

DUNG

A Light Roasting of
Frank Herbert's *Dune*

Tom Cole

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all of the sandworms that made this possible.

Table of Contents

The Gum Jabber	1
The Barman, Fay Ray, and Spidy.....	11
Plans to Transgender?.....	20
A Case for Inbreeding	27
The Guitar Lesson.....	34
Guests Who Are Coming to Dinner?	40
The Hunter-Gatherer	56
The Dude is Betrayed.....	62
Bonbon Gone Wrong	70
A Flight, a Fight, and a Force Field	77
The Christening.....	94
Pokey, Dale, and Roger	103
Drummer Boy.....	115
Round Worm Round-up	119
I Am a Friend of Jambo.....	126
Lord of the Sandworms.....	135
Dung Near Done.....	141
Dinner Party Type II.....	151
Glossary	163

I

The Gum Jabber

Deep in the human unconscious is a pervasive need for a logical universe that makes sense, the deep and abiding desire for something more enlightening than what can be found in a rambling, convoluted, and overblown novel that is always a step beyond logic and makes no sense at all!

—From *Sayings of Paulie Moab Utah*
by the Princess Ireful

Things didn't just fall neatly into place for the Atavist family as they occasionally do when folks make plans to move. Not even close. With just ten days left to prepare for their trip to Ascaris, every single member of the blue-blooded clan was scuttling about like a crab in a TS Eliot poem. Even the mother of the boy Paulie was so frenzied and beleaguered that her son had begun to suspect she was no longer up to the task of being a royal concubine. And he further reasoned that moving to the worm-filled desert sands of Ascaris, a planet rife with giant nematodes, warring religious fanatics, and thirsty, ill-tempered nomads, didn't promise

much respite for her either—not if she felt that packing a few suitcases and negotiating for the security deposit on the castle was a big deal here on placid Calamari.

The final preparations to get out of Dodge had put everyone in the castle on edge, and as if to add to the confusion, a former associate of Paulie’s mother, an ancient old battle-axe named Mother Teresa chose this moment to make an appearance.

It was hot that evening in the Castle Calamari as it often had been these last twenty-six summers and the whole place bore that familiar bad broccoli smell that always made you wish for a change in weather. Lots were drawn and the loser led the old lady down the shag carpeted hallway leading to Paulie’s bedroom. When the boy’s mother arrived, she found Mother Teresa stooping by the bedroom door and working a lock pick into the keyhole.

“These low-grav pin tumblers don’t like to cooperate sometimes,” she complained. “Ah, here we are!”

She twisted the handle. The door snicked open, and the two women peered in at Paulie where he lay in his bed.

By the tenuous light of the air freshener plugged into an outlet close to the floor, the boy might have noted the old woman’s matted Rastafarian dreads, rounded hoodie, and hoot-

owl like features had he not been fast asleep. She gazed into the room. Her eyes were like glittering jewels, babbling brooks, and raging torrents.

“He’s dead to the world, is he not, Jezebel?” asked Mother Teresa, introducing the woman’s name to the reader seamlessly. Her voice plucked and twanged like a country guitarist attempting to play in Bb.

Jezebel answered in her soft *contrabando*, “The Atavists are known to be heavy sleepers.”

“I’ve heard that,” wheezed the old woman. “Let go of my throat.”

“Yes, Your Reverence.”

“An indolent little bugger, yet he’s already fifteen.”

“He is indeed—I mean about being fifteen,” said Jezebel, then quickly added somewhat pridefully, “Gets his learner’s permit next month.”

“Well, he should do fine on the written, and if he’s really the *Whachacalladat*...well...the driving test should be a cinch too.”

The two women paused, gazed at the sleeping boy. “That’s my son,” said Jezebel. The *Whachacalladat*. ”

“Is he not young for his age?” asked Mother Teresa.

“How can someone be young for their age?”

Mother Teresa slapped herself on the thigh. “Silly me!” she laughed. “Small. I meant to say *small* for his age!”

“The Atavists are known for getting their growth late.”

Mother Teresa looked at Jezebel and grimaced. “Speaking of which, you’d really better have a doctor look at that thing on your neck.”

Mother Teresa turned and spoke to the boy. “Sweet dreams, you indolent little bugger. You’ll need all your beauty rest when I introduce you to my *gum jabber*.”

She slammed door hard enough to wake the boy who sat bolt upright and shouted irritably, “Somebody *sleeping* over here!”

He should have asked “What’s a *gum jabber*?” But, of course, he hadn’t heard, and it really didn’t matter much. He would find out soon enough. Oh, *brother* would he.

Paulie lay awake muttering to himself. *Too much for a guy to expect a peaceful night’s rest around this joint?*

He couldn’t get back to sleep. There were so many things for him to learn. Ascaris would be different from Calamari. *Plenty* different. Paulie’s mind whirled like liver and herbs being whisked into a *pâté*.

Ascaris, Dung, Desert Planet.

Thunder Hellcat, the family assassin, had explained it very well, and Paulie, belaboring the obvious, now mused in detail over the very same explanation in order to fill the reader in.

According to Hellcat, the Atavists had made enemies—*mortal* ones (to coin a phrase), and these folks were known as the Harkincinemas, a name for which they were mercilessly teased. (Almost all of the people Paulie would come to know in life had the very same problem and, of course, Thunder Hellcat was certainly no exception.)

For eighty years the Harkincinemas had been on Ascaris mining the Geritol-based spice known as *meringue* under a sweetheart deal they had with the GLOAMIN' LOCH LOMOND Company. Now, however, the Harkincinemas were being run clean off of the planet by the other five families, and Paulie's dad, Dude Pito was taking over.

Pito was popular with the Great Houses of the Landgrab and Hellcat had explained how that was a big problem. He said that people get really jealous of a popular guy like that and they *stay* jealous until, one way or another, they've managed to knock him off.

"Hombre celoso no tiene reposo!" he always used to say, although Paulie knew not one blind word of Spanish. Indeed, his own vocabulary (in the implausibly ubiquitous

English spoken galaxy-wide in sci fi novels) was fairly circumscribed itself.

Paulie finally dropped off and dreamed of wandering through caverns measureless to man, etc., etc. within whose labyrinths he heard the incessant *drip...drip...drip* of water. He awoke with a start and rushed to the washroom.

The following morning, Paulie's mother found him in the hallway near his room. She was carrying a pair of black dress shoes, slacks, and a semiformal jacket.

"Ah, you're up," she said. "Did you sleep well?"

"People slamming doors all night."

She handed him the clothes. "Go put these on," she said. "You need to meet with the Reverend Mother."

"Who's she?"

"Aside from the one slamming the doors, she was my chemistry lab assistant when I was in the Benzedrine Geltabs School."

"Is she any part of the reason that you and me gotta go to Ascaris?"

"You and *I* gotta go," Jezebel corrected. "And no, she isn't, though she's coming *with* you and *me*—that is, if you survive the test of her *gum jabber*..." She covered her mouth with a hand. "...oops!"

"What in the hell is a *gum jabber*?" asked Paulie eying her with suspicion.

“Oh, nothing, nothing,” she said hurriedly ushering him down the hall. “Now, go put on those clothes. Mother Teresa is waiting for you in the living room.”

Paulie shuffled slowly and stubbornly down the hall carrying the shoes, slacks, and jacket. “Yeah, well let her wait,” he said grumpily.

Jezebel lovingly watched her son depart as she read the words on his T-shirt: *If you can read this, get off my back!*

It was a good forty-five minutes before Paulie got around to introducing himself to Mother Teresa. He hadn't bothered to change clothes.

The Reverend Mother took one look at him and something suddenly occurred to her—something very important indeed that somehow she had never thought of before. It had to do with the move to Ascaris.

Damn that Jezebel! If only she had borne us a girl child as she was instructed to. We could have had triple occupancy rates for all the hotels on the way to Ascaris. Now I've got to pop for single rooms. Shit!

Paulie stuck out his hand and when the Reverend Mother offered him hers, he shook it. He was only fifteen, but he had been trained by his mother in the arts of the Benzedrine Geltabs School whose curriculum did not fail to include a goodly dose of old fashioned etiquette.

“My name’s Paulie,” he told her. “Yours I hear is Teresa. My mom said to meet you here and introduce myself and so now I have. It’s been real. Bye now.”

“Hold your sandworms, young fellah,” said Mother Teresa. “I’ve got something here for you.”

She reached into a tear in her garments and extracted a nine-inch shiv. It was a narrow instrument that looked homemade. Its steel was dull and it had no handle.

“Is that your famous *gum jabber*?” Paulie asked.

“It is,” replied the Reverend Mother.

Paulie grinned at her. “What? You gonna jab me in the gums with it?” He laughed at his joke but his laughter quickly died away when he saw the Reverend Mother’s affirmative smile and nod.

“You’ve *got* to be kidding me,” he said, but she wasn’t, and then she was upon him like a cat.

“Get that goddamned thing out of my *mouuuufff!*” Paulie hollered. But she had a steely clench on him as she jabbed the *gum jabber* repeatedly into his gums.

He tried to pull away but she wouldn’t let him, and when he managed to get an arm free and took a swing at her, she head-butted him and body slammed him onto the floor all the

time keeping a firm right-handed grip on the *gum jabber* while her left arm was wrenched around his head and like to breaking his neck.

Blood was spurting everywhere.

Paulie tried to use his Benzedrine Geltabs training and locked his ankles around her back. That way, she couldn't get him in a heel hook. *Maybe I can choke her out*, he thought. But it was no use. They remained locked in some ghastly neo-coital embrace as she leisurely rammed the gum jabber through both upper and lower gums. If she got tired of poking the instrument through the old holes, she'd just make new ones and what with her ferocious neck cranking, he was helpless to resist.

She jabbed and jabbed.

The pain! The pain! Paulie thought. *Jesus Christ that hurts like hell!*

She kept jabbing his gums. Would she ever stop?

My gums! My poor old gums!

It seemed that she would leave him nothing to keep his teeth in place.

My mouf! My gums!

She let him up.

It was over.

Paulie rose unsteadily to his feet rubbing his jaw reproachfully.

“Christ on a crutch!” breathed Mother Teresa. “I must have wanted you to fail. No

woman child ever took that much without tapping out.”

“I had the option to tap out?” Paulie cried, hemoglobin drizzling down his chin. “Might have *told* me!”

“Well, *duh!*”

The reverend mother turned and shouted in the direction of the doorway. “Jezebel!”

Paulie’s mother rushed in and saw Paulie standing on the blood-soaked carpet.

My son is alive, she thought. *My son is alive....Now, I can be alive again too...*

“I think you’d best get to the infirmary for a pint or two of the red stuff, Sweetheart,” said Mother Teresa.

“Yes, Paulie,” Jezebel said. “You’ll need those gums fitted with plugs and stitched. And your forehead needs tending as well—you know, where she head-butted you, dear.”

Paulie walked off a little stiffly in the direction of the castle infirmary.

“You hate me just a little,” said Mother Teresa.

Jezebel didn’t answer, but it was true, and she had good reason.

Look at this bloody mess, she thought. *With what it costs to replace carpet these days, I’ll be kissing that security deposit good-bye for sure.*

2

The Barman, Fay Ray, and Spidy

Trying to understand Paulie Moab Utah without understanding his enemies the Harkincinemas is like trying to understand James Joyce's *Ulysses* when you haven't read every single book that Joyce himself read because if you haven't, friend, face it, there's a lot of that *Ulysses* stuff you're just not gonna get.

From the *Manuela of Paulie Moab Utah* by
the Princess Ireful

A big, fat, disgusting slob was hanging from two steel cables in the middle of the family room in the Harkincinemas' ranch house. The cables were set in tracks in the ceiling so the humongous blubber gut could swing and glide on them and dangle over other areas of the room. The cables strained under his colossal poundage.

At the end of both were meathooks that had been pierced through the man's 60-pound love handles. They (the hooks that is) belonged to his nephew Fay Ray, who had bought them when the town's meat lockers were outsourced to Durango and all of the equipment that didn't get shipped to Mexico was sold at auction.

It was a thoughtful gesture getting those hooks for his uncle. Fay Ray had also paid for the cables and Mercurochrome and even volunteered to gaff the hooks through those enormous and repulsive man flaps.

It was a nice setup. Fay Ray was only sixteen, but he was resourceful and efficient. Now he was observing his uncle who was swinging slowly back and forth with the greatest of ease like something out of a flying trapeze artist's nightmare.

Fay Ray couldn't take all the credit. It was Doc Watson's orders. He told Fay Ray that his uncle absolutely needed to get off the couch occasionally and this was the best way the boy could think of to do it. He designed and installed the hooks, cables, and ceiling tracks himself and also bolted his own Rotzler 25-ton hydraulic tractor winch to the floor to crank him up there. What a rig!

His uncle was observing two giant globes that were also hanging from the ceiling. You could tell that one was really old because Eastern Europe still had Czechoslovakia on it. Below him stood his nephew and the family's skinny and somewhat androgynous neck throtter who was so creepy looking he would give Jeffrey Dahmer the heebie-jeebies. He was just plain icky. To get an idea of how much so, imagine a human sized mouse, specifically

about five feet eight inches tall and 130 pounds wearing a house dress and red high heels but nonetheless walking on tiptoes, a black beret set askance on its head and a submachine gun held in its grimy, spindly fingered hands.

“Tell me, Fay Ray and Spidy...” The human lard warehouse swung a little to the right to address them. “Is it not *Sanfrantastic* what I, Barman Valium Harkincinema, do?” he asked, relieved and also somewhat prideful at not only having introduced his own name (and his *full* name at that) but also the spooky strangler’s before it got very much later in the chapter.

“Look at where Dude Pito Atavist will go to meet the doom that I have devised for him!”

“The Dude’s going to Prague?” Spidy asked.

“Wrong globe,” said Fay Ray pointing to the other one, a dusty looking planet hanging next to the globe of ancient earth. “He’s talking about our dear Ascaris, Dung, Desert Planet.”

“*Correctomundo*, Fay Ray,” said the Barman.

“I hear the Dude’s buying you out,” said Spidy.

“Oh, that’s a big laugh, hah hah,” said the Barman. The Atavist family doesn’t even have that kind of muscle anymore. He doesn’t buy *me* out; I buy *him* out!”

“How?” Spidy asked.

“Easy,” the Barman replied. “I’m selling the Dude all my interests in the *meringue* business and moving to Las Vegas, but in the meantime I know this guy who works as a security guard for GLOAMIN’ LOCH LOMOND.”

“So?”

“He says they’ve been stockpiling *meringue*,” said the Barman. “And I’ve got him to agree to tell everyone they’re going to dump all that spice on the market. It’s simple high school economics. Supply and demand. Word gets out and even the most daring investors are going to run for cover. The price of worm dust will fall so low that the Dude and his mortgage will be underwater.”

“Underwater?” asked Spidy, confused. The term was unfamiliar.

“Upside down, I mean,” said the Barman. “Anyhow, I’m carrying the note, so the first time the Dude misses a mortgage payment, I foreclose on him and take back Ascaris. See? I can do the deal with the Atavists and *still* keep my planet!”

The Barman did a joyful pirouette on the cables spinning three full turns before coming to a halt. The cables gave off wiry pings under the stationary weight of the hippopotamus-like Harkincinema. Then they unwound themselves spinning the Barman three times in the opposite direction to regain their tensile equilibrium.

“I then get the guy at GLOAMIN’ LOCH LOMOND to take back what he said. When he does, the price of spice will go sky high and I’ll take my planet and flip it!”

“I thought you were going to just kill the Dude.”

“Well, that’s going to be done after the foreclosure, naturally. “By Hugh.”

“Me?” Spidy ejaculated. “How am I supposed to whack Dude Pito? He’s never even in town.”

“Not *you—Hugh!*” said the Barman. “Dr. Hugh, DDS. He’s been the Atavists’ family dentist for years.”

“Oh, *him!*” Spidy said.

“Only thing is,” said the Barman. “I’m a little wary about hiring him for the job because it was I, Barman Valium Harkincinema, who had his precious girlfriend and dental assistant Wanda whacked—and by the way, thanks for returning the garrote in such a timely manner. Another assassin really needed it.”

“Don’t mention it,” said Spidy. “Always help out. Glad to.”

“Anyway,” continued the Barman. “Because of our whacking Wanda I’m not sure whether he’s agreeing to this in order to trick me and get even somehow.”

“Well, hire someone else.”

“I would,” said the Barman. “Trouble is, he’s the only one I can find in the whole Atavist family circle who will agree to kill the Dude at all. So I’m stuck.”

“Well, I think Hugh might be the one who’s stuck.”

“I just said that!”

“The *dentist!*”

“Oh, *Hugh!*”

Whew! thought Fay Ray. *What a couple of jerks!* He was unhappy at being left out of the conversation as though he was there just to lend ear and somehow gain wisdom from this pair of two-headed changos.

“When and where was this?” he asked. “Why did you whack Wanda, Uncle Barney?”

“Last August in the linen closet,” his uncle replied. “For mixing a madras shirt in with my whites.”¹

“Oh,” said Fay Ray. He had always wondered where, when, and why he whacked Wanda.

There was a *thump!*

“Ah, a letter has arrived!” said the Barman and glided squeakily on the tracks to the message cylinder on the wall. There was a popping sound when he pulled the rubber-

¹ Besides being a dental assistant, Wanda also did a lot of the Harkincinemas’ laundry. The Atavist family didn’t much like this, but Dr. Hugh had talked them into letting her keep both jobs, a decision that everyone would eventually regret.

ended capsule from the pneumatic tube. He unscrewed the top and pulled out an envelope. “It’s for me!” he cried happily. “I *think!* Here, Spidy. Read it to me!” He dropped the envelope down and Spidy caught it.

It was 10,191 and the telegraph had recently been invented, but Spidy hadn’t gotten around to learning Morse Code (and the Barman hadn’t even gotten around to learning to read) so the message cylinder system was the best way to go as long as the Barman could keep his spooky-looking garroter on call.

“It’s from Dude Pito,” said Spidy. He’s sending his regrets regarding your invitation to lunch with him.”

“What does he say?”

“He says he has no intention of having lunch with you or any other Harkincinema son of a bitch.”

“Well, write him back and tell him that I think *he* is a son of a bitch too!”

There was another *Thump!* and the Barman retrieved the capsule. “Could this be for you, Spidy?” He tossed the envelope down.

“Yeah, it’s my paycheck from Assassins Are Us,” he said. He opened the envelope and a sprinkling of green leaves spilled out.

“What the hell is this?” he asked. “Parsley?”

“It’s a traditional message,” said the Barman. “It means they’re garnishing your wages.”

He stared down at the assassin and continued, “Which is exactly what *I* might do if you continue moonlighting. What’s more, I might just forget a certain promise I made...”

“You wouldn’t.”

“What’s the promise?” asked Fay Ray.

“He promised me the mother of the boy Paulie.”

“Paulie. Really a lovely boy,” the Barman said. “A lovely person.”

“Let’s get this settled right now,” Spidy pressed. “What about our agreement about his mom?”

“Oh, Relax. That should be *no* problemo,” answered the Barman. “Although you might have to stand in line. Just pray the Sardonican fleet isn’t in town when I hand her over to you.”

“What do you want with her?” Fay Ray asked. “I didn’t think you even liked older women. Or women at all.”

“I don’t,” said Spidy. “I need a decent cello player for the string quartet I’m putting together. You know how hard they are to find on a planet full of Harkincinemas? They’re all musical idiots!” He hesitated, then added hastily: “Present company excluded—of course!”

“But of course,” said the Barman, who in fact was called by some ‘the master of the dry lands kazoo.’ “Am I not *Sanfrantastic?*”

“As am I. Don’t forget who it was that suggested you contact Dr. Hugh in the first place.”

“Well, it wasn’t you, O’ *Speedo*,” countered the Barman.

“Was too, O’ *Pauncho!*”

“Was *not!*”

Fay Ray listened *Oh, Pauncho! Oh Speedo!* he mocked. *Idiots! My uncle can’t even discuss business with his favorite assassin without getting into an argument.*”

“Fay Ray,” said the Barman. “Are you learning from this art, this exchange of ideas between two masters of disaster?”

“I sure am,” he said knowing full well that all he was learning was the art of needlessly filling pages with vapid, contrived banter.

The Barman struggled on his cables uncomfortably. “Crank me down,” he said. “I want back on the couch.”

“Tired of just, you know—*just hanging around?*” Spidy smirked.

The Barman glared at him ferociously as his nephew started up the winch and cranked him down.

“Now get over here Fay Ray, and get your big meat hooks off of me!” he said.

3

Plans to Transgender?

There is no more terrible moment of enlightenment than when you suddenly discover your father is a man with human flesh unless perhaps it is the moment you discover he is a woman with human flesh.

From “The Fibteller’s Drug. Is It Really Worth It?” by the Princess Ireful

Late in the afternoon of the ninth day before their departure to Ascaris, Mother Teresa and the mother of the boy Paulie had a little conference with the son of the mother of the boy Paulie. They wanted to fill him in on the whys and what fors regarding the Reverend Mother’s savaging of his oral cavity. They were pretty sure he’d be curious to know about it.

They met once again in the living room and managed to find a corner where the Daisy Fresh Cleaners weren’t unsuccessfully attempting to remove the blood imbrued in the carpet—this despite the jingle that they incessantly played on the television:

*There is no stain
We don't disdain
We'll send those stains
Right down the drains!*

Paulie had just returned from a guitar lesson with a guy named Gurgling Haddock and was carrying a vintage Ranger Doug Gibson L5 archtop. He gave the Reverend Mother an accusatory look.

“Hey, I’ve got an idea for you, Honey,” he snarled. “This evening why don’t you organize a four-squad garbage can kicking tournament in the castle? You know, just to quiet things down at night.”

Who told him? she thought, then looked at Jezebel whose Benzedrine Geltabs poker face training wasn’t all that it might have been.

“*You!*”

“Sorry.”

Mother Teresa glared at her a moment, then turned to address Paulie again.

“We have called you here to discuss my *gum jabber*.”

“Oh, yeah? And what was *that* all about anyway, Granny? Some sort of freaking test?”

“Yes.”

“A test to what? Kill me?”

“No, to set you free.”

“Oh, *please*. Spare me the clichés,” said Paulie. “You are simply *ruining* the novel!”

Jezebel then spoke, “Son, the *gum jabber* is a machine, a simple one, true, but a machine nonetheless. Men must match their minds against machines lest they become enslaved by them.”

“Thou shall not make a machine in the likeness of a man’s mind,” quoted Mother Teresa as though people in the distant future had never heard of a computer or had any ear to detect hackneyed writing.

“Nice quote,” Paulie said. “Only you’ll get Sci Fi pellagra feasting on a diet of corn like that.”

Paulie didn’t quite know what the Reverend Mother was driving at, so he didn’t take his daring any farther than that. He sure didn’t want his mother confiscating his brand new iPad.

“Hard to argue with her, son,” Jezebel said. That’s straight out of the OK Corral Bible.

“Well, I can do better,” said Paulie. He lifted the arch top and played a four-note Eb minor sixth. “Cool, eh? *That’s* straight out of my Mickey Baker jazz guitar book!”

The two women fell silent. It was an awkward moment. By chance they had only just been discussing Mickey Baker and the fact that his book had gone into a new edition. Jezebel hadn’t told her son about it as the book would have to be shipped all the way from St. Louis and with the recent rise in postage rates she

didn't want to put any extra strain on the family budget.

Mother Teresa finally broke the uncomfortable silence.

"Have you heard of the Fibteller's drug?" she asked.

"No, but if will help me to play like Tommy Emmanuel, I'll smoke all you got."

"One does not smoke the drug," Mother Teresa said. "One must but digest a single drop."

"The drug gives insight into *all* things," said his mother.

"Well, my Django Reinhardt arrangement of 'Miss Otis Regrets' could use some work, so I just might try a little glass," Paulie said.

"It's not that easy," Mother Teresa replied. "Not for a boy, that is."

"What do you mean?"

"Let me tell him, Terry," said Jezebel. "It's kind of my duty as his mother." She reached over, set Paulie's guitar aside, and stroked his hair.

"You see, Son, not only do girls grow up much faster than boys do, but they seem to be able to withstand pain much better."

"The drug is painful?"

"It would make your little scrap with me and my *gum jabber* seem like a stroll in the park," said Mother Teresa, apparently now having

trouble coming up with anything better than stock phrases. She'd have to be careful. It was a good way for a character to get killed off early.

Paulie said, "Well, I've proved I can take pain."

"There's more to it than pain," said Jezebel.

"Like what?" Paulie asked.

"Well, there will be some tenderness...some swelling in the area of the....the breast."

"What?"

"And you might acquire a hippier figure."

"I'm not sure I'm liking this conversation as much as I was," Paulie said. "My Django arrangement's pretty good as is."

"Relax," said Mother Teresa. "There's every chance you'll wind up with nothing more than what your mother has described. And that can be remedied."

"Yes, son," agreed Jezebel. "You can just wear baggy pants and those big, heavy canvas work shirts—the ones with the two large pockets in the front. Who's gonna be the wiser?"

"Either of you ever heard of hormone therapy?"

Mother Teresa ignored the question. "I'm also sure there are benefits even beyond the insight that the drug imparts," she added.

"For instance?"

“Well, for starters, you won’t have to shave anymore. Of course, then again, there’ll be that time of the month.”

Jezebel patted her son’s hand gently. “Many men have tried to gain the insight of the Fibteller’s Drug...so very many, but no man has ever lived to possess the insight that the drug provides.”

“They tried the drug and died? All of them?”

“Are you kidding? Obviously, they all tried the drug and turned into girls which in itself wouldn’t be that bad at all but oh-my-*God* such *strumpets!*” She gave her son a disapproving look. “Plug in, Paulie for heaven’s sake. ‘Tried and *died?*’ I mean honestly. *Duh!*”

“I used that expression with him a few pages back,” cautioned Mother Teresa.

“Darn!” said Jezebel. “Do you think people will notice?”

“I think a *lot* of them will.”

Jezebel said resignedly, “Oh well, what’s said is said. Anyway, I have some business to attend to elsewhere in the castle, so I’ll leave you two kids to get better acquainted.”

She spun on her heel and walked off with a swish of her poodle skirt.

Paulie wasn’t especially keen on the idea of being left alone with Mother Teresa again, and who could blame him? But to his surprise, this time he found her company delightful.

“Your mother is something of a dingbat, isn’t she?” asked the Reverend Mother.

“And a complainer,” Paulie added.

“About what?”

“About everything. Her duties as a royal concubine.”

“Such duties can be weighty, young man.”

“Not for her,” Paulie said. “Last week she told my father she wanted to go somewhere she’d never been before and he suggested the kitchen.”

“Be fair. Royal concubines are not expected to cook.”

“Well, her duties are pretty light with regard to what royal concubines *are* expected to do,” Paulie told her. “My father’s rather an absentee lord of the castle which means he’s gone so often that he doesn’t even need to be regularly serviced if you know what I mean.”

“At least not by *her* if you know what *I* mean,” said Mother Teresa.

They laughed like hell.

4

A Case for Inbreeding

The Freebaser religion is the wellspring of much art, music, and beauty. Who has not heard and been moved (and *deeply* so) by "The Tin Ear Hymn?"

I saw the canaries furiously flapping hither
Canaries bolder still than charging hippopotamuses
That spread unctuousness
Upon the briar patch of my budding literacy
I felt the hippos roosting upon my young green shoots
And their tiny, scratchy feet tickling my thighs!

From *Ascaris Awakening—Nightmares in
Meaningless Light Verse* by the Princess Ireful

It wasn't long before Mother Teresa and Paulie had a bit of a falling out. It seemed that the security cameras had caught the wholesale harpooning of Paulie's chops in the living room. Somebody post-toasted it, and it had gone viral. Now people from Antares to Far Centaurus were calling him "Gumbo Boy" and the Reverend Mother "Teresa the Impaler." Paulie was livid and blamed it all on the Reverend Mother which, of course, he had every right to do. But if Mother Teresa cared at

all about what half the galaxy was calling her, she didn't seem to show it.

Gumbo Boy? Paulie thought. *It doesn't make sense. Gumbo is a stew made with okra. I wasn't being fed any stew in the video or any okra either. So how do I get to be "Gumbo Boy? What's the connection?*

He asked other people in the castle all of whom said they knew exactly what the connection was, but somehow they could never get him to understand even when they said things like, "Gumbo, *gums*. Get it?" and for days he could be seen wandering about the castle muttering:

"Gumbo boy. *Gumbo!* It makes no *sense* and it isn't fair!"

Paulie, his mother, and Mother Teresa had another powwow in the living room on one of the final days before their departure to Ascaris.

"Think hard, Paulie," said his mother. "What did you dream last night?"

"You'll always be able to remember the dreams that are predictions about what's going to happen on Ascaris," said the Reverend Mother.

"I dreamed of a cavern, a stately pleasure dome, and many an incense-bearing tree..."

"You can stop right there," said Mother Teresa. "We're wasting our time. That *can't* be prophetic. There *aren't* any trees on Ascaris."

“You really must work harder on your precognition skills,” his mother chided.

“I’ll get right back to sleep on it,” promised Paulie.

“You do that,” Jezebel said. “This very evening, you hear?” The last two words came out in a southern accent. Jezebel had originally been from Georgia and had met the Dude Pito in Atlanta when he was there for a paper manufacturer’s convention.

“We really need to know in advance what the Barman Valium Harkincinema is going try and pull,” said Jezebel. “So start, like, *foreseeing*, okay?”

“Dude Pito is a cousin of the royal blood,” added Mother Teresa. “And so the Barman wants to kill him and all his heirs—you included.”

“The Barman and my dad aren’t kissing cousins, are they?” Paulie asked jokingly.

“No, if they’re cousins at all they’re only distant ones,” Mother Teresa answered. “But about the kissing, in the case of a fifteen-year-old boy like you, the Barman might very well be interested. Frankly, I’ve heard pretty much the same about your father.”

She turned to address his mother.

“The Barman isn’t going to stand for Dude Pito taking all that prime desert real estate and

meringue away from him, Jezebel. He's gonna come after us with everything he's got."

"That'll be his first reaction, sure."

"Well, that boy of yours had better get to be pretty damn good at fortune telling. You don't want your son walking out in that desert with nothing but the Farmer's Almanac in his hand."

"And if I do, you'll have your own crappy pedagogy to blame, won't you, Mom?" said Paulie unpleasantly.

"It's all so unfortunate, so unnecessary," said Mother Teresa. "If you had borne a girl the way we all agreed, we could avoid a destructive war entirely. A daughter could wed one of the Harkincinemas. Then you'd all be in-laws, and the only fighting would be at the dinner table on Thanksgiving over who gets a drumstick."

"She's right," Paulie hollered as if he would prefer to have never been born or been born a girl or whatever the hell a fifteen-year-old is ever thinking. "You've consigned us all to doom—on *Dung!*"

Jezebel said nothing. She simply turned and slunk away, shamed and disheartened. There was nothing left for her to do but drink a quick bottle of Johnnie Walker Black and slip into bed where she lay filled with regret at her failing. *Perhaps if the Fibteller's drug is really as good as they say*, she thought hopefully. But no, that was out. The Harkincinema men were

pretty much rednecks, notorious homophobic gay bashers² who would never even consider betrothal to the transgendered.

She also felt like a hypocrite. Who, after all, was she to scold Paulie for not being able to tell the future when she herself couldn't even manage to turn a Y chromosome into an X? That was something you learned as an undergraduate in a 101 class at Geltabs State U, for heaven's sake. The freshmen girls did it all the time. And thank goodness for Roe Wade!

Just before she fell asleep, a thought occurred to her. Perhaps it was her Benzedrine Geltabs training or more likely the effects of Mr. Walker's Amber Restorative that made her rouse from her swoon suddenly aware of something that no one ever seemed to talk about.

The Harkincinemas are hardly a men's-only club, she thought. There are women in that family as well, aren't there?

She propped herself up on an elbow in bed and spoke aloud, "Why can't *Paulie* marry one of *them*? It wouldn't kill him."

She reached for an unopened bottle on the night-stand, cracked it open, and drank a couple of heavy slugs, then four or five more *pico de botella* as they used to phrase it when she was

² Most often because they had some unresolved issues of their own. Nothing had really changed for more than 100 centuries.

in graduate school in Nogales. (Of course, back then it had invariably been José Cuervo or Bacardi!)

Why does it have to be a daughter especially? Doesn't it work both ways? Why the hell not? There are plenty of cheap Harkincinema skanks that would suit him just fine. (She deliberately put it in such rough terms because she knew that Paulie liked his girls a little on the trashy side.)

Jezebel fell asleep in the comforting knowledge that she had found the key to averting war.

The following day, however, the epiphany of the previous evening was driven completely from her mind. It was the last-minute rush to get things done that made Jezebel forget all about her plan for world peace. Or perhaps those extra slugs of scotch had had something to do with her lapse of memory. Who can say? The only sure thing was that the chance to avoid war had been lost and as the family historian, Princess Ireful would later record for posterity:

The infernal machine was back on its tracks chugging full bore down the railroad of galactic history with a topped-off tank of diesel and twenty-five sacks of mail. There even was one pretty credible report by an eyewitness, a

banjo-player engaged to perform onboard, who swore a kitchen maid named Dinah had hijacked the train, taken the controls, and proceeded to blow the air horn like a maniac through the Mississippi darkness from Kankenny clean to the Gulf of Mexico.

—From “A Historical Analysis of a Locomotive’s Sassy Chassis” by the Princess Ireful

5

The Guitar Lesson

Paulie Moab Utah was raised in a gated community and was home schooled. He thus grew up about as socialized as Romulus and Remus. He had a third string group of music and dance instructors who like his parents knew nothing and who wouldn't have had the slightest idea of how to teach anybody anything even if they did. His parents took over his math studies, and afterwards their son enrolled in and graduated from Home School University in the add-on bedroom of the Castle Calamari, where he majored in long division.

From "The Home Schooling of Paulie Moab Utah" by the Princess Ireful

"Let's take a break," said Gurgling Haddock, the royal strum master, sword-fighting instructor, and poetry coach. He put his Pete Huttlinger Signature OM1 Collings on its guitar stand. Paulie did the same with his Ranger Doug Limited Edition Gibson L5.

"I'm not convinced you were playing your best on that last number. "Don't you like the blues?"

"No," Paulie admitted.

"How come?"

“Playing blues is like taking requests to play ‘Brown-eyed Girl.’”

“Well, I promise not to make you do *that!*” Haddock answered, smiling.

“I guess I’m just not in the mood.”

“What?” Haddock stared a moment at Paulie, then rose to his feet, feeling the rage building up inside him. *Mood? How dare he say that? Has he paid no attention at all to his instruction?* He was furious and wanted Paulie to know it, so he mule-kicked the chair behind him for effect unintentionally spilling his gin and tonic in the process. *Damn!* he thought, then turned to Paulie. “You tub of guts!” he roared. “What does *mood* have to do with it?”

Paulie could see that his teacher was angry or at least pretending to be. Luckily, he had once had a summer job on a fishing smack in the North Atlantic so he knew how to handle Haddock. He picked up his guitar and strummed a Bb major sixth followed by an Eb sixth and an F ninth.

“*I’m in the mood for love,*” he sang. “C’mon, Gurgling. *C’mon!* Sing it with me! On the beat, now! ...*simply because you’re near me...*”

Haddock joined in, crooning the words softly, his head rocking musically from side to side, “*Funny but when you’re near me, I’m in the mood...Hey!*” he yelled, catching on.

“Keep singing!” Paulie encouraged. “Very good. Tempo. Lightly. Then strongly. Again.”

Haddock put one hand on his hip and said crossly: “I was *trying* to say that *moods* are for sword-fighting or reloading your weapon in a firefight. They are NOT for guitar playing!”

“Funny; I’ve always been told just the reverse.”

“Okay, smart guy,” Gurgling said, the anger mushrooming up in him again. “I promised never to ask you to play ‘Brown-eyed Girl’ and I won’t. Same goes for ‘Gloria.’ In fact, I’ll agree to make any Van Morrison tune off limits, all right?”

“You’ve got a deal.”

“Instead, how would you like to be playing an Esteban guitar for some penny-ante busker while she sings Janis Joplin’s version of ‘Bobbie McGee?’ In the *subway!* Huh? Girls like that are real easy to find, so I can make it happen for you, mister. *Bobbity, bobbity, bobbity* and all!”

Gurgling Haddock’s eyes were crazed and Paulie realized the strum master was staring at him the way his pet Great Basin rattlesnake used to stare when it nuzzled up to a feeder mouse.

Haddock’s mouth was twisted in anger, cracked half open, and drooling copiously. He

stepped close to Paulie—*very* close. He was a much taller guitar player than the boy.

Paulie was filled with fright. His knees trembled. A rivulet of saliva ran down his spine.

“I’ll invoke the Kurse of Kristofferson on you,” Haddock said.

Paulie’s jaw dropped along with the expensive L5, which made a worrisome cracking sound when it hit the floor. *My God*, he thought. *He really means it.*

Fear coursed through him. He recited mentally the words to the famous Benzedrine Geltabs litany: *I dassn’t fear. Fear is the Little Prince that brings total nausea, the Mini Cooper that wreaks crampiness, the Tiny Tim who hobbles about in syrupy 19th century pot boilers....* There were others on the list but he couldn’t remember them all, so he fast-forwarded to the end:

I will fear my face and where my face was, there will be nothing. Only fear will remain...

The litany had never seemed to work for the boy and, of course, the reason was obvious: “Fear my *face*?” Gurgling Haddock had taught it to him *backwards* in poetry class—*backwards!*—and he had done it on purpose. It was just another case of sabotage, standard fare back biting in the Atavist household.

And speaking of such, Gurgling Haddock wasn't even close to being done with Paulie. He towered over the boy menacingly.

"I'll make you play 'Stairway to Heaven.'"

"No, please..."

"I'll put you in a bluegrass band playing the bass!"

"No, no...not *that*..."

Haddock was on a roll.

"I'll make you play heavy metal with a wound third string!"

Anticipatory pain shot through the fingers of the boy's left hand.

"I'll sign you up for a yearlong tour playing Creedence Clearwater covers."

Paulie could hardly move, hardly breathe. He just stood there horrified at the...the words... the terrible, terrible words...

"Buster, I'll put a cowboy hat on you and book you in the Pecos Saloon Saturday nights to play three-chord country tunes in..." He paused to make the point stick. "...*the key of vanilla D!*"

Paulie fell to his knees.

"Know what else?"

"What?" the boy sniffled weakly. He knew he couldn't take much more.

"I'll tell everyone you were one of the guys singing harmony on the Dead's recording of 'Truckin'!"

Paulie toppled forward, collapsed in a heap.

When he regained consciousness, he said nothing. He didn't dare.

"Get up," Haddock ordered. "Looks like the guitar lesson's over. Let's start the poetry class."

"Yes, sir," Paulie said meekly. "*Sir?*"

"Yes?"

"Did you mean all those things you said?"

"If you'd made one more wisecrack, your swan-song at the saloon would have been "Little Brown Egg,"" said Haddock. "Now—the poetry class! Repeat after me, "*I see England I see France...*"

6

Guests Who Are Coming to Dinner?

Ascaris teaches the attitude of the knife chopping-off what's incomplete and saying: "Now, it's complete because it's ended here." which (if it can be understood at all) is a little like showing someone a blank sheet of paper and telling them it's a portrait of a polar bear in a snowstorm eating a sandwich and when they inquire as to where the sandwich is, you say: "He ate it!"

—from *Sayings of Paulie Moab Utah*
by the Princess Ireful

It was a cool night at Castle Ascaris and the ancient pile of stone that served the Atavist family as home while they waited to move into their new townhouse was being readied for guests.

Jezebel and Shady Drapes were at work making preparations in the kitchen. Shady Drapes was the desert Freebaser woman who had been employed by the Atavists to help out in their new digs on Dung. She was a frowzy old biddy, who was not only gullible enough to believe in homeopathy but also chiropractic and who swallowed hook line and sinker every imaginable kind of conspiracy theory.

Lately she was heavily into the legends that the famous *Missionaria Positionaria* had planted for centuries from the Gobi clean to the deserts of Dung and she was determined to find evidence that every one of them was true.

She swallowed a tablet of Walborne, a national drugstore chain's knockoff of a quack supplement called Airborne, then asked, "Can you identify this object?"

She handed Jezebel a knifelike instrument made of a milky porcelain. Its edges were lightly serrated and glistened in the kitchen lights. Near the handle was a long blood groove as well as a built-in bottle opener.

Jezebel held it to her nose and gave it cautious whiff. The blade smelled faintly of lemon meringue and urine.

What could it be? she thought. Obviously it was some kind of knife, but Shady Drapes was looking for her to give her the official name.

A Bowie? A cleaver? she asked herself. *It certainly isn't a Swiss Army knife!*

She let her mind start to free associate as she had been taught in the Benzedrine Geltabs School. What is it? A paring knife? A filleting knife?

She used her training to *grok* the object in her hand as her mind drifted far, far back—back to her school days when she once dressed in one of the new avant-garde pantsuits. She had

been so happy that day, but what was to take place made it a bitter memory that she always tried to suppress the way 20th century cowboys were said to have tried to suppress certain urges. She remembered now what happened. Her teacher most insultingly had asked her, “Well, which are you, fancy pants? A *mod* or a *rocker*?” She would never forget the hurt feelings nor the answer she gave: “A *mod* or a *rocker*? Neither, *neither* you...you big *snot*! I’m a ... a—”

She awoke from her reverie. The Freebaser woman was looking at her. “A *MOCKER!*” Jezebel shouted.

Shady Drapes dropped a plate of hors d'oeuvres, and gasped.

She must be psychic! she thought. *How could she know that the desert tribes called the great Shangri-La worm a mocker? Of course, that isn't really a mocker per se, only its tooth—but calling it a mocker is getting pretty darned near the mark. I'm, like, so impressed!*

I only know the name,” said Jezebel. “I have no idea *why* the desert tribesmen call the great *Shangri-La* sandworms mockers. Why? *Why* is this so?

She just read my mind!!!

Shady Drapes was even more impressed, but at the same time she seemed a little

uncomfortable with the question. She hesitated a moment before she answered.

“Well, do you know how cats can sometimes seem *aloof*?

“Yes?”

“Well, it’s not nice to say so, and it’s always a bad practice to stereotype, but sandworms can be really, really *snide*.”

“I see.”

“Now, let me fill you in a little bit more. What you got there is a worm tooth and when we sharpen them and add the bottle opener and occasionally a corkscrew, we refer to them as *crystalmeth knives*. A *mock*er proper is the whole worm, you see, not just a tooth.”

“Am I to keep the knife?”

“Yes. And I suggest that you hide it in your brassiere. You’re having dinner guests this evening and if tonight’s catered *soirée* is anything like the last one we had in the castle you just might want to have it handy.”

A little later, Jezebel joined Paulie and Pito at a secret pre-dinner planning session. Also attending the session were Thunder Hellcat, Gurgling Haddock, and others including the family’s best swordsman, Duncan Doughnut. Doughnut was originally from Idaho, so his friends often called him Duncan Idaho Potato, but never to his face. Not after they found out how much it pissed him off. At any rate, it was

a productive meeting and everyone thought that they got a lot done in a short time and were pretty much ready to entertain.

One wouldn't have expected many people to show up for a feed that the Atavists were hosting. They weren't the most popular family among the houses of the Landgrab but quite a few people owed Pito favors and plenty of others came for the bean dip. It was to die for!

Rocket ships from as far away as Rigel IV and Sigma Draconis had already begun to land out front. Indeed, there soon were so many that the Dude Pito not only had to get extra staff to help direct traffic but also open up the overflow lot on the west side of the castle.

The rockets continued to arrive and Pito finally made the decision to send word to the kitchen that if they ran out of bean dip not to make any more. It wouldn't make a difference this evening, but people would talk, and that would help alleviate parking problems if they ever decided to throw another bash. The Dude prided himself on always planning ahead.

He went to greet guests at the entranceway and saw that they were each being given a pint glass of pilsener which they ceremoniously dumped on the foyer floor before making their way into the dining area.

“What in the hell is going on here?” he snapped. *If water is precious on Dung, he thought. Beer must cost a fortune!*

The castle janitor who was mopping up the suds said, “Sire, it is an Ascarian tradition. The guests cast their beer on the floor to symbolize their purity, to show that they care nothing for material riches.”

“Well, let them throw their own beer on their own floors!” the Dude snapped, looking at the bubbly mess the janitor was swabbing up.

“But the tradition...”

“The tradition ends here and now!” roared the Dude.

“*Sire!*”

“In fact, instead of wasting good barley pop, I want it taken outside and any desert Bedouin who asks can *have* a glass!”

“But, sir...” started the janitor.

“That’s a dudal order!”

“As you wish, Sire,” but the janitor gave him a murderous glare, and Dude Pito suddenly understood why. He was planning to wring that mop out and sell the beer to the Bedouins! He didn’t like the way the janitor was staring at him.

I got enough to worry about getting killed by the Harkincinemas on the street! He thought. *Now I’ve got to look out that I don’t get whacked at home—by the janitorial staff!*

A little while later, Jezebel came into the foyer to help the Dude out with greeting the guests.

“Make like we’re fighting,” the Dude whispered to her.

“What for?”

“I’ve heard that there are some among the dinner attendees who wish to assassinate me.”

“Who?”

“Believe me, if I knew *that*, they’d be off the guest list so fast it’d make their heads swim,” the Dude answered. “All I know is that they’re out to kill me, but if they think you’re going to save them the trouble, they just might postpone their plans for a while.”

“Right,” Jezebel whispered back. Then, in a loud, insulting voice: “Word has it that you have discontinued the centuries-old Beer Slop tradition. Do you plan to similarly dispense with the tradition of leading our guests to the table, *Douche Pito*? *Oh!* I mean *Dude Pito!*”

“No, *Jizzabel*,” he answered back even more loudly and insultingly, but with a furtive wink to his mistress. “We’re just going to *change* it a bit.

“After *you!*” he said to the guests at the door and motioned towards the dining room. Then, in a whisper to Jezebel: “I don’t want any of those sniping scuts walking behind *me*—like *ever!*”

Dude Pito took the chair at the head of the long table. To his left was Paulie and his right Jezebel.

Gurgling Haddock had been conscripted to play light jazz during the dinner. He sat on a stool that had been placed on the small stage nearby and was going through his Duke Ellington set. When he started “Mood Indigo” Paulie fumed a bit.

Probably isn't even aware of what he's doing, the big hypocrite! he said to himself.

Dude Pito wasn't halfway through his cheeseburger when a messenger arrived at the table and whispered into his ear. The Dude whispered back to him and then dabbed the corners of his mouth daintily with his dinner napkin. He rose from the table.

“A matter of urgency requires my attention,” he told his guests. “I must leave at once.”

He didn't want to go without a decent excuse so he said, “I apologize, but, you see, the castle sump pump has broken down and water from the moat is just *pouring* into the dungeon!”

There was an understanding murmur across the table. Everyone knew now that the Dude wasn't leaving their company over a trifle. They were simple, practical people who might not have understood his need to leave for a

matter of war or politics—but the sump pump? That really *was* an emergency!

“Gurgling Haddock,” said the Dude. “Set aside your Fender Squier and take Paulie’s place at the table. We don’t want to have an odd number.”

“No,” agreed Haddock. “We are not, after all, *barbarians!*” But he said it rolling his eyes and scowling. He’d rehearsed for weeks and now he wasn’t even going to get the chance to try out his brand new Cole Porter material.

The Dude was particular about having an even number at the table, but didn’t care at all that he had no replacement for the dinner music. *Who listens to the guitar player while they’re eating anyway?* he figured. He grabbed a handful of fries and a couple of onion rings for the road and left.

Paulie rose to change places, and Haddock made his way to Paulie’s seat. As he passed Paulie, he whispered, “*Your* turn to give *me* some instruction, boy. Or at the very least some signals. I don’t even know which fork to use!”

“Relax,” Paulie whispered back. “Dad’s gone and you can shovel your food into your mouth with both hands for all I care.” He picked up something from a basket on the table and handed it to Haddock as he passed. “Here’s a piece of toast to mop up your gravy.”

Paulie took his seat and said, “Please continue dining. I believe Dr. Kildare was discussing climate change.”

“Mind if we discuss it later?” Kildare asked.

“By all means,” Paulie replied, then leaned over and whispered in a voice loud enough for everyone at the table to hear, “Thanks for the help with the conversation—you big, bullet-headed *jerk!*”

Jezebel looked over, proud at the dignity and maturity of her son and oblivious to the sexist 101st century customs that let a 15-year-old boy serve as head of the table over his own 47-year-old mother.

“Maybe he’d prefer to talk about freebase.” It was a rich banker who everyone disliked because he made a thousand times more money than they did but paid less than half the tax. “It is said that the Freebaser scum smoke the ashes of the dead to recover the last molecule of crack.”

“So?” responded Kildare. “You’ve done nationalized the entire *meringue* industry where you come from, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well, we done much the same out in the desert. Crack belongs to the tribe. We got laws, too, just like you got and ours don’t allow a man to take nothing with him that don’t belong to him, see? Besides, a dead man ain’t got no

reason for complaint ‘cause he don’t snort much blow—which reminds me—if you ever come visitin’, don’t bother to bring a big canteen.”

“Why not?”

“A dead man, he don’t drink much water neither.”

“You dare to threaten me?”

Paulie interrupted and said in a relaxed, offhanded way to the banker, “Your comments remind me of the time back on Calamari when I was bass fishing with my dad.”

“How so?” asked the banker.

“Well, I saw the body of a drowned fisherman.”

There was a whisper of voices around the table and the rustling of pocket dictionaries. *Drowned? Drowned?*

Paulie realized that half the people didn’t know what he was talking about.

“Drowned,” he repeated. “Dunked under water until dead.”

“You can *die* that way?” someone asked. “Can’t you just breathe the water? H₂O’s got an oxygen atom in it.”

“You’d think so,” agreed Paulie. “But believe me, it just doesn’t work.”

He turned back to address the banker. “Anyway,” he continued. “The sight of that drowned man got me thinking. I realized that

too much of anything like water or even love is not necessarily a good thing. Do you think it's possible to have too much love?"

"I suppose so," the banker replied philosophically.

"How about conversation?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you got a big mouth. You know, you just *talk* too much!"

The house dicks stiffened. Duncan Doughnut's index and middle finger started doing an imitation of a tiny man walking down his pant leg on the way to the knife in his sock. Gurgling Haddock just sat there looking worried. He never brought a weapon when he had a gig. What with the mike stand, guitar, and amp it was just too much to carry.

Jezebel addressed the banker. "Perhaps you misunderstand my son. If he talked about a nicely *faceted garnet*, would you take it to mean he thought it would be nice to *unfasten* your wife's *garter*?"

It wasn't the most eloquent way for her to fit in the code word "garnet" into the conversation, but it was the best she could do on short notice³. "Garnet" meant, "*Go for your guns!*"

³ Jezebel did not know it, but she would have found comfort in the fact that centuries ago much the same thing had been done almost as ineloquently and the editors allowed it to go into print anyway.

She was irritated to have been forced to use such a difficult codeword. At the planning session before dinner, she had told Duncan Doughnut, Thunder Hellcat, and the rest that some of the code words they had decided upon were pretty obscure and hard to fit into the conversation in a natural way. They did not really disagree but reminded her of what happened the time they chose to use the phrase “Pass the salt” as the code instead of something unusual like “garnet.” People were getting shot all through dinner.

Jezebel then grimaced with feigned discomfort and pretended to be readjusting her bra, but she was really going for the crystalmeth knife.

“DRINKS ARE ON THE HOUSE!” shouted the servants coming in from all directions with trays laden with margaritas, Manhattans, and martinis.

Oh, that’s right! Jezebel thought, mentally scolding herself for her forgetfulness. She’d got it wrong; “Garnet” was the code for “Cause a distraction!”

The staff had been well trained. There was a round of “Happy Birthday to You” as a

surprised guest⁴ was presented with a cake flaming with candles, and party poppers were handed out to everyone else.

The ruse had succeeded. The tension at the table evaporated and everyone began to relax and enjoy themselves.

As the cake was cut, placed on plates, and passed around, Jezebel listened to bits and pieces of the discussion around her.

“They asked me at the check-out if I was able to find everything all right. *Well!* I told *them* I didn’t think they should have the big sign reading ‘Snack Nuts’ and then make you search forever for the actual *dinner* nuts which they’ve decided to tuck away in some corner!”

Another guest remarked, “I never buy the high-priced spread. I swear I can’t tell it from margarine!”

“I know the feeling, ma’am,” came a reply. “The other day a guy walked into my shop whose hair was so long that I couldn’t tell if he was a boy or a girl. I honestly could *not tell!*”

“Well, maybe it was a girl.”

“No, it was a boy.”

“‘Cause you said you couldn’t *tell.*”

⁴ The planning committee had checked everyone’s Facebook pages and knew in advance that none of the guests was really having a birthday. But they figured no one was likely to embarrass the host by pointing that out—and *certainly* no one was going to say no to cake!

“Well, all right then, I *could*, okay? You wanna make a federal case out of it?”

She also caught a bit of her son’s conversation.

A woman said, “As the proverb goes on Altair V, *The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.*”

“How quaint and lovely,” said Paulie. We have a similar saying on Calamari: *The food is always tastier on someone else’s plate.*” And with that, he grabbed her club sandwich along with a dill pickle and a handful of chips and gobbled them down without another word.

Jezebel felt a tapping at her sleeve.

“What *is* this dish?” asked the Duchess of Rotherham. “It’s delicious!”

“Testicles of wild kangaroo rat in a special white sauce,” Jezebel said.

“Oh, I *must* have the recipe,” the Duchess said, although she was privately thinking to herself, *Wild? Is there any other kind of kangaroo rat? I mean really! Who actually raises them anymore?*

“I’ll see that you get it,” Jezebel said, using her Benzedrine Geltabs training to make a mental note to get her the recipe, then bent for her purse, dug out her Franklin planner, and wrote it down in case she forgot.

Privately *she* was thinking: *Oh, sure, as if she is going to be able to get her hands on any*

kangaroo rats back in Yorkshire—or half of the other ingredients. That empty-headed little duchess is just that: an empty-headed little duchess!

7

The *Hunter-Gatherer*

We pay for the violence of our ancestors, but it isn't fair at all, is it? I mean to say, we weren't, like, even born when the crime in question went down, so how come we've got to look out for people coming at us with gum jabbers and hunter gatherers and cyanide capsules that they're looking to drop into our pale ale? I mean, it's not like anyone still believes in original sin anymore, so what gives?

—from *Sayings of Paulie Moab Utah*
by the Princess Ireful

When the guests had left, it was late and Paulie was too tired to help his mother clear the table or do the dishes. He finally agreed to dump out one of the ashtrays which happened to have some smoldering butts in it, and during the night there was a pretty decent-sized fire under the sink that was luckily extinguished by water spouting from the burned-through plastic piping there. His mother found out about it in the morning and told Paulie's father, who gave the boy a pretty sound licking.

When Paulie entered his bedroom after the dinner, he immediately noticed that someone

had been in his room. His bed was made. No one had ever done that back on Calamari but since there was new staff here, he shrugged it off.

Something else was different too. In the middle of the bedspread was a 7-inch needle-nosed object that looked like a dart. It seemed to sense Paulie's presence and rose from the bed with an electric humming. It then went *zip!* and sped towards the boy, stopping about two feet away.

With a sudden motion Paulie reached out and grabbed the device. He held it in his fist as it made a series of buzzes and clicks. A hypodermic needle snapped out of its nose. The sterilized metal, gleaming after having been automatically pierced through the sanitizing alcohol pad contained inside, was dripping poison. Acrid smoke rose from where each dark droplet struck the floor.

"Help!" Paulie cried.

Not far away in the castle, Duncan Doughnut recognized the prearranged code word, "Help" and rushed to the boy's room.

"A hunter gatherer!" he cried. "Someone get a bucket of water!"

In a moment, the janitor came in with a pail slopping to the brim with a beer and water mixture. Since the Dude was passing out free suds to the Bedouins, the janitor wasn't going

to be able to sell any, so he had kept what he had already wrung out into the pail and had just been pouring himself a nice little second glass when he heard Duncan's shout.

To save time, the janitor didn't dump out the beer that was left but ran straight to the sink and fauceted the water on top of it. It was unfortunate in a way, but it also served to direct attention away from him. He was the one who the Harkincinemas had bribed to plant the hunter gatherer in Paulie's room. Now he only hoped the Atavists didn't do one of their famous surprise audits. He had no idea of how he was going to explain the extra \$19.95 in his account.

"Jam that hunter-gatherer in there!" Duncan ordered and Paulie obeyed.

"What am I doing?" Paulie asked. "Trying to drown it?"

"Well, yeah," Duncan answered. "More or less. See those blind rivets? That means it's a D-9 series model and the Harkincinemas got the waterproofing all wrong on those. That works to our advantage."

Paulie held the hunter-gatherer under the water and beer. It bubbled just a little—or maybe that was just the beer?—but it wasn't doing anything else.

“It’ll short circuit in a few seconds. When it does, you’d best pretend you were somewhere else.”

There was a loud sizzling sound from the pail and Duncan hollered, “*Scram skiddoo!*”

Paulie dived through the doorway pushing the janitor out of his way and rolled into the hallway. Duncan Doughnut was already there and the janitor made it out as well.

There was an abrupt *KABOOM!* and the lights in the castle flickered out for a moment, then came back on.

Paulie and Duncan reentered the room. “Look at that pail,” Paulie said. “Blown to smithereens! Cool.”

“What’s all this blood?” asked Duncan Doughnut.

“The janitor made it out all right. But one of his legs doesn’t seem to have,” Paulie said. “See? It’s over in the corner. There by my fresh laundry.”

“Is that the way you lay out your laundry? On the floor?”

“Hey,” said Paulie. “My dad taught me to plan ahead. Those are my skins for the whole week!”

Duncan looked at the room. *What a mess, he thought. Fifteen-year-olds are such slobs. The blown-up pail and severed leg in the room are practically improvements.*

“Why do they call those things *hunter-gatherers*?” Paulie asked.

“Name comes from the !Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert. They were hunter-gatherers.”

“Never heard of them.”

“Well, they made the first prototype to kill giraffes. They didn’t call it a *hunter-gatherer* of course; that was later.”

“What did they call it?”

“They first called it a *hunter-seeker* but that didn’t sound right to them and it didn’t make much sense because hunting and seeking are pretty nearly the same thing, so they changed it to *hunter-killer*.”

“How’s *hunter-gatherer* a better name?”

“Well, it’s not really, is it? Doesn’t gather anything at all. I think the bushmen got the name right on the second try. They didn’t bag that many giraffes, though. Subsisted almost exclusively on a diet of Mongongo nuts.”

“Never heard of Mongongo nuts either.”

“Doesn’t matter. It’s enough to know that that’s what they lived on.”

“That’s all they ever ate?”

“That and the very occasional giraffe as I said.” Duncan thought a moment and then added, “Well, actually they did eat another kind of nut from time to time. Those bushmen are

the same folks who passed down that kangaroo
rat recipe your mom's so proud of.”

8

The Dude is Betrayed

Some say the Dude Pito walked straight over a cliff in a noble self-sacrificing effort to provide a better life for his son. Those who knew him best, however, agree that he likely just wasn't watching where he was going.

From Commentaries from an Ascarian Family by the Princess Ireful

Barman Valium Harkincinema pressed the telephone receiver firmly against his ear. That way he wouldn't have to hold it there anymore. The phone simply stuck to the buttery suet of his blubbery cheek and ear as he swung in his cables. He was talking to the Atavists' family dental practitioner, Dr. Francis Hugh.

"You'd do us a big favor if you put the Dude on ice for us over there instead of making us do it on this end, Hugh," he said. It'd save us the trouble of driving him all the way from the airport to the ranch house to finish him off. Kind of an unnecessary step."

"No way," Hugh replied. "I've agreed to deliver him to you at the airport. That's it. After

that, it's up to you to whack him. I may be a double-crosser but I'm no killer."

Actually he *was* a killer, or at least planning to be. The Barman Valium Harkincinema had had every reason to feel wary about hiring Hugh for the job of betraying the Dude; he was most *definitely* aiming to get even. That's why he was so stubborn about what he would agree to do. He had to have things exactly his way in order to be sure to avenge Wanda.

"I'm going to deliver him just as agreed. "He'll be drugged and as gentle as a pussy cat when I wheel him over to you in the airport lobby.

The Barman made one more attempt to change Hugh's mind. "But look, you've got that big moat over there at the castle. Can't you just outfit the Dude with a pair of cement swim fins and toss him in? Easier for all concerned."

"I'm a dentist," said Hugh. "Not a cement mixer." And that seemed to put an end to the matter. "I'll meet you and your nephew at the airport at eight o'clock tonight. Flight 103. I'll have the Dude with me."

He hung up the phone, made a quick check of the change return for coins, found only a penny which he pocketed disappointedly, and went back to the castle. Dude Pito's root canal appointment was in a half hour.

When the Dude came in, Hugh didn't make him wait but got him into the chair right away. He had not hired a new assistant after Wanda's passing and so he and the Dude were alone.

"How's the boy?" he asked conversationally.

"Great!" the Dude replied.

"And the concubine?"

"Fine," he said, then added, "Nags a lot."

"Don't they all!" smiled the dentist, although he had never actually had a concubine. All he had ever had was Wanda and while it was true that she *had* nagged him constantly that didn't mean he didn't love her. It was funny; the little things were what you missed when someone was gone and the thought of Wanda's nonstop henpecking made him even more determined to carry out his plan.

Hugh had replaced the nitrous oxide tank with one that contained a paralyzing neurogas, and he lifted the plastic mask connected to the tank and placed it over Dude Pito's mouth.

"Breathe deeply," he said.

The Dude did and felt paralysis take hold of his extremities. He couldn't move his body at all although he was still able to speak.

"Is this some new kind of anesthetic?" he asked.

"It is," replied Hugh. "Listen Dude, I've got some bad news. I'm using a neurogas on you and in a minute or two I'm going to give you

something a little stronger so you can't yell for help. I'm going wheel you onto a jet and tell them you're my brain injured cousin. Then, I'm handing you over to the Harkincinemas—Barman Valium to be specific. And you're going to kill him for me.”

The Dude struggled to get up but only managed to wrinkle his forehead a little.

“Powerful stuff, eh? said Hugh. “But for now you can talk and hear all right. That way you can learn the details of my plan and ask any questions you might have so you'll best be able to put that plan into effect.”

“Treachery!”

“I'm afraid so. But there's nothing you can do about it so you might as well get used to the idea.”

“What makes you think I'll carry out your plan?”

“Oh, you'll carry it out all right.”

“*Villain!*”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Hugh. “I'm this, that, and the other thing. I admit it, okay? But it's the only way I could think of to avenge Wanda. Now, I realize that all of this inconveniences you quite a lot and I do apologize for that.”

“Who's Wanda?”

“Wanda. My girlfriend and dental assistant. Am I giving you too much gas or what? Like

she hasn't been inside your mouth scraping tartar a hundred times."

"I haven't seen her lately."

Hugh rolled his eyes. "You wouldn't have. She's, er, *dead*? That's why I'm, like, *avenging her*?"

"Who killed her?"

"Oh, let's see. If only you had some kind of clue. I'm avenging her death by having you kill Barman Valium Harkincinema. Now who on earth could it have been?"

"I know what you're planning," said Dude Pito. "You're going to hollow out one of my molars and fill it with a poison gas."

"Not a chance," Hugh said. "That's the *first* thing the Barman will expect from a dentist. Besides, I pulled your last molar over a month ago and you know it, so quit playing dumb 'cause I'm not turning off the gas."

"What's the plan?"

"It's something they would never expect a dentist to do in a million years. I mean what kind of dentist would ever give something to someone that was sure to rot their teeth?"

"What's that?"

"Chocolate! Sugary, sugary chocolate!" cried Hugh. "A chocolate truffle *bonbon*. I'm filling it with Silly Green, the deadly brain gas."

“What makes you think the Barman will eat it?”

“Are you trying to make me laugh? Have you seen a recent photo of the Barman?”

“No.”

“Well, if you had, you’d know that that man will eat absolutely anything!”

Hugh took something out of his pocket and held it up. “This is it,” he said. “The bonbon.” He tucked it into the Dude’s vest pocket.

“I bite down on the bonbon, and then...” started the Dude.

“Look, I *told* you I’m not turning off the gas. You know very well it’s the Barman who bites down on it, so don’t get cute. Just offer him the chocolate. Agreed?”

Hugh picked up a syringe that was lying on the counter by the chair and injected the Dude in the arm. “This is the drug that’s going to keep you quiet all through the flight.”

The Dude’s eyes closed and his mouth fell open under the clear plastic mask. Dr. Hugh whispered in his ear.

“The *bonbon!* Don’t forget to offer him *the bonbon!*”

Everything went according to plan. When Hugh got off the plane, Fay Ray was waiting for him in the lobby and the two of them wheeled the Dude out to the parking lot where

the Barman was waiting by the side of the pickup that had brought them.

Hugh saw that the Barman had a chain attached to the back of his neck, but he didn't ask why it was there. Who knew or cared what that big fat slob was up to?

"I checked his teeth the way you wanted," said Fay Ray. "They're clean."

It was true. Dr. Hugh had had more than an hour to wait before he needed to drive to the airport and since the Dude was out cold and right there in the chair, he killed time by cleaning and polishing his teeth for nothing. It was a gesture that made him feel a little less guilty about everything. He hadn't had time to do the root canal, however, and he did feel bad about that.

There was a *swish!* and Dr. Hugh was staring at a brightly colored flechette sticking in his arm.

"Sorry, buddy," said the Barman pocketing a Daisy air pistol. "If you'd only killed the Dude in the castle the way we asked, you wouldn't have even been here to get darted like this. Oh, and before you ask, yes it *is* a poison dart and no you don't have much time. About thirty seconds, so if you've got anything to say make it quick."

"Did you think I wouldn't get even with you for killing my Wanda?" Hugh said. "I hope that

whacking the Dude is going to be *reeeeally sweeeeeeet!*” He tried to keep the sarcasm he felt from showing. He didn’t want to tip his hand.

“I’m sure it will be,” said the Barman.

“Yes, killing him is going to be like taking *candy* from a baby.”

“Easy as pie.”

“Pie? Close, but more like being offered a *treat!*”

“What are you inferring?” asked the Barman, suddenly growing suspicious.

“As the speaker, I can’t *infer* anything, Einstein. But perhaps I’m *implying* something. You can infer anything you like.”

“Like what?”

But Hugh had expired and was now lying on the asphalt. It was just as well. If he could have reflected upon it, he’d have probably agreed that he had already said too much anyway.

9

Bonbon Gone Wrong

Legend has it that over the Castle Calamari a blazing white star fell across the sky at the precise second that the Dude Pito died on Ascaris light years away. However, if one reads only a chapter or two of Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, it becomes apparent that such an assertion is a pretty hard one to make as the exact time would be almost impossible to calculate even if Fay Ray or his uncle had recorded the event with a stopwatch which no one has even suggested they did.

—From *Dung: Tales True and Tall*
by the Princess Ireful

It was 8:45 PM on Friday night, and Spidy was in the ranch house parlor with two other musicians having just finished the final rehearsal before Saturday evening's performance of his ensemble "Twelve Strings and a Strangler."

"I've got some good news, said Spidy. We've been stuck as a trio for some time, but I think we're going to soon round out this little combo with a cellist so we'll finally be a proper quartet."

He held his violin in one hand and pointed with the bow in his other. “In the meantime, I’d like to thank our violist here for being the only one besides me to attend every practice session.”

He gave the violinist a dirty look and she fidgeted a little uncomfortably in her seat. The violist looked a little uncomfortable as well. “It was the least I could do,” he said. “You see, I don’t think I’m going to be able to make it tomorrow night.”

This bad news was interrupted by a loud commotion down the hall and the door banged suddenly open. It was Fay Ray with his uncle in tow. It was a good thing that the ranch house’s hallway was so wide or the Chevy Silverado would never have fit.

In the center of the truck bed was a gooseneck hitch and a lifting arm that had one end of a chain connected to it. The other end of the chain was connected to his uncle, the Barman Valium Harkincinema.

They’d started the trip over to the house with the Barman riding on a wheeled gurney⁵, but when the axles had broken under the extreme weight of the dimpled colossus (This had become pretty much a regular occurrence.), Fay Ray had no choice but to simply drag him down the road—this time to the ranch house

⁵ Also called a *Halleck* on Ascaris.

walkway, up over the porch, and finally straight down the hall to the parlor entrance.

The front bumper of the pickup had bashed in the door, and Fay Ray put the truck into reverse and moved it back a few feet so there'd be room to get into the parlor. He inadvertently put a wheel over the instep of his uncle who screamed when the tire rolled up on his foot and then again when Fay Ray moved the truck forward a little to get it off.

The Dude Pito was in the passenger seat drugged and in handcuffs and Fay Ray pushed him out of the cab towards Spidy who caught him. The other musicians had already left.

Fay Ray turned the pickup around facing the other way so he could drive it back down to Monster Joe's Truck and Tow, where he had rented it. Meanwhile Spidy dragged the Dude into the parlor as the chubby beached sea cow that was Fay Ray's uncle squirmed slowly across the floor and into the room, the tow chain still attached to him and clinking behind.

"You again?" said the Dude when he started coming around and saw the Barman staring. "I thought I told you I heard your *mother* calling you!"

Bada-BING! The Barman punched him in the jaw. It was not a knockout blow. The Barman's fist had the consistency of a marshmallowy tallow that could gross a person

out a lot more than it could ever physically hurt them.

“Hungry...” said the Dude.

“What did he say?” asked the Barman looking up at Spidy.

“I think he said he’s hungry.”

“Not me...” the Dude said. “You. You hungry?”

“What?” said the Barman.

“Truffle...” said the Dude. “Chocolate truffle. Vest pocket. Yours.”

The Barman wasn’t the giant *panzón* he was because he ever turned down a chocolate or even a leftover slice of banquet Spam for that matter. The man would eat out of the front yard dumpster if he weren’t too fat to get into it.⁶ He pawed at the man’s vest, removed the bonbon and raised it to his slobbering lips.

But Spidy was much faster than the Barman. “You’re on a diet!” he hollered, snatched the chocolate from his hand, and bit into it.

Green fumes exploded from the confection. The Barman slammed his mouth shut and held his nose as Spidy melted to the floor.

I got that creepy strangler too! thought the Dude in the instant before he, too, succumbed to the gas.

Breathing outward only, the Barman screamed: “Poisoned *bonbon!* Gun it, boy!”

⁶ More on the dumpster in just a bit.

Fay Ray leapt into the cab, jammed the truck into drive and stomped on the accelerator dragging his uncle down the hall and out into the street. He careened around a corner with the tires screeching and the tow chain sending up a shower of brilliant white sparks as it scoured along the asphalt. He looked in the rearview mirror and saw Uncle Barney fishtailing behind the truck like an industrial-sized tub of Crisco attached to the end of a bull whip.

As they rocketed down the roadway, Barman Harkincinema had a moment to reflect.

Poisoned bonbon! Oldest trick in the book. I must be slipping! How could I have ever have fallen for that? he thought. *Sure they're tasty, but come on, Barney!* He also thought, *When were these streets last resurfaced? I've been dragged down some rough road over the last few years but this is the worst chafing I've ever had!*

Paulie raced at high speed all the way to the outskirts of town where he brought the Barman to a skin-removing halt. They waited there a good half hour to give the poisoned gas plenty of time to dissipate. Then they drove back to the ranch house. (At his uncle's request, Fay Ray took an alternate route home over some newer streets so he wouldn't get quite so scraped up.)

Fay Ray parked the truck in front of the house and took the chain off of the meat hook that had been neatly crooked through the deeply creased, camel-like hump on the back of his uncle's neck. Then he went inside, picked up one of the ceiling cables, tugged it outside, and fastened it to the meat hook where the chain had been. All he then had to do was go back in and start up the winch to haul his uncle inside.

When he had finished, Fay Ray looked at the Barman lying in the family room. It was as if someone had made a stiff, pink taffy out of the entire world's supply of congealed beef drippings, brought it into the house with a front end loader, and dumped it on the floor. The Barman struggled under the weight of his gargantuan gut and managed to get halfway onto the davenport, the meat hook still stuck to the back of his neck and the cable still attached to it.

His nephew didn't bother to pull out the hook or help him up on the couch. Instead he went to the parlor, dragged the bodies of the Dude and Spidy outside, and threw them in the dumpster.

Sometimes it seems like I've got to do just about everything around here myself! he complained to himself.

Trash pickup wasn't until Tuesday but Fay Ray figured the cadavers would keep all right

until then. It was the best he could do in any case and it would hardly be the first time they'd had to leave a body in the dumpster for a little longer than they wanted. Last year, the city refuse collectors had gone on strike and Wanda was in there for over a month before the union negotiated a settlement and a truck came to haul away her body along with all the other trash that had been piling up on top of her. The stench had been horrific.

And the flies! My goodness the flies! Fay Ray recalled.

10

A Flight, a Fight, and a Force Field

The tide of MicroSoft shall not spill over the Atavists' threshold!

From Confessions of the Lead Character in a Series of Absolutely Incomprehensible Science Fiction Novels edited by the Princess Ireful

The minute word got out that the Dude had been iced, an assault was launched against the Atavists' castle on Dung by the airborne wing of the Sardonican army and everyone associated with the family started commandeering any vehicle they could to get out of that area as fast as possible.

The staff grabbed up most of the family jeeps and ATVs and Thunder Hellcat rode out of the castle in the brand-new dune buggy that Pito had just purchased but never got a chance to use.

Duncan Doughnut was last seen racing over the moat on Paulie's own Schwinn ten-speed with Gurgling Haddock sitting uncomfortably on the handlebars. Someone attempted to close the main door to the castle which served also as

the drawbridge over the moat and Duncan Doughnut had to Evel Knievel the ten-speed over the end. He landed all right although after the maneuver somehow he had switched places with his passenger and he was now sitting backwards on the handlebars as Haddock pedaled furiously down the winding path from the castle into town.

Shady Drapes didn't make it out at all. She foolishly stayed in the castle in the mistaken belief that the supplement she was taking would protect her from airborne Sardonicans

Paulie and Jezebel had much better luck. They were able to get to the Atavist family shuttle craft before anyone else and flew it out over the desert to escape.

Paulie was at the controls and looked down at the parched, uninviting land below.

"I'd hate to have to crash land down there. I don't care what the *Missionaria Positionaria* legends about me might say. I'd rather be stranded somewhere in Oklahoma."

It was then that the screen on the control panel lighted up:

Your shuttlecraft is shutting down to update to the newest version of MicroSoft Windows... Download complete. Now rebooting...

“What!” shouted Paulie angrily. “This is a PC Cruiser?”⁷

“I’m sorry,” said Jezebel. “We were trying to get a little break on the price.”

The shuttle’s engines sputtered and then went silent and Paulie handed his mother his drink, lowered the nose, and put on 40 degrees of flaps. There was a flat area of sand in the desert below, but he found the shuttle’s trajectory was a little too high so he turned the yoke to the left as he stood on the right rudder pedal.

“You shouldn’t reverse controls like that with the flaps down,” warned Jezebel. “And the slip would be more effective if you did it into the wind.”

“Like I know where *that* is,” Paulie snapped. “See any wind socks down there?”

Actually she did. Apparently, it was laundry day and the desert Freebasers had hung out their clothing down below. There were mostly Levis’ and shirts and blouses. But there were a few socks as well and Jezebel could see that she

⁷ The PC Cruiser was previously called a *thopter* but the Royal Academy of Dung purged it from the planet’s lexicon because there was never a word *helicopter* and thus the apostrophe had no antecedent. Many linguists argue that the academy needn’t have bothered because although the word existed, it took its place among expressions like “raining cats and dogs” that everyone knew but had never once used in 100 centuries because doing so would sound so silly.

was right. Paulie had turned the yoke away from the wind.

“See?” Jezebel said. “You’re slipping the wrong way.”

“So what?” Paulie answered. “The maneuver’s still effective enough to make the landing area, so don’t complain. Next time *you* can volunteer to drive, instead of playing the little backseat driver! Now hand me back my Manhattan!”

Paulie had the drink in the same hand as the yoke, which wasn’t the best way to make an emergency landing. The 40 degrees of flaps, however, turned out to be the real problem. The shuttle made it to the flat landing area, but the flaps combined with the crossed controls meant the shuttle’s airspeed dipped too low and the ship lost lift and stalled about four feet above the sand. It came down with a loud *bang!* before it slid to a halt about a hundred yards further on.

When the dust had cleared from in front of the windscreen, Paulie sat up straight stretching his lightly compacted vertebra back into place. Then, he turned the key and stomped on the accelerator. The engine cranked but didn’t start. He tried it again.

“Be careful,” warned his mother. “You’ll flood it.”

Suddenly the control panel screen lighted up again.

A fatal error has occurred. The shuttle has failed to restart. Contact your system administrator.

“Who’s the system administrator?” Jezebel asked.

“Well, we don’t really have one, but Ravi Balasubramanium could probably help. You remember Ravi; he’s our computer lab assistant.”

“Can we get in contact with him?”

“I don’t think he was able to get out of the castle.”

Paulie had good reason to believe that Ravi had either been killed or captured. When Paulie had last seen him, Ravi was rebooting a computer and holding down the option key to reinstall the system from a CD. Paulie guessed that Ravi didn’t have time to get out of the lab ahead of the attacking Sardonians because he had to keep holding the key down until the computer restarted.

Paulie took a swig of what was left of his drink and his mother refreshed it and her own from a chilled and sweating plastic bottle that she had filled with a mixture of vermouth, bourbon, whiskey, and bitters.

“Here’s to Dude Pito,” Paulie said, clinking his glass against his mother’s. “He was a

mighty warrior, loving father, and a kept woman's dream come true."

"We shall not soon forget him," Jezebel added.

"Who?" Paulie asked.

"Who *what?*" said his mother.

Paulie downed his drink and the concubine of the late Dude Pito refilled it. "Let's get out and have a look around," said the son of the concubine of the late Dude Pito.

They pushed open the shuttle doors and stepped out into the baking oven of Dung. Paulie mused that when people baked dung back on Calamari, neighbors could smell it for blocks and blocks and so it was no surprise that here on Ascaris the odor was even worse.

A hot, dry wind was blowing. The desolate sands of the desert stretched endlessly before them. Mountains cut across the horizon.

Sand—immeasurable sand, sky, and mountains, Paulie thought. There was nothing else except for a few ramshackle outbuildings, a branding corral, a broken half buried snow cone machine, and a rusty old thresher with tumbleweeds stuck in its blades.

A band of men appeared as they came out from around one side of a cowshed not far away. They were big, rough-looking, bushy-bearded desert hillbilly types, each with a wide bandana wrapped around his forehead to hide

his receding hairline. They hurried up to where Paulie and Jezebel were standing by the shuttle.

“Well, now, looky here!” said one of them crudely. “This day just keeps getting better and better. Robbed two Wells Fargo worm coaches, and cheated a vending machine out of two Eskimo pies with a couple of slugs. Now look what we’ve got,” he grinned at his companions. “And it ain’t even lunchtime yet!”

The others laughed and Paulie and his mother braced themselves against the meringue scented halitosis that shouted in their faces.

“Then you haven’t eaten?” said Jezebel. She sat on the front fender of the shuttle, crossed her legs, and lighted a Chesterfield. “Perhaps you’d like a little *appetizer* before the main course?” She threw her head back and laughed revealing the pinkish, deeply ribbed hard palate bordered by none-too-white teeth glinting with gold dental work. Jezebel took a sip of the Manhattan in her hand, blew a column of smoke into the air, and leaned forward coquettishly revealing just the tiniest bit of cleavage.

Paulie kept silent. He didn’t want to interfere with the spell his mother was casting. *She’s really good at this sort of thing*, he thought, and he was right. They didn’t call his mother Jezebel for nothing. Nor MILF neither.

The men stared lustily at the mother of the boy Paulie and a giant desert nomad took a step forward.

“I am Kroin,” he stated. “Me first.”

He was an enormous man and none of the others deigned to dispute his place in line.

Suddenly, Paulie’s precognition awakened in his mind like an old HyperCard program that you’ve forgotten you even had and then accidentally tap and launch with a System 9 emulation you didn’t even know still existed. And suddenly, suddenly he could see—really *see* the *Truth*—in *italics* with a capital T and an explosion of confetti and daisies.

And the *Truth* was that his mother’s plan to put a spell on the men would never work.

It wasn’t that his mother was bad looking but face it, she had just about turned the corner age-wise to really be able pull that kind of thing off the way she used to do. Not with any assurance anyway. It might have still worked on his dad, but it just wasn’t going to fly out here in the desert. Not with these guys.

Paulie stepped between his mother and Kroin. He stood firm, feet planted well apart. “You want her,” he said. “You gotta get past me first, mister.”

“Paulie!” his mother protested.

“I know what I’m doing, Mom!” he said.

The target he was offering was pretty hard for Kroin to resist. The big man halted about two paces from Paulie and kicked with all the savage intensity he possessed. The man's heavy number-thirteen boot caught Paulie directly in the groin, the force of it practically lifting him from the ground. To the surprise of the onlookers, however, it was Kroin, not Paulie, who fell squalling in agony.

Paulie knew the kind of ruffian he would be dealing with here on Dung and had made preparations in the form of a stainless steel scrotal cup. He also took his precautions a bit beyond the ordinary by taking this protective garment to the Castle Calamari metal shop and welded on a two-inch dock spike where it would do the most good.

Jezebel had stepped forward fast enough to be able to sock Kroin directly in the teeth before the man could even hit the ground; this, she thought, would give him *two* things to scream "Aagh!" about.

"Aagh!" Kroin screamed. "Aagh!"

"How's that, tough guy?" she sneered kicking him in the head two or three times.

Kroin lay groaning in pain, dividing his attentions between the ruins of his teeth and his punctured metatarsus. In the top center of his right boot was a quarter-inch hole from which oozed a thin trickle of blood. Around the fallen

giant lay a scattering of red-backed federal guilders that had popped out of his pocket. Paulie scooped these up with a sudden, aggressive motion and Kroin cringed quickly in alarm. Paulie peeled off a couple of bills and tossed them at him. "Here! I'm leaving you a hundred bucks and taking the rest," he said. "I recommend Dr. Francis Hugh, Jr. He's taking over the practice of his late father, our longtime family dentist. Drop our name and he'll give you a rate."

But Paulie wasn't finished. He began to kick Kroin where he lay. Jezebel joined in, and the rest of the men left in a hurry. The woman and her boy were obviously crazy and if those two were willing to kick a guy when he was down, there was no telling *what* they were capable of and Kroin's cohorts weren't about to hang around to find out.

In the distance was a cloud of dust, and in a few moments a man slid up on a glistening sandworm. He was a big man but unlike Kroin and his companions wore no beard—just a perpetual five o'clock shadow. He had on a canvas shirt and a pair of faded Wranglers. Protruding from his pockets were lengths of surgical tubing the ends of which had been neatly closed off, each with a different colored twist tie.

The sandworm puffed, spattering about five gallons of stinking yellow goo on the sand.

“Easy fellah,” said the man, stroking its gunky dorsal segments to calm the animal. He looked at Paulie and Jezebel. “My name’s Sturgeongar,” he told them. “I’m the chief of the desert Freebasers. I take it you’re escaping that bad business over at the castle.”

“We are,” said Jezebel.

“Okay, then,” said Sturgeongar. “You got asylum.”

“We do? Thank you.”

“Well, it ain’t exactly my doin’ so don’t thank me too much,” said Sturgeongar. “It’s the rest of the tribe. They treat every *Missionaria Positionaria* legend like gospel and one of them says that the messiah and his mom’s gonna come out of a castle and bring frankincense and myrrh and whatnot to the desert. Frankly, I’m somewhat skeptical, but it ain’t up to me. You got any?”

“Any what?”

“Frankincense and myrrh.”

“A little,” Paulie said. “But not very much. Where is it, Mom?”

“In the glove box, I think,” said Jezebel. Then to Sturgeongar: “Shall I go get it?”

“No,” said Sturgeongar. “I don’t actually want none; I was just checking the legend is all.”

Sturgeongar dismounted and held his sandworm's reins as it coughed up something onto the ground that looked like a fetal deer. "I've been out scouting and was on my way back to the camp when I seen you come down." He poked a finger over their shoulders. "Camp's back in *that* direction. You passed it as you come in to make that forced landing. Let's walk on over, folks."

"What about the shuttle?" Paulie asked.

"What about it?"

"Well, I don't want those bandits coming back and selling it for parts."

"Don't you worry none about that. I seen them runnin' and I already sent a text to my guys. They ain't coming back nohow."

"And the shuttle?"

"It's got a Gates interface, don't it?"

"Yes."

"Figures," said Sturgeongar. "I suspected right away it was a Windows reboot what brought you down. Just leave that heap for the worms." He pointed at the ground. "Who's this bum with all the shoe polish and scuff marks on him?"

"That's Kroin," said Paulie.

"Friend of yours?"

"I wouldn't say that," Paulie answered. "We just met."

“Then I suggest we leave him for the worms as well,” said Sturgeongar. “Let’s go, people.”

Sturgeongar led his sandworm by the reins back towards camp and Paulie and Jezebel followed in the slippery wake.

When they got there, Sturgeongar immediately introduced Jezebel to the president of the Freebaser Women’s Club who whisked her away to a tent where she could freshen up and gossip. He stayed with Paulie, who finally introduced himself.

“My name’s Paulie, but my friends call me the *Whachacalladat*.”

“Really? The *Whachacalladat*. Well, whad’ya know about that! Just like in the *Missionaria Positionaria* stories!” He stuck out his hand. “As I said, my name’s Sturgeongar. Glad to meet you.”

“Likewise, I’m sure,” said Paulie, shaking his hand.

“That’s a nice sticker you got there,” said Sturgeongar.

“Thanks,” said Paulie. “I thought up the design myself and used my old color dot matrix machine to print it on a denim patch. Then I got my mom to iron it on my T-shirt. Cool, eh?”

Sturgeongar looked at the boy’s shirt. *That’s a denim pants patch all right*, he thought. *Nice job. You can hardly tell. Looks just like a professional print job.*

On the patch was a picture of an egg frying in a pan. Beneath that were the words:

THIS IS YOUR BRAIN ON MERINGUE.

“That’s real nice boy,” said Sturgeongar. “But by sticker I meant that short sword of yours.”

“Oh, *that!*” Paulie said, slapping the blade’s sheath on his hip. “Yeah, right. The pride of ownership is just *killing* me.”

“Don’t you like your sword?”

“Not especially. They’ve been training me to use it for years, but I’ve never been able to figure out why. I’d feel a lot safer with a .45.”

“Zounds, boy!” cried Sturgeongar. “Didn’t they teach you nothing back on Calamari? A pistol’s no good out here in the desert. We all have these here force fields that a bullet just bounces off of.”

He flipped a switch on his utility belt and there was an electronic humming sound. Paulie saw that Sturgeongar’s image had blurred as if viewed through a bottle of rum after you’ve finished drinking it. His voice seemed oddly garbled. “Go ahaed, boy. Tkae a siwpe at me whit taht sitcekr!”

Paulie immediately drew his sword and viciously swung it with both hands directly at Sturgeongar’s head.

There was a loud *zap* as the blade struck Sturgeongar's force field and the sword bounced backwards slicing off a good two-inch strip of Paulie's ear.

"Hloy Crhist, yonug falelh. You dnid't wsate mcuh tmie. Dno't you lkie me or soenmthig?"

"I like you just fine."

"Awnyay, see waht I maen?"

"So how's a sword any better than a revolver?"

"A bellut form a rovelver aawlys geos rlaley fsat. You cna't solw taht bellut dwon no metatr waht you do."

"So?"

"You suptid or semohitng? You dno't hvae to snwig a swrod sepur fsat. Wtih a ltilte fenise it's pissoble to silp taht sowrd rhigt tuhogr the oehr gyu's focre filed—the way the kinghst of old uesd to use a dagegr to silp trhuogh the otehr gyu's amror!"

"Well, could you turn that thing off?" Paulie asked. "You're giving me a headache."

"Srue, kid," Sturgeongar said. He reached down and flipped off the force field switch on his belt. "I'ts ternud off now. As I was syiang, you gtota *mestar* taht *art*, taht *fenise* if you wnat to dfened yolesruf wth a sorwd in the dseret."

"You're still talking like that."

"Srory boy, it taeks a wilhe to waer off."

“Wlel, I wsih yu’od hrury up. Yu’oer dnivirg me cmopeltly cazry...” Paulie broke off and shouted, “Now you’ve got *me* doing it!”

“Jsut a mneiut,” Sturgeongar said pointing his finger in the air. “Just a minuet...just a *minute*, ah! That’s better!”

“Well, if I can’t use a .45 why didn’t they issue me a ray gun?”

“Man,” Sturgeongar said. “You got rocks in your head or something, boy? Everyone knows if you fire a ray gun at a guy who’s got a force field, it creates feedback that breaks everyone’s windows and eardrums for a radius of fifty miles.”

“So it isn’t practical to use one of them either.”

“No,” said Sturgeongar. “Not unless you want to be fitted for a hearing aid. But I can tell you what *is* practical—or *handy* as I like to phrase it.”

“What?”

“Two things: bullets bouncing off force fields and ray guns feeding back.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, obviously if it weren’t for these handy little bulletproof force fields and the also handy fact that ray guns and force fields cause horrible feedback, where would we have to go? I mean, if it was possible to use a single-action .45 revolver on Ascaris, we’d might as

well be play-acting various roles in a Louie L'Amour novel. With ray guns, we'd look like a bunch of characters in the TV version of *Jet Jackson!* But this way, *this* way, we can use swords—*swords*, baby! So we look just like something out of a twelfth century French romance. You gotta admit it Kid; King Arthur's got sturdier literary legs than Luke Skywalker any day even though an overcooked name like Skywalker would fit in better here.”

Paulie's eyebrows rose with sudden comprehension. “You keep your Sci Fi gig, but get to have sword fights too!” he said.

“That's a beautiful way of putting it, kid,” said Sturgeongar. “Throw in a little of your mom's sorcery along with them swords and you've got it all!”

A thought came to Paulie. “Wouldn't it be awfully easy to invent a slow bullet or put some kind of a ground wire on the ray gun?” he asked.

Sturgeongar didn't answer. He figured that was something the readers could be left to puzzle over. “Hey,” he said. “Watch this!”

He drew his *spada da lato* from its sheathe, stood with one foot planted solidly in front of him and the other behind, raised the blade into the air, and screamed in an Australian fascist's version of a Scottish accent, “You may take our lives but you will never take our...*freebase!*”

11

The Christening

When deciding upon a name for a baby, it's important not to choose one that is too grand for daily wear and tear. It's best to go with simple names as is the custom upon Dung—names such as Sasquatch Saskatchewan, Penelope Mumbley-peg, Miltonic Milquetoast, Crabalocker Fishwife and Semolina Pilchard.

—From *Name That Rugrat!* by the Princess Ireful

In the morning, Paulie found that he had been playing host to a 14-foot *Taenia* worm. His father had given him a C in his home schooled parasitology class and raised it to a C+ when the boy agreed to take out the trash, so he knew that the worm's scolex was still buried in his colon and that it was happily growing new segments all the time.

"I didn't even know they had that kind of tapeworm on Ascaris," he complained to Sturgeongar.

"We got all kinds here, boy. Some you might never even of heard of. It's a hard world. There's a saying we Freebasers have here on

Ascaris and I think it applies to your situation, so I'll quote you it."

Sturgeongar stood up straight and clasped his hands behind his back as he had been taught in Prickly Pear Primary.

"Fear not the worm that inhabits the sands of Ascaris so much as the worm within."

"We have a similarly germane proverb back home," Paulie said. "'Go not to the Freebasers for counsel.'"

"Well, it's advice I hope you'll take anyway, son," replied Sturgeongar. "Or else you're sure to end up like me—just an old man with a wattle."

"Oh, so you have *taken* the fibteller's drug."

"What? No! Not a *waddle*—a wattle! Wah *tul!*" He pointed to the turkey gobbler under his chin. "Sheesh!" he snorted, then reached for the circular tin that had left a half moon imprint on the back pocket of his Wranglers and opened it. The scent of lemon wafted out. "Want a dip of *meringue*, boy?"

Paulie didn't answer.

Sturgeongar tucked a pinch between cheek and gum. It sure felt relaxin' in there.

"I heard what that old witch done to you, son. I seen it too. Video's still hot out on the internets. Umpteen quadrillion hits last count on her spiking your gums. But ain't they healed

well enough for you to use ‘em the way God intended? Come on, have a dip!”

“Well,” said Paulie bashfully, stepping forward and taking a pinch. “I guess I *could*. But just this one, mind you!”

Sturgeongar looked at his watch. “Come on,” he said. “It’s...” He paused to make a calculation. The big hand had been on the 12 and the little hand on the 9... “It’s...uh, is it *nine* o’clock?”

“Rather past that,” Paulie said glancing at his iPhone which luckily had a digital clock display.

“Damn! Then we’re already late for the ceremony you got to attend.”

“What is the ceremony?”

“It’s one where you get a new name. A couple of ‘em in fact. They call it a *Christening*. They say the word comes from the name ‘Christ’ but what Jesus has to do with it beats the hell out of me. Let’s go.”

The troop had already assembled in the central part of the encampment when Paulie and Sturgeongar got there. Everyone was standing around the fire. One freebaser was fanning it with little success in getting a blaze going.

“Give *me* the paper plate, damn it,” someone said. “You’re not doing it right!”

“Just let ‘er smolder there,” said Sturgeongar. “And let’s get this little revival meetin’ over with.”

There were roars of appreciative laughter⁸ from the troops, none of whom was in the least bit religious. Sturgeongar always officiated at such ceremonies and everybody liked the way he cut to the chase.

“Now, Paulie,” he said. “We’ve already done decided on the secret name that we’s gonna call you and it’s Ueda, so that part of these proceedings is already over.”

“Ueda,” repeated Paulie. The word had a nice feel. He tried it out again a little louder: “*Ueda!*”

“Shhh!” people cried.

“Not so loud, boy,” Sturgeongar said. “Don’t be broadcasting that name. It’s a secret.”

“My Dungeese is a little rusty,” said Paulie. “But I believe it means the base, the base of a pillar.”

“Nah, you’re thinking of Usul, kid, *Usul*. But you’re not far off in a way. You see, we’re naming you after Takeshi Ueda, the *bass* player, get it? You like music, don’t you, kid?”

“Sure I do.”

“Great! Now, what name do you choose for us to call you openly?” Sturgeongar asked.

⁸ The same troops always abbreviated this as ROAL whenever they texted it.

“You can pick any one you want. No questions asked.”

Paulie was pretty sure he wasn't going to choose 'Gumbo Boy' but he otherwise found it hard to decide. *Let's see. Oh, golly, golly. Why did they have to have TWO names for goodness' sake? Lemese, lemese, lemese...* Then he had an idea.

“How do you say kangaroo rat around here?”

There was a whisper throughout the troop. “Kangaroo rat?”

“You know. The big bull goose desert rat that jumps all over the place.” Paulie bent over, put a hand behind himself and waggled it as if he had a tail. Then he jumped up and down. “See?” he said, dry-mooning them as he grinned over his shoulder. He wagged his “tail” again.

A giggle sounded through the troop. “We call that kind of rat a *Moab*,” said Sturgeongar.

“Then, I would like to be called Paulie Moab.”

Sturgeongar raised both hands to the crowd as though he were about to cleanse the encampment. He then reached into his pocket and pulled out a wand made out of a saguaro rib, turned and made a swirling motion with it over Paulie's head. “Now, click your heels

together three times. You are Paulie Moab, and for millennia this name shall echo...”

“Wait! Wait!” Paulie cried. “It is not right that I neglect to render tribute to my many friends in Salt Lake and those in the other cities, towns and hamlets of the Beehive State including the small municipality of Moab. May I be known to you as Paulie Moab Utah?”

“That gonna need a comma? Moab, Utah?”

“Nah, you can hardly hear it, so leave it out. Folks’ll understand.”

“Agreed. Now, if you’re done, click your heels together three times. You are Paulie Moab Utah without a comma and for millennia this name shall echo from the noble deserts of the Landgrab, to the halls of Montezuma, and eventually all the way to the shores of Tripoli.”

After the ceremony, Sturgeongar walked up to Paulie and put his arm around his shoulder.

“Let me tell you a thing or two about your new name,” he said. “As I mentioned, you’re allowed to pick any one you like, but I have to say that we’re not particularly thrilled with your choice.”

“Why not?” asked Paulie, hurt.

“Have you ever smelled a worm turd, a big one? I mean up close? Well, son, if ever you do, you’ll know at once that that worm turd is doing nothing more than its level best to impersonate a Moab rat. Desert folk call it ‘Old

Prickly Prick' because it has an overactive libido and spends half its time humping cactus—that is, when it isn't biting your feet when you're trying to sleep or gnawing holes in your backpack for your trail mix. We call the Moab rat the Despoiler of GORP."

"Gorp?"

"Good old raisins and peanuts," Sturgeongar explained. "But they'll steal anything you got long as it's edible. Last week one of 'em chewed through my pants pocket when I was asleep and ate all of my M&Ms. And they're a coveted item in hot place like Ascaris on account of they melt in your mouth, not in your hand."

"So there's nothing good about a Moab rat."

"Well, I didn't say that," Sturgeongar said. "Their meat's good to eat so there are plenty of packing houses that will take all you got and butcher 'em for you. They usually mix the stringed meat in with a tomato-based barbecue sauce so you can put it on a bun and make a sloppy joe. I've always felt they used too much *meringue*, but it's still a very good sauce."

This news didn't cheer Paulie. He was still moping about the handle he had chosen for himself. He had once counseled a friend who had "Angle Baby!" tattooed on his chest, and so now he knew just how the guy must have felt. A thought occurred to him: *You can't easily*

remove a tattoo. But a name... He looked hopefully at Sturgeongar.

“Perhaps we could change the na...”

“Too late. Ceremony’s over.” As Sturgeongar spoke the sound of laughter floated in from several sides of the encampment. He stroked his chin. “Besides, I ‘spect the name has already stuck.”

Paulie hung his head. He would better have picked ‘Gumbo Boy.’

“Don’t take it too hard, son,” said Sturgeongar. “That last touch of yours was an act of genius.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, now you’ve done joined the ranks of guys with states for names. You got some pretty good company, too.”

Paulie brightened up. “Tennessee Ernie Ford!” he shouted.

“Don’t forget Tennessee Williams,” said Sturgeongar smiling. “And the Oklahoma Kid!”

“Duncan Idaho!” Paulie shouted.

“Indiana Jones!”

“Hannah Montana!”

“Yukon Jack!”

“That’s a territory,” said Paulie.

“Yeah? Well Hannah Montana is a *girl’s* name but I didn’t say nothin’ did I, smartypants!”

“Hey, the Oklahoma kid is technically an *epithet*, not a name and I didn’t say nothin’ neither, did I?” Paulie fired back. “Beats having two fish for your name any day, *jackass!*”

There was nothing left to say. The conversation had ended with badly hurt feelings on the part of all concerned, and so the two crabby desert hikers parted, each cherishing a fervent hope that the other would be forgiving come the following morn and accepting of his apologies rather than stove-piping him over the head while he slept.

Paulie couldn’t get the day’s events out of his mind as he drifted off to sleep. *The Oklahoma Kid! What kind of name is that for Christ’s sake? Oh, like Johnny Cash used to go around introducing himself as ‘the Man in Black.’ ‘Ladies and gentlemen, I’m Johnny Cash.’ That’s ALL he ever used to say—period!*”

12

Pokey, Dale, and Roger

"People need hard times and oppression to develop psychic muscles," which is the argument of every tin horn dictator that ever lived with the exception of the ridiculous "psychic muscles" part that Adolf Hitler himself wouldn't have been able to sell or even understand.

From Confessions of the Lead Character in a Series of Absolutely Incomprehensible Science Fiction Novels edited by the Princess Ireful

When morning came, Paulie and Sturgeongar had forgotten all about the harsh words spoken the previous day. They ran into each other by the chuck wagon and had breakfast together.

"I talked to my mom and she's not very satisfied with the sleeping arrangements around here," Paulie said, chewing on a piece of chuck. "Or much of anything else in the camp. The sand's all right but she doesn't like all the rocks. Complains about them getting into her pumps and sticking her in the back through her

sleeping bag at night. Doesn't like the food either."

"Well, you two could kind of commute out here every day though it's a bit of a hike. The Breezy Palms Motel's just over the ridge."

"I'll tell her."

"They got a nice continental breakfast."

"She likes bacon and eggs."

"Then get one of the kitchenettes. They got those too, though they're a little pricier. But then you can cook anything you like."

When Paulie and Jezebel hiked over to town and looked over the motel, they decided to take Sturgeongar's advice and booked a kitchenette.

Paulie wanted to rent a scooter to get around town a little easier but his mother said they had spent enough by getting the more expensive room, so they walked.

Mother and son spent more than two hours shopping for clothes at Woolworth's and buying groceries at Food King before they finally got back to the motel. The next morning they got dressed and cooked breakfast.

"The suit looks great on you Son," said Jezebel. "Now, go Mr. Rogers your sweatshirt. You aren't going to be needing it today. Then come back and help me with the dishes."

Paulie took the sweatshirt to the closet.

"You want me to put it on a wire hanger or a wooden one? They have both."

“Either will be fine,” she said feeling glad that she had not inherited her mother’s insane preference for wooden ones. When the dishes were done, they left the motel.

It was noon by the time Jezebel and Paulie had finished the hike back out to the encampment. Jezebel said good-bye to Paulie near the worm corral that was fashioned out of hundreds of thorny ocotillo branches. She was anxious to be on her way to the tribe’s Bridge Club meeting.

Paulie wiped his brow with the back of his hand. It was hot. He wished he’d left the suit back at the motel—with him in it!

“What the hell are you wearing there, boy?”

It was Sturgeongar.

“A condenser suit,” Paulie answered. “For getting back the water you sweat away when you’re in the desert. Don’t you wear one?”

“I’d rather be trapped inside a hermetically sealed glass tube filled with tarantula hawks and biting midges.”

“But my mom and I were told that they were all the rage out here.”

“Advertising kid. They sell those things to the tourists who don’t know any better.”

“So I can’t use it to reclaim my perspiration?”

“You’d have an easier time getting Sea Monkeys to hatch,” said Sturgeongar.

“Whoever dreamed up the idea of a condenser suit had to have been an imbecile. I mean such a thing could never work in a million years. There’s no evaporation in a sealed system like that so anyone wearing one would die of dehydration and heat stroke in about twenty minutes flat.”

Paulie looked unhappily at the expensive brand-name suit, lifted a hem on the underside of which was printed: Sweatsucker®.

“Take it off,” said Sturgeongar. “You’ll roast alive in that thing.”

Paulie peeled off the suit gratefully. A cool breeze stirred around his boxer shorts.

“Out here we got a much simpler system!” Sturgeongar lifted up both arms. “See, here?”

Under each arm was a Dixie cup held in place by duct tape. A surgical tube ran from the bottom of each, down his sides and into his dungarees.

“With *this* rig, I can get a little reclaimed water without dying a horrible death in the process.” He offered Paulie the end of a tube that came out of his jeans. “Here, boy, take a sip out of the cache pocket.”

Paulie hesitated.

“Give it a try,” Sturgeongar urged. “See what you think.”

Paulie picked up the tube, removed the green twist tie, and sucked in a mouthful of

salty sweat water, then sucked in another. It was a little warm but it wasn't bad—although he *definitely* could have done without all of that Ice Blue Secret!

“I'll have you fitted for a pair of Dixies, but you gotta promise me something first.”

“What?”

“That you'll shave them armpits first. Last guy we outfitted had a bad time with the tape and we thought we'd never hear the end of his complaining.”

Sturgeongar motioned to the ocotillo corral. “But the first order of business today is getting you a worm to ride. You're gonna wear out those tennis shoes.”

“How about that one!” Paulie said eagerly. “The one closest to us oozing the nice lemon meringue slime.”

As if in response, the worm hocked up something resembling a fluffy mixture of phlegm and lung tissue and huffed it onto one of the corral's ocotillo limbs. Whatever it was hung there for a while getting longer and longer until it made a snapping noise, fell off onto the sand, and sank slowly out of sight.

“That one? In your dreams, kid. Cotton-eyed Joe is *my* worm. You're getting that little speckle-rumped *Ascaroosa*, Pokey.”

They walked up to the corral and the worms wriggled up frisking and eager to be petted.

“He’s all broken in and outfitted and ready for you to ride,” Sturgeongar said. “He’s a nice little spicer. ‘Course Pokey don’t excrete no lemon scent; he’s a *tarragon* worm. You like tarragon, kid?”

“Tarragon’s nice.”

“Good. Say hello to your new bestest friend and trusty sand prancer.”

Paulie took the sandworm’s bridle in his hand and gently stroked its foregut and terminal bulb. “I guess they call you Pokey because you’re not as fast as the other sandworms, huh boy?” he said.

“That and for being nosy,” Sturgeongar said.

“Won’t mind your own business, will you fellah?”

“I don’t mean nosy *that* way. He ain’t never gonna poke his nose into your business, but if you don’t watch him he’ll poke it into the business end of the worm in front of you. Look out for that. It can be a problem.”

“Well, nobody’s perfect, Pokey,” Paulie said to the worm, and then to Sturgeongar: “I’m not complaining. I’m not going to, er, *Look a gift worm in the mouth*,” he smiled. Taking that online cross-cultural communication class was really beginning to pay off. “I was told that’s a common expression on Dung.”

“It is,” said Sturgeongar. “We also got the saying, *Don’t put your hand in a sandworm’s mouth. It’s bad business.*”

“Well, that makes sense,” said Paulie. “You might get bitten.”

Sturgeongar rubbed his chin. “Bitten. Interesting. That’s one way to look at it. But actually sandworms don’t really bite that hard. It’s their *undertow* you gotta look out for. The saying’s about the fact that it’s hard to tell a sandworm’s mouth from its...”

“Its what?”

“Well, let’s just say it’s hard to tell one end of a sandworm from the other.”

“And so?”

“And so if you go around putting your hand into what you judge are sandworms’ mouths, no one will ever really know precisely *where* that hand has been, Son.”

“So how is it bad for business?”

“Well, who’s gonna ever say, ‘*¡Trato hecho!*’ and shake on it with you, kid? Nobody around here!”

It was times like this when Paulie spoke with Sturgeongar that he realized how little he knew and how much he had to learn.

Paulie reached into his boxers for an apple.⁹ “Are you hungry, boy?” he said to Pokey. “Here you are.”

There was a loud *snuck!* and the apple vanished from the palm of Paulie’s hand leaving in its place something that looked and felt like a mound of warm salamander eggs.

Paulie wiped his hand on his boxer shorts. He was fast becoming very fond of this worm.

“Got something special lined up for the troop this afternoon,” said Sturgeongar. “Some terrific entertainers.”

He walked with Paulie over to where a crowd had gathered. A large circle had been drawn in the sand and everyone stood along its circumference leaving an area for the performers to do their show.

“See the lady in the middle there with her saddlebags stuffed full of tracts?” said Sturgeongar. “That’s Dale Evangelist. She wrote “Sandy Trails to You.”

Paulie was impressed. Everyone knew that “Sandy Trails” was the greatest fare-thee-well ever penned although, of course, it always seemed a little corny when someone actually *sang* it at the end of a show.

⁹ Like all the Freebasers, Paulie carried apples in his pockets. It was essential for a man to do so in the desert in case he found himself a little peckish between meals.

Dale stepped up to the edge of the thronging crowd and waved.

“Over there is her husband Roger Autry, the King of the Bedouins,” said Sturgeongar. “Look! He’s riding his famous sandworm there *Wiggler*.”

“What a saddle!” Paulie said. “Almost hurts my eyes it’s so shiny. Look at all of that silver inlay!”

“Actually there’s a lot of chrome plate in there and even a little bit of strategically placed aluminum foil too, but don’t tell nobody, okay?”

“How do you know so much about the saddle?”

“My brother-in-law owns a leather works shop in town and Roger hired him to make a custom saddle for him. That’s it right there.”

He leaned over to Paulie and whispered, “Saddle makin’ isn’t the only leather art he and Roger are into, but don’t tell nobody about that neither.”

The King of the Bedouins smiled and winked at the crowd as he slid around on his trusty palowormo. There was a loud applause. Roger tipped his Taquiyah as his wife stared hollowly out of her burqa.

“Thank you kindly, ladies and gentlemen,” Roger said. “Now, friends, I’d like to do a little tune that was recorded a while back by Mr.

Chet Atkins. ‘Course Chet’s version was an instrumental that’s near impossible to play so I’m just gonna chord it a little and *sing* the words for y’all.” He started strumming his guitar and crooning as he rode the slithering Wiggler around the sandy improvised stage. *“Mr. Sandworm, bring me a dream. Make her the sweetest gal that I’ve ever seen...”*

The entertainment was pretty good although nobody would join Dale on the religious songs. The Freebasers did, however, sing along softly to “Dungbaya” and practically shouted out the words to “Nomad is an Island,” a desert camp favorite.

After the show, Sturgeongar said, “Roger always meets and greets all the fans after each show. Says it’s the ‘worm rider’s way,’ but mostly I think he does it to sell T-shirts and CDs.”

“Well, let’s skip it,” said Paulie. “That way we don’t buy a CD just for his recording of ‘Cool Water’ and never listen to the rest of the duds on it.”

“Got it,” said Sturgeongar. It made sense. Who wanted to buy a whole album for one song; the way everyone did when the “What’s New Pussycat?” vinyl was rereleased back in 10,181?

Sturgeongar said in a whisper to Paulie: “In addition to that, if we don’t go up and say hello,

they'll never notice that we ain't put nothing in the tip jar neither."

"Good thinking," agreed Paulie. He was learning a lot.

"C'mon, boy! We've got some plantin' to do over on the east side of the camp. There's plenty you got to know if you want to be a legend in the desert the way folks say you're gonna be."

Only a little later, Paulie found himself standing with the Freebaser chief among a group of tribesmen with wheelbarrows full of small cacti.

Sturgeongar grabbed a shovel and scooped out a foot-deep hole. He placed the rooted end of a peyote cactus inside it, covered its base with dirt.

Everyone quickly stepped back for a solemn moment of reflection.

We stand where the bold mountains kneel at sunset's gate. Young cactus, dig deep, drink water, live long and prosper... They chanted as was their custom.

Paulie was not overly comfortable with the words as he didn't think that it was particularly sound poetically to say that mountains "kneeled." He tried to get them to use the word "tower" but the Freebasers saw *that* as clichéd and were having none of it so Paulie had to give

in and agree to spend the afternoon planting and chanting in the tradition of the desert dwellers.

When the work was done, Sturgeongar said, “Let’s go riding, now, boy. Cotton-eyed Joe and Pokey could use the exercise and you definitely could use some practice getting mucous on your boots as we say.”

After their ride, Paulie ran into his mother. She wanted him to go back to the motel. She seemed a little put off that Paulie had apparently scrapped the new suit and was walking around in his briefs but she said nothing. Paulie told her he wanted to camp out again, and she didn’t object to having the kitchenette all to herself.

It had been a long day. Paulie was tired and fell asleep just after sundown, but he wouldn’t sleep for long.

Drummer Boy

“It was rough out in the desert,” reflected Paulie Moab Utah later in life. “Still, I can’t deny we had fun.”

From *Sayings of Paulie Moab Utah* by the Princess Ireful.

Boomlay, boomlay, boomlay boom!
Sometime in the middle of the night the encampment was awakened by a lot of loud, unmusical banging, clunking, and clattering. Sturgeongar and Paulie mounted their worms and slid out to see what it was.

About a quarter mile from the encampment they found a short, rat-faced 20-year-old sitting on a stool in front of a Ludwig drum kit.

The three moons of Ascaris were high and bright and by their light they could see that the drummer was covered with Bic-blue tattoos that read things like: “I’m a ledgend in my owen mined,” “Jesus is my strenght,” and “Death before dishouner.”

“Look at them tats,” Sturgeongard said to Paulie. “Even the Kanji’s misspelled.” Then to

the drummer, "Somebody lose his metronome?"

"Along with his dictionary?" Paulie added with a grin.

"I mean what gives?" Sturgeongar continued.

"Oh, I'm just calling a worm."

"Well, cut it out," said Paulie irritably. "You're waking up the entire camp!"

"I no my rights," said the drummer.

"*Know*," Paulie corrected.

"Well, you don't 'no' much about sandworms if you're callin' one here, boy." Sturgeongar said.

"Why's that?"

"The worms here on the west side of the camp are *crawlers*. They're so big you'll never be able to lasso 'em, much less break 'em. Wastin' your time. It's also dangerous. Them crawlers will suck you right under if you're not careful."

"Besides," said Paulie grinning at Sturgeongar. "Pete Worst here's drumming sucks!"

"Kid's right," Sturgeongar agreed. "Gene Krupa you are not."

"For your information, I used to play for the Four Liver Flukes of the Apostrophe."

"I remember that band," said Sturgeongar. "Three musicians and a drummer."

He high fived Paulie.

“Maybe my sandworm Pokey here could give you some lessons on that thumper,” Paulie laughed. When Pokey heard his name, he happily pattered the sand with the tip of his tail.

“*Thumper?*” said Drummer Boy. “Is that supposed to be funny? I mean like a joke?”

“I guess so, Drum Dummy.”

“Well, if you want my advice,” said the drummer. “Don’t try so hard to come up with creative names. You’re not very good at it. I mean, you *are* kidding, aren’t you? A *thumper?*”

“Hey, Bongo Boy,” replied Paulie. “What does a drummer’s girlfriend use for contraception?”

“I don’t know. What?”

“The drummer’s personality!”

“Hey, Paulie!” said Sturgeongar. “What do you call a drummer *without* a girlfriend?”

“What?”

“Homeless!”¹⁰

Their laughter and the testy silence of the drummer were interrupted by the sudden sound of whirling sand. A dusty vortex appeared beneath the drum kit and the glint of *mocker*

¹⁰ It was an old joke, but on Ascaris as on most other planets people were forgiving of that. It wasn’t that people had grown more tolerant over the centuries. It’s just that they had little choice in the matter. After all, by the year 10,191 what joke *wasn’t* old for heaven’s sake!

teeth shone from the black cavity farther down which was the maw of a colossal sandworm. There was a flushing sound and the drum kit swirled and rushed down into the gritty darkness taking the unemployed, so-called musician with it. From the depths far below came a low rumbling and then a single noisy, irritating *clack!* Drummer Boy had managed to get in one last rimshot.

For a while they heard the *drip, drip, drip* of water, the sound from Paulie's dream in the Castle Calamari, which ceased when the water in the underground tank had risen high enough to close the float valve. And then there was silence.¹¹

"Man," Paulie said. "You weren't kidding about the size of some of the worms around here."

"Hey, kid," Sturgeongar said. "What have you got when your drummer's buried under a hundred feet of sand?"

"What?"

"A band that can keep time!"

They laughed until their sides near split.

¹¹ They never dug down into that sandy pit. They just put a metal marker over it. These few words are written on that plaque: Beneath this sand lies a really, really bad, bad drummer. *In pace requiescat!*

From the poem, "Little Drummer Boy"
by the Princess Ireful

14

Round Worm Round-up

Watch that tackle box lid doesn't bang shut. Always start a silent approach at least a half mile from where you're planning to go worming... Now, as the sun grows higher in the sky, the worms will move over to the deeper sand and so will we.

From *The Sayings of Dick Kotis of the Fred Arbogast Bait Company* by the Princess Ireful

“Calling a worm Drummer Boy-style is old school!” said Sturgeongar the next day.

They'd ridden out to the east of the encampment where the worms weren't so big that you couldn't catch and break them for ranch work.

He motioned with his hand to the stretch of desert in front of them. “Out there in that sand there's a big old muster of worms and we're going to corral a few using *this*.”

He pointed to a 3-foot long oval-shaped tube of yellow plastic lying on the ground. It had large, staring eyes painted on one of its rounded ends. In front of the eyes was a good foot of concave sheet metal—the patented paddling lip—with a swivel clip in the middle. Strategically

placed below and at the end of the tube were two giant treble hooks. A length of 200-lb-test monofilament was attached to the clip. It ran through the eyelet of an eight-foot rod a few feet beyond.

“Hey,” said Paulie. “That’s an Arbogast Jitterbug!”

“That a surprise?”

Actually, it wasn’t. Everyone knew that the Fred Arbogast Company had been marketing the best selling topwater lure for the last 100 centuries. The would-be *Whachacalladat* was well aware of that. He’d done some fishing on Calamari—in fact, he’d done quite a lot. His dad had had a bass boat with a fifty-horse Merc.

“Got the Giant Jumbo model here,” Sturgeongar was saying. “I always use a solid yellow one, but the frog colored bug’s a good choice too.”

“Do they make a weedless Jumbo?” Paulie asked.

“Don’t know and don’t care,” Sturgeongar answered. “Even Cotton-eyed Joe here could tell you that weedless lures are also fishless. Plus, there ain’t no weeds out on that sand and we’re not fishing in the first place; we’re *wormin’!*”

“They say it’s a big sport here. I heard you got teams and everything.”

“Sure do,” said Sturgeongar. “Our very own Burrowers made it into the Worm Series a couple of years back. Didn’t win, but we was all proud they got that far.”

He took the monofilament in his hand and gave it a yank, then dragged the lure for a few feet. The Jitterbug wobbled along the sand making the paddling sound that was so irresistible to large-mouthed bass, northern pike, and desert sandworms alike.

Sturgeongar stroked his chin. “Tell you what. Gonna let *you* do the wormin’ today,” he said. “Now sit backwards on Pokey there and hold *this*.”

He put the rod which was equipped with a Zebco 333 reel into Paulie’s hands. “Good, now just let Pokey wander around the sand as you troll that crank bait.”

Paulie looked at the pole and its spinning reel with the pointed, funnel-like tip from which the line protruded. “You ever use casting reels?” He asked Sturgeongar, who sighed and said sarcastically:

“Yeah, right. We just *love* spending the entire day out in the blazing hot sun untangling backlashes when we could be wormin’.”

My God, Sturgeongar thought. If it weren't for the news that trickles into Calamari from off planet, I swear they'd all still be manufacturing eight-tracks!

Paulie began to troll, dragging the crank bait across the desert and in a few minutes there was an explosion of sand and the Jitterbug disappeared.

“You got one!” hollered Sturgeongar.

Paulie leaned backwards on Pokey. The saddle horn pressed painfully into his back. He cranked the reel frantically.

“You’re horsing him! Don’t horse him, boy!” Sturgeongar yelled. “He’ll break that monofilament! Whatever you do, don’t *horse* him!”

Paulie horsed the worm up close to the glistening segmented tip of Pokey’s tail.

“Get ready, boy,” Sturgeongar warned. “He’s gonna run!”

There was a *eeeeeeek!* as the worm took off under the sand, stripping the monofilament out of the reel.

“Tighten up that drag!” cried Sturgeongar. “He’ll take all the line you got!”

Paulie tightened the drag and put steady pressure on the worm that suddenly exploded from the sand and danced across the surface of the desert like a tarpon, rattling the hooks that were buried into its prostomium.

“You’ve foul-hooked him, boy,” shouted Sturgeongar. “You’re not allowed to keep a foul-hooked worm, but if you don’t say nothing

I won't either. No way we're throwing *this* one back!" Then, "He's fixin' to sound!"

Paulie looked. The Freebaser chief was right. The line was pointing straight down into the sand. Paulie guessed the worm was already about fifty feet under.

"He's getting tired," Sturgeongar said. "That's when they always make for the bottom. Now, you and Pokey get up onto those rocks over there."

Paulie spurred Pokey up on the rocks and dismounted holding the rod in both hands. A Freebaser carrying a net with a long handle rode up on his worm.

"Forget the net," Sturgeongar said. "This ain't no crawler but it ain't no pinworm neither. Nothing you can do, kid, but crank him up on the rocks. Careful of the line. He'll weigh a lot more out of the sand."

Paulie started cranking until the worm was up on the rocky talus flipping like a tuna on the deck of a trawler. One of the Freebasers dismounted and pulled the hooks out. Another bridled the already resigned and compliant nematode and led him away in the direction of the corral.

"Nice work," Sturgeongar congratulated. "Now, let's try for another—Look! the pod has surfaced!"

Paulie looked to see the worms coursing across the desert fifty strong, sunlight glistening on the seeping yellow gloop that streamed over their backs.

Oh, we're gonna have a full creel today, he thought.

He was wrong.

Someone suddenly shouted, "Bream attack!" And everyone immediately rode their worms up onto the rocks for safety.

Paulie was among the many newcomers who were under the impression that there were no fish on Dung. This assumption was understandable but at the same time completely untrue. There were plenty of them. Over the centuries they had evolved into gigantic air breathers adapted to living in the blazing hot sands of many desert planets and Dung was one of them.

The attacking fish were *bluegills* (with a few pumpkinseeds mixed in), a school of about a hundred of them, their dorsal fins were breaking the surface of the sand and cutting through it in a knifing path straight for the pod of worms.

The worms sped away but the fish were faster. They plowed into the pod tearing most of the sandworms to shreds, but a few worms looked as though they were going to be able to escape.

"Ai! Ai!" screamed one of the Freebasers.
"*A greenie! A greenie has come!*"

The green sunfish wasn't as big as the bluegills and pumpkinseeds, but ounce for ounce, pound for pound, there was no scrappier panfish. It ripped into the sandworms as the other fish skedaddled. It was slaughter. When the greenie was finished with the whole worms it had caught, it cleaned up all the pieces the bluegills and pumpkies had left. Then it cut across the desert and disappeared between the dusty buttes in the distance.

Sturgeongar couldn't stand it. He turned his back on the scene of carnage. "Hellava waste of fine livestock," he said.

The next day they went wormin' again but got skunked.

15

I Am a Friend of Jambo

And the day came when Dung lay at the hub of the universe with the wheel spinning at 10,000 revolutions per second. Then, something suddenly went wrong. When I awoke six months later in the hospital, my head looked like the top of a Dairy Queen ice cream cone.

—from *Sayings of Paulie Moab Utah*
by the Princess Ireful

A couple of days later, Sturgeongar took Paulie and his mother around the camp to introduce them to a few new people. He led them up to a boy about Paulie's age. "This is Paulie Moab Utah Atavist and his mother Jezebel," he told the boy. "Guys, say hello to Jambo."

"Hello, Jambo," Jezebel said.

Paulie looked over at him, "Jambo *means* 'hello' in Swahili, so Jambo, Jambo!" he said giggling madly at his own joke. His father Dude Pito had done a stint in the Peace Corps in Mozambique and had taught him a few Swahili phrases. Dude Pito had also done some

vaudeville and helped his son get his delivery absolutely perfect. But this time no one but Paulie laughed.

“You’re Paulie Moab Utah Atavist?” Jambo smirked. “All the guys in camp are calling you Ratso Atso!”

“Oh, that reminds me!” said Paulie. “I forgot to ask. Are you Jambo Junior or Jambo *Jumbo*?”

Jambo punched him in the stomach and Paulie fell in a heap cracking his teeth on a lump of quartzite.

“That reminds *me*,” Jambo said, looking down at Paulie. “I forgot to ask. How’re ya likin’ the planet so far?”

“Well, at first it seemed a little too hot,” Paulie answered. “But now I’m really beginning to enjoy it!”

“It’s a *dry* heat isn’t it, Ratso Atso?”

“Okay, hold it right there, boys,” said Sturgeongar. “If you’re gonna fight, it has to be supervised in the Freebaser way.”

He shouted over the camp. “Need a referee over here!”

From across the camp came happy cries of “Fight! Fight!” and a crowd began to gather.

Then Sturgeongar said to Paulie, who had managed to regain his feet, “You want to fight with your shoes on or off?”

Paulie remembered his Benzedrine Geltabs training. *When unsure of your footing, tennis shoes are always best. Just make sure you tie them!*”

“I’ll keep my PF Flyers.”

Jambo opted for bare feet.

A man in a white and black striped shirt arrived. “Okay gentlemen. I’m the ref so obey my commands at all times. No swords, no knives, no guns. Sticks are all right, but no poking in the eye with them. Understood? I want a clean fight.”

“Why can’t I use my sword?” Paulie asked.

“We used to allow that,” Sturgeongar said. “But then people complained the fights were over too soon. Nothing for nobody to talk about afterwards.”

“I’ll bet they talk about *this!*” Paulie said and slammed the quartzite boulder which he had palmed into Jambo’s face. He looked at the ref. “Didn’t say anything about rocks, did you?” He then turned his attention to Jambo who was lying face down on the ground.

“Wanna give up?” he said as he had been trained to do when anyone was hit with a rock during a fight.

“Hold!” cried the ref. “The boy doesn’t know our rules.”

“What rules?”

“You don’t ask nobody to give up in one of these fights,” Sturgeongar said. “It’s to the death.”

“To the death?”

“Either that or someone says ‘uncle.’”

“*That’s* to the death?”

“Well, I guess *technically* it’s not. If someone wants to, they can get out of the fight by sayin’ that, but it don’t mean you’re allowed to *remind* them like *you* done! *That’s* definitely against the rules.”

While they were talking, Jambo came up with a rock of his own and hit Paulie over the head with it. “Protect yourself at all times, Ratso Atso!” he said.

Paulie staggered around in circles holding his head for a while before he finally fell face first in the dirt. It didn’t look like he was going to get up. The ref leaned down to see if he should stop the fight.

“Where are you, kid?” he asked Paulie.

“MGM Grand Arena?”

“Oh, that is *so* way off.”

“Madison Square Garden?” Paulie tried again.

“Give him a chance!” cried Jezebel. “He’s getting closer.”

“What year is it?”

“10,991.”

“See? Barely off by 800 years. *Told* you!”

“All right, enough! And no arguing about it afterwards,” said the ref. “I’m gonna ask him one more question and if he doesn’t nail it, the fight’s over.”

He grabbed the boy and lifted him up by his shoulders. Paulie’s head twirled in circles like a caster on a piece of cheap office furniture.

“Listen kid, what’s the square root of 49?”

“6.992”

“Close enough. Fight’s back on!”

It was a tough fight which Paulie was losing badly until he called for his mother to help out. She jumped into the fray knocking Jambo down and then sat on him while Paulie beat him to a bloody pulp. When he was done, he got up and looked at the ref who shouted, “You’re disqualified!”

“No swords, no knives, no guns,” Paulie reminded him. “I don’t remember hearing anything about *mothers!*”

Jezebel agreed. “Or *rocks* and you let Jambo hit my son with one. What’s fair is fair!”

The crowd grumbled in agreement and the ref had to give in and award the fight to Paulie, who afterwards was known as Ratso Atso, Mamma’s Little Slugger, but by then the added epithet seemed merely superfluous so Paulie didn’t really care.

When Jambo finally got to his feet there was a cry from the crowd. “Two, four, six, eight!

Who do we appreciate? Jambo! Jambo! Jambo!”

It was a freebaser tradition to praise the loser in a desert fight and to thus metaphorically dab balm on his burnt fingers and damaged ego. It also provided the winner with the opportunity to show he could be magnanimous in victory.

People stepped up to testify in the ceremony:

“I am a friend of Jambo! In the Valley of the Bifurcated Annelids, a desert sand cat was behind me ready to pounce and Jambo hollered, ‘Scat!’”

“I am a friend of Jambo! When I was out of matches, Jambo let me borrow his Zippo to light my crack pipe!”

“I am a friend of Jambo! When Jambo had a steady girlfriend and the rest of us couldn’t find dates, Jambo shared!”

People kept coming up to speak.

“I am a friend of Jambo! Jambo borrowed a 20-dollar bill from me to roll into a tube so he could snort some blow. Then, he gave it *back!*”

It went on for a long time. Finally, it was the victor’s turn to show magnanimity. All eyes turned to Paulie who looked at Jambo and said, “I ain’t your friend, Palooka.”

The crowd gasped but Paulie waved them to silence.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said. “‘Jambo bought me a beer.’ ‘Jambo gave me a bite of his Philly.’ Anyone bother to mention who *started* the fight? Huh?”

He turned scowling and pointed an accusative finger at Jambo and then began jumping up and down.

“He did! He did!”

The *Missionaria Positionaria* had planted legends here in the desert. All those present knew them by heart. One of them was:

And the Whachacalladat will be as a child among you.

There was a murmur of wonderment through the troop. “Look!” someone said. “He’s acting just like a little baby! Exactly as the legends say the messiah will do!”

Paulie wasn’t done. “If any of you Jambophiles are looking for magnanimity don’t look at this little Abenaki¹² boy! Back where I come from, we don’t take any stock in losers, so I’m opting out of this little Jambo Jamboree right now. I got my *own* way of doing things!”

¹² Like many Caucasians with identity crises, Paulie liked to tell people he had Native American ancestry. This not only built up his ego but also served to put other people in their place as the point being made was that others hadn’t chosen their ancestors with the good taste that he had used in choosing his. He used to tell people he was a Mohawk until some of the neighborhood boys got tired of hearing about it, held him down, and gave him one.

And he shall exchange your sacred customs for his own. And the new customs, like the Whachacalladat will be a gift from God.

There were whispers from the crowd.

It's the legend for sure.

The gift of the Whachacalladat stands before us. It is, indeed, a most wondrous thing!

Paulie Moab Utah is the kangaroo rat's pajamas!

“The Jambo Fanbo Club meeting is now officially adjourned folks,” Paulie spread his arms open to welcome them. Then he smiled rather greasily for a fifteen-year-old and said, “What say we put a little love on the *victor* for a change!”

The troop crowded around him.

“I touched the *gift!*” someone said.

“So did I!” said another.

“I took his *wallet!*” said somebody else.

Paulie was eating this up and working the crowd like a pro.

“First, I’d like to thank my mom for giving me life and helping me practice some desert whoop-ass on your all’s good friend—but not mine—Jambo, the human punching bag here.”

Jambo stalked away in a snit while the others cried, “Jambo! Come back! C’mon! Don’t be that way!”

But they didn’t divert their attention away from the *Whachacalladat* for long. The crowd

kept pressing up to Paulie, each person eager to be able to say they touched the hallowed gift that was the tantrum-throwing *Whachacalladat* of ancient legend. Some of the young women in the tribe touched the gift a little more inappropriately than perhaps they should have, but no one was indiscreet enough to say anything and Paulie certainly wasn't about to complain. He just smiled at them and playfully snapped their thongs.

Afterwards, Paulie and his mother decided to go back to the Breezy Palms since Paulie hadn't had a shower in a few days.

When they got there Jezebel said, "You must be tired—and *hungry*. It was a grueling fight, son. Just *grueling*! Go wash up. We'll eat supper on the porch."

"What are we having?"

"Gruel."

"All right," he smiled. "His mother always seem to know how to cheer him up. Gruel was his favorite dish."

16

Lord of the Sandworms

And Paulie Moab Utah stood before them and he said, “Though we think the captive are deceased yet does she live! For her seed is my seed and her voice is my voice and what I am is what I am and I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together!”

—from *Sayings of Paulie Moab Utah*
by the Princess Ireful

The days and years passed and the son of the mother of the boy Paulie grew in knowledge, manliness, virility, and stagnancy. He had acquired a tremendous skill set which included an impressive assortment of screwdrivers both regular and Phillips, a wide array of drill bits and augers, a socket wrench set and, of course, a skill saw. He could build a tepee fire and set it ablaze with either matches or a cigarette lighter and he knew one different way to cook with buffalo chips. His wormmanship was unrivaled; he could spin a dime on a sandworm and had mastered the art of stealth worm riding to the point where Pokey no longer even left a

noticeable slick on the sand.¹³ He could also brew a pretty respectable imitation of Earl Grey from mesquite twigs and became a creative and sought-after chef who specialized in the art of poaching the tasty desert slop hog on a bed of collared greens, Swiss cheese, and mustard-infused worm glop.

In admiration and adoration, the desert folk had begun to call him both *The Master of Slop Hog Bleu* and *The Lord of the Sandworms*.

When the TV signed off every evening at midnight on Dung, a tribute to Paulie Moab Utah was run with the Blue Angels flying over the desert and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir's recording of the Battle Hymn of the Republic playing in the background. The beloved *Whachacalladat* could be seen standing on a desert crag, the wind blowing through his hair and his loincloth flying proudly as he was lionized with reverent names like "Our Dear Leader," "Master of the Wah-cry," and "Nuestro Señor de Guadalupe."

With his maturation, however, the *Missionaria Positionaria* legends of a spoiled child messiah no longer matched the toughened adult Paulie Moab Utah as they had in the days and years past and Paulie astutely endeavored to correct this by conforming to yet another

¹³ Paulie accomplished this by adding a couple of tablespoons of baking soda to Pokey's mixture of oats and alfalfa.

Missionaria Positionaria legend planted in the desert centuries ago.

Besides being described as a mollycoddle taken to hissy fits, the *Whachacalladat* of ancient tales was widely known by the saying:

And He shall give moisture to the dead.

In a stroke of sheer genius, Paulie succeeded in marrying both stories of sissy boy and water gifter at once.

He noticed that the Freebaser warriors would often cry, “*Yah!*” after slaying their enemies and the new *Lord of the Sandworms* deviated only slightly from this custom to acquire the desired effect and reach his goal of legitimate messiahship by crying, “*Wah!*” whenever he lay sword to a foe.

The moisture part of the legend was a bit of a stretch for Paulie. While tantrum-throwing came naturally to the spoiled only child, the shedding of actual tears was a problem for someone who had about as much empathy as a two-year-old does when he’s pulling the wings off of a fly.

Paulie solved this problem by pretending to cover his eyes in grief as he bawled “*Wah!*” but he was, in *fact*, furtively pulling a few nostril hairs to get the waterworks flowing. He perfected his technique by concealing on his

person a tiny pair of metal tweezers to ensure a good grip and in addition cleverly palmed a small bottle of nasal spray which served to get his nose running as well.

The wonderstruck tribesmen of the desert would breathe, “The *Cryin’ Messiah* gives moisture to the dead!”

“I touched the sacred tears!”

“I, too, touched them.”

“You think it’s tears but it’s not.”

“It isn’t?”

“No, it’s *snot!*”

While all this solidified Paulie’s claim to the title *Lord of the Sandworms*, his enemies took full advantage of it, calling him Paulie Wah-Wah and other names.

During battle, there were often shouts of “Hey, Ratso Atso! Your nose is running!”

Paulie always fell for this and reached for a hanky upon which he’d hear. “It’s heading down Elm Street, Gumbo Boy! Hurry or you’ll never catch it!”

Paulie Moab Utah was a skilled military tactician and canny strategist who regularly outflanked, outshanked, and completely outbrisketed his enemies. One such case was his encounter with soldiers on the sands of New Hookworm near Trichinella Springs. Paulie Moab Utah had arrived with a small

detachment of Freebaser troops and was attempting to parlay with an enemy lieutenant.

It was a dark night on Planet Ascaris and the smoking shrouds of the swirling sky covered the bright moons above.

“I am Mr. Sardonicus Junior, son of Mr. Sardonicus Senior. Stand down or I shall slay you all,” said the dark, grinning, and toothy mouthed warrior that stood before Paulie.

“Yeah?” Paulie answered. “You and what army?”

The clouds chose that moment to move and the three moons of Dung peeked out to illuminate the scene before the defiant *Whachacalladat*. Paulie’s eyes popped wide and blinked once or twice as he glimpsed the thronging troops of the Sardonican Legions just behind Mr. Sardonicus Junior. The Sardonican infantry resembled some impossibly large porcupine with swords, bazookas, rocket launchers, bayonets, and the odd hoe and occasional pitchfork bristling from it like oversized quills.

“Oh, *that* army!” said Paulie with a nervous smile and ran like a rabbit in the opposite direction. He made it to his sand buggy and sped away while his troops were crushed into mush like cockroaches on the floor of a Mexican diner.

“That was a close shave,” he would later remark. “God bless our brave men and women in uniform!” He then cried “*Wah!*” and stuck an extra yellow Support Our Troops ribbon on the sand buggy.

Dung Near Done

My father was 72 but didn't look a day over thirty. He credited Wonder Bread for his youthful appearance as it builds strong bodies eight ways.

From *In My Father's House* by the Princess Ireful

Many a thing happened before the Atavist family was able to hold their solidify of power and deed their claim on the planet Ascaris.

Paulie teamed up with a Freebaser girl named Chianti and she moved in with him in the Breezy Palms kitchenette that he had begun to rent long-term at a cut-rate price.

Life was good for them. There were some bumps along the way, of course. The ice machine occasionally broke down and once Paulie foolishly lent his mask and snorkel to a traveling family from Iowa. They packed their station wagon and left the next morning without returning his swim gear and Paulie found the mask hanging on a lawn chair and the snorkel in the deep end of the motel pool and he had to dive down to retrieve it. Those times were trying, but aside from that, the Breezy Palms

was as close to heaven as Paulie could ever have asked for.

Jezebel moved into an apartment with her bridge partner with whom she had a baby girl named Alice. Alice was a precocious child who could beat anyone at Gin Rummy by the time she was two and who could be seen teething either on her binky or on one of her mother's Lucky Strikes as she did one New York Times crossword puzzle after another.

Jezebel had been taking the Fibteller's drug when she got pregnant—not because she was searching for insight as much as trying to recover some of her youthfulness from the mind and body transforming pharmaceutical. Sadly, most everyone thought (but never told her) that she looked about the same or even a little older afterwards, which really made sense; time didn't stop when you took the drug and she had been using it for about six years. The effect it had on her daughter, however, was more than obvious to everyone.

In 10,196 it just so happened that the laws of biology had been turned completely upside down and it now was suddenly possible to inherit acquired characteristics as long as your mother took a homeopathic supplement like the Fibteller's drug when she was pregnant. Thus, Alice was born knowing how to roller skate, multiply fractions, and speak Pig Latin,

Esperanto, and a pretty passable conversational Spanish. She also could quote from the Cliff Notes version of any Shakespeare play.

All of this she inherited from her mother. Her father bequeathed knowledge to her as well. She could be called upon to recite any passage written by Edgar Rice Burroughs with the exception of anything from *Apache Devil* or *Tarzan and the Jewels of Opar* neither of which he could ever seem to find available in soft back.

Alice Atavist was five years old when her half brother hit upon the idea of throwing another dinner party. There was not enough room in the kitchenette, so he booked the Los Feliz Club House next door to the Breezy Palms. The Club House, whose lobby was spacious enough to accommodate a large crowd, was the favorite salt lick of many a desert Bedouin and plenty of courtesy invitations would be going out to most all of them in order to cement relationships and bond the political glue between the desert tribes and the good offices of Breezy Palms Kitchenette #4.

Paulie was keenly aware of the fact that no blood had been spilled at the banquet in Castle Ascaris and he felt it was high time they threw the correct type of dinner party.

Traditionally, there were two types of dinner party and Paulie had once written a classification¹⁴ essay on the topic, so he was perhaps better qualified than most to organize such an event. Here is the essay in its entirety. It includes an introduction, two body paragraphs, and a conclusion.¹⁵

Dinner Parties

Dinner parties can be classified into two general categories which for illustrative purposes we shall call Dinner Party Type I and Dinner Party Type II.

At a Dinner Party Type I, guests drink and smoke and cuss and trade both pleasantries and insults.

At a Dinner Party Type II, guests also drink and smoke and cuss and trade both pleasantries and insults. However, at a Dinner Party Type II, selected guests are assassinated in

¹⁴ Although rhetorical styles like classification and cause and effect resemble nothing that exists in nature and for centuries were known to be recipes for dreadful writing, composition teachers were still assigning them to students in the 101st Century. The alternative was to discontinue otherwise comfortably familiar books and write completely new texts from scratch rather than to run the old ones into new editions, a much more difficult task by far.

¹⁵ Paulie's grade was lowered because as was true of all such essays ever written, he introduced elements of another rhetorical style (in this case compare/contrast).

order to strengthen the political power of the hosts.

In conclusion, there are two general types of dinner party. They are alike—and yet so very different!

Jezebel and Alice helped Paulie send out invitations to their Dinner Party Type II and then everyone sat down to work out a rough seating chart and strangling plan. Afterwards, Paulie himself took all of the invitations down to the mailbox in front of the Food King and posted them.

The response to the invitations, however, was disappointing. About a week before the party was to take place it appeared that almost none of the guests Paulie had counted upon to attend was even going to bother to RSVP.

“Looks like we’re sunk,” Paulie complained to his mother and half sister. “This is going to be the prize flop of any and all dinner parties!”

“Don’t worry,” said Alice. “It’s going to turn out better than any of us could have imagined.”

Since the laws of science had been completely reversed by the 101st century and it was now possible to foretell the future, Alice’s prediction proved entirely correct.

On the day of the dinner party, all of the people on the list to be poisoned or garroted mid munch had arrived and booked rooms in local hotels and motels including the Breezy

Palms. As luck would have it, Barman Valium Harkincinema and his nephew Fay Ray had rented the vacant kitchenette next to Paulie and that would certainly work out to save the *Whachacalladat* some shoe leather. All he had to do was go over and whack the Barman and Fay Ray in the next room and then get dressed for dinner. Those two were really the only ones that he just absolutely *had* to kill anyway so things were really working out better than expected.

Paulie discussed his plan with Alice who told him, “I knew in advance that the Barman would be renting his room here.”

“Well, it’s because you can tell the future, Sis, and as things turned out, I just plain suck at it,” said Paulie.

“I don’t mean *that*,” said Alice. “It’s just that I’ve seen his picture online and you don’t have to be a soothsayer or a rocket scientist to deduce that he’d be renting a kitchenette. Come on!”

Despite the age difference, Alice had become something of a mentor¹⁶ to her older brother.

“What’s a mentor?” Chianti had once asked him.

¹⁶ The Atavist family had previously called it a *mentat*, but Paulie thought the word sounded so ridiculous that he made an official decree banning it from all speech and all literature for all eternity.

“A mentor is a kind of advisor,” Paulie explained. “Very important to the family.”

His half sister threw something of a monkey wrench into his assassination plans, however. She insisted on killing the Barman herself and if anyone thought Paulie could throw a good tantrum, they obviously hadn’t seen one of Alice’s. Paulie had to give in and since Alice wanted to use the Atavists’ gum jabber on the Harkincineman, Paulie had to call upon the person in charge of it, our old friend Mother Teresa, who had been invited as a dinner guest and had also managed to book a room at the BP.

When they met in Paulie’s kitchenette, Paulie said, “Long time no see, Terry.”

The Reverend Mother took one look at Alice and screamed, “That child is an abomination!”

“Lighten up,” said Paulie. “She’s not so bad, a bit of a little Miss Know-it-all maybe...”

“You don’t understand. Your mother took the Fibteller’s drug while she was *with child!*” cried Mother Teresa.

“More power to her,” said Paulie. “Just so long as I don’t have to take any of it.”

“Can’t you see? Are you blind? Your sister has Fetal Fibteller’s syndrome,” the old woman rasped. “Shame!” She rasped again.

“Quit imitating a wood file and give her the gum jabber,” Paulie said.

“She’s inside my mind!”

“Hey, it ain’t no party for me either!” Alice said. “You *nasty* old biddy. You could have more ladylike thoughts. Gag me with a spoon!”

“Kill her!” Mother Teresa shouted.

“Just shut up and give her the gum jabber!” Paulie snapped.

Mother Teresa frowned, opened her purse, and took out the gum jabber. “Here,” she said, handing it to Alice. “Beware, however, my child. I will make it my business to rid my mind and the universe of you. The game of intrigue is *my* domain and I will one day defeat you.”

“You couldn’t beat me in a quick game of Scrabble,” Alice said and the Reverend Mother knew suddenly that this was true and that her quest would never be fulfilled.

Alice looked at Paulie. “Now let’s go take care of Fatso and Fay Ray.”

When Paulie kicked open the door to the Barman’s motor flat, the three of them found him floating a few feet over the range where he had been sautéing a few choice edibles in corn oil.

He was supported by a battery of hundreds of sizzling Jet X engines that were attached to the looped off and thus shortened cables from the ranch house. On the opposite ends of the cables were Fay Ray’s perennial meat hooks poked through his lateral *slabs de grasa*. Fay

Ray wasn't there as he had gone on a quick trip to Food King to get the olive oil that they had foolishly forgotten to pack.

Alice picked up the skillet from the range and clouted the Barman across the knees. Hot liver and onions splattered all over him. He spun on his cables yowling in pain, man flaps flapping and jowls swinging like the *cojones* on a Brahma bull.

The Jet X engines sputtered and went out and the Barman drifted to the floor.

"I've got something for you," said Alice and tossed a couple of Hershey's Kisses on the linoleum.

When the Barman bent to pick them up, Alice thrust the gum jabber through the man's left lower and right upper gums.

"Moof!" moofed the Barman.

"Moof?" said Alice. "Is Moof a planet or something? I don't remember any planet named Moof. They speak English on Moof?"

She grabbed the gum jabber and yanked, but the shiv was stuck tight. "Give...me...that *BACK!*" she hollered pulling hard enough to rip the blade out of the Harkincinema's gums and taking a few of his teeth with it.

Then she opened her purse, pulled out a snub-nosed .38 and emptied it into the man's obese frame. He toppled to the floor with a thud that shook the whole building.

For a moment there was nothing but the sound of appreciative silence. And then the Reverend Mother spoke.

“Have to admit it,” she said. “That was *very* nicely done. I couldn’t have gum jabbed any better myself and that last bit with the revolver was a fine, fine touch. Did you use hollow points or steel jacketed slugs, my dear?”

“Mixed,” Alice answered.

Paulie put his iPhone to his ear. “Manny,” he said. “This is Paulie. Wet mop Kitchenette #3.”

He put the phone away and said, “Well, looks like we’ll have to take care of Fay Ray at dinner.”

Dinner Party Type II

My father was 71 at the time he took me down the hall to see the portrait of Dude Pito. I was but 14, yet I knew at once that he regretted that the Dude was not his son for if he were, he could just have thrown him a good beating instead of fulfilling his role as the Dude's mortal enemy. Of course, if the Dude were my brother, that would make me the aunt of Paulie Moab Utah and we should never have been able to marry. It all evens out!

From *In My Father's House* by the Princess Ireful

One would have thought attendance would be lower when word got around that the Atavists were throwing a Type II Dinner Party. There was a good reason, however, that Fay Ray, the Barman, and others had RSVPed in the affirmative; they were all hoping that instead of being assassinated themselves, they might be able to take out the host. Indeed, there were often tricks within tricks within tricks at Type IIs. Paulie had not bothered to include this information in his essay because all he had to do was get the four paragraphs done to complete the assignment.

The dinner resembled a Type I for the first half hour, so Paulie was able to concentrate on his chili dog as he listened to the conversation around him.

“Is it actually true that you were born knowing your ABCs?” came a polite voice.

“Well, I’ve already answered that question like ten times already this evening so I’m not gonna answer it anymore, *all right?*” Alice said testily, then drained her flagon of ale and waved to the servants for more.

“Have you been to many of these dinner parties?” asked the OK Corral Bible priest who had been invited.

“Enough to know that you’ve got to be Jesus Christ to get your beer refilled,” said Alice. She shook her flagon in the air irritably.

There then came a sudden scraping sound as a guest scooted back in his chair and stood. The chair folded up and fell over. On the back of its metal seat was stenciled: “Prickly Pear Elementary School District No. 3”

It was Fay Ray who stood.

He was dressed in a loud, long-sleeved western shirt with abalone snaps and an embroidered cow skull on each shoulder. On his feet was an expensive-looking pair of silver inlaid roach killer cowboy boots. Around his neck was a bolo tie with fake bullets as tips and a slide made of clear casting resin. It had a

scorpion embedded in it. His belt buckle was large and lavish and had an inset toy derringer in the middle. On his head was a cowboy hat the size of one of the Breezy Palms' swimming pool umbrellas.

Fay Ray drew his sword. Paulie pulled out his crystalmeth knife.

"Be careful," Jezebel told Paulie. "He's very observant in a fight. He'll be watching every move you make."

Paulie stood holding his worm tooth knife as Fay Ray made his way around the table. When he got there, Paulie made a move to the opposite side, strategically positioning himself with the dinner table and guests between him and his adversary.

"How beautifully you dance," said Fay Ray.

"I'm sure you think so, but I'm not getting up on the table if that's where you're headed, Girlfriend," Paulie replied.

"The little pixie over there in the rhinestone thong—" said Fay Ray "—a pet of yours perhaps?"

"They're *zirconiums*, smart guy," said Paulie circling his foe cautiously as they both worked their way around opposite sides of the table. "And I'd be careful how I bandied about words like 'pet,' Mr. Nephew with Benefits."

Fay Ray tried to ignore that but couldn't.

“You take that *back*, you big snob!” he cried.

“Hey, if you can’t get anything better than a fat old man what’s it to me?” said Paulie. “Just because you happen to be *inadequate* in one way...”

“*Inadequate?*” cried Fay Ray furiously.

He raced to Paulie’s side of the table swinging his sword and Paulie deftly traded places with him still keeping the table and his cringing guests between him and Fay Ray. He was, indeed, a canny strategist.

“Perhaps I should plan some diversion with your little gal friend over there,” said Fay Ray. “How would *that* be? *Oh!* I see the future—a white mini skirt and a nurse’s cap or perhaps it’s a French maid’s uniform?”

Paulie laughed. “Is that supposed to scare me somehow?” he sneered. “If I lose the fight, how do you figure I’m gonna give a damn *what* you do to her? I’ll be *dead* for crying out loud. God, what a stupe!”

Paulie remembered the advice of Duncan Doughnut:

Never expect only what happens in a fight. Think ahead. That way if you’re surprised, you won’t be kicking yourself for not at least trying to anticipate an obvious trick.

He looked at Fay Ray. There was no telling what he had hidden in those cowboy boots and

then, suddenly—Paulie’s sharp eye noticed the gun on Fay Ray’s belt. Everyone had assumed it was just a design, but what if...might it...just maybe...could it possibly be...?

If it’s a pop-out derringer buckle, it’s a cunningly made one, he thought. Looks just like one piece of cast pewter. But...

Paulie’s suspicions turned out to be right on mark. Fay Ray puffed his stomach and the derringer on his belt buckle popped out pointing directly at Paulie. *Snap!* Its top sprang open with a flinty spark and a flame appeared on a short wick.

“Damn!” cried Fay Ray. “Wrong buckle!”

Tricks within tricks, Paulie thought. But he wasn’t falling for any of it. He looked at Fay Ray sideways and said:

“If you think I’m gonna light a filter tip on that you’re wrong, fellah. Even my dear, dizzy Chianti would know better than to put her head down there, and if you know her, that’s saying something.”

Fay Ray could not hide his disappointment and Paulie took advantage of his preoccupation to leap over the table and slash.

The crystalmeth blade caught Fay Ray’s sword arm tearing open the shirt sleeve and cutting a long, narrow furrow that dripped with blood.

Fay Ray grabbed his arm and shouted, “Cheater! Cheater! It’s a poisoned blade! He’s poisoned me! My arm burns! My arm burns!”

“Well, stick it out the window and cool it off,” someone said.

Paulie smiled mockingly and said, “No poison, Sweetie Pie. I just put a little chili sauce on the blade and that evens things up after your stunt with the belt buckle. Okay?”

The fight continued. The two combatants stealthily circled and circled. If either one of them made a move to attack, the other would quickly run to the opposite side of the table.

“Nice manly footwear you got there, Tex. Is that why your late uncle used to call you ‘Booty Boy?’” Paulie mocked. “Or was there *another* reason?”

There was audible laughter from the diners that Fay Ray tried to ignore.

“Oh, yeah?” he countered. “May that knife of yours chip and shatter next time you open a bottle with it!”

So this knife can break doing that? Paulie thought. The Freebasers might have kept me a little better informed for Christ’s sake. I’ve already opened about a thousand bottles of Desert Sky Cola with it!

The two grew silent. Minutes passed as they circled and repeatedly sought refuge on one side of the table or the other. The dinner guests

grew impatient and there was grumbling that soon turned to loud boos of disapproval.

Paulie then effected a Benzedrine Geltabs fighting strategy that his mother had taught him.

Certain words, if spoken in the Benzedrine Geltabs Way can serve to distract an opponent. We call this Using the Voice on our enemies.

“Gosh, my nose itches—doesn’t *yours?*” he said, and when Fay Ray reached to scratch, Paulie grabbed a *bolillo* from a basket on the table and threw it in his face.

Fay Ray scowled. “Hey Ratso! Your nose is running!” he said and when Paulie reached for his hanky, Fay Ray got him with Kaiser roll.

Instantly a full-blown food fight erupted in the dining hall. It wasn’t just the two combatants who were involved but the entire assembly of dinner guests. They were sick to death of the fight and were ready to do anything to have an end to it.

The air was at once filled with flying Bacon Habaneros, Buffalo Wings, Southwest Salad, and Fajita Pitas.

Paulie ducked for cover but was brought down by a hail of Chicken McNuggets. Fay Ray didn’t fare much better; he was covered from head to toe with ranch dressing and there was a breakfast burrito sticking out of one of his ears.

A sudden explosion put an end to the fight. Corn dogs, and quarter pounders rained down followed by the patter of the lighter tater tots and curly fries.¹⁷

Fay Ray stood alone holding his stomach. He spun in a circle, faced the guests. The cinnamon apple tart he was going to throw dropped from his hand. “Got me!” he said and fell face first onto the floor.

Alice blew the smoke out of her .38 and put it back in her purse. She turned to Paulie and said cantankerously:

“How can the servants bring us any drinks when you two knuckleheads are at it that way? Same goes for the rest of you!” She raised the flagon in the air and shouted, “Need a *refill* over here!”

Someone at the table said, “Count Ringworm! Will you not kill this young upchuck?”

“Nay, shall I *not* do it,” replied Count Ringworm. “For should I do it, people will say it was out of envy that I did it because he, not I, became the *Whachacalladat*, a title that I did not eschew but did sorely covet! And thus I hereby declare that I will slay him *not!* However, I *do* have a suggestion.”

“What?”

¹⁷ In the 101st century everyone knew that heavier objects fell faster than lighter ones.

“Let *Ueda*...”

There was a gasp from the dining Freebasers at the mention of their tribesman’s secret name.

“Oh, please!” said Count Ringworm. “*Ueda! Ueda! Ueda!* Okay? Everybody knows already! But I say unto you that the upstart shall start up a relationship with the daughter of my old school mate Shadowfax IV and that will keep the peace.”

He motioned to the blond sitting a couple of places from Jezebel. “Princess Ireful, stand up, Honey, and let the people see you!”

The princess stood and there was a round of applause. She was dressed in a long flowing gown only slightly flecked with bits of coleslaw. Her hair was done in a kind of feathered bun which vaguely reminded Paulie of a dead buzzard he had once seen lying in a roadway back on Calamari.

Why can't they just wear braids or something? Paulie thought. *What is that? A beehive?*

“It’s not a beehive,” said Alice, who was also born being able to read minds. “It’s a French Twist.”

The Princess genuflected but only slightly so not to start the French Twist unraveling.

“Marriage will be the political bond that binds and the airplane glue that glues the

houses of the Landgrab together in strong yet peaceful coaxial cables,” said the count.

“I don’t like it, Paulie,” said Jezebel. “But he’s right. I think you’re going to *have* to marry the princess.”

“Why do I have to marry her?” complained Paulie “It’s not like I knocked her up or anything!”

Count Ringworm leaned over and whispered to Paulie, “Try to understand which side of your bread’s got the butter on it, boy. I’m working in your best interests here and don’t forget if you get tired of Princess Ireful over there, she has four sisters: Charro, Whimsy, Jehoshaphata, and Ruby who wouldn’t be adverse to sticking it to their eldest sibling whose tatty hand-me-downs they’ve had to wear their entire lives.”

Paulie stroked his chin and looked across the room at the tall blond princess. Aside from the hair she really wasn’t that bad. No, she wasn’t that bad at all. And if it were true she had sisters...

“It’s also the smart move health-wise,” Ringworm went on. “Do you think anyone’s going to make that princess a widow? Turn on, tune in, tie the knot!”

“I’ll do it!” cried Paulie. “But I want to talk to my girlfriend before anyone starts throwing any rice around.” He smiled a little uncomfortably at Chianti and winked.

He never got a chance to square things with her, however, as a host of cleaners as if on cue entered the hall with push brooms and swept away the burgers, fries, and wrappers along with the body of Fay Ray. An organ was wheeled in and Mother Teresa sat at the bench and started the strains of “Here Comes the Bride.”

She’s in on this with the count! Paulie cursed to himself. The OK Corral Bible priest rose. He brushed the ketchup and lettuce from his suit and took his place in the front of the hall with the Princess Ireful.

Paulie knew he was beat. “What the heck,” he said resignedly and went up to say his vows.

The rest of the guests stood politely at the table to watch the ceremony. Jezebel and Chianti were standing together.

“At least I know that my Paulie will always be faithful to me,” Chianti said with both conviction and pride in her voice.

“Do you know so little of my son?” Jezebel said. “Look at that Princess so stuck-up and confident. She has every reason to be both. She’ll have the title—and make no mistake; Paulie’s sure to have her *boudoir*.”

“Her *boudoir*? Well, I hope they both choke on it!”

“Exactly, my dear,” said Jezebel. “Think on it, Chianti. Look at that brazen little hussy.

They say she likes to write. Well, with the Messiah as her husband, there isn't a publishing house in this end of the galaxy that won't print every word of every boilerplate novel she pens. We can only hope it sticks in her minxish craw."

"It's so unfair!" Chianti said.

"You know it, Honey. A dissembling, ten-cent trollop will be called Mrs. Paulie Moab Utah. While we, we Chianti, we concubines who carry the name of Ms.—history will call us whores."

Glossary

Names in bold are those which appear in the book *Dung* and are followed in parentheses by the corresponding names that appear in Frank Herbert's *Dune*.

Alice (Alia) Half sister of Paulie Moab Utah

Arbobast Jitterbug (Thumper) Device for attracting worms

Ascaris (Arrakis): Also known as Dung, Desert Planet

Atavist family (Atreides family): Paulie's family

Barman Valium Harkincinema (Baron Vladimir Harkonnen): Fat arch enemy of the Atavist family

Benedrine Geltabs (Bene Gesserits): Referring to the special training of the Benedrine Geltabs School

Calamari (Caladan) Planet and home to the Atavist family before their move to Ascaris

Chianti (Chani) Paulie Moab Utah's Freebaser girlfriend

Condenser Suit (Stillsuit): Suit in the Sweatsucker label that is sold to tourists as a way to reclaim perspiration but doesn't function as advertised

Count Ringworm (Count Fenring): Wanabe *Whachacalladat* and friend of Shadowfax IV

Crystalmeth Knife (Crysknife): Knife made from a worm tooth equipped with a built-in bottle opener and occasionally a cork screw

Dude Pito (Duke Leto): Paulie's father

Duncan Doughnut (Duncan Idaho): Atavist family swordsman

Dung (Dune): Ascaris, Desert Planet

Fay Ray (Feyd-Rautha): Nephew of Barman Valium Harkincinema

Fibteller's Drug (Truthsayer's Drug): Drug that transgresses and imparts insight

Freebasers (Fremen): Desert dwellers on Ascaris, Dung, Desert Planet

GLOAMIN' LOCH LOMOND (CHOAM): Intergalactic spice company

Guitar (Baliset): Six-stringed instrument such as the Ranger Doug Gibson L5 archtop, the Pete Huttlinger Signature OM1 Collings, and the Fender Squier

Gum Jabber (Gom Jabbar): The Atavist family shiv used to test people by poking holes in their gums

Gurgling Haddock (Gurney Halleck): Swordsman, strum master, and poetry coach

Hugh, Francis, DDS (Yueh, Wellington, MD): Atavist family dentist and betrayer of Dude Pito

Hunter-gatherer (Hunter-seeker): a motorized flying syringe used to assassinate people

Jambo (Jamis): Freebaser boy that Paulie beats up with the help of his mother

Jezebel (Jessica): The mother of the boy Paulie
Dr. Kildare (Liet Kynes): Freebaser dinner guest at the Castle Ascaris

Landgrab (Lansgraad): A group of families

Meringue (Melange): The lemon-scented spice/drug excreted by sandworms

Missionaria Positionaria (Missionaria Protectiva): Group of religious nuts who planted legends in the desert

Moab Rat (Muad'Dib): a kangaroo rat

Moab Utah (Muad'Dib): Short for Paulie Moab Utah, son of the mother of the boy Paulie, son of Jezebel and Dude Pito

Mocker (Maker): One of the giant Shangri-La sandworms

Mother Teresa (Gaius Helen Mohiam): Jezebel's former chemistry lab assistant at the Benzadrine Geltabs School and steward of the Atavist family's Gum Jabber. Also known as Reverend Mother

OK Corral Bible (O.C. Bible) Bronze/Iron Age Middle Eastern Religious Document

Paulie Atavist (Paul Atreides): Son of Jezebel and the Dude Pito. Son of the mother of the boy Paulie. Also known as Paulie Moab Utah, Gumbo Boy, Ratso Atso (Mamma's Little Slugger), and the Cryin' Messiah.

Paulie Moab Utah (Paul Muad'Dib): See Paulie Atavist.

PC Cruiser ('Thopter): A winged vehicle

Princess Ireful (Princess Irulan): Family historian, wife of Paulie Moab Utah and Daughter of Shadowfax IV

Sardonican Army (Sardaukar) An all-purpose army

Shadowfax IV (Shaddam Corrino IV): Father of Princess Ireful and old friend of Count Ringworm.

Shady Drapes (Shadout Mapes): Jezebel's servant on Ascaris

Shangri-La (Shai-Hulud): A giant desert sandworm, also known as a spicer or a sand prancer

Spidy (Piter): Creepy-looking assassin for the Harkincinema family

Sturgeongar (Stilgar): Freebaser leader

Thunder Hellcat (Thufir Hawat) Assassin for the Atavist family

Ueda (Usul): Paulie Moab Utah's secret Freebaser name taken from Takashi Ueda, the bass player

Wanda (Wanna): Girlfriend of Dr. Francis Hugh

Whachacalladat (Kwisatz Haderach): The desert messiah and bringer of all rich, good things. Appears in the form of Paulie Moab Utah.