath the picture there was a line that said, “Last year, the Lions went 0-4.”

All this wasn’t so bad. The part of the article I didn’t appreciate was the list of the men Coach Andason had welcomed to his football squad, including their height and weight. They had almost everybody else’s height and weight correct but they were way off on mine. They listed me as 5’ 6’ and 125 lbs., which was my old freshman size, and didn’t mention the fact that I

had grown six inches and put on three and a quarter pounds over the summer, which was why I was pretty confident that my plan for a football career was right on track.

My plan was pretty simple. By the end of my sophomore year I was going to be on the first team and have *The Inverness Weekly* quote some nice comments from Coach Andason about my future stardom. My junior year I was going to lead the Inverness Lions to their first undefeated season since 1933 and have the paper tout me as a sure-fire All District in my senior year. I planned to surpass these expectations. I was going to crown my career by being picked as a unanimous All State and the *Weekly* was going to report that “John ‘Dutch’ Reischer, who last autumn broke all the Inverness High School pass-catching and touchdown records, has been chosen as the recipient of a football scholarship at the U. of Michigan. We wish you well, Dutch, in your quest for gridiron glory.”

After that it was going to be more headlines, along the lines of “Does Reischer Rhyme with Heisman?”

Anyway, that was the plan.

COACH VICTOR “PORK” ANDASON had played football at Oneida College right there in Idaho, in fact he used to brag that he would have made Little All American as an end if he hadn’t had the concussion in his senior year. He would explain

that “Little” didn’t necessarily refer to his size but to the size of Oneida College, which was true, in fact a lot of the Idaho population hadn’t even heard of it.

Coach Andason had been coaching football and track and teaching P.E. and General Science as long as I could remember. Everybody down at the barber shop called him Pork, because everybody down there had played football for him when he first hit town after his distinguished career at little Oneida College and they all remembered that at halftime during the very first game, when Inverness was four or five touchdowns behind, he had gathered the team around him and said, “The problem is simple, min, you’ve got to git down there in the trenches and root out them guards and tacklers just like a porker roots out grub.” Uncle Herb was on that team and told Aunt Lena the story, this was before they were married, and after that she referred to Coach Andason as Pork and it stuck, even his own wife got in the habit of calling him Pork.

Coach Andason was one of those little guys who is very spirited, he was always running up and down the sideline yelling things like, “Take it to ’em, min” and “Get a piece of ’im” and “Don’t worry, min, we’ll git ’em next time!” As a matter of fact Aunt Lena once said, “I’m having second thoughts about that ‘Pork’ moniker, I should have gone with ‘Get-a-Piece’ Andason.”

The reason they didn't fire him was probably because of his personality, probably also because he'd always say, "Let's keep things in perspective, what we're here for is not a great won-lost record, what we're here for is to build the spirit and characteristics of these young men."

Another reason they didn't fire him was because he was so well-liked as a teacher of General Science. He'd sprinkle the lessons with athletic references, which everybody said made it a helluva lot easier to grasp the concepts of science. For instance he'd ask us, "If a 170 pound tailback runs into a 125 pound tackler going at twenty-five miles per hour and the tackler is standing still, what are the odds of the tackle getting made?"

The answer wasn't as easy as you'd think because Coach would say it would depend on which teams the tailback and the tackler were on. If the tackler was an Inverness Lion the answer was zero odds but if the tailback was a Lion the odds would improve to damn near a hundred percent of the time, in fact the tackler would probably make the tailback cough up the ball and he'd recover the "thumble," which was Coach Andason's word for fumble. Everybody would laugh at this, even the players, in fact even Bobby Joe Runningwater, who was the Inverness 170-pound tailback, because appreciating the coach's humor was your best bet if you wanted a passing grade in General Science. Besides, Bobby

Joe told everybody he didn't mind the fact that Coach told this story on him, he had it figured that twenty-five miles per hour amounted to world-record time.

Bobby Joe was quite the athlete, of course, maybe not world-class but good enough to be the class of the sophomores, I have to admit. The guy from *The Inverness Weekly* had it right when he quoted Coach as saying go ahead and pencil Bobby Joe Runningwater in at tailback for the next three years, that position was the least of his worries. Coach also told the guy, and I heard him say it, that the position that worried him most was left end because Buck Cardenas had the habit of getting hurt. In fact that was why Coach said to pencil me in as second-string left end, probably thinking the chances were that Buck would sooner or later get hurt and he needed a strong replacement for him, probably also thinking he should be grooming me as next year's star.

Bobby Joe and I weren't the only sophomores to make the team, there were others, for instance Jock Buffone and Billy Bauman and Ervin Huddleston and Gary Albrecht.

Jock got penciled in as first-string fullback. He was listed in the newspaper at 140 pounds though I know for a fact that he was nearly 145 pounds, which wasn't as big as your usual fullback, but the thing about Jock was that he had lots of spirit, which made up for the lack of

bulk. At the start of every play he'd yell, "Take it to 'em, men, let's kick a little butt," which was exactly the spirit Coach was looking for.

Billy Bauman made the first team too, as a tackle. He was listed at 180 pounds, which was right on the money. Aunt Lena pointed out that it was easy to figure his weight, all you had to do was triple his I.Q. Billy had a lot of friends among the seniors and juniors, he was two years older than most of us sophomores and had been in class with those upper-classmen back in grade school days. Billy also had lots of spirit, when he got ready to make a block or a tackle he'd yell, "Geronimo," and when he'd miss the block or tackle he'd yell, "Wait till next time," which was a habit he picked up from listening to Coach Andason.

Ervin Huddleston was the fourth sophomore to get penciled in as a first-stringer. He was the center. Coach said he needed a firm anchor in the middle of the line, referring to the fact that Ervin was listed at 260 pounds, which might not have been right on the money but still gave you the general impression. Ervin didn't make it just on size alone, however, he also had spirit going for him. As soon as he hiked the ball he'd yell, "On your ass, tenpin," and then block the tackle on the other team who, sure enough, would hit the ground spinning. Sometimes he'd accidentally block his own teammate, with pretty much the same result.

Gary Albrecht was another sophomore who made the team but not as a first stringer. In fact he wasn't actually a player, he was the trainer. His job was to wrap tender ankles before the game and to run the water out to the players on the field between quarters and during time outs and to call for the doctor when Ervin Huddleston made a direct hit. Coach told Gary his job was the most important on the whole team, probably even more important than his own, because the trainer was responsible for seeing that there were eleven men alive and playing by the end of the game. So Gary had to show a lot of spirit too, he'd stand there on the sidelines yelling, "Kill 'em, kill the SOBs," except that he didn't believe in abbreviations, he'd spell it right out, even when Rev. Prediger was in the stands cheering the home team on.

Another sophomore who could have made the team but wasn't even allowed to go out for football was Annie Jantzen. Before the season began she went up to Coach Andason and told him all he needed to break his losing streak was a real athlete and there she was, how about it? He said he liked her spirit, why not put it to positive use by trying out for cheerleader? She said What's the matter, do you have something against women, and he said Not at all, I'm married to one, ha ha. Then she asked him to name her a man on his team who was a better athlete than she was, just one, and he couldn't,

so she said Well, how about it, Coach? So he said he'd think about it but what did her father think about the idea of a nice girl like her on the football team?

According to Aunt Lena what ol' Heinrich Jantzen thought about his daughter occupying the same dressing room as twenty-odd spirited young men, including the trainer but not including the coach, could not be repeated in the vicinity of virgin ears. So that's why the Inverness Lions entered their 1953 football season without a star wingback.

We had to practice one hour every day after school. The only way you could get out of those practices was if you lived on a farm and had a note from your father saying he needed you at home by such-and-such a time to milk the cows. Since over half the men on the team lived on farms we usually had to practice with only nine players.

During the first twenty minutes of practice Coach Andason had us do push-ups and deep knee-bends and wind sprints while he went over to talk to the cheerleaders, who were practicing their cartwheels and yells over in front of the empty bleachers, which represented the Spirit Squad. After that he'd come over and have us run through the plays. The first week he started out with about ten plays and he had numbers for each play. But this was too confusing for Billy Bauman and Ervin Huddleston, so the second

week he cut it down to the six basic plays and replaced the numbers with ordinary English. The plays were Up the gut right, Up the gut left, Tailback sweep right, Tailback sweep left, Reverse, and Pass to left end. This was still pretty confusing for Billy, so Coach put some tape around both of Billy's hands and wrote "R" and "L" on them so that Billy could keep his directions straight.

Coach always had us do each of these plays three times, one on Hut-one, one on Hut-two, and one on Hut-three. He wasn't too specific about what each player was supposed to do on these plays, he said it was enough to have what he called "a rule of thump," which was that every blocker should try to knock down one enemy tackler, leaving it up to the blocker to decide who that tackler would be. During practice there weren't any tacklers, they were all home milking cows, so everybody who was present and accounted for got to be on offense, in fact everybody got to be first string, which made for a lot of spirit. Sometimes Coach would bring over the cheerleaders to fill in for some of the cow milkers, so Margaret Siebert and Penny Dyck also got to be first string. He'd put Penny at center and then instead of using the single wing formation he'd switch to the T formation and be the quarterback and have her hike the ball directly to him, which everybody but the cheerleaders thought was hilarious. Then he'd

point out that if Annie Jantzen had played her cards right she would have gotten her wish too.

At practice there weren't any tacklers to block, so Coach would throw some helmets on the ground to represent the enemy, the idea being that when the ball was snapped we were supposed to block the nearest helmet and clear the way for the ball carrier, who would then run sixty yards to paydirt while Billy and Ervin were practicing their war cries. Then we'd all run down to the end zone to congratulate Bobby Joe or Buck or Jock, the men slapping them on the butt and the cheerleaders hugging them because as Coach Victor Andason always said, great spirit will go a long way toward making up for a lack of size and depth.

Besides the practices the other way Coach would have us prepare for games was by making us train. After practicing our six plays three times each he'd say, "Okay min, that's plenty for today, I want you all in bed by curfew and remember, keep away from the smokes and the booze and the women." Then he'd turn to the cheerleaders and wink and say, "And I want you girls to keep away from my boys, you can stick to the older min."

These rules were pretty easy to follow, at least for me. I was allergic to tobacco smoke and alcohol was beginning to be against my religion and I never wasted my time on girls and anyway,

there wasn't anything to do in Inverness after ten-thirty.

The hardest part of training was the beefsteak before the games. It wasn't that I didn't like beefsteak, I did, it was the way we were supposed to eat it. Coach said that back in 1933, which was the last year the Inverness Lions had a winning season, which also happened to be the year before Coach Andason started his coaching career, the players always ate beefsteak before their games and not only that, they ate it raw. This was a hint that we were supposed to do the same. So everybody had raw beefsteak before the games, at least everybody I knew, which included all of the sophomores.

Not everybody thought this raw beefsteak was a great idea. One time Aunt Lena came over before a game and happened to see me eating my beefsteak raw and she wanted to know what gave, so I told her and she said, "I suppose if ol' Pork told you to eat raw boar's balls with vinegar and horseradish before a game that's what you'd have on your plate right now, and you wouldn't have any more success with it than you're having with that fresh cow."

To tell the truth I didn't appreciate that remark, even if Mom thought it was amusing. But it didn't bother me too much, I knew that sooner or later the raw beefsteak and the other training rules were going to start working in my favor. Sooner or later Buck Cardenas was going

to be injured again and then Coach would call on me to go in and show a lot of spirit and snag a few passes and begin my rise to stardom.

It wasn't sooner. In the first three games of the season we went 0-3, losing 28-0 to the Mud Valley Patsies, who were really the Mud Valley Loons but Coach called them the Patsies because his team had beaten them a couple of times back in the forties, 35-0 to the Hot Springs Ducks, and 42-0 to the Pocatello JVs.

This was in spite of our Secret Weapon. Before every game Coach would gather all his men around him in the locker room and have us bow our heads and he'd holler, "Our Father Art in Heaven not all of us are religious min we admit it but we got a lot of Thy Spirit so let's go out and beat them guys. But if it be Thine will to let us lose at least let's me and you build the characteristics of these young min and we'll git 'em next time. P.S., help Billy Bauman he's Number 78 I believe and Ervin Huddlebury he's the big guy at center you can't miss 'im help these young min remember the plays. In Jeez name we pray it Amen okay now let's git out there and BEAT THEM GODDAM BASTARDS!"

But the first three games we just couldn't. Maybe it was because some guys were breaking training, I'm thinking of Jock Buffone, who had the habit of driving over to Beaver Falls for a smoke and a glass of beer, and Buck Cardenas, who was always staying out late with Margaret

Siebert. Or maybe it was because Coach Andason belonged to the wrong religion and couldn't get his prayer airborne, or because God didn't appreciate his grammar.

Lord knows I did everything I could to help. Every night I was tempted to pray that Buck would break an arm or a leg but violence was not a big part of the family religion, so I just prayed that Coach would catch Buck bringing Margaret in late and kick him off the team so I'd have my chance to replace him and win a game with a spectacular catch as time was running out in the fourth quarter.

I FINALLY GOT MY CHANCE.

The last game of the season was right before school let out for October spud harvest, which was the reason we only had four games per year. It was against the Beaver Falls Muskrats, our big rivals. This was always the event of the year, it was Homecoming, with all the graduates of Inverness High School coming back to see if the Lions could break their losing streak to the Muskrats, which went back to 1933. Graduates would come from as far away as forty miles to buy hot dogs and sit behind the Spirit Squad and cheer and shiver and go home saying wait till next year, we'll kill the SOBs. They really meant that last part too, everybody hated the Muskrats, they played so dirty.

The next season was something special, due to the fact that it was the last year for Buck Cardenas. Everybody, and I'm thinking mostly of the barbershop crowd, had big expectations. They expected we'd lose, of course, they weren't stupid, but they were hoping we'd at least score a touchdown. They were also hoping to see Buck and Bobby Joe team up for a thrilling pass or two. Pass to left end was our best play, it had been successful three times already that season, twice in the loss to the Mud Valley Patsies and once in the loss to the Hot Springs Ducks.

Before the game that night Coach Andason led us in prayer, then everybody showed spirit and off we went to perform in front of the crowd.

Buck and Bobby Joe led us in calisthenics and wind sprints while the Inverness fans yelled and the Beaver Falls fans booed and laughed at us, just because our uniforms weren't as new and classy as the Muskrat uniforms. Theirs were white with dark blue numerals and you could tell they were just back from the cleaners. Ours were originally orange and black and at the start of every season each player was supposed to take his uniform home to have his mother wash it but this didn't always get done because some mothers didn't approve of their young men playing football, so you couldn't really tell from looking at the uniforms what the school colors were. You might have guessed orange and black

but you also might have guessed green and brown.

After we stopped to catch our breath from the exercises, Buck and Bobby Joe went out to the middle of the field for the toss of the coin. The referee flipped the nickel and Buck called heads but when it fell on the ground it got lost in the grass, which was about six inches deep. The reason for the long grass was that Coach was supposed to be in charge of mowing it and he had forgotten, maybe because he had other things on his mind, which was my theory, but maybe because not as many touchdowns tended to get scored in high grass, which was Aunt Lena's theory. Be that as it may, the referee flipped the coin again and this time he caught it in the air and Buck called heads again and next thing you know the referee was signaling that the Inverness Lions were scheduled to kick off to the enemy.

Coach gathered his men around him and reminded us that it was Homecoming, saying, "This is a great time to break the string, min, 'cause all the cheerleaders and student bodies and teachers and former stars and parents are watching and remember Our Father Art in Heaven is watching. Let's not let that whole gang down, let's go out and kick some butt!"

Then everybody showed spirit, yelling things like, "Take it to 'em, men" and "Let's knock 'em on their asses" and "Kill the SOBs," and Billy

Bauman yelled "Wait till next year" as the first team ran out on the field to kick off.

At the end of the first quarter we were only down 14-0, partly because of that good ol' Lion spirit and partly because of the high grass but mostly because halfway through the quarter the power on several of the light poles went out and the whole north end of the field got pretty dark and their star ends started to drop passes. So beginning with the second quarter some of the Beaver Falls fans decided to help their team out by parking their cars around the oval track at the north end and shining their headlights on the field, or at least when the Muskrats had the ball on offense, which was most of the time. This seemed to take some spirit out of our men and by the end of the first half we were down 42-0.

In the second half there were two major changes, one being the fact that we switched ends of the field, the other being the fact that the Muskrats put in their third stringers, probably because our ruthless play had taken something out of the front line of the enemy. So the score remained 42-0 till the middle of the fourth quarter, when the Muskrats intercepted a pass meant for our left end and started to head south for paydirt.

Then all of a sudden Bobby Joe Runningwater yelled over to the bench, "Man injured, man injured," and sure enough one of our guys was rolling around in the grass holding his arm and

sure enough it was Buck Cardenas. Well, out popped Coach Andason onto the field to pump some spirit into his injured star and out followed Gary Albrecht with his little bottles of water. Pretty soon Buck was up and around, limping because of the arm, and the rest of the men on the team were spitting water on the grass, which was probably to impress Margaret Siebert, who was crying in front of everybody as she watched her man walk off the field with help from Bobby Joe and the big guy who God couldn't help but notice.

Before you knew it Coach was yelling, "Reisender, git yore ass over here," and I was over by his side getting my instructions. "This is yore big chance, Reisender," he said, "go in there for Buck and show some spirit—and maybe even kick a little butt."

On the first play I couldn't believe my luck. Nobody laid a finger on me as I swooped down from my left end position and started to close in on the ball carrier. I was thinking, All that training and raw beefsteak and hoping and praying and righteous living are really paying off, when all of a sudden, just as I was getting ready to tackle the guy, he stopped running and I could see he didn't have the ball and Coach was yelling, "REVERSE, REVERSE," at the top of his lungs.

They made the extra point on that one too, so just like that it was 49-0 Muskrats.

Our first three plays after that were all reverses, the idea being what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the Muskrat, as Coach put it. But the strategy didn't work, so on fourth and hell-and-gone Coach yelled, "Punt it or make it, punt it or make it." In the huddle Billy said, "We got these goddam bastards exactly where we want 'em, they're expecting a reverse, let's send Jock up the gut right," and he looked down at his taped hands to see which direction was right. Calmer heads prevailed, however, we punted.

One of their star ends returned it for another touch-down but the ref called it back because of clipping. It was a good call. I know, I was the one who got clipped. So they were first down on their own 30-yard line.

On the next play I had another chance for a big tackle. They must not have realized that Buck Cardenas's replacement was no slouch, he was destined to be a star in his own right, they didn't block me and once again I swooped down for the kill. But all of a sudden I heard Coach yelling, "REVERSE, YOU IDIOT, REVERSE!" and sure enough, the ball carrier didn't have the ball again. So I reversed my field, I still had lots of spirit left, and then I heard Coach yelling "THUMBLE, THUMBLE!"

I ran over to the general vicinity of the fumble, where everybody was diving on the ground looking for the ball in the tall grass. But I didn't have my glasses on because Mom wouldn't let me

wear them for football, she was afraid they'd get broken and that would be twenty bucks down the drain but I dove on the ground anyway. To tell the truth I was just trying to show some spirit but when I hit that grass I could feel cool pigskin under my belly, which ranks right up there as one of the great feelings of life.

Everybody was gathering around me and slapping me on the back and yelling, "Play of the game, play of the game," when the ref stepped in and called time out Muskrats with about two minutes to play. Right away Coach called a time out of his own and sent Gary out with the water and three plays, which were Reverse, Up the gut left, and Reverse. But Bobby Joe said, "What the hell, Reiserder recovered the fumble, let's do Pass to left end, on Hut-one, and if that doesn't work it'll be the same on Hut-two, and if that doesn't work, we'll try it on Hut-three."

This was my big chance. On Hut-one I ran down the field into paydirt country and then looked back for the ball, which was supposed to be over my right shoulder. I couldn't find it though, partly because I wasn't wearing my glasses and partly because the Muskrat fans had turned off the lights on their cars and nobody could see anything up there on the north end of the field anyway but mostly because Bobby Joe hadn't got around to throwing the ball before he was tackled.

About this time I have to admit, I did something a little bit illegal. I went behind the goal post and just stayed there. I wasn't cheating, I was just trying to get my breath because when I had fallen on the grass to recover that fumble my asthma had started acting up.

Nobody seemed to notice me there. The team just huddled and went up to the line and started the play without me, I could see that much. Then I stepped out from behind the goal post and waved my hands to get Bobby Joe's attention and pretty soon I could see a fuzzy object flying through the night in my direction. I ran two steps to my right and waited and there it was, right before my eyes, and there it was right in my hands and the barbershop crowd was getting its wish, a touchdown on the last game of the season!

But as Aunt Lena later consoled me, "They don't make those things with handles, do they," referring to the fact that the pig is an animal that can easily squirt out of your hands.

Anyway, the short version is that Coach called another time out and in came Buck Cardenas to replace me, limping like an old man. The next play was Pass to left end, as already agreed on, and on Hut-three Buck took off for the end zone like there was no tomorrow and Bobby Joe threw it in his general direction and Buck caught it in spite of his injured hand and it was 49-6 in favor of the enemy. So the barber shop crowd got its

wish, Buck went out in a blaze of glory on the last play of his career.

And that's the way it ended up, 49-6. The try for extra point failed because Billy Bauman jumped offside three times in a row and on the fourth try Jock Buffone fumbled and everybody dove on the ground but this time nobody could find the ball because the star fumble recoverer was over on the sidelines trying to get his breath back. Then the ref called the game so we could all get home by curfew.

The next edition of *The Inverness Weekly* carried the story. It said:

Lions Score!!!

Following a fumble recovery, by an unidentified Lion, Inverness High School scored their first touchdown of the season, last Friday night. It came on a spectacular pass, from sophomore taleback Bobby Joe Ruiningwater to senior end Jose "Buck" Cardenas, who announced his plans to join the Marines after the game.

This reporter asked Coach Victor H. "Pork" Andason to comment on this years season, and he said, "This year, the men gave their fans some spirited football, and built a lot of character, so you have to say this passed season was a success. We had a moral victory."

When this reporter asked Coach Andason about next years team, he said, “We have some fine freshmen coming up through the ranks, and we have the Runningwater kid coming back, so the future of football at Inverness High looks bright. Final score: Muskrats 49, Lions 66.

Next Thursday I looked high and low in the paper to see if they were going to comment on the unidentified Lion who had recovered the fumble but no such luck. Nobody even wrote a letter to the editor on the subject. I blamed Mom for this, if she had bothered to wash my uniform that year the editor of the *Weekly* would have been able to see the 81 and to give credit where credit was due. The reason Mom hadn’t washed the uniform was that she was worried that football would interfere with the future career she was planning for me. I had said if she wanted a poet in the family I nominated her but she’d said, “John, you are not by nature a violent boy, you have a sensitive temperament.” I can’t begin to say how much this hurt.

I suppose it didn’t really matter because that was my last game in the ol’ Inverness orange and black anyway. Next year I didn’t play football, partly because Mom was right about my asthma but mostly because Inverness High didn’t even field a team. The reason had nothing to do with the won-lost record, it had to do with the fact that

the next spring Coach Andason sneaked into the girls' locker room after cheerleader tryouts and offered to take a shower with Annie Jantzen, who reported this to her dad, who happened to be on the school board, and after they had to let Coach go and they didn't have time to hire a qualified replacement for the next season.

As Aunt Lena explained it, "They're having a hard time finding a replacement for ol' Get-a-Piece, they're looking for somebody with lots of spirit but not *that* kind of spirit."

FROM *Dead White Male*

Chapter 1

A Pair of Star-Crossed Lovers

1

He stood before the door of the principal's office, hesitant.

He tilted his head back slightly, adjusted his trifocals, squinted through the narrow slab, and read the new nameplate announcing the new occupant as MS. PENNI MODE, ED. D.

He took a large white handkerchief from a rear pocket. He unfolded it and wiped off the dewdrops that were beginning to form on his great white dome. He carefully refolded it and put it back in his pocket. Then he reached into his watch pouch, extracted the gold-plated timepiece he had inherited from his grandfather, thumbnailed open its worn cover, and checked the hour. Two forty-one: exactly on time.

He snapped the cover shut and slipped the watch back into its pouch. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and knocked.

"Come in," called a low feminine voice.

He reminded himself of Rule #1 for actors: relax. He counted to three. Then he made his

grand entrance, taking pains to close the door behind him.

Ms. Penni Mode sat posture-perfect in a chair behind her desk. She was dressed in a dark-blue shoulder-padded business suit and was wearing a pair of fashionable steel-rimmed glasses. A small frown broke the surface of her wrinkle-free face as she vigorously made checkmarks on the papers arranged neatly before her.

Oh yes, he remembered. Faculty evaluation time.

“Sit down,” she said without looking up at him. She pointed at the guest chair with the eraser end of her pencil.

He carefully sat down, shoehorning himself into the narrow chair. He hadn't been in this office for several weeks, since Ms. Mode took over for Henry Constant. He discreetly glanced around. Everything was changed. Instead of an old oak desk, there was this new steel one. Instead of a big soft padded guest chair, there was this mobile model on wheels, built for persons of more modest proportion. Instead of a red carpet beneath the chair, there was this slippery plastic sheet. Instead of a sign on the wall advising ONE DAY AT A TIME, there was a poster with the message, THINK GLOBALLY—ACT LOCALLY. And instead of old standbys like *Lord Jim* and *Fathers and Sons* and *Hard Times*, the bookshelves now held new and unfamiliar titles like *Building Robust Competencies: Linking Human Resource Systems to Organizational*

Strategies and Beyond American Graffiti: A Longitudinal Study of Writing and Learning at the Post-Primary Level and Agenda for the Third Millennium: Empowering the Disadvantaged.

She finally looked up, resting her chin on her left wrist. “Mr. Budwieser,” she said abruptly.

Henry Constant used to call him Ed, and he called Henry Hank. He would come in and philosophize with Hank during his free hour; no appointment necessary. They’d sit there in the office with their feet up on that solid oak desk, he and good old Hank, drinking coffee and calling each other by their Christian names and wondering what the world was coming to. But a month ago, just before Easter, wise, dependable Henry Constant had passed away from a heart attack—possibly a complication from the cirrhosis—and the control tower downtown had replaced him with Ms. Mode, a freshly-minted young Ed. D. who had got the job, as the *Kirkland Bugle* reported, because of her “skills in personnel management.”

She whipped off her glasses and flashed a temporary smile.

He thought it appropriate to smile back.

She leaned forward. “I thought we should talk about the future,” she began.

He nodded and cleared his throat and began to search for a masterful sentence that would introduce the speech he had spent this past Memorial Day weekend formulating and revising and polishing and practicing in front of the

bathroom mirror—the speech that would eloquently put forth his vision of the future for Language Arts at Sunset High; the speech that would begin with a declaration of his well-considered philosophy of education, formed by the experience of thirty-odd years; the speech that would subtly demonstrate his mastery of the Classics, those immortal works of outstanding merit, those monuments of the human spirit, those shining and infallible touchstones that had stood the test of time; the speech that would off-handedly remind her (in case she had not had time to look at his file) that he had spent ten long hard summers working on his Master's thesis on Shakespeare's tragic heroes; the speech that would proceed to inform her that with Henry Constant's sage counsel, he had been grooming young Bob White to replace himself as Chairman of Language Arts in three years, when he would turn sixty-two and would finally be eligible for Social Security; the speech that would go on to recommend that Bobbie, despite being just fifty-one and having just a B.A. and being just a mite weak in Greek tragedy and Shakespeare's later plays, as well as having just a slight stutter, was the perfect man (having spent the last five summers on his thesis showing the influence of Aristophanes's *The Clouds* on John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*) to step into his own shoes and continue the long venerable tradition that had made Language Arts the pride of Sunset High—in fact, the pride of the entire

Kirkland School District, if they only had the good sense to recognize the gold mine they had on their hands.

But that masterful first sentence would not come. It was a prisoner in his brain, tied up in a knot of words and parentheses and semicolons.

She looked at him for a long moment, quizzically.

“I thought you should be the first to know,” she went on, sitting back in her chair, “that next year we’re planning to reform the Language Arts curriculum.”

Oh yes. Curriculum reform. That was another thing he had intended to mention in his speech. He’d been planning to point out that for the last several years he had given a great deal of thought to the possibility of revamping World Literature, perhaps replacing *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* with *The Tempest* and *The Cherry Orchard* with *Death of a Salesman*.

She stared at a space twenty yards directly behind him.

Nice eyes, he observed. In fact, quite an attractive young woman.

“I’ve asked Ms. Greene to be in charge of this process,” she said.

Not exactly beautiful, not in Dora’s class, but still, quite attract—. . . . What? Ms. Greene, in charge? Ms. Candi Greene? Twenty-three-year-old Candi Greene? Bubble-gum-chewing Candi Greene? Little Candi Greene, still running around in her training bra? Candi Greene, B.A.

(Women's Studies), who only had a *minor* in English? Candi Greene, who refused to teach *The Scarlet Letter* because she found it "extremely offensive," who insisted on teaching *The Color Purple* instead? Candi Greene, who Hank Constant had just last month admitted was his one big mistake? Candi Greene? In charge?

"As you may or may not know," she went on, "Ms. Greene is an expert in deconstruction."

An expert. In deconstruction. He nodded wearily. Yes. He'd heard rumors to that effect. And he knew all about deconstruction. He'd once read an article on the subject in *Newsweek*. He was well aware that deconstructionism was a dangerous theory, designed by overpaid ex-Nazi professors in Ivy League universities as a plot to deprive Western Civilization of its most priceless possession, the Classics. He was well aware that the whole point of deconstruction was to rid the world of some fanciful concoction called "phallocentrism," a word that wasn't even listed in his definitive 1974 *Webster's*. He was well aware that the deconstructionists would not be satisfied until they had left the cultural battlefield strewn with the castrated corpses of legions of so-called "dead white males," from William Shakespeare to Ed Budwieser.

"I just wanted you to be the first to know," she repeated.

"Thank you," he murmured. It was the only sentence that came to mind.

She put her glasses back on and briskly stood up.

He stood up too, like an exhausted jack-in-the-box.

She glanced at her watch. “If you have any questions,” she said, “I’d suggest you speak to Ms. Greene.”

Speak to Ms. Greene? Candi Greene, whom he had overheard jesting about his teaching method, in which he played the parts of the characters in the Classics he assigned his students? Who snickered openly when he told her about his extensive collection of costumes: Prometheus, Oedipus, Samson, Becket—not to speak of Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, and King Lear? Who actually LAUGHED OUT LOUD last week when he came into the faculty lounge attired in Shakespearean doublet and hose immediately after treating his English Literature seniors to a stunning performance of Romeo’s part in the balcony scene of the greatest love story of all time? Whose jests “set the table on a roar,” to quote Hamlet, when she asked him whether he was sure he was doing Romeo, whether he wasn’t “really, like, doing Fatstuff, y’know, that *old* guy,” referring in her crude, vulgar way to Sir John Falstaff? Who was incapable of understanding the fact that playing the parts of those heroic characters, in costume, was the finest way to bring the Classics alive? Who could not possibly grasp the truth that the one time a man felt no boundary between what

he was and what he aspired to be was when he was “strutting the boards, holding up a mirror to nature,” in the sublime words of the Bard? Would *he* speak to a snide, disrespectful young woman about her plans for *his* department, *his* project for the last twenty-five illustrious years? He would not!

Ms. Mode strode quickly to the door.

He followed her, a speech beginning to form in his brain.

She turned to face him. “I have every confidence in Ms. Greene,” she said with a sweet smile.

He cleared his throat.

“Yes?” she said brightly, opening the door for him.

He paused for a moment in the doorway, to think. He thought of the past, of the thirty-odd years he had spent as a member of the Department of Language Arts, twenty-five of them as its leader. He thought of the present, of the ominous but clear challenge to Western Culture’s most valuable asset, the Classics. He thought of the future, wondering whether posterity would forgive him if he failed them in this, his hour of trial. He thought of his preparation for this moment of crisis, of the ten long hot vacationless Kansas summers he had devoted to the study of Shakespeare’s tragic heroes. He thought of Shakespeare’s bust, standing guard over his office, and of Shakespeare’s serene but observant eyes,

monitoring his every action. He thought of Hamlet, “screwing his courage to the sticking point,” and of that young hero’s words as he prepared to wreak his vengeance on those who had robbed him of his patrimony: “Readiness is all.” Then he thought of the faculty evaluation forms on Ms. Mode’s desk, and of Sir John Falstaff’s prudent advice, “The better part of valor is discretion.”

He left her office without another word.

So next year, he sighed as she closed the door behind him, Ed Budwieser, whose steady hand had guided the ship of Language Arts for the last quarter of a century, was to be replaced at the helm by a callow young woman who had not even been born when he was her age. Just as this year Hank Constant—dead white male Henry Duncan Constant—had been replaced by Lady Macbeth.

But was this all so tragic? he asked himself as he wandered out into the long dark empty hall. Or was it a blessing in disguise? His thoughts turned to the judicious advice he always wrote on the blackboard for the benefit of his seniors at the end of their last semester:

A. THERE’S ALWAYS A LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL;

and:

B. LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE.

And as he considered his own wisdom, he felt a strange but unmistakable relief. The weight of passing Western Culture to the next generation no longer rested on his substantial shoulders. Now that for all practical purposes he was no longer Chairman of Language Arts, he was finally free to do what he had been hoping and planning to do for the last ten years: leave philistine, prosaic Kirkland, move to the West Coast, and compose his memoirs for the benefit of a distant posterity that would, in time, come to appreciate the fact that for thirty-odd years Edward Budwieser, M.A., had wasted his fragrance on the Kansas air.

2

She buzzed around the patient, dressed in a tiny pink pant suit, armed with a line of floss.

“Open wide,” she sang.

He opened wide.

She accidentally rubbed up against him.

He flinched.

“Relax, Rabbi Scheinblum,” she said gaily.

“I’m not going to hurt you. That’s Dr. Digby’s job.”

He flinched again.

“Just kidding,” she reassured him. “My job is to take your mind off the coming pain.”

A major flinch.

She ignored this response and launched into her assignment. One of the questions she’d been asking people as she flossed them up for Dr.

Digby was, what did they like best about Kirkland? If they were to name her the one thing they liked best about living in Kirkland, Kansas, one thing and one thing only, what would that one thing be?

They'd been saying it's a nice conservative town. Still too much crime in the streets, maybe, and it was getting a little too big, in terms of population, but basically it was still a nice conservative town, knock on wood. They'd been mentioning the friendliness of the people. They'd been saying Kirkland was the kind of a place where family values were allowed to shine through, which accounted for the friendliness. They'd also been saying it was one big happy church-going community where everybody was free to go to the religion of his own choice and there were no long-haired Socialists—she guessed that maybe now they were called Liberals (this brought an indisputable flinch)—and very, very few atheists, just a few long-haired philosophers out at the University, and nobody paid any attention to them anyway, except for maybe a few sophomores, who'd grow out of it just about the time they started applying for jobs in the appliance department at Sears.

She personally had to agree with those who said the number one thing about Kirkland was the friendly people. But that's not what she told the patients, oh no, she was there to serve, not to preach sermons, and in her book one of the best ways to serve was to make the patient feel

comfortable before Dr. Digby came in and shot him up with novocaine, and it would go against this basic philosophy if she started him—or her, she guessed it was now him *or* her—if she started him out with a sermon from her own personal point of view. So she started him out with a question, then she flossed his uppers, which gave him lots of time to think about his answer: nice conservative town, the friendliness of the people, great family values, freedom of so many churches to choose from, these four being the most popular choices.

She withdrew the floss from Rabbi Scheinblum's mouth and stood back to admire her work.

“Now I'm going to let you rinse.”

Rabbi Scheinblum rinsed.

Then she started out on the lowers, and encouraged him to give some careful thought to the question about the advantages of Kirkland as a place to live.

She was beginning to say, she said, that from her own personal point of view Kirkland's number one asset was its people. Where else could you find honest, friendly people like the ones they had over at church, as well as Christian gentlemen like Dr. Digby, who had a different religious persuasion but wasn't prejudiced against people from other denominations, just as long as they believed in God and . . . (she was going to add *Jesus* but then noticed Rabbi

Scheinblum's yarmulke and changed directions)
. . . and had their share of cavities?

Another question she'd become known for lately was, why would anybody in their right mind want to leave Kirkland of their own free choice? Why on earth?

She invited him to rinse again.

Rabbi Scheinblum rinsed again.

The usual answer, she said, is, beats me. She didn't even have to give them a few moments to think about this question, the answer just kept popping out of them, often before she'd got to the point of drawing blood. Over ninety percent of the customers gave that exact same answer of, beats me. This was no exaggeration. Ninety, ninety-five percent at least.

She paused, then went back in to clean between a pair of lower left molars she'd missed.

Ed was another story, of course. Ed was her husband of forty years, maybe she'd mentioned that last time, she usually did—mention it, that is. Ed, and Mabel, her twin sister, who had been on her mind lately, poor dear. Anyway, Ed was another story. Ed was *always* another story. He belonged to that rare five, ten percent who spend their time thinking of reasons why people in their right minds would want to leave Kirkland of their own free choice. When she had challenged him the other day to give her just one good reason—she was still talking about Ed—he ticked off ten in a row, one right after the other. Then what did he do but, he added injury to

insult by taking off his shoes and socks and counting on his toes!

She withdrew the floss and came up with the punch line:

“And they say teachers are underpaid.”

Rabbi Scheinblum smiled.

“There,” she said, flushed with the success of her joke. “One last rinse.”

He accepted the tiny cup of water she offered him and did one last rinse.

“Now,” she said. “Would you like to answer the quiz?”

There was a long silence.

“What do you like best about Kirkland?”

“I . . . ,” said Rabbi Scheinblum.

“It’s the kind of a test,” she encouraged him, “where there are no wrong answers.”

Rabbi Scheinblum cleared his throat.

“Well?”

“Actually,” he said, “next week I’m moving to Seattle.”

“Seattle! . . . Why Seattle?”

He cleared his throat again.

“Oh, you’ve lost your job!” she sympathized.

“That too,” he confessed. “Also . . . I’m getting a divorce.”

Mildred Budwieser paused, then headed for the door. There she stopped. “Doctor will be with you in a minute,” she said icily without looking back at him, “right after he’s done with his E-trade.”

The Wager

There was a man in the land of Oz whose name was Job. And he was reputed to be a perfect and upright man, who spent his Sabbaths fearing God and eschewing evil. He was a wealthy man, numbering among his possessions seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred she-asses, one hundred goats, four maids, two cooks, a butler, a wife, three children, and an account with Bildad the Broker.

And just down the road from Job's ranch lived Satan, who spent his weekdays going to and fro in the earth, and walking up and down in it, being an international lawyer as well as a member of the Sierra Club. And Satan also was successful in his chosen line of work, numbering among his clients Rameses the Second, Alexander the Great, the crown princes of half a dozen oil-rich nations, and the Queen of Sheba, at whose seaside retreat he spent the better part of his weekends, gamboling about in the surf with the beautiful people and closing deals and devising how he might fleece the unwary.

One blustery spring day, after tramping five miles through Job's impressive spread, Satan appeared at the door of God, his friendly adversary.

“Just make yourself at home,” said God, inviting Satan into his sanctuary. “A pot of coffee would hit the spot, don’t you think?”

Satan unbuttoned his windbreaker, took off his gloves, and sat down in front of the hot stove.

“Make mine black,” he said, rubbing his hands in anticipation.

“Black it is,” said God, pouring his guest a drink.

“Now then,” continued God as he joined Satan at the stove, which doubled as a bargaining table. “What’s on your mind?”

“Good and evil.”

“Speaking of good. Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and upright man?”

Satan frowned and lit his pipe and blew a smoke ring. “Frankly,” he said, “I’m not impressed.”

“Not impressed?” replied God. “How can you fail to be impressed by someone who owns seven thousand sheep? The average in Oz is a thousand sheep per family unit. My man beats the averages seven times over, and you fail to be impressed?”

“I’m referring to his so-called ‘uprightness.’ Who wouldn’t be upright with all those sheep? Excessive sheep is one of the five leading causes of uprightness.”

“I fail to see the connection between the uprightness of a man and the quantity of sheep he has grazing out there on the rolling hills of Oz.”

“It’s a well-known fact.”

“I’ve never heard of it.” “Studies have shown—”

“Don’t talk ‘studies have shown’ with *me*,” interrupted God testily. “As far as I’m concerned, they’re nothing but a lot of oxen droppings.”

“How can you call yourself an educated person,” protested Satan, “and not be aware that sheep are one of the root causes of uprightness?”

And so the argument raged. Do large quantities of sheep cause uprightness, or do they not?

Two hours later, Satan came up with a stunning proposal. “Say,” he suddenly suggested with a cunning smile, “what do you suppose would happen if Job went bankrupt and had to go through a harrowing divorce?”

“It’s not the kind of thing I like to think about,” admitted God. “My guess, however, is that he’d bounce right back. He’d rebuild his fortune and work out a deal regarding visitation rights and turn right around and find a woman even more beautiful and talented and supportive—”

“No no,” interrupted Satan. “You know what’d happen? He’d lose interest in the uprightness lifestyle in about two seconds.”

“You seem pretty sure of yourself,” observed God.

“You’re damned right I’m sure of myself,” replied Satan. “When you travel to and fro in the earth as much as I do, you’re bound to pick up some self-esteem.”

“I guess that’s true,” mused God. “Maybe *I* should try to get around more.”

“Might help you keep up on things,” suggested Satan diplomatically.

“Improve the circulation,” added God. “Also, keep you regular.”

“There’s that, too, isn’t there.” “Well, what do you say? Are you game for testing my hypothesis?”

“Which hypothesis was that?” “God, you *are* getting old,” said Satan under his breath. Then, more loudly: “I’M REFERRING TO THE HYPOTHESIS ABOUT THE CORRELATION BETWEEN THE NUMBER OF SHEEP AND THE DEGREE OF UPRIGHTNESS!”

“Ah yes,” nodded God. “*That* hypothesis. Okay. I’m game. But how do you suggest we proceed, and you don’t have to shout.”

“What I’d suggest,” replied Satan, “—and I’m just playing devil’s advocate—is that you put forth thy hand and touch all that he hath. . . . There. Is that better?”

“Fine,” said God, who in the meantime had turned up his hearing aid, “except could you be more specific, and use plain English?”

“Specifically,” suggested Satan, “you might start by stampeding his sheep over a cliff, moving on to the other livestock, rattling his ranch with a few earthquakes, then afflicting him with boils from head to foot.”

God was aghast at this proposal. “That’s not the way I like to treat my trusted servants,” he protested. “It’s very difficult to find good help these days.”

“Which is more important,” asked Satan, “good help, or the testing of scientific hypotheses?”

God thought about this question for a moment. “Good help,” he finally replied. “Of course,” he added quickly, “that’s from the perspective of an employer.”

“And a *major* employer.”

“Yes,” agreed God, “a major employer.” “I’ve got a million shekels here that say that if somebody”—and here Satan gave his host a significant look—“if somebody should just happen to destroy Job’s possessions, he’d give up his uprightness and perfection and re-evaluate his lifestyle.”

God shook his head. “I’m not a betting man,” he protested.

“Tell you what I’m gonna do,” replied Satan, pursing his lips and squinting his eyes. “I’m gonna give you

odds. I put a million shekels on this stove, you put down half a million, winner take all. Deal?"

God pondered this proposition. "A million shekels, did you say? Versus five hundred thousand?" He paused to reflect and strum his fingers. "Okay. You're on."

And so the wager was made. In no time at all Oz was inundated with suffering. As per the agreement, God stampeded Job's livestock over a cliff, rattled his ranch with several earthquakes, and afflicted him grievously with boils from head to foot. He even went the extra mile, planting skeptical thoughts in the mind of Job's wife, Dorothy (the mother of Leo, age six; skinny little Oscar, nicknamed "Scarecrow," age nine; and Tim Woodman, age 13, a son by a previous marriage). For shortly after God took action, Job came back home from the "natural disaster" to confront a suspicious helpmeet.

Q: Where have you been all day?

A: I have been going to and fro in the earth, and walking up and down in it.

Q: Do I smell perfume?

A: What you're smelling is sheep dip. I tried to tackle several of the dumb beasts as they were stampeding over the cliff.

Q: Am I supposed to believe that? Why on earth would

your sheep—

A: They're *our* sheep, darling. What's mine is thine.

Q: Could I have that in writing?

A: Certainly. Hmm. . . . I seem to have misplaced my pen. It was probably knocked out of my pocket in the stampede.

Q: Why on earth would *our* sheep suddenly take off and dive over a cliff?

A: How should I know? I was just out in the meadows of Oz herding them, playing my guitar, minding my own business, being more or less upright and perfect and eschewing evil, as is my practice, when bam, out of the clear blue, they and other of my livestock panicked and took off and began leaping over the cliff. It was your classic stampede.

Q: Are you suggesting they thought they were lemmings?

A: What I'm suggesting is, they were just following orders.

Q: Orders? From whom?

A: I suspect it was God.

Q: Where did you get *that* idea?

A: It had all the earmarks of a supernatural operation.

Quick. Unexpected. Vengeful. Besides, how else would you explain it? Or those earthquakes we had this afternoon?

Q: [*Sarcastically*] Low-flying aircraft?

A: [*Seriously*] Keep in mind that aircraft have not yet been invented. Balloons have been invented, but I wouldn't put them in the same category as aircraft. They don't rumble or shake the earth. They float. Serenely and gracefully, they float. Over hill, over dale—

Q: What's that red stuff on your collar?

A: Red stuff? What red stuff?

Q: [*Indicating the position of the "red stuff"*] There.

A: Oh, *that*. Looks like blood, doesn't it? It's probably from the boils.

On hearing this explanation, Dorothy went on a stampede of her own, calling her mother, loading the kids on the camels, and taking off. But fortunately for Job, he had three close friends who were accomplished in the art of consolation. And so immediately after this catechism, he telephoned his three friends, inviting them to come over and comfort him.

"I know exactly what you're going through," Bildad the Broker told Job as the cards were being dealt. "I've

been there myself. I lost a bundle in the Crash of '87."

"How can you possibly know what it's like?" protested Job. "That was a crashette, comparatively speaking."

"It's like comparing figs and grapes," observed Bildad as he checked his hand. "The point is, the Big Crash almost took me down the tubes. If I wouldn't have had a 30 percent cash position, I wouldn't be here consoling you now. They'd have had to scrape me off the sidewalk."

"That's nothing," replied Job. "*I* was fully invested."

"I *told* you to get out of sheep," said Bildad.

"The hell you did," said Job, his voice rising. "Four days before the stampede, you told me to purchase an extra five thousand head of the woolly creatures."

Bildad gazed expressionlessly at his friend across the top of his cards. "I encouraged you to purchase five thousand head of emus," he replied without the least hint of emotion in his voice.

"Sheep," insisted Job.

"Emus."

"Sheep!"

"Emus!"

"*Sheep!!*"

“Emus!!” cried Bildad, removing a derringer from his belt and placing it on the table that separated them.

“SHEEP!!!” cried Job, removing a dagger from his belt and placing it atop the firearm.

At this point Zophar the Physician broke the mounting tension. “Let’s talk about the boils, shall we?” he suggested in a calm tone of voice. “Where does it hurt?”

Job indicated the location of the pain.

“Hmmm. . . ,” said Zophar, examining his patient closely. “I’m going to give you a prescription for doxycycline, a broad-spectrum antibiotic. Take one pill three times a day, at mealtime. If the problem doesn’t clear up in three weeks, just give me a call and we’ll schedule you for a vas.”

“Vas?” protested Job. “I don’t see the connection. You might as well amputate both my legs and pull all my wisdom teeth.”

“We don’t like to do those things,” explained Zophar, “if the patient has just suffered a serious financial setback.”

“Speaking of setbacks,” interrupted Rabbi Eliphaz Woodman. “I know just the thing to solve your marital problem.”

“I think I’d like that,” said Job.

“As you may or may not remember,” continued Rabbi

Woodman, "I used to be married to Dorothy."

"Oh yes," replied Job, "I seem to recall that fact, now that you mention it. You are Eliphaz Woodman. When I married her, Dorothy was a Woodman. And if I am not mistaken, her oldest son, Tim, age thirteen, also bears the proud Woodman name. This suggests that she, Dorothy, must have been previously married. Either that, or living in sin. However, judging by her many comments on the subject, she was not one to live in sin. Therefore, she must have been married. Since her last name was Woodman, she must have been married to a Woodman. And since you are the only Woodman in these parts, it would seem to follow that yes, Dorothy, my estranged wife, must have been married to you, and that you were formerly married to her."

"Remarkable powers of deduction," observed Bildad the Broker.

"Elementary," responded Job. "You were saying, Rabbi Woodman?"

"I was saying I used to be married to Dorothy. The thing you should know about her is that she was in the habit of leaving her spouse at the drop of a Dow. She'd load the kids onto the camels and take off for Mama. She had the act down pat. When the Dow took a technical bounce, however, she'd come back. Except on the third crash. Her rule of thumb was, on the third crash, don't bother to come back. On the third crash, just file."

“That sounds like something she’d do,” agreed Job.

“This is only your first crash,” Woodman pointed out.

“Stampede.”

“Stampede, crash, it makes no difference. My point is that she’ll come back when you’re in a position to purchase, say, fourteen thousand head of fine New Zealand sheep.”

“I understand the theory behind this,” said Job. “The problem is, how do I avoid the second and third stampedes?”

“That’s something you’re going to have to work out with God,” counseled Rabbi Woodman.

“My advice,” broke in Zophar playfully, “would be to cut down on the perfection and uprightness. Lower your standards. Be like the rest of us.”

“Are you saying perfection and uprightness are the cause of suffering?” asked Job sarcastically.

“It’s a well-known medical fact,” explained Zophar, winking at Bildad and Eliphaz. “If you become too perfect and upright, you’re asking Satan to approach God and suggest the introduction of suffering into the picture.”

“Why is this so?” inquired Job.

“Nobody really knows,” admitted Zophar. “Some of the

best minds in captivity have been working on this problem for centuries. It's known as the problem of suffering."

"One theory," offered Bildad the Broker, "is the ups and downs of the market."

"Another theory," offered Rabbi Eliphaz Woodman, "is Satanic jealousy."

"A third theory," offered Zophar the Physician, "is a chemical imbalance in the brain."

"But nobody knows for sure," admitted Bildad.

"I suppose if I want to find out," sighed Job, "I'll just have to go straight to the top."

And straight to the top Job went. He requested an audience with God. But God quickly put things in perspective. He came rolling through the Land of Oz and spoke to Job out of a tornado.

"Look, Job, look. Look and see. See me spin."

"Gee whiz!" cried Job.

"Can you top this?"

"Not with the present software."

"So?"

“So,” acknowledged Job, “I get your point.” “

So?” persisted God. At this point in the conversation he had Job’s right arm in a half nelson.

“Oww,” replied Job. “I *said* I got your point.”

“What I meant was, so, what are you going to do about it?”

By this time God had his foe wrapped in a full nelson.

“I’m sure you have some suggestions,” replied Job sarcastically.

“You’re absolutely right,” conceded God, secure in his identity as the Master of the Universe. “The first thing I’d do if I were you is, I’d abhor myself.”

Job, who by this time had been allowed to ease himself from the vice-like hold of his more powerful adversary, took a pencil and notepad from his vest pocket. “Abhor . . . myself,” he repeated as he wrote the prescription down. “Got that. Then what?”

“Then what I usually recommend is that the patient repent in dust and ashes.”

“Repent . . . in dust . . . and ashes,” Job muttered to himself. “Fine. Anything else?”

“That’ll do, for now.”

“And what’s the recommended dosage?”

“Start with three bouts of self-aborrence every day, one before each meal. The dust and ashes should be taken at bedtime, with an eight-ounce glass of goat milk.”

“Goat milk?!” cried Job. “Where the hell am I supposed to get *goat* milk? You killed all my goats.”

“Correction,” replied God. “I killed all your *sheep* . . . Also, the oxen . . . Camels too, I have to admit . . . Plus most of the she-asses. But I left the goats alone.”

“I think you’ll find you got the goats, too.”

“Why would I do that?” asked God. “I’m very proud of the job I did on the creation of goats.”

“I won’t argue with you on that point,” acknowledged Job. “But it doesn’t change the fact that I’m now a zero-goat rancher.” At this he rose, dusted himself off from the recent fray, and prepared to leave.

“Goats too, huh?” mused God. “An endangered species . . . Wonder what I could have been thinking of?”

But Job did not hear these last remarks. He was already walking down the yellow brick road that leads to the drug store and the cessation of suffering.

“Stop!” God cried after him.

Job turned around, puzzled.

“Can’t you take a joke?” asked God.

This question piqued Job's curiosity, and he returned to the scene of his recent humiliation. "Pardon me?" he said.

"The truth of the matter," explained God, "is that I am not really a terrifying, awesome personage, as the rabbis, priests, and ministers take pleasure in depicting me. My closest friends know me as a lover of practical jokes; as always on the lookout for life's little incongruities; as someone whose oft-stern countenance hides an ever-so-slight twinkle in his eye—in short, as a rather merry, even impish, sort of fellow."

"Then you, too, are misunderstood?"

"Alas," responded God sadly. "It's the cross I have to bear."

Job considered this surprising revelation for a long moment. "I'll take your word for it," he finally said. "But how does this affect *me*?"

"Good question," acknowledged God. "The point is, I didn't really come to exact repentance of you."

"Then the self-abhorrence, the dust and ashes, the goat milk...?"

"Oh, you can follow that prescription if you *want* to," replied God. "But just between the two of us, self-abhorrence is not conducive to mental health, dust and ashes wreak havoc in the alimentary canal, and goat milk has become a gourmet drink and is thus rather expensive."

“But what about my iniquities?”

“You mean your mistresses?”

“Actually, there are only three.”

“Who am I to judge?” asked God, shrugging his massive shoulders. “That’s a matter between you and your wife.”

“But if you are not come to judge me,” asked a confused Job, “why *are* you come?”

“I am come,” said God, “to pay off.” At this, God reached into his wallet and pulled out a certified check, in Job’s name, for half a million shekels. Thus it happened that Job was able to purchase fourteen thousand head of New Zealand sheep. Dorothy then decided she had been too hasty and came back to her prosperous husband and became pregnant and began to knit booties for tiny Toto.

Some time later, God returned home from a busy day at the office to confront his own suspicious helpmeet.

Q: What’s this canceled check for half a million shekels?

A: Canceled check?

Q: For half a million.

A: Half a million?

Q: The one made out to Job.

A: Oh *that*. Job was down on his luck—livestock stampede, ill health, a recent separation—and I just gave him a little something to tide him over.

Q: A *little* something?

A: Well, you know how it is, when they get used to a certain lifestyle—

Q: But how can we afford it?

A: If I'm not mistaken, I recently deposited a million shekels in our account.

Q: And where, may I ask, did *that* come from?

A: I got it . . . let's see . . . from a fellow by the name of . . . Satan.

Q: Satan? *The* Satan? Your adversary?

A: I think we're talking about the same guy.

Q: And since when was that con man Satan so generous with

his money?

A: Aren't we being a little judgmental here?

Q: You've been gambling!

A: Me? Gamble? You know I only bet on sure things.

Q: Okay, I want the full story.

And so God told Ernestine the story of how he had made a wager with Satan over whether if someone should just happen to destroy Job's possessions, he'd give up his uprightness and perfection; and how God had caused Job to suffer (intending all along to pay him back, of course); and how Job didn't give up his uprightness, for the simple and logical reason that *you can't give up something you never had*; and how Satan, because of his busy weekday schedule, didn't know about the mistresses.

Ernestine was curious. "Isn't that what they call a *sting*?"

And God burst into uproarious laughter.

FROM *Benedict XVI*

Chapter 1

Enter Benny, Stage Left

At the Vatican, the pope was sound asleep, having four hours earlier mumbled the simple benediction he had learned as a child. In New York City, the anchors at the major networks were preparing to sign off after reading the news of the most ingenious and entertaining samples of human depravity that had appeared in the last twenty-four hours. In Las Vegas, thousands of American parents were busy initiating their offspring into the deepest mysteries of the nation's folklore. At a race track in Southern California, eight sleek thoroughbreds were pounding the turf and coming down the home stretch as the spectators either clutched their tickets in anxiously sweating hands or, resigned to their temporary fate, began to destroy those tokens of hope.

And in the Kansas metropolis of Kirkland, not its real name, two men were preparing for a meeting that would launch a chain of events that was destined to have profound consequences both for America and for the largest and most powerful ecclesiastical organization in all Christendom. Unaware as yet of his significance in the grand scheme of things, the older of the two ambled down a nondescript hall toward an unexceptional office at the rear of an unimposing tan cinder block building standing at the foot of an

ordinary radio transmitter at the outskirts of this typical Middle-American city.

“Sit down,” said Dennis Bright as large, unkempt Benny Good ambled into his office.

Benny squeezed himself into the chair across the desk from his smallish, kempt boss, who was dressed in a new Sears suit, a new Sears shirt, and a new Sears tie, a uniform designed to highlight a generic male managerial face still on the pleasant side of forty.

Bright strummed his fingers on the desk. He adjusted his glasses. He cleared his throat. He inserted an index finger under the collar of his new Sears shirt and straightened his new Sears tie. He took a deep breath. He exhaled, slowly but audibly. “This is not working out, Benny,” he began.

“It’s only been a month,” said Benny.

Bright wagged his head sadly. “The numbers just aren’t there.”

“One. Incredible. Month,” said Benny.

Bright sighed. “Benny’s Begonias’ is not the blockbuster we projected.”

“One month of lively discussion of the delights of indoor gardening!” said Benny, growing eloquent.

Dennis Bright frowned as he tilted back in his chair and placed five pairs of interlocking fingers behind his head. “Listen, Benny,” he said to the older man, “I hate to tell you this, but.”

Benny carefully placed a foot on Bright’s desktop. That foot was fitted with a sandal. Between the sandal and a pair of wrinkled shorts stretched an expanse of hairy, well-fed leg. Between the shorts and a soiled T-shirt stretched an expanse of equally hairy, equally well-fed abdomen. The T-shirt bore the insignia of KKKS (“First in Alternative Programming for the

Kirkland Listening Area”) and a pocketful of cigars (Swisher Sweets). Above this T-shirt rose a head that had frequently invited comparisons to the head of Larry Flynt—it had the same broad features, the same rugged handsomeness, the same wavy hair; some of Benny’s old colleagues used to take pleasure in observing that the glint in his eye also bore an uncanny similarity to that of the king of porn, though others took equal pleasure in protesting that Benny was cut from somewhat nobler cloth.

“I had five call-ins today,” said Benny in an attempt to shift the conversation in a more promising direction.

“Two were from your regular listener,” Bright pointed out.

“She’s very knowledgeable about plants,” Benny pointed out.

“Why shouldn’t she be? She runs a nursery.”

“Actually, she’s retired from the business. The stress got to her. Probably from watching the plants grow.”

Dennis Bright smiled in spite of himself. But then he remembered his responsibilities as the KKKS program director and recovered his dignity. “One was from Shannon,” he pointed out.

“She asks very intelligent questions.”

“That’s because you tell her what to ask.”

“It’s not just *what* she asks, it’s how she asks it. Her phrasing is impeccable.”

“Her phrasing may be great, or whatever, but the woman doesn’t know a tulip from a cactus. I oughtta know. Ten years I’ve lived with her.”

“Aha,” said Benny as he placed a second foot on the desk. “So *that’s* where she picked up her impeccable phrasing.”

Bright ignored this remark, but not the foot, which was dangerously near his coffee cup. He stared at the encroaching sandal. "One was a wrong number," he pointed out with a warning frown.

Benny carefully relocated his sandal to a site several millimeters away from the cup. "Did you notice how curious she became about begonias? I think we can expect to hear a lot more from that young woman."

"One was from an Alzheimer," Bright pointed out. He could be ruthless. That was part of his job. He liked his job. It allowed him to show the ruthless side of his personality. It also paid reasonably well. It kept the wolf from the door, his wife Shannon in the less expensive varieties of French wine, and the Sears men's wear department in business.

"Did I or did I not have fun with her?" asked Benny.

"You had fun with her," admitted Bright. "But," he added, "you gotta wonder how well it went over with your regular listener. I don't think we can expect to hear a lot more from that old lady."

"She must like my act or she wouldn't keep calling."

Bright removed his coffee cup from the danger zone and took a long sip. "Listen, Benny," he finally said. "The issue is not whether you got the gift. That's not what I'm trying to say."

"What *are* you trying to say, Dennis? Speak up, lad. Don't be shy."

Bright prepared his reply by emitting another sigh. "What I'm trying to tell you is, the numbers are not there. That's the bottom line. The numbers. Are simply. Not. There."

Benny tilted his head back. He closed his eyes as if in deep thought. He eventually broke the silence. "Maybe if we came up with a new format."

"A new format."

"Impeccable phrasing, Dennis. 'A new format.'" Benny paused long enough to unwrap a cigar and plant one end between his teeth. The other end began to describe circles in the air as he plunged into virgin territory. "Here's how we do it. I call numbers at random, ask them if they can define the word *begonia*, send them scampering to their dictionaries, arouse their curiosity about the wonders of nature, suggest that they call several of their closest friends and start an indoor gardening club, invite this expanding network of plant-lovers down to the station, show them around the premises, take them over to meet our sponsor, and in no time at all 'Benny's Begonias' is the talk of Kirkland and the bottom line is decorated with the color black and the Kingdom of God has been reconstituted on a capitalist basis."

"Numbers do not like being called at random," observed Bright. He was busy scribbling on his writing pad.

"You scored a point, Dennis." Benny gestured toward the pad with his unlit cigar. "What's the score by now?"

Bright consulted his pad. "The score is five to one in favor of management, who's sitting here checking the numbers, which at this point in time are simply not there." He glanced up at Benny, who had returned the cigar to its natural position between his teeth. "The one thing in your favor is the fact that you got the gift." He looked back down at his pad and frowned and began to

sketch the outline of what appeared to be an evergreen. “The question is, finding the tree to put it under.”

Benny consulted his fingernails. He might have been thinking, That’s a very good question. Or, That’s the story of my life. Or perhaps, When was the last time I cleaned my nails? Possibly even, Would this be a good time to light the cigar? The only thing certain is that he wasn’t just being modest.

Bright’s chair became untilted. “Come back tomorrow with an idea,” he said. “A halfway decent idea wins you a one-hour slot and maybe a little extra pocket money.” He placed his elbows on the desk and cupped his chin within his two sets of knuckles and gazed at his employee, following the instructions on page 127 of *The Personnel Manager’s Manual*.

Benny removed his feet from the desk, following his instincts. “What about two ideas?”

“Sure. Give me a choice.”

Benny removed the cigar from between his teeth and gazed at it thoughtfully. “Think you could handle a dozen?”

Dennis Bright consulted his appointment calendar. “My schedule only allows for a lunch hour.” He looked up. “Tell you what, Benny. Hold it to two ideas and everybody goes home happy. Okay?” He flashed a facsimile of a smile.

Benny stood up and stretched. “Great,” he yawned. Then he saluted, did an abrupt about-face, and ambled out of Bright’s office.

§

Benny Good had enjoyed a long and distinguished career as a truck driver. He had roamed the interstate

highway system of America, transported a wide selection of its products from east to west and back again, eaten in a high percentage of its better truck stops, made the acquaintance of many of its friendliest truck stop waitresses, and talked his way out of more than his share of speeding tickets.

If, a short month ago, he had been asked to reflect on his life, Benny would have said that he had found happiness in his chosen profession. There were times when he missed Lucy, of course, but in his view the bliss of married life was overestimated by a small but vocal minority of the American public. Besides, he enjoyed the camaraderie of the other truckers, and the truck stop waitresses more than made up for the slight hole he felt in what may or may not have been a heart. As for the long hours he spent in the cab, they were not always solitary. There was of course the radio, with the country music and the talk shows that provide a trucker's main source of entertainment. But there were also the young runaway girls who now and then accepted his invitation to use his cab as a home away from home.

The single drawback to this life was the fear faced by all male truckers, the fear that month after month of bouncing across America in a sitting position might lead to impotence. This fear had played some part in his decision to start a new chapter in his life, a larger part being played by the loss of his Peterbilt on a bet during his last run across Kansas. Fortunately, he happened to hear KKKS advertise for a qualified voice to host a radio talk show devoted to indoor gardening. He stopped in at a used Kirkland bookstore, rummaged through the stacks, strolled out the door with a book on the art of indoor gardening tucked away in his

shorts, became an overnight expert, and called the station next morning to set up an interview.

Dennis Bright hired him on the spot. “You got the gift,” said Bright, shaking his head in amazement and relieved that somebody had finally answered his ad.

§

“I’ll have what he’s having,” Benny said to the waitress.

The waitress cast a gaze in Dennis Bright’s direction and quizzically lifted a well-pencilled eyebrow and wondered aloud what he was having. Bright, after some reflection, said he was having the small shrimp salad with French dressing and a cup of decaf.

Benny frowned and announced that he was reconsidering. He would begin with the large turkey salad (Italian dressing), accompanied by a milk shake (chocolate). From there he would move on to the large sirloin (rare). He would finish with the apple pie, topped off with a generous portion of ice cream (tutti frutti, if possible; if not, strawberry). He also suggested that the waitress put a bottle of bubbles on ice, explaining that he and his friend were there to celebrate a great moment.

“We’re not allowed to serve alcoholic beverages,” said the waitress, as if repeating a mantra. “Kansas law.”

Benny feigned disbelief. “What? The State of Kansas discourages the celebration of great moments?”

The waitress ignored this question, glumly plucked the menus from their hands, and shuffled off with their orders.

Busy Bright got right to the point. “Idea number one,” he began.

“Idea number one. Benny does the news.”

“John already does the news.”

Benny crossed his arms and assumed a Buddha-like calm. “The news, as John delivers it, produces insight and knowledge, and tends to calm, wisdom, enlightenment, and Nirvana.” Then he went into a manic frenzy: “The news, as Benny delivers it, produces smiles and laughter, and tends to delight, folly, skepticism, and riotous living.”

Bright stared at his employee. “God, Benny, where do you come up with that stuff?”

“You’re forgetting, Dennis, that your employee is an educated man. He knows a thing or two about wisdom and enlightenment and Nirvana. He once took a course in World Religions.”

This was true, up to a point. At one time early in his adult life, when he was between employment opportunities, Benny had enrolled in an institution of higher learning, where he had signed up for an evening class in World Religions. He had stayed the course until the first machine-graded exam, after which he concluded that he could do a better job of improving his mind than any community college in the State of West Virginia. So he returned to the trucking life, borrowing books from libraries and book stores and supermarkets and devouring them during those moments when he wasn’t driving or eating or entertaining waitresses and waifs.

Bright took a quick peek at his watch. “And that’s idea number one?” he asked, referring to Benny’s offer to do the news.

“That’s idea number one. Would you like a sample?”

“We’re going with number two.”

“What’s wrong with number one?”

“I just told you. John already does the news.”

“So? We switch shows. I do the news, our young, handsome friend does ‘John’s Jonquils.’ The ratings for the evening news skyrocket, the ratings for the gardening show remain at their present modest level. A net gain.”

“You’re forgetting one thing.”

Benny nodded wisely. “Ah yes. John is allergic to plants.”

“That’s probably true, but it’s beside the point.”

“Which is?”

“Which is, John’s father-in-law owns the damn station. The old man wants his son-in-law in that particular slot.”

“Because he can read.”

“That’s part of it.”

“The other part being, reading’s about the only thing he can do.”

“You said it. I didn’t.”

Benny thought for a moment. Then, “Are John and What’s-Her-Name happily married?”

“Forget it. She’s a bitch. Idea number two.”

Benny groaned, either because his heart had been set on doing the news or because his literate colleague’s wife, though attractive, was a bitch. “Idea number two. ‘Truck Talk.’”

“‘Truck Talk?’” Bright was drawing a blank.

Benny explained. “There’s this radio program, ‘Car Talk.’ Maybe you’ve heard of it.”

“Can’t say that I have. What’s the hook?”

“A couple of crazies field questions from motorists who want to know why their vehicles make strange sounds.”

“Yeah?” Bright’s curiosity was aroused. “You know, my Infiniti has been—”

“Unfortunately,” Benny interrupted, “they never get around to explaining the strange sounds.”

“You mean those guys don’t answer the questions?”

“Right. We the people, who have a sacred right to know, are never informed.”

“So what’s the point?”

“The point is to produce smiles and laughter, which tend to delight, folly, cynicism, and riotous driving.”

A dim light went on in Bright’s eyes. “Why does that sound familiar?”

“Because I took this course called ‘World Religions,’” Benny reminded him.

“So we’re back to World Religions.”

“These things go in cycles. Did you ever notice, Dennis—may I call you by your Christian name? no?—did you ever notice, Mr. Bright, that these things go in cycles? The correct answer is Yes.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Bright.

“An excellent answer. And have you ever wondered why these things go in cycles?”

“Listen, Benny, I haven’t got all day.”

The waitress came and distributed food. She removed a greasy tab from her apron pocket and placed it between her two customers. She left. The two customers eyed the tab warily. Benny chose this moment to resume their conversation.

“These things go in cycles because the universe itself goes in cycles. If I remember correctly, that was the main point of the course. The professor explained that

the universe, vast though it is, occupies a limited amount of space. So if it wishes to move around, it has no other option than to go in cycles. Being restless by nature, the universe is always on the go. Therefore, cycles. In case you're wondering, I believe he got that bit of information from a book."

"All I can say is, he must've read a lot."

"He was a major-league reader," agreed Benny as his fork attacked a large chunk of turkey. "I believe he had a degree in Hinduism." Benny transferred the turkey to his mouth. "Or maybe it was Buddhism." Benny chewed thoughtfully. "I could never quite figure out the difference."

Bright toyed with his salad. "Those are religions, right?"

Benny swallowed. "I'd have to look it up, Dennis, but I believe you're correct. If not, we should probably alert the textbook industry."

Bright took a sip of his coffee. His eyes narrowed. He appeared to be deep in thought. "Idea number three," he suddenly announced. "'Religion Talk.'"

"What's wrong with number two?" asked Benny, continuing his assault on the turkey salad.

"I see a problem with our sponsors. They wouldn't want the public to notice that their trucks make funny sounds."

"Good point," said Benny with a full mouth.

"I'm glad you noticed. 'Religion Talk.'"

"An excellent idea, Mr. Bright," agreed Benny with a gesture of his fork. "However, there's one problem."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"I don't know a damn thing about religion."

"So what? You also don't know a damn thing about begonias."

“I know they require water.”

“My point is,” explained Bright, “that in this business you don’t need to actually *know* anything about a subject to talk about it.”

“Congratulations, Dennis, and my apologies. I didn’t realize you were so perceptive. I thought you were like the rest of your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning for a tax cut.”

“So what about it? ‘Religion Talk.’”

“With your host, Benny Good, who in the distant past took a course dealing with Hinduism and Buddhism—though he can’t seem to remember the difference—and who for the following hour will answer questions from puzzled believers who are eager to know why their ministers, priests, and rabbis make strange sounds.”

Bright leaned forward. “Benny, you can do it!” he said with sudden enthusiasm. “You got the gift!”

Benny shook his head slowly and sadly. “I don’t think we’ve found the tree to put it under.”

Bright frowned. His fork began to make quick, furtive forays into his salad, separating the shrimp from the non-shrimp. He captured the shrimp and guided them, two by two, into his mouth. “What *do* you know about religion, Benny?”

“I was brought up Amish.”

This time Benny was telling the whole truth.

Approximately forty-three years ago, while Eli Good was attending an evening worship service, an unknown person or persons had left a tiny infant in the back seat of his black buggy. Instead of seeking help with this active bundle of joy, as both the church elders and his sisters urged, Mr. Good, an honest but simple Amish bachelor and raiser of rabbits, chose to rear the

child himself. He started by christening him Kaninchen (the German word for Bunny), a name the lad later shortened to Benny.

With his sunny disposition and verbal gifts, Kaninchen quickly worked his way into the hearts of the Amish community. But as he grew in wisdom and stature, his playful curiosity occasionally got him into trouble. By the age of four, he knew the location of every cookie jar within a two-mile radius. By the age of six, he had composed irreverent versions of over half the songs in the Amish hymnbook and taught them to the other children. By the time he was eight, the young prodigy had moved from music to literature and was entertaining his little friends with bawdy paraphrases of the Bible stories that were their daily fare. When he was ten, Eli Good found him at the rabbit hutches, amusing himself by placing a love-starved buck in the hutch of three does and cheering the results. At twelve, he was caught peering into the bedroom window of a neighboring couple. At fourteen, it was reported that he had attempted to break into the bedroom of a young Amish woman. Then, at sixteen, his adoptive father died of a heart attack. Because the elders could find no one to volunteer a spare bedroom, they took Kaninchen aside, gave him a hundred dollars and a shoo-fly pie, advised him to make his own way in the outside world, and, with fervent but desperate hope in their hearts, said a parting prayer.

“I’ll be damned,” said an intrigued Dennis Bright. “Amish, huh? Who said you didn’t know anything about religion?”

“I’m afraid,” warned Benny, “that I’d be the one held responsible for that statement.”

“Listen, Benny. You got the perfect background for doing a show on religion.” A broad smile made its way across Bright’s face. “Amish,” he repeated. “Perfect!”

“That’s a common misconception. They have their faults.”

“Yeah?”

“Your typical Amishman deprives himself of the bliss of the radio talk show. Your typical Amishman distrusts the American way of life. Your typical Amishman is a kindly, gentle person and when he finds himself under enemy attack he loves nothing better than to turn the other cheek. Your typical Amishman . . . — here Benny caught sight of the tab floating in a pool of water near his former milk shake—. . . much like the rest of us, occasionally needs to purge himself of nasty fluids.”

He left for the men’s room.

Bright rescued the tab from drowning and went to the register and paid.

Benny returned. Checking for eyewitnesses and finding none, he swept a scattering of coins from the top of an unattended table and then sauntered over to his former booth and distributed them among the empty plates and cups. After completing this exchange, he joined his boss at the door.

“I got the tip,” he announced, lighting a Swisher Sweet.

§

Dennis Bright, Benny Good, and Swisher Sweet were back in Bright’s office, where Bright and Good continued their discussion while Sweet described circles in the air.

“Okay, Benny, it’s ‘Religion Talk’ or it’s nothing.”

“Could you explain the difference?”

“Listen, you got the gift. You can take it back on the road, or you can put it under this tree called ‘Religion Talk.’”

“I move we go with ‘Truck Talk,’” said Benny. “Do I hear a second? Second. The motion has been seconded. Discussion? Question. The question has been called for. All those in favor, say Aye. Aye. Those opposed, speak up or forever hold your peace. A moment of silence. The motion passes. ‘Truck Talk’ it is, with Benny Good as your host.”

Bright stared hard at his employee. “What’ve you got against religion, Benny?”

“I’m afraid we’re running out of time, Dennis. I’d like to thank you for being my guest.” Benny leaned over and offered his boss a hand in a mock gesture of parting.

Bright ignored the hand. “What’ve you got against religion?”

Benny removed a large handkerchief from the pocket of his shorts and dabbed insincerely at his eyes. “I had an unfortunate experience as a child.”

“Yeah?”

“The Amish made me eat shoo-fly pie till I escaped and converted to a religion based on apple pie.”

“You’re kidding. What religion was that?”

“The name escapes me. All I remember is spending evenings in a church, rolling around on the floor.”

“You were a Holy Roller?”

“Is that what they’re called?”

“Did you speak in tongues?”

“Mostly English. But I scattered a few German phrases here and there, just to show my solidarity with the cause.”

“Seriously, Benny. You left the Amish and joined the Holy Rollers?”

“Only because of my love of apple pie.”

This was all true, though a good lawyer would have quibbled.

After Kaninchen’s excommunication from the Amish community, he had hiked to the nearest town, where he dumped the shoo-fly pie into the first trash can he could find, bought a new set of non-black clothes, and changed his name to Benny. He then wandered the streets, looking for food and companionship. He found them in a corner café, where he met a kindly minister of the Gospel, a Reverend Barnabas, who invited him to sit down and share an apple pie. Within thirteen minutes, Benny had embraced the tenets of foursquare Christianity and had promised to give his life to the ministry of the Church, in exchange for room and board and a small allowance.

It happened that Reverend Barnabas, who was nearing sixty, had a young wife whom he had saved from the life of the street. Lucy spent several evenings a week in the church sanctuary communing with God, openly petitioning Him to relieve her of her childless state. Listening from behind a pew one evening, Benny learned of her plight and came forth to offer his sympathy. Touched by his concern, she pressed his hand to her heart. Touched by her grief, he asked her what he could do to relieve it. She put her head to one side and smiled at him through her tears. “Oh Benny,” she exclaimed, “you are an answer to my prayers!”

“*Ja*,” he replied in a good German accent, “I vas up brought to halp vun anodder,” and on the floor of that sanctuary, Benny Good did as he had been brought up.

“Well I’ll be damned! A Holy Roller!” marveled Bright. “Any bad experiences?”

“Several,” said Benny. Though he did not volunteer any further information, he may have been thinking of the twins God had sent to relieve Lucy of her barren state.

“What about good experiences? Have any of those?”

Benny considered this question carefully. “Well . . . I got the chance to do the work of the Lord.”

“Yeah? I guess that’s gotta count for something.”

“It made me what I am today,” said Benny, snuffing out his cigar.

“Host of ‘Religion Talk.’”

“Trucker,” said Benny, standing up.

“Sit down, Benny.”

Benny headed for the door.

Bright beat him there and turned around and confronted him. “Hold it right there, Benny,” he said. “Let’s just stop and think about this for a minute. One, you got the gift. Why waste it on the road, listening to crap like country music and talk shows? Why not have your own talk show? Face it. You got the gift, point one. Plus this fantastic background. Two religions, Amish and Holy Roller! *Plus* a course in World Religions! My God! Perfect for something like ‘Religion Talk.’ So you had a few bad experiences. Who hasn’t? That’s why people would wanna tune in. They could identify. This business is built around the concept of identification. That’ll be the whole point of ‘Religion Talk.’ Identification. You show me somebody with a religious

background and I'll show you somebody who can identify."

"Blessed are those who identify," observed Benny.

"Exactly!" agreed Bright, pounding his slight fist on the desk. "I couldn't have said it better myself."

"That's because Benny's the one with the gift."

Bright chose to ignore this remark. "Two religions," he went on. "You're making my case for me."

Benny paused to retrieve another cigar from his shirt pocket. He eyed his boss shrewdly. "Frankly," he said, "I'd feel a helluva lot better with half a dozen under my belt."

"So, visit a few churches. Then in, say, six weeks we're in business."

"I'll stay on the payroll?"

It was Bright's turn to pause. "Yyyyes. . . . Let's make that three weeks. One church and one synagogue per week. Isn't that what they're called? Synagogues?"

"I believe you're right, Dennis. But I sense you may be misspelling it."

"The place Jewish people meet once a week? On Saturdays?"

"Since Day Seven."

"So, come back in three weeks and we're in business."

Benny rolled the cigar between his fingers. "Travel expenses?"

Bright balked. "You weren't thinking of somewhere like Rome?"

"I assure you, my lord and master," said Benny, bowing as low as his well-fed abdomen would permit, "Rome is the farthest thing from my mind."

Bright hesitated. The abacus hidden in the spongy portion of his skull was busy having its beads shuttled

hither and yon. "Okay," he finally agreed. "Travel expenses."

"I was thinking of somewhere," said Benny, lighting up, "more like," aiming a perfect smoke ring at the ceiling, "say," and then gazing directly and cunningly at Bright, "Beverly Hills."