

TAKING PRETTY FREQUENT HOLIDAYS

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This is dedicated to my partner and continued source of inspiration, Valerie Johnson

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ABSTRACT

TAKING PRETTY FREQUENT HOLIDAYS

by Saul Lemerond

This project began with my need, through the art of short fiction, to comment upon the inherent contradictions found in human existence. This is to say that all individuals, as social animals, must reconcile their unique personal desires with those of the communities to which they belong. This inherent conflict of existence deserves exploration as there is a sense that individual and social human reality is created out of a reconciliation of these conflicts.

For this project, my intention is to both explore and magnify these conflicts through absurd and satirical avenues as I feel that humor allows readers a relatively painless access point for the consideration of these conflicts. A relative painless ease in the experience of reading my works is also why I chose to approach these issues through the stylistic lens of minimalism, which provides readers with the simplest prose needed for understanding complex relationships.

The result of this endeavor represents the panicle of what I am currently capable. The four works of short fiction, contained here, fulfill the criteria of acting as in-depth satirical explorations of what has come to be known as the human condition.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
FAKE BARRY	9
KAYFABE	21
A PIG TO A MAN	31
COWBOYS IN RAINBOW CITY	48

INTRODUCTION

My thesis is comprised of four short stories, and my motivation for writing them is three fold. First and foremost, it is my wish to grow as a writer with each and every story that I undertake, and it is my belief that these four stories represent the pinnacle of my abilities to date. Any particular emphasis I might choose to assess my writing is secondary to this goal, but it is apparent, even to me, that my secondary emphases are what give my work any kind of meaning. That is to say that my second and third goals, which are that of self expression and recognition from a writing community that I've contributed something of value to a greater creative conversation, are nearly as important to my own feelings of artistic progress.

I believe I should define what I mean by "value" in this context. When I say that I wish my work to have value, I mean that I want my readers to discover, when they read my work, the sorts of things about the modern American life that I find important, unimportant, meaningful, contradictory, emotionally stimulating, humorous, or even mundane, and then have that reading experience cause them to reevaluate their own ideas about these concepts in some sort of significant way. In the same way Kurt Vonnegut is able to sneak strong progressive social messages into his stories with a certain amount of innocence in his voice, I would like to point out some of life's inherent contradictions in a poignant but nonjudgmental way. I am not sure that I have even come close to succeeding in this, but I will again assert that those are, and continue to be, my goals as a writer. I will attempt, here, to elucidate several major techniques I have incorporated in the construction of these pieces to achieve the sense of value I previously mentioned.

Techniques that will be discussed include, but most certainly are not limited to, minimalistic prose, satire, absurdism, surrealism, humor, and repetition of certain stylistic

elements. Indeed there is a fair amount of crossover between these techniques, but I shall attempt to delineate them or combine them as I see fit. I will also attempt to give context to the motivations behind the creation of the pieces, as oftentimes my motivation is more important in understanding the meaning of my work than anything else.

“Cowboys in Rainbow City”

“Cowboys in Rainbow City” is closest to straight satire in this collection. While the story is set in an absurd/surrealist reality, the absurd/surreal elements primarily act to reveal some part of American society that I wish to criticize. There is, in fact, not a single element in the story that is not meant to mirror some sort of absurd social practice that we, as citizens engaging in the American cultural zeitgeist, are currently immersed in.

The idea that there is an industrial town that produces rainbows is meant to be a comment on industry in general. That is to say that most things made in factories are considered good (at least to someone) to some extent, but the process of making them is usually not the most pleasant. I was born and raised in Green Bay, Wisconsin. This town, which is normally recognized for its national football team, is actually home to one of the largest paper manufacturers in the world, and also one of the largest coal burning power plants in the world. It is an industrial town built beside water sources that no one in their right mind would swim in or eat out of because they've been so polluted they are now considered toxic. Because Green Bay is in a valley, the air tends to get bad when the wind is not strong enough to push the factory smog out over the valley's ridge. This happens often.

Rainbow City is patterned off the city of Green Bay. Cody's rainbow lung (a play off of the “black lung” miners suffered from at the beginning of the industrial revolution) is meant to point out there is always a price we must pay for beauty and luxury. I fear I may be making this

whole business sound rather grim. I should point out that I do not think pollution for the sake of excess is necessarily bad, I just think it's funny how natural this trade-off seems to be made on the part of human beings when a simple cost/benefit analysis would show that the added benefit (rainbow) does not clearly outweigh the cost (rainbow lung).

The same sort of reasoning becomes evident in the plot of the story, where Shelly and Cody, twin brother and sister, are essentially on an adventure to save their preferred form of entertainment. The irony here is that both Shelly and Cody are unhappy (Shelly is an alcoholic, Cody is dying from rainbow lung) before their favorite form entertainment is threatened to be taken away, so at the end of the story when they have saved the entertainment that they loved so dearly, nothing has really changed. Buildings are still exploding, Cody is still dying, and Shelly is still drinking herself to death. The only thing they've saved is their entertainment, which only functions in helping them ignore their problems. I guess that's the joke: This story is a testament to the lengths people will go so that they may better ignore their problems.

“A Pig to a Man”

“A Pig to a Man” is also straight surrealist satire. My intention was to call to the reader's attention a possible problem inherent in America's culture of consumption. America's culture of consumption, as I understand it, posits that my value can only be ascertained by comparing the stuff that other people have to the stuff I have. If I want to feel equal or better in value to another person, then my stuff must be equal or better than their stuff.

I chose a twenty-three foot long crocodile because they are large, primal, and vicious eating machines. I thought this would be an accurate representation of America's culture of consumption. I also thought it would be an appropriate lampooning of the sorts of ridiculous things rich people actually do buy, like thirty million dollar baseballs and ten thousand dollar

handbags that match the color of their dog's fur. I also must admit that this story was written partially in response to my own large-crocodile-owning fantasy. I often think about how cool it would be to have a crocodile hanging out with me in my office, it's possible I'm imagining it at this very moment, but I suppose that is neither here nor there. The culture of consumption is an easy target because it is, on its face, so absolutely absurd. It's constantly criticized at the end of Friday night family sitcoms because it is so obviously delusional, and yet people continue to compare each other in terms of their stuff. It seems that it is human nature for human beings to use ridiculous logic, and America's culture of consumption is a perfect theme for an absurdist story.

I will admit that this piece can be easily categorized. It's a monkey's paw story. It is a story where a person gets a thing they always wanted, then finds out that the thing they always wanted is tainted by a bunch of unforeseen problems, and then is ultimately ruined by the thing they always wanted. I think the one element of this story that differentiates it (if anything does) from a standard "be careful what you wish for" story is the pig, Porky. Stewart sets out to have an awesome crocodile and ends up with Porky, the pig. This is significant because it is made evident that Porky and Stewart do not like each other. Porky is constantly eyeballing Stewart and Stewart is put off by this and is not shy about voicing his distaste for the actions of the pig.

At the very least, I think that the pig adds another level of irony to the story since Kyle is supposed to eat Porky, and what happens instead is that Porky eats the ice-cream and Stewart eats Porky. I also employ a good deal of sight gags, or visual humor. The scenes where Kyle the crocodile and Janet are eating in the fancy French restaurant *Le Che La Rue* or when Porky is watching Stewart undress after work are a couple of my favorites. These humorous descriptions enrich the story in simple yet meaningful ways. I mention they are simple because I believe this

piece is a simple piece. This is probably the least complex of the stories included here, but I think there is a certain charm in the simplicity.

“Kayfabe”

My intention with “Kayfabe” was not only to explore the ways that entertainment sometimes blurs the boundaries between reality and fantasy, but also to explore the ways that entertainment is used as a means for profit. This sort of exploration could have been done with any sort of American entertainment where performers take on alternate personas and entertain for money. But I thought wrestling would be ideally suited for this sort of an exploration because of wrestling’s robust history of deception, dramatic violence, pageantry, and sensationalism.

There is nothing within the story that isn’t based on some actual person or event. PCS (Post Concussion Syndrome) is fast becoming a major issue in the world of professional wrestling and all of Solid Mike’s actions in the story are informed by Wikipedia’s list of PCS symptoms. As the story hopefully communicates, Kayfabe is an industry term for the fiction that is played out for wrestling fans. What I found most interesting in my research (which consisted mostly of Netflix documentaries) is that the writers for promotions like the WWE often use real life events from their industry as inspiration for their story lines.

For example: there was an instance where one WWE wrestler named Lolita was both Kayfabe married and actually married to another wrestler named Tom Hardy, and she had (what ended up being) a highly publicized actual affair with another wrestler, Edge. This led to a real and Kayfabe divorce, to a real and Kayfabe marriage between the adulterers (Lolita and Edge), and to a Kayfabe feud (between Tom and Edge) that lasted more than a year. There was never really a real feud. Real feuds get people sued and/or thrown in jail.

While from a business standpoint it makes a certain amount of intuitive sense to have wrestler's real lives parallel their Kayfabe lives, it's also downright confusing. I can only imagine what goes through the mind of a wrestler who is acting out a fake feud for what are essentially real reasons. There are, it seems, as many levels of truth being played out as there are different levels of deception, and I think that conceptually it's really cool.

So these are the sorts of main ideas I have attempted to capture in the story. I know I also comment on merchandizing and blood-crazed audiences, but I do this primarily to develop Solid Mike's character. I wanted show a portrait of a man who cares more about his career than family, and show the tragedy behind what that ultimately means for him.

“Fake Barry”

For my story “Fake Barry,” I wanted to write an Oedipal tale that readers would not find tragic, but instead grotesquely romantic. The idea of bending the form of a classic Oedipal tale was funny to me, and I believed I could make this experience funny, and thus somewhat satisfying, for my readers if written appropriately. What I ended up writing was a different sort of story. I will admit that even I do not entirely grasp its meaning, but I think my failure to understand the piece is one of the things that I like most about it. While I did succeed in writing a grotesque romance, I found I also had unintentionally created a larger theme having to do with the average person's familiarity with the mundane aspects of life. I like this theme.

There are several elements: office satire, the potential defamiliarization of all existence, food humor, nods to deconstructionism, passive voice, sentence fragments, repetition of words or lines to accentuate humor or theme, and minimalistic prose, all working within in this story in an attempt to turn tragedy into romance. And, as I said, the result of this creates a much larger

commentary on mundane modern urban life that I am proud of, even if I'm not entirely sure what that commentary is.

Of the many stories I have written in my lifetime, "Fake Barry" is by far the most popular and I think it's because there's a sort of inherent difficulty when it comes to deciphering its meaning. I think this works because, for the most part, readers like being challenged. The biggest criticism I get from this story is readers telling me that they feel as though they are missing something deeper. That to me is one of the biggest compliments I could receive.

I should mention that all four of the stories in this collection are written in the tradition of minimalism, satire, and absurdism. By minimalism I mean the style of prose that began with Ernest Hemingway and is continued today by writers like Amy Hempel. By satire I mean the tradition that started with Sterne, and then was followed by Voltaire, Swift, West, and Vonnegut. By absurdism I mean the tradition that begins with Kafka and is followed by the likes of Bender and Saunders.

The strengths of this collection lie in my ability to honor those traditions in which I am writing. The entire collection has a strong satirical vein running through it, and the minimalism, especially in the first person stories, is both evident and effective. Also the absurdity found in the collection is strong and poignant. But more importantly, I believe the stories contained in this collection represent the best work I have written.

This collection's biggest weaknesses lie in its discontinuity. Not all the stories contain absurdist elements ("Kayfabe" does not). Not all the stories are appropriately minimal ("Cowboys in Rainbow City" is not). There is also a sense that the collection has no strong unifying theme. Identity seems to be the largest theme that stands out in this collection, but "Cowboys in Rainbow City" and "A Pig to a Man" do not deal with identity issues the same way

that “Kayfabe” and “Fake Barry” do. And while I might admit that the collection contains a certain amount of cynicism, a cynical theme was not my intention and I reject the idea as a possibility.

Regardless of these thematic drawbacks, I will assert this collection is tied together stylistically. And by that I mean that this collection of stories is an excellent representation of my style. At the very least I would like to use this collection as inspiration for me to write better, more advanced work, but my real hope for this collection is to someday see it bound together, along with some stories I’ve yet to write, and sold on Amazon by some publisher who wishes to publish and sell my work because they believe it has value.

FAKE BARRY

There is a beautiful woman in my kitchen who says she's my mother, and she's not. I find this strange.

When I was younger, strange things never happened to me. Back then, my life was uncomplicated. My mother was my mother and everything was much, much simpler. When I was eleven, on most nights after dinner, I would sit down on the couch in the living room with my mother and watch TV. I would always be on one side of the couch with my tiny boy-feet stretched toward the center pillow, and my mother on the opposite side with her feet stretched towards mine. With the two of us positioned like this, with me being a child and my mom being the woman she was, a game of footsy was always inevitable. We would sit under the glow of the TV, mingling our toes and tickling each other's feet.

I think of these nights fondly. There was always a softness in my mother's eyes and a warmth to her body. Sometimes, I wonder if this is where my attraction to older women came from. She always gave me a good feeling, and I always felt safe around her.

I suppose I think of these things now because, as I said, there is a woman in my kitchen who claims to be my mother, a woman who isn't my mother and seems to be having a difficult time accepting the fact that she's not. I know my mother when I see her and this ain't her. This woman is an impostor, a faker, a stranger standing in my kitchen and crying for reasons I don't understand. Though, I must admit, she is kind of cute.

"You're in the wrong house," I tell her. "You walked into the wrong house. I'm not your son, but if you tell me your son's name, maybe I can help you find him."

"This isn't the right house," she admits, looking around a bit befuddled but then locking her striking sky-blue eyes with mine, "but you are my son."

She seems quite sure of this as she slowly looks me up and down. I say nothing.

“Barry?” she says haltingly. She looks like a child who has just learned there is no such thing as Elmo. “Don’t...don’t you recognize your mother?”

Her crying is steadily increasing. I wish this was a date and not a case of mistaken identity. Do people this beautiful always come with this much baggage?

“Look,” I say, trying to phrase my response in a way that will not make her erupt like a volcano of emotional pressure. “I don’t know who you are.”

This doesn’t create the desired effect.

“Barry!” she screams. Her eyes are beet-red and the wrinkles on her face become troughs for rivers of her tears. “Why are you doing this to me?”

She runs toward me, and I grasp her wrists before she can grab a hold of me.

“Please,” she pleads. “I love you.”

The only thing I can think to say is, “I’m sorry.”

She screams again and her face turns up a shade of red, then her eyes go blank and she faints dead away. I already have a firm grip on her and do my best to keep her from crashing onto my tile floor. I carry her to my living room, turn on the lamp, and lay the unconscious woman on the lounge.

I must admit, there is a resemblance. She’s right around the same age as my mother, probably a young forty-nine. She has the same wavy blonde hair and cute stubby nose. She has my mother’s figure, the figure of a woman who gave birth once at nineteen and then worked hard to make sure no one could tell. Has her fashion sense too; the flower print red dress that flatters her hips and waist is certainly something she’d wear.

She's not my mother, though. I have no urge to tickle this woman's feet and there are several things she's got that mine doesn't. For one, she's more attractive, there seems to be sort of a glow about her; it's a sexy glow, almost playfully sexy. It's the kind of sexy I like. My own mother was never sexy. I am absolutely certain of this.

I give calling the police a moment's thought but decide against it. She seems harmless enough. Plus, lately, it has been rare for a beautiful woman stay over.

I hate my job.

Click

The clock on the office wall always reminds me of the clocks we had in my house as a kid.

"Hello, Ms. Phillips, my name is Barry. I'm calling on behalf of ComPlex. We have an exciting new offer..." *Click*

It's one of those traditional clocks with twelve numbers and three hands. I have no idea why the hell they even make them anymore.

"Hello, may I please speak to Stanley Johnson? Hello, Mr. Johnson, my name is Barry from ComPlex and I'm offering a two-month free..." *Click*

"And a beautiful day to you, Ms. Perchfield. I'm calling on behalf of..." *Click*

Sometimes, when it's dead quiet, I hear the thing tick off the seconds of my life.

"Hello, this is Barry from..." *Click* Tick, tick.

It's almost as if I can make out the rhythm of my sorry existence.

"Hello?" *Click* Tick, tick.

"If I could have just a moment of your time?" *Click* Tick, tick.

“I represent...” Tick, tick.

I try to ease my own atmosphere by talking to folks after they hang up on me.

“Good evening to you, sir. Did you know that...” *Click* “...And did you know I’m letting a strange woman who thinks she’s my mother stay in my house?”

Click “She won’t leave.”

Click “I don’t even know if I want her to leave...she’s kind of cute.”

“Oh, god, it’s been such a long time since I’ve gotten laid. Is it wrong that I think a woman who kind of looks like my mother is attractive?”

“What?!” The voice of a customer comes through into my ear piece.

Oops, lost my rhythm.

“Oh, I apologize Ms...Thomson. My name is Barry and I’m calli...” *Click*

I woke up this morning to the smell of coffee and homemade French toast. I walked into the kitchen and she was making me breakfast, standing right around the spot where she had fainted the night before.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “but I don’t know you. I think it would probably be better if you left.”

At this, she began to cry again, but it was different this time, not hysterical like before. She put her head down and cried silently to herself.

In the daylight, she didn’t look crazy as she had the night before. Instead, she just looked sad, deeply sad, and I was touched in a way that made me feel as though I had, up to this point, been a complete asshole.

“Look,” I said. “Can I get you some help? Give you a ride home or maybe call someone for you?” She tried wiping her tears with a dishtowel but they were just replaced by more.

“I have nowhere to go,” she whispered, “and no one to call. You’re the only one I have.” Then she looked at me like I was the last person left on the planet and said, “I love you, Barry.”

This broke my heart. Here was a woman who needed my help. A beautiful, lively, vivacious woman who needed my help and here I was trying to push her out my door. I felt ashamed for making such a beautiful creature sad so I let her stay under the condition that we would have to have a serious talk when I got home from work, which brings me to back my job.

I hate my job. Even when there is not a hot, crazy woman in my house, I hate my job. People hang up on me all day, and I’m pretty sure no one at the office likes me.

“Hello my name is Barry. I’m calling on behalf of ComPlex, where quality custom copiers are our specialty...” *Click*

When I first started here, I’m pretty sure I actually liked myself, thought that I was a good person, and that my existence held some sort of inherent value. This translated into a confidence that allowed me to pick up women and then engage them in good conversation that would make them like me.

Situations like this are no longer an option. Although I am relatively good at my job, it does not change the fact that it is still a daily exercise in humiliation and rejection. When these things go on long enough, they both start to become something you expect out of life.

I still have hope, though, and I think that’s why my co-workers hate me. It seems to me they abandoned hope a long time ago and find it ridiculous that I haven’t, and because of this, they sometimes go out of their way to try and get under my skin.

Like today for instance, when I came in to find that they had replaced my old desk with another old desk. I suspect Bob or Fred. Neither of them had said anything to me the entire time I’ve worked here and are always making it obvious that they don’t like me. Replacing my desk

with another, similar desk must be their odd way of getting their jollies, as I've been complaining that I need a new desk for just over two years, and here they are giving me another old desk. They even took the time to find a used desk that looks a lot like my original one. It even has a chip in the right-hand corner like the old one did. In fact, looking at it right now, I'd say it looks more like the old one than the old one did.

This wouldn't bother me as much except that I'm sure most of the women who work here don't like me much either. In fact, thinking about it now, this is probably the reason why I'm letting a crazy woman stay in my house. I think it's nice to have the female company. Probably, it's also because she's incredibly attractive, and I have a thing for incredibly attractive women.

"Ma'am, your ComPlex copies will be of such high quality they'll look better than the originals..." *Click*

I bet the cute crazy woman will have a good dinner ready for me for when I get home. I kind of hope she does; the French toast this morning was a nice change. Maybe I should try to keep her around. Sure she seems a bit crazy, but I tend to be attracted to that sort of thing, too. Plus, doesn't everybody have problems? If I went around rejecting everyone who had some kind of problem, I wouldn't stand a chance of landing anyone.

It's a simple case of mistaken identity. Maybe it's something we can work on together. I like her, and she could like me if she could get it through her head that I'm not her son. I think this might have the makings of a wonderfully productive relationship. If not... well... then we both got problems and how is that different from anyone else anyway?

"How can a copy be better than the original, you ask?" *Click* Tick, tick.

I walk in the door, and she has dinner ready for me like I had hoped. She's made meatloaf—beautiful, wonderful—meatloaf.

“This smells excellent,” I say, sitting down and grabbing a fork. Maybe it's the food, but she looks even more beautiful than I remember.

She stares at me for a long moment, inspecting me like a piece of fruit with some minor flaws on its rind. I'm not bothered by this and happily shovel meatloaf into my mouth. It has been a long time since anyone this attractive has shown me any attention.

“This is really good,” I say, pointing at the meatloaf.

“Thank you,” she says, still eyeing me in such a way that I start to feel as though I may have done something wrong. Again, I'm not too bothered by it. There is something about her that I find almost irresistible. I find myself needing her and having to tell her so, but explaining to her that I am not her son seems like a very hard task.

I'm beginning to speak when she says, “You're not my son.”

I look up from my meatloaf. “What?”

“You're not my son,” she says again, and I'd be happy but she sounds accusatory. Her eyes turn red, her face turns ugly, and she points an index finger at me slowly saying, “You're...not...my....”

As much as I don't want to, I abandon my meatloaf.

“Wait,” I say, stopping her. “Don't you see this is a good thing? I like you, and I want to take care of you.” I look her in the eye and smile my best ‘I want you’ smile.

“But,” she whispers, her face softening again, “my son...”

“You can stay here,” I tell her, motioning to the rest of my house. “We can make this work. I think you’re beautiful, and I want to help you. I’ll do anything you want. Get you whatever you need. I make good money. I’ll even help you find your son.”

She looks at the tiles of my floor.

“But,” she says pointedly, “you’re a faker.”

“No, I’m not a faker,” I say, “I want you to understand what you do to me. I need...” I stop myself as I notice she has the unmistakable look of an unsatisfied woman who wants to run out of my house.

A moment later, she turns and runs toward the living room. I run after her, but she has too much of a head start. I hear the front door slam shut and, by the time I open it, my beauty has disappeared into the night.

I go back to the kitchen, sit down to her meatloaf, and wonder if she’s coming back. Looking down at my fork, I realize it’s not my fork though it looks remarkably similar. Why’d that hot mess bring her silverware into my home?

I wake up, hear the doorbell, get out of bed go see who it is. She’s at my door and looks terrible. Her face is swollen, tiny purple veins spider web her eyes, her flower print dress is dirty and wet, and she’s shivering from the cold. I grab a blanket and wrap it around her. She grabs me, I hold her so close I can feel her warm breath on my neck, and I’m excited.

“I don’t know what to think,” she says, looking at my coat rack, confused and vulnerable.

I put a finger to her lips and then kiss her, fully and deeply. She tries to pull away, but I don’t let her. After a couple of seconds, her body relents and she kisses me back and a warm buzz floods out from my chest and out through my extremities. The moment of electricity lasts

as long as I've heard moments like this should. Time crawls like a snail in a garden, I let her go. There is a softness in her eyes and a openness to the glow of her body, and everything's going to be all right.

"We need to get some rest," I tell her, and show her to my bedroom.

I do not hate my job so much. Even if they have replaced the old analogue three-hand clock with a clock that is also old and analogue and three-handed. One that also ticks. One exactly the same as the old one.

I don't let it get to me. I have a beautiful woman, and it feels good. It's been too long.

A man taps me on the shoulder. It's Bob, he works in the cubical next to me. His well-manicured hand holds a black pen in my face and he proceeds to speak the first words he's ever spoken to me in our three years.

"This isn't my pen," he says. "I know my pen when I see it, and this ain't it. Did you take my pen and replace it with this one?"

"Why would I do something like that?"

Anger swells in the lines around Bob's eyes.

"I don't know," he says. "Why don't you tell me?"

"I don't know anything about your pen," I say. "Besides, what does it matter as long as it works?" I ask, "Does it work?"

"It works fine," says Bob, "but that's not the point. I want to know what happened to my pen. I want to know what sick bastard would take my pen and replace it with a different pen."

His excitement takes the form of small drops of spittle flying from his mouth and landing on my shirt. "You trying to play tricks on me, Barry?"

With my new woman in mind, I smile and say, “Screw the pen, Bob.”

“Hey!” another voice rises from the cubical next to ours. It’s Fred, another coworker who has neglected to speak a word to me since he started working here sixteen months ago, “Shut up! At least neither of you woke up this morning to find out you were sleeping in the wrong house.”

“What?” asks Bob, placing his pen back in his front pocket.

“I mean that when I woke up this morning, someone had replaced my house with a different house.”

“A different house?” asks Bob.

“Yeah,” says Fred. “It looks like my house, but it’s not. I know my house when I see it.”

“How the hell could that happen?” I say.

“I don’t know,” he says. “I’m wondering if maybe Bob did it.”

This makes me laugh.

“Hey!” This voice was from our supervisor coming from around the corner. “I don’t know who the hell you people are, but if you don’t start to do the jobs you’ve all come here to pretend to do, you’re all fired!”

When I was younger, strange things didn’t happen to me.

“Hello, my name is Barry. I’m calling on behalf of ComPlex.”

“You’re not Barry.” The man over the phone seems pretty sure of this. “I know a Barry when I hear one.”

“You couldn’t possibly know that,” I say. “You’ve never met me.”

“Look, whatever your name is. If you’re going to lie about your name, then how can you expect me to trust that you’re being honest about anything else?”

“My name doesn’t matter,” I say. “What does matter is how we at ComPlex are able to sell copy machines that make copies of such quality that you’ll think they’re better...” *Click*

This has been happening all day. I don’t understand these people. If I’m someone else, does the customer still not get the same terrific offer? Do they not get the same first two months free? Do they not get ComPlex’s excellent service plan? I know for a fact that I am me, but what the hell should they care if I’m me or not? It’s not like my boss cared earlier today when I talked to him. Perhaps it didn’t help that he called me in on a bad day.

“You’re not the one I want,” he said when I walked into his office. “I wanted Barry.” He picked up a piece of paper off his desk and waved it at me. “Every performance review on this floor is absolutely terrible, but I’m going to have to say his are by far the worst of the bunch. Could you go back out there and send Barry in here for me, please?”

This confused me, as I’m the only person here named Barry.

“You wanted Barry,” I said.

His eyes turned to slits, “I do want Barry.”

My eyes opened wide “I am Barry.”

“You don’t look like Barry.”

“I can assure you that I am.” My boss looked at me and then down at his paper again for more than a few moments, getting frustrated after obviously not finding what he was looking for.

“I don’t care if you’re Jesus Christ!” he yelled. Spit sprayed from his lips and he again waved his piece of paper at me that did not look like my performance review. “Not with performance reviews like this one. We sell copiers here. Do you understand that?”

“High quality copiers,” I nodded in agreement with slight confidence.

“They practically sell themselves,” added my boss, still waving sheet of paper he said was a performance review.

“Copies better than the originals,” I mentioned the slogan, almost automatically.

My boss seemed somewhat placated by this and set the paper back down on his desk, saying, “You need to shape up or you’re gone, do you understand me?”

I nodded again, and he motioned toward the door. As I walked out his office, I heard him yell, “And if you see Barry out there, tell him to give Bob his pen back!”

If I was still alone in this world, days like today might bother me. But I’m not alone. I have a woman at home who wants me, who will do anything for me, who has confessed to me that I am the most passionate lover she has ever had.

The day before yesterday, I drove home on a street that had just that day been replaced by a new street that for all intents and purposes looked just like the old one. I did this in a car that wasn’t mine, though luckily there was a key on my keychain that worked in its ignition. I wondered if I should be concerned about my car and mentioned it to my lover.

“It doesn’t matter, Barry,” she said, pressing her body against mine, “as long as we love each other.”

Then I kissed her and we made love, once in the kitchen, then again in the bedroom. We lay awake in bed all night, caressing each other’s bodies and gazing into each other’s eyes.

We were in the living room when I said, “I love you,” and tickled the sides of her belly. She screamed, I laughed, we fell off the couch, and she started tickling my feet.

I went to tickle hers and found her feet had been replaced with someone else’s, but the feet were still beautiful so I tickled them anyway, laughing as she laughed.

KAYFABE

Steve is smashing my head into concrete outside the ring. It's not as bad as it looks, but I try to make it look as bad as possible. I should be performing better and my marriage problems are to blame.

Steve doesn't like me and I don't like him. If you don't like someone, you fight them. It's the quickest, easiest, and most satisfying course to conflict resolution.

Usually, your head gets slammed against things when you fight. My head's always been a popular target and, right now, a large mass of scar tissue on it has broken open and begun to bleed. Both Steve and I are happy about the blood, it makes fights look good and that's essential to what we do.

The reason I don't like Steve: his friend Hank shattered my friend Jimmy's knee with a lead pipe.

At the time, I had tried to save my friend Jimmy by running down a long dimly lit hallway to his rescue. Tragically, I was thwarted when Steve jumped out from behind a corner and hit me over the head with a metal folding chair. And so as I lay, concussed, really concussed, on the floor, Hank brought the full force of his hatred, in the form lead pipe, on my good friend Jimmy's knee. Cameras caught the whole thing, and the lighting was perfect. The audience at the Wings Stadium arena was absolutely shocked. Many trucker hats were sold.

I have reason not to like Steve. I've reason not to like the way he conducts himself, and this angle means we get in the ring and fight most nights for the foreseeable future. My cause is just and it's right I should win. Steve is now the hated one.

Steve and I are actually very good friends. My dislike for him is kayfabe. Jimmy's shattered knee is also kayfabe. Hank did give it a good whack with a pipe, though it wasn't a real

lead pipe. Lead pipes aren't around anymore because no one wants to drink water with lead in it. It was decided that Hank's aluminum pipe would be a kayfabe lead pipe because it sounded more tough and fit Hank's gimmick and sold more merchandise. We sell "Hank's Lead Pipe" to children, but it is made of Styrofoam because parents don't want their kids to whacking each other with heavy metal.

Hanks gimmick: he's a union plumber. His name: Hank The Union Plumber.

Jimmy is my kayfabe friend and also my actual friend, or at least he thinks he is. I don't really consider him my friend, which means he's not. I don't like Jimmy much because he flirted with my wife last year at a Christmas party when he thought no one was looking. He also flirted with her at the New Year's party when he thought no one was looking, and at a meet-and-greet two years ago. He was wrong to think he was any kind of sly because I saw him every time.

My wife no longer wishes to see me, but I'd still like to fight Jimmy. I would like to meet him on the street and slam his head into a concrete sidewalk in a way that hurt as bad as it looked. I've spent many nights in hotel rooms thinking about the various ways I could make Jimmy wish he hadn't hit on my wife, but I cannot do these things, because fights that aren't kayfabe and in rings get you arrested and don't sell merchandise.

Twenty thousand people chant my name as Steve stops driving my head into the mat with his large black boot, stands me up, and punches me a few times in the solar plexus. This doesn't hurt as much as I make it look.

At some point I'll beat up Steve. At some point one of us will win, but I can't remember who or how, and this is going to be a problem. I'm a bit confused today. My head's still kind of concussed and fuzzy from last night when Steve hit me over the head with a metal folding chair.

The mat smells like stale sweat and alcohol wipes. Steve picks me up and lifts me over his head and throws me back down. Twenty thousand people want me to kick Steve's ass and chant the name that is printed in red brick letters across the back of my tight black shorts.

“Solid Mike!” They yell.

The “T” in “Solid” and “Mike” is represented with a yellow lightning bolt. I don't feel the crowd's enthusiasm like I normally do. My wife has left me. The crowd knows this.

Solid Mike's my fighting name. I used to have a different name but I had to change it years ago because I lost a namefight to a man with the same name as me. Our name: The Patriot. We didn't like each other because we felt the other was not patriotic enough, and so we got into the ring and fought over who got to keep it. Now my name's Solid Mike. That's “Solid Mike,” in red brick letters with two lightning bolts.

The name on my birth certificate, my Florida marriage license, and on the title to my house is Howard Finkle. My parents named me Howard after Howard Nemerov, the great American Poet and are very proud of my accomplishments.

I sign into hotels under the name Jacob Johnson because most of my fans know the name Howard Finkle and bother me if they find I'm staying in a hotel that is within driving distance of their homes.

When my two daughters in Florida talk about me to other people they use the name Solid Mike, and so does my wife. They do this so people will know who I am. Sometimes older people do not recognize the name Solid Mike, and when this happens they mention I used to be The Patriot.

My wife and kids spend the majority of their time in Tampa, Florida. The kids, who my wife no longer wishes me to see, are very active in school and extracurriculars. The youngest takes jujitsu lessons and plays the bassoon. Oldest runs track and is president of the debate team. They're both at an age where neither of them thinks it's very cool to be the child of Solid Mike. When they're happy with me, they call me Dad. When they're not, they call me Solid Mike in a way that makes me feel very small. I miss them both dearly.

My wife, who currently serves as a Florida State Senator, attends various community and social events where she gets hit on. This is because many people, like Jimmy, are attracted to the fact she's a skinny waif of a thing with small but plump breasts, curly red hair, and a face that stops traffic. All of this is very helpful to her political career, and she's currently in a rather heated race for a seat on the United States House of Representatives. Probably she will win, political analysts say she has just the right combination of confident intelligence and elegant beauty.

My kayfabe wife has enormous fake breasts, bleach blonde hair, and a nose that is too small for her face. Her name is Nexus. Currently Nexus isn't happy with me, and we've been having a lot of arguments in rooms that are lit in ways that show the full brunt of our emotional toil. But I still love her dearly, and this is all that matters.

Steve taunts Nexus after he lifts me up over his shoulder and slams me down. The crowd screams for me to get it together. Steve's words are unkind. He says my kayfabe wife's reputation for sexual promiscuity is well-known.

"Nexus is a hoe," says Steve, grinding his knee in my face.

Nexus and I fell in love years ago when one of my matches was interrupted by The Union Of Devastation. Steve and Hank ran into the ring and rendered me unconscious by concussing my brain with their pipes and metal folding chairs.

I was saved when Nexus ran to the ring and frenziedly struck The Union with her metal folding chair, knocking them out and giving them concussions. All of this was kayfabe except for the concussions. In my business there are many concussions and few of them are kayfabe because kayfabe injuries must be visible for us to have any chance of selling them.

The name on Nexus's birth certificate is Janet Holt. This name is also on her California marriage license, along with her wife's name. Janet's wife's is almost as attractive as my own. I've met her, she seems very nice.

"You broke Jimmy's knee," I say to Steve, blood dripping from my forehead down my face. Jimmy's full fighting name is Jimmy Jamm. The fans love his smile and this sells lots of merchandise.

"Hank did," corrects Steve, "Hank broke Jimmy's knee and he deserved it." He's right. It was Hank who busted Jimmy's knee with a lead pipe, not Steve. This all gets very confusing sometimes.

Steve gets me to my feet and swings by body, head first, into one of the four metal poles supporting the ring. This further tears the mass of scar tissue on my forehead. Also, it probably worsens a concussion I got in Charlotte yesterday when Steve accidentally dropped me directly on my head. There's enough blood now that the smell should be clearly pungent for the screaming audience members standing in the front rows. This is a treat for them. They wear my lightning bolt t-shirts and love the sight of my blood.

"Don't you say nothin' bad about Janet," I say, wiping my eyes.

“Nexus,” corrects Steve, “Nexus is a hoe.”

“Don’t you say nothing bad ‘bout her either.” I yell, louder this time. I’ve been breaking kayfabe a lot lately and it’s bad, completely unprofessional.

Steve and I’ve fought many times. Our current match is particularly important, only I can’t remember why. This gets confusing sometimes. Guess it could be the concussions, but part of this is Creative’s fault. Creative has taken complete control of my angles because, they think, my ideas are no longer complex enough, which is bullshit. Easy for them to keep track of my angles when they’re not the ones getting railed in the face.

Creative has also taken Steve’s angles and, like me, he’s pretty pissed about it. Steve’s full fighting name: Long-Haul Steve. He also lives in Tampa, Florida. The name on the title of his house: Franklin Palmer. The occupation listed on his tax return: Professional Sports Entertainer.

His kayfabe occupation, his gimmick: he’s a truck driver. He comes to the ring in a green flannel shirt and blue trucker hat and has joined up with Hank-the-Plumber to start The Union of Devastation. When they fight together, their finishing move is Union Local 187. Steve’s finishing move is called The Truck Driver. They’re both currently actively recruiting other fighters into their kayfabe union. Even holding kayfabe union elections where the fans get to vote on representatives. Merchandise is flying off the shelves.

“You’re no kind of man anymore,” says Steve, “no kind of father.” The crowd’s screaming at me to get up.

He’s right about Nexus. We are fighting, and I’m a questionable father. The twins are kayfabe. I got Nexus kayfabe pregnant and she wore a prosthetic tummy for three months and wrestled in a magenta floral print maternity dress and sold a good deal of merchandise.

A nice set was created for our house and cameras were placed in ideal positions and lights would be set up to capture the emotion in Nexus's face as she sang to her belly and suffered strange food cravings and got emotional over dramatic television programming. We had many televised moments during her pregnancy. It was decided I should turn heel, go bad, and I had to strike her in order to get my fans to turn against me. This worked like a charm. Very few people want to cheer for an abusive husband. Simple as that. If you want the audience to dislike you, you strike a woman.

This was when I had to change my name from The Patriot to Solid Mike. The other Patriot said striking women wasn't very American. A year later, Nexus got into some trouble, I swooped in with a baseball bat and saved her, and she forgave me and this marked the end of my heelness. Fans still talk about this dark period in my life.

There's many rules in this business, the number one rule: never break kayfabe. Keeping kayfabe is necessary for maintaining the audience's suspension of disbelief. Two nights ago, while fighting Steve, I stated that Jimmy couldn't fight because of his strained neck which, of course, is wrong.

The kayfabe reason Jimmy cannot fight is because his knee was shattered by Hank's lead pipe. The reason stated on Jimmy's website, and Wikipedia, and on many fan blogs, is he suffers from a severe neck-muscle strain and must let it mend before performing again.

The real reason: Jimmy's in rehab, kicking a prescription pill addiction. Few people know this. Management decided it was time to send Jimmy to rehab when he got too belligerent at a company dinner and hit on the owner's wife when he thought no one was looking.

Creative went to work and, a few nights later, Hank shattered Jimmy's knee with a lead pipe in a hallway which was lit in a way the cameras could perfectly capture the hatred on

Hank's face as he brought down the pipe. Yeah, the angle's good because now every night at least twenty thousand people cheer for me, hold up signs proclaiming my vengeance of Jimmy's knee, and buy my merchandise. With Jimmy out, more fans spend their money on my stuff. But it's not because Creative's coming up with good ideas, they just got lucky because Jimmy's a no-good dope head who can't keep his dick in his pants.

Steve climbs up to the top rope, jumps off, and lands on my chest, elbow-first. A sharp thud sound emanates out from the ring and reaches out to the edges of Wings Stadium arena. I make this look like it hurts worse than it does. Though I'm not sure my grimace is grimacey enough. The crowd screams my name. I've no idea how this match ends. This is a problem. I haven't been performing great lately. I get confused sometimes. The doctor says it's due to an accumulation of concussions. Thankfully, the audience isn't expecting my best effort because my mind isn't completely on the match. They know I'm distracted by my marriage problems.

Weeks ago, a set was created for my wife Nexus and I to have an argument. Lights were set up so that the emotion on our faces could be clearly lit and accented as we passionately screamed at each other. She was mad because I forgot her birthday, she was mad because I forgot our anniversary. She said I was never around and neglected our children, I was obsessed with my feud with Steve and she was leaving me, so I struck her and the cameras caught everything. We sold a hell of a lot of merchandise.

Wait, that's not right.

My actual wife was mad about these things. She was mad because I forgot her birthday and anniversary, she said I was never around and was neglecting our children. She said that she wanted to separate and to for me to leave and not to come back, so I struck her. I struck my actual wife.

I don't think there were any cameras there.

Come to think of it, I don't think there was any special attempt to light our faces as that usually only happens when I'm with Nexus.

Steve kicks me in the head. This doesn't hurt so bad, but he doesn't pull-up enough and my brain gets jarred and the air's filled with the smell of overripe fruit.

"You're weak," he says. "That's why Nexus is going to leave you."

Steve throws me against the ropes, I dodge his clothesline, bounce off the opposite ropes and clothesline him. Screams of joy rip through the audience, and it's so loud I can feel their roar in my bones.

Nexus has been doing well for quite a while but we aren't getting along anymore, though I still love her. Two weeks ago she told me she was leaving me for Hank The Plumber. She said she's part of The Union, that she's running for union representative.

She said she was leaving and taking our children and then hit me over the head with a metal folding chair. All this was done on the set of our kayfabe home and was lighted perfectly. Everyone thinks this is tragic, especially considering my current feud with Steve, and empathizes.

No one knows I struck my actual wife. No one knows we're separated.

My wife says no one wants to vote for a woman whose husband beats her, so she's keeping everything quiet. She says that if I have any respect left for her or our children, I'll keep it quiet too. She says she doesn't want me around anymore because she's afraid what I might do. I drive my elbow into Steve's chest and wish I knew how this was suppose to end.

Steve spits and says, "You're pathetic, you're wife doesn't want you."

“I still love my wife,” I say, and pick Steve up over my head and slam him down on the mat. He lies motionless on the ground as I get out of the ring and get a metal folding chair. My notoriety got my wife elected to State Senate and now it’s going to get her elected to the National House of Representatives. My yearly earning potential is seven figures and she doesn’t want me to see our kids anymore.

Steve’s getting up when I climb back into the ring and whack his head. Probably this gives him a concussion. I don’t much care, it’s part of the business.

One of the ringside announcers pounds his fist on the announcing table and then proceeds to scratch his nose. These means the match is over in ninety seconds. This is not good.

I don’t remember how this is supposed to end.

Steve gets up and I hit him again. A cut opens up on his face and fans can probably smell the blood fifteen rows up. This is good. We’re going to sell a lot of merchandise.

The crowd screams as Nexus runs into the arena and down the aisle with metal folding chair. She’s wearing a blue pin-striped pantsuit with a yellow button attached to the lapel that reads “VOTE FOR NEXUS!”

“I don’t want to see you anymore,” she says, and my kayfabe wife baseball-swings the chair toward my head.

“This marriage is over!” She yells and hits me again. “You’re never going to see your children again.”

I fall to my knees. I remember how this match ends.

A PIG TO A MAN

Stewart called his wife Janet from his car on the way home from work.

“Did he come?”

“Yes, Stewie, he came.”

“Is he beautiful?”

“Yes, Stewie, you know he is.”

Once inside his apartment, Stewart saw the crocodile’s tail jutting out from the computer room. He quickly stepped over the tail so he could get into the doorway and see his new acquisition in all its reptilian glory.

Janet was sitting at the desk and his new crocodile lay next to her in its pool of dark murky water. The crocodile was so remarkable that he could barely handle his emotions, and for a moment, he felt tears swell.

Its scales were as big as Stewart’s eyes and the color and texture of stone. It was at least three feet wide and had ridge after ridge of bone plate starting from his head all the way back to the tip of his tail. There were no muscles in his face and yet he still looked as though he was smiling about some secret.

Stewart had just gotten a promotion and with that promotion came a new office, new responsibilities, much respect within the company, and enough money to buy a crocodile. This was Stewart’s new crocodile.

The reptile lay perfectly motionless. Stewart’s ecstasy presented itself as a warm buzz that started at the base of his skull and then spread through the rest of his body.

“What do you think of Kyle?” he asked Janet, who was sitting at the desk and working at the computer, browsing some nature website, just a few feet away from the crocodile and its pool of muddy saltwater.

Janet turned to him, “You know, I have never felt more comfortable,” she paused thoughtfully, “in my life. Kyle really knows how to make a girl feel safe.” She pointed at the crocodile he had named Kyle, and the gigantic reptile picked up its enormous head and moved slightly to the left before settling back into the mud. “Just look at him. You can already tell he’s protective of me. Plus, he’s pleasant to be around.” Most of Kyle’s head was submerged in mud, but his eyes were still visible. “I feel like I’ve been so much more productive ever since they dropped him off.”

Stewart studied Kyle proudly. The reptilian eye that looked at him winked twice with two different sets of eyelids, one vertical and one horizontal. Stewart winked back, certain their friendship had begun.

“Has he eaten yet?” he asked, and then noticed the pig sitting in the opposite corner of the room, a few feet away from Janet.

“I don’t really understand,” said Janet, “but Kyle doesn’t seem interested. Ever since they brought Kyle and Porky in, all the two have done is stare at each other.”

The pig had to be at least two hundred pounds and was as round as a barrel. It looked everything like a pig: pink, smooth, and piggish right down to the spiral tail. It sat on a small pile of hay beneath the window in the corner with its eyes fixed on the giant croc. Every once and awhile, it oinked.

Stewart figured Kyle would eventually get hungry though he wasn’t sure he liked the idea of Janet getting so familiar with his crocodile’s meals.

“You shouldn’t have named the pig,” he said. “It’s not good to get attached.”

“Hey,” said Janet, turning her head back to the computer screen, “I like Porky. He’s got personality.”

Stewart eyed the pig in an attempt to discover the personality to which his wife was referring. The pig stared blankly at Stewart. It oinked.

“But he’s a meal.”

“Whatever,” said Janet, for a second, her smile reminded him of Kyle’s, like she knew something he didn’t. “If it happens, it happens. It’s the circle of life.”

Stewart wrinkled his nose in disapproval and walked out of the office, going down the hallway into the kitchen. The discussion about food had made him hungry. “Did you pick up ice cream today?” He shouted at the open office door with the tail poking out of it.

“I didn’t have time, and the caterers will be here soon. Why don’t you walk down to the store and let me worry about the party.”

Not really wanting to deal with the caterers, Stewart left happily. As he walked down the street the sun shined upon his face and glinted off the window of *La Che Le Rue*, the nicest restaurant in town. Now that he had Kyle, he might even be able to get a table there. Before today, such a thing would have been impossible.

At the corner store, he picked up the ice cream because Janet was always forgetting to buy his Rocky Road.

“What a wonderful alligator,” remarked the wife of a VP, while sipping her merlot.

The caterers had made certain the apartment was finely appointed. They had even gone so far as to place a drink waiter directly in front of Kyle, and a waiter with hors d'oeuvres in front of Porky.

“It’s not an alligator, it’s a crocodile,” Stewart corrected her. “Saltwater, *Crocodylus porosus*, from Indonesia.”

“One of the biggest crocodiles I’ve ever seen,” commented the director of technical operations, while he sipped his gin martini.

“He’s actually the biggest on record,” Stewart corrected, smiling and sipping a vodka martini.

“What’s the pig doing here?” asked Ted’s wife Marge.

The pig seemed to notice that it was being talked about, and greeted her with a look of mild disinterest. She stared back in kind. The pig oinked.

“Porky should eventually be Kyle’s first meal,” answered Janet, holding her cosmopolitan away from her body and shifting her hips toward the crocodile. “But I not sure about that because I’m starting to I think they like each other.”

Stewart’s boss, Ted, was pleasantly impressed with the croc. “That’s one beautiful animal you got there, Stewart. He’s going to be a big hit.”

Stewart thanked him again, and Ted laughed warmly. “Do you like golf?”

Drinks were poured. The night went long. Kyle’s head sat in his pool of mud with only his eyes above the water, and the heads of the company oohed and aahed. Every once-in-a-while, Kyle blinked his two eyelids in succession and the oohs and aahs would come faster.

At the end of the night, Stewart and Janet found themselves alone with Stewart’s boss Ted and his drunken wife Marge.

“I heard the VP of technology just got himself a Galápagos tortoise,” said Marge. The waiter again took away her empty glass and replaced it with a full one.

“Goddamn show-off,” commented Ted under his breath as he sipped his fresh martini.

“Harvey, from accounts receivable, they say he just picked up his second Komodo dragon.”

“Oh, my god,” Janet chuckled, shifting her hips toward the Kyle. “Could you get anymore cliché?”

“Well,” said Marge, “I can tell you that that saltwater croc you’ve picked out is a good one.” Marge paused for a moment. “What’s his name? Lyle?”

“Kyle,” said Stewart. “His name is Kyle.”

“Kyle?” asked Marge.

Ted had several poison dart frogs and a Colorado River Toad. Marge was always mentioning how poison dart frogs were nearly extinct; also, that the Colorado River toad could be licked for a high that was like no other. She’d given the frogs all names of past presidents. Problem was that everybody knew that Ted didn’t really care for frogs, didn’t even like to lick them. What was the point of having a Colorado River toad if you didn’t even lick it?

“You’ve got a fine animal there Stewart,” said Ted, “a fine animal. You know, I wasn’t kidding about that game of golf.”

Stewart had to admit that being the head of the division was certainly better than being a part of it. He felt he was a better person now that he had his own crocodile. He no longer felt drained by the never ending columns of numbers it was his job to keep in order. Recently, his work had seemed much easier and life was good.

That morning, his wife had told him she wanted to bring Kyle out and show him off to some of Marge's lunch friends. It had only been a couple of weeks, and they had already made sufficient advances up the social strata. Soon, the three of them would be unstoppable.

However Stewart was beginning to be bothered by the pig. It had been almost two weeks, and Kyle still hadn't eaten him.

"I'm going to leave the office door open and let Porky go where he likes," Janet had announced that morning, hands on her hips.

Stewart had tried to be staunch, saying, "Janet, he's food."

Janet was stauncher, "I don't think Kyle's going to eat him. Look at them, they're friends."

"But..." Stewart marched into the computer room and observed the two animals. They were staring at each other, as if they were planning something. When they noticed him they broke their eye contact. There were no signs of a predator prey relationship. Janet was right and though this wasn't something that normally bothered him, it was one of the first times in recent memory that Stewart was happy to leave for work.

"How are you settling in, Stewart?" asked Ted.

When Stewart had moved into his office, he'd hung a picture of a crocodile biting down on a gazelle as it tried to cross a river. Ted always liked to look at it when he visited, and this day was no different.

"Not too bad, I'd say," said Stewart. He and Ted had not yet played their game of golf. Stewart was just going to mention this when Ted began to speak.

"And how is Kyle?"

"Excellent, sir."

“You’re not too overwhelmed by your new responsibilities are you?”

Stewart gave him a quizzical look. He had, up to that point, been feeling underwhelmed by his new position.

“Oh, it’s nothing, really.” replied Ted, “It’s just that we received a few reports from this office with the columns miscalculated.”

Stewart felt like his gut had been punched several times. Bad numbers were contrary to games of golf with Ted and were also bad for careers.

“Don’t worry, Stew,” consoled Ted. “I made my fair share of mistakes when I first started. Even after I got the job down I still had my fair share.”

Stewart nodded.

“No worries, Stewart,” said Ted as he walked out the office door. “We have the utmost faith in you. I mean, with a crocodile like Kyle, how could you go anywhere but up?”

Ted was out the door and Stewart was distraught. This was bad. He’d never before overlooked a column error. Had his contentment made him soft and caused him to lose his edge?

He spent the remainder of his day pouring over numbers and making sure everything was correct. Late in the afternoon, he texted Janet telling her that he wasn’t going to be home until even later.

He got a text back from her telling him not to worry; her parents were having a dinner party and she had brought Kyle out to see them. She said things were going well and that everybody just adored Kyle.

At home he found that she and Kyle were still not there. It was 9:00 p.m. and the only other living thing in the apartment was the pig.

Porky followed him into the bedroom and stared at him while he undressed. This was disconcerting. It was as though the pig could not only read Stewart's thoughts, but also that it thought those thoughts were trivial. He threw his socks at the pig but they curved wide left and the pig seemed not to care.

"Is there something I can do for you?" he asked the pig.

It oinked.

Too exhausted to wait for his wife to come home, Stewart found himself falling asleep on the recliner in the living room, watching the news as the pig watched him.

"Janet, I don't like Porky running around the apartment," said Stewart. When he woke up earlier that morning, he could smell the scent of truffles and green peppers being cooked into an omelet along with what smelled like country apple ham.

When Stewart sat down for breakfast, Janet set down in front of him a cup of coffee, a peeled orange, and some toast.

"No eggs today," she said as Stewart looked dispassionately at his toast. "I used the last of them to make omelets for Kyle and Porky. You should have seen Kyle yesterday. Everybody loves him."

Yesterday, Janet had brought Kyle to racquetball. The day before, she brought him to her bridge club. Today, she was taking him out again. She'd been spending a lot more time socializing lately and Stewart didn't really mind.

There was still the problem with the pig, though. He'd been spending way too much time with alone with that unnerving pig. All it did was stare at him with its cool pig gaze. Nor did

Stewart like the fact that Kyle was eating truffle, green pepper, and country apple ham omelets and not eating Porky.

The pig was hunkered in the corner of the kitchen, and it noticed Stewart watching him. It oinked.

“Why don’t you take Porky with you today?” asked Stewart.

Janet laughed loudly, then said, “Bring a pig...to the country club?”

“Hey, stop laughing at me and make sure you pick up some Rocky Road, we’re out again.”

At his office, Stewart made certain his numbers were in order. There had not been a single error since he started pulling a few extra hours every day. He almost wanted to run up to Ted’s office for affirmation, but decided to take a more professional route.

He opened the intercom to his secretary.

“Have you been able to contact Ted about our golf game yet?” Stewart peered across his office to where his gazelle picture hung and thought what a golf game could mean for him at this company.

His thoughts were interrupted by his secretary saying that, no, Ted was not available this week.

Stewart asked his secretary to try and schedule golf for the coming week. Then he spent the rest of his day making his numbers perfect before happily leaving the office.

When Stewart got home the pig, as usual, was waiting for him at the door. It stared at him accusingly while he made a ham sandwich. It stared at him even more accusingly while he ate the ham sandwich. Stewart felt no remorse.

Janet was still not back. It was possible she was at the country club, but by this hour only the bar would be open and it was bad form for a married woman to sit unescorted at a bar this late into the evening. Stewart figured she'd probably taken Kyle to some party, but was annoyed she forgetting to tell him. She'd been forgetting a lot of stuff lately.

Stewart walked to the freezer and was unsurprised that his wife had again forgotten to pick up his ice cream.

Porky sat on its rump in the middle of the kitchen, and its eyes methodically tracked Stewart's movements. A walk to the corner store seemed like a good idea.

Thoughts of delicious Rocky Road ice cream filled his mind as he walked past *Le Che La Rue*.

Something familiar caught the corner of his vision and he noticed his wife sitting at a table by the window. Across from the table was Kyle. The head of the crocodile rested on the chair beside Janet, and the rest of his awesome body snaked across the aisles and under the tables of several other customers.

Janet was talking to some patrons at the table across from hers. He figured she must be discussing Kyle because she kept motioning to the large crocodile next to her that had just finished eating its foie gras and was now beginning on a plate of roast duck.

Several other patrons looked in their direction and must have also been enamored with Kyle because they all appeared to smile, laugh, point, and comment when Kyle blinked both sets of eyelids.

Stewart turned around and went back to his apartment. The pig oinked at him as he walked into the door, but he paid no attention. Why hadn't she told him where she was going? She knew he'd been dreaming about going to *Le Che La Rue* for years. He would have been

excited to hear she made successful reservations. He would have made a point to take off work and come along if she'd asked him.

Stewart turned around and walked back to the apartment. The pig waited at the door and Stewart went to the kitchen and poured himself a whiskey. If the pig noticed Stewart's distress, it didn't show when he gave him the kind of look one might find a mother giving a child after they'd just colored on a wall with crayon. Stewart sat on a recliner in the living room and wished he had some ice cream. It was three in the morning when he fell asleep.

The sun was peeking through the apartment windows when Kyle and Janet walked in.

"Where were you last night?" Stewart asked, rubbing his eyes and walking toward the kitchen to fix himself a pot of coffee.

"I took Kyle to the country club, then I took him to the spa, then we went to *Le Che La Rue* for dinner, and then we went clubbing." The energy in Janet's smile was too much for this early in the morning. She was glowing.

"You went clubbing? What time did you get home?"

"Oh, Stewart, we're just getting home now. We fell asleep at the afterparty."

Stewart frowned and waited for an explanation.

Janet shrugged. "So I was out all night, so what? You should be thanking me, Stewart. It was all I could do to keep the women off Kyle."

"What?"

"I had to stake him out, you know. Let the all the other ladies know that he was mine."

Janet stuck her arms out and shuffled her feet from right to left like a defender in basketball.

Stewart couldn't remember his wife showing this much spunk since before they were married. He looked down and curmudgeonly sipped his coffee.

"Oh Stewie, it's just a little fun. We wouldn't have seen each other until morning anyway." Janet paused, "Oh, and I told Ted he could take Kyle for a few days."

Stewart began to mention that Ted was snubbing their golf outing, and he probably didn't deserve to take Kyle for a few days, but Janet cut him off.

"I know what you're going to say. Ted's got his own reptiles. Well he doesn't, actually, frogs are amphibians and everybody knows he got them because of Marge. Let the man have a real lizard for little while."

"Crocodiles aren't lizards," said Stewart, correcting her. "That's like saying a monitor lizard is a crocodile."

"What does that have to do with Ted?"

Stewart suppressed his anger. She was right. It was nothing for Stewart to share Kyle. Sure, he hadn't been able to spend any real time with the reptile of his dreams, but it was OK, it would raise his esteem in the eyes of Ted.

Stewart got it all straight in his mind on the way to his office. He would talk to Janet about spending more time together. Maybe taking a vacation would help rekindle the fire between them.

At work he asked his secretary if his good friend and boss had gotten back to him about the golf outing.

No, he hadn't.

Important business to be sure, Ted just wanted to impress some out-of-town clients. Stewart walked over to the picture of the doomed gazelle.

“Maybe I shouldn’t be concerned with Ted,” he told the picture, “Even if he is out golfing with my crocodile. The man has important things to do.”

Stewart turned away and hoped that Ted would have the time to get back to him at some point. If his numbers and his crocodile were any indication of his value, there was no way he could go unnoticed by Ted for long.

He occupied himself with work. The numbers were a good distraction. If he’d ever been good at anything, numbers was it. He texted Janet and told her to pick up some ice cream on the way home.

“I miss Kyle,” Stewart lamented, lying in bed next to his wife, Janet. This was their last morning without the croc. Ted was due to return the gigantic reptile that day. The pig sat at the foot of the bed, acting as it always did.

“I know,” said Janet, “which is why we shouldn’t lend him out anymore. Ted’s got plenty of amphibians that he can impress his clients with. You know that he’s got a toad...”

“I know,” Stewart was irritated. “Everybody knows about Ted’s tripping toad.” He paused, “And wasn’t it your idea to lend him Kyle in the first place?”

“Stewart,” said Janet, changing the subject. “I’ve got something I need to talk to you about.”

Stewart did not like the sound of this.

“We need to get another bed.”

Stewart looked down at their comforter. “What?” he asked. “What’s wrong with this one?”

“Since you’ve been working nights lately and usually falling asleep on the recliner, I’ve taken to sleeping next to Kyle, and I think we should get another bed before we get him back.”

“What?”

“He’s quite cuddly, you know.”

Stewart didn’t know. Stewart hadn’t been able to spend more than twenty uninterrupted minutes with his crocodile since he bought him. “I don’t understand why giving Kyle his own bed would help him sleep.”

Janet gave him a tentative frown, “The bed isn’t for him, Stewart. It’s for you.”

Stewart didn’t even get a chance to say ‘what’.

“It’s really no big deal. We’ve pretty much been doing it already.” Janet seemed to notice the distress in Stewart’s eyes. Her face softened, she put her hand on his arm, leaned over, and kissed his lips. It felt good.

“Just try it for one night. If you don’t like it, then we can figure something else out.”

Janet looked at her husband with a softness he hadn’t remembered seeing since early in their marriage, and he suddenly remembered why he fell in love with her.

The next evening Stewart was driving home in a cloud of frustration and anger.

Earlier that day when he drove to work Stewart had called his secretary. She reported that there was still no appointment for golf with Ted. At the time he figured that was OK. Respect was the name of the game. At least now he knew he had some leverage because it would only be a matter of time before Ted was calling up to borrow Kyle again.

Stewart had been surprised when, once at work, Ted had decided to visit him at his office.

“You’ve got a mighty fine crocodile there, Stewart,” Ted had said. He stared at the picture of the doomed gazelle as he always did. “I’ll probably need to borrow him again soon.”

“Sure,” Stewart paused, knowing this was the time to make his move. “Say, maybe we could talk about it when we go out for our golf game.”

“I can’t do it this week,” said Ted. His lips spread into a thin smile as he studied the picture. On this day, the gazelle looked especially helpless. “Just make sure you keep in contact with my secretary.”

Stewart had said nothing he Ted left. He couldn’t believe the nerve of the man. He’d been calling Ted’s secretary for weeks and it had never gotten him anywhere. The message had been obvious: he was being blown off, again.

Now his drive home was filled with numerous fevered attempts to call Janet, who wasn’t picking up, to vent his many frustrations about Ted and his job. It didn’t matter, he almost didn’t want to talk to her until he was able to sit down and tell her the whole story, uninterrupted, while eating a bowl of ice cream.

Hopefully they would be able to come up with some reasonable solution to his problems with Ted. He remembered a time in his life when nothing was more consoling than Janet and a bowl of Rocky Road.

When he arrived home, there was a note on the apartment door.

Stewart,

I’ve been rather stressed lately and decided to take a vacation. For the next couple of weeks, I will be sunning myself in beautiful Tahiti, Mexico. Don’t worry, I’ve taken Kyle with me because I think he’s also getting stressed and I feel the tropical air could do him some good. We’ll send you a postcard when we get there.

I hope everything is going well at work,

Janet

P.S. Don't forget to feed Porky.

Stewart dropped the note on the ground, not believing the news could have come at a worse possible time. He needed her, now. He needed Kyle the Crocodile too.

Didn't she care about him anymore? Was Kyle the only reason she was still with him?

He stalked into his apartment and walked into his kitchen to get some ice cream.

In the kitchen, both the freezer and refrigerator doors were open, and the floor was strewn with vegetables, condiment bottles, and bags of fish sticks were all over the floor. And there was Porky, sitting between the refrigerator and the counter on its big old pig rump in the middle of its makeshift pigsty, its snout covered in some kind of creamy white substance.

Next to Porky was an empty container of Rocky Road. Porky stared up at him with what looked like a satisfied smile, like a bully high on a power trip. It oinked.

For a moment, Stewart thought about it how nice it would have been to have the sun on his skin had he been soaking up rays a beach in Tahiti.

"That's my Rocky Road!" Screamed Stewart. He wondered if he still had a wife, if he should go after her, or if he should even care anymore. He wondered if his job was worth all of the stress when his boss had no respect for him.

He noticed Porky sitting on the tile floor and looking up at him as it always did.

"I've had just about enough of you!"

Stewart grabbed a butcher knife from the counter and launched himself at the pig.

Porky squealed while scrambling around to the other side of the counter. Then it ran across the hall into the living room. Stewart ran after the pig and positioned himself so that the computer room was the only direction the pig could flee. And, as he closed in on the pig, that is where the pig went, trying to hide itself in the pool of muddy saltwater.

Stewart walked in slowly and closed the door behind him.

“Let me tell you something, Porky,” said Stewart as he raised his knife and looked into the eyes of the terrified pig. “If nobody else is gonna eat you, I will.”

COWBOYS IN RAINBOW CITY

The sky is full of rainbows. Shelly, a nine-year-old girl, sits next to her teddy bear on the couch. In another room, her brother is coughing. Outside, a building explodes. Shelly doesn't pay any attention to the sound or to the small bits of debris from the four-story insurance building falling past her window, and neither does her teddy bear. This isn't entirely their fault: the couch they're sitting on is facing away from the window, and the show they're watching has shocked them, quite violently, into a rage trance.

The big screen shows a beautiful beach of white sand. The sun is shining, techno music is playing, and small waves roll up on the shore as young people dance.

"This is abhorrent." Shelly's head wobbles in horror. More than anything she hopes her eyes might be lying to her.

"Disgusting," agrees Teddy the teddy bear, scratching his furry chin with a furry paw.

The youths gyrate to the beat of the music in swimsuits that utilize as little fabric as possible. Shelly feels her nine-year-old eye twitch, opens her mouth and, head still wobbling, speaks as slowly and deliberately as she can; "What is this abomination?"

Teddy knows she knows what they're watching, but answers anyway. "I believe the kids call it 'freak dancing,'" his front paws resting firmly atop his large and furry belly.

On her big screen the show continues. Techno-pop music's playing, and all over the beach there are young ladies and young men bending over and thrusting their posteriors into the welcoming pelvic regions of other young ladies and men. Usually, it's a young lady's posterior that is thrust into a young man's pelvic region. But sometimes this positioning is reversed, or is between a man and a man or a lady and a lady, or any combination thereof. In fact, the combination seems not to matter.

“Sometimes referred to as ‘booty grinding,’” Teddy adds.

Both parties continually bounce up and down to the techno. They’re sweating profusely; no doubt the result of the intense friction between their posterior and pelvic regions. The look on Shelly’s face lets Teddy know she needs a drink. She watches him get up and walk towards the kitchen. As he disappears from view, she notices a crossed-eyed kitten walking jerkily into the room. For a moment this strange tabby looks as though it’s going to block the view of her program; instead, it stumbles headfirst into the wall.

“Cody!” Shelly yells, “Could you please keep your inbred kittens on *your* side of the apartment?”

Her twin brother stumbles in. The nine-year-old boy wears thick square-rimmed glasses and a pair of tighty-whiteys. He coughs, coughs again, and then readjusts his glasses, as they are askew his head.

“Sorry,” he mumbles as he picks up the mangy, inbred tabby-kitten. He exits the room as quickly as possible, probably trying to get away before Shelly can say anything else. As usual, he’s too slow.

“You’re supposed to keep them in your room,” she snaps.

“Whatever” comes back from around the corner, along with another cough. From the opposite direction comes Teddy. The stuffed bear walks up to the coffee table and sets down two lowball glasses, a bucket of ice, and a freshly opened bottle of Moldy Poison Black Label Whiskey.

“I don’t want any ice,” grumbles Shelly. “Cowboy Rick doesn’t take ice with his Moldy Poison.”

Outside, another building explodes. Rubble from the five-story walk-up flies high up in the air before the arms of gravity bring it all back down. Again, debris showers the world beyond Shelly's window. Again, she doesn't notice. She takes a sip from her lowball. The kick from the pure liquor makes her head wobble noticeably. She thinks about her show and her day, which is ruined because her favorite show has been cancelled. Probably, she would never see Cowboy Rick again.

The nine-year-old had been watching *Cowboys* for most of her life. The reality TV series chronicled the movements and exploits of several cowboys. Initially, Shelly was surprised by how little she knew about them. Figuring them a plain and simple folk with a disposition for fist-fighting which, for the most part, was true—at least at first.

In the beginning most of the show's conflicts centered on whether the cowboys were manly and prideful enough. An example being when one of the cowboys died in the "Rustlers Attacking the Cattle Drive" challenge and Cowboy Rick attributed Cowboy Dave's failure to shoot a single rustler as evidence of him "not being much of a man, much less a cowboy." The same could be said in the aftermath of the "Starving Settlers Attacking the Cattle Drive" challenge. Such incidents were common. Usually these episodes involved fistfights, which always did well in the ratings. But what really upped the ante and the viewership was when the host presented the cowboy cast with the "Creating Your Own Frontier Society" challenge: a society suitable to be known as truly "cowboy." Yes, indeed, this created many a fistfight, but just as interesting was how the different cowboys interpreted what it meant to be "cowboy." It made the show multidimensional, which Shelly liked. The fact that Cowboy Rick was extremely attractive was also something Shelly liked.

Had the show not been cancelled, “The Most ‘Cowboy’ Cowboy” challenge would have been set to air. This was a show where viewers would call in and vote on which cowboy they thought acted most like a real cowboy. Anyone who thought more than one cowboy fit the description then had to vote for who they thought was the realest cowboy.

Shelly had been waiting for “The Most ‘Cowboy’ Cowboy” challenge all week. There would be drama and politics, and most of all, there would be fistfights. She’d vote for Cowboy Rick, although she was pretty sure he’d win regardless. He was easily the most ‘cowboy’ of all the cowboys. He was rugged, dangerous, hard, and handsome. Over the years, Shelly had become very comfortable staring at Cowboy Rick and looked forward to having her esteem of him validated by the viewing audience.

But Shelly turned on the TV this morning to find that the show had been cancelled. And she now finds herself watching a show that’s very much like most other shows. A show where real, live people who live by a real, live beach freak dance live to techno-pop music.

Thump, thump, thump goes the techno-pop, and Shelly’s head hurts. She flips through three channels. Each goes *thump* as she passes. She knows it doesn’t matter, so she stops. There are one thousand channels; her bother Cody insists on having them. This results in the apartment now having access to one thousand different variations of freak dancing. It’s on every channel; a reality show for every possible situation. Young people freak dancing on beaches and in clubs. Competitions for who is the best freak dancer. Booty-grinding for debt relief. Pelvic friction weight-loss expos. Celebrity freak dancing and even on newscasts.

Shelly swallows her drink. Teddy does the same, refills their glasses.

“This has to stop,” says Shelly, muting the television. “I mean, what would Cowboy Rick think of such debauchery?”

A vague *thump, thump, thump*, can still be heard from down the hall. The door to Cody's room is open. Two kittens, cross-eyed and drooling, exit Cody's bedroom booty dancing past the living room on their way to the kitchen.

Teddy shakes his head, replies, "I couldn't agree more," and takes a drink.

Cody appears, still in his tighty-whiteys. He runs past the living room, presumably to retrieve his dancing kittens.

Shelly pretends she doesn't notice and continues her rant. "I mean, we don't just live anywhere; this is Rainbow City! We should be setting an example. Freak dancing is the kind of hedonism that will plunge us into amoral anarchy. With fine upstanding shows like *Cowboys* off the air, we're going to find ourselves on a crash course into the dark ages."

A voice comes from the hallway. "You know what your problem is?" Cody's voice startles Shelly. She looks up to find her brother at the entrance to the living room. In each hand, he's holding one of the two kittens who had booty danced past Shelly and Teddy just moments before.

"Your problem is you're too idealistic." He coughs, absentmindedly covering his mouth with one of his demented kittens, then says, "You think everyone has to think the same as you." Shelly silently stares at Cody, who couldn't be more wrong. She just wants her show back. She wants Cowboy Rick, her ruggedly handsome beefcake, back on the air and that's it. Not wanting to admit this to her brother, she instead points at the freak-dancing teens on the big screen.

"Is it too idealistic to want a program that doesn't consist entirely of pornography? When did continuous pelvis-to-butt contact become our chief form of entertainment?"

Cody frowns, and his kittens frown with him. "What're you going to do? Tell the kids 'no freak dancing?' They'll never listen to you. They're having too much fun."

Shelly shifts her gazes again to the gyrating youngsters grinding genitalia. The smiles are hard to miss. It would be difficult to argue fun wasn't being had.

"Look," she says, "I'm a good person. I pay my taxes. I volunteer time and give money to help the poor and needy because I love my city." Shelly empties her glass, thinking fondly of Cowboy Rick, the most "cowboy" of all cowboys. "But the city I fell in love with was not trapped," Shelly's voice raises in anticipation of her final judgments, "in the sultry embrace of hedonism."

Whoops and hollers emit from the big screen while Shelly's big head shakes in anger. Teddy nods in agreement; with one hand he's drinking and with the other, rubbing his furry belly.

Cody shakes his head. He's so excited that he forgets he's holding his kittens as he thrusts his right arm forward to gesture accusingly at his sister. "You're getting behind the times, Shelly. The world's passing you by."

The kitten stares at Shelly, then blinks. She ignores it. "Said the pot to the kettle," she indignantly replies to the boy who hasn't bothered to socialize with anyone except his kittens for a long, long time.

Cody keeps the one kitten thrust forward; it's no longer staring at Shelly but seems to be distracted by something debris-related going on outside the window. "Whatever, like cowboys even matter anymore."

"Hey, cowboys are relevant!" Shelly points sanctimoniously at the ceiling. "They help us better understand ourselves because they represent a microcosm of our social attitudes. Really, what could better express such things?"

Probably because he knows his sister is just repeated the opening monologue of the show, Cody says, "That's easy, watch this." He sets down his kittens and they immediately begin freak dancing. "How do you like that for attitude?"

Having made his point, Cody picks up his kittens and stalks off to his room. Shelly visualizes strangling her brother, and this makes her feel better momentarily. She doesn't understand why he's always so obstinate and wonders why he couldn't be more like Teddy. Now *there's* someone who knew how to agree with a person.

Looking over at him, she sees his furry paw pointed at the TV. It's a special report. The news camera's leveled at the city's central post office. There are, of course, several young people freak dancing out in front. They whoop and holler and rub and bounce, and behind them, the post office explodes.

Shelly takes the TV off mute. The announcer informs the viewing public of several similar reports there'd been over the course of that morning. Looking outside, Shelly and her bear find their normally illustrious skyline is missing several buildings. Adjacent to their apartment window are a couple of smoking craters. Behind them, the announcer reports that Grandmaster Mayor Manley will be holding a town hall meeting to address the recent exploding building problem, after which he will allow the public to air grievances they have, if any. The ridiculously square jaw of the tremendously handsome Grandmaster Mayor now appears on screen.

Shelly always thought that if there were any man more manly than Cowboy Rick, it'd have to be Grandmaster Mayor Manley. This, of course, is the reason he gets elected over and over again. The man has a jaw people can't say no to.

She wondered what he would do about the exploding buildings; probably ban them. It's what he always does. Everybody in town knows if Mayor Manley thinks something's a problem, he bans it. For him, it's the simplest and most effective solution. When there were too many car accidents on the streets, he banned cars. When too many girls hurt their ankles playing hopscotch, he banned chalk. When he needed to appear tough on crime, he banned criminals. When he wanted to show his citizens they had nothing to fear from earthquakes, he banned earthquakes and then he banned fear.

Thinking of all this it creates an idea, the force of which makes Shelly's head shake harder than the kick from her Moldy Poison. If Grandmaster Mayor Manley could see freak dancing as a threat, he would ban it. The solution was as simple as that. He would ban freak dancing in all its forms, even the abstract ones, and freak dancing would be banned from television, and then it would only be a matter of time before Cowboy Rick was back on the air.

"We must go to that town hall meeting!" she shouts. Teddy gives her quizzical look, which she ignores. "Get our yellow rain coats, boots, and Cody's umbrella. I'll explain on the way!"

Teddy, who has always been a lightweight, is drunk. He stumbles to the hallway closet and retrieves two yellow raincoats, two pairs of green rubber boots, and Cody's enormous red and green striped umbrella. Getting ready to venture out into the city, they make sure to refresh their drinks and leave a note for Cody before they go.

On Cody's bed there is a pillow. Under the pillow is a gun. Next to the pillow and on top of the bed there is Cody. All around Cody there are kittens, because Cody is a kitty hoarder. And,

in the immortal words of nine-year-old kitty hoarders everywhere: “It started out with just a couple of strays.”

Though most of the blame should be placed on his sister. Contrary to what one usually hears about twins, Cody’s nothing like his sister and makes it his purpose to be so. It’s not that he hates her; he doesn’t hate her. He loves his sister. He’s just never been anything like her and has no desire to be. Mostly, he finds her vain, close-minded, and grumpy. These, her undesirable characteristics, usually make him want to neutralize any negative effects she has on her surroundings.

The day he’d found those first strays had been mostly unremarkable. Cody and Shelly had just come home from the night half of their swing shift at the rainbow factory. As always, work at the factory was grueling. It was when they took their usual route through the alley behind their apartment building that they noticed two stray kittens eating out of the trash.

“We should do something,” said Cody, his heart melting.

“*Cowboys* is on and I don’t want to miss it” was the reply. She ignored the look of horror on her brother’s face and continued, “Just call Kitten Control. They’ll take care of it,” and went up the stairs.

Cody pictured her plopping down on her couch with a glass of booze and her teddy bear, just in time to watch the first fist fight break out. He didn’t like the show. He just didn’t understand the appeal of watching two cowboys argue over what kind of immigration policy was more in line with the “cowboy way.”

He did like kittens though, and he knew there was little chance for them if he called Kitten Control, so he secreted them up to his room. Worried he might not be able to sneak them past Shelly and Teddy, he was relieved to find they were so completely focused on their program

that he could have had a herd of kittens freak dancing their lives away in the next room and they wouldn't have noticed.

So, while Shelly and Teddy watched Cowboy Steve explain how, "if we're going to let them live in our town, we should make them take a test, with both written and oral parts. Just so we knows they ain't cheatin' like most foreigners is like to do," Cody brought the strays to the kitchen and gave them a bowl of milk.

The kittens had finished their meal and were playing in Cody's room by the time Cowboy Rick finished telling Cowboy Steve that if they needed to create tests for incoming citizens, then he needed to punch him in his stupid face for being so stupid.

Before work, Cody would lock the kittens in his room and no one was the wiser. Shelly and Teddy were usually too distracted or too drunk. By the time Shelly found out Cody was keeping the kittens, they'd already had a litter.

Initially, Shelly looked at the kittens with disdain, but she pitied her brother enough to not raise a fuss. Cody had no friends and his health was failing. Plus, it seemed like she couldn't be bothered. Her days were filled with working, drinking, and watching *Cowboys* and *Cowboys* reruns. She ignored the kittens the first time she saw them because she was excited to tell Cody what was happening on *Cowboys*. And Cody, who was so happy his sister wasn't raising a fuss, actually listened to her explain to him how the cowboys were getting rich because they had developed a system to lend out cattle on credit and how that was the "cowboy way,"

With the exception of the kittens sometimes wandering in front of her big screen, she rarely complained about the members of his new kitten family.

And so it went. Every day Shelly and Cody would come home from their ten-hour shift at the rainbow factory, Teddy would have a drink ready for Shelly, and Cody would go to his room.

While Shelly and Teddy were getting drunk and watching *Cowboys*, Cody and the rest of the kitty clan would be in his room, enjoying many channels of booty-grinding reality television. It was not long before another litter of kittens came along. That litter reached maturity a short time later and also started having litters. Cody wasn't a pervert or anything. He just loved his kittens. They were his family. He felt very much like a parent and wanted to treat them with as much love and care as possible.

Others, he knew, would probably point out how he was far too permissive in allowing them to inbreed. A more responsible kitten owner might have gotten them fixed in order to prevent such behavior. If ever asked, Cody would have been quick to counter that his wages were barely enough for him to pay rent, not to mention the ever-increasing cost of kitten food.

It is important to note that Cody was not and is not delusional. He knows he is a kitten hoarder. He's always been hypersensitive about his own behavior and has done his research. People who spent their careers studying kitten hoarding would gladly profile him as a typical obsessive compulsive. Cody had previously felt alone but is now safe in the company of kittens who provide him with a support structure, a safety net, a cute and cuddly distraction from a harsh world that's slowly killing him.

It was nothing new. He'd always been nervous. He didn't like to be around people, didn't like to go outside, was afraid of uniformed police officers and sometimes thought he was being watched. Every once in awhile and for no apparent reason he believed his molecules might be becoming unstable.

Life had not been good before his kittens. Aside from the slight amount of contact with his sister and a few other coworkers at the rainbow factory, Cody was alone. When he cried himself to sleep after his severe coughing fits, he was alone. When the doctor informed him the

lung disease contracted from breathing in too much rainbow dust was terminal, he was alone. When he lied about his cough to others, he had never felt more alone. Worse was the fact that he did everything he could to convince himself it wasn't a problem, lying to himself as much as he did to other people.

Whenever Shelly showed concern about his cough, he'd tell her no, he was fine, and pretended like the rainbow dust he breathed in all day at the factory hadn't coated his lungs. His pulmonary constitution was ideal. He wasn't in pain, and it didn't matter if he was a little lonely. This was the way life was supposed to be and everything was fine, just fine. He was most certainly not planning his suicide, and even if he was, he most certainly hadn't bought a gun and put it under his pillow for when he finally built up the courage to end all the suffering he most certainly wasn't in.

In retrospect, the day he'd rescued those first two kittens had been the happiest day ever. There was pure love in their eyes and he knew taking them in was the right thing to do the instant he held them. He felt centered and fortified. These kittens loved him and wouldn't ever leave. He'd feed them and they'd freak dance the evening away and then cuddle him to sleep. The feeling was intoxicating and he felt alive for the first time in a long, long time. When he'd noticed that one of the strays' kittens was pregnant, he wasn't bothered by the inbreeding. There would be more kittens now. What could possibly be wrong with that?

Shelly notices the Blue Street Bank explode off in the distance. She hands Teddy her drink and opens her brother's oversized red and blue striped umbrella in preparation for incoming debris. Much to the gratitude of Teddy, the umbrella is large enough for both of them.

Teddy thanks her for her consideration and hands her drink back while brick and mortar are deflected away from them.

Teddy takes a fuzzy paw off his big belly and points to a rainbow arching over Blue Street, now visible because the bank is gone. “That yours?” he asks. “It’s gotta be the most vivid one yet.”

“Of course it is,” She says flatly. “You know there’s not a rainbow within leagues of here that didn’t come from our factory.”

Teddy does know. It is just that the reds, blues, and greens of this particular rainbow are quite fetching. “It’s very beautiful.”

Shelly, although appreciative of the attempt at conversation, ignores his comment. Instead she says, “I need a refill.”

The bear hands her the bottle. The liquor is serving its purpose. Her nervousness at the prospect of confronting the Grandmaster Mayor is becoming more and more subdued with each sip, her courage and confidence bolstered. How to convince Manley to put her show back on the air is troubling. The Grandmaster Mayor is a shrewd man. His was a jaw one did not question, for it came bursting down from his skull commanding awe, respect, and obedience. Most folks requested nothing of him. Rarely did they question him, because if Manley didn’t like the way something was, he would’ve already changed it.

Looking up at the rainbow Teddy pointed out, she remembers standing on its red arch as it lay on the factory floor. Her job is to caulk the open space between the red and blue arches. Tedious work, no thought required. Over the years the action has become as mindless as blinking, and the anticipation of seeing Cowboy Rick has gotten her through many a boring day. The absence of Cowboy Rick, she knows, will make the workplace unbearable.

Teddy says something, but she misses it. Before she can ask him to repeat himself, she's distracted by two men standing on a bridge in the distance, directly under her rainbow. She can barely believe her eyes.

"Cowboys!" she screams.

"What?" asks Teddy, drunkenly looking to see what she's on about. She points toward a bridge spanning the city's purple river. Upon this bridge two cowboys stand next to a burlap sack. Shelly barely believes her luck. It's possible these two cowboys are the answer to her problems. The strength of the cowboy value system is something people admire and with them, she just might be able to stand before the Grandmaster with a reasonable amount of confidence.

Teddy gives her a knowing look and strokes the hair on his belly. "What are you gonna say to them?" he asks.

"Yee haw, Teddy," the nine-year-old girl replies to her friend. "Yee haw."

Cody's television is on perpetual scan, and his kittens dance to their hearts' content. Every five or ten seconds, the television automatically switches channels. This seems the most pleasing setting for the kittens as they get varying stimulation in addition to uninterrupted freak dancing. Cody shakes as he coughs; it's getting worse again, but he's not worried. He's happy as long as his kittens are happy, and as long as his kittens are booty dancing, they're happy. It's not like anybody ever got hurt because of booty dancing. Well, he supposed a lady with a lead butt could do him some damage, but such a thing was yet unheard of.

Apart from his kittens, there's extra satisfaction in the symbolism behind the craze. It was small at first, just a bunch of inner-city youths venting their anger at having to identify

themselves with rainbows. Some had argued the first unhappy youths who embraced the movement would have been unhappy whether they had grown up in an industrial center like Rainbow City or not. Some people just couldn't let themselves be happy.

The fact that the movement grew so significantly in number and popularity was proof they'd been wrong. What began as just a fad, only embraced by the poorest and most destitute citizens of a large city center, had suddenly transformed into a full-blown cultural phenomenon, and, all at once, genitalia were being thrust about inappropriately at every turn.

Cody can't freak dance because of his rainbow lungs. He lives vicariously through his kittens as they vent their existential urban rage.

He leaves for the kitchen to get his kittens breakfast. Walking past the living room, he notices that Shelly and Teddy are gone. Their couch is empty, and Grandmaster Mayor Manley is on the big screen standing in front of City Hall. He is tall and proud. It's obvious several youngsters, who freak dance behind him as he speaks, are not supposed to be there.

Cody is not sure, but apparently there's some city emergency of sorts. It sounds like it may have something to do with some buildings exploding. The Grandmaster Mayor stands at his podium wearing his serious face. A significant amount of sunlight reflects off his jaw. He asks the viewers to please not panic. He promises to deal with this problem swiftly and with as little expense to the citizens of Rainbow City as possible. He currently has his best people working on it. There is a town hall meeting.

This reminds Cody of the sun fiasco the city had gone through a few years back. It was wintertime, and a bunch of folks complained how they weren't getting enough sun. It was all over the news. A rather vocal opposition spoke up, saying there wasn't supposed to be much sun

in the winter, that that was one of the reasons why they called it winter, and why should they change such a storied institution like winter just because a few folks were getting depressed? This sparked a great deal of debates. There were town hall meetings devoted to the topic, as well as televised debates that included social pundits and experts from the sciences discussing a possible banning of winter. In the end, nothing was done. Too many people liked skiing. The skiers were, of course, expected to be sorry for inconveniencing everyone. It was all completely ridiculous, which is why Cody doesn't care for politics. All people do is complain, and in the end no one is happy.

He shuts down the screen and walks into the kitchen. There's a note on the refrigerator:

Cody,

Went to town hall to convince Mayor booty dancing must go. Be back later.

Shelly

P.S. Make sure no kittens in living-room.

The force of the letter hits Cody like a lead butt to the groin. The Mayor's power is absolute. If he wants freaking off the air, it's off the air. Sure people might complain at first, but come election time there won't a man or woman within leagues whose jaw even closely compared. What the Mayor's reaction might be was impossible to tell. He has been too random, making capricious pronouncements that never favor any group. A decision on freak dancing could go either way. Cody can't have that. His kittens are the last good thing in his life, and their happiness is the only thing keeping him alive. His sister might not know it, but she's trying to murder him.

Cody marches into his room and retrieves his gun. The idea that he originally bought it to kill himself seems absurd to him now. There is too much to live for. He looks down at the

chambers of his revolver. There are six bullets. Six bullets between him and the end of what the kids like to call 'the freaky grind.'

He puts on his red raincoat and green rubber boots, walks to the door, then stops. He'd almost forgotten his kittens still need tuna and milk. He gives it to them.

The gun in his pocket rattles against his keys as he walks out the door and then out onto Blue Street.

The cowboys look just like cowboys. They stand wearing big thick brown boots, dirty blue jeans, and dusty leather chaps. They wear long leather coats with fringe on the sleeves and Stetson hats on their heads. Beneath their hats, their mustachioed faces are stern and weathered from constant exposure. A gun belt and large six-shot pistol hangs from either's hips. Between them, a large brown burlap sack.

The taller cowboy, the one closest to Shelly, turns his head and tips his hat in greeting.

"There somethin' I can do for you, little lady?"

Shelly, having never seen a cowboy in real life, is speechless. Standing mouth agape, face blushing, she ventures a side glance at Teddy, who is absentmindedly playing with the fur on his belly. Small hope of Teddy stepping in; the bear is an excellent listener but a horrible conversationalist. At the present moment he is quite drunk, probably waiting for something to agree with.

The cowboys seem to have dealt with similar situations before. Because, after a moment of watching the awestruck Shelly stand before them with her mouth hanging open, the tall one speaks to the short one.

“Kenny,” he says, stretching his large fingers against his cowhide gloves, “what do you suppose this little girl and her teddy bear come all the way up to this here bridge for?”

“I reckon they’s admirers, Boss,” says Kenny, who, even though shorter than Boss, is just as rugged because his mustache is fuller and richer. “That there girl looks as though she might be a fan of cowboys, and the cowboy way.” Kenny’s face shines as he mentions this.

“I think you’re right, Kenny. I think you’re right.” Boss wiggles his lesser, though still full and rich, mustache and points at the large burlap sack. “Then they’re in luck because today they’re going to witness an authentic example of the cowboy experience.”

“Love the show!” Shelly blurts out. Her face flushes red, and she quickly looks down at her glass. Teddy, empathizing with her pain, tops it off.

She starts to mumble an excuse and Boss cuts her off, “Don’t worry about it. We’re always happy when people take interest in the cowboy way.” He turns and addresses his companion, “Ain’t we, Kenny?”

“We sure is, Boss.”

“We sure is,” repeats Boss, nodding. He points at his sack. “This here might be the favorite pastime of quite a few cowboys, ain’t it, Kenny?”

“It sure is, Boss,” replies his companion.

“It sure is,” repeats Boss.

Reaching into the sack, Boss pulls out a puppy. Judging by the floppiness of the pup’s ears, it might be an English Cocker Spaniel. Shelly’s only able to get a glimpse before Boss throws it over the side of the bridge. A small gasp escapes her lips as it goes over the rail. The puppy makes a small splash before the river’s current takes it downstream.

Shelly runs to the guard rail and suddenly, she's deaf to everything. There's a loud ringing and she smells gunpowder. Kenny's pistol's drawn and smoking and back in the river the puppy's disappeared. Shelly's confused.

Everything becomes clear when another puppy, this time a tiny golden retriever, flies over her head and plops in the water. Again Kenny draws. He fires three shots, and they wait for the smoke to clear.

Shelly's hearing returns, and there's a look on her face that resembles something less than amusement. Both cowboys seem to have anticipated her reaction.

"It would seem our little admirers are partial to golden retrievers," says Kenny.

"Do you mean to say, Kenny, that these two city slickers find fault with certain nuances of cowboy culture?"

Kenny spits and replies, "If I had to guess, I'd say it's the part where we throw the puppies into the river and shoot them dead, Boss."

"Why, but that's absurd Kenny, you make it sound as though shooting puppies was like laughing in the face of God?"

"Well, Boss," Kenny answers, "I've heard tell that some folks take puppies, raise them to adulthood and glean a certain amount of satisfaction from their company. But, then again, most folks don't know nothin' 'bout art."

Before now, Shelly didn't believe cowboys could be so dramatic. But it was so obvious: cowboy culture meant cowboy art. These two men have come to this bridge to express themselves. Shelly and Teddy were now their audience.

"Well then, Kenny, what if I told 'em they sell big sacks like this one right next to the lead balls and black powder in the target shooting aisle at The Cowboy Warehouse?"

“Perhaps this little girl disagrees with that as well,” says Kenny. “I myself have heard many a honest folk insist to me that puppies should not be shot, but petted. I’ve been told that it’s why they call ‘em pets.”

“Pets?” asks Boss, playfully annoyed. “Why of course they are.” Boss points at the side of the bag where the word “PETS” is printed in large blocky stenciled letters.

He picks out a red tick hound and gives it a toss. Kenny’s six-shooter goes boom. He looks over to Shelly.

Another toss. Another boom. This time it’s a chowchow and Kenny lets out a whoop, his large Stetson hat shaking as he nods his approval.

“It’s not just target practice, you’re seeing here. It’s a transference of pain and lost innocence. That’s the reason we came to the city today. We wanted to see if we could help people like you understand the reality of our lives.”

If Kenny or Boss had direct access to Shelly’s thoughts, they would’ve been quite taken aback by how much Shelly didn’t care. Not only did Shelly care very little for the plight of cute puppies. She cared even less about cowboy performance pieces done in the name of truth, art, and politics. She cared not whether cowboys were correctly understood by a majority public. Nor did the plight she didn’t care about become more highlighted when she watched them shoot puppies. Puppies were cute, yes, but Cowboy Rick was cuter and she’d personally oversee the slaughter of all the puppies in Rainbow City if it meant she could get lost in his piercing blue eyes once more.

“Oh, I totally understand. If you ask me,” says Shelly, “shooting puppies as a pastime is preferable to sitting on the couch and watching kids rub their asses on each other all day. It’s obscene.” Boss and Kenny frown at the mention of freak dancing and she hopes she might be

getting somewhere. “Personally, I like to drink. Teddy...” She looks at her bear, he hands her the bottle. She fills her glass and offers the bottle to the cowboys.

“I agree,” says Boss, accepting the bottle. “I can’t stand any o’ them shows. They don’t make no goddamn sense.”

“There’s no depth to them,” Kenny agrees, “and no meaning.”

“Only good show left these days is *Cowboys*,” says Boss. He takes the bottle from Kenny after he’s finished.

“Oh, didn’t you hear?” asks Shelly, taking the bottle. “They cancelled *Cowboys* and replaced it with *Beach Booty Dancing*.”

The double travesty of this hits Boss and Kenny like a bullet hitting a puppy. Both men go silent and stare blankly.

“I know,” Shelly’s playing them now, “I think it’s a travesty. Why, me and Teddy here were just on our way to complain to Grandmaster Mayor Manley.”

“Can we go with you?”

The Party Awning is rocking and the gun in his pocket rattles as Cody walks up Blue Street toward the town hall. His kittens are with him as well as about two dozen freak dancers. An entourage wasn’t exactly what he had in mind when he’d left the house. Then, he’d been alone, on a solo mission to assassinate someone. If someone died, it would be his fault. The fact that he had an entourage would be his sister’s.

Before Cody left his apartment, he had wondered why his sister had taken his umbrella. When bits of brick and mortar fell from the sky, his question was answered and he was forced to take refuge in the first shop he came to. Thankfully, it was an umbrella shop. Sadly, there were

no umbrellas. A question concerning this was on Cody's tongue when the manager came out from the back room.

"Sorry, but we're out of umbrellas." The manager was pale and looked as though everything confused him.

Cody was crestfallen; he could not let these exploding buildings stop him. "Look," he said. "I really need some sort of protection. You know, from all that falling debris. The quality of my life depends on it."

"Protection," the manager repeated confusedly, "from the debris. You mean something like an umbrella?"

Cody did not like where this was going. "Yes," he said, "like an umbrella."

Again, the manager looked confused, "We're out of umbrellas."

"I know," said Cody.

"Well," the manager appeared to look as though he was thinking very hard, "there is an armory store next door that sells all different sorts of shields. You know, like metal ones."

This couldn't have been more perfect, but before Cody could say so, the manager frowned and said, "But they're sold out too, I think."

Cody said nothing. The manager noticed this and again looked as though he was thinking very hard, "There's an awning store next to the armory. Business hasn't been too good for them lately, on a count of there being a recent shortage of buildings. They'd probably be happy to sell you one."

"An awning?" asked Cody, dubiously.

"Yup, they're just like umbrellas but bigger. I imagine they probably could fix you up sweet. They got cool designs and stuff."

The people at the awning shop were surprisingly helpful, but rainbow lung or no, awnings were simply too large for an individual to carry.

This is why Cody now has his kittens with him. He'd gone back and gotten them so they could help carry his awning, which from above, appears twenty feet in length and ten feet in width. At each corner of the awning there are eight kittens.

Four to help hold up a corner poll and freak dance.

Four waiting to relieve any kitten that might get tired and freak dance.

Toward the center of the awning, three booty-dancing kittens hold up a boom box, which steadily pumps out techno music. Three more stand in the wings to relieve them if they get tired, and while they wait, they also booty dance.

Cody picked the awning that best suited him. A ten-foot-tall print of a yellow kitten silhouetted against a bright orange background. The orange because it complements his kittens, which are mostly tabbies. The yellow because it complements his red raincoat. The kitten for obvious reasons.

Initially it was just him and his kittens. Now there is also a large group of people, which grows larger the further he goes up Blue Street. Apparently, it's people trying to come out from the debris and youngsters coming out to "freak it" with his kittens, possibly with hopes of getting on television. According to many of the youths coming in, he is "it" and the "party is on" under Cody's awning (which has now been dubbed 'the party awning') as it bounces up Blue Street.

Cody doesn't mind all the company. His kittens are having a blast and all the extra people means more help with carrying the awning. This is good. He would be on time. Maybe the mob will cheer him on when he shoots his sister. That will also be nice.

Shelly, Teddy, Boss, and Kenny stand in front of Blue Street's historic sculpture. The sculpture, named The Duke after the sculptor who sculpted it, could very easily pass for a garden variety twenty-foot-tall revolver. They've stopped because the statue is one of the principle works of art by the most major artist of the Cowboy Movement.

Shelly's not bothered by the fact Kenny and Boss' need to stop. Cowboys had been making pilgrimages to see The Duke ever since it was erected. Today, as always, there is a large group of cowboys—all with Stetson Hats, leather chaps, six-shooters, and mustaches of varying lengths and thickness—gathered in front of the statue. Some interested cowboys overhear Kenny, who has been drinking steadily since they left the bridge, as he launches into a drunken rant concerning the meaning of The Duke and what he says is “it's justification as an artistic marvel in the contemporary world.” Intrigued, they begin to drift over.

“This here statue,” he slurs in his cowboy drawl, “not only immortalizes the traditional cowboy weapon, but also the way it's been put up against the backdrop of that there Rainbow City skyline, it juxtaposes folks' modern ideas of urbanality against more historicized ideas of growth and progress.”

The group of cowboys closest to Kenny all nod their Stetson-hatted heads and mutter their agreement. Kenny smoothes out his mustache in approval. Shelly rolls her eyes and wonders if they wouldn't have been better off staying on the bridge and shooting puppies. Indeed, the statue is pretty. The metal is the bluest of cobalt blues which contrasts nicely against the sky, and the cherry wood stock is bursting with such complex character Shelly sometimes thinks she could get lost in it for days. But it was not, as Kenny points out, “what we honest folk like to think of as an anti-meta-social-commentary.”

Thankfully, they're not too far away from the Town Hall. Shelly can see it just up Blue Street, and the large clock out front tells her she still has some time. This is good. There's no telling when she'll be able to pull Kenny away from The Duke, especially now that he has an audience and can explain to them the subtle intricacies of color choice.

Shelly hears techno music, looks back down Blue Street, and sees a large group of people coming up. They're a bit far off, but Shelly can tell that the group's comprised of an awning, people, and kittens. And all of them appear to be embraced in some kind of hedonistic orgy. A voice breaks her concentration.

"Excuse me, partner." A striking cowboy separates himself from those standing around The Duke and walks toward Kenny. Shelly's breath catches in her throat, and she falls to the ground as her knees buckle. The cowboy before them stands a head taller than any other cowboy. His face is as rugged as his cowboy clothing. Of all the other cowboys that Shelly has known, his mustache is both the fullest and richest. He is the most rugged, most handsome, most 'cowboy' cowboy Shelly has ever seen. Other cowboys around him look more so like cowboys because of him. He is Cowboy Rick. Never in her life had Shelly thought she had the remotest chance of meeting him in person.

"What can I do for you, partner?" Cowboy Kenny eyes Cowboy Rick. Cowboy Rick eyes Cowboy Kenny. They search one another for signs of anything uncowboyly and find nothing. Mutual respect forms instantaneously.

"You seem to have an eye for art. What's your name, son?"

"It's a gift," Kenny's face, already red from Moldy Poison, bushes redder at the compliment, "and you can call me Kenny."

“Well, Kenny, my name’s Rick. I noticed that you seem to know your art and that you got a knack for speakin’. You ever consider a career in television?”

Shelly’s knees are jelly. Teddy does his best to hold her up as she hyperventilates. Boss drinks from the bottle, and Kenny is at a loss for words. They all now notice the television crew. Several men and women stand behind Cowboy Rick with cameras and boom microphones. The lone producer stands with a headset on her head and a clipboard in hand. She whispers into her headset and then holds her breath, waiting to see what will happen.

“I thought *Cowboys* was cancelled,” says Boss, the first of the group to find their voice. “How you gonna put Kenny on TV when you ain’t got no show?”

Cowboy Rick smiles wide as a rainbow at the mention of the reality TV show. “*Cowboys* is cancelled because the network thought they’d get better ratings if they gave me my own show,” he pauses, then continues, “*The Cowboy Rick Show.*”

Shelly can’t believe what she’s hearing. She shouts, “Oh my God! I love you Rick!” Cowboy Rick looks warmly over to Shelly and says, “Why, aren’t you a pretty little thing?” Shelly nearly faints.

“They’re giving you your own show?” asks Kenny.

“Actually, that’s why I’m here,” says Cowboy Rick. “I’m gonna do a piece on The Duke.”

This is the best day of Shelly’s life. Cowboy Rick’s getting his own show, and he just called her pretty. She is so overwhelmed that she can barely move. Teddy sits her down, takes her glass, fills it, and hands it to her. Cowboy Kenny shakes Cowboy Rick’s hand, and they begin discussing how Kenny might approach the topic of The Duke for Rick’s show.

Shelly hears her heart beating inside of her chest. Cowboy Rick asks Cowboy Kenny if he and his friends want to go out for coffee with his producer, and Kenny says yes. The film crew is constantly moving around for better shots. She can hear her heart beating louder and begins to think it might be beating too loud when she realizes it's not her heart she's hearing, it's techno-pop accompanied by the faint sound of coughing.

The air is filled with the sight of smoke and the sound of gunshots.

Certain he's caught a glimpse of his green and red striped umbrella in the crowd of cowboys surrounding The Duke, Cody calls for the party awning to stop. Nothing happens. He walks over to the stereo, turns down the music and they stop. The kittens and party awning-ers eye him questioningly. He takes his gun out of his pocket.

"I'm doing this for you," he says, knowing that his sister must die if there is any chance of them maintaining their happiness. Since he had left the apartment, every once-in-a-while a part of him would wonder if he was capable of shooting his twin sister. They were blood, after all. But then another part of him, the part that loves kittens and joy, would insist that his sister had to die. The truth was he simply had more love for the things that loved him back. He couldn't remember the last time his sister showed him any emotion that wasn't drunken annoyance. His kittens exuded love. All he had to do was look into their eyes and he could see it. When it came down to deciding importance, he owed his sister nothing and his kittens everything. And in this case, he owed them his sister's life.

He tries to find his umbrella in the crowd but it's gone, lost in a sea of cowboys. It'd be impossible to navigate the crowd, so Cody does the next best thing.

He makes sure each end of the awning is being held firmly by his kittens, and gets some other folks to boost him up atop the awning. Once atop the awning, he addresses the crowd. “Alright, everybody, listen up!” yells Cody, taking out his pistol and firing up into the air. The whole crowd of cowboys looks up, see a boy standing atop an awning holding a pistol, and begin to cheer all at once. This is not the desired effect. Cody fires again. The cheering gets louder and all the cowboys, following Cody’s lead, take out their pistols and fire them into the air. Hundreds of bullets race upward. Gun smoke fills the streets and visibility is reduced to zero.

“Shelly!” shouts Cody and he waits for the smoke to clear.

He hears someone yelling, “Cody!” But the voice is faint.

“Cody!” It’s closer this time, and the second Cody sees his sister run out of the crowd he levels his pistol at her.

“Cody, what are you doing?” Standing in her raincoat, Shelly eyes her brother’s pistol and takes a drink.

Cody tries to think of an answer to his sister’s question. He can’t think of one. Not one that she would understand anyway. Understanding required empathy and there was no way that his sister would ever be able to understand anything that didn’t directly relate to her. She was too selfish. How do you explain a personal vendetta to a selfish person?

Finally, he says, “You deserve this Shelly,” and lets his finger begin to squeeze the trigger.

Even with the gun pointing at her, Shelly has never felt better in her life.

“Cody,” she says, “You look upset.” She looks down the barrel of her brother’s gun and wonders what could have possibly gotten him into such a tizzy.

A look of confusion comes across Cody's face and his trigger finger drops down to the gun's grip.

"Since when have you ever cared if I look upset?" he asks pointedly.

Teddy appears behind Shelly, umbrella held firmly in one fuzzy hand. Cody still stares confusedly at his sister, gun shaking in his hand. Shelly begins to speak again but Cody interrupts her.

"You're going to kill me by taking away everything good in my life, and I'm going to kill you before I let that happen."

Shelly looks at Cody holding his shaking gun, then at the group of people and inbred kittens under the party awning. They're all gently bouncing to the soft techno beat coming from the turned-down stereo. They look like they're coiling their bodies so that they can be ready to leap into action as soon as the music is turned back up. Every few moments, a kitten stares longingly at the stereo and then Shelly gets it. She understands. Cody loves booty dancing as much as she loves cowboys. No wonder he's so mad. She turns back to her brother.

"This is about that note I left on the table this morning about trying to get booty dancing banned, isn't it?"

Cody nods his head. He looks tentative, as if she has just said the last thing he would have expected to hear from his sister. He drops his gun, jumps down from the awning, and runs toward his sister.

Shelly wants to say that she was sorry, and that she no longer has any intention of trying to get booty dancing banned. But she is only able to say "Well, I guess I'm sorry tha...." before Cody embraces her with the full force of a bear hug and all her air is forced out of her lungs.

Cheers roar from the party awning. The kittens turn up the stereo. The cowboys whoop and holler and, again, fire their guns in the air.

“You know,” says Shelly to her brother after some time has passed. “Cowboy Rick asked a bunch of us out for coffee. I think I’m going to do that instead of the Town Hall meeting. Did you want to come with us?”

“Um,” Cody motions to the crowd under his awning. “I got all these folks with me.” The dancing is now more furious than ever.

“You could just leave them outside for a bit. I don’t think they’ll hurt anything.”

“Well,” Cody thinks for a moment. She has a point. If, as they said, the party was always “on” under the party awning, then it would still be “on” after they got back from coffee.

“Ok,” he says.

Shelly, Teddy, Cody, and Cowboys Rick, Kenny, and Boss all sit down at an outside table and order coffee. The camera crew stands back at a respectable distance.

“It sure makes me happy that you two were able to work out your differences,” says Cowboy Kenny to the two siblings. “I think it’s a shame when a brother and sister can’t get along.”

“Yup,” says Boss, “you two just need to remember to keep the lines of communication open.”

“I’d say,” says Cowboy Rick. “It’s been my experience that the only result we can expect from the ignoring of problems is more problems.”

The producer looked at of the camera crew to make sure they captured Rick’s piece of sage advice.

“I agree,” says Teddy. “No good ever comes from ignoring your problems.”

The bear uncorks the bottle of whiskey and tops off his and Shelly’s coffee. Cody coughs violently several times. Everyone agrees that today is a good day. Up Blue Street, the Town Hall explodes.