

Tell me about your mother ...

“Tell me about your mother, Fex.” The quiet produced by this unexpected line of inquiry enabled Owl Man to tap in a few notes about the ambient sounds of a houseboat at peace on the lake, the whispering ripples not otherwise heard when the confines of the vessel so amplified everyone’s voice and movements, and other such descriptive elements unimportant just now to our story.

“My what?” Fex’s incredulity was evident even if he would not know what the word was referring to.

“Your mother, Fex. You can’t believe how often bringing in ‘the mother’ gives us an angle on our plans that is worth exploring. “I think you will know what to tell us, Fex.”

“You mean about her being president of Koala Loan Shark Enterprises?”

“Fex! I do believe you are getting a handle on the situation. We don’t need at the moment to go into the relationship in your mother’s mind between a koala bear and a shark, but even you, I would guess, can see that a woman who thinks this way is now going to play an important part in the working out of our diversion.”

Owl Man was close to going into lecture mode and might soon launch into an oration on the symbolism of sharks and koala bears. As interesting as this might be, Heron Man knew it would be wasted on the present crowd, so he stepped in.

“Fex, I think what Owl Man is getting at, is that it’s time to call your mother and get her on board, so to speak.”

“Exactly,” echoed Owl Man, who then turned to Sally. “Sally, while we are waiting for Fex’s mother, I’d like to see how you do a faint. Can you just collapse as if you had fainted, and scream in a most horrific way as you do so? Can you do that, Sally?”

“I did gymnastics and ballet when I was little. But, oh my, I’m little no longer. I was a pumpkin that said ‘boo’ in a school play once, but, heavens, that was years ago. I’m not sure, Owl Man, I might break something.” Sally’s eyes were pleading.

“Let’s begin with the scream, Sally, it will help you get into the act.” Heron Man

had moved closer to Sally as if Owl Man had cued him to take on the role of director.

Sally's first effort was something of a frog-in-throat sound, not so much a scream as squeak, not horrific, but horrible. On her own initiative, Sally tried again, puffing up her lungs, opening wide her mouth, and letting go. This time, quite frogless, the sound coming from this plump lady-in-waiting to Baroness Catherine Rothschild Van Rensselaer was nothing other than pure *bel canto*.

The perfect note circled the cabin, Owl Man closing his eyes, lifting his head, nostrils flaring as if the sound could be taken in as a sweet smell satisfying some deep yearning. "Magnificato," both he and Heron Man announced at the same time, both whispers trailing the last of Sally's effort into the silence that followed, both writers holding up circles formed by their thumbs and forefingers, the classic gesture in response to perfection.

"That sure as hell ain't no scream, but I just found another part of you to love." It was Sal cooing at his Sally as he grabbed and hugged her, planting a big smooch on her lips, which had finally closed after letting out the wondrous note.

Owl Man had taken off his glasses and was rubbing away the dampness from his eyes. Heron Man was looking at the ceiling as if trying to find some physical remains of what had just happened, an anthropologist of sound as it were, having read somewhere that sound waves never die, they just circle ever larger to the ends of the universe.

"I don't have much ear for what you all are going on about. What I'm wondering, does this mean the scream is out and this bird note is in? Is she going to do it again?" It was Coo, expressing his usual uncertainty as to the nature of events swirling about him.

"She'll come," Fex announced.

"Sally will come?" Coo's take on what Fex had said illustrated the mire that was Coo's mind at work.

"No, you idiot. My mother. She'll be here in about ten minutes and she's bringing the bag.

Writers write, actors act ...

Owl Man turned to the ladies and spoke as if he were speaking to them alone. “Please relax, girls, we are not in a hurry. There is plenty of time; no need to worry.” In fact, the girls shuffled about and their bodies loosened up at the sound of the quiet words. Owl Man, seeing the impact, continued. “Now, the secret to the success of any diversion is that it must be so completely authentic as to overcome any training that would cause any of those in the situation to question it—except for those of us who know perfectly well what is happening and what is going to happen. And, as you already know, because we are writers, we know what is going to happen.”

“It’s nothin’ but crap, pure bird droppings.” This view was offered by Fex as he watched the girls swaying. “You can’t know the future any more than anyone else. How you learned about us is still beyond me, but I intend to find out. I have my sources you know.” With that, Fex made his way to the door, opening it with a flourish, and announced: “Out you go, both of you.”

“The diversion must, of course, consist of three parts, just as a play is in three acts, a novel in three parts, any story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. It’s what I call the Rule of Three.” Owl man continued speaking directly to the girls and they seemed not even to have heard Fex’s regal order.

Fex’s massive jowls had now become cherry red as his fluster grew and his spittle went flying after his words. “Out, I say. Out. You damned birds, out of here.”

“Fex, calm down and let Owl Man instruct the ladies in the structure of diversion. There is no purpose in your diverting us now and as you can see it is not working. This diversion the girls will learn is essential to the rescue of your plan. You do want your plan to be rescued, don’t you?” Heron Man spoke in a shouted whisper in Fex’s direction, and then looked at Coo and Sal, both nodding their heads yes. “Sit down, Fex, your friends are waiting,” said Heron Man.

Fex stepped back into the room and slammed the door and then parked himself with his behind against the wall, folding his arms in an obvious but compliant snit.

“What ya’ wanus to do, Mr. Owl? Fexie, you shut up for now and let’s hear the plan.” It was Heather, now swaying her hips to some tune no one else heard, at least not

yet. Sally was trying her best to keep in synch but was concentrating so hard on Heather's lithesome moves it was more a parody than a success.

Owl Man noticed Heather's problem and made a mental calculation of how he could make use of this in setting up the diversion. He looked over at Heron Man, and gestured with his finger to take a look at the girl's disparity in motion. Heron Man knew at once what Owl Man intended.

Heather and Sally rehearse ...

The discrepancy in motion and rhythm between Heather and Sally was slight. It would have passed unnoticed by most onlookers, who might well have been distracted by the fantasies unfolding in their own minds. But Owl Man saw something in it. He saw the disruption of a pattern, a potential discontinuity in the fabric of whatever would be happening at Ling Bank on the day the plan went into effect. Owl Man intended to exploit that disruption, tossing a potentially explosive event, like a jalapeño pepper, into the otherwise bland, unscripted soup of the day.

“OK. Let’s try out some possibilities, shall we? Heather, what if you were to play, let’s say, a haughty aristocrat?”

“A naughty what?”

“No, not naughty. I said, ‘haughty.’”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means proud, arrogant, snobbish.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“I didn’t say there was anything wrong with it.” This may not be as easy as I had hoped, Owl Man thought to himself. “I just want you to stand up straight and look down on people as if you were better than everyone.”

“OK. So?”

“So you need an aristocratic name.”

“Oh, yeah. Like a duchess or queen or somethin’.”

“That’s right. Now you’re getting it, Heather. Let’s call you, for now anyway, Baroness Catherine Rothschild Van Rensselaer.”

“That’s the plan? That’s stupid. I can’t even pronounce it.” Heather canted her pelvis in a severe *contrapposto* pose, losing two or three inches in the process. She took a stick of chewing gum out of her purse, unwrapped it and began chewing vigorously, almost sarcastically.

“Don’t slouch like that, Heather. And you won’t be chewing gum in the bank. You’re supposed to be an aristocratic lady, nobility. You stand head-and-shoulders above the common people. And don’t worry about pronouncing the name. You will be

presenting an engraved calling card to the security guard in the lobby. You're going to act very supercilious."

"Stop usin' them big words, Mr. Owl. I don't talk like that."

"Just pretend you're Queen Mary or Queen Elizabeth, and the bank employee is your servant."

"OK, that's better. That, I can do. So then the guy at the bank, the servant, is like ... like Sal." Heather giggled, then Sally started in. Fex snorted, then soon was bellowing with laughter. He enjoyed humor at others' expense. He had forgotten that he was supposed to be miffed.

"What's the joke?" Coo didn't get it.

Sal, whose attention had been drifting until then, got it, but he didn't think it was funny. "Shut up, you idiots! This ain't gettin' us nowhere."

Heron Man watched the scene, making mental notes. He was interested to see how Owl Man was going to bring this back around to the topic at hand. He didn't have to wait long.

Foxy brings the bag ...

Fex's mother, Mrs. Zelda "Foxy" Fexworth, walked with a pronounced limp, a souvenir of the Chevy low-rider that ran over her foot one time when she was having trouble collecting on a loan gone bad.

Before the sympathetic voice could concur again, Foxy had reached the marina gate. She couldn't talk to herself just now because it took all her concentration to find the proper ramp and the proper berth—No. 27.

Once she reached the houseboat itself, she still had to concentrate on finding the right door. It was only after she had knocked that she could resume her conversation.

"I told Fexie, I told him, I said, 'You got no business treatin' me so mean. He didn't, now did he?'"

Again the concurring voice was interrupted, this time by the sudden opening of the door.

Foxy jumped, startled out of her lonely conversation. She took in a sudden breath

of air, as if shocked, and peered at the apparition standing before her.

“Where’s Fexie?”

“I’m right here, Ma, you’re lookin’ at him. Where the hell did you think I’d be, swimmin’ in the bay?”

“You can’t talk to me like that, Fexie, after all I done for you!”

“Shut up, Ma, and get inside. Did you bring the bag?”

Fex ushered the frail crone into the living room and slammed the door.

Aspects of Fex's youth ...

Before we proceed with Foxy's introduction to the rest of this zany cohort, it might help to share with the reader a few aspects of Fex's youth. Perhaps we can just introduce them into the present text, and catch up with Foxy later:

There is no telling what depths of depravity Fex might have fallen into, over the course of his life, had he not undergone a massive growth spurt in the tenth grade. True, for a while he lost the coordination he had enjoyed as a younger child, when he was stickball champion and roller-skating king on his block.

But his body eventually caught up with itself and when it did, he lost no time in dishing out retribution for the slights and injuries he had suffered over the years. His campaign of stylish aggression provided a great boost for his self-esteem.

A case in point: On more than one occasion, Joe Don Mullen, originally a farm boy from Savannah, had shot Fex in the back of the head with a squirt gun during Social Studies class.

Since the teacher was also the Varsity Football coach and had been a nose tackle in the Canadian Football League, Fex's options at the time of the infraction were limited. Albert "Coach" Grozinsky kept a muscular discipline over his sweaty, unruly charges. Rarely was it necessary to send a miscreant to the Principal's Office. Coach took care of most disciplinary problems right in the classroom, Room 41, known to students as "the meat locker."

Besides, Joe Don had been four inches taller than Fex at the time of those misdemeanors (they were felonies in Fex's mind), so Fex knew he had to bide his time. But he didn't have to wait long.

After the growth spurt Fex was suddenly three inches taller and twenty pounds heavier than Joe Don. Availing himself of this advantage, he stuffed Joe Don's head in an unflushed toilet one day between classes. Joe Don did not return to class that day. Nor did he bother Fex thereafter, although Fex delighted in threatening him.

"Hey, Joe Don. Want another toilet job?"

"Heh, heh, no thanks, Fex, I'll pass." And Joe Don would hustle away from the hall lockers where Fex had cornered him, and slip off to English class, which Fex rarely

attended.

Joe Don was by no means the sole beneficiary of Fex's Ministry of Vengeance. Fex even kept a chart pinned to his bedroom wall, listing each malefactor, the date of the offense as near as possible, sometimes even detailing the terms and conditions of Fex's anticipated satisfaction.

"Satisfaction" was one of Fex's favorite words—after "dickhead" and "pussy." He got it from an old black-and-white re-run movie about Southern gentlemen whose honor was so important that they gladly took umbrage at the slightest insult and marched out at dawn with their valets. These latter usually wore white gloves and carried silver trays with bottles of brandy, snifters and engraved boxes containing ivory-handled pistols.

"Excuse me, suh, but ah require satisfaction," one of the disputants would say.

"At your pleasure, suh. Shall we meet at dawn, then?"

And then they would enjoy a toast.

Fex was taken by the dignity these gentlemen brought to their deadly disagreements, though he never rose to their level. Still, he retained a memory of the chilling word "satisfaction," because he knew that blood would follow.

Dispensing with the tradition of Southern chivalry and gentility, Fex would extract his "satisfaction" any way he could, with or without warning. Joe Don coughed up his share without warning. "Tiny" del Vecchio, however, was warned well in advance.

Tiny had committed the unpardonable crime of making fun of Fex's hair, when Fex was first experimenting with Pompadours and his face was covered with pimples. Tiny, who happened to walk into the school bathroom while Fex was primping at the mirror, had the poor judgment to make a disparaging comment about the motivation, the process and the result of Fex's styling efforts.

As is so often the case with people named "Tiny," Tiny was huge. In gym class the teacher had to add extra weights to the platform scales when Tiny got on. His idea of fighting was to sit on someone.

"Hey, Fex. You gonna be singin' at the opera or somethin'?" This was Tiny's way of broaching the subject of Fex's hairdo.

"Whatta ya talkin' about, Fatso? You gotta problem?"

“Yeah, I gotta problem, Fex. With you and that big red donut on top of your head! Maybe put some chocolate syrup on it and I’ll eat it for dessert!”

Tiny laughed at his own joke.

At first Fex gestured as if to slug Tiny in the belly, but Tiny, though obese, was also quick. He grabbed Fex’s arm and twisted it, bringing Fex to the floor.

“Hey, you fat motherfucker,” shouted Fex.

This invective only served to bring Tiny down upon him full force, 289 lbs. of jelly donuts and buttered popcorn landing squarely on Fex’s solar plexus. Fex couldn’t breathe for a long time. His face turned bright red and his hands scabbled in the air, as if reaching for something. Finally the spasm subsided and Fex sucked in a thin thread of air in a prolonged gasp, almost a wobbling shriek, such as a barnyard turkey might make while being dragged to the chopping block at Thanksgiving.

Tiny bounced up and down a few times, to make sure Fex got the point. Then he hoisted himself up and looked down on prostrate, disabled Fex. For good measure, Tiny reached out with his tennis shoe and mussed up Fex’s Pompadour.

When Fex got home that night, he carefully scrawled on his chart, “Tiny del Vecchio, March 25—sat on me, mussed up hair, lotta insults. Get the bastard good.”

For nearly two years Fex made it a point to let Tiny know that he was planning some lurid revenge. At first Tiny discounted it, because he still had his weight advantage. But as he watched Fex shooting up in height—sometimes it seemed he was growing an inch a week—Tiny started to get nervous. Fex started offering up specific suggestions as to what he might do to Tiny. The threats became more embellished as Fex started to see tangible results: Tiny getting visibly nervous when Fex approached; Tiny beginning to stutter; Tiny even whimpering once when Fex described one scenario in particularly graphic detail.

Finally Fex decided that he’d waited long enough. Hiding behind a dumpster one afternoon when Tiny was walking alone, Fex jumped out onto the sidewalk, threw a black plastic bag over Tiny’s head, then yanked him into the alley. It took some doing, but Fex managed to muscle Tiny up and into the dumpster, locking the lid with a padlock. He walked away whistling and brushing his hands while Tiny struggled and moaned amidst the chicken bones, coffee grounds and disposable diapers.

Fex decided the occasion called for a celebration, so, leaving the dumpster behind, he walked down the street and stopped at Mack's Soda Fountain for a banana split and root beer float.

Around 6:30 AM the next morning, when the garbage truck was lifting the dumpster in the air to empty it, city workers saw the padlocked dumpster lid. As they lowered the massive container back to the ground they heard muffled shouts and banging from within. They had to borrow a hacksaw to let Tiny out.

The rumor spread around school like a virus on a Merry-Go-Round, and each time it came around Fex added a few more inventive details to the wild speculations, for the sake of color. Fex considered the whole episode a triumph, one of his finest moments. That night he marked a big "X" over Tiny's name on the chart.

But in addition to his vengeful streak, Fex also had a generous streak that he kept carefully hidden, like a miser who possesses a swollen strongbox from which he doles out single coins with all the parsimony of Scrooge *before* his Christmas epiphany. Sal and Coo were two of the very few who received such sporadic benefits, though they both paid dearly and in advance for the honor, in the form of more or less constant tribute and submission to Fex, the Big One.

"Hey, Coo. Come on down to the corner. I'll treat you to a malt." But before they left, Coo would have to shine Fex's shoes.

Or, "Hey, Sal, let's you and me go to the movie today. I'll pay." But Sal would have to pedal the bike, huffing and sweating, while Fex rode on the handle bars like a Mandarin with his rickshaw coolie. And since Fex had bought Sal's ticket, Sal would have to buy the jumbo popcorn, the giant coke and several candy bars for Fex, the cost of which was always at least three times the price of admission.

But these indignities were small change to Sal and Coo, for whom the camaraderie with Fex was as good as gold. Thus, like ancient river channels long since covered by a shallow sea, the hidden currents that flowed between the three friends were well-established long before any of them would recognize, let alone admit, the fact. Their fast friendship formed in the apparent context of insults, denigrations, harmless pranks and dirty tricks. But the truth was that a kind of love bound Fex, Coo and Sal, though they would never admit it. Instead, any tender sentiment was immediately covered up

with a sharp tongue and a fist.

In this way they drifted through the sluggish, polluted waters of adolescence, toward the bracing, tumultuous sea of manhood.

Fex's character was already developing a few ominous perversions under the influence of Foxy's early mothering, her ever-present "voices" and her tutelage of Fex as her "bag-boy." Not that any of this would ever cross the threshold into Foxy's consciousness, of course. But, by the time of Fex's growth spurt, the appearance of Mr. Moto effectively saved Fex from his own—and Fexy's—darker potentials.

Owl Man wins Foxy's heart with gallantry ...

“Ah, Foxy, how good of you to come.” Owl Man’s gracious bow to the lady with the colorful bag was not lost on her.

“Now, Fexie, why can’t you learn some manners like this wonderful man here. He knows how to greet a lady, that’s for sure.”

By this time, Owl Man had finished kissing Foxy’s hand in the French manner, and to her audible, “Oh, my!” He followed with, “Let’s not be too hard on your Fexie just now, Foxy, he’s been under some duress, and we need his ego boosted a bit, if you can imagine Fexie needing an ego boost, in order to carry out the plan, to which we welcome you to as a new member of the team.”

“We’ll decide about that, ourselves, Mr ... um, what did you say your name was?”

“Foxy, dear, I didn’t say, but no matter, please call me Owl Man, and this other gentleman, is known as Heron Man; and while your Fexie has referred to us as bird brains, we assure you that this rather underestimates our talents and most particularly our capacity to add to the success of the plan, that, as you may know, Fex and Coo had abandoned without thinking through the consequences of their decision, and moreover, even before telling Sal, and—”

Heron Man stepped in, cutting Owl Man’s oration short, and much shorter than it was likely to become if Owl Man were left to his own devices, of which he seemed to have an endless supply, and proffered his own greeting to the bag lady.

“Welcome aboard, Foxy.” Heron Man did not bow, but spread his arms wide in a grand gesture of welcome, adding, “What Owl Man means to say, is that we are sure that all your selves will be in agreement when you hear the fail-safe nature of our plan, in which your selves are to play a crucial part.”

“We thank you for that. We are pleased. And the bag. It has not had such a promise of fun in such a long while.” Her smile went nearly from ear to ear as she lifted up the bag in question by the plastic handle, and patted it on the side as one might a baby’s rump.

It was Sal who broke through the high feelings of welcome to Fex’s mother. His

alarm sounded genuine, although as we have seen, he was often a step or two behind where things were, though certainly a step or two or more ahead of Coo, who at present was totally lost for words, a not uncommon state.

“All right, birdies, this plan of yours is getting crazier all the time. I don’t know about you guys,” gesturing to Fex and Coo and the women, “but I’m ready to abandon ship on this whole idea.” Sal headed for the door.

“Sal, I am impressed with your use of this allusion to a sinking ship and, if that were the case, then abandoning might be the proper thing to do, unless of course, you were the captain, which in this case, you are not. The plan, Sal, is not so much a ship as it is a story, and to abandon a story is a much different animal, as it were.” Owl Man was standing with his hands clasped behind him, once again in danger of going into lecture mode, missing only the leather patches, which of course, his owl shirt did not have. He was interrupted this time, not by Heron Man, but by the bag lady herself.

“Damn it, Mr. Owl Man, you’ve just reminded me. I forgot to leave some food for Footsie. I’ve got to go.”

“No, no, my dear, Footsie will be fine. In fact, when you get home later on, you will see that your cat has had a fine feast on a poor unfortunate starling. Which brings us back, in a timely way, to our plan for Ling Bank.” Owl Man gestured toward Heron Man, to once again assume his position as director of this unlikely cast of characters.

Foxy joins in the planning ...

“Now, Foxy, my dear. I understand you have considerable experience in, how shall I say, devising various entertainments and diversions for your customers, both in terms of recruitment policies as well as termination penalties.”

Foxy looked around the room suspiciously, but when her eyes rested on Owl Man’s beaming face, she broke out into a broad smile again. She actually curtsied in Owl Man’s direction. He tipped his hat, nodded, and with a flourish of his hand, gestured for her to respond to Heron Man’s query.

Fex was biting his fingernails.

“Well, of course, we were known in the business for the creative, personal touch we brought to all our dealings.”

She paused, turned her head, and spoke to her left lapel. “Do you think he’s talkin’ about the fingers?”

“I’m sorry?” Heron Man hadn’t heard her clearly.

“The fingers,” she said. “I said, ‘We never done the fingers.’ Mr. Moto done all that, when we needed muscle.”

Fex rolled his eyes. There she goes, he thought. I shoulda moved to Singapore.

“If our plan holds water—”

“That’s a laugh!” Sal was shaking his head doubtfully.

“If our plan holds water,” Heron Man continued, “we won’t need Mr. Moto and his ‘muscle.’”

Now Owl Man spoke up. “Just a minute, Heron Man. We might want to reconsider calling on Mr. Moto. He could be useful as well. But I don’t seem to have him in my notes.” Owl Man was scrolling through his computer files.

“That’s because our dear lady, Miss Foxy, hasn’t really told us about Mr. Moto yet. Only in oblique references. Perhaps, dear, you’d care to ... ”

“He’s my muscle, always was. Strong as a bull. Loyal. Not like Fexie.” Foxy was talking to her lapel again. When she raised her head she reverted to the first person plural, the Royal We.

“We only call Mr. Moto when we need lots of muscle. He don’t scare easy.”

“Mr. Moto, I take it, is your enforcer, Foxy?”

“You could say that. But don’t tell him, or you might find yourself floating in the bay along with the seagulls, food for the crabs.”

Heron Man looked at Owl Man questioningly. They seemed to arrive at a mutual decision.

“OK,” said Heron Man. “We’ll interview Mr. Moto another time, but we definitely want to use him somehow.”

“It’ll cost ya.” Foxy wasn’t known as a shrewd businesswoman for nothing.

“I’m sure it will. But we’ll arrive at a sensible fee—including a generous commission for you, of course. A ‘cut,’ I think you call it?”

Foxy was warming up to the plan, even though she had no idea what it was.

“OK, so what’s the plan?”

Heron Man resumed.

“Now Heather here is going to play an aristocratic lady, the Baroness Catherine Rothschild Van Renssalaer, who will enter the bank along with her personal secretary, Sally—who, by the way, happens to have a lovely operatic voice ... ”

But Foxy was already ahead of Heron Man.

“Somebody’s gotta break a leg. Threaten to sue. That’s me. I’m in a wheelchair. It falls over. Sally screams. The Baroness walks out in a huff. Sal gets the jump on Jolene, grabs the key. Fex walks in at that point carryin’ the bag. Coo takes the guard. It’ll all be over in sixty seconds. You two birds stand watch outside. Have the car ready.”

“Well, it sounds like you’ve done some homework, Miss Foxy. I’m impressed.”

“Piece of cake.” Foxy turned. “Is this what you got me down here for, Fexie?”

Fex looked up from examining his fingernails, still biting one resistant hangnail. “Huh?” When he was around his mother Fex seemed mysteriously reduced in stature, almost shrunken, as if smoked over a fire by headhunters. His tone of blustering dominance disappeared.

Owl Man stood and bowed to Foxy. The lighting seemed to shift with his courtly manners, altering the mood, as if they had been transported to a different time.

“Oh, madame, it is so exciting, so *frappant*, to hear the gurglings from the nest of your throat. It reminds me of the sweet baby birds in the *Bois de Boulogne* on that spring

morning when I arrived to fight the duel, from which I returned with my life, but marked forever with this scar across my face.”

“Oh, Owl Man, the scar is nothing compared to your honor. I too bear scars too horrible to describe, from when I too had to defend my honor against the ... the scum that took my hand in marriage.” She gave this last word an exaggerated French pronunciation, *ma-ri-age*, extending the last syllable as if she were eating succulent grapes, or warm figs.

With this sudden, inexplicable outburst of noble manners, everyone in the small room—all but Foxy and Owl Man, that is—seemed at once puzzled and dumbstruck.

Foxy withdrew a lace handkerchief from a side pocket and dabbed at her nose. Owl Man, miraculously, took a small silver box from *his* pocket—or his *poche*, as he was wont to call it—pinched a bit of snuff and, throwing back his head, quickly drew it into his nostrils.

This was getting crazy, Sal thought. The gathering was teetering dangerously out of control. Someone had to restore sanity, or the boat might just sink, in reality.

Surprisingly, it was Coo who took command at that point.

Coo shows his stuff ...

Transformations are sometimes unexpected, sometimes unbelievable, sometimes impossible. What the houseboat assemblage was witnessing was a version of the impossible, witnessing Coo stepping forward, actually ahead of everyone else. His words took everyone by surprise.

“The image of Foxy tipping over in a wheelchair with Sally belting out a 100-decibel scream and the Baroness in a huff—I like it, it’s the first idea that has made any sense at all. But Sal cannot jump on Jolene, that’s not going to work. Jolene must be distracted just at the moment she’s opened the drop-off from Brinks. The Baroness must not walk out. No, no. She must shout out in her imperial voice, ‘We’ll sue the bastards!’ Yes, that will catch Jolene and get her to leave the drop-off and rush to quell the disturbance in spite of all her training to the contrary. Sal must shout out, ‘I’ll call 911!’, in order to cover himself from suspicion. He will be doing this as he transfers the stuff to Foxy’s bag, which Fex has placed at Jolene’s teller window just as she leaves in a rush to Foxy’s aid. Fex takes Foxy’s bag and casually walks out. I like it. I really do.”

Everyone was speechless at Coo's sudden oration—no one had ever heard him speak with such determination, such passion, such right-on-ed-ness, if we may be permitted such a word, which, of course, we can easily grant ourselves in the light of Coo's inspiring oratory.

Coo had single-handedly recast the mood which was dangerously close to tipping into some craziness wherein Foxy would be quite at home and which Owl Man was always eager to explore for the fictive possibilities they might offer.

Coo was beaming, his moon-face at full radiance, the plan unfolding in plain sight. Owl Man tapped away at his keyboard. Heron Man nodded his head up and down in a silent “yes.” The girls looked at each other. Sal looked at the girls. Fex put his hands on his hips, his nail chewing done, as if about to make an announcement.

Instead, it was Foxy who announced, “It’s inevitable.”

All heads turned in her direction, wondering what in the world she was talking about this time.

They didn’t wait long for her to finish her thought.

“Sooner or later, someone’s gonna have to talk to Mr. Moto.”

Coo tells Heron Man about Chelsea ...

Later in the week Heron Man stopped at Tully's for a cup of coffee. He wanted to check some background details for upcoming Tully scenes. Make some notes on lighting, acoustics, surfaces, wait staff ... check the menu in more detail. He ordered a coffee—dark roast again—then sat at the same table as he did that historic morning when he and Owl Man first met Sal, Fex and Coo.

Heron Man removed his laptop from its leather case, flipped open the lid, arranged his cup and napkin, and pushed the power button. The hard drive whirred and images began whipping across the screen. As he looked at the computer, he saw a round face appear from behind his right shoulder, reflected in the glass display.

“Pssst. Heron Man! Are you alone?”

It was Coo. He pulled a chair next to Heron Man's, sat down and looked around, then leaned closer to Heron Man. “Is Owl Man here?”

“Hey, Coo! I didn't expect to see you today. No, Owl Man isn't here, just me. And you. This is not a scripted meeting. Are you OK?”

“Yeah, yeah, fine. Well, actually, not so fine. Listen, about the other day—”

“The day on the houseboat?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you referring to our conversation back by the head, then in the kitchen—I mean, the galley?”

“Yeah. Don't say nothin' to Fex about that, OK?”

“I wasn't planning on saying anything to anyone about it. But why are you here today. Did you know I was coming here?”

“Yeah. No. Well, actually, I followed you here.”

“Really! That's very enterprising of you, Coo. Not everyone can tail properly.”

“Well, I'm pretty good at it. Fex makes me tail a lot of people. So I learned the ropes.”

“I still don't understand *why* you followed me here.”

“I just thought maybe, you know, maybe, uh ... ”

“Maybe we could continue the conversation?”

“Yeah, that's it. I knew you'd get it.”

“Sure, Coo, we can talk ... for a while anyway. I have work to do for the book, but I've got a few minutes. What's on your mind?”

“It's about Fex.”

“About Fex? Or your relationship with Fex?”

“Yeah, that. I don't like it. I wanted to tell you back by the head, but I couldn't, what with Fex bein' there and all.”

“I'm not surprised. He treats you like he said he was treated as a kid ... like dirt.”

“I can't take it anymore. I'm about to explode. I might do somethin' ... drastic.”

“Well, don't explode yet, Coo. There's still a lot of work to do.”

“Yeah, yeah. Say, listen. Sal may be comin' over for a coffee break from the bank. I don't want him to see us talkin'. He'll think I'm pullin' somethin' over on him and Fex. Let's get out of here and go down the block to Dunkin' Donuts. That OK with you?”

“Of course, Coo, I understand. Their coffee isn't as good as Tully's, but that's OK. Let's go. When we're done I'll come back here to finish my research.”

“Hey, thanks, Heron Man. Thanks a lot.”

Coo was starting to get emotional again, though not like at the houseboat.

Heron Man packed up his computer, put on his coat, cleared the table and walked out of Tully's. He and Coo walked separately, as if they didn't know each other. Couldn't be too careful. That was Coo's idea. Dunkin' Donuts was a short walk away. They ducked in out of the wind—partly cloudy, breezy, high of 46 degrees in Seattle that day—ordered their donuts and fresh coffee. Dunkin' Donuts was no Tully's, but they were not as likely to be interrupted there.

Once settled, Coo began to spill the beans.

“I can't take it, Heron Man. Sometimes I want to punch Fex smack in the nose, except I'd have to stand on a chair to do it. And even if I did he'd turn right around and pound me into the ground. He's big and he's mean and he's smarter than me. And the other day Fex ... ”

And so it went: Fex this, and Fex that. Every sentence Coo tried to form, every thought, was bracketed one way or another by the great hulking presence of Fex. Words

bubbled and spurted from stubby, tormented Coo like steam from a throbbing teakettle. Heron Man let him talk, listening sympathetically. He had turned on his laptop when they entered, and opened a new file. As Coo rambled on, Heron Man occasionally tapped on the keyboard, making notes.

“What’re you doin’?” Coo asked.

“I’m taking notes, Coo.”

“How come?”

“Two reasons. One, I’ll be more helpful to you if I can recall most of what you say. Two, don’t forget that we’re both in a book, and I’ll need this material in order to present you in a convincing way, not just to some reader out there, but also to Fex. Don’t forget Fex.”

“How can I? He’s in my face every day. Except when he and Heather are holed up on that ratty houseboat.”

“They seem to like each other a lot.”

“Puppy love. It’s bullshit. They don’t know nothin’.”

“You mean, about love?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know something about love, Coo?”

Coo hesitated. He grabbed the stringy ponytail at the back of his head, unreeled the elastic band holding it in place, pulled the few strands of thinning hair together and re-applied the band.

During this elaborate operation Heron Man observed Coo’s features. His face was round, not because of fat, but because of his great, outwardly bowed jaws. Adding to the effect, he wore large sideburns that amounted to old-fashioned muttonchops, an anachronous touch considering his thin, graying ponytail. Just which century was Coo living in? Heron Man wondered. Apart from the jaws, the face as a whole was not unpleasant, it was more like a bland void—a void with muttonchops. What was striking, however, was the color of his small, pointed, irregular teeth. They were the color of red iron-oxide—rust—as if he brushed every night with the gritty effluent from an abandoned shipyard boiler. When he opened his mouth, or yawned, he suddenly took on the appearance of a cartoonish, round-faced Count Dracula, his teeth verging on red, as if

from a recent feeding.

Yet, surprisingly, there was a carefully hidden gentleness in Coo's appearance, easily overlooked, which gave his otherwise disjointed looks a kind of martyr's beauty ... like a modern Saint Sebastian, without the arrows, and hailing from the New Jersey slums. Heron Man felt a surge of compassion for this self-selected victim of Fex's outrageousness. Coo spent his life in Fex's shadow, like a remora attached to a Great White Shark.

In fiddling with his ponytail, Coo was just killing time, avoiding the question.

"Does the question make you uncomfortable, Coo? You don't have to answer it, you know."

"No, no, I wanna answer it. I just had to get my hair in order."

Heron Man waited.

"Well," Coo began, still stalling. "Yeah, sure, I guess I know somethin' about love."

"That's a pretty big statement, Coo. Tell me more."

Coo launched into an account of his first romance, with a girl named Chelsea Peppers. Chelsea sat in front of Coo in the eighth grade. He had heard stories of boys dipping girls' pigtails into inkwells on their desks, but there were no inkwells in Coo's school. Besides, Chelsea didn't wear pigtails, so he had to find a different way to get her attention.

At lunch recess one day, he approached her and offered her his bologna sandwich. To Coo's amazement, she did not slap him in the face. She did not insult him. Instead, she gratefully accepted the morsel and ate it on the spot while he stood there gaping. When she was finished she shyly thanked him and walked off. From that moment Coo's heart was bound forever to the life and fate of Chelsea Peppers.

"When was the last time you saw Chelsea, Coo?"

"I don't remember," snapped Coo defensively.

"That's funny. Sounds like a pretty big moment in your life. I should think you would remember how it went with Chelsea."

Coo continued the story. After four years of devoted pursuit—was that an early form of *tailing*?—Coo discovered Chelsea one day making out in the back seat of a

battered Oldsmobile sedan in the school parking lot. She had taken up with one Billy O'Malley, a popular jock that Coo especially hated. Coo was so enraged that he smashed the rear window of the car with a rock. No one was injured, except for the Oldsmobile, but the incident resulted in Coo's suspension from school. Chelsea never spoke to him again. It was during that suspension period, and the monumental breaking of Coo's heart, that Coo took up with Fex, who seemed at first like a gentle giant, a fast friend, an answer, in a way, to Coo's great need. But that was then.

"So you've been with Fex ever since?"

"Yeah, just about."

"Has he ever been ... good to you?"

"Yeah, maybe, once or twice. He gave me a necktie once. It was his old one. He told me I looked like a bum and to wear his old tie. I tried to get the grease spots out, told 'em to take a hike"—Coo chuckled, amused by his own wit—"but they didn't wanna leave. Plus the tie was too long. I had to cut off the tail and glue the threads together so they didn't unravel."

"Do you still have it?"

"Nah, I threw it away when I was mad at Fex one time, which I usually am."

"Maybe there's some other line of work you could do. Get out from under Fex's thumb."

"Yeah, I could. Sure I could. I could walk away any time I wanted. But Fex pays me enough to get by. He don't want to lose his errand boy. Besides, he's kinda interesting. I been makin' a study of Fex."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I got a bunch a notes about him at home."

"I'd like to see those notes, Coo, if you don't mind, that is."

"I don't know, Heron Man, they're pretty personal, ya know? And if Fex ever found out ..."

"Sure, Coo. But think about it. Maybe you could give Owl Man and me a hand with this book project. Write your own chapter about you and Fex, or something."

"I'll think about it. But don't tell Fex nothin' about this. He'd kill me."

"OK, Coo. Maybe you'd better remind Owl Man not to say anything either, tell

him in person: He just walked in the door.”

Coo spun around on his chair to see Owl Man standing just inside the door, cleaning his glasses on his “Parliament of Owls” sweatshirt. He put them back on, blinked twice and looked at Coo the way an owl zeroes in on a mouse. Coo shuddered. He felt a strange, mouse-like impulse, like an instinct. He wanted to skitter and bounce across the floor to take refuge in a crack somewhere. Some place where Owl Man couldn’t see him. But the feeling passed, and instead of running along the baseboards Coo remained frozen in his chair.

Owl Man started toward them.

“Hello, Owl Man. Didn’t think you were coming today.”

“Thought I’d get a couple of donuts.”

“Have a seat. Coo and I were just talking, but he’s about to leave, right, Coo?”

“Yeah, I gotta go. Don’t do nothin’ I wouldn’t do.” Coo was trying to joke, but there was no laughter in his face, only a pained apprehension. “See you guys.” And he skittered and bounced out the door.

Owl Man, mildly puzzled, watched Coo disappear.

“Can you sit down for a moment?” asked Heron Man.

“Not really. As a matter of fact, I have to meet someone. And it’s not a scripted meeting. I didn’t dream this up. Heather and Sally wanted to talk to me. So I said I would meet them here. They should be arriving any second now.”

“Well, in that case, I’d better get back to Tully’s and finish my research. I might even drift over to Ling Bank afterwards, take notes on the cracks in the sidewalk. Who knows? They might figure into the story. Maybe somebody might trip over one.”

“You never know,” said Owl Man.

As he approached the counter to order his donuts, a shrill ruckus broke out in front as the street door fairly burst open, and Heather and Sally breezed in breathlessly. Had there been an Animal Magnetism Meter on the wall of that Dunkin’ Donuts, it would have been pegged at redline. As it was, there was no such meter. Nevertheless, with their arrival all semblance of business came to an abrupt, though momentary, halt.

By the time “normal” business resumed, Heather and Sally were both leaning in Owl Man’s direction with abnormal intensity. Heron Man never found out what their

urgent discussion was about, although, if pressed, he probably could have made a few guesses.

Mr. Moto at the gym ...

While Foxy was busy being enthralled by Owl Man at the houseboat, Mr. Moto had survived an acute dental crisis. He left the dentist's office with no more than a slightly swollen jaw and a numb lip, so he decided to go to the weight room at the Kung Fu gym in Chinatown, near the Dirty Dozen Dance Club, to finish his workout. He was bench-pressing 300 pounds, nowhere near his limit. What impressed about Mr. Moto were the reps. It seemed as if he could keep pressing the massive cast-iron weights into the air without stopping. He even seemed to gain strength as the reps increased.

Although a kind of macho camaraderie prevailed at the gym, no one joked with Mr. Moto. They rarely even talked to him. As a result no one knew what he did for a living, though most suspected that they were better off not knowing.

Of Chinese-Hawaiian extract, Mr. Moto was orphaned at an early age and lived on the streets until Foxy "picked up the option on him," as she liked to put it. She gave him work, cleaned him up, gave him dignity. No matter that the work she gave him was intimidating people, breaking their fingers and such. During his life on the streets he had done much worse.

Sweat poured off of him. He looked as if he had just crawled out of a dark lagoon. The steel lifting bar flexed downward with each upraising of the clanking weights. He breathed steadily, vigorously. The bench beneath him groaned at the joints, its welds and bolts straining to hold. Mr. Moto was in stride. After a shower and his organic power drink he would be ready for anything.

No sooner had he hit the street than anything called.

It was Foxy. Whenever she buzzed him, Mr. Moto jumped. She was the only person in the world Mr. Moto was afraid of. Not physically, of course, and not really fear, exactly. It was more a question of dominance. Foxy had a command over Mr. Moto that no other mortal had.

"Mr. Moto."

"Yes, Foxy?"

"I want you to get down here to Fexie's houseboat as fast as you can. Can you do that, Mr. Moto?"

“Right away, Foxy. You havin’ trouble with someone? I’ll break their face.”

“No, no trouble, Mr. Moto. I want you in on a little plan we’re making up. Want you to meet my new friends.”

“OK, sure thing, Foxy. I be right there.”

And true to his word, within a very short time Mr. Moto arrived at the houseboat. Fex had asked him never to knock at the door, after the time he had knocked once and the hinge screws had given way and the oak jamb splintered. Fex had to call Alex Bystrom, the marina woodworker, for that repair.

This time Mr. Moto just called out for Foxy, and Sal ran to open the door. He wanted to reach it before Mr. Moto knocked, in case he had forgotten Fex’s injunction. The *Come Ye Heather* rocked slightly when Mr. Moto stepped on board. He walked directly to Foxy, put his arm around her protectively and said, “You sure you don’t want me to break someone’s face, Foxy?”

“No, Mr. Moto. I want you to meet my friends. This is Heron Man.”

Mr. Moto just stared at him. Heron Man did not proffer his hand. He was not about to test the limits of Mr. Moto’s grip.

“And *this*, Mr. Moto, is a very gallant gentleman, my very dearest friend, Mr. Owl Man.” Curiously, Foxy’s command of English seemed to soar in Owl Man’s presence, from her usual Jersey gutter speech to a level of remarkable courtliness. A psychic had once told her she was a princess in a past life, a claim she had always felt was true. It was a source of constant aggravation and embitterment to her that no one else recognized it—no one but Owl Man, that is.

Not wanting to break the spell, Owl Man leaned forward and bowed to Mr. Moto, more as a gesture to Foxy than to Mr. Moto who, once again, only stared.

After Foxy introduced Heather and Sally, who both seemed stunned by Mr. Moto’s presence, Owl Man brought Mr. Moto up to speed on the developing plan. He repeated Foxy’s sly elaborations, Coo’s audacious modifications and went on to suggest some possible roles for Mr. Moto.

Foxy, however, had other ideas.

The whole room seemed suspended, as if the space itself awaited her next words.