

*Joe Goes Bowling ...*

Old Joe Dupuis, the *former* Security Guard at Ling Bank, felt like a rabbit as he walked out the front door of the bank, holding his bologna sandwich in his hand. He peeled back the waxed paper, sniffed the sandwich, and proceeded to nibble at it, polishing it off as he walked down the sidewalk toward the parking garage. He was practically hopping along, with the easiest stride he'd felt in years.

The rabbit part did not consist in the sniffing or the hopping, however. The reason he felt like a rabbit was because rabbits have big ears, and they depend on those ears for their survival against coyotes, humans and other predators. Rabbit ears are constantly rotating, forwards and backwards, picking up the slightest auditory signals of danger that might reach them from any direction. Even though they weren't as long as a rabbit's, that's what Joe's ears were doing—searching for danger.

Here he was, celebrating his freedom from Ling Bank, the boredom and all the rest, but the auditory part of him—his ears—were on high-alert, because of Ling's destructive rampage upstairs only a few minutes ago. So Joe was not really as free as he wanted to feel. Sure, he was nearly hopping along, but his big, floppy ears were practically rotating like radar dishes, alert for more breaking glass, more shouting, or the growing proximity of sirens from the emergency vehicles that were converging on the bank from what seemed like every direction. The paranoid, most rabbit-like part of Joe, down somewhere in the reptilian brain, was listening for a SWAT team to come roaring up from behind and haul him away for some unspecified crime.

As the reader can well imagine, Old Man Ling's violent meltdown in response to his humiliation at the hands of the Baroness and her Companion, caused emergency switchboards everywhere to light up with alarmed calls. This led to an awesome concentration of officialdom and firepower, everyone trying to get inside Ling Bank at once, while Joe nonchalantly strolled off toward his car. One astonished passerby counted fifteen (15) emergency or official vehicles at the height of it, plus a number of those unmarked but obvious black government sedans with black rims and black-walled tires—usually medium-priced Fords or Chevys with radio antennae on the back—so glaringly obvious!

“Why don't they ever fake out evil-doers by using Jaguars or even used Hondas?”

Who the f\*\*k do they think they're fooling?" said one passerby aloud, a mechanic on his lunch break. He may have occupied the low-end of the social-scale, he realized, but he sure knew his cars.

When Joe reached his own car, a reliable 1978 Mazda with 283,000 miles on the odometer, he fired it up and sped out of the parking garage. He was not the type to go to a bar and get drunk by himself just because he quit his job. Instead, he headed straight for the bowling alley where his pal Manny had worked for years, but who had just been granted disability compensation for some mysterious ailment.

Because Manny was a good guy, he was desperate to find another good guy to take over his job. Manny told Joe many times that, being good, he wanted to feel good about leaving, so he had been hounding good ol' Joe for weeks to be that good guy, so everybody could feel good about everything. That's how Manny explained it to Joe. "It's gotta be good, Joe."

Joe pulled up in front of the bowling alley and found a parking spot right by the front door. It was called the Level Lanes Bowling Arcade, and Joe fairly bounced into the place, spotting Manny immediately and shouting to him, "Hey, Manny, this here's yer lucky day! You gotta deal! I'll take yer damn job like you been wantin'!"

They sat down at the bar to discuss terms and conditions—which, because of all the details, took more than four and a half beers each to accomplish. It worked out that Joe took over the remainder of Manny's shift right then and there, even though he was a bit loopy from the beer, and Manny just sauntered out easy as you please—after telling Ace, the boss, of course, what was happening. Ace glanced at Joe's uniform, nodded, said goodbye to Manny, and went back to the bookkeeping problem he'd been struggling with all day.

Joe's security uniform was "off the rack," but that was fine with Ace, who didn't care. "Long's it looks official," was all he said. He had Joe fill out a couple of forms, then went back to his ledgers and his half-smoked stogie.

So Joe the Security Guard began his new life, strolling around in the way that had become second-nature to him, nice and casual, eyes flicking back and forth, looking for perps but not scaring anybody—although today his eyes *were* rotating in their sockets a little more than usual, thanks to the beer. But a short cup of coffee was all he needed to get straight. All the league bowlers and other regulars were well-behaved, as if for Joe's inauguration. "Easy

as pie,” he whispered to himself. “No perps.”

The next day, he was fifteen or twenty minutes into his second shift when he almost upchucked at the sight of Jolene entering the Level Lanes in tears. She was obviously distraught, hiccoughing and gurgling, dabbing her reddened eyes with a series of tissues she kept pulling out of her deep-red, patent-leather purse, pausing occasionally to blow her nose. She kept a small plastic baggie to hold the used tissues inside her purse.

“Jolene? What the—? What the—?” Joe was so dumbstruck he couldn’t complete the sentence, but he was excited just the same, because, in truth, he had nursed a secret attraction to Jolene during all those years he had strolled the floor at Ling Bank, forced to sneak peaks at Jolene behind glass in her office—a fitting metaphor for Joe’s dilemma: He could look, but he couldn’t touch. And so he consoled himself with bologna sandwiches and men’s magazines in his corner—that, and being able to wad up the waxed paper into a ball and hit the basket from ten feet every time, without fail.

“Oh, Joe, I’m so glad I found you. It took me *forever* to find out where you’d gone. I was afraid you’d left my life, well, forever!”

“Ferever? What the hell are you talkin’ about, Jolene? What about Sal?”

“Oh, screw Sal. He just dumped me for Sally, like he’d been playing me along for a fool. He broke my heart, the bastard. Not like you, Joe. You’d never do that to me. You’d never break my heart. You’re too—loyal.” She stuffed the used tissue into her purse with one hand and took his hand with the other.

For a moment Jolene’s tears dried up and, with only the slightest misty film, her dark eyes as moist and wide as a seal’s, she looked Joe directly in the eye for the first time in all the years they’d known one another. No one had ever looked at Joe like that.

Joe shivered and almost fell over backwards, but she held onto him with her hand, then *his eyes* started welling up with tears. The moment was almost spoiled by the starch he’d put in his crisp uniform, which was rustling a bit in an annoying way. His collar started itching and, once again, he was at a loss for words.

“Uh, well, you know dang well ah’m loyal, Jolene. That’s fer dang sure. Loyal ol’ Joe. Maybe you even figgered out that ah’ve had a big, humongous *crush* on you all these—here years.”

This virtual oath of loyal affection from Joe was all it took to set Jolene off again,

spouting tears all over her aqua pants-suit. She reached for another fresh tissue.

“How did you find me, Jolene? I didn’t tell nobody at the damn bank. Ah jest walked outta that-there rat-hole.”

“Fortunately, Manny called me asking for a quick loan. ‘A bridge,’ he called it. He didn’t know the bank was in chaos and its assets were already frozen, so I had to turn him down. But he told me you took over his job and now here I am. I’m yours, Joe, if you’ll have me, that is.”

“Mine? But, what about Ling Bank? You been there so damn long, Jolene, Old Man Ling couldn’t get along without you.

“Ha! That’s a laugh, Joe! Old Man Ling is in jail, and the bank is probably going into receivership pretty soon.”

“Into whut?” Joe did not understand the technicalities and terminologies of bankruptcies. To him, a bankruptcy (he couldn’t even pronounce the word) just referred to those frequent occasions when a business “went belly up.” “Like a catfish in a dry pond,” he would sometimes add, for color.

“Well, it’s very complicated and it will take a while to happen, my dear Joe, but receivership means that the bank regulators are taking over the bank, freezing its assets and taking possession of all its records—they’re counting cash and hauling boxes of files right now, in fact.”

“Can they do that? Just mosey on in and take everything? Don’t sound right to me.”

“Yes, they can, Joe. It’s called ‘regulation of the banking industry.’ And right now Old Man Ling is, if I can use this word, totally screwed. He’s in police custody.”

“Well, I’ll be—” exclaimed Joe.

“And do you remember that funny occasion where some money went missing but it really wasn’t missing, and that agent—”

“Ya mean that guy, whut’s his name—”

“Yes, that’s the one I mean, Joe.” And Jolene slipped her arm through Joe’s and walked a few laps around the bowling alley with him, watching the league players warming up, enjoying the crashing and banging sounds of bowling balls knocking over the hardwood or solid-plastic pins (there was a combination of new and old).

“But what about that other thing I said, Joe? About ... if you *want me*, if you’ll *have*

me?”

“I mean, ‘course I want you, Jolene. Is that whut you mean?”

“Yes, Joe, dear, that’s exactly what I mean. I’ve waited so long for this moment.”

“Ya have?”

“Yes, Joe.”

They stood there looking at one another, then Jolene broke off the eye contact and looked around the entire bowling alley—the lanes, the pins, the orderly rows of smooth black balls, the hamburger grill, the coke and beer tap handles, all the stainless steel—not to mention the *fun* the customers were having!

“You know, my dear Joe, this might be an activity I could get interested in.”

Somewhat rabbit-like, Joe hopped up and down a few times before he got control over himself, cleared his throat and said, “H-hemm, uh, really, Jolene? That’d be swell!”

Meanwhile, Ace had finished off the stub of his daily cigar and was banging his head with his fists and pounding his desk, swearing loudly in the glass booth that served as his office. He didn’t realize that every last syllable of his vulgarities were perfectly audible to anyone outside who was listening.

“What’s the matter with Ace, Joe?” asked Jolene.

“Aw, he’s been havin’ a hell of a time, fer years, with them numbers. Somethin’ about ‘em. Tried to get Manny to take care of it once, but Manny don’t know nothin’ about numbers. One time ol’ Ace even broke the window. Threw the stapler right through it. Cost over two hunnert dollars ta fix it.”

Jolene paused for a moment, took a second slow look around the Level Lanes Bowling Arcade, observing the animation of league members, their eager anticipation, and she even found herself sharing the excitement of the league members when Nadine, whom everybody loved, hit a strike and started jumping up and down—amidst all this joy and activity, Jolene turned to Joe and said:

“Joe, my dear, perhaps I could be of help to Ace.”

*Ling in Irons ...*

What Jolene neglected to tell Joe that first day at the Level Lanes Bowling Arcade, was the reason *why* Old Man Ling was behind bars.

Joe had forgotten the name of the agent who had subjected his dear Jolene to what she called “that horrid interrogation,” but Jolene hadn’t. The agent’s name was Pederson, Agent “Pete” Pederson, Federal Marshal. And considering all the switchboards that were blinking, winking and nodding all over downtown Seattle on the day of Ling’s meltdown, it was like a cosmic coincidence that *that* was the day, *the very day*, that Agent Pederson’s 50-member task force was poised to swoop down on Ling Bank, armed with about two bank-sized file cartons full of warrants of one sort or another. Jolene had been cleared in the initial interrogation, but after years of digging and surveillance and testimony and paying-off flunkies, Agent Pederson and the Feds were finally ready to go after Ling himself, the king-pin, armed to the hilt with *the full force of the law*, as Pederson kept putting it, always in his most solemn, Joe Friday tones.

It’s not as if there was a conflict in jurisdiction that day, between Agent Pederson, the local SWAT team and the local cops and firemen, there was simply a conflict of *space*. There just wasn’t enough room for everyone who had an interest in entering and intervening in the operations taking place inside Ling Bank, let alone bringing it down.

Jee Besus himself had an interest in Ling—one could even say he had a *thing about Ling*, which had almost become a theme song for Besus. (“I ... gotta thing ... about Ling ... da da da ... etc.,” then he would just whistle the rest of the song, having finished composing the tune but not the lyrics.)

The local police chief, Paddy Paddington, long-overdue for retirement, wanted to get in on this action despite his being over-aged and his belly being oversized—both of which prevented any “action” per se. Nevertheless, he was at the scene, and at least he “took command” by assigning one of his rookie lieutenants the grunt job of directing traffic in the front lobby. After all, everyone couldn’t enter at once.

But it worked out.

What Agent Pederson sought would be located in all those file boxes *downstairs*, the ones his underlings—his “strike-force,” as he called them—were carrying out by the dozens.

On the other hand, what the SWAT team and the cops were looking for was blood and mayhem—which they would find *upstairs*, in spades, inside Ling’s office.

When they burst into the office, the first object of the cops’ attention was Mr. Ling himself, who was reportedly drooling and babbling incoherently, covered with blood—his own, lab techs later affirmed, as well as that of his victim, one Tony K. Canario, aka “Tone.”

It seems that Mr. Ling threw Mr. Canario, bodily, through the plate glass window behind Mr. Ling’s desk while his bodyguards (Ling’s) simply stood by and watched. The combination of deep cuts from broken glass, plus landing half-way on a Toyota Corolla and half-way on the asphalt parking lot two floors below, resulted in Mr. Canario’s death. Unfortunately, the EMTs who were first on the scene arrived too late to render assistance. It was not known what relationship Mr. Canario had, if any, with Mr. Ling. Police quickly noted, however, that there were multiple warrants for Mr. Canario’s arrest in New Jersey on fifteen counts of grand-theft-auto, embezzlement and extortion.

Chief Paddington, who had taken the elevator to the second floor on account of his bad knees, surveyed the damage knowingly. When a sergeant notified him about Canario’s death below and told him about all the outstanding warrants, Chief Paddington pronounced with finality, “Well, I guess that case is closed.” Then the Chief looked around for a chair where he could sit down.

In view of Mr. Ling’s condition, which officials on the scene deemed “high-security and psychiatric to boot,” psychiatric aides were summoned and told “to put on your little white coats and come take Mr. Ling away in a strait-jacket.” That’s how one highly-ranked official, who refused to be named, put it—“strait-jacket, as in straight to the high security, forensic Western State Hospital Steilacoom Facility near Tacoma. Oh, and bring an armored car,” the official added.

Mr. Ling’s bodyguards, one of whom only gave his name as “Oak-Neck,” refused to make any official statements unless guaranteed witness-protection status. State Prosecutors are working on this possibility, given the rich trove of information they expect to extract from the bodyguards as to Ling’s many illegal activities.

The bank’s manager, Miss Jolene Baker-Tomlins, was interviewed briefly and released by Agent Pederson. Pederson, a familiar figure in local law enforcement circles, and not known for his volubility, would only say to reporters: “She’s clear.”

The acting bank Security Guard at the time of the “rampage,” as it’s being called on local newscasts, had quit and left the bank at the time of the homicide and is not considered to be a person of interest. The long-time and beloved guard, known to customers and employees only as “Old Joe,” could not be found. He had worked at Ling Bank for so long that few people knew his last name, and his original employment records could not be located. When asked, not even Miss Baker-Tomlins, under the duress of the moment, could remember his last name. “Du—, Dupe—something,” was all she could say.

Local news anchors breathlessly repeated all of the same details with moronic frequency, while showing all the same camera shots endlessly repeated—Ling being frog-marched in handcuffs wearing an orange jumpsuit, smiling widely, drooling and jabbering, or being taken away by strapping young men in white coats in a plain van with flashing lights on top. Their destination was not announced, but, under the circumstances, it was surmised to be a high-security facility indeed.

Soon enough the news cycle took over and TV screens across the Northwest were flooded with shots of a washed out intersection in the Ballard district due to a broken water main, and repeated clips of a beached orca whale near Bellingham. Volunteers came from several states and, together, managed to pull the “great Leviathan,” as it was being called, back to the waterline, where, at high tide, it calmly swam away.

A year later there was a brief clip on an evening “action newscast,” which showed a blurry shot of Agent Pederson as he ducked into a plain sedan during a light rain-squall. A throng of soggy reporters asked Pederson for a statement about the Ling case, but all he would say was, “We nailed him.”

Then he drove away.



*Sal confesses to Sally ...*

Sal had already made up his mind the night Heather called Sally with the news about Fex signing the contract with Old Man Ling. And what had he decided? Yes, he was definitely going to tell Sally the truth about Jolene—but with Sals being so upset he couldn't do it just yet.

On the other hand, Heather called back not long after and said that Helen and Jasmine had confronted Old Man Ling and he *tore up the contract and burned it right in front of them!* So Fex's dilemma was solved. For the time being, at least.

"So, what's stopping you now, Sal?" said a nagging voice inside him.

"Huh? Uhhhh, well, ah, hmmm," he equivocated. "Well, you know ..."

"No, I don't know. Explain it to me, wise guy," the voice persisted.

"You know," said Sal, "you're gettin' to be a big pain in the ass, you know that?"

"Whose ass are we talkin' about, wise guy? Yours? Or Sally's? Or are we talkin' about Jolene's big ass?" This voice was really starting to get on Sal's nerves.

"You leave Jolene's ass out of this!" Sal was really feeling insulted now.

"Oh really? You mean Jolene's nice big round ass don't play no part in your high-and-mighty decisions here, wise guy? You can't tell Sally tonight 'cause she might get upset? Well, in case you haven't noticed, she's already upset. In fact, she's probably about to kick you out on your keister."

"Look, buster, who the hell do you think you are?"

"Who am I? You mean you don't know? You with the big brain, the one that was settin' up that scam for Fex and Co that got Owl Man and Heron Man all involved and breathin' down your neck? You can't figure this out, who I am?"

"Yeah, I mean, no, I don't know who you are."

"Boy, you are a real schmuck, you know that? I'm your conscience, Sal. Y'ever heard of one? You remember, when you felt so bad after stealin' Father O'Malley's secret stash of chocolate behind the altar cloth? That was me, makin' you feel so bad. I'm built-in, case you didn't notice. I come with the territory."

"That was you, in that Father O'Malley thing?"

"Yep. Yours truly. And I'm the one makin' you feel so bad about playin' grab-ass

with Jolene while poor Sally's sittin' here alone, night after night, eatin' her heart out."

"So, OK, bigshot. Tell me what to do. Her eyes look like red jawbreakers from all the cryin' she's been doin'. Ya want me to make it worse tonight?"

"Sal. We've known each other a long time. You can't tell me you don't know it's just gonna get worse, the longer you wait. You gotta tell her the truth, pal, and tonight's the night!"

"Yeah, maybe you're right."

"Of course I'm right. And you know it."

And so, after this bracing exchange with his conscience, Sal crept toward the bedroom door and put his ear against it, expecting to hear a whispering conversation. But there was nothing but a muted, whooshing sound, like jet airplanes in the distance.

He tapped on the door. Nothing.

Then he whispered, "Sals?"

Still nothing.

So he twisted the door knob very slowly—all the way so the latch wouldn't click against the strike plate—and pushed the door slightly open.

He peeked inside. Sally had shut off her cell phone and fallen asleep. The whooshing sound was Sally snoring.

Sal looked behind him, as if his conscience were located in space, and said, "Now what, big shot?"

"Wake her up!" said the conscience with annoyance. "What are you, an idiot?"

"OK, I'll try."

"Don't just try, fer Christ's sake, just do it!" His conscience was practically shouting now.

"OK, OK, I'll do it."

So Sal walked into the bedroom, got on the bed next to Sally and put his arm around her.

"Hmmm," she mumbled.

"Hey, Sals. Wake up. I gotta talk to ya."

"What?"

"Wake up. We need to talk. I gotta tell ya somethin'."

“OK. Go ahead.”

“Well, this is kinda hard for me, Salsy. You see, I been ...”

“Having an affair with Jolene?”

“Yeah. How the hell did you know?”

“Heather told me. A long time ago.”

“You mean you ... ?”

“Knew all along? Yeah. I knew. Why d’you think I’ve been so bummed out?”

“I didn’t know. How did you know?”

“I just told you. Heather told me. Besides, it’s so obvious. I mean, come on, Sal, a software problem you’re working on with Jolene after hours? How obvious is that? Did you expect me to believe that line of bullshit?” Sally turned over and rubbed her eyes.

“Well, actually, uh ... ”

“Oh, come on, Sal, wake up.”

“OK, then, tell me this. How come you didn’t throw me out a long time ago?”

“Boy, Sal, you are gonna get some Big Dumb Award for this. ‘Cause I *love you*, idiot! Why do you think?”

At this point, Sal was, frankly, amazed. It had never occurred to him that Sally loved him enough to put up with his stupid affair with Jolene and with the stupid stories he was trying to get past her. His conscience spoke up again.

“See what I mean, pal? Ain’t you feelin’ a little better now? Got that off yer chest? But yer still an idiot,” said the conscience.

“Yeah, yeah, I guess yer right.”

“Of course I’m right! Now you gotta go tell Jolene.”

“What?”

“You heard me, Sal. You gotta march right down to Ling Bank in the morning—no beatin’ around the bush—and you gotta tell Jolene it’s over.”

“Boy, you’re really askin’ a lot. Hey, what’s your name, anyway?”

“I can’t believe this. Guy’s got an IQ through the roof and he don’t know the name of his own conscience. My name is Sal, pal. I’m you, big shot. Now quit your bullshittin’ and go talk to Jolene, first thing in the morning. And in the meantime, Mr. Wise Guy, go be nice to your lady in there.”

Sal and Sally spent the rest of the night in a loving embrace that reminded both of them of their courtship.

In the morning, Sal and Jolene both arrived at the bank on the early side and each of them tried to speak first.

“Sal—”

“Jolene—”

They both began at the same time and they both had the same thing to say. The exact words were lost to the winds—nobody was taking dictation—but they had each arrived at the same decision: It had to stop—today.

And the marvelous thing was that, although Jolene’s face crumpled a little as if she was about to cry, they both knew it was the right thing to do, that their caring for each other, however forbidden, was genuine, and that this decision was much better, more freeing, than their sweaty meetings at night spent working out their “software problems.” And if, during subsequent events, Jolene altered her account of their relationship in certain respects, why, that was only to be expected.

At that moment, two elegant women entered the bank, one tall, one short, and approached Old Joe the Security Guard. Sal had gone back to his keyboard and Jolene was on the phone in her office, so they did not see them enter, did not see the taller one offer a calling card to Joe, see him go upstairs and return immediately, stumbling over himself to escort them upstairs, or see them return some time later and leave the bank, ushered out by the one recently known as Oak-Neck. It was not long after these events that Sal’s and Jolene’s attention was broken by the crashing and yelling sounds upstairs, by Joe’s sudden severance of his employment at the bank, and by the subsequent inrush of governmental forces that changed Sal’s and Jolene’s lives forever.

*Fex and Heather Move On ...*

After the Baroness Catherine Rothschild Van Renssalaer and her Companion left Ling Bank, and just before Old Man Ling went berserk, Jasmine called Heather to let her know that Fex was “off the hook,” that Ling had torn up the contract.

And when Fex and Heather started seeing the news reports that were flooding every TV screen, showing all the cop cars and Ling in cuffs being frog-marched in the orange jumpsuit, they knew Fex was *really* off the hook. In short, Old Man Ling was finished.

But Fex, rather than feeling completely relieved and liberated, came away from the whole experience with a sour, let-down sort of feeling. He expressed this to Heather in many subtle ways.

Heather would say, “Nice weather today, eh, Fexie?”

And Fex would reply, “Yeah, it’s OK.”

Or, Heather would say, “Ya know, we oughta go shoppin’, get you some flashy new duds, maybe a new ascot.”

And Fex would reply, “Nah, the old ascot still has a lotta life in it, just a coupla stains on it. Think I’ll just stay home today.”

It didn’t take much of this kind of back-and-forth before Heather said, “OK, buster, out with it. What gives? Why are you so down in the dumps when Helen and Jasmine just saved your bleedin’ life?” (Heather had been picking up slang phrases from British crime dramas on TV.)

“Ah, I dunno. I just feel like maybe we ought to blow this place. I’m gettin’ tired of Seattle. Nothin’ ever happens here. Best thing ever happened to me—‘sides meetin’ you, baby—was that prize we won for doin’ our Mashed Potato down at the dance joint that night.”

“Yeah, that was a big deal, all right,” Heather agreed.

Then Heather had a big idea. “Hey, Fexie, I was readin’ in my Showtime Magazine the other day and they had this big ad callin’ for contestants to apply for some big dance contest on TV. Had a real producer and everything. ‘Course you gotta go through lots of auditions and stuff, but we’re gettin’ good at that. Whattaya think, Fexie? We take the Lincoln and drive down to Hollywood. Sign up for them auditions. Get on TV. Maybe win

the prize! It could happen, ya know!”

All of a sudden Fex perked up at Heather’s idea.

“Yeah. Give the Lincoln a little exercise. See the country. Give them Hollywood fakes a lesson in how it’s really done. Show ‘em a thing or two. Maybe even pitch some ideas I been working on for a TV series called “Fex Firestone, Private Eye”—or somethin’ like that.”

Then Fex started having second thoughts.

“But what about the heist? What about Owl Man and Heron Man? What about all our practice with the Hasty Heisters?”

Heather’s reply was blunt and to the point:

“What are you talkin’ about, Fexie. There ain’t gonna *be* no heist. Haven’t you figured it out yet? Old Man Ling’s in jail. The feds are crawling all over the bank. Jolene got a job at a bowlin’ alley, for Pete’s sake—”

“You mean the Level Lanes?”

“Course I mean the Level Lanes. Where else?”

Heather continued.

“I even heard the Feds are taking all the money away from Ling Bank, shrink-wrapped on pallets, like they did on that Iraq thing, and big canvas bags and stuff. Besides, the only thing Owl Man talks about any more is Jasmine, and the only thing Heron Man talks about is Helen. They’re both gaga. I don’t even know if they’re writin’ any more. We haven’t even had a heist rehearsal for weeks. They just sit there at Tully’s and argue over grammar. It’s so stupid. Don’t you get it?”

“Yeah, yeah, I see what you mean. I always knew that heist plan of theirs was bullshit anyway. They had some tricks, but that’s all they was. Just tricks.”

“And here’s another thing I heard from Jasmine. She called me the other day and said she didn’t know how much longer she was gonna have a job. Said Tully was thinkin’ of closing down the coffee shop. Said it wasn’t makin’ enough money.”

“Are you kiddin’ me?”

“Fexie, who the hell do you think you’re talkin’ to?”

“Yeah, sorry, baby. Tully’s goin’ outta business? Hard to believe.”

“Well, Tully’s not goin’ outta business ‘til he’s dead. He’s talking about startin’

*another* business, a *different* one. This time it's gonna be all booze. All that fancy imported Scotch he and Owl Man are always goin' on about—Macallan this and Lagavulin that, all the casks and the clans bullshit. Says he's gonna do a real authentic Scottish pub kinda place. Bring in a piper on Friday nights. Says he'll make a bundle. Probably will, too. He's got a spot all picked out."

Fex thought about this for a while and finally agreed.

"Yeah. Shot of booze costs more than ten coffees. Now you're thinkin', Tully. I'll miss the coffee shop, though."

"No, you won't, Fexie. We're gonna be in Hollywood, pullin' up in the Lincoln, walkin' on the red carpet, all the *paparazzi* snappin' them shots, I'll get a fancy dress, you'll get a tux and a *new* ascot. Hollywood's crawlin' with coffee shops. Everybody's always pitchin' some script or other, makin' deals, rakin' in dough."

"Yeah, baby, this is startin' to sound good!"

"And you know what, Fexie? If we don't win the contest I'll get a job as fashion consultant to the stars. Do makeovers and stuff. Charge a bundle. Kathleen Turner, all them over-the-hill types. I can splash 'em up, make 'em look like new. Already got some ideas and a couple of contacts."

So, with a little push from Heather, Fex was on board and they began making their plans to escape the drear climes of Puget Sound and bask in the golden California sun. Fex put the houseboat up for sale in a hot market, and within three weeks the houseboat was sold and the Lincoln was packed and rolling.

"Baby," said Fex to Heather as they pulled away from the marina parking lot, "we're headin' south!"

### *Coo Makes His Big Break ...*

When Coo heard that Fex and Feather were selling the houseboat and moving to Hollywood and weren't taking him with them, he was crushed—at first. Then he started thinking, and thinking, and thinking.

Soon an image began appearing, as if from the back of his mind, a red shape emerging from black darkness. Two shapes actually. At first Coo thought they were two big boobs coming towards him, then he realized they weren't boobs at all: they were big, round *ears*. In fact, what Coo was seeing were *Mickey Mouse ears*, just like the plastic ones he used to wear around the neighborhood when he was a kid and wanted to be on the Mickey Mouse Club on TV. Wanted to sing those fun songs, like Annette Funicello and the other Mouseketeers.

For a few days Coo tried to nurse a grudge about Fex taking off like he did, but he found he just couldn't stay offended when these happy Mouseketeer songs kept popping into his head. He just felt good, Fex or no Fex. And in fact, he was actually *relieved* not to have Fex bossing him around all the time, insulting him, making fun of him—rather than having fun *with* him, like the Mouseketeers used to do.

So one day he counted up his stash, and discovered he had more money hidden away than he realized. Then Coo made the biggest decision of his life.

He decided he was going to sub-let his apartment to a couple of computer nerds from U of W and drive straight through to Anaheim, California. Once he got there, he would find a room to rent, then he would go directly to the employment office at Disneyland to apply for a job as none other than Mickey Mouse!

He'd heard that the turn-over in those costumed field-positions was pretty high. The helmets were stuffy, the costumes were hot and heavy, and you had to be on your feet all day long. At least he didn't have to smile eight hours a day, because the smile was sculpted and painted onto the injection-molded plastic helmet that had screened vents here and there anyway, so nobody ever dropped dead from asphyxiation. All he had to do was put the costume on and walk around acting happy. But because he *looked happy*, he *felt happy*! He couldn't find any flaw in his plan.

Coo wasn't about to stick around Seattle waiting for Owl Man and Heron Man to



figure out what they were going to do. He was *leaving*, no matter what!

Thus, in what seemed like a very short period of time, Coo was getting out of his car, squinting in the bright California sunshine, looking at a sign with an arrow that said, “Employment Office. No Tattoos Or Piercings Allowed.” Even though the administrative offices were done up in no-nonsense industrial architecture that resembled something from the Soviet gulag, still, the entire Disneyland complex was wired with thousands of speakers pumping out non-stop, happy Disney songs—*Chim-chiminey-chim-chiminey-chim-chim-cheree*, and so forth.

Coo was practically skipping when he knocked on the three-hour-rated, steel fire-door leading to the employment desk. He had to ask for help in spelling a few words, but, throughout the entire process, time seemed to fly. And before Coo knew it—two days later—he got a call saying they had a position open for Mickey Mouse and could he be there in twenty minutes to try out his costume for sizing and start the shift in a half hour?

Coo did them one better. He was there in ten minutes, the suit fit perfectly, and he started his shift only twenty minutes later.

That was just the start. Coo worked at Disneyland for the rest of his life, playing the role of Mickey Mouse, greeting kids and parents from all over the world. He’d never been so proud, nor had he ever been so happy. There was only one event during all those years that made him sad. It was when he turned around in his costume and, because of the limited visibility the helmet afforded, he accidentally bumped into a four-year-old child and knocked the scoop of ice cream off of his cone. The child cried and Mickey—that is, Coo—felt terrible and immediately got a new and bigger one (two scoops) for the distraught child.

Other than that one mishap, however, Coo’s career as Mickey Mouse was undiminished by anything negative. Many years later, when Coo finally died, the entire staff of Disney field-characters gave a parade in Mickey-Coo’s honor. He was buried in a flower-bed at the entrance turnstiles, with a bronze plaque on a granite stand. The inscription on the plaque read: “To Coo, the Best Mickey Ever.”

*Foxy goes to Vegas ...*

Foxy had long since lost interest in the heist, since the “bird brains” had nixed her idea of blasting her way in with her tommy gun.

“What’s the point?” she asked herself repeatedly, “if there ain’t no blastin’?”

Instead of planning for the heist, she spent her days sitting around reading a pile of magazines devoted to guns and ammunition, hunting and survival gear, with titles like *Camo ‘n’ Ammo*, or *Shotgun Shirley’s Special Secrets*, or *Blast ‘Em Dead Survival Tips*, or *Big-Bore Daddy*.

The magazines consisted mostly of ads promoting every conceivable weapon and weapon-related device, plus all the fashion and style you would ever need to look good, or tough, or sexy—whether on the shooting range, the hunting fields, or the electric bucking bull in the glitzy cowboy bars in Las Vegas.

It was this last ad that caught Foxy’s attention one afternoon.

“Vegas! Hey! Now there’s a place I could do business in. Don’t need that little crybaby Fex any more ‘cause I still got Mr. Moto, bless his heart.”

So Foxy started calculating—she was good at that—whipping through the ads looking at prices, figuring out wholesale, high seasons and low seasons, writing down the dates for Vegas survivalist conventions, antique gun traders, knife shows, even “camo” conventions (Desert Storm camo was turning into a “collectible” and showing up in Vegas auctions and eBay). She checked out a Vegas phone book from the library and tried to find out how many shooting ranges and gun shops there were in Vegas and she only found two—and they were measly *pawn shops!*

“Hell, this is a slam duck,” she said. “I mean ‘dunk.’”

She called Mr. Moto and told him to fill the car with gas. They were going to Vegas to check it out.

Mr. Moto had dropped off Shaman Song at the snake farm some time ago, and he had nothing to do besides lift weights and keep an eye on Foxy. So he was glad—insofar as you could ever say Mr. Moto was “glad”—to go with Foxy to Vegas and check it out.

Once arrived, they drove up and down the main strips a few times to get a feel for the place, and all Foxy could see was money. All Mr. Moto could see was danger to Foxy, but he

kept quiet, as usual.

Foxy didn't waste any time. She found a two-bedroom rental with a four-foot palm tree in the front yard. Then she located a long brick building with bars over the windows that had been up "for sale or lease" going on two years. It had once been a shooting range and bar with a few slot machines, but the owner been arrested for various infractions and was in prison for twenty-years-to-life. The agency that had listed it was more interested in developing new properties on the up-and-coming side of town so "the bricks" just sat there attracting no interest—until Foxy came to town.

She called the real estate agent—Nat Spitzer—who was only too happy to drive over "right here and now," armed with a year's lease that Foxy signed on the spot. For her next move she walked into City Hall and walked out again, after only three hours of haggling, with an armful of preliminary permits—firearms, food, liquor and gambling, among others, which allowed her to hire a general contractor—recommended under the table by the people issuing the permits—to clean up the building, do some minor repairs and bring the plumbing, wiring, sewer and food-prep area up to code.

Once the work was done, she paid off the inspectors "just to expedite the process," which they were all glad to do, signing off on everything and walking out with wads of bills stuffed in their pockets. She hired a sign company to design, fabricate and install a flashy neon sign ("Gotta be neon," said Foxy), with the new business name emblazoned on it:

*Foxy's Fun Fair: Tommy Gun Firing Range, Bar and Grill.*

All the while this was going on, Foxy had been ordering new stock for the shooting range—a selection of rifles, tommy guns, ammo, hearing protectors and ear plugs, safety glasses and such. She also needed an array of fancy new weapons, spot-lighting and glass cases for the guns-n-ammo sales room. Then came the bar and the burger grill, the deep-fat-fryer, plus a row of new slot machines, because the old ones were mechanical. She hired a local company specializing in the high-speed set-up (practically overnight) of every type of electronic "slot" machine you could imagine, ones that allowed their techs to set up the software to deliver whatever pay-off frequency you wanted—within State licensing guidelines, of course—for whatever annual profit your "business model" demanded.

Sooner than anyone would have imagined possible, Foxy had hired and trained her staff and was ready for the opening night. Mr. Moto, of course, stood at the front door—as

bodyguard, business manager and bouncer.

Foxy put on a splashy red silk organza party dress for opening night and circulated among the tables like a pro, which, as a matter of fact, she really was. Her earlier stint as President of Koala Loan Shark Enterprises gave her priceless experience in dealing expertly with all sorts of people in all kinds of predicaments. She dealt with sheiks and princes, bankers and bums, all with equal aplomb, so long as she got her percentage. And if timely payments were lacking, she had little Fexie as bag boy, whom she replaced as soon as possible with Mr. Moto, who was perfect for the job.

All of the customers who flocked to Foxy's Fun Fair were looking for something different, something more *interesting* than the same old Sands-type casinos, or the pile of Egyptian-pyramid-motif casinos—the usual lot.

They wanted something with *pizzazz*, and Foxy's had it.

On opening night, at the stroke of midnight, Foxy got up on the mini dance-stage in the bar, took the stage-mic in hand, and made an announcement. This lucky crowd, she revealed, would be the *very first group of customers* to witness Foxy's weekly "Tommy Gun Bust 'em and Blast 'em Shoot-Out."

A wall of bullet-proof windows had been installed so that day-drinkers could sit on the stools and watch the target-practice range while getting loaded on martinis, gin fizzes, or whatever their pleasure of the day might be.

Tonight, the drinks were on the house for "Foxy's Shoot-Out," as it was starting to be called. A crowd gathered, stirring and murmuring amidst the occasional shout of encouragement.

"C'mon, Foxy, give 'em hell!" would come the cries, and Foxy would flash first a big smile, then a stern frown, and people would cheer.

Then the dance-band drummer started a continuous roll as Foxy slowly put on her bullet-proof vest, removed the tommy gun from its violin case and stepped up to the shooting railing.

She nodded to a flunky who danced out onto the back of the range and nervously grabbed a plywood wheel mounted on angle-iron stilts and ball-bearings. He leaned back, gave a big heave, and set the enormous wheel to spinning, then ran off the target-range as if a herd of angry rhinos were chasing him.

Foxy calmly took aim and pulled the trigger, holding it in Full-On position until the entire circular cartridge was spent. By the time the tommy gun was empty there were splinters of plywood flying into every corner of the target-range, smoke was billowing from the barrel of the gun, whose nozzle was nearly red-hot, and the angle-iron tripod was a pathetic tangle of steel fit for nothing more than the blast furnace at the Vegas Steel and Aluminum Scrap Works twenty miles out of town.

The crowd roared its appreciation as Foxy turned around and daintily curtsied, “like a lady,” as she always insisted she was taught. That’s why she was so taken with Owl Man that first morning on Fex’s houseboat, because “Owl Man knows how to treat a lady.”

So great was Foxy’s opening night success that it rated a front-page headline on the Vegas Gazette, in grand journalistic style, which ran thus: *Foxy’s Fun Fair Filled with Frolic!*

And indeed the place was packed on a regular basis, so long as “Miss Foxy” was the proprietor.

She finished her life a legend in Las Vegas and there is now a bronze statue of her, prominently placed downtown on a special, landscaped berm with manicured *real grass*. A bronze plaque on the base pointed out that the dimensions of the statue were “over-life-sized, as befitted our Foxy.”

Of the many stories attached to her legend, one in particular deserves repetition here.

It took place about six months after Foxy’s Grand Opening. She and Mr. Moto had been raking in huge profits, and movie scouts from LA had spotted Mr. Moto and signed him to periodic character roles as a “heavy” in Hollywood martial arts films. None of Mr. Moto’s roles would involve “speaking”—it was specified in the contract—so he signed. No sooner had the ink dried, than Mr. Moto and Foxy decided to go out on the town to celebrate their good fortune.

Thanks to Nevada’s “Open Carry Law” Foxy always carried her tommy gun with her, which she would have done anyway, law or no law. As fate would have it, they decided to dine at Caesar’s Palace on the night a bunch of thugs burst into the casino and held up “Chico,” the roulette wheel employee. They wore face masks, black nylon military garb and brandished plenty of firepower. Customers were cowering, as customers will do, but Foxy was outraged.

“And I was *so* enjoying my *filet mignon!*”

She said, “Sit still, Mr. Moto. Don’t move until I say so. I’ll give you the signal.”

Foxy then got up from her chair and indignantly reached under the table.

“Hey, lady!” shouted one of the gunmen. “What d’you think you’re doin’?”

“What I’m *doing, monsieur*, is getting my tommy gun from under the table and I’m going to blast you all to pieces.”

Then she disappeared under the table for a minute or two.

The gunman laughed and shouted, “Hey, Carmine! Ya hear that? She’s gonna get her tommy gun! Ha ha ha ha ha ha—ach, ach, agh,” and he began choking. He had been smoking too much on account of nerves preceding this stick-up.

“Shut up and take the haul,” shouted Carmine impatiently.

As the thugs returned to the business at hand, Foxy stood up, tommy gun in *her* hand, nodded to Mr. Moto, saying, “Now!” and began blasting away at the hapless crooks who fell like dominos. Foxy’s aim was so accurate, on account of the practicing she had done at her own shooting range, that she did not so much as nick any of the customers. Mr. Moto busied himself pulling innocent customers out of the line of fire.

By the time the Vegas police had arrived, taken photos, made chalk outlines on the carpet and so forth, servers were cleaning up the mess and Foxy and Mr. Moto were surrounded by a throng of grateful customers who were insisting that they accept all of the chips the customers were carrying. At first they both refused; then, since the customers continued to insist, Foxy said, “Oh, what the hell, Mr. Moto,” and they were given a plastic tub to carry all the gift-chips to the pay-out window, where they received \$167,905 from grateful customers.

The next day, as one can imagine, the entire front page of the Vegas Gazette was devoted to the big robbery attempt and the big shoot-out, with Foxy and Mr. Moto playing starring roles.

There was a photo of the Las Vegas mayor, Salvatore Domenici, presenting a Citizen’s Award Trophy with Foxy’s and Mr. Moto’s names engraved on it, to the valiant pair.

The headline read: “Vegas’ Own Foxy and Mr. Moto Thwart Robbery Attempt: 9 Perps Dead, Not One Innocent Injured.”

The only statement any reporter could obtain from Foxy herself was, "I blasted 'em."  
As for Mr. Moto, he had no comment.

*Trim Hips at Level Lanes ...*

During the many years she sat behind her desk at Ling Bank, nibbling away at the snacks she always kept in her desk drawer, the size of Jolene's hips kept creeping upward and outward, a fact that gave Jolene, like so many women, a constant, self-conscious concern. But the simple fact was that Jolene was addicted to junk food.

She knew it, talked about it, read lots of articles about it—and now that she and Joe were “a couple,” she shared her concerns with Joe, who always said, “I think yer haunches look pretty damn good, Jolene, if y’ask me.”

“Oh, Joe, you’re so sweet,” Jolene would inevitably reply.

But still she was annoyed at the efforts corporations made to get people addicted to their products. And whenever she wanted to read him a passage, Joe would listen sympathetically.

“Listen to this, Joe, dear.”

“OK.

“This is so typical, and it really gets my goat!”

“Uh huh.”

Jolene began reading from a print-out:

“Given the merging of American corporate agribusiness with corporate artificial food-mongers, ‘weight’ seems to be a problem every snack-addict suffers from: the ever-present threat of obesity, a modern American epidemic. Just imagine the CEOs of the major food producers calling their chemistry professors up from the chem-lab kitchens, showing them a big drawing of the human body on a cork-board, giving them all a handful of darts, and saying, ‘OK, boys and girls, what part of the human-body obesity-machine are we going to target this week?’”

“Do they really do that?”

“No, Joe, they want you to *imagine it*.”

“Oh, ah get it.”

It’s not as if Jolene didn’t have her own share of responsibility for her long-term addiction to junk-food snacks, but we must admit that the odds were stacked against her. The constant flogging of “new, improved” products with catchy names and flashy graphics



created by well-paid, ad-agency geniuses—products that were designed by the chemist-nutritionists to get people hooked—not to mention the constant stress of having Old Man Ling breathing down her neck every day, scanning the balance sheets at night and glaring at Jolene in the morning ... all this naturally produced in Jolene a state of metabolic disequilibrium that the snacks were designed to “equalize.”

It is to Jolene’s credit that, even as she nibbled guiltily away all those years, she secretly entertained a fairly constant fantasy of other life-possibilities outside of Ling Bank, fantasies that centered around two things: a loving and loyal relationship, and trimmed-down hips.

Thus, Old Man Ling’s meltdown and arrest for first-degree murder, and the years-long task-force investigation of Ling by “that nice man Agent Pederson” on multiple counts of fraud—an investigation that left Jolene in the clear—were not disasters for Jolene at all.

In fact, she was glad that the “Ling thing” was finally over, all that slaving over phony numbers at Ling Bank, always trying to get things to balance while running into weird little anomalies, counting on Sal to find the errors, or ways around them so he could rectify the discrepancies and balance the books. In comparison, for Jolene to help Ace with the old-fashioned ledgers in his little glass office at the Level Lanes was a welcome relief, like a Hawaiian vacation.

And, though she had never admitted this to anyone, the central image of her secret fantasy had always been a *bowling alley*, revolving around the fact that women who bowled a lot always seemed to have trim hips. They were able to wear tight jeans, stylish and comfortable slacks—and when they approached the line at the head of the alley, swinging the heavy ball with finesse, the angle of their leading leg combined with the smooth trailing leg, created a taut, ballet dancer’s firmness around the buttocks that Jolene practically dreamed about. She admired the same thing at rodeos and horse shows, where the female riders always wore leather belts that looked like “cinches,” the perky riders silver-buckled into tight jeans with no rear pockets, so that the whole array—which never failed to fascinate all the bow-legged cowboys standing around watching—seemed to manifest the horseman’s ideal of “Trim Hips on a Trim Horse.”

That was Jolene’s aspirational motto: Trim Hips.

And so periodically, when the books were squared away and Joe was busy sidling

around the lanes, the bar and the grill—nice and easy, eyes flitting back and forth, on the look-out for perps—Jolene would take a few practice swings of that sixteen-pound ball, paying special attention to the stretching and strengthening of those “haunch muscles,” as Joe called them.

After a few weeks of this, and virtually cutting out the junk-food snacks altogether, Jolene began noticing that she’d lost a size and had to cinch her belt one hole tighter. That was all the incentive she needed.

She joined the bowling league and soon became a favorite, due to her irrepressible enthusiasm and gusto for the sport, plus her ability to keep track of the scores without ever using a pencil.

Even Joe, while doing his rounds, began noticing the “tightenin’ up of them haunch muscles,” and told Jolene so. This declaration from Joe, in utmost sincerity, could only have the effect of deepening what Jolene recognized as a powerful love that was growing between the two of them.

The short version of the story, then, is that, one year to the day after Old Man Ling’s arrest, Ace retired from the business, only too happy to turn it over to Joe and Jolene, who bought out Ace for a cheap but fair price—given the condition of the place. The happy couple ran the Level Lanes as co-owners. One month later, they celebrated their wedding vows on adjacent lanes Numbers Three and Four, surrounded by all the league bowlers and other regulars.

Part of the ceremony consisted in Joe and Jolene each taking a bowling ball and, in perfectly synchronized steps and movements, hurling them down the adjacent lanes at the same moment. In what soon became known as the Legend of the Level Lanes Bowling Arcade, on that simultaneous swing of the two bowling balls they both hit strikes, and then—after all the jumping and screaming—Joe, normally very shy in public, gave Jolene a big kiss, right in front of the whole crowd.

Then the party began in earnest.

Not long after the cake, the dancing and the schmoozing, they left the celebration to the intoxicated celebrants, the happy couple striding toward the exit and heading off to their secret honeymoon. But this time, Old Joe the Security Guard no longer sidled, as he usually did, but walked like a king, with Jolene on his arm.

