

About *Commercial Fiction*

"In *Commercial Fiction* you experience everything a best-seller should be. The shakers and movers of business, government and lithe bodies collide with the sitters and squirmers of real life, as the powerful, the beautiful and the enticing exploit the average and the obsequious in their relentless pursuit of wealth, power and glamour."

— *Times-End Literary Supplement*

"Vernon Frazer rivals Joseph Heller and Nathanael West as a master of literary cartooning. *Commercial Fiction*'s living caricatures pursue their ambitions through a comic maze of game shows, talk shows, news shows, prime time features and late-night sci-fi reruns, pausing to endorse products at every station break. *Commercial Fiction* is a wild, wacky and wonderful roller coaster ride through the amusement park of contemporary television..."

— Los Angeles *Noon-Times*

"...a madcap world in which commercials interrupt reality and reality interrupts commercials faster than you can surf with your remote. Place *Commercial Fiction* at the top of your reading list!"

—*Krakus Reviews*

"Not since Chauncey Gardiner in *Being There* has a character risen to world prominence as meteorically as Ralph Putz in *Commercial Fiction*....A laugh-a-minute literary *tour de force*..."

—*Manhattan Morning Star*

"The most hilarious novel I've read since *Catch-22*! A must read!"

—*Chicago Evening Messenger*

“A funny, fast-paced read, *Commercial Fiction* is literary video-surfing at its satirical best. Highly recommended.”

—Seattle *Sun-Dispatch*

“Is it hyper-reality, or is it *Commercial Fiction*? Only the author knows for sure...Or does he?”

— San Francisco *Midnight Star*

“Franz Kafka scripts *Saturday Night Live*...*Commercial Fiction* portrays a media-saturated world that will make its readers question their ability to tell fantasy from reality.”

—Detroit *Auto-Examiner*

“Delightful, hilarious and incisive...A bold and biting commentary on contemporary life. Don't miss this one.”

—*Publishers Millennial*

Commercial Fiction contextualizes the lives of the shakers and movers of business, government and lithe bodies in the most contemporary of literary environments: the Post Nomo-pomo aesthetic of interactive fiction that embraces our society's demand for Instant Product while satirizing it at the same time.”

—*Quarterly Journal of Commercial Fiction*

COMMERCIAL FICTION

Also by Vernon Frazer

POETRY

Improvisations (XXV-L)

Amplitudes

Improvisations (I-XXIV)

Demolition Fedora

Free Fall

Sing Me One Song of Evolution

Demon Dance

A Slick Set of Wheels

FICTION

Relic's Reunions

Stay Tuned to This Channel

RECORDINGS

Song of Baobab

Slam!

Sex Queen of the Berlin Turnpike

ANTHOLOGIES

THE JAZZ VOICE

THOMAS CHAPIN-ALIVE

COMMERCIAL FICTION

BY

VERNON FRAZER

BENEATH THE UNDERGROUND

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An earlier version of *Commercial Fiction* appeared in serial form in *Plain Brown Wrapper*.

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This is a work of fiction. Although the author has made reference to some real people in this novel, none of them did or said any of the things attributed to them.

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East Hartford, CT 06118

Printed in the United States of America

*To Dick Freeman,
a friend who's published my most adventurous work*

COMMERCIAL FICTION

is brought to you by **THE AUTHOR***

(Medium shot. A SUBURBAN MOTHER and her SON stare at the present page, hovering on display above a table in a Megabook\$ chain store.)

Son: Mommy, what's that?

Mother: That's the author.

Author: *(From behind the page.)* That's right. An author, ninety-nine and 44/100 percent pure. His work is guaranteed to build strong minds in eight ways, or your money back.

Son: I want to see him. *(Steps forward, tears away the page, revealing the author's snarling, bearded face.)*

Author: You little brat!

Mother: What a rude man! We're not buying *his* book. *(Drags SON by the arm.)*

Author: *(Runs after them.)* I'm sorry. I'll even give you a copy. Here!

Mother: I wouldn't even take one from the likes of you.

(The AUTHOR steps toward the camera, pawing his gray beard into a strained expression of congeniality.)

Being an author isn't as easy as it seems. It looks glamorous on the surface: the instant wealth, the Celebrity Status, the hundreds of adoring women

* an unco-opted non-subsidiary of WalMart, BrandsMart, K-Mart, Telemart, AT&T or

any other conglomerate in the American Merchandising Machine (as of this writing).

just waiting in line for an autograph, a few kind words and maybe a little *tete-a-tete* afterward.

(The book table behind the AUTHOR has no visitors.)

Before you can become an author, you have to be a writer. Being a writer takes lots of hard work and dedication. If your dedications are to editors and publishers, being a writer doesn't take quite as much hard work.

But there's more to being a writer than the act of writing itself. Writing requires courage, the kind of courage that enables you to:

- 1) Suck up to editors, publishers, agents and semi-literate staff in chain bookstores.
- 2) State your heartfelt personal opinions so that they agree unequivocally with those of the people whose influence can make or break your career.
- 3) Give your body and soul to people who wouldn't even consider buying them at a clearance sale.

Last but not quite least, there's the act of writing itself. Writing demands time, patience and a head thick enough not to crack while you're pounding it against a brick wall for decades on end. If you're an especially good writer, you'll need stamina so that you can continue to produce work posthumously. That's when the demand for your work gets really strong. To develop the stamina you need, you have to work hard, live clean and die young. That way, aging doesn't deplete the bodily energies you need to continue producing posthumous work. If you'll give me just a few minutes of your time, I'll be more than happy to show you what it's really like to live

A Life in the Day of (1)

I heard a fly buzz when I lived.

[illegible]

spooned around her Florida motel neon flickering outside window bodies
naked on an empty beach sunset moon felt her softness what a way to

6:45 a.m. ***BZZZ-BZZZ-BZZZ-BZZZ—BZZZ-BZZZ-BZZZ-BZZZ***
BZZZ-BZZZ-BZZZ-BZZZ—BZZZ-BZZZ-BZZZ-BZZZ

WHAP!

"FUUUUUUUUUUCK!"

The Real Way to start the day: kill the fly buzzing its Monday reminder. Waking cry of existential dread. Bounce out of bed. The pretense of vigor quickly vanishes as the dizzying whirl from reclining to standing settles like dead weight reminding me I'm not fully awake no matter what my position. The rush toward the coffee maker remains a trudge, the attempt at speed forced but ineffective. Nausea: not so much at being alive as at my options. Do I:

- (1) Say fuck it & go back to sleep?
- (2) Call in well, stay home & write?
- (3) Go to work, feel sick & write?
- (4) All of the above?
- (5) Some of the above in various permutations?
- (6) None of the above?

The answer, as anybody knows, is indeterminate. The choices have no relation to the available options. In *Commercial Fiction* you experience the lives of the rich and the powerful, the beautiful and the enticing, the shakers and movers of business, government and lithe bodies.

So, what does going to work have to do with *Commercial Fiction*? You go where the money is. You experience the upper-middle class and the politically-indebted, the average and the obsequious, the sitters and squirmers of real life. Without them, you can't afford to write *Commercial Fiction*. They don't generate interest so much as material. Material reward for showing up, that is.

If showing up is 85% of life, I've already got B quality. B-movie without the tawdry glamour of *noir*.

Commercial Fiction is about showing up. And glitzing away the *noir*.

Before I trot out the Armani suits and the Lady Clairol, let me get myself ready for my 85%.

Let me get you ready too, by showing you the disparity between image and reality:

Image: The Author, hoary in his eminence, slowly sips his tea while thoughtfully reviewing the news of the day, as presented by *The New York Times*. Gently awakened, he seats himself at his desk and prepares to write.

Reality: The author, hairy with no spare time for a trim, runs between kitchen and studio, in various but increasing states of dress, while slurping

coffee, printing out the morning's e-mail, making his lunch, cramming the printouts into his briefcase, grabbing his laptop and bolting out the door in a stress frenzy while the caffeine megadose kicks in prepares him for the road of insane drivers refuse to give me the right of way no matter how important my writing about *Commercial Fiction*. Readers want *real* people, plausible characters they can identify with, living exciting lives in suburban mansions, not in urban ghost towns begging for new residents. The rich and the powerful don't live the latest incarnation of ers, junkies, alcoholics and

***Insurance City
Security Systems***

1-800-911-1911

these are not the people hopes to attract to Insurance City's western burbs, where the latest generation of Stepford wives buys

**Insurance City
Condominiums**

***Downtown Living
at its finest***

starting at \$99,999

behind the billboards above apartments housing hook-women who got it on with

**COUNTRY
MUSIC
96.5 FM**

loud on their stereos, not to mention all the others. No,

**Swarthmore &
Ivy**

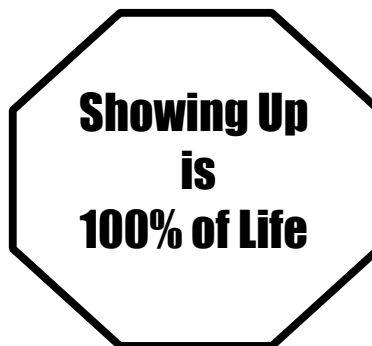
power suits and sweats.

Good Morning, Audience

(an interactive news program that demands author and reader participation. Its HOST is a low-key nondescript white male who exudes a comforting combination of homey warmth and intelligence. The HOST's image can be any morning news program host in television history, from Dave Garroway to Bryant Gumbel. His thick voice carries the mildly sluggish tone of a person waking.)

Good morning, audience, and welcome to today's show. I'm pleased to see that our live studio audience is awake.

(Laughter. The camera pans the red-eyed crowd, then zooms in on a pudgy man in his mid-forties wearing coke-bottle glasses and a fire sale suit. The wiry protrusions from his overgrown crewcut and bushy mustache give him the appearance of an untrimmed schnauzer. The camera zooms to the button on his left lapel:)



[] [] []

(Aerial view: suburban tract homes. VOICEOVER of America's housewives:)

Housewife #1: Willya lookit that schlub!

Housewife #2: He may be a schlub, but at least he shows up.

Housewife #3: So does the furnace man. He keeps me hot, too.

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(Studio. The HOST continues.)

On today's show we'll be bringing you the world news, the local news, the weather and our usual line-up of celebrity guests. In addition, *I'll* be bringing you something seldom seen on television. Is everybody ready?

(The audience howls its approval.)

We'll be right back after this station break.

[] [] []

(Medium shot, the schlub.)

Hi. My name is Ralph Putz, and I'm a Role Model. Now, most of you are used to seeing celebrity Role Models, people like Michael Jordan, Muhammad Ali, Mark McGwire and Harrison Ford, just to name a few. They do public service announcements like these or come to your school to tell you to stay in there and don't do drugs. Now, the truth is, most of you will never be celebrities like them. Very few of us have the God-given talents that will make us celebrity Role Models. I didn't, but I learned that I could be a Role Model just by using my own God-given talents. When I was your age and

in your grade at school, I learned that my greatest God-given talent was Showing Up. That's what I did in school, that's what I did in life. Showing Up meant I went to school. Showing Up meant I didn't do drugs. Showing Up meant I went to job interviews. Showing Up meant I got hired. Now, there are some wise guys out there who will tell you Showing Up is only 85% of life. Don't let them steer you down the path to trouble. Take it from me:

SHOWING UP IS 100% OF LIFE

Be there.

[] [] []

(Studio. HOST, irritably:)

I'm here, I'm here. And with today's news, no less.

Today an earthquake scoring ten points on the Richter scale struck the land mass formerly known as the Soviet Union, dropping Russia and its warring neighbors into the Arctic Ocean. An estimated three hundred million lives were lost. Also lost were the political ambitions of many Republicans, who had hoped to win public office this election by reviving the Cold War.

An airliner, as yet unidentified, struck the Empire State Building late last night, killing all two hundred of its passengers and causing a power outage from Montreal, Canada to Washington, D.C. The streets of all communities affected by the outage are overrun with looters toting automatic weapons. The Pentagon has informed the President that the crash may be the start of a massive terrorist attack. The National Guard was sent to the area, but apparently got lost in the dark. To aid our defense team, the nation's utility

companies have agreed to octuple their rates, effective immediately.

In Europe, the nations formerly known as Yugoslavia have forgotten who they were at war with and have begun attacking anybody they see, including their own citizens.

Mukhdhup Muhammad, newly self-appointed spiritual leader of the Nation of Islam, has withdrawn his support from the Fruit of Islam, drawing protests from Gay Rights groups worldwide.

In the local news, a recent drop in this show's ratings has caused the network to replace me after today's show. In a related sidebar, my wife, who is suing me for divorce and custody of our three children, is having an affair with this show's producer. He's moving into my Malibu home.

You want to know about the weather? It sucks.

And now, I promised you something you seldom see on television. I know it'll be the last thing *I* see on televison. Is everybody ready?

(The cheerful faces of applauding members of the audience. Cut to HOST, who holds a snubnose revolver to his temple. A startled hush from the audience. Then, their shocked murmur competes with the station's canned laughter.)

Yeah, yeah. You can't believe it, all you folks out there in TV-land? Well, get with the program. This is real.

(PRODUCER enters from the left, STATION MANAGER from the right. RALPH PUTZ walks down the aisle toward the stage.)

Get back, all of you. I'm not afraid to take a few of you with me.

(Medium. Everybody stops in their tracks.)

Now for my last words. Barney, I could kill you right now, but I'd rather you find out living with Angie is a fate worse than death. And to Angie, my beloved wife: I sold our house for a buck to a street person this morning and I didn't pay up my life insurance. I wish you the best of luck, both of you. You may deserve each other, but you don't deserve my assets. Not a damn one.

Fuck you, network. Fuck you, sponsors. Fuck you, audience. Goodbye.

(The audience boos and hisses. HOST sticks out his tongue and thumbs his nose. He pulls the trigger. At the audience's collective shriek, the screen goes black.)

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"DEAD AIR! WE'VE GOT DEAD AIR!" the Producer shouts, rushing frantically between the bloody desk and the blackened monitor.

"We've got a dead host, too," says the Stage Manager. He picks up a phone. "Damned prop! Somebody dial 911."

"Never mind that. Somebody get a fill-in. Who the hell are you, mister?"

"Ralph Putz." Offers a handshake.

"Cut to a commercial."

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(The Rock of Gibraltar, the logo of Gibraltar Life & Casualty, stands firm in center screen. Then, superimposed, an official document. A rubber stamp imprints "CANCELLED." The Rock dissolves. Cut to BANK REPRESENTATIVE approaching the front door of a home radiating affluence toward the mover's truck parked in front. Behind the door, the sound of crying voices.

Before entering, the REPRESENTATIVE grins at the camera. The HOST is playing the part of the REPRESENTATIVE. Cut to interior:)

Representative: I'm truly sorry that this happened. But you have to understand our position in this matter.

Host's Widow: But we have nowhere to go.

Representative: I'm sorry.

(Sobbing sounds as REPRESENTATIVE leaves, grinning. Lamps and bureau drawers fly through windows in his wake. A bed and box spring roll down the sloping front lawn. VOICEOVER:)

Gibraltar won't erode if you don't.

(A rubber stamp imprints an official document: "PAID BACK." Cut to the Rock of Gibraltar.)

[] [] []

(A seamy urban side street. Street people with stringy, unwashed hair lean against a white, shaker-shingled building. A gray-haired man wearing a week's supply of clothing under a wrinkled raincoat passes a bottle toward the other men. After sipping, they turn to the camera.)

Man #1: Hey, baby. Got a buck on ya?

(The camera moves forward.)

Man #2: Hey, lady. I'm a buck and I'll get on ya for twenty.

(The camera moves forward.)

Man #2: (voiceover) That's the best deal in town, hey.

(The WIDOW and her children tread nervously between the men clustered around the entrance. Interior. The HOST, with a priestly demeanor, speaks to the camera.)

I understand. The loss of a home can be truly devastating. Here at the Sister of Mercy Shelter we understand your pain. But we also understand the pain of people who had no home to begin with, of mothers whose children were born and raised in dumpsters. I'm afraid our beds are full.

(Weeping off-camera. Then, a slurred, raspy voiceover as the WIDOW and her children trudge into the distance:)

At Sister of Mercy, we help people who want to help themselves. If you want to help yourself, get here early. Or go sleep somewhere else.

[] [] []

"Let me get this straight," says the Producer, pawing back his thinning hair. "You're telling me that you want to just go up there in front of the cameras and take over. Right here, right now?"

"I'm here." Putz's shaggy mustache shadows his grin.

"We need someone with experience. Tony. Any luck?"

"Holly's in Hawaii, Phil's in Pennsylvania. Everybody else is an answering machine."

The Producer's appraising stare takes in the Role Model's paunch rolling over a low-slung vinyl belt. "You're right. You're here."

A Life in the Day of (2)

I'm here now, boxed inside the illusion that the physical world is an illusion and vice-versa. But I'm not sure which box I'm in: home or work. If it's my desktop computer I'm at home. My laptop I'm at work. Either place I think Outside the Box, the latest corporate buzzword for creative thinking in uncreative environments. But where am I?

Here's the walking Reality Check: Bubbles LaFlamme, the miniskirted mid-30's bottle blonde, parading her killer legs down the row of cubicles. Her four-inch heels click, even on the institutional carpeting. Male heads turn so fast coffee splatters their laps. Strange suppressed mating dances ensue. As she curves past my desk I notice her hair is shading toward platinum. "Your hair looks really bright today. You catch a lot of sun this weekend?"

"Only my hairdresser knows for sure." The Lady Clairol line through her kewpie-doll grin, a giveaway tic at its corners. Great looks, but no originality. She struts away from me, her gum snapping disco syncopation.

There's one box I'm not in. So I think creatively—and Outside the Box.

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(Black screen. The sound of high heels clicking and gum snapping disco syncopation. At the center of the screen, a tiny dot appears. It hovers to the beat, emanating a golden glow. The hover becomes a spin that launches the

dot forward. The spinning dot enlarges and takes on the shape of a box. The box springs forward, a runway cage with a curvaceous woman dancing as wildly as a go-go girl, engulfed in the nearly blinding glow. A sharp pop of gum stops the music and the box. Under the FOX IN THE BOX label BUBBLES LAFLAMME poses enticingly, hands on the hips of her leopard-skin bikini. Her glittering aqua gaze mists toward the camera. She speaks:)

Are you Out of the Box? I'm not. But if you are, there's still hope for you.

A little dash of FOX IN THE BOX gives you that something extra that catches the eye of the shakers and movers in today's world. If you want free penthouse suites, luxury cars and handsome men who take you to *all* the right places, you want FOX IN THE BOX.

(The rhythm resumes. BUBBLES dances wildly while the box spins back to a dot. A sunlike glow remains onscreen. BUBBLES in voiceover:)

FOX IN THE BOX gets you where you want to go.

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Straight out of morning TV commercials, that woman: self-improvement through beauty aids. Always the aura of mystery: the Mystery of Product, not the Mystery of Woman. If you've got it, flaunt it, I say. And Bubbles does.

"Ms. LaFlamme, Commissioner Johnson-Barr would like to see you in his office, ASAP," Melissa announces over the morning's first soap opera broadcast blaring from the mini-TV on her desk. The soft-eyed Clerk II, who considers dreaming of a modeling career her real job, resumes her sporadic keyboard clicks behind me, a tap here and there between the cast's lines.

Bubbles' hips sway over her heels as she approaches the elevator, a little extra strut in her stride.

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(The commercial's rhythm. On the box, BUBBLES dances into the distance. Stops. Looking over her shoulder, she says:)

And you don't get in *this* fox's box.

[] [] []

Did that really happen?

Nice little spin, the commercial's personal touch. And while she's parading off to see the Commissioner's johnson bar, Bubbles is still sitting at her desk talking on the phone about yesterday's soaps: "I really wouldn't say he's an *admirable* character."

If I base her personality on a trace of conversation, I can give her bonus points for intellect; a college professor who taught the Modern Novel used to ask his students if such-and-such a character was admirable. It didn't seem like a very postmodern question to ask. But maybe Bubbles isn't as uninhibited as her image suggests. When a literary magazine called *Nude Beach* published a story of mine, I forwarded her name to the editors as part of my mailing list. The flyer they sent her came back unopened, "Take Me Off Your List" written in clear bold script. Since she didn't open the envelope I assume she was rejecting nude beaches, not me. She rejected me with the commercial come to life.

But did it really?

It's so hard to tell. The accumulated inundation of stimuli seems to create a spontaneous Virtual Reality. Bubbles is a fading advertisement, an elevator riding to the top floor, a telephone voice, a defiance of the conventional logic applicable to time and space. If she's in more than one place, then I'm not sure I'm at work. Maybe I'm home, typing in my morning fog, waiting for the caffeine jolt. But maybe I'm not.

Kyle the walkman'd stockroom clerk pushes an empty dolly past me. His

unwashed ponytail flaps against the back of his black Joe Camel T-shirt.
YOU ARE WHAT YOU ADVERTISE.

[Reminder: Order a T-shirt with your face printed on it.]

It's a violation of my principles, pushing somebody else's product with my chest and back. Free advertising. Slave wages. Right after the sixties I tried to explain this to the friends I made when I first moved to Insurance City. They *drank* Bud, so what was *my* problem? The same then as now: that youth rebellion comes down to wearing a commercial and listening to bad rock.

But Kyle's walkman overflow tells me I'm at work. He isn't someone I have fantasies about. Aside from delivering copy paper, he exists to sort my illusion from my reality. So here I am in the office, locked to the laptop locked to my desk. So many distractions here. Let's return to

***—WE DISRUPT THE “FLOW” OF
THIS FRAGMENTED NARRATIVE IN
ORDER THAT WE MAY BRING YOU
THE FOLLOWING INTERRUPTION—***

Author: (*offscreen*) Come on. I'm in the head.

Voice: (*offscreen*) In TV we have a five-second tape delay. In literature we have an indefinite tape delay.

Author: When you do this, you make me feel as though I'm not in control of my material.

Voice: It depends on what you mean by “you.” In a very real sense, I *am* you.

Author: True...

Voice: Not to mention the issues you raise by “control” and “material.”

Author: This isn't exactly the time to wax theoretical.

(A toilet flushes. The AUTHOR appears, pulling up his zipper and notching his trouser belt. He glances at the screen. Momentary shock, then blush. Through a wan grin struggling toward poise, he says:)

Being a writer isn't just sitting down and telling a story or telling a non-story or not telling a story or not-telling a non-story and all the attendant ramifications of whatever theory is in fashion at the moment. Being a writer carries a certain responsibility. If you're attuned to what you're writing, the things you write can come true. It started happening to me in college. I'd type some situation, something *surreal*, something *totally* improbable, and it would come true. At least part of it, anyway. And it *still* happens. William Burroughs has written about it. When I read that he found things came true after *he* wrote about them, I didn't feel so isolated, even though the greatest part of my life takes place in isolation. But what I learned from having my own experience confirmed is that the writer, even in this high-tech era, occupies a shamanistic role, sometimes as shaman, sometimes as prophet, sometimes

**—WE DISRUPT THE “FLOW” OF
THIS FRAGMENTED NARRATIVE IN
ORDER THAT WE MAY BRING YOU
THE FOLLOWING INTERRUPTION—**

Only this time I wasn't, uh, indisposed. I'll pick up the topic again later, if I can. If not, well, how much *real* closure does life offer before the Reaper beats us? Let's return to

Good Morning, Audience

The Producer flails a sheet of paper like a flyswatter against a swarm. “*This*—this is the most outrageous contract I’ve ever seen. If you think I’m signing it, you’re crazy.” The blue-purple blue-purple throb from the vein on his boiled temple coronas his balding head.

“Sane or crazy, I’m here, and you’ve got Dead Air.” Putz is unflappable.

“What are you trying to *do* to me?”

“To you, nothing. I’m trying to Be All That I Can Be.”

“Then join the *Army*, for God’s sake.”

“Been there, done that.”

“Go there and do it again, for all I care.”

“I already did. Would you rather I got an agent?”

“*You!*” Snickers. “You wouldn’t know *how* to get an agent.”

Putz grins his Schnauzer grin. “I know how to show up at an agent’s office.”

“And what would you do when you got there?”

“I dunno. The rest just seems to take care of itself.”

A sinking expression consumes the Producer’s face. He sags into the nearest seat. “I’ll sign.”

[] [] []

(The homes of America, aerial view. PUTZ’s low-key murmur serves as

background music.)

Housewife #1: He's not exactly handsome...

Housewife #2: But he's not really ugly...

Housewife #3: I like the way he stands up for himself.

Putz: I'm the morning host, not an undertaker. Please remove this body from my chair.

Housewife #3: See what I mean? He don't take nothin' offa nobody.

Putz: That's very rude.

Housewife #2: I'm beginning to see.

Putz: If you don't, I'm walking off the show.

Housewife #1: Just like Waldo when he puts his foot down. I love it.

Putz: That's better.

Housewives #1, 2 and 3: He's the *best*.

[] [] []

PUTZ TAKES OVER SHOW IN CRISIS Emergency Walk-on Becomes Audience Favorite

It was do or die. filled the dead anchor's low-key stage manner
The air was as dead as shoes after hurried defused the impact of the
the long-time anchorman negotiations with station tragedy broadcast only

[] [] []

(Interior. Plush office of the Network CEO. Glass cases holding rows of Emmies line the wall behind the PRODUCER, who sits in a thickly-cushioned black leather chair that seems to dwarf him. The CEO, out of view, speaks with a booming authority whose every word pummels the PRODUCER:)

YOU MEAN YOU CAN SIT THERE LIKE THE GODDAMNED FOOL YOU ARE
AND TELL ME YOU ACTUALLY *SIGNED* THAT PIECE OF PAPER?

[] [] []

(A seamy urban side street. The PRODUCER, WIDOW and CHILDREN weave around the homeless people crowding the sidewalk. Cut to interior: a cramped office with the backs of chairs forming a half-circle in front of the director's desk that faces the screen. Behind the desk and to its right, another desk faces the wall. In-baskets on both desks overflow with paper. Flanked by a pair of high-piled baskets, the SHELTER DIRECTOR, a woman with short graying hair and a severe face, introduces herself, then:)

And this is the monitor from our funding source, Mr. au Thor.

I glance toward her clients, grin and turn back to my laptop. No point to correcting her Franco-Nordic corruption of what she thinks is my name. Nor to explaining that my name is really my function. Above all, no point to blowing the cover for my function: typing up my analysis of the shelter's operation.

"Mr. au Thor," she continues, "I hate to interrupt your work, but I am, as you know, a firm believer in the shelter service consumer's right to confidentiality."

"No problem. I'll come back and finish up after the interview."

I close the laptop on the back desk, leave her office and drop myself in the seat next to Vanessa Caliente, her secretary. Vanessa's beehive of thick black hair tilts back so that the overhead light puddles gently in the hollows below her cheekbones. She chirps click-click rapid-fire Español into the telephone. Her left hand twists and fondles a plastic lanyard woven from the colors of the Los Locos gang the same teasing way it will my cock. Her dark eyes dart in my direction, glitter black gold into my gaze. Once our

eyes lock, she turns away. My eyes follow the long thigh curving through her skintight denims. She's teasing me every way she can before she shares with me the Shelter Director's latest injustice and her desire to replace her boss. Finally she clicks the phone onto the receiver and spins her beacon grin toward me.

"Hi, Arthur!"

(Game Show. Three CONTESTANTS stand behind podiums. CONTESTANT #1 is a bony white male with long sandy hair matted down to his shoulders, four front teeth missing and a week's unwashed clothing layered over him. CONTESTANT #2 is the Producer. CONTESTANT #3 is the Widow. The SHELTER DIRECTOR, wearing a gray business suit, is the emcee.)

Director: Welcome to *GIMME SHELTER*, the only morning game show that gets you through the night. And now I'll introduce our three contestants. Contestant #1, tell our TV audience what you do.

Contestant #1: Baby I do *lotsa* things, separately and in combination. You name it, I done it. Booze, pot, acid, smack, cocaine, crack...

Director: I know one crack you won't do unless you win a free Lysol bath, sweetie. Contestant #2, what do you do?

Contestant #2: I'm a Producer. Or was.

Director: If you win, sweetie, you'd *better* produce. Contestant #3, tell us what you do.

Contestant #3: I'm...a mother.

Director: Oh, you're a re-producer. Or former. You look like your trophy wife days were a long time ago. Of course, if you win, you *could* be a trophy *matron* for the night. *(Curls a finger under #3's chin.)*

I follow Vanessa up the stairs, the better to observe her cheeky sway. She unlocks the door to the family bedroom, lets me enter first, then presses the door shut with her shapely seat cushion. "You should see what she does, that Director. What I told you before? She talks fresh to everybody. She makes the people have sex with her or else they go sleep in the dumpster. She hits on the womens too. Even me. I don't like no womens hittin' on me."

I'm concerned. If she doesn't stop talking we might experience coitus interruptus when the family takes the room. "You like sex too," curving my arms around the taper of her waist and pressing my groin against hers. Instant hard-on.

"But we want different things."

Instant soft-on. "We do?"

"Not you and me. Me and her. She wants sex, I want to be Director."

"If you get it, don't talk to your clients the way you talk to me."

"What you mean? I talk nice to you."

"You have ulterior motives."

"Don't talk to me like that. I am not ulterior to nobody."

"That's not what I meant."

"I know. Sometimes we say things we don't mean."

"Maybe we should just stop talking," I suggest as she presses against me again.

"Mmmm..." through lips tasting mine one lip at a time.

We grind toward the double bed.

(Game show.)

Director: And here are today's prizes. Winner #3 gets to sleep on (voice-over) *AN ARMY COT!*

(Cut to army cot. VANESSA, wearing a neon blue string bikini and glitter-gold high-heels, bounces up and down in positions exotic dancers use.)

As you can see from my charming and beautiful secretary, this cot has the lively spring of a trampoline. If you bounce in your sleep, this will satisfy your every need.

And Winner #2 will win a wonderful and solitary night's sleep on
(voiceover) *A SINGLE BED!*

(Cut to bed. VANESSA poses on her side, the curve of her hips accentuated by the top leg stretching toward the screen.)

Looks good, doesn't it?

feels good ohhhh baby the way your tight little pussy squeezes my rod
omigod I don't know if I can hold come on hold back hold those lovely
curves the soft belly flesh pressing against me the swivel of your hips those
legs kicking the air rubbing down my thighs and calves your long nails
digging into my ass you look omigod your hair spread across the mattress
baby-faced Medusa nipples stiff brush my chest my cock oh god my cock
the way I slide inside your softness satin silk no smoother than both oh oh
ohhhhhh baby you whimper I moan the bed rocks

(Game Show.)

Director: And now for the Grand Prize! Today's Winner #1 will get to share—

All: OMIGOD!

(AUTHOR and VANESSA spring off the double bed, cross their bodies with their arms. They scamper around the floor, snatching up clothing and trying

to pull it on with little success.)

Director: Let's go to a commercial.

(Replay of AUTHOR and VANESSA springing off the bed. Cut to a hype-meister in his late forties, raccoon-eyed, weak-chinned, wearing a discount store suit and a black toupee showing more loose threads than hair.)

LIKED THAT MATTRESS ACTION, DID YA? WELL, HERE AT INSANE ERNIE'S MATTRESS PAD YOU DON'T HAVE TO CLIMB OFF. INSANE ERNIE HAS MATTRESSES THAT SUIT YOUR EVERY NEED AT PRICES THAT WILL MAKE YOU WANT TO ROCK AND ROLL. WE HAVE SINGLES FOR MIDGETS AND SOLITARIES, DOUBLES FOR COUPLES, QUEENS FOR THE DRAG SET AND KINGS FOR THE GROUP-GROPERS. WHENEVER YOU FEEL THE NEED TO DO THE DEED, JUST COME ON DOWN TO THE MATTRESS PAD WHERE THE PRICES ARE *INSANE*.

(Rates start at \$29.95 for first four hours. Ceiling mirrors not included.)

Voiceover: TRAGEDY STRIKES THE AIRWAVES.

(In slow-motion, the host of Good Morning, Audience shoots himself and falls across his desk.)

ONE STAR FALLS, ANOTHER RISES.

(PUTZ sweeps a gesture of revulsion at the body on the desk.)

ALL THIS AND MORE ON ***THE NEWS AT NOON***. BE THERE.

(Voiceover:)

I'm here, I'm here. (AUTHOR *turns away from laptop to grin at the screen.*) In today's fast-paced high-stressed world it's more and more difficult to separate factoid from fiction. You didn't think I'd *really* be dumb enough to get caught with my pants down, do you?

(*Medium shot. AUTHOR looks at shirttails dangling over his bare crotch, a white sock on his left foot, a Reebok on his unsocked right.*)

I guess I'd better get back to work.

While the shelter's night-time use is down from the projected levels, a recent field visit indicated the shelter has enormous potential for daytime use. It is my recom-

And the winner is... Contestants #2 and 3. You get to join me in a *menage a trois*. Oh, you won't? Sorry, no consolation prizes. The winner is Contestant #1. So,

When I'm locked to my laptop time and space assume a life of their own, both inside my head and outside in the real world. Sensory bombardment blurs the line separating

(*The seamy urban side street. The PRODUCER, WIDOW and CHILDREN trudge through the homeless people crowding the sidewalk. Each taunt starts one of them sobbing. When they pass out of view, the HOST steps into center screen, smirking:*)

In every game, there are winners and there are losers. *GIMME SHELTER* makes room for both.

(Turns and walks away from the camera. Offscreen a coarse voice cries out:)

This is my goddamn dumpster. You take your bitch and them brats an' go find your own. Bald-headed bastid!

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Yeah, the hair's still there. But where was I? Somewhere...struggling to sort my senses from the stimulation they receive. Even a 4-F like me wants to Be All You Can Be. But are Reaching Full Potential and Information Overload the same thing? Even when I'm locked into my laptop mind body and soul the communion of myself with the words that portray my perceptions on the screen interior reality expresses itself as nonstop bombardment by exterior reality or what used to be exterior reality. Even though I live in my head like most writers the stimuli rocket through endlessly violating my sensibilities imagine a woman raped repeatedly no pause for torn vaginal tissues to heal. A spear of deodorant stick here a dick of toothpaste there all guaranteed to aggravate my bleeding hemorrhoids despite their money-back guarantees to keep me odor and plaque free through the next seventy-two hours of media attacks. Even Your Best Friends Won't Tell You Your Breath Stinks Your Armpits Reek Your Crotch Rots. But the heat-seeking missile of Truth strikes the minute you stare into the bathroom mirror: the tube of toothpaste blasting itself through the other side of the mirror its mint-flecked paste spraying the glass my reflection and me like the air escaping a balloon, the deodorant stick springing to scented life rubbing my armpits so raw that its alcohol base seeps into the broken flesh and burns it. Even fast-forwarding through the commercials is no escape. In the Golden Age of TV one commercial separated Sid Caesar from his next skit or the next round of the Gillette Cavalcade of Sports Friday

Night Fights. Then there were two then four now eight. When I hit the remote's play button I think I'm back to watching the show but the ad runs like a narrative until the protagonist antagonist or enabler whips out the product and the action-packed adventure climaxes with a guarantee of safety against graying hair dirty laundry sink stains body fat or impotence. The mechanism for co-opting dissent that began in the fifties and turned the protests of the sixties into commodity quests has reached new levels of sophistication

BIG BROTHER IS NOT WATCHING YOU

BIG BROTHER LIVES INSIDE OF YOU

but there are always the nameless Winston Smiths like me who try if not to subvert the message then at least to let others outside the reach of my immediate consciousness know that they're stuck playing a shell game. Turning the products back on themselves inverting their cliches even becoming them with a vengeance, these flailing strategies at least offer resistance to

Big Brother: (*on intercom*) Get out of your head and get your ass in here. I've got an assignment for you.

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"Your Breath Stinks Your Armpits Reek Your Crotch Rots," Big Brother says through his trim black mustache, his long finger stabbing the air in front of me.

"Your knuckles need Hair Remover," I retort.

"And this shelter report needs Blank-It, the Thorough Whitewash. Not a trace of stain in twenty-four hours or your money back."

"I didn't even realize I'd completed it. Last I knew it was my cover

document while I was working on *Commercial Fiction*, an attempt to express reality by using the imagination to extend its insidious reach. Do your thing till someone comes then switch the screen. Ctl + F6: *FAST!*"

"Man, you move so fast you can't even keep up with yourself."

"What do you want, Bro? A ritual diatribe against the fast-paced Modern Age that makes each of us a walking Stress Attack? Every generation says that about its technology."

Big Brother leans back and laughs. "That's not what I want. I want to know about some alleged irregularities at the Sister of Mercy Shelter."

"What do you want to know?"

"That young babe, Vanessa. How is she for sack action?"

"I've never tried her."

"That's not what she says. She told the Commissioner's office she's filing sexual harassment charges against you and against the Shelter Director. She says there's a big game going on."

My fingers wipe the sweat off my forehead. "I thought I was just imagining that." Wasn't I?

"You gotta watch that," Big Brother says, lighting a cigar in his Smoke-Free office and switching on an air-filter the size of his new computer monitor. "People imagined electricity, automobiles, airplanes, spaceships ...and you know what? They've all come true. As a public servant, you've got to be particularly careful. Remember when Jimmy Carter was running for President? He told *Playboy* he lusted in his heart. That's the same thing as lusting in real life."

"Come on! That's just the old puritanical guilt trip."

"It's also the logical extension of ending the mind-body duality."

"I guess I should be more aware of unintended consequences. So, what's the *real* problem?"

Big Brother leans back in his chair. "There's a guy on the Shelter's Board named Putz..."

"Don't tell me it's Ralph Putz."

Brother's backhand sweep shakes the ashes off his cigar's inch-wide

cinder. "Yeah, that's the dude's name."

Damn! This is getting spooky.

"Why? You know him?"

"A little. By reputation, mostly."

"You'll get to know him a little better today. The Commissioner wants one of my staff to meet with him."

"And I'm nominated."

Big Brother grins. "You're Number One."

Mr. Putz Has Left the Building

the receptionist tells me the celebrity cliché same tone every time except after the fifth she drops the “I’m sorry” preface her polite smile fades to a half-grin then tightens to a sneer almost a snarl with each repetition.

“Look.” I rest my hands on her desk, lean across its institutional green blotter. “I’m not trying to be a pain in the butt—”

“If you’re not, you must have a great natural talent for it.”

“He made a call to Commissioner Johnson-Barr this morning. I’m supposed to meet with him about a matter of great concern to him.”

An expression of resignation shades her face. At last! I’ve worn her down. My writer’s persistence in the face of insistent failure has paid off in one area of my life, at least—though not the one I want it to. “Why don’t you go through the door on the right and have a seat? Someone will be with you shortly.”

“Thank you.” Victory’s in my grasp, I can tell.

But you couldn’t tell that by the cubicle I’m suddenly sitting in: walls so close they remind me of the cells in horror flicks whose walls crush their prisoners and a light so blinding I wonder if I’ve stumbled into a brain-washing compound. My elbows bump the walls every time I move. What feels like a long period of silence under the lights in the cramped booth disorients my senses. Then a speaker crackles and a voice asks: “And what is your reason for being here today, Mr. X?”

“I’m looking for someone.”

"You're here looking for That Special Someone?"

"Special to some people, I guess." What more can I say about Putz? I never heard of him before he showed up this morning.

"And if you were to find That Special Someone today, what would you say?"

"Let's try to work things out."

"You must be taking lessons from Alan Alda. Tell us, Mr. X. How would you describe yourself, sight unseen, to That Special Someone?"

How *would* I describe myself? That's the hardest thing to do. Middle-aged, graying, physically fit despite my beltline paunch...Too factual, too mundane. A writer trying to dig past an evanescent reality, hampered yet helped by the internal and external derangement of his senses? Too abstract. A pencil-pusher who runs his writing reconnaissance covertly on company time? No, gives away too much. Wrong context, anyway. A government flak-catcher? No. Putz would know that already...

"I see. You're a strong, silent type," the over-amplified voice booms and echoes around me.

My hands raise to protect my ears. My elbows bang the tight walls.

"Aha! A shaker and a mover. We have a strong, silent type who's also a shaker and a mover. It's time to make your choice."

"What choice?" I ask. The silence tells me the man hasn't heard my question. The heat and light are making my forehead sweat. I reach into my left pocket, pull out a handkerchief. My elbow whacks against the wall. I wipe my forehead. Thump the wall again.

"You'd better make up your mind. The strong, silent shaker and mover is rattling his cage."

My ears! Dammit! Both arms rattle the cage.

"Congratulations, Mr. X. You have been chosen as a winner on this portion of *The Mating Game*. Come out and meet your new partner."

The door opens. I step out of the booth, my eyes still filled with blazing light, stumble and fall flat on my face. Laughter. And another voice booming around me:

"TODAY'S WINNING COUPLE WILL RECEIVE AN ALL-EXPENSES PAID TEN-DAY VACATION AT THE SOUTH POLE MOTOR LODGE IN ANTARCTICA, A 1967 FORD FAIRLANE AND A TEN-DOLLAR GIFT CERTIFICATE FROM ACME TOWING COMPANY OF COLUMBUS, OHIO."

Winning couple! *The Mating Game*! What did I stumble into? My vision clears enough for me to make out Bubbles LaFlamme's waxed legs and high wave of platinum hair gleaming under the studio lights. Ten days with Bubbles at the South Pole! Those long legs lovelocked around me, those full lips brushing mine! And the penguins her only alternative!

Yes!

"NO!" Her eyes blaze green flames. *"NO! NOT HIM! ANYONE BUT HIM!"*

The camera tracks her hysterical exit. She presses the elevator's down button, glares impatiently at the floor indicator. Takes the stairs instead. Her four-inch heels break. She tumbles down two flights of stairs. Rises, hair disheveled and darkened with stairway grit. Runs outside. Climbs into the rusted-out Fairlane. It doesn't start. She leaps out, slams the door. Flags down the Acme Towing truck. The brawny driver, tanktop ponytail and tattoo, offers her a hand. The camera zooms in on her derriere swinging up the steps and onto the seat next to him. His arm wraps around her shoulder. The truck drives toward the horizon.

Next thing I see on the monitor is me: a gape-mouthed blush sagging at shoulders and knees.

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HOW WILL OUR HERO ESCAPE THIS EMBARRASSING DILEMMA? WILL HE ENJOY A TEN-DAY SOLO STAY AMONG THE PENGUINS OF HIS CHOICE? WILL HE TAKE VANESSA, THE DAY-BED WONDER OF THE SHELTER WORLD? OR WILL OUR WOUNDED HERO

switch screens? Why leave the building Putz report to Big Brother not? Another reality has already left before I that I've failed in my awaits its creation and stumble into a crazed mission not that he channel-surfing has its rumble some shockjock gives a damn beyond own analogues, *deus* host started on his talk keeping a fresh stash *ex machina* be damned show to boost ratings of big Cuban cigars

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assuming I was ever out of the office in the first place. In a network of simultaneous realities I can surf any channel. Maybe I've had my morning fitness workout with Vanessa Bedgrave, my rejection immunity injection from Bubbles LaFlamme and my daily dose of philosophical inquiry with Big Brother. So, where am I now? Which is illusion, which is reality? Any button I care to press will take me somewhere equally present, equally lacking in real closure. Continuity becomes the sequence of juxtapositions experienced, history the juxtapositions remembered.

How to separate illusion from reality?

Illusion: The author takes his morning break from his day's creative labor. Makes green tea, turns the TV to PBS. Misses the button on his remote. Instead finds himself watching Psycho Babel, the controversial talk show host whose raging issue today is Reverse Transsexual Gender Abuse Among Middle-Aged Necrophiliacs. The vehement reactions of the guests pique his curiosity. He watches so intently that he doesn't feel his fingers blistering from the heat of his Pfaltzgraff cup. Very interesting...in a vulgar sort of way, naturally. But...what is *this*? An image of himself, graying and wearing a corduroy jacket, stumbles into the screen, a perplexed look on his face.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" Babel demands through a predator's snarl.

"It's an accident. I was looking for a Putz that, uh, left the building."

“You want a putz?” snarls one guest, a biker type whose broad shoulders bristle. “Talk to the surgeon that didn’t stitch mine back on this last operation.”

“Maybe it got bitten off at your last funeral home. Post-mortem reflex,” says another.

What am *I* doing here? the author asks. “It’s not *my* putz,” he says. “It’s a *person* named—”

“I don’t care what you’re looking for,” the biker snarls. “I was talking and you interrupted me. That’s very rude. You know what I do to rude little punks like you?”

Before the author knows it, the biker has lifted his duplicate overhead. Through the screen he goes, landing face-first on the livingroom floor.

“Let’s stomp the wimp.”

The guests climb through the broken screen, kick the fallen author in the face and sides. The watching author backs away from five attackers. One lunges for him. In self-defense he hits the attacker with his remote. The channel button changes to a talk show panel discussing Spousal Abuse Among Masturbating Bachelors and immediately cuts to a commercial:

IS GETTING BEATEN SENSELESS RUINING *YOUR* COMPLEXION? THEN *YOU* NEED PAM’S POLYURETHANE PANCAKE MAKEUP. PAM’S POLYURETHANE PANCAKE MAKEUP LETS YOU TAKE THOSE TOUGH BEATINGS WITHOUT WORRYING ABOUT UNSIGHTLY BUMPS AND BRUISES. JUST ONE APPLICATION A DAY WILL KEEP YOU LOOKING LIKE A *LOVELY* TARGET.

(Caution: the Surgeon General has determined that Pam’s Polyurethane Pancake Makeup is of limited effectiveness in preventing internal injuries such as cerebral hemorrhages.)

Reality: "The receptionist kept telling me he left the building," I tell Big Brother over the air purifier sucking up the yellow smoke that billows from his Cuban's glowing tip. "I tried."

"Don't sweat it. You were there, he wasn't. Let the dude call back."

"After that sexual harassment charge, I'm a little leery of any reality I walk into. Assuming they're realities in the first place, that is."

Brother leans back, his black mustache and gapped teeth grinning reassurance. "It's not the realities that you walk into that you gotta worry about. It's the realities that walk into *you* that you gotta watch."

"Good point." Brother's hardly an Orwellian projection. He seems to know the score as it's tallied in the back rooms of the world. He should; he manages the subliminal information programming that has shaped the culture. "Fuck it. Let's take a break."

"It's closer to lunch than mid-morning."

"Did I say 'Fuck it'?"

"You did. At least in this reality."

"Then let's hit the cafeteria."

Over steaming coffee and the front page of the tabloid *Amerika Today* we swap small talk, glancing through the circular glass wall at the Interstate so close a car could leap a guard rail and land on us and at the nearby security desk vulnerable to end runs just like the one happening now guests from Psycho Babel's show breaking through the guards' TV hurling one frail badge through the screen sending him skidding across our table till his nose breaks against the view of the Interstate. The guests overrun the lobby then the caf pounding the employees who haven't fled to cover or ducked under a table. Finally they leave.

Brother looks up from under the table. "What'd I tell ya?"

I raise my head. "You're right. Looks like this one walked into us. It looked pretty damn real, too." I pull the *Amerika Today* off my head. What protection did I think it could offer me against these crazed Reality Invaders? I should just crumple it up and toss it in the "THIS IS NOT A WASTE BASKET" waste basket that reminds me of the seminal post-

modern work, “*Ceci n’est pas une pipe.*” But I pause long enough to read its headline:

PUTZ WALKS OFF SHOW, OUT OF BUILDING

Rising Star Cites Network President’s Lowball Offer as Reason

What does TV’s hottest star do when he gets hot under the collar? The headline says it all. Ralph Putz, who was able to raise *Good Morning, Audience*—but not its former host—from the ratings dead in a remarkably short time, expressed his strong dissatisfaction with the network’s

latest offer by leaving the show he saved single-handedly. At issue was appropriate compensation for his incredibly rapid rise from a Role Model in public service announcements to the most in-demand emcee in today’s competitive morning TV market. “I know what I’m worth,” he

The News at Noon

(Newsroom. The male co-anchor sits on the left side of a kidney-shaped desk, the female co-anchor on the right. Each is carefully-groomed, about age thirty-five. The male is African-American, the female a blonde Caucasian. In a crowd of attractive people, neither would stand out.)

Ryan Bumble: Welcome to *The News at Noon*.

Jessica Candy: We'll be back with today's news after these messages.

*

Bumble: Some say he's the best

Candy: But none say he's the brightest.

Bumble: Today Ralph Putz, the rapidly-rising star of *Good Morning, Audience*, walked off the show he had saved from certain cancellation earlier this morning.

Candy: At issue was the salary Putz received for saving the program after its former host committed suicide at the start of today's broadcast.

Bumble: Network President A. Barnum Rube refused to grant Putz's on-air request for \$20,000,000 a year, citing the former host's suicide as the reason for the astonishing rise in today's ratings.

Candy: Putz, known for his low-key, affable style, asked his staff to return the dead former host to his former desk before walking out.

Bumble: Well, Jessica, I guess that's just his low-key, affable way of saying, "I'm mad as hell and won't take it anymore."

Candy: You know, that line from Paddy Chayevsky's *Network* calls to mind a related story.

Bumble: We'll show you after these words from our sponsors.

*

Candy: Early this morning, after receiving his pink slip, the former host of *Good Morning, Audience* took his life before an entire nation of viewers.

(Footage from the show.)

BBBBB you, network. BBBBB you, sponsors. BBBBB you, audience. Goodbye.

(The audience boos and hisses. In slow-motion replay: HOST sticks out his tongue and thumbs his nose. He pulls the trigger. At the audience's collective shriek, the screen goes black.)

Bumble: That's one way to start your show with a bang.

Candy: *(A cold glare, then:)* Is there Life after Death? You'll find out—after these messages.

*

Bumble: You've seen him everywhere today.

Candy: You've seen him alive, you've seen him dead

Bumble: And you've seen him alive again.

Candy: By now, you're probably wondering "Is he or isn't he?"

Bumble: Talk about Elvis sightings! The former host of *Good Morning, Audience*, took his life earlier this morning at the start of his show.

(The suicide scene replays in extreme slow-motion.)

Candy: Despite his passing this morning, the host has been seen in commercials for Gibraltar Life Insurance and public service announcements for the Sister of Mercy Shelter. Our news crew spoke with the appropriate spokespeople earlier today.

(Front steps of Gibraltar Insurance. The CEO, a white-haired man with patrician features, responds to the familiar-sounding voiceover.)

Voiceover: These commercials were made prior to his death, weren't they?

CEO: It is my understanding that they were taped after he left *Good Morning, Audience*. We would certainly want to avoid any appearance of conflict of interest with regard to our hiring practices.

Voiceover: Are you saying these commercials were filmed *after* his death?

CEO: It would be inappropriate for me to comment on that.

Voiceover: Why would it be inappropriate? The man is either alive or dead.

CEO: Gibraltar sells Life Insurance. If people who rose from the dead were to collect on their policies, we would be out of business within a very short time frame.

(Entrance to Sister of Mercy Shelter. DIRECTOR stands on the sidewalk in front of it.)

Voiceover: Did you know he was dead?

Director: We serve so many people it's hard to say. Given the desperate straits they find themselves in, many of our service consumers look as if they might be dead.

Voiceover: When was the ad filmed?

Director: This morning.

Voiceover: Before or after he shot himself?

Director: In the mornings we hold our *GIMME SHELTER* evaluation, where we determine which needy applicants will get the beds that are in such short supply due to our inadequate funding.

Voiceover: Before or after?

Director: I really can't say.

(Studio.)

Bumble: But there are some who can.

(Street. The WIDOW and the former PRODUCER.)

Voiceover: Are both of you sure he was alive?

Widow: He was *definitely* alive. When we left the shelter, I looked back and...and there he was, big as life. Er, almost as big. And he had this *smug* little gloat.

Producer: He said he'd let me live so he could see me suffer with her. But I had no inkling whatsoever that he would find a way to actually stick around and *watch*.

(Studio.)

Candy: So, the answer to the question of whether there's Life after Death remains up in the air, where only the Higher Powers know.

Bumble: Meanwhile, down on the earth, a sex scandal is brewing at a local homeless shelter.

Candy: We'll be back after these messages.

(The HOST appears. His voice is the VOICEOVER heard in the previous feature.)

Is there Life after Death? Maybe, maybe not. I don't have all the answers. Am I alive or dead right now? I can't really tell you. But I can tell you what I use when I want to get out of a life I'm in. I use the WESTON-SMITHERS snub-nose .357 magnum revolver, complete with two-inch barrel and pearl handles.

(Revolver rotates slowly as if floating in space. Voiceover:)

The Weston-Smithers snubnose .357 magnum revolver guarantees maximum impact at close range. The optional hollow-point cartridge expands upon contact, ensuring terminal damage to all living tissue.

(Cut to HOST.)

I take mine with me whenever I want to go.

(His on-air suicide replays in extreme slow-motion. Instead of fading to black, the screen shows him lying across the desk, the visible side of his head disfigured, smeared with blood and brain tissue. Beneath him a small trickle of blood runs over the edge of the table and down its front. Back to HOST:)

Remember: with a Weston-Smithers, you can't miss.

THIS IS *NEWS*! GIMME A BREAK! NO, TAKE THAT BACK. I'VE SEEN ENOUGH BREAKS. BUT COMMERCIAL BREAKS FROM THE AFTERLIFE! LOOKS LIKE THIS GUY CORNERED THE MARKET. NEXT THING YOU KNOW, HE'LL BE DOING FUNERAL HOMES. I'D BETTER GET BACK TO

“Hello, Arthur? This is Vanessa. I know you’re at lunch right now, but I need to talk to you about something very important. My boss, the director? She tried to make me have sex with her right after you left. I told her I don’t do nothin’ like that with no womens and then she told me I was fired and I had to leave or she would call the police. I need to talk to you. Maybe I could see you? Please call me. I’ll be at home watching”

The Bald and the Ruthless

(The program's maudlin organ theme segues to the office of COMMISSIONER JOHNSON-BARR, a fortyish male wearing a closely-trimmed full beard and a blue pinstripe suit. BUBBLES LaFLAMME enters tentatively.)

Bubbles: You wanted me to come to your office?

Commissioner: Not exactly. I wanted you to come *in* my office.

Bubbles: Excuse me, sir. Are you prepositioning me?

Commissioner: To be frank...

Bubbles: I mean, I don't do prepositions well.

Commissioner: I'll bet you're great at conjugating.

Bubbles: At...What's *that*?

[] [] []

(Restaurant. Stock upscale set: an abundance of ferns, hanging plants and wood furniture. PUTZ sits across from the SHELTER DIRECTOR.)

Director: I think you can understand the problems she poses for us.

Putz: She definitely sounds like a loose cannon.

Director: It's not the kind of information you pass along to your funding source.

Putz: You had no choice but to let her go.

Director: Vanessa? Yes, she's not a good worker. Moreover...

Putz: You mean the rumors about her being involved in drug gangs?

Director: That, too. But what I was going to say is, she's not a Team Player.

Putz: That's even worse.

Director: It only takes one person like her to destroy a viable concept.

Putz: Even one with Network potential. The funding source is supposed to meet with me. I'm waiting to hear from them.

Director: I'd appreciate anything you can do for the shelter.

Putz: I'm not the kind of person who forgets where he came from.

[] [] []

(Commissioner's Office.)

Commissioner: For the special project I have in mind, I need someone who can work with me very closely.

Bubbles: I understand. It's a very big project, Commissioner.

Commissioner: You can call me Commish.

Bubbles: Thank you, sir—I mean, Commish.

Commissioner: In these situations I like to dispense with formalities. Now, about this project, I need someone who can work with me, not only closely, but intimately as well.

Bubbles: On a project of the dimensions you describe, you couldn't do it any other way.

Commissioner: That's the yardstick I go by.

Bubbles: It's a great tool for measurement.

Commissioner: I've never had any complaints.

Bubbles: And you won't hear any from me, Commish.

Commissioner: Before we wrestle further with this, I need to know just a little more about your qualifications. It's essential that my assistant have exceptional oral skills.

Bubbles: Well, gee, I mean, that is, I'm perfectly good in private. Orally, you

know. So...you know...I guess I could *learn* to be as good in public. I mean...

Commissioner: When the situation arises, I'm sure you'll address an important need. What about your other skills? Can you take dictation?

Bubbles: All I need is a pad.

Commissioner: (*Pulls out a black leather outfit with studs, a whip, handcuffs, etc.*) We don't need to worry about that. I'll tell the secretary to hold my calls.

(BUBBLES *looks at him with a vacant expression of submission.*)

[] [] []

(*Seedy urban apartment. High ceilings, faded beige paint, cracked plaster. Soap opera organ droning in background. VANESSA sits next to PACO on an old, sunken sofa. Each wears blue jeans and a black tanktop.*)

Vanessa: You got to *trust* me, Paco. That man, that woman...they don't mean *nothin'* to me.

Paco: Just make sure they don't, *chica*.

Vanessa: That Anglo Arthur, he back me to save his own butt. They fire her, they hire me back. As Director. Who else they got?

Paco: And Los Locos got a clubhouse.

Vanessa: You got it.

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(*Exterior. High-rise office building. Zoom in. Cut to plush interior: thick wine-red carpet, floor-to-ceiling windows looking out to the horizon. AUTHOR stands at a circular desk, hovering over an indifferent RECEPTIONIST reading Vamp magazine.*)

Author: I'm here to see Mr. Putz.

Receptionist: Get in line.

Author: He's here, then?

Receptionist: He's here, but he's in the middle of some very important negotiations.

Author: My meeting with him is important too. Can you tell him I'm here representing Commissioner Johnson-Barr?

Receptionist: You'll have to wait. I'm going on break. *(Leaves.)*

(AUTHOR goes to the double door behind the receptionist's desk. He listens:)

Putz: I'm telling you, this is not *my* career move. This is *your* career move.

Female Voice: I don't see it that way.

Putz: I'll *make* you see it that way.

Female Voice: Don't threaten me.

Putz: Go ahead. Shoot.

Author: Oh, shit!

(AUTHOR breaks through the door. PUTZ is naked. His beefy butt rises up and down as he fucks PAMELA ANDALE, a TV star known for her big blonde hair and even bigger silicon breast implants. A camera man films the couple while his crew handles the lighting. Above the massive waterbed a sign reads "TWO O'CLOCK MATINEE.")

Author: I—I'm sorry. I mean, I didn't mean to—I—your secretary told me you were in a meeting.

Putz: *My* secretary!

Andale: Ooh! Ooh! Ooh! You must've talked to *my* secretary.

Author: Whoever's secretary she was, she told me you were in a meeting, not in a...uh...movie.

Andale: We *are* in a meeting. In fact, we just met.

Putz: I just showed up.

Andale: Pudzi's a very powerful man. One minute he's in the waiting room, next minute he's in here, talking turkey.

Putz: Talking turkey *neck*, she means.

Andale: (*small voice*) Ooh! You're such a naughty boy, the way you talk.

Putz: So, what did you barge in here for?

Author: I was looking for—

Putz: A job? There's a Role Model opening available.

Author: I was looking for you. Commissioner Johnson-Barr told—

Putz: Commissioner Johnson-Barr can wait. This comes first.

Andale: Not if you don't start moving it, Pudzi.

Author: Sorry to disturb you. Maybe some other time...

Putz: Yeah yeah yeah.

(AUTHOR *turns to leave. Behind him:*)

Andale: Remember, Pudzi. You promised.

Putz: I'm not the kind of person who forgets where he came.

A Life in the Day of (3)

This isn't the first time my life has turned into a soap opera, but it's the first time I've ever *walked into* one. It's the first time I've ever walked into the filming of a porn movie...or was that a soap opera in which a porn movie was being filmed? The disruption of time and space in contemporary media affects contemporary life and contemporary literature, as well. If continuity continues to exist as a linear concept it does so only because memory links one burst of sensations to another. I'm no longer sure whether I'm at home at work or in a soap. The \$64,000 Dollar Question is: how do I find out?

Dr. Joyce Brothers stares at me from her cubicle, a sage glance from the 1950's when the show launched her into lifelong celebrity. She bends slightly forward from the waist to press a buzzer. "Actually, Author," she says, the first person to get my name right, "reality is composed of many elements, all of which originate with perception. It is possible for one person to have one perception of reality and another person a different perception, simply due to our individual differences." She smiles: a pleasant face, even teeth.

"Once again the winner!" the emcee shouts. The cameras turn away from me. Apparently I'm the loser on a show I never knew I was participating in. I step away from the hullabaloo surrounding the winner. Discover my office cubicle has shrunk around me. Now I have to exit through a door that wasn't there before.

On the other side Bubbles LaFlamme says to one of the female clerks in

the unit: "You can't exactly call him an *admirable* character." Apparently her critical repertoire has its limits.

"But he's a Role Model," Melissa insists, continuing to type her five words an hour without distraction or damage to her three-inch nails.

"I think the Commissioner is a better Role Model than he is."

"Him!" Melissa stops completely. "They say he's only got one thing on his mind."

"But he *is* an attractive man," Bubbles insists.

"So, which of the two would you rather do a skin flick with?" I ask.

They glare at me. My mouth feels crowded with my Reebok in it.

< Do *you* stick your foot in your mouth more often than you should?

< Do your heels scrape your tongue when you talk?

< Do friends you've never had stare at the shoelaces that dangle over your lips?

Then *you* need

PUCKER ALUM

the mouthwash that really works.

"Oh, Art. It's so nice to talk to you. You're so different now."

"Uhm thwk wmm mm mfff."

"It's really *nice* of you to say that."

Remember:

PUCKER ALUM

“The mouthwash dentists recommend to their patients”

Was I watching the same soap opera that they were listening to on Melissa's desk radio? Or was I writing a soap of my own? More \$64,000 questions and no Dr. Joyce to answer them. Not even her cubicle sticking out on the floor like a cut-rate gazebo. And what about the commercial? Which is illusion and which is reality? I can no longer tell. Even the world's remaining Winston Smiths are turning to Big Brother for answers.

Big Brother's office more and more resembles a mall cigar store. Behind its plexiglass walls the ferns concealing the NO SMOKING sign wither crinkle and die. Their leaves flake into the roiling yellow cloud pungent as cat piss.

“What can I do for you, boss?” Big Brother asks as I close the door behind me.

“I'd like a reality check.”

“Wait till payday.”

“How will I know that's real?”

“You don't. But that's as real as it gets.”

“Well, I had this experience...” I tell him how disoriented I'm feeling.

“Wherever you are, you're here,” he assures me.

“But where *is* that?”

“If you don't know, I can't tell you.”

Even Big Brother has his limits in a media-saturated environment, I guess. I tell him about *The Bald and the Ruthless* in general terms. He leans back from his long puff and says, “You stepped in some deep doo when you

stumbled into that porn flick, man.”

“How did you know about that? You see the show?”

“No...”

“It must’ve been the radio blasting out there.”

“No...”

“Then, how did you find out?”

“We live in an age of Instant Communication.”

“I just mentioned two forms of instant communication.”

“The Commissioner communicates even more instantly when you piss him off. He was in the Luv Tub Motel with Bubbles when Putz called him.”

“But....Bubbles has been right *here...Hasn’t* she?”

His gap-toothed grin flashes through a break in the smoke. “Sometimes you’re too logical for your own good.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You keep thinking reality is consecutive, man. Maybe it’s concurrent.”

“Those sound like prison terms.”

“They are. Concurrent gets you out sooner. But there’s still no escape.”

No. 2: You’re Number Six.

No. 6: I am not a number. I am a free man.

No. 2: You’re Number Six.

No. 6: Who’s Number One?

No. 2: I’m Number Two.

No. 6: You certainly are.

Nothing like a flashback to *The Prisoner* show from the sixties to remind me of my youthful delusion that I could actually escape the mind-body prison.

WE'RE NUMBER ONE

WHO SAID THAT?

I can't even remember the commercial that appeared in. Maybe the failure of memory is the way to escape the system's all-embracing mindtrap. But the same failure of memory allows the mindtrap to exist in the first place.

"You wanna know who said that?"

I turn. Big Brother's standing behind my cubicle. How did he know what I heard? How did he get out of his office? For that matter, how did I? Does it matter?

"Here's the scoop." He hands me an Extra Special Edition of *Amerika Today*. Its headline reads:

TALK SHOW PUTZ BECOMES NETWORK PREZ

Is he a rocket, or merely a Roman candle? Only time will tell. Meanwhile, Ralph Putz continues his meteoric rise from a mediocre role model to a mediocre talk show host and beyond.

Putz, who walked off his hugely popular *Good Morning, Audience* show because of a salary dispute with network executives, used his instant popularity to

leverage a position industry professionals would have considered inconceivable.

Until today, that is, when the Board of the International Broadcasting Company surrendered to Putz's hard-line strategy and gave the role model turned celebrity host, in effect, *carte blanche* to oversee not only his own show, but the entire network as well.

"Looks like our home boy is making good," Big Brother says.

"And redefining time and space in the process," I say.

“Even he can't defy gravity. You see that roll hanging over his belt? He's one fat dude, man.”

“And getting fatter by the minute.” The front page photo shows a larger Putz than the dumpy Role Model that started the day. Does his girth change in proportion to his stature? I wonder.

Meanwhile Melissa's radio continues to blare

One Soap at a Time

and it's driving me crazy one tawdry episode after the other what I need is my remote control Reality Converter to change the perceptual field surrounding me the radio the TV the computer screen even the formerly private Viewing Room behind my closed-eyes reality/dream dream/reality illusion/reality reality/illusion sustained delusion Rimbaud's derangement of the senses reduced to media bombardment: the medium is the message said McLuhan then now the medium *is* no prisoners allowed outside the bounds of perception all doors sealed hands on/hands off get a grip man got a grip man time to

SWITCH

(KYLE stacks boxes in the stockroom, his head nodding to the funk rhythm leaking through his Walkman headphones. MELISSA enters. First, her thick shag of brown hair, then her soft brown eyes and full red lips, which part as she watches the stockroom clerk work at a pace slow beyond measure.)

Melissa: Hi, Kyle.

Kyle: Uh, hi. I didn't see ya come in.

Melissa: You weren't looking. *(Sets her hands on her hips. KYLE looks. The camera's stare traces her slender frame as it tapers through a maroon sweater that hugs her small, shapely breasts and a pair of jeans caressing*

her from hips and buns down to the calves covered by brown vinyl boots with spike heels.)

Kyle: I'm lookin' now.

Melissa: Like what you see?

Kyle: Oh yeah.

Melissa: Like to see more?

Kyle: Oh yeah.

Melissa: More than you saw the last time?

Kyle: Oh yeah.

Melissa: Then, you better show me more than you showed me the last time.

Kyle: Oh yeah!

(Pushes the door shut behind her. Turns the lock. Soft cooing noises. Her boot heels rise off the concrete floor.)

I never knew Kyle had it in him. Nor Melissa. At least she'll put her fake nails to use raking his back however far they go. I'm tempted to watch, but not before issuing the following disclaimer:

THE ACTIONS OF THE CHARACTERS IN THIS WORK DO NOT NECESSARILY REFLECT THE VIEWS, OPINIONS OR ATTITUDES OF THE AUTHOR. THEY REFLECT THE VIEWS, OPINIONS AND ATTITUDES OF THE CHARACTERS WHO LIVE IN THE WORLD OF *COMMERCIAL FICTION* IN ITS MANY MANIFESTATIONS. THE AUTHOR CANNOT ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY FOR A POLITICALLY INCORRECT PORTRAYAL OF A CHARACTER WHOSE POLITICALLY INCORRECT ACTIVITIES, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO INDISCREET WANTON SEX, ARE INTENDED TO STIMULATE SALES OF BOOKS AND OTHER COMMERCIAL PRODUCTS THROUGH THE VICARIOUS STIMULATION OF THE SEXUAL APPETITES OF ITS INTENDED AUDIENCE.

Now that I've covered my ass let's tune back in for some nice juicy action.

[] [] []

*(Close-up: MELISSA's firm, tight buttocks in their form-fitting denim pouch.
Female Voiceover:)*

You too can have buns like these. Firm up those sagging cheeks with the

Fountain of Youth Fitness Trainer

Just five minutes a day using the Fountain of Youth Fitness Trainer and you too can turn your drooping derriere into a guaranteed head-turner.

Melissa: *(voiceover)* Want to see more?

Kyle: *(voiceover)* Oh yeah!

Melissa: *(voiceover)* Maybe next time.

[] [] []

You mean, I issued a disclaimer for *that*! If I'd known a steamy closet sex scene would deteriorate into a daytime TV self-improvement commercial I never would've said anything. I've got to admit, though, the coopting machine is getting increasingly sophisticated. I used to fast forward through commercials but now they use story elements to hook you into watching till they slam you with the sales pitch.

While I'm scratching my head on this one Kyle's running out the door nearly slams into me gallops after Melissa like a floppy hound in heat. "Where can I get one o' them kits?" he shouts. I picture him stretching

with the bars springs and bungee cords expecting to get at her buns through dedicated exercise. He's too spaced out to realize he'll only tighten up his own cheeks, invisible behind the baggy jeans except for the butt crack a half-inch above his beltline.

Crass commercialization. Rather than fight I'll

SWITCH

(A door with a generic "Board Room" sign. Voices murmur behind it. The camera enters a room as well-appointed as a city council chamber in an affluent suburb. Around the large oval table sit the SHELTER DIRECTOR, RALPH PUTZ, VANESSA and a half-dozen BOARD MEMBERS, four of them men.)

Vanessa: ...and so I was fired.

(PUTZ and the BOARD turn accusing stares toward the DIRECTOR.)

Putz: These are serious allegations, Emma.

Director: They're fictitious allegations. The kind you only see in soap operas.

Putz: Then, you're saying they're not true?

Director: I'm saying they're bold-faced lies.

Putz: We've had other complaints. The *GIMME SHELTER* game...

Director: *GIMME SHELTER* kept the homeless numbers high. Without those turnaway figures, we couldn't get the money to pay for the beds that we do have.

Putz: That still doesn't answer the question, Emma.

Director: I told you, Ralph—

Putz: —*Mr.* Putz.

Director: Mr. Putz. I told you, Mr. Putz, they're not true.

Putz: We have to consider the position this puts us in *vis a vis* our funding source.

Director: You should see the position *she* was in with one of the staff from our funding source.

Vanessa: That's not true. I would never do *nothin'* like that.

Putz: Like what?

Vanessa: I don't even like to talk about no stuff like that.

Putz: That's alright, Vanessa. A young, attractive lady like you...I can see how jealousy could start rumors.

Vanessa: Thank you, Ralph.

Putz: And given the recent changes in my personal situation, it's even more important that we avoid any appearance of impropriety. Therefore...

(Fade out. The phone rings. Fade in to split screen, VANESSA on the left, BIG BROTHER on the right.)

Mr. Brother?

Speaking.

This is Vanessa Caliente. I'm the new Interim Director of the Sister of Mercy Shelter.

What can I do for you?

(COMMISSIONER JOHNSON-BARR sits behind his desk.)

I've got to admit, at forty-one, I'm not as young as I used to be. There are times in the day when I feel my energy flagging, when I feel tired and listless. To combat that feeling of fatigue and restore my youthful vigor, I use

POWER!

POWER! restores my vitality. With ***POWER!*** I just fire a hand-picked executive assistant with an M.B.A., hire a foxy young file clerk to replace him and I'm good as new.

(BUBBLES and VANESSA begin an endless parade of beautiful women who assemble around his desk. KYLE follows MELISSA, flexing his Fountain of Youth Fitness Trainer. COMMISSIONER kicks him in the seat of the pants, throws him out the door and returns to his chair, his grin widening with each woman who gathers around him. Baritone voiceover:)

Use ***POWER!*** The Ultimate Aphrodisiac!

[] [] []

That's about what I'd expect from Johnson-Barr. He's probably getting paid more for his endorsements than he gets for playing Commissioner. He should apply for a patent on Management by Penis. He's big on Equal Opportunity screwing: he screws the people he likes and screws the ones he doesn't. Time to

SWITCH

(The stock set for an upscale restaurant. Piano music and hanging plants. PUTZ sits across the table from VANESSA.)

Putz: I still believe there are some things that are more important than power.

Vanessa: That's why I like you, Ralph. You're not like other men.

Putz: That's because I'm still a Role Model.

Vanessa: You're a wonderful Role Model, Ralph.

Putz: Believing in my message helps. I believe money is more important than power. With money you can *buy* power.

Vanessa: And love, too.

**THIS PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT HAS BEEN
BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE UNITED STATES TREASURY.**

[] [] []

Now the government's getting into the act. When I was in school I was taught we had a representational democracy. Now that we've moved past the postmodern era we have non-representational democracy. Still, it's the closest thing to an honest statement I've heard any branch of government utter.

One thing I can say about this commercial assault on the senses: it's asserting the values the Mind Control set wants us to internalize. Personally I don't see any real conflict between the Commissioner's pitch and Putz's. But then, I'm just a disgruntled, disoriented author who can't find his way from home to work or inside or outside of his own head through the stroboscopic maze of flickering stimuli. So why don't I step back and

You Be the Judge

Oy! Oy! Oy! Karaoke Court is now in session, Judge You presiding. All rise. Here come de judge, here come de judge. Court's in session, here come de judge.

(YOU enter the courtroom, black robe flowing behind you. Eighteenth-century hairpiece is optional.)

You: You may be seated.

(Nobody moves.)

You: I said, you may be seated.

(Nobody moves except the bailiff, who approaches the judge.)

Bailiff: With all due respect, Your Honor, perhaps if you sit down first, the others will follow.

(YOU sit down, the others follow.)

Bailiff: The first case is Slackborn vs. Johnson-Barr.

You: Commissioner Johnson-Barr, you have been charged with Sex Discrimination. How do you plead?

Johnson-Barr: Not Guilty, Your Honor.

You: The Prosecution will now state its case. Mr. Rother, if you will.

Wait a minute! The judge is addressing *me*. How did *I* get mixed up in this? I may be active as an author, but I was passive as a viewer. Now I'm an unwilling if not unwitting participant.

Author: On _____, _____ of this year, Kyle Slackborn, the plaintiff, entered the office of Commissioner Johnson-Barr, his employer, as part of a retinue. He was physically abused and expelled from the office because he wasn't a comely female.

You: He isn't a comely male, either.

Author: Your Honor, that is irrelevant.

You: But it is also true. And what does the Defense have to say about this?

Defense: Your Honor, may we approach the bench?

You: By all means.

(AUTHOR and DEFENSE approach the bench.)

Defense: Your Honor, we concede that the event did happen. The Defendant is willing to plead guilty to a lesser charge if certain conditions are met.

You: And what are those conditions?

Defense: That the Defendant be appointed a Superior Court Judge after his term as Commissioner expires.

You: And Mr. Rother, are you and your client willing to agree to this resolution of the matter?

Author: This does nothing to address the wrong done to my client, or to compensate him for his pain and personal suffering.

Defense: We'll raise his salary five dollars a week and not fire him for

bringing this matter to court.

You: Based on the evidence, that's as fair a settlement as this Court can reach.

Author: Your Honor, we haven't even *begun* to present the evidence.

You: Nor will you. Return to your seats. The Court finds the Defendant guilty of fourth-degree non-criminal mischief. After your term as Commissioner expires, you will be sentenced to a lifetime judgeship in Superior Court. The plaintiff will be awarded a five dollar weekly increase in salary as compensation for his pain and suffering.

Kyle: Five dollars! Way to go, man!

That's all the poor sap gets. And he doesn't even know any better. Meanwhile, Johnson-Barr gets set for life. This is some commentary on justice in this country.

Bailiff: The next case is Caliente vs. Arthur, Sexual Harassment in the First Degree.

WHAT! I thought that was purely imaginary. Looks to me like her beaver's certainly been busy, in fact, fiction or both. Now I'm caught in the blur between the two, unable to tell which is which. But she certainly *felt* real.

You: How do you plead, Mr. Arthur?

Author: Not Guilty, Your Honor. (*Sits down next to BIG BROTHER, his pro bono attorney, who shifts and fidgets edgily in the smoke-free courtroom.*)

You: The Prosecution will state its case.

(The COMMISSIONER, wearing a "Judge Trainee" button, rises.)

Commissioner: Your Honor, I will let the Plaintiff, Vanessa Caliente, tell the court of the injurious offenses perpetrated against her under the guise of public service.

Vanessa: *(rises)* Your Honor, this man, he did terrible things to me. At the time I was a secretary at the Sister of Mercy Shelter, where I am now the Interim Director. When I was the secretary, he used to take me to the big room we use for families who have no place to sleep at night. He would force me to do these terrible things I didn't want to do.

Big Brother: Did the Defendant actually use *physical* force?

Vanessa: Only when he tied me to the bed and whipped me.

Author: Your Honor, that's a lie.

You: Restrain yourself. You may continue, Ms. Caliente.

Vanessa: He used to take me into that room and lock the door. He said he was there to evaluate the performance of the shelter and if I didn't do what he said he would close the shelter for, how you say it, lack of performance.

Commissioner: Did he ever do that?

Vanessa: No, but he made the other Director fire me. He made her do things to him, too. These powerful men, they think they can get away with anything they want.

Big Brother: Your Honor, we can prove that Mr. Arthur was nowhere near the shelter at the time these acts were alleged to have taken place.

Commissioner: We, on the other hand, can prove that the former Director is currently waiting in a love motel for the Defendant, who arranged the, ahem, liaison under the guise of reinstating her to her former position.

Big Brother: Your Honor, the Commissioner has his own dubious history to deal with. Let me suggest that he arranged for this...this room to establish a basis for this fictional case against the innocent man charged with this grievous offense.

Commissioner: *(thumbs under his lapels to flaunt the Judge Trainee badge)* Your Honor, I have paid a great price for my past mistakes. I would never

compromise my position in public service by perpetrating such an act of fraudulence.

You: If you make any further unwarranted allegations against this rehabilitated individual, Mr. Brother, I will have no choice but to raise this matter with the Bar Association.

Author: Looks like you're raising the bar, so to speak.

You: Any further outbursts from you, Mr. Arthur, and I will cite you for contempt.

Brother: Doesn't look good, bro.

Author: Not when they threaten to bag Big Brother.

You: You may continue your testimony, Ms. Caliente.

Vanessa: What he did, he did to me so many times. It was terrible, the way he made me feel....so cheap, like trash. *(Begins crying. YOU hand her a handkerchief.)*

You: There, there, now.

Brother: Your Honor, I request that the Defendant be allowed to testify on his own behalf.

Commissioner: Objection. Irrelevant to the case.

You: We will entertain, not so much the motion, as ourselves with his spurious testimony. Mr. Arthur, you may take the stand.

Brother: Mr. Arthur, will you state your occupation?

Author: Author.

Commissioner: Objection. Defendant cannot prove he supports himself through this fictive assertion.

You: Sustained. State your real occupation.

Brother: Your Honor, the Defendant's status as an author has a direct bearing on this case.

You: State your real occupation, Mr. Arthur.

Author: Bureaucrat monitoring homeless shelters.

Brother: Please explain to the court what actually happened.

Author: I would, if I could be sure of what actually happened. As an author

transcribing what is in front of my senses, a part of me seems to exist outside chronological time. As a result—

Commissioner: Objection. The question of authorship has already been rejected by the court.

You: Sustained.

Vanessa: See how he lies. Just like that.

Author: She misinterpreted—

You: Or, more likely, you misled this woman to gain her trust, Mr. Arthur.

Author: I did nothing of the—

Commissioner: Then, what *did* you do? As a person who works as a bureaucrat—if bureaucrats can be said to work.

Author: As a person constantly blitzed by a media whose pace operates much faster than my own mind, I can no longer say what is real and what isn't. As a bureaucrat, I carry out policies that make even less sense and have less continuity than the media infomissiles I just mentioned. The lack of continuity doesn't just distort my sense of time, it destroys it. I can no longer differentiate between what actually happens and what I'm told has happened. Fact, fiction... I can't tell one from the other anymore. Events seem to happen concurrently, instead of consecutively, but as far as I know, I can't be in more than one place at the same time.

You: I can assure you, Mr. Arthur, that your sentencing will be consecutive, not concurrent.

Brother: Your Honor, I wish to change the Defendant's plea to Not Guilty by reason of mental incompetence.

You: We will let the television audience serve as jury in this case. You, the television jury, may find the Defendant:

- (1) guilty.
- (2) guilty by reason of mental incompetence.
- (3) all of the above.

We will announce your verdict after this message.

Stress. (thump-thump)

Everybody feels stress. (thump-thump)
(thump-thump)

Stress from work. (thump-thump-thump-thump)
(thump-thump-thump-thump)

Stress from play. (thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump)
(thump-thump- thump-thump-thump-thump)

Stress from everyday living. (thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump)
(thump-thump -thump-thump-thump-thump)

(THUMP-THUMP- THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP)

Stress from sitting (THUMP-THUMP- THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP)

in a kangaroo court (THUMP-THUMP- THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP)

KNOWING YOU (THUMP-THUMP- THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP)

DON'T HAVE A (THUMP-THUMP- THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP)

SNOWBALL'S (THUMP-THUMP- THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP)

CHANCE IN (THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP)

HELL OF BEAT- (THUMP-THUMP- THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP)

ING A BUM RAP. (THUMP-THUMP- THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP)

(THUMP-THUMP- THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP)

(THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-

THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-

THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-

THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP-THUMP!)

(Cut to grinning AUTHOR.)

That's when I reach for

ARTFUL DODGER

the skin cream that not only
moisturizes skin dried to eczema
and soothes nerve endings frayed beyond
patience. ***ARTFUL DODGER***'s secret healing
ingredient allows me to become invisible during
any stressful moments I may find myself experiencing.

*(Close-up. AUTHOR begins to rub lotion onto himself, disappearing as he does.
Cut to courtroom:)*

You: Where did he go?

Commissioner: He was sitting right there on the stand.

Vanessa: You believe a man who can do things like that?

You: I'm issuing an All Points Bulletin for his arrest.

(Cut to AUTHOR:)

When you need to escape from stress, use ***ARTFUL DODGER***. I do.

A Life in the Day of (4)

"Where the hell you been, man?" Big Brother says, drawing out his tone like a 1950's hipster.

"You mean, you don't know?"

"No, man. I thought you'd *vanished*."

I rub my skin, testing for Artful Dodger residue. Nothing. Either Artful Dodger's free of clinging grease or a fictional invention. No point, then, in mentioning his recent role as defense attorney. "I *did* vanish. Sort of."

He looks quizzically at me through his cigar haze.

"You seen the Commissioner lately?" My way of conducting an indirect Reality Check.

"In what context?"

Even Reality Checks aren't as simple as they used to be. "I dunno. As the prime shaker and mover for Insurance City's downtrodden and homeless, as a self-proclaimed stud, as a political hack awaiting a judge's appointment, as a pseudo-celebrity endorsing abstract products, any or all of the above."

"I haven't seen him in any of those. But I did get a call from the chick you've been banging mercilessly at Sister of Mercy."

"Who's that?" Or which reality is that? I should ask. In matters of desire is thought separate from act? In what ways is what I've written real? In a world with no answers the role of the writer is to raise questions that make a person think outside the confines of the co-opting mechanism. If that's

possible. My doing the Artful Dodger ad makes me wonder.

"The chick who decided to drop the sexual harassment charges against you."

"Now I know who you mean." Fantasy reality fiction fact whatever, I've had my share of vivid experiences with her, some pleasurable, some not.

"She's the shelter's new Director. Apparently she swung a deal with Putz."

"Apparently she swings a great deal."

Brother's silent laugh splits the screen of cigar smoke. His finger points at me as if to say "You're the one."

What product used that slogan? I've fast-forwarded so many commercials to my memory's Back Room I can't keep track....too much infodust covering the archive.

"He's their new Board President." Brother's long fingers slide the latest Extra toward me, freshly printed from the *Insurance City Gazette Online*. It's been decades since a paper's issued an "Extra Extra Read All About It" edition kids shouting on streetcorners hustling at a quarter a paper a dime or nickle before my time even pennies. Is this really the second one today?

SHELTER ELECTS CELEBRITY BOARD PRESIDENT ***Putz to Use Power for Government Funds, Tax Shelter Capacity***

The Sister of Mercy Homeless Shelter, beleaguered by continuing controversy concerning its low utilization rates and allegations of unethical practices, elected meteoric media celebrity and entrepreneur Ralph Putz President of its Board of Directors Tuesday.

"I intend to use everything in my power to turn this shelter around," said Putz, who recently signed a celebrity endorsement contract with POWER!

"I know he can do it," said Vanessa

See what I mean about what you write coming true? I push back from the desk, cross my legs, link my hands behind my head. "Instant communication takes more than an instant," I say.

Brother folds the paper, tucks it neatly inside his tight attache case, turns

back to me. "Man, you sound like that McLuhan dude."

"It just takes time to write the article, no matter how quickly they can post it. I knew he was Board President an hour or two ago."

"How'd you find out?"

It doesn't sound like Big Brother knows everything however calm and in control he appears. No matter what Mind Control data he manages. "Moonlighting. You know I can't reveal my sources." A chuckle escapes my lips. Teasing Camaraderie.

"Not even if your ass depended on it?" Brother's high forehead creases over his mock scowl.

"Not even. But I can tell you something."

"What's that?"

"The endorsement. Putz is becoming a PR shill. He doesn't believe in **POWER!** He believes in Money."

Brother's long arm stretches. His hand grips the edge of his desk. "You mean, there's a difference between the two?"

"Whether there is or isn't, it could affect his credibility as a Role Model."

"He's grown so big so fast...You think he even gives a damn?"

"If he's a Role Model, it means he worked his way up from somewhere. Now that he's President of the Board, I think he'd want to keep his image intact."

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No doubt some of you have wondered for some time about my characteristics and those of the other characters. How tall am I what color hair eyes beard? Smoker or non and related teeth coloring? Marital status number of kids formative life experiences etc. And wondered the same about the other characters. What deep underlying motives are propelling Putz's supermeth rise from PSA flak to...who knows where before I type THE END? Is he the millennial Jay Gatsby? Rags to riches without concealment? Why is Big Brother a weary civil servant instead of the omnipresent face onscreen

whose verbal fingers dip into your mind and knot your neurons into the so-called proper order? If he's not Orwell's mind control myth personified who does he go home to? A wife and kiddies? A Cigar Store indian? Does he live in a Cigar Store after hours blowing his mind on chainsmoked gangsta blunts? And what about these women so brazenly sexual their lives hopscotch soap scripts? Does Bubbles LaFlamme have a husband two children ages five and nine? A hot red convertible or a neon blue neo-Bug? Does her real life revolve around choir practice two nights a week and chiming her pipes at Sunday morning service? Or Vanessa Caliente? What about this Latina whose Camp Vamp name conveys a negative stereotype? Is my portrayal of her politically incorrect or merely irreverent? Maybe she's happily married to Paco, a former gang member who now counsels in a drug rehab center. And Melissa? Maybe she's a gifted model waiting for the photo op that puts her over the top. Kyle? Maybe a great DJ or guitarist whose ability to make your feet move under you excuses his schlublike work habits and goofy sexual pursuit—if he really does either/or. The others I've neglected to mention? What about them?

No matter their habits off the page all of them are living *Commercial Fiction* from the N.Y. *Times* Bestseller List to the munchtime melodramas and other media formats for vicarious living. Where I sit (still a dubious question given the double (at minimum) life you should have figured out) I see them as living the realities readers and viewers aspire to—only several at a time, as if living a single one made a real difference. Their intrigues cross lines of medium and genre as they reinforce the conventional underpinnings carried over from the naturalistic novel. But now they're here, dipping in and out of the anti-narrative waters.

And where are you? What kind of life are you living, soap or cold wash? What are you bringing to the page? Click the left or right button in the mouse of your mind. Interact with the Virtual Fiction. Immerse yourself in the totality of the written moment. Maybe the questions will become clearer if not the answers.

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(Medium shot. PUTZ wearing a gray Armani suit .)

Hi. My name is Ralph Putz, and I'm a Role Model. Now, I used to tell you not to pay attention to celebrity Role Models, people like Michael Jordan, Muhammad Ali, Mark McGwire and Harrison Ford, just to name a few. I used to tell you that most of you will never be celebrities like them. But that was before I became a celebrity. I worked my way up from a humble background very much like yours to a position that even sports celebrities would envy. Why would they envy me, a guy who showed up every day just to climb one tiny step up that long ladder to the top? Why? Because I have

POWER!

and they don't. They have money. But I have ***POWER!*** to make more money than they'll ever have. And the more money I have, the more ***POWER!*** I can buy. The more ***POWER!*** I have, the more money I can make. With the money ***POWER!*** gives me I can buy anything from cars to women to conglomerates. So, remember: every step you take up that ladder is a step toward ***POWER!***

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"You want me back already? What's up?"

Big Brother's forehead creases over narrowing brown eyes. "You were right about Putz. The Commissioner just saw the ***POWER!*** commercial. He's not too happy about having to compete for his endorsement slot."

"You think it's competition? I thought ***POWER!*** was just showing endorsements from private business as well as government. Showing its range..."

Brother shakes his head slowly from side to side, an amused grin creasing its bottom quarter. "If you don't know the connection between business and government..."

"One subsidizes the other and vice-versa. But the players wear their Hat of the Day."

"The Commissioner thinks Putz is trying to take his endorsement hat from him."

I feel my lips twisting into a thoughtful expression. "So, where do I fit into this picture?"

"He asked me to assign one of my staff to look into it. I figure You're the One."

Now I remember it. "You're 'still having fun' with that old Coke Commercial?"

He laughs. "Diet and decaf these days...but, yeah."

"I can't start on it right away. Remember, I told you I was doing a talk show appearance? It's a great opportunity. The host is supposed to be Oprah Winfrey's up-and-coming competition."

"Start on it when you want. While I'm here having fun, you're still the one."

