

By the Numbers

or

ACE: In the Hole

By

Brett Paufler

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started 3-29-15 at 2:49pm

first draft and edit finished 11:12am, 4-21-15

set free to the wild and posted to the web with minor revisions

11-14-15 at 10:40am

Ace in the Hole

Life: Don't talk to me about life, or...

Life: What a strange set of coincidences this world does tend to be.

I wanted to do something different, take the morning easy, so I decided to go down to the laundry room in my apartment complex and look through the free books.

I found a stack of *National Geographic's*.

I knew (had a hunch, a premonition, a hope) that some sort of story would come from them. And in the third magazine, I found the picture: a gaggle of guys (six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven) and a lone girl, hanging out (friends) in front of a boat (call it a space ship).

And then, I've been reviewing my outlook on sex roles lately (digging the manosphere, if you must know), and the image of this lone girl surrounded by her gang of

ruffian geeks triggered something in me, spoke to me, told me of a deviant (or less traveled) sexual way.

I knew there was a story in it.

This, then, is that story.

###

The rules, for there must be rules, guidelines for the work of art that is to follow:

- 1) I will write in short hops.
 - a. I've already overstepped my mark.
 - b. The target is a page a day, a page a sitting.
 - c. So, I shall stop soon.
- 2) The wrap around shall be myself, my life.
 - a. I don't write clean, rather layers upon layers.
 - b. Me, myself, and I shall be the layer... or so I shall claim.
- 3) There shall be no sex.
 - a. Yes, the idea was fomented in sex; the impetus is sex; and sex is the motive force; but I shall NOT engage in the nasty-nasty.
 - b. Food will replace sex. Oh, yes it shall.
 - c. And to insure I do not change my mind, the lead shall be female, because as enticing as that lead shall be, the truth of the matter is, as much as I want her, I do not want to be her... not like that.

###

And with all that said, having overshoot my mark by nearly double, I shall take a break and eat some grapes: fresh black seedless. I wonder what that says about my sex life... or that of the lead character: a one Angelica Ann Marie the Anabaptist last in the line of the Archers from down Ann Arbor way.

Yes, I have every intention of naming the characters alphabetically. Let's see how long that lasts.

###

Ann Marie, she...

I like to get into character.

You can view her from afar if you like, from across the room, college dorm, entrance hall, say by sitting in a sofa, sipping on a soda, surveying the sights, and scoping it out, all while getting that all important alliteration out of your system. And as you sit (perhaps pen in hand, sketching in a notebook), she just might catch your eye. If you were a guy, she just might catch your eye: long black hair, in a braid, long jeans when I fall into her (you'll see), shorts at a distance, ripped, ragged, wearing flip flops, sort of short shirt that's not really there, fit, incredibly fit, thin, strong muscles, the type that come from working out, hitting the gym, cross training, push ups, sit ups, chin ups, all sorts of ups, downs, squats, pushes, and presses. She's mean and lean, a down to earth fighting machine.

In truth, if you were sitting on a couch, across the hall, you'd likely hardly even notice her with her hair tucked in tight under her baseball cap, slung low, not trying, not-not trying, not looking around, not-not looking around, just

not-not trying or looking or really even caring with a duffle bag slung over her shoulder, all army reserve style even if she's a bit young for that.

But like I said, I like to get into character, drop into character...

#

The flip-flops, I want to concentrate on the flip-flops, the flip, the flop, sort of playing, sort of flopping, like walking a balance beam, walking up the stairs, tightrope, walking the line.

You took the bus to get to the school town...

No, train, I like trains better, the station was across town, so you walked the two miles, maybe three to get to the campus proper and then on through, getting the lay of the land, not really planning on it, not really thinking about it, bag on your back, over your shoulder, every once in a while a guy whistling, a guy shouting. It's nice. Feels like home.

Are you comfortable in her skin?

Are you comfortable being her? Walking down the street? Tight jeans, smiling at the whistles, not looking, not caring, not ignoring either, just not caring, because it just doesn't matter, not of importance, about the only thing that would be import, ruin your day, would be if someone up and got in your way, blocked your path, put the shade in your eyes, blotting out the sun. But no one had, no one has, so no worries. And now, you're walking up the steps, to the dorm, some old building, cut stone, imitation castle look and feel, something special about this building, this

dorm. I should remember what that was. You should remember what that was. But you filled out the application a long time ago, lied to get in, get into this dorm, and at this point, you can't remember what you said: don't rightly know, don't rightly care.

#

So, um, do you care about logistics?

Sometimes I get caught up in the logistics of a story, the details of this and that (the details of the lie), the details that make a story seem real, legit. So, into the building, turn right, no left, it's left, to the registration desk where you say your name, flash an ID, get a key, and some second year sophomore assistant say, 'Second floor, all the way at the end. Well, almost at the end. But you'll like it. Lucky to get it.' But of course, the next in line, the boy standing next to you, they do it two by two, so standing in the next line over, he's told, 'Third floor tower, how'd you get so lucky?' So, maybe this is everyone's 'lucky' day. But whatever, the boy, you know how it is, face-to-face interpersonal contact is not his thing, so he's through the door, up the stairs, and out of sight, while you're still standing there, not so much in a hurry, no so much slacking, as taking your time and rooting through the plate glass dish of candy (more like a bowl) by the check in. Lollipops, I think I'd like to suck on a lollipop. The only real question being what flavor does Ann Marie favor? That's the real question as she takes her time, digs around in the dish with a slow methodical purpose, making sure she doesn't overlook a one, not an option, before she

slowly unwraps it, plops it in her mouth, and then (and only then), tosses her bag to the floor, where she proceeds to sit down, sit down on it, as she settles in and listens to the orientation speech, the rules, introductions, that sort of thing. Hell, if we get lucky, maybe someone will say what this castle looking dorm is all about.

Give me a day, maybe I'll figure it out. If I do, maybe (just maybe) I bother to let you in on the secret.

#

And then (and only then, if not before), we'll fade back to the bloke on the couch, eyes wandering here, eyes wandering there, eyes falling on the girl (Ann Marie), not quite dressed up, not quite dressed down, obviously trying too hard, with neither of you smiling, just locking eyes (as if in a contest) until the scene slowly fades away...

#

The dorm, the house, the Medieval Mansion is themed living. No, that doesn't say it right. It's a symposium. It's one of those college courses that isn't so much a course, as a group of courses, in which every student is in all the other courses, so Theme Park Education (or something like that), perhaps says it better. Still, I'm not selling it right. As our two leads (well, one lead, and one other, by the name of Bob, probably, maybe, in keeping with the alphabetical alliteration theme, we know his name starts with a 'B', at least, so if not Bob, then another 'B' name; anyway, whatever, as our two leads face off), somewhere amid the

couches and chairs and kids sitting on the floor and jostling each other as they lean against the wall, someone is going on about the symposium that everyone but Ann (and probably Bob) already knows about.

Four courses, I haven't figured them out yet:

English 1301: *Contemporary Writings by Brett* (or should that be *Contemptible Writings by Brett*) being whatever I want it to be.

And so on and so forth...

Like I said, I haven't figured what the symposium is about yet. When I know, you'll know. Anyway, the speaker talks, most folks listen, Archer Ann and Bluster Bob Brown (dashing good looks, clean cut, sportster to the core, the type of guy you'd think Ann might like, but since she's not much into guys, not so much at all, with short hair, a muscular build, piercing blue eyes, and all the rest, and he and Ann) sort of stare the night away. Don't ask me how they got locked into a staring contest. It's not like I started this chapter saying to myself, 'A & B, stare down carry through from Part 2 - 3', but there you are.

Anyway, they (or at least, she) spaces out most of the words (of course, it might have been helpful if she had listened, then maybe she could have told me what to write about next that way). And then, when it breaks up, folks stand up (and get in the way, blocking the view, cutting our two leads off from each other); and so, when Bob walks over to where Ann was to say hello (and perhaps concede victory, nah, probably not), Ann is nowhere to be seen, already on her way (the staring contest -- as has been mentioned -- already being cut short by the intervening

multitudes, so nothing left to see here, move along, move along, and it's time to get to her room).

###

Perhaps it's just plain lack of an agenda on my part. Perhaps it's just me having fun. Or perhaps I just haven't gotten into character enough, yet.

Ann walks down the hallway, flip-flops, long jeans, and breathtaking good looks. The guys, many of them, most of them, at least half of them dart glances at her, staring, out of the corner of their eyes. She smiles at the flattery, but pays these losers (does she think that) no mind. Either way, it's up the stairs with a pack on her back (black, not too heavy, a duffel bag if I remember correctly), sort of tossing it back and forth like a medicine ball as she squeezes through a grouping, clump of whatever (boys, I guess you might call them, obstacles to her present frame of mind), and then she's in her room.

Charlie is there. Only Charlie is a girl, so that name would only get confusing (even if Charlie is the first name that comes to mind). Besides, the girl doesn't really look like a Charlie, more like a Melissa, so call her Claire? Clarence? Clarissa! And with that last, I think we have a winner.

Now, if I were Clarissa, I'd be hanging something on the wall when Ann walked into the room, something like a butterfly bouquet air-mobile or something like that, definitely something girlie and weird and purely decorative: soft and pink, light bluish, and yellow. The room is all made up (decorated from head to toe) all soft

and inviting with sheets on the bed, well, on the one beds, the bottom bunk, yellow sheets, fluffy pillows, a stuffed... unicorn (yeah, why not, a stuffed unicorn with rainbow stripes) on the bed.

So, perhaps the scene is best in third person, Ann walking in, drop-throwing her bag into the middle of the room, stopping, standing, not saying a word, looking around, eyeing the unicorn, picking it up, all the while Clarissa babbling on, “Hello. Hi. OMG! So, I guess we’re roomies! Wow! This is going to be so great! I can hardly wait! So, why’d you pick the Symposium? Well, me, Uni,” in reference to the aforementioned unicorn, so Uni going to university, I’ll let you work it out from there, “one track mind, how could I pass, Medieval Studies, like, duh? And the Resurgence of Women in the Renaissance Era,” so, perhaps I know more about that symposium than I’m letting on (or maybe I’m just incredibly gifted at completing sentences with... you know, whatever comes to mind, first thing, without worrying too much about the consequences).

And I think Clarissa just sort of stops there mid-sentence. Ann is looking at her, staring at her, hard, like through her, into her, dissolving her, wondering who -- the bloody fuck -- this girl is? No, not who, but what. What -- the bloody fuck -- is this girl? Or, just fuck this girl. Shut the fuck up already.

Ann turns her back on Clarissa to gain some freedom of thought, respite from the babble, as she takes in the top bunk (bare, unmade, empty, with nary a pillow in sight).

“I hope you don’t mind. I tried to find someone to move them, the beds...”

At which point Ann turns around, what the bloody fuck? Don't you ever shut up?

"But I can't. I didn't. I couldn't move them on my own. I'm sorry. I'm scared of heights. Look, if you don't want the top bunk..."

So, cutting to the chase, Ann says (or really, it's more like a demand), "Sheets!"

"What?" As in, huh?

"I didn't bring any sheets. I need sheets."

"Oh, I've got sheets," opening a well-organized closet, Clarissa asks, "Which do you want?" as she holds out the selection.

"Fairies or Glitter Bugs?" Ann asks in open contempt of the selection.

"Glamour."

"What?"

"Glamour. They're *Glamour Bugs*."

"Yeah, I don't care. I'll take the Fairies."

"*Friendly Fairies* it is."

"Yeah, no," Ann declines, as Clarissa tries to hand the sheets over, "Happy Homemaker, I'm guessing that's you," Ann says, as she walks over to the open window and casually pops the screen out.

"I don't think," but Clarissa just sort of stops cold as Ann turns around to smile at her. Now, I wouldn't say that Ann doesn't smile much or that her smile is something out of the ordinary, but sometimes folks smile when they are happy or about to do something that would make them happy or when somebody else is going to do or say something that would make them happy or would allow, enable, or justify them doing something that would make

them happy, but which wouldn't necessarily make the person of the first part (or is that the second part) necessarily happy. Now, I know that probably doesn't make much logical sense and who really cares who is the first or the second part of the matter. And I'm guessing I'll proofread it later (and twist it up even more if I can find a way). But until then, just take it on faith that Clarissa is the party of the second part that doesn't want to annoy the party of the first part, because she's not quite sure what the party of the first part would do, but it probably wouldn't be very good. And in light of this (or perhaps, because of all this), Ann doesn't even bother picking up on that whole 'I don't think' thing. Rather, Ann just sort of smiles, puts the screen down, sticks her head out the window, gives a good look around, sizes things up, flips off her flip-flops (hence the name, good for both flipping and flopping), and proceeds to jump up on the window sill, as she reaches around, gets a good grip, sort of swings herself outside, and then (and only then), pokes her head back inside to sort of explain the how's, wherefore's, and why's of their coming time together. "Those *Friendly Fairies*? Is that one of those Saturday morning cartoon things?"

"Sunday, actually," Clarissa corrects, but regrets having made the comment almost immediately.

"Yeah, I think I didn't see that one on account of having a life, but remind me, again, who was that one character, that special one, a princess or something?"

"Oh, you mean Chastity Cherish."

"No," Ann corrects as she jumps theatrically back into the room, "I mean, what's your fucking name?"

“Clarissa Caution Chamberlain,” the girl answers directly and meekly.

“Caution? You’re shitting me?”

“It’s my aunt’s...”

“Yeah, you can tell me the rest of that story another time, Caution. But right now, we were talking about these *Friendly Fucking Fairies*[™] and how the king’s adopted daughter,” so you see, Ann had actually watched the show a time or two or three (or all six seasons to be exact, but who’s counting), “Who’s name was? That’s your cue, Caution. What’s your name, again?”

“Clarissa Caution Chamberlain.”

“Clarissa Caution Chambermaid, fucking classic.”

“Chamberlain.”

“Chamber! Fucking! Maid! Or are we going to get off on the wrong foot here?” as Ann (perhaps not so patiently at this point) waits for the non-existent reply.

“Excellent. Because let’s be honest, Clarissa Caution Chamber Lane, I fucking love your name,” Ann says as she wraps her arm around Clarissa, who sort of says “Thank you?” as she sort of wonders whether she should be calling for help or not at the same time.

“Now,” Ann continues (warming to her newfound friend), “These kiddie shows, they always have a bad seed, some misunderstood Fairy whose not so Friendly, always living on the edge, not quite fitting in, and her name is...”

“It’s Ann, isn’t it?” Clarissa answers, sort of breaking into Ann’s big speech. And then, because knowing something like that might require an explanation or something, “Your welcome envelope was addressed to: Angelica Ann Marie the Anabaptist last in the line of the

Archers from down Ann Arbor way,” Clarissa says by way of explanation.

“Wow, I really got carried away on that form. I guess I never thought I’d get accepted.”

“Why not?”

“Stop distracting me with your puppy dog eyes, soft lips, and stupid questions,” Ann says, sort of playfully (and sort of sincerely), as she pushes Clarissa away and hops back onto the windowsill. “So, it’s understood, you good girl princess, me bad seed. If you don’t make my bed, I sleep in yours... with you shoved against the wall or on the floor, I guess the choice is yours.” And I guess, we will just silently overlook whether this causes Chastity Cherish to frown in consternation, blush with excitement, or whatever, because Ann isn’t actually paying that much attention at this point. (She’s a little nervous herself).

“Anyhow, long story short, this semester is going to be that *Freak’n Fun Fairy* episode wherein Chastity gets to share a college dorm room with that rebel rouser Archer Ann. And you can decide whether it includes such hijinks as frogs in your sock drawer, ants in your pants, and/or term paper destroying...” at which point both, I, your dear sweet author, and Ann draw a blank, so, “well, whatever it would take to destroy your life... I guess throwing your computer out the window would do the trick. Speaking of which,” Ann sort of offhandedly remarks as she looks over the vacant desk that must be her own (as apposed to the well stocked, color coordinated, TV theme show decorated one, which is likely Clarissa’s), “I’m going to need a few supplies. Think you can set me up,” and trying it on for size, “Bunkie?”

“I think...” Eh, seriously, who cares what she had to say. We all know she doesn’t get a vote.

So, Ann calls back with a “Great!” over her shoulder as she’s out the window: gone till the next episode.

###

Freakin’ Fun Fairies: Trial Episodes

Independent Study: wherein Uni the Unicorn visits the municipal garbage dump... and the comedy ensues

Bats in the Belfry: wherein Chastity spends the night locked in the broom closet... and the comedy ensues

Just the start of a list good ole Ann Marie might have left lying around that first night (or was it the second) just, you know, to set the right tone, and make sure the two of them got off to a good start. Oh, almost forgot, there was one more episode (no, make that two) on the list, I think between the two, they may have made up the pilot.

Good Fences: wherein good ole Chastity is caught sticking her nose where it doesn’t belong (like reading notes left lying around on my desk, just as a for instance)... and the comedy ensues with much hilarity, hijinx, kidnapping of Unicorns, and other capricious capers such as make the *Freakin’ Fun Fairies: Real Life Adventures* such a fun show to be a part of.

Lollipop! Lollipop!

Thanks for helping me out with the pillow and sheets and paper and pens and stuff. I know there was a whole bowl of them down in the lobby, but I'm thinking you probably didn't think to stock up. So, have a lollipop on me. Cherry, right?

###

Ann Marie is on the side of the building: two stories up (out of three, in the book, at least, probably a little higher -- and thus, more dramatic -- in the movie version). I see limestone blocks in my head. But I feel sloppy mortar in my hands, the type of brickwork that's lazy and haphazard with lots of extra mortar seeping through the cracks, besides it's easier to climb.

I feel the sting of concrete in my fingers, on my fingers, gripping tight. I feel the scrape of mortar against my toes and the kiss of brick at the rip in my jeans against my knees (no need to wonder how they got torn, the girl is a wild child). I feel the wind in my face and hair. It's mostly braided, but sloppy strands are coming loose, blowing in the wind, getting into my eyes, as I spit a clump of the stuff out of my mouth.

I am Ann Marie.

I am angry.

No, angry isn't the word. Feel those hands, those fingers tightly grabbing the rock. You, she, I, we are not a big time rock climber, just a hobbyist. It's the type of thing that starts with trees: everyone climbs trees. And then, it's the shed, the roof, a railway embankment, a bridge, a trellis, some industrial structure with its rusty old ladders,

chain link fences: easy to climb with hand holds, broken out windows, drain pipes, iron stubs that used to hold... pipes, wires... anything... everything.

So, Ann can climb, but she's no expert. She's not an expert in a lot of things: baseball, basketball, soccer, flag football, tennis, lacrosse, never the star player, but always on the team. In fact, that's one of the reasons why Ann got into college, this college, and the symposium in particular: jack of all trades, master of none... along with the willingness and ability to fabricate a complete lie (illusion, alternate reality) on her admissions application. It speaks of intelligence, ability, and raw talent... and the guts to just get it done. It also speaks of someone who doesn't (not yet, not quite yet) know who they are. "And isn't that what *The Loyalton Liberal Arts Symposium* is all about?" I can almost hear the admission officer say, arguing in Ann Marie's defense. To which the only possible reply by another in the admissions committee would be something along the lines of, "Seriously? Have you seen her transcript? One C, mostly D's, and more than a few F's. Sorry, but she's not a contender."

"Her SAT scores tell a different story: a story that is more compelling and what with the sports and extracurricular activities, it tells the story of a young lady..."

"Who was abducted by aliens and subsequently served as ambassador to Venus?"

"So, she's well-rounded and has plenty of life experience."

"No."

“Her guidance counselor actually hand delivered her application. And while doing so, after driving 150 miles out of his way to do so, he could not say enough nice things about her: how she’s smart, quick, intelligent, popular with both the students and teachers, easy to get along with, and has had surprisingly few disciplinary problems.”

“I do not like the sound of that,” but the tone of the admission board chair tells a different story, a story of Ann Marie being grudgingly admitted.

“There is one little small tiny snag, however.”

“Just the one? Minor thing? What? The girl sees visages? The aliens show up if she doesn’t take her pills.”

“No. No. Nothing like that, just that...”

“Out with it.”

“A scholarship. She checked the scholarship box.”

“Well, she’s not getting one.”

But we all know how that turned out.

Hint: she got one.

###

I’ve been swimming lately, treading water mostly. It is sort of surprising how used to the water I’ve become. I just close my eyes and sort of meditate, probably not full blown, but I can sort-of kind-of see my hands flowing through the water through closed eyes as I tread the water ever so serenely. And I’m talking about make-believe hands, here, the hands my mind creates to track them through the world, while death (or at least, the possibility of gulping a mouthful of water) never more than forgetful

moment away, a moment of completely letting go, and forgetting that I'm supposed to be treading water.

Because Ann is basically I (in a make believe, alternate universe, split dysfunctional personality sort of way), and when I see myself as her, I see myself inching along the building, searching for handholds, it is night (so no one sees her up there, as much as anything else). And I see her closing her eyes: to gain peace, to focus on the moment, to concentrate on The Now: to feel the wind in her hair, the stone in her hand, and the ledge at her feet. Eyes closed, shutting off the outside, all the better to experience the inside, experience reality, that which is real, the flickering thoughts as the mind drifts by and the brain does what it does: reality, nothing more than fluttering currents of air.

There is an owl here, on this building, this night. It just lands. Ann Marie has been hanging still in one place so long, just standing, hanging, holding still for so long, the owl doesn't notice her and just lands, feeds its young, blinks it's eyes, and is off without a care in the world: at least, not a care for Ann Marie. The world is strange that way. If you stand still long enough, the whole of reality will come to you; or so, the Buddhists prophets of old will claim.

The cause of all this, this hanging on the side of buildings, putting Spider Man to shame, is that Ann has the need to regroup, think... chill. I don't know how else to say this. Don't really want this to become a diary of my life; but then, all stories are little more than chronicles of the writer's own imagination... and the things that put this imagination in motion. So, let's just say I saw a nice

looking girl the other day, the girl of my dreams perhaps, nice, hot, delicious looking, so very beautiful: a special little snowflake. And being more than a bit of a schmuck, I tend to look away in the presence of such delightful creatures. But as I grow old (ever older still), I tire of looking away. So, I looked at this breathtakingly beautiful girl. I forced myself to stare her down with a piercing, vengeful gaze, fighting any reaction to look away, any response that might hint at the control she held over my soul, the need I felt in my loins, my aching heart: so, perhaps glare is the proper word. Yeah, I glared at this clerk in a store. I think I scared her. Who knows? I stared too hard, too long, too intensely, too deep. But then, at least (take your victories where you can), I didn't look away. But in truth, what I really want is to be able to appreciate awe-inspiring beautiful girls like that in the moment without losing my mind, myself, or who I am and to still exist in the moment and not become this reactionary blob, this blithering idiot, lost in the wondrousness of who they are, to not even care who they are, because who knows who this girl was, just her body, such an effect.

Ann is disgusted with herself.

No, not disgusted.

Angry? No, not angry, not mad. Her hands aren't shaking, she has no desire to hit anything, destroy something at random. She just wishes... that owl. That owl so free and perfect, paying her no mind, letting her be who she is, letting her share the moment, no cares, no worries. She wants, she wanted, she wants in the future...

Damn! That fucking Cherry Charity Cutie Pie Cunt!

No, that's not it. Those lips. Did you see Chastity's lips? Nice lips. Nice hips. And talk about a happy homemaker. I'd love to taste her cupcakes...

No! No! No!

They are just going to be roommates. She is not going to lie in that bunk, mere inches away, hovering over her, looking down... the bitch probably snores in her sleep, drooling over that stupid unicorn...

Ann Marie could be a unicorn.

What would it be like to be a unicorn? Up on that wall? So, centaur? OK, guess not.

Lucky fucking unicorn!

And inching along slowly, not really thinking about it, not a hard wall to climb, on a ledge, smooth-ish rock, maybe granite or brownstone, plenty of roughness and edges, a frickin' ledge to stand on, so no real concern, three stories up (in the real, the locale we've adopted for a foray into make-believe), not quite at the top, not in the uppermost turret, but the South Tower, edging along, not even paying attention to those inside, which, of course, is right when she starts paying attention to those inside... or rather, those inside start paying attention to her.

###

Darren: he's the one that throws the pillow at the window, breaking Archer Ann's thoughts, ending her isolation, almost causing her to fall. Darren the Deceitful Dick, um, yeah, he's a bit of a dork, a foil, the type of guy that would throw a pillow at a girl, standing on a ledge, three stories up, actually intending to make her fall, not

with malice aforethought, just, you know, “What the fuck?” To be translated along the lines of: *What the fuck are you looking at? Get the fuck away from my window!*

But Darren is not the only one inside the room.

Ethan: I’ve worked with him before in another story; and ironically enough, he was married to an Angelica in that story. In that story, Ethan was Angelica’s bitch, her toady, her pussy-whipped excuse for a husband. So, I’m thinking Ann will find little difficulty in wrapping *this* Ethan around her little finger. Anyway, Ethan is busy playing some sort of High Tech Fantasy Computerized Miniatures Game (think Dungeons and Dragons on hi-tech steroids) with Freddie.

Freddie: names are important to me. I’ve worked with a Fred before (actually a trio of anthro-polymorphic characters named Fred, Fred, & Fred), so Freddie will be based on (extracted from, become an extension of) the aforementioned Fred’s. He’s Ethan’s friend from High School (both from the good side of town), fun loving, jokester, who’s pet snakes, lizards, and iguanas fill one of the walls in the room. It will probably be a bit of a challenge for me to make the cross-over in making Freddie seem real, but I’m guessing the Fred’s will offer plenty of advice whenever needed or not needed (and I’ll let you imagine the debate that quickly follows concerning the type of emblematic t-shirt Freddie should be wearing: Star Wars, Star Trek, or something more esoteric to best express the Fred’s character and wit.

#

Ann pauses in the window to watch Freddie (*we's come first*) and Ethan playing on the ground, fiddling with their miniatures (think small scale robot wars with a computer controlling the victory conditions). The game shall be called *Slaughter Quest* (for I reuse characters, names, ideas, and content whenever possible, as it allows me to go further with the lie -- i.e. I already have a fair understanding of what *Slaughter Quest* means, so it's easy to hang new ideas off of the base and I don't have to make it all up on the fly, even if computerized miniatures are a new twist).

Any-the-way, Ann recognizes the game. It's not her thing per se (not enough running around, climbing walls, and the like), but she recognizes the game; and as such, she feels like she already knows both Ethan and Freddie. (*Heys! We's already decideds! We's come first!!!*)

So, she just hanging out, enjoying the pair's friendly banter as Darryl the Dickhead looks up from his laptop (streaming food-porn, I'm sure) and throws his pillow at the girl who dare invade his privacy (as if a girl as good looking as Ann dropping in on a guy isn't every food network viewer's wet-dream).

Anyway, Ann nearly drops (nearly), while the insect screen pops out of the window (note the seriously shitty screens in this building and/or story; and/or, feel free to note my near debilitating obsession with meaningless narrative details); and in a flash, Ann is leaping through the window, jumping across the room in a single bound,

pulling Darryl off his bunk (top of three... the one with the most headroom, if you must know), when she sees what he's been streaming, and what's girl to do but comment rather wryly, "Well, at least you have good taste," while at the same time being in control enough not to verbalize any follow up questions about the size of those melons, a request for the ingredients list (i.e. for the sauce and whatnot), network and/or host names, and so on and so forth, because, you know, sometimes when you see fresh streaming Grilled Fish Tacos with Melon Ball Slaw, well, sometimes a girl just wants to know...

###

Yada. Yada. I'm really not that type of writer (or even if I am, that's not what this story is about), so work out your own food recipe and/or insert your own melon-slaw video, here.

###

Often, when I write, the setting is my childhood home... or, not so much my home, as my childhood neighborhood. In fact, so much so, that recently I had the opportunity to visit my childhood home (I was within a few dozen miles, when normally I'm thousands upon thousands of miles away) and I made no effort to go there. In fact, when it was suggested, I turned the side-trip down. One of the reasons is that, well, you can never go back. And then, no one (or next to no one that I know) is still there. But mostly, perhaps the most important reason was that I didn't

want to spoil the memories that I had, disrupt the location of my youth, the location of so many of these stories, and, in fact, what was originally slated to be the location of this very story. But then, I decided I'd done enough writing about High School (in one form or another) over the last few years. And wasn't it about time I graduated and moved on to college.

But before college, there is High School and the Old Neighborhood, and that's where this next scene originates.

You see, being Ann Marie (by fictional proxy or whatever), it's easy to place her in my childhood home. I often start these daydreams (as perhaps all stories start, as but mere fantasies) dancing in my backyard, down through the neighbor's yards, to the open space, the park by the creek.

So, Ann is dancing. And Freddie (*see, we's told's you'd we'd come firstest!!!*) and Ethan are watching her. They're inside working on the precursor to *Slaughter Quest*, playing some role-playing game, rolling dice, and doing what it is that nerdy boys do over the weekend when they are in High School, having plenty of free time since they're not into girls or sports or anything like that. And while they play, Ann is outside in the rain, enjoying the wind, enjoying the rain, noticing the boys through the plate glass windows (I grew up in a big house, a really big-big house), but not really caring (about the size of the house, the audience, or anything for that matter).

And then the scene ends.

I don't know if they are neighbors. I don't really care.

I think Ann moved into the neighborhood recently, family tragedy, living with her aunt, maybe adopted, foster

child, something like that. Not that it matters, just that she and the boys haven't spent the last fifteen years getting to know each other, just one day she appears outside, dancing in the rain.

I like dancing in the rain.

I like the feel of wet blue-jeans, the old ones, the ones that are a size (or two) too small, nice and tight, well worn and ripped, barefoot in the soft grass, earthworms rising, thunder in the distance, then closer, lightning flashing across the sky, illuminating dark ominous clouds ever so briefly, with wind blowing about, as she twists and turns and enjoys her nubile young body in the rain.

It's fun.

It makes me feel alive.

It's one of those things...

See, it's like this. When I'm old, in the old folks home, perhaps this is the story I will tell over and over, of being a young girl (or boy, likely bending the gender in either case) dancing in the rain.

Of course, I never did dance in the rain. I was more of a creek crawler. But then, that is an entirely different story.

###

The next day, the next week, a few days later, who really knows when, who can tell in these fictional cross-dimensional storybook worlds, these twice removed stories within stories that form the basis of stories...

Freddie and Ethan are in the park, playing in the park by the creek. They are dressed up like knights. OK. No, they aren't. But with a little imagination, that baseball hat

is a knight's helmet, and that catcher's mask looks right at home, and that willow branch (truly the best tree in the world for fashioning impromptu swords from) is a blade to behold, and those ragweed roots, turned brown from the late summer dryness, the autumnal fall, they are nice and crisp and the most awesome spears known to man (or child-kind), +5 to hit, at the least (unless you get some maggot infested cursed one; but then, them be the breaks).

Anyhow, the two of them look like idiots wearing their snow boots in the summer, t-shirts tied around their necks for capes, and I could go on; but let's just say, I spent enough time in my youth carrying around sticks and calling them radios, hand grenades, laser pistols, or whatnot, that it's really not my place to call them idiots... except, you know, that they are.

###

Freddie and Ethan are fighting. It's a joust, a duel, a battle of honor, willow branches at the ready... only they don't really know what they are doing, not a clue. In fake fights, one aims for the opponent's stick: in real fights, the opponent. Do I need to explain how they are just hitting their sticks together, that even going for the other never crosses their minds (mostly because that shit hurts).

Meanwhile, Ann is lying down at the edge of the forest, hiding in the shadows, as only moments before she had been stomping in the mud, playing in the creek, when she heard the boy's loud voices challenging each other, calling out, boasting of the coming challenge, so she

crouched down, crawled forward, and watched (just like any good -- creek crawling -- girl would do).

Later, we will skip this scene, after we jump forward to the dorm room. And then, Ann will have an understanding of Freddie and Ethan based on this scene, her prior experience. And of course, since it can work that way, it can work this way, in the reverse direction, as well. It's circular, of course, with her already knowing the outcome before she even begins.

“Who dare walk through my woods!” she cries out as she leaps forth from her hiding place, catching both of the boys (and they do really look like boys now as they jump in fright and look to each other for guidance). “Who are you that you dare soil my woods with your presence?” With a final short dash, she has closed the distance. “I asked you a question, knave?” she says, as she grabs Freddie’s sword (or would be sword) out of his hand (because, you know, the Freds wanted to be first), as she flips him to the ground, sort of stands on his chest as she pins him with one foot, and deftly (if gently) pokes the stick thus gained into Ethan’s chest. “Yield, knave!” to which, Ethan sort of moves his hand, which sort of causes Ann to bash his ‘sword’ with her own, sending his stick flying through the air. And then, we’re pretty much back to the part where she reestablishes her footing on Freddie’s chest, pokes Ethan in the chest with the stick, and demands that he, “Yield!”

“Yield already!” Freddie demands from where he lies on the ground, firmly underfoot...

Oh, we’s do no such things!

We’s biters her!

So, um, yeah, as Ethan says, “I yield?” in a, like, totally unconvincing manner, as if questioning what that might even mean (quite unbecoming of a knight of old, I assure you), Freddie struggles and squirms underfoot, causing Ann to fall, sort of, kind of, the kind of fall that you do when playing football wherein you make sure to land on your opponent, knocking the wind out of the guy underneath with your knees and elbows, as you grab his shirt and raise your hand in a fist (holding it high and shoving it in his face) like you mean business, “I said ‘Yield’, knave!”

We’s no knaves...

So, of course, she hits him.

“Ooof!”

She’s hits us?

She’s crazy?

“Do you yield?”

We’s yields!

We’s yields!

And that’s pretty much how Freddie, Ethan, and Ann (*see’s, we’s still’s first... Silence, Knaves!*) met for the first time in that alternate storybook universe, the world that preceded this particular storybook universe (the story that inspired this story, the first iteration of the dream).

###

You see, Ann has had problems being friends with boys before (as much as she feels like a boy, as much as she’d like to be a boy, but boys don’t always see it that way), so she likes to do a little roughhousing with potential

buds (buddies, pals) prior to settling in just so they know the score and they know she can kick their ass but good should the need ever arise or they cross certain lines, unspoken lines in the sand.

Oh, right! I should explain (back that bit of braggadocio with a bit of back story), so along with the ping pong, shuffle board, and horseback riding, Ann also tried her hand at wrestling, boxing, kick-boxing -- not so sure what the real difference between those last two are -- karate, judo, tae kwon do, and all the rest).

So, Archer Ann: a bad ass with a nice ass. Did I just say that? Sorry, make that an awesome ass. Just don't try to pinch it or she'll drop your ass.

###

If you'd like, you can replay the scene in the park with Ann taking both the boys down, punching them in the gut, as she explains, "You two seem cool, but we're going to do this," that, and pretty much everything, "my way. Understand?"

And if this were another book, another story (you know, the one in which Ethan married Angelica), this would be about where the subchapter would end with Ethan saying:

"Yes."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Yes, mistress."

With each line being punctuated by the sound of fist hitting flesh (or riding crop, or whatever) along with some sort of meat-tendering fast-food-fetish innuendo. But then,

that is a totally different story. Still, no need to wonder what sort of food porn (cheap video thrills and/or still shots of luscious undercooked meat) Ethan gets into (i.e. he likes it raw, hammered, and unseasoned --- whatever the bloody heck that's supposed to mean).

###

Ann does not hit Darren. I make story notes... or that is to say, I have some idea of what comes next, not a complete idea, I couldn't begin to tell you how this all ends or even the major milestones (if any) before it does all come to an end (or even how far away that point might be; in my mind, I'm just starting), but I have some idea as to what I wish to write next, in the upcoming section. And that can be summarized (or more or less has been summarized) as: Ann does not hit Darren.

Perhaps she should.

In fact, it could well be a repeating theme (that Ann does not hit Darren, although perhaps, she should), so much so that perhaps I should just repeat the theme here, and skip this section entirely, merely summarize it, provide the barest of outlines; and then, move on, for there really isn't much to it.

Ann closes the distance to Darren, feels like hitting him, goes to hit him, but is distracted by the Vile Vegan display streaming live from the Fruit Network that he has been watching on his laptop. Losing her momentum, he struggles free, says something along the lines of, "What the fuck?" but all of this is very quickly lost amidst Freddie and Ethan's cry (in near unison) of:

“Cool!”
“Awesome!”
And the like.

###

“Where did you come from?” Ethan asks.
But that’s pretty obvious, “Through the window!”
Freddie informs.

“That is so cool!”

“Yeah! Like a ninja!” Freddie continues to quip.

And then, Ann, having sort of regained her footing, having let go of Darren’s shirt collar, explains the reason she was standing outside their window so long in the first place (or really, not so much why she was there, but why she was lingering there and hadn’t moved on long ago), “Slaughter Quest, right? I mean, that’s what you guys are playing?” all excited like, which like I said, doesn’t really explain much at all; but then, explains pretty much everything.

“Oh, don’t tell me, you’re one of those SQ Geeks, as well,” Darren says; but then, calling *Slaughter Quest*TM SQTM is about the geekiest thing a fictional character could possibly do at this juncture, so he’s clearly a fanboy in recovery, trying to reinvent himself in his first week at college, by disavowing any knowledge of the pastime: a quest he is clearly failing at.

But more importantly, a statement like that is a challenge to Ann’s dominance, so rather than going down some geeky line of questioning concerning her prior in-game accomplishments or what exactly Freddie and Ethan

are presently doing in-game, Ann turns to Darren, as she explains, threatens, and/or otherwise elucidates on the possibility of all those lizards, snakes, frogs, and geckos that line the wall (for she miscalculates who they belong to, the snakes, perhaps, steering her wrong) and advises of a certain owl family that lives in close proximity and wouldn't it be a shame if someone left the door open on account of trying to get revenge for his trying to kill her by throwing a pillow at her and trying to knock her off the window ledge only moments ago.

Of course, I'm not going to figure out the exact wording of what she says, because that would be too complicated. Suffice to say:

Darren responds with something along the lines of, "I wasn't trying to kill you," all sulkily like.

And Freddie responds with, "They're my reptiles. Don't do anything to them because of him," in what can only be described as paranoid self-protectionism. (*The Meester be best advisers that we's Fred'ers takers these threats to ours personhood the personably.*)

While Ethan is sort of lost in his own little *Slaughter Quest* world of make-believe. "You're a Shadow Dancer, aren't you?" And since, certain aspects of reality are being replaced with food based innuendo, Ethan suddenly realizes that he's really quite hungry, so grabs a bag of chips, sort of holding them nonchalantly right *there*; you know, *there* (or perhaps you don't know *there*, so let me explain *there*: in romance books, the type that replace certain sexual functions with mere innuendo -- food based or otherwise -- total denial, and obscuration, *there* is *there*: the *there* an author is not at liberty to define any further lest one engage

the readers imagination in a direction they would not otherwise wish to go or would upset their parents, some moral authority, or perhaps, even themselves). So, Ethan is holding the bag of chips right about mid-level, waist high, almost exactly right about *there*, as he tries (quite successfully I might add) to hide certain momentary anatomical abnormalities, while (with seemingly casual indifference) he snacks on a chip.

It doesn't help that Freddie promptly reaches into the bag, groping around to get a good one... or that Darren grabs a great big heaping handful ... or that Ann reaches forth uncertainly.

“Um, er, help yourself,” for what's a boy to do?
Or, er, I mean, does this Ethan chap know no shame?

###

And for good or bad, that really is the scene I'd planned: an accidental introduction (with absolutely no hitting) that leads to a friendship (or at least, an association or an acquaintanceship) all around.

Darren will forever be the outlier of the group, a geographic necessity. Well, I say that, but these things have a way of changing.

While Ethan has proven himself to be a bit of a dithering dork, even if he is quite well endowed in the prepackaged food department. And with that said (even though to many it may not directly follow), I believe that I must mention, here, that often times, when I read a story, it seems so much so like the author is collecting assets: a pastime which always seems like a waste, since it's so easy

for a writer to endow any random character with any random gift. And since that is (in some sense) the case, let's just say (right here) that Ethan comes equipped with a fairly fat wallet and enough bucks to keep the gang in chips and salsa deep into their senior year. But I'm not really collecting assets (characters, yes; assets, no) nor is anyone going to become king of the universe or anything remotely close to that (this isn't some rags to riches glory quest). And I sincerely doubt there will be much character development (once a shy introverted guy, always a shy introverted guy). So, anyway, that's Ethan.

And Freddie is already introducing Ann to his friends in the aquariums that line the wall. "And I call these three, The Freds."

We's better get the premium override royalties for the cameo, Mister.

We's no workers cheeps.

Or for the frees.

Maybe, Mister best be opening the bag of chips in the reals and make the settlement on the down and the dirty.

Out of the court like or The Fred's wills have to sue.

###

I suppose Darren is the one that cuts the aquarium reptile safari short. "This is all fine and dandy for you losers, but I'm going to go eat." Yeah, sometimes my dialogue does truly suck.

The important point being that cafeteria style eating is part of the standard room and board package in this dorm. So, yeah, maybe I am collecting assets. As a much-much

older gentleman, I cannot begin to tell you how appealing being gifted with complete room and board sounds. Of course, I'd probably want it to be more on the lines of some sort of Magical Bed & Breakfast Boarding House; but then again, college dorms tend to be full of young nubile college coeds and you know what they say about that, "The best part of waking up is a coed in your bed." I suppose a reader might need to be old enough to remember the old Folgers Coffee advertising jingle that went, "The best part of waking up is Folgers in your cup," to recognize the reference.

Whatever.

It is what it is.

And then, by way of a little logistical bookkeeping, we need Ann to say something along the lines of, "Let's go back to my room first, so I can get my shoes," as the dining hall is probably a *No Shoes, No Shirt, No Service* affair. "And if you're all very-very lucky, my roommate might still be there and we can all eat together. That is, of course, if you're down with breaking bread with members of the opposite sex?"

Yeah, Ethan's not quite ready to let go of that bag of chips, yet. So, I'm guessing he'll be bringing up the rear... whatever that's supposed to mean.

###

We pull out of the dorm room. Think of a camera pulling back as the chapter ends and we go into movie mode, pulling out of the dorm room, so that all we see is the trio of boys leaving, Ann at the lead, from outside the

window. It's light inside, dark outside. As we pull back, out the window, through the open window, broken screen lying on the floor, and recede past the owls. The mom lands. The babies cry. And food is given.

It is dark, stars above, perhaps a silvery moon. I could go with a comet, but what might really catch the eye are the gray-scaled wings that cut across the lens, switching the view to first person, as a flurry of dragon wings fills the senses and you feel a playful tap on your shoulder.

“You’se be it’s, nows, Fred.”

You are Fred.

He is Fred.

And we be the Freds, all together.

Cuckoo-ka-cho, here’s looking at you.

I’m flying!

I’m fly-ing!

###

I thought about flying away as an owl; and then, the Fredz and I had a conference and it was decided on how they never did have wings in the real, so wouldn't this be the ideal place to make it all up to them.

They are dragons living on the side of the building.

I once was going to write a werewolf like story, pack mentality, and decided flying dragons would be more fun, first person, growling menace slithering through the air... only these are the Fredz, so they are playful, instead.

###

I suppose, I could give you a quick tour of the campus... but then, I don't know it that well. What I'd really be doing is listing off locales:

The Pizza Place from *G'narsh: The Troll, The Myth, The Legend* and a slew of other stories: a locale that is more like a city block at this point than anything else that I keep going back to, so it's fairly well developed in my mind... and I know this gives you no info, that it's not a real description, but it's all that I'm offering at the moment.

And then, there is the university town in which I spent a few years of my wasted youth: the frat row, the quad, and bar central, taken together, making a complete framework for a college town (in that, it was a college town and all).

But that is no fun.

And I tire of the exercise.

###

Up in the air, looking down, the walls of the dorm are almost cut away like some sort of Architectural Digest 3-D model. We are gliding gently in circles a few hundred feet in the night sky, looking down at the dorm, through the dorm, into the dorm with our writer's x-ray eyes, as Ann and the rest walk down the stairs back to her room where they pick up Clarissa (if that's even her name, as I can't be bothered to go back and check at this point). As it is, all this while, Chatterbox Clarissa has been straightening up their shared dorm room, unpacking Ann's duffel bag, making her bed with the *Friendly Fairy* sheets, setting up the second desk, using her own supplies, from the more than ample collection her parents provided.

So, um, yeah, collecting things, it certainly would look like that's what I'm doing, as Charity will make a nice maid, a swell housekeeper. And if we go back and remember that this story started as a picture in a random issue of *National Geographic*, as the inspiration for the crew for a ship, based on an alternative sexual strategy, a relationship off the beaten path, well, let's just say, Ann can see the usefulness of having guys around (as companions, coconspirators, and most importantly, as crew), but she wants to be captain (make no mistake about that), and she is smart enough to know that first and foremost, the boys (all the boys) see her as a girl... in the way that girls are different from boys and what a girl can do for a boy... in the kitchen, if nowhere else, so best to fulfill those cooking requirements with another girl as the lead chef, if you know what I mean.

Which obviously leads to the introductions, "Chastity, this is Freddie, Ethan, and Darren. Boys, this is Chastity." And with a name like that, I hope I don't have to point out that she is the sweet-innocent girl of your dreams, so don't fuck it up, and be nice. "Shall we go eat?"

But it is no longer a question.

Boys meet girl.

Girl meet boys.

Any questions?

I (as Ann) can make this happen for you (all of you)... or I can nuke your chances of obtaining happiness in this world (my world) all the way to hell and back. The choice is yours.

###

And then, all I really want to do is fly, to feel the wind on my face, push up on my wings, my fingers, graceful and free, doing flips and twirls.

There really isn't enough focus on the simple things in your average *Slaughter Quest* campaign; rather, they tend to focus on the killing of this and the killing of that, the acquiring of great stacks of gold, unearthing mythical treasures, conquering mighty lands, and befriending (or enslaving) as many wondrous companions as possible. But ask any newly-reborn baby dragon what they really-really want, and it's not gold, not a kingdom to rule, nor for the locals to greet them with fear in their hearts; rather, it's to soar ever higher, glide on the wind, and dance in the breeze.

Yes, it's going to rain, a light sprinkle, not a big thing for those of us wearing dragon-scales on their sleeves, droplets running off our skin, as we soar ever higher, diving deep, grazing the ground, right down the middle of college lane, through the city streets, frat row, seeing the sights, checking out the town...

Dis be's da lifers.

Fred be the flying machine.

Oh, the Fred, he should be the happy...

What? What the Fred saying.

Fred, just the notice everyone else go to the eat.

Oh, wait!

Youse means the Freds be the Flying...

While da odders be the eatering.

Oh, dat no good!

Sneaky Mister!

I'se says!
First he no givers us da wings.
Den, he givers us da wings...
At the pricers of da STARVATION!!!
Starvation be the rights!
I'd hungries!
Der gots to be da place to eaters around here...
And then, they catch the whiff (the whiff of freshly baked pizza pie, the type they serve at *G'narsh's: Pizzeria and Handyman Services*) in the thermal updraft...

###

Like I said, I have no idea where this story is going. And in truth, it's this sort of aside (this sort of side quest, this sort of turn in the moment towards *G'narsh's*) that makes or breaks a story. But I guess I have the need, the heartfelt desire to include the Freds in this story, so they are in. And I suppose you have the option of making their scenes as real or make-believe as you wish to allow...

Choosing Clans

I live by a City College (or if you want to parse words, I am staying indefinitely in close proximity to a college located in a downtown urban environment). And when I go for my morning walks, when I do my morning work out routine (push-ups on park benches, Haolie Tai Chi, short sprints, leg lifts, or just walking about), I tend to pass through a college campus. Of course, it's really just

another way of saying that I walk through the Financial District (the college campus is really spread out, having taken over a good half dozen office buildings by now, scattered here and there throughout the downtown).

Anyhow, there are chicks.

Most of the chicks don't catch my eye. OK, sure. At one time in my life (not too long ago), I'd probably have looked at them all. But my desire to window shop has dropped significantly over the last few months. I guess, I've adopted the philosophy that if I don't intend to buy (inspect the merchandise, strike up a conversation, or merely say 'Good day' in passing), there's not much point in checking out the stock. Nonetheless, everyone once in a while (every hour on the hour if not more often) a girl catches my eye and is worthy of attention even if I'm not in the market. (Sorry ladies, I'm taken.)

One of these girls was Gloria. True, I never asked her name, can't say for certain, but as we are at the G's, I'm pretty sure her name was either was Glenda, Gertrude, or Gloria. And of the lot, Gloria just sounds best.

Now, Gloria wasn't really that much to look at. Young, true, but beyond youth, I question what she had going for her. I think what caught me eye more than anything else was the complete lack of trying. She wore droopy pants: like either she didn't want to show off her figure, she knew she had no figure to show off, was embarrassed by her figure (or lack thereof), or had a weight problem and was just lucky enough at the moment to be on the downward swing (towards the skinny side of life). So, baggy pants, baggy shirt, long, ratty, blowing in the wind type blonde hair, girl next door good looks (or if you prefer,

girl next door bad looks), maybe a smidgen of makeup, but that really would have been an indication that she cared. So no, in truth, I can't remember her wearing the slightest smear of the stuff. But she was wearing big old gold (plated, no doubt) hoop earrings.

I have a thing for hoop earrings (gold plated or otherwise, but the real McCoy, solid through and through, is the best). Anyway, (solid or not) I call them hooker hoops. I like hooker hoops, the look. Add a bit of slutty sex appeal to an otherwise ordinary girl, they do. And the Hoops of Hookerdom were completely out of place on this girl... like she actually was trying, like maybe trying for the first time, you know, thinking to herself, well, I have to do something to stand out from the crowd, and this author that I like has been going on some time about this weird fetish he has for hooker hoops, so maybe I'll give those a go... just enough to show interest, but not enough that anyone could accuse me (her, or whoever) of trying.

###

They, the gang, Ann, Clarissa, and the trio of boys are in line at the cafeteria. Darren is being a bit of an asshole. It's how he copes (copes with feeling like an asshole, I'm guessing), by making Chastity feel uncomfortable, telling raunchy jokes, trying to be the life of the party, by killing the rest of the party. The other two boys are too nervous to speak (I've mentioned that they are standing in close proximity to not one, but two girls), while Chastity has been shocked into silence, and Ann is scoping out the room.

I suppose Ann should do something, be protective of Clarissa, keep Darren in line, but she doesn't. She's concentrating on the other students, the food, the room, and most importantly, the seating. She's looking for where to sit down when they finally get their food, that most stressful of activities (don't want to sit alone... or get mixed up with the wrong sort of crowd, Clarissa, she may just be thinking).

So, without paying it any real mind, Ann pushes Darren ahead when it's time to load up on food, then Ethan (*Hey's we should be next!*), and then Freddie, who if you're keeping track, puts him next to Clarissa (*Ooh, that be nicers!!!*), while Ann brings up the rear. Does it matter that it's fried chicken night?

No?

Well, I didn't really think it did.

When they are finished getting their food, Darren...

Does he rush off?

Does he wait?

But where to sit?

And does he even want to be saddled (and/or associated) with these jokers (who don't appreciate a good joke that involves a plumber, a preacher, and a prostitute)?

But Freddie and Ethan (*Yippies! We's firsts agains! Takers dat Ethan'ers!*) catch up with Darren before he can decide (make his move, or whatever). And then, Chastity joins them, virtually waiting, wanting to be pushed forward by Ann... who takes Chastity's tray (that's one way to make sure your posse follows you), as she instructs Freddie (the clear leader of the two), "Over here." And then, she sitting down next to Gloria, says, "You don't mind, do you?"

#

Ah, Gloria, what is there to say? She could suck meat off a drumstick and lick the skin off a bone or something like that. Sure, start with the girl I described earlier, the look, the feel, and make her a foreign exchange student (because why the hell not) from Brazil... keeping in mind that I know absolutely nothing about Brazil except that they make a mean chicken gumbo down there, which is sort of what she's got going with her chili-chicken stew.

#

There should be small talk.
But I don't feel like writing anymore today.
And this is college, after all.

Exercise #1:

Write a limerick to complete the scene. Here, I'll get you started:

*There once was a young girl from Brazil
Who decided she give fried chicken a whirl
And when the boys came around
Soon they all found...*

Exercise #2:

Freddie dares Ethan to do something. What is it? Does Ethan do it? Why or why not (keeping in mind that

Ethan is a bit of a putz and Darren is crude to the point of being socially inept, so maybe it should be Darren doing the daring)?

Exercise #3:

Before the next subsection starts, there will be much conversation. Write some sample dialogue between any two characters sitting at the table (Ann, Clarissa, Darren, Ethan, Freddie, and Gloria). Try to have each character say the type of thing they would say (i.e. try to keep it in character as much as possible).

Multiple Choice Questions:

1: Fried chicken:

- A: That must mean it's Tuesday.
- B: So, how come Gloria gets chili-chicken stew?
- C: Come early, the drumsticks won't last.
- D: Clearly, someone (e.g. the author) is hungry.

2: Ann eats:

- A: With a knife and fork, even fried chicken.
- B: With her hands.
- C: Seriously, her table manners are pathetic.
- D: Where did she grow up? A barn?
- E: Chew with your mouth closed, at least, girl.

3: Chastity responds to Ann manners by:

- A: Making a scene.
- B: Matching Ann slurp for slurp.
- C: Pretending she doesn't notice.
- D: Cleaning up around Ann as she eats.

4: For dessert there is:

A: Cupcakes: lick that frosting right off...

B: A chocolate fountain. This college rocks!

C: A nice selection of homemade pies.

D. Rice Crispy treats. (*Yippies!*)

5: When Darren starts to tell another dirty joke:

A: Ethan tells him to shut up!

B: Freddie tells him to shut up!

C: Clarissa puts her hands over her ears.

D: Gloria jumps in with the punch line.

E: It's time to start the next section.

###

Now, I like Clarissa... and why wouldn't I? I made her. I own her (likeness... in all media known now or to be discovered at some future date, etc., etc.). So, she's pretty much what I wanted... for the story. But then, another way of looking at fiction is that writers either write what they want or they know, who they wish to be or who they are, or some mixture of the two. I mean, I'm not saying every mystery writer is a mass murderer (though, to be honest, I don't trust the lot of them). But to write about grisly murders takes some degree of desire to write about grisly murders... and whether that desire comes from a desire to commit murderous mayhem, a fear of (and therefore obsession with) the act itself, or some sort of dramatic lineage (I write mysteries because I like mysteries because that's what I read growing up because that's what my mom

had lying around the house... because she was married to a mass murderer) is really beside the point.

So, Mystery Writers: psychotic mass murders, the lot of them.

Fantasy Writers (on the other hand): unbelievably sexy and awesome in bed, the lot of them... or you know, this is what interests us (ah, the fantasy of sinking one's teeth into a good broth or stew), so this is what we write about.

#

And at the moment, well... who?

I was going to say Clarissa, but it can be handy to keep one's characters one-dimensional (give them much more and they start to look well-rounded, which makes them harder to differentiate, one self-actualized well-adjusted person looking pretty much like the rest). And, besides, Clarissa already has that matronly repressed sexuality (surrogate mother of the group) thing going for her. So, it must be Gloria.

Gloria has her cell phone out. It's not really an important detail... just that it gives Ethan a chance to be helpful, show her how it works (she knows how it works), but it's nice to have the attention, and he does, actually, know way more about the device than she does. Anyway, Gloria is Brazilian, which means that along with preferring her chicken skinless, her clothes tight... sloppily revealing, cleverly sexy in an, oh, this old thing, sort of highly thought out, looks like it was just thrown together and completely out of touch with American culture type way. Actually, this last I should probably go into a bit more. Do you live in a

tourist city? A locale loaded with tourists? Well, I do. The Japanese care about style: it's a flashy, I have money, I'm dressing in this category of look, type style, where the category of look can be... well, there's probably a good dozen at any time (schoolgirl chic, wedding dress special, that dress style every other Japanese tourist is wearing, businessman special, playboy special, and so on and so forth... probably not very descriptive, but let's just say, certain people just look like Japanese tourists). And the European have the same sort of thing going (stupid, out of date non-name-brand, plain but clean, trying to disappear into the crowd, but standing out on account of it's just off type way).

I think that last paragraph had a point, but truthfully, at this point, I don't remember exactly what it was. Gloria is from Brazil. So, she speaks Portuguese, while Spanish is her second language, and English is a distant third. So, in order to follow Darren's witty banter and the joke he is currently telling (a joke so delightfully hilarious, that if it weren't so rude and crude I would write herewith in its entirety... or I can't think of a joke -- witty or otherwise -- so best to use your imagination).

"Plumber? Ping pong balls?" Gloria might be saying, as she holds up her phone... or perhaps you'd prefer if she'd done a search for *Prostitute Ping Pong Balls*, the video-image results might be a bit more interesting.

But I have the need for Ann to take control, so she grabs Gloria's phone (not forcefully, it's a given that Gloria will let Ann have it, do what she wants with it), and punches in a select phrase before handing it back.

Inappropriate (*in-a-pro-pre-ate*, adverb): 1) rude, callous, unrefined; 2) offense, obscene, off putting; 3) Darren's current behavior. (exp: Telling raunchy jokes at a mixed sex social gathering is inappropriate.)

###

More Multiple Choice Questions:

1: Ann would like to:

- A: Stab Darren with a fork.
- B: Stab Darren with a knife.
- C: Punch Darren... hard.
- D: Shelter Clarissa... at whatever the cost.

2: Originally the author had intended to have:

- A: Ann grab Darren by the collar.
- B: Ann threaten to wipe the floor with Darren.
- C: Gloria look up what 'wiping the floor' means.
- D: Ann stab Darren in the hand with a fork.
- E: Ann stab the table between Darren's fingers.
- F: Ann tell Darren to behave or leave.

###

So, lot's of possibilities, but the possibility that makes itself manifest is the one where Ann punches in the search for *Obnoxious Asshole* into Gloria's phone and Darren's face comes up as the number one search result (because on the Internet, obnoxious memories never die).

"I don't have to stand for this shit," Darren says as he grabs his phone back, suddenly remembers that it's not his

phone, tosses it onto the table (where it lands in Gloria's leftover food, getting it dirty, reinforcing the concept that he's a bit of a jerk), and goes storming off... before Ann (or the author) changes (his or) her mind and decides to kick Darren's ass: that bitch is crazy (and this particular author has been known to hold a grudge against a bit character for 100,000 words, because he thought it would make a good joke). Or, you know, perhaps what Darren says is something more along the lines of, "Dessert! I think it's time for some dessert! I hope they have pie," as he gets up, tosses the phone (wherever, not really caring), and all the rest.

Gloria likes Darren, finds his behavior becoming. She might have self-esteem issues. Whatever the case, Gloria smiles at Ann and says, "Mucho Bueno," or some such shit. I mean, sure, it's annoying that her phone is a bit greasy, but Ethan is busy cleaning it off on his shirt, so he's, "Bueno Comprande," as well, so Gloria sort of scoots her chair a bit closer, so he can continue to help her with the phone (and get a better view of her fruit rack... yeah, I think this thought goes through her head, word for word, or maybe she's trying to decide whether she should get some dessert as well).

###

And there it is.

Of course, I can't say it's a great scene. Truthfully, I don't know if I'd recognize a great scene if I wrote it myself, which is far-far wittier than the likes of *you* are likely to comprehend, so just let me get snotty and uppity

for a second, and point out that only extremely self-critical writers are any good, because first drafts always suck (yes, always), and only the type of guy (or gal) who's willing to go back and correct his (or her) work a few dozen times can actually write worth a damn, and that means that the average bit of writing that a writer reads of his own work is really-really bad, mediocre, and in desperate need of help; and it's only after a full ten or twenty rewrites that said writing becomes any good. So, um, yeah, I wouldn't recognize a great scene, great aside, witty commentary, or pretty much anything, especially if I wrote it myself, by the time it's any good, I'm totally sick and tired of the fucking thing.

So, where was I?

###

It has been long enough that by now, Ethan has downloaded some game onto Gloria's phone, probably some cheesy, non-thinking, mindless bit of drivel (maybe sort of like the gaming equivalent of this story)... or, you know, there is that whole *Slaughter Quest* universe; and they have various interlaced games, wherein if you get experience (levels, whatever) in one, it translates into abilities in another, as part of a whole geeky lifestyle choice and/or gaming ecosystem. And these games start with the most basic and easy; so clearly, one of those bubble shooter or bubble drop games, decorated with a fantasy theme, which means, scantily clad girls, which elicits a, "Mui Beun", from Gloria, and yeah, I got no idea what that means, but I can guess what the follow up of, "Mucho

macho,” means, when she sees the muscle clad guys in the game, which, of course, elicits something along the lines of, “*Freddies? Freddies in the game?*” from the Freds. So, while Freddie joins the conversation and he and Ethan (*See, we still firsts!*) try to explain the intricacies of a plot lone gone completely cuckoo to Gloria... what else it happening?

Ah, yes. Ann is talking to Clarissa, sort of nodding with her head, indicating, that yes, Clarissa should be taking action, maybe breaking into the conversation with the *Slaughter Quest Trio* across the ways, and maybe request that Freddie (*He’s the cutest’ster ones*) go fetch the table some dessert (you know, as a special quest for his lady).

Anyhow, working towards that, as Clarissa is still working that out in her head, BoB (yes, BoB, B-nada-B), shows up, carrying multiple plates in his hands, lots of chicken and the like (fucking show off, it’s not the size of the serving that matters, but what you do with it), vegetables (healthy eater, takes care of his body, it’s enough to make you sick), and lots of those Rice Krispy Treats (because he enjoys the good things in life, sickening sweet bastard). But whatever, Bob sits down, smiles at Clarissa, says something offhand about how he forgot the milk, but before he can get up, Clarissa is up and running (so, you know, Bob is the competition... to Ann, for Clarissa’s attention): and the moment Clarissa is gone, not paying the slightest bit of attention to Gloria, Ethan, or Freddie (*Mister, get the order wrong, Fred come first... or the Fred’s revolt! You’s e say we’s revolting? No’s e, no’s e. Revolt! We maka da war!*); yeah, right, whatever, the point

being, Bob and Ann (or is that Ann and Bob) might as well be alone, as he sort of smirks, she sort of smiles, and without any further ado, they are back into that staring contest that they left off a few pages back.

#

Do I give away too much when I say that said staring contest will be over in the blink of an eye?

#

It's true. I tend to insert questions when I either don't feel like writing or have nothing (better, absolutely nothing better) to say. Just as a bye-the-bye (which is to say I have absolutely nothing better to write about at this juncture), I've been inserting questions into my stories for going on seven years now (at a guess). It started when I was reading someone else's work. (Yeah, I copy style. Just don't call me a plagiarist. Pugilist, maybe? Plagiarist, never.) Anyhow, I was reading this other author's story. I can't remember what it was about, don't rightly care, and don't even think I was particularly impressed. But it had been selected for the Oprah Book Club or something like that; and so, it had sample book club type questions inserted at the end in a special appendix.

Chapter 1: Book Club Questions

Why do you think the author named his characters alphabetically? Was this for convenience? If so, whose? The author's? The reader's? Or does the naming

convention have deeper metaphorical significance? What does naming a character Alpha Ann tell us about them? How about Beta Bob? Charming Clarissa? Dorky Darren? Emasculated Ethan? Fantastic Freddie (*at least, he's gets dat one right, we do's be fantastic'ers*)? Gorgeous Gloria? And? Who might be next?

I suppose I could go on with more questions, but I was in the middle of explaining something. This author, she (I think it was a she, if I remember correctly) had provided helpful questions about her story at the end of the book: questions that she clearly added after the fact (post-haste, or whatever). Well, I might not be the greatest author in the world, but I'm probably one of the most arrogant ones. So I figured, why bother waiting for the story to make it onto some stupid book club list? Why not simply assume it would get there eventually? (Please feel free to comment on the likeliness or un-likeliness of this eventuality, pulling examples from the author's vast body of work to support your opinion.)

So, yeah, clearly, my stuff was destined for fame, so why wait, write the questions now. And one thing led to another. And it turns out I like writing questions... often more so than the text involved.

Chapter 2: Book Club Questions

Is it true that author's 'Do it better'? If so, what is it that they 'do' and how is 'it', 'better'? Please provide examples from your own life, double-spaced, typed in triplicate, and mailed postage paid in care of the author, all

rights conferred (reproductive rights assigned to me, that is).

What is it with staring contests in modern literature? Seriously, I can't seem to open a book these days without one character 'staring down' another? Ooh, drama! (Note the sarcasm.)

Or seriously, I do enough writing in the main story, why the hell would I want to answer any essay questions in my own fucking (-1 for swearing, watch that Mr. Paufler) novel? How about a few of those multiple choice ones? At least those are easy. And usually the correct answer is the last of the bunch.

1: Staring contests are ubiquitous in modern literature because:

- A: Most writers are hacks.
- B: Therefore, they're copying me.
- C: Staring contests are more exciting than knife play.
- D: They tested well in men 45-104.
- E: They tested well in coma patients of all ages.
- F: I'm not sure 'ubiquitous' is the right word.
- G: I'm not sure what 'ubiquitous' means.

2: Ann wins the staring contest by:

- A: Reminding Bob that it's a key plot point.
- B: Spitting in his face.
- C: Saying, "Hey, look! A butterfly!"
- D: Saying, "Made you look! Made you look!"
- E: Throwing water in his face.

F: By being better.

G: By not blinking for a longer period of time.

H: By slapping him (once again) in the face.

I: By throwing bits of Rice Krispy treats at him.

The answer is, of course, 'I'. We know it is 'I', because, as previously mentioned, I am quite the egotist, and in a nutshell, this story is all about me... or because it's last on the list... or, you know, because it's the answer that makes the most sense. (Seriously, as an author, why is it that most readers expect me to explain everything? Feel free to flip the page over and use the backside if you need more room to explain your answer).

###

Clarissa having returned, carrying a big plate of Rice Krispy Treats, so big that the average reader might think that I have a obsession with Rice Krispy Treats... an obsession that goes far beyond the professional writing endorsement deal that I'm hoping to secure from the fine folks at Kellogg's Foods. (Though, seriously, wouldn't it be great fun if Rice Krispy's were made by Post instead of Kellogg and I'd just made some sort of major, deal breaking, faux pa.)

Whatever, what's really the case is that my back is killing me, I've been hunched over this typewriter for far too long (really going to have to upgrade to a computer one of these days), and I'm anxious for the day's writing to be done, so I can go swimming.

So without further ado, let's have Clarissa return with those Rice Krispy Treats™ (accept no substitutes, the swimmers choice, and all that deng), while Ann grabs one (without looking away or blinking).

Clarissa, "What are you two *guys* doing?"

And here, I will leave the emphasis on guys left hanging with nary a mention (or even pointing it out to the reader).

Anyway, Ann took one, so Bob takes one (the copycat). And they eat and stare and is it just me or is the tension unbearable, one could just cut it with the proverbial knife (not so much with a butter knife, but one of those honking-big murderific chef knives, which is what it takes to cut those gooey and delicious Rice Krispy Treats into handy dandy single serving size pieces the size of a small plate).

Right!

So, where were we?

Ah, yes.

Ann stares.

So, Bob stares (the copycat).

While Clarissa stares at Ann and Bob, trying to figure out what's up. "Are you two like having a moment?" a remark, which causes Ann to toss the rest of her Rice Krispy Treat™ (got to watch that girlish, er, um, boyish figure) at Bob, who (being a bit of a wuss) blinks, rather than letting the thing land in his eye.

Essay Question:

Bob: wussy or pussy?

While discussing this topic, be sure to address the issue of whether or not it is derogatory to all womyn-kind for a man-child such as Bob to be likened to a female sexual organ? And/or is it quite the compliment?

#

Bob blinks.
End of section...

#

Or, you know, not really.

Should I go over the dangers inherent in tossing foodstuffs at another person? (You could put an eye out!) Or mention the psychosocial mores than have been transgressed by the offer to share bodily fluids (saliva in this case from the half chewed -- or bitten -- foodstuffs) with another human being (a male at that) in a public social setting (a college cafeteria, so clearly I am extending the term to include lower forms of life, primates, and sociology majors) without concern for the physical, social, or emotion ramifications to all involved.

Um, if that's not clear, Bob has the hots for Ann.

Yeah, I'm not really sure if that's clear either. Is 'hots' still a term? Maybe I should say, Bob would like to *get with* Ann. Eh, now it just sounds like I'm trying to write *A Primer on Post Seventies Pop Culture and the Impact of the Disco Subculture on the Linguistic Mechanizations of the Mainstream: A Meta-Study in Slang Usage in Sociology Analysis*.

Seriously, though, here's the deal, classic love triangle shit. Ann digs Clarissa. Clarissa is more than happy to dote on Bob. And Bob *doesn't deserve* Ann. OK. Sorry, rampant post-reactionary feminist whatever getting in the way there, obviously Bob is interested in Ann; that's why he can't keep his eyes off her.

Too bad she couldn't care less.

And all there really is left to do is for Ann to grab another one of those golden delicious, gooey to the center, made just right, like only a college dorm kitchen can, Rice Krispy Treats™, before she kicks back in her chair, tosses a crumb at Bob (who playfully catches in his mouth, like only a guy, dog, trained monkey, or whatever can), as Ann turns to Clarissa and says something witty.

You'll have to give me a moment or two on that.

Perhaps it's best that I go for a swim, after all.

###

Or better yet, I know:

End of Chapter Questions:

Want to write like a pro? Why not start now! Right about here, Ann is supposed to say something witty. Well, what are you waiting for! Now's your big break! Get writing!

###

And no need to wait for the 'morrow (or even the swim); after a few minutes of lazing on the couch with the cat (my writing partner, I admit it), I (yes, I, it wasn't the

cat, as if a cat, a mere cat, could -- or would -- come up with something like this)...

Ann turns to Clarissa (or probably has been looking at Clarissa the entire time), “We should go to a graveyard.”

“What? No?” Clarissa suggests, requests, as if she gets a vote.

While Bob says, “OK, sounds like fun. If that’s the sort of thing you’re into?” to Ann as much as anyone else at the table (OK, actually, to no one else, really).

Clarissa, tries to get out of it by saying, “Then, you two.” Or rather, starts to say, but Ann is right there with, “Oh, no. Of everyone at this table, you’re the only one who’s going for sure.”

And there was going to be some sort of chair confusion when Darren came back, but I guess not as Ann is standing at this point, taking Clarissa’s hand in her own, as she says to Bob (in what can only be taken to be a condescending tone), “Now, if you get scared... well, I guess you’ll always have your own hand to hold onto.” So, I guess rather than condescendingly, she’s sounding a bit like a bitch; but then, she wouldn’t be the first girl who sounded like a bitch, nor the last lesbian who has little use for a certain class of man and isn’t afraid to show it.

Anyhow, Darren’s back, and surprisingly quick on the uptake, so he says, “Graveyard? I’m in.” And then to Bob, “But don’t be expecting me to hold your hand.” Ah, always the joker.

And if Darren is going (am I always going to have to go down the list, gads, I hope not), Gloria is keen to go along, “Trie, spooky,” she says, as she wraps an arm around

Ethan, “But safe I will be, no, with two strong amigo’s to protect me?” she adds, as she latches onto Freddie, as well. And with that, Ann takes a mental sigh of relief, as both she and I were sort of hoping Gloria would turn into a bit of a slut (and that does seem to be the way the world is turning).

Who else?

Oh, right, Bob. All he’s gotten from Ann from the git-go is grief, so he’s sort of hesitant, as Darren leads the way (don’t ask me why he knows the way to the graveyard, but he does), Gloria follows, bringing Ethan and Freddie (*It OK’ers, maybe’s et not always besters to be firsts*) in tow, followed by Ann holding Clarissa’s hand firmly (protectively, owningly, like she’s mine’ingly), but Ann can tell there are going to be problems (like I’d have anything else to write about if there weren’t), so she grabs Bob’s hand, “Yeah, don’t worry. We’ll find someone’s hand for you to hold when the going gets rough. Maybe Clarissa’s, here,” as she drags him along, out the door; and Miss Chastity is all aglow, virtually holding onto the hunk’s hand by proxy thru Ann’s.

Why, if I were the salacious sort, I might point out that Miss Chastity does seem to lick her lips in eager anticipation of the night to come, graveyard or not; but then, maybe that was just a wayward speck of Rice Krispy Treats™ (*Not Just for Halloween, anymore*) stuck in her gums.

###

I did this series of stories, which I called *Dancer Stories*. Now, unsurprisingly, *Dancer Stories* star *The*

Dancer, take place in a college town (and center around graveyards), and since I wrote them, they contain much food eating innuendo. A typical *Dancer Story* might go something like this (note, the story we are in is NOT a *Dancer Story*, so the characters do not map well at all):

A shy girl (perhaps someone like Clarissa) goes off to college. She shares a room with her polar opposite; but then, also, the girl she secretly wishes (as apposed to wants) to be (so, like, Ann, in a nutshell). And this girl that she secretly wishes to be is an amazing chef, first class hostess, food prep, pastry chef, par excellence... and this master chef doesn't so much take the shy bumbling would be chef under her wing, as lead by inspiration, teach by example -- by leaving cookies on her desk, next to the recipe, the day before a final, a cup of soup here, the odd sandwich there, and pretty soon, shy girl has a massive eating problem... enter bulimia. So, now we have the best of all worlds: social activism, food porn, and a coming of age story all wrapped up into one. Needless to say, soon the shy girl has learned all she can from the chef and starts cooking chef-girl's dishes, stealing her gigs, becoming the girl she always secretly wished she could be, until that big night, the awards ceremony, annual gala, the big banquet, and lordy-lordy-lordy, you have not read first person bulimic deconstructionist existentialism until you've read a *Dancer Story*, twirling away... er, that is to say, savoring the sweet taste of success, coming back to school the next semester still hyped on your glory, only to find yet another shy girl waiting for you in your room, the room you share, that you've been inhabiting for years, because I guess, you over did it that last night, at the banquet, and ate one too many

chocolate-fudge-bombs, and one lodged in your throat, coming up... or going down, and you're now a ghost, starting the cycle anew, one more time, with someone new.

So, like, in a *Dancer Story* proper, all the food porn is replaced by ballet pierrots and the like; and then again, in the type of story I'm prone to write, it's replaced by something else altogether. But the important point is that it's circular, it starts where it ends (or re-begins from where it circles around to at the end); and some poor sap of a girl (or a boy, but usually a girl) is locked into an endless loop. It's pretty darn horrific, I can assure you, especially if a story that revolves around gorging oneself on endless pastries sounds as revolting to you as it does to me. And yeah, the shy girl probably has a massive weight problem, hence the bulimia, and hence why not even Gloria would fit the bill properly, meaning, we have no clear Dancer in this story.

Anyhow, we're at a graveyard, and what would a visit to a graveyard be like without someone telling a ghost story? And in our story, the person who would do such a thing (tell such a tale) is clearly Darren (as in *Darren the Dancer*... no, sorry, just doesn't work).

###

Gloria, "So, she dances herself to death?"

Bob, "I'm pretty sure dancing is a metaphor."

Freddie, "For what?"

What's? We no says dat!

We's know!

It be the metaphoricoricallys for the foodies!

Good foodies!

Come to tink of it, we's hungries!

And to get the full impact of this last, one should perhaps realize that he says this (the he being Fred, of Fred, Fred, and Fred fame) while holding onto a slice of pizza.

Dis no slice!

Et be da half eaten!

Mostly eaten!

Den when we be done's wit dis...

We's starve!

No food's eber again!!!

Yeah, so they're a bit preoccupied with food. And if we do some sort of circular *Dancer Story*, it will involve the Fred's. In fact, you may wish to imagine them standing around as gargoyles (stone still... or whatever sort of phrasing for that last that would sound best, sorry, but my linguistic skills fail me at the moment) sneaking bites of pizza whenever anyone isn't looking, which isn't very often:

Geez! Mister!

How many charactes you'd habe?

Da one lookers dis ways!

Da other lookers dat ways!

So, da one be always looking our'd ways...

And we'b neber eats agains!

We'd starve!

Clearly, their voices carry on the wind, rustling the dry leaves of late summer...

###

“You hear that?”

“I don’t think we’re supposed to be here?” someone says questioningly... and at this point, who really cares who, as the minors (Freddie, Ethan, Gloria, maybe even Clarissa) can barely hang onto their minds, the place is so frighteningly scary (yeah, I set the scene that well).

So, it’s really just Ann, Bob, and Darren at the moment...

#

I am in the graveyard.

I am Ann.

I cannot begin to tell you how little I care about either Darren or Bob. I care so little that I climb onto one of the larger obelisks. (Is that what they’re called?) I like the idea of a cross, but I’m concerned that it might break, a sculpture would seem disrespectful (yes, I am full of respect in graveyards), and as to the gargoyles:

Get’s you’rs hands out of my facers!

Ow!

Now, she’d standing on my’d head’ers!

Oh, we’d are so’d going do get her!!!

If we’d ghost’est’ers, we’d haunt’er her for sures!!!

So, an obelisk, one of those prism pillar things, black onyx, Ann is standing on one of those, five, six, seven, or eight feet off the ground, standing on one foot, showing off, hands out, pretending to be a statue, looking into the distance, seeing her life ahead, her death... cool wind blowing, last of the warm summer breeze, leaves crinkling in the air, if you listen, you can hear their voices say:

*What's she'd doing?
Maybe she'd pretending to be da gargoyle?
Maybe she'd pretending to be da Fred?
She'd better not's takers my laster's piece'a of da
pizza pie?*

But alas, my mind in not in the moment, Ann's mind is not in the moment, she cannot become one with the currents of air, so she jumps down.

“Careful!” It is Clarissa that voices the concern, but Bob who reaches out to steady her, which sort of irks Ann, “Don't worry. I'm fine.” And then, more importantly, “I think I saw a pond over there,” she says pointing, you know, because most graveyards are built on swampy ground.

###

Graveyard: Pond.

I can't be bothered to set the scene. Darren has taken charge of the scaredy cats, while Ann and Bob share in the escort duties for Clarissa. Upon reaching the pond, Ann says something about skinny-dipping, which nobody really picks up on... or at least, not in time. I mean, by the time Darren realizes what has been said, how easy it might have been to get Gloria to play along, and how much fun that would have been, the moment is over, and she (Ann, Gloria, everyone, pretty much) merely ignores his feeble attempts to redirect the conversation.

Meanwhile, Bob says something along the lines of, “I swam varsity,” trying to show off, impress Ann, who is not in the mood to be impressed by her rival.

“You think you can beat me at anything?” Ann asks, challenges, says with defiance, as she lets go of Clarissa’s hand, leaving Bob behind, as she takes a few steps (walking backwards, she can do that, too, the show off) toward the murky pool of water, “I bet I can swim to that big tree,” that old oak tree, half dead, growing out of the water, into the water, hollow trunk to be sure, as she nods her head backwards, behind her, towards the water, “before you...” trailing off, as if she was going to say, *before you even get started*, but no sense being cocky.

So, what does Bob say?

“Now?”

“There’s no way.”

“In that glop?”

Those are all good very choices as to what Bob might say, but as we need him (I need him) to somehow agree to the challenge (the bet), instead he asks (quite conveniently, I might add), “So, what should we bet?” thinking that if he plays his cards right, he can get Ann to agree, well, let’s just say, this gal looks like she knows how to kneed bread and wouldn’t it be fun to put a loaf in the oven with her... or something like that (seriously, sometimes I wonder why I ever thought I could get into this writing game in the first place).

But whatever, verbal accent is all Ann needs (or I need to weave a good, fair-to-middling, god-awful sort of story, I’ll let you be the judge of that), as Ann kicks off her flip-flops and runs into the pond scum, splashing water (if you want to call it water) everywhere, as she calls back loudly over her shoulder something along the lines of, “Whatever you want to lose,” without even bothering to look back,

before the water rises above her waist, the going gets rough, so she dives under, and is halfway across the pond, before Bob even knows the race is on. In fact, Ann is already at the tree on the other side before Bob gets his cell phone out his pocket (the pond isn't that big, he wasn't moving that fast) and hands it to Clarissa for safekeeping; but at this point, getting covered in slime for a losing proposition really isn't worth the effort... as Ann is already claiming victory, standing on the roots of the big tree, and before long, diving off, and slowly splashing (so, mostly wading) her way back to the others. And it is only as she emerges (breathing hard, as she went all out), does Bob start in with, "You cheated."

But to be fair, there's probably some witty banter by the others as she makes her way to and fro across the pond:

Darren, "That girl is crazy!"

Gloria, "Miu crazy!" which Darren can tell means Gloria likes that sort of thing.

So, "Oh, yeah, crazy," Freddie and Ethan agree, as the Freds take it upon themselves to go for a bit of a swim, as well, so perhaps this is where they get under her skin (whoever her might be)... or then again, perhaps that's a different story, too.

Anyway, back with others, Bob is going on about how Ann cheated, while Ann just sort of looks at Clarissa, burning holes through her eyes (her soul, whatever), as she merely shrugs, and says, "All's fair in love and war." And then turning to Bob, so what were we wagering, again?"

"There was no bet. You cheated."

But Ann puts a slimy sort of finger up to Bob's lips, "All's fair... and if there was nothing else," and it really is

the only bet I ever take, “it’s a gentleman’s bet, a bet of honor, you know, to determine the better man... and who gets the spoils of war,” she says, while turning to face Clarissa again.

And, is it just me? No, it’s not. Just look, right there, stuck in Clarissa’s teeth, a bit of left over spinach from dinner, big hideous thing. Seriously, don’t ask me how Ann can see it in the dim light (a pale romantic moonlight... and/or a weak flickering streetlamp in the distance, as the graveyard is close-in to the college campus, swamp-pond too, so close, everyone pretty much just calls it the West End Park), but Ann has amazing eyes (eyesight, hearing, and all the rest) and she can see it, right there, in the front, front and center, smack dab in the center, a big ole piece of spinach, just sort of dangling, poking, hanging in the way. Well, Ann can’t help herself but to... flick? No. Suck? Yeah, that’s the word I’m looking for. Well, Ann can’t help but to suck that spinach out from between Clarissa’s teeth. I suppose it might look like a kiss, a long lingering, heartfelt, I won, and hereby I claim my prize sort of kiss; but really, we all know, spinach, stuck in the teeth, getting it out.

###

The moment over, while Clarissa is recovering, sort of shell shocked, not that she’s angry, she’s not upset, just sort of letting the realization seep through her: *Spinach? I had spinach in my teeth this entire time?* And Ann is turning back to Bob, “My prize,” she says, as she wraps a muddy arm (and body) around Clarissa. “When you’re the better

man... well, why bother wondering about things that will never be.”

Yeah, sure, it's a challenge. And Ann's being a bit of a bitch... or whatever. But before Clarissa has time to recover (think or sort out the where's, why's, with who's, and how's), Ann let's go of her, smiles, sort of closes the distance to where Gloria is standing with the trio, as she announces, “Now, I do believe there is one more prize to be won here, tonight, fellas. For the Lady Gloria's honor, any takers?”

Um, yes. The answer is yes, as Darren is already on the job. Without a thought, he tosses his phone to the side and with his shoes still on, he jumps head first into the water, sort of like a land whale, sort of like a wallaby, sort of like... oh, I don't know, perhaps a land-shark. Oh, and he's plenty funny to watch as he makes his way across the pond in about the most spastic manner possible, falling down, falling over himself, clearly he has no idea how to swim, and not very athletic or able to keep his balance in the slippery water. I'm thinking that Bob starts to laugh first, not so much in meanness, but rather in a sort of *how can you not laugh* sort of way; and soon all of the rest are joining in, laughing, joking, falling over each other, as Darren makes the far shore, stands on the old oak's sprawling roots, nearly falling back into the water as he does, then deciding that would make a good joke, so making a big deal of falling into the water, like a pole falling over or a statue rocking over; and then, he's trudging back through the water until he is back amongst the others.

“My prize?” he asks, when he reaches the shore, but Gloria is already in his arms, pressing close, licking her lips in eager anticipation...

###

I think we might just need another food scene.
“Ice Cream Social,” Darren informs suddenly (being the helpful sort of guy that he is). “There’s an Ice Cream Social tonight back at the dorm.”

Oh, right!

I’d almost forgotten about that.

###

Character Summary

Athletic Ann wins the contest.

Boring Bob watches on as the world runs circles around him. Still, good-natured, not even upset. “You’re going to be fun,” he says to Ann, “as a friend if nothing else,” as he wraps his arm around Clarissa (opposite side from Ann) and adds, “Maybe we can be friends, as well.”

Confused Clarissa really doesn’t know what to make of Ann. She feels like a third wheel between Ann and Bob. She can feel the sparks flow between them. It’s a nice place to be. But then, why does she feel so envious of Ann? Well, it’s clear; Bob is more interest in Ann than her. But then, Bob’s arm is around her waist, not Ann’s, so she does have that going for her.

Daring Darren winner of the tourney is busy escorting his lady to the banquet and/or the Ice Cream Social... that is being held tonight... back at the dorm... just in case you missed that important plot turning event when it was revealed a few paragraphs back. And what other astounding surprises does the author have in store in the paragraphs ahead? There's only one way to find out! Read on to see!!!

Enterprising Ethan (yeah, well, sue me, after a few minutes, that was the best moniker I could come up with and it's the best moniker Ethan can come up with, too, so maybe it should be): Un-Engaged Ethan (yeah, that's better) feels aware, he watches and wonders at the social interactions going on around him, trying to makes sense of them. He can see the ebb and flow of them, but he can't latch on and ride the wave (not being much of a surfer, either). Whatever the case, Ethan is walking next to Freddie, listening to him, not saying a word.

You see, Fantastic Freddie has this idea, the start of an idea, it's a feel, all those gargoyles at the graveyard, they could be, something, a sleeping dragon, about to rise, while his reptilian horde awaits in his dorm... or something like that. It could make a good Slaughter Quest™ campaign after he's worked out the kinks: maybe tie in the *Dancer Stories*, maybe there should be three of them, like the owls outside his room. And then suddenly, to no one in particular, "We should set up an owl-cam!"

While Giggling Gloria has found herself a new home. What else is there to say? "Thank you, Ann," she mouths from a distance, before smiling at Darren; and then, stepping back, pausing a moment for them to catch up,

taking the effort to bring Freddie and Ethan back into the horde, “So, this OL-cam. What are you hoping to record?”

Ah, yes. Everyone loves a slut.

And I say, ole chap. Now, that’s a bit of poetic writing. You can almost taste the clever irony in that lot. Or perhaps, we should wait until we get back to the dorm. I hear an Ice Cream Social awaits us, once we do...

Calling it Quits ###
At the Ice Cream Social

I tire of this story. I’m sick of writing. Is that the right thing to say to a reader? It’s been three days since I wrote, two since I edited (five again, now, since I got around to rereading this last chapter)... and I don’t feel like writing this story anymore. I leave for a three month long journey (call it a vacation) in two weeks. I need to get ready: pack... and close up loose ends, of which this project is one. So, it is time for the story to end... even if we’ve just begun.

###

I once read a collection of short stories by JD Salinger. I think he wrote it? The guy who wrote *The Catcher in the Rye*, I mean, that’s who I think it was, but I could be wrong. I bring it up, because I was disappointed (like, very-very disappointed) in those short stories of his. They weren’t stories at all: scenes, really, just snippets of time, no tie-ins, no wrap-ups, nothing closed about them, at all. They could have just as easily started earlier... and all of them could

have easily lasted longer. There was no closure: none at all.

So, let's try to give this project some closure... without really doing anything like that, at all.

###

Originally, when I felt I had a few more days (or even weeks) in me, well, even then, I'd wanted to cut down the cast of characters for this next scene. It's outside, on the lawn, the dorm has a pool attached to it (yeah, I've been swimming lately); and maybe it's easier to think of the entire thing as something that might happen out on the lawn of the Playboy Mansion.

Ann and Darren are covered in slime, so they need to get clean. There's a very experiential thing in taking a shower with one's clothes on.

Multiple Choice Questions

1: Before showering, Ann:

A: Doesn't bother to check her pockets, because she hardly ever has anything of importance in them.

B: Discovers a frog in her pocket that she hands to Freddie, who in the original version would then scurry off to his room with Ethan, removing the two from the scene.

C: Ann would never shower, that's girl stuff.

D: Sends Clarissa off ahead to make a banana split (along with Bob to help carry the monstrosity).

2: Before showering, Darren:

A: Checks his pockets repeatedly for his phone, only remembering he handed it to Gloria to for safe keeping when she finally holds it up for him to see, laughing.

B: Kisses Gloria.

C: Kisses Gloria, again.

D: I guess, Gloria is going to be taking a shower with Darren.

E. I guess, Darren needs a new phone.

###

Ann steps into the shower. It's one of those outdoor ones, the type they put by swimming pools; so if you've just come back from swimming in the swamp by the local graveyard, you can rinse the muck off, before polluting the (relatively clean) pool water.

I like showers.

Do you?

Sometimes, I wonder about modern fiction. In the future, they'll look back, and they'll want to know about showers, why they were so important, were we really that dirty, and all the rest.

Standing in the water... Ann relaxes.

I am Ann. I relax. I don't have to worry about the rest of the day, the story... the story will come naturally, as I type on the keyboard, based upon the thoughts, the gentle musings that flow through my head, that come to me while swimming, showering, taking a walk.

Ann let's the thoughts of the day flow through her, past her. Letting them go, we shall not get to them, not yet. It is not time for them yet.

It is time to enjoy the warmth of the flow, the sensory input, the lack of all other concerns or agendas. Showers are alone time: just you and your body... and if you're like Ann, a time to get in touch with the different muscle groups, to stretch, relax, check in with your arms and legs, feel the pains from the day... from being alive... and then turn the water to cold... and become alive.

Ah, folks and their cold showers. Cold showers spike my adrenaline. I can be doing fine in a shower, nice and warm, then flip it all the way over to cold, maybe 50 degrees (Fahrenheit, some parts of the world), and the jolt! My body gets scared. I think of the movie *Psycho*, of someone breaking into my apartment and disturbing my peace... never while taking a hot bath, but the second I switch to a cold shower: I come alive... and worry about death.

###

Still fully clothed (sans flip-flops), and without much looking around, Ann walks (the few steps) to the pool's edge, and dives in.

This is another good place to be: under the water, deep down, holding one's breath, the world fills one's ears, the hum of the filters, the beating of one's heart, along with the press from the water above, until all that matters is taking a breath.

You can stay down there as long as you like: at the bottom of the pool. When Ann comes up, the story will end. So, take a break, put the book down, close the computer screen, dim your monitor, there's not much left, not much to lose, shut it down, find a pool, and sink to the bottom. While you're there, I'm sure you'll figure out how the story ends. You don't need my help for that.

###

*Breaking the surface, treading water...
How does this story end?*

For Gloria, she collects a lot of boyfriends, perhaps all we've mentioned so far, and more... so numerous it would be a chore to write them all in: friends, associates, study partners. Ann manages them the best she can. This, after all, is a story about Ann and her relation to the others. And make no doubt about it, Ann and Gloria become friends... with different agendas that overlap and complement the other. Every boy Ann discards, overlooks, and has no care for, she hands off to Gloria.

Freddie...

Hey's we's come's almoser's first!

The Fred's do that circular *Dancer Story* thing with Freddie, they being the creation that he makes, that inspires him to create them in the first place: his muse. He writes them into a *Slaughter Quest* adventure, programs them into his computer (Ann's a programming major, don't know that I ever mentioned that, but there it is, another link to the

symposium) and things go horribly-horribly wrong... or right, I suppose it depends on your point of view. Let's just say, a game needs a player as much as a player needs a game and leave it at that.

Ethan... just another friend to Gloria, just another friend to Freddie, just another player to the Fred's, just another boy to Ann. He's just another... just another character that I've started writing into these stories. He should be glad, so many characters wind up with one-time, bit, walk-on roles that I soon forget about, but he's been a major (in an ensemble cast, to be sure) twice... in a row. I must like him. In this story, I think he'll probably wind up seeing someone in Student Services around midterms for antidepressants. He'll volunteer for the help line. He'll meet someone nice. And then, I'll go back in time, write that other story he's in, and make his life a living hell. I can assure you, he can hardly wait. I'm actually being serious, here. To be happy with a life that sucks... or miserable with one that is grand, which would you choose? Well, Ethan would choose Angelica... even if she is no angel and treats him like shit. He loves her. And he loves it. And he is proud of his role, his place in the universe, miserable worm that he is.

Miserable Worm. Hmm? Tell me, why does Darren's name suddenly come to mind. He's a fat, loser, slob... and of almost all of Gloria's regular's, he's the only one who will spin plates of his own. Right now, he's over there sharing a banana split with Gloria. I don't know what it says about a guy who's more than happy to eat a whole

banana, raw, with both hands, while it drips ice cream down his face? Other than perhaps, he's not afraid to grab life... by the balls, by the horns, by the *whatever presents itself* with both hands, grasping as hard as he can, holding on for dear life. Let me tell you, he's going to have a good time over the next few years in college... especially during rush.

Clarissa will wind up with Bob... but not very quickly. Bob will be her first love. He will be her last love. I don't know if they will live happily ever after, but as far as the horizon goes, she will. Though, in all honesty, the horizon isn't all that far away. I was going to say it only extends to the end of next semester, but if after my vacation, I decide to pick up this story again, who knows where we will start off... and what changes will have taken place... to reality... in the interim?

Bob will chase Clarissa... and Ann... and a few others. He'll give Darren a run for his (girl-chasing, womanizing) money, perhaps beating him, if not in quantity, certainly in quality. I never did quite fully resolve Bob. He never came into complete focus in my mind. He's there with Clarissa if you choose to look, holding the plate, as she organizes the platter, making the banana split, that before long they will bring back and share with Ann. Bob already knows quite a few of the people who live in the dorm (he's a social type guy): girls, boys, but mostly girls... maybe even the new one, Helen?

Or maybe Helen is in the pool: redhead, don't ask me why? Long red hair, it's pretty much what Ann sees as she surfaces, why she surfaces, why she surfaces where she does, and is it love at first site? Yes? No? Well, let's just say, it's a bit of recognition in the other of what they have in common, a certain overlap in what they both consider quarry... and prey... and the virtues to be sought in a lover: that is to say, they share an appetite in common.

And that's, of course, when Bob and Clarissa return, "Oh, I see you've already met?" because he has, she has... and what that means, it would take another chapter to tell, perhaps a complete book.

###

So, there we are.
Everybody's a friend.
The End.

###

Or, you could be a lizard...
That be LeeZard, Meester.
Smile's when you says dat!

Or, you could be a LeeZard, a trio of the same: one, eating chocolate ice cream in a sugar cone; the next, a scoop of vanilla wedged between two oatmeal cookies; and the last, sipping on a strawberry malt.

Dis be the gooder's party.
Dis be the gooder's start.

So, who'd we get signer'ed up for da game?
But the other two just look at him, as he shrugs it off,
taking another sip from his shake.
Oh'd, righter's. Da symposiumer's.
Da one'ers and da all'ers.
Dat be da gooders idear's, Fred.
I must concur, *Dat be the gooders idear's, Fred...*
Fred and Fred.

###

Now, if you'll excuse me, feel free to complete the story in my absence. Me? I've got a vacation I must prepare for, pack, whatever, get my affairs in order... which somehow seems like a premonition of death:

- 1: By vacation, the author means:
- A: Radiation Therapy
 - B: Jail, the appeal was not successful.
 - C: Marriage, the Brett's getting married in the morning...
 - D: No, no. Vacation pretty much says it all.

But where were we?
Ah, yes! Premonition of death...
My things are packed. I'm ready to go. And whether I live for a year or a thousand more, of this particular story, this particular book, it's extremely unlikely there will ever be more.

###

*You'd know'd what'ers dat means, Fred's!
He'd going to cheater's on us!
Write wit'out da us!
It be'ers da outrage!*

Ah, but is it enough to make a LeeZard take pen in hand and write there own story?

#

Or a reader?

#

Or my dear sweet robotic descendents, will you bother to add another chapter to the work I started?

#

But enough!
I have already said too much.
Of this, I shall write no more.

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Originally posted to:
www.paufler.net
And a good way to reach me might still be:
Brett@Paufler.net