

Pablo By Numbers

By Thom Calandra

After Picasso had earned eternal fame, the artist found he could scrawl drawings, using a pencil, strokes of lipstick on a tablecloth, charcoal across a torn paper bag even, in return for meals ... and other favors.

Chapter One

Our Narrator

This isn't about Pablo's scrip. It's about mine. You see I was a writer that winter, but some called me a promoter, a pied-piping booster of other people's money. I was that diddler in the stock market who minted the term "melt-up."

After I'd clocked notoriety in the stock market, thanks to my "Melt-Up" alerts and the hordes of investors, sugar-doused whoo-pee cushions they were, hop-scotching to my laptop slapshots, I found I could scrawl my tickered wisdom at table and dine like an earl, just like the famous artist. Did that cast me as crank artist, flake and fraud? What people, my subs first and foremost, a waiter or flight attendant or grocery bagger, paid me in kind for a few letters of stock ticker in my boxy, oversized scratch, on a scrap of note-paper, a trattoria napkin, a square of tissue paper from les toilettes even ... well, we're talking biblical returns here. Everyone near the peak wanted a piece of the market melt-up, up as in price, and who wouldn't, watching the number on a denominated piece of paper get so hot, it was near melting down, but all the while the paper kept rising, up, because hot air rises, always my life-altering tickers beamed on the wireless, tongue-teasing the cracked lips of my slab of subs, my

audience of grocery clerks and burger flippers who wanted to become the next millionaires on their blocks without even greasing a wheel: well, who wouldn't?

At the time, I didn't know it, cradling my Queen of Toshiba from inside a clappy California condo, transmitting my laptop melt-ups to deep-pockets as far flung as Dubai and Cape Town, Medellín and Moscow. I was in the zone, I figured, wired on the wireless in a place called Strawberry, where on most mornings the yelps of harbor seals punctuated the not unpleasant sound of city-bound traffic across the Richardson Bay Bridge a mile from my kitchen, the cars sounding like lapping waves off Malibu if you set your ears to it, and where just outside my door a channel of brackish water widened into the Golden Gate. See, I just didn't know it. I didn't reckon, as I munched my signature sustenance, vodka-drenched Meyer lemons, yellow skin-'n-all, plucking them right from the floppy bush in my front yard, cradling that laptop like wireless booty from above, I never for a moment ... realized ... I'd ... reached ... my ... numbered ... summit.

I was the Melt-Up infused, and the Melt-Up was vested in me. My subs, thousands of Joeys and Josephines, lived through me. For this crowd, I was just as good as TV or a guest pass at the spa, maybe better. In one 12-day stretch I circled the globe twice, supper-clubbed in Beijing and London on the same day. Got this close to the next president of China and more importantly, the current president of the Bank of China and his No. 1, a mealy mouthed wisp of a matron who could have been your waitress at the local kung-fu chicken but instead controlled close to a half-billion dollars in one of China's multiplying sovereign wealth funds, both of them sharing a round table with me at a Hong Kong banquet where the crispy eel was snaked in a chili paste chunkier, spicier and more crimson than even hot sauces in the most southern state of Mexico, and the Shanghai hairy crab was stir-fried with sea urchins and an exquisite splicing of farm-fresh ginger. Swam laps at 3 in the morning in a Dubai hotel pool, on a rooftop 40 stories high, me staring down through goggled eyeballs at a polished-stone mosaic of some horrible dragon myth, shimmering beneath 10 feet of water. Ate foie-gras-stuffed hamburger on slates of Lebanese flat bread, for breakfast even and spread before me on a red and gold table cloth, feeling sassy I was in plush leather seating on a streaking Gulfstream IV or V, maybe 30,000 feet above Morocco's dimpled Ajax. Shook hands with Elton John less than a minute after he wrapped up "Rocket Man" for some big-wigged merchant bankers on a yacht the size of a soccer field just off Grand Cayman. Had Pele the soccer star to myself for two whole minutes in an alcove of a

lakeside Geneva restaurant. Okay, maybe it was in les toilettes we mingled, it was still Pele. Slept in an 18th century bed about a mile wide at some English country estate frequented by the royals and their cashew gallery of ladies, lots of young and old ladies and their shampooed mini-Doodle poodles. Most of all, I helped through the power of my script -- and a troupe of silk-suited metals miners and market financiers with their origami paper tricks -- I helped engineer a clutch of reverse-stock transfers and other magical multipliers, ticker physics that beamed into my world, and theirs, and into the slums of my parched subs in their garages and attics and burger joints, beamed to them all the liquidity that comes with a hot stock and a hopping commodity.

Shorties, the nanny goat nay-sayers who turned a profit when their voodoo sent a stock's price south, they said my magic was black as squid ink, that it was "ticker toxin." So maybe the shorts, midgets in the hot tub all of 'em, maybe they were the ones who tipped off the federales, torpedoed me and my submarines by pressing their own buttons on the wireless, putting the ping on me, activating online tattle-tale templates that our dot-gov gatekeepers forwarded to their supervisors, and they to theirs on the 22nd floor, and they to theirs on some DC dot-gov panel. Don't know and probably never will, who the squealing pigs were. Maybe I don't care. Maybe the comeuppance comes to everyone. I know one thing for sure, and anyone who tells you otherwise, that they know two things for sure, or three, is for sure of one thing: they are full of beeswax. I know, I knew at the time I was sure of one thing: I was reversed, flopped, entirely turned around and brittle as the eucalyptus bark in the front yard.

How turned around? This what follows is part of my epilogue. For real. The self scripted end of my story, yes, I know, my throwaway magazine submission pygmy stacked against a planetary scale of armies, elections, bleeding infants and trillion-a-day capital flows for sure, but still, it was my little epilogue, part of it anyway, coming right here at the beginning, that's how reversed I was, me, a crawling moaning anthro-morphed reverse stock transfer:

MEDELLIN , Colombia -- There are no enhanced images, no staged shots in this story. Not even the signature photo of the buried and battered boots just below. The wildcat mills and rock-hauling vaqueros and the careful mujer weighing the gold dust that scores of families sift and water-slucice off the mountain each and every day, these are the things that testify to the potency of El Marmato.

But why start here, three hours' humpy ride from the city? It is the city that just might ignite, once again and after decades of violence and poverty, apathy and narcotics, that might spark a run on the mountains and valleys of inland Colombia. Because it is THE CITY THAT HAS IT ALL that first must lure new flesh with its pastels, its hearty meals, its stunning Antioquian women and men, its orchids, and yeh, OK, even its cosmetic surgeons.

Colombia moves me.

The city of Medellín, a place of about 3 million, not counting the squatters from the countryside, is where billboards proclaim: "Medellín el tiene todo," and it's true. Medellín does have it all. The flowers. Samba. Luscious fruit and the sidestreets abundant with native pine and non-native eucalyptus and sweet green grass and ... well, dang, a lot of cosmetic surgery clinics. Medellín has it all: the Antioquian restaurants, clappy with courtyards and wicker where is served sweet fried platano with frijoles and sour cream; the Botero swollen art; the dawn-to-dusk work ethic that sets this city apart from many of its sister cities across Latin America; the wide and spotless boulevards that resemble those in Madrid or Buenos Aires. Great pizza, too.

Medellín has it all. It has the traffic, for sure. The Poblado and other lush neighborhoods. The lore of that other Pablo, Señor Escobar el narco who for all of the myths out there deserves supreme credit for giving the world one of the great and years-long chase scenes in the annals of crime and commerce.

Medellín also has plenty of fresh air these days. The air is well scrubbed, a lot fresher than I remember it from the early 1980s. Cleansed I suppose by the afternoon thundershowers. Being up in the mountains helps, for sure. So do the cleaner fuels Latin America is using these days as compared with 20 years ago.

See, this entire story, but for the end, has almost nothing to do with my tipsy travelogue of Medellín. The Latin snapshot is cut and pasted like lots of stuff these days. I was peaking in my Strawberry flat, and I was about to see my tranny reversed, clutch-jammed and spent, my rouge profile cut up and pasted to the front of the stinky fishwrap. I was about to be devoured by flattops in their agency leased SF tower, all because I'd made thousands of ordinary folks boatloads of money, and in the ticker hunt this story is about I played the fox I suppose, catch me if you will, and those B-rods of mine, the subscribers, never lifted a forest finger to turn tricks because I was A-Rod, Mister Melt-Up with flute in hand, hoarding gingerbread men, skipping tickers across the water, snapping and drooling and taunting, always at the heart of the hive, always ready to smash the hive to smithers. I was scribe of all trades.

All my subs had to do was read my electronic lips and accept my treasury of tickers and my global romps in their portfolios and in their imaginations. They did, the subs, and gladly, in exchange for chump-change monthly subscription fees that added up when my audience grew to thousands and thousands, and every one of them loved the zoomy ride they took each day or week, reading the reports I beamed on the wireless, probably loved the read as much as they cherished the pay dirt of my ticker payoffs. Lapped it up like sweet potato pie or something.

Here is what I saw in the mirror of my kitchen window each day: some Roman-nosed kid, creases around the eyes from all those California rays, some 40-year-old lad in his laboratory, bubbling up just one more golden ticket for a clutching audience of thousands. Who did I think I was, some wonked out willy in a choco factory? I never felt like the rogue the fishwrappers wrote I was.

When the federales punctured my dream bubble, a rude day or two before Christmas, on a Saturday no less, sending their dot-gov notice of inquiry not via wireless, instead needling me nailing me via a garish purple and orange Fed-Ex truck, I knew my Melt-Up ticker factory and its author, yours cruelly, were worse than toast. The meltdown was just ahead, and infused in it still, me and my assembly line of flash were no better than one of those overpriced tuna-melts on sourdough, the ones with heirloom tomatoes and the baby pickle on the side, what you buy when you're killing time on the Tiburon ferry landing, waiting for your boat to come in with all the commuters who wear their sneakers on the boat, then switch to dress shoes for the trek to their respecting SF towers. The ferry landing was just down the hill from my Strawberry condo, my mortgaged little pad with the kitchen-window view of Richardson Bay, my tiny piece of turf on the shore of a suburban county drenched in wealth. That ferry landing in downtown Tiburon, California, that's where I wound up after Fed-Ex did its dirty work, me walking like the hollowed-out lead in a zombie movie. I could just as well been sleep walking to that rickety little boat pier.

But first: my name, my Melt-Up byline what spiked the piper, is/was Robbie Thom. I held the distinction of being "that writer in California" with possibly the fastest growing stock market newsletter in the pocked history of the business. For a few fistfuls of fast and furious months, hundreds of subscribers were signing on each and every day, even on weekends, willing to pay me \$10, \$20, \$30 a

month for the tickers I put on my electronic marquee. Nice numbers for a Baltimore transplant living in a trim cottage on the lip of Richardson Bay, just a jog along the bike path and voila, the sinfully overpriced homes where tennis players came to retire, actors came for their three-month intermissions, presidential candidates came to sip Darjeeling and rub elbows with their own brand of subs at thousand-dollar-a-plate buffet breakfasts.

Once I hit stride, got the motion down pat, I was on the rail, just like paroxetine servers on the tennis trail. The more my audience of subs grew, the less time I spent in the saddle of my Strawberry coven. Like the most successful writers in the business of dispensing stock tips, I was spending most of my time in hotel lobbies, at investment conferences and on planes, spreading the gospel of Melt-Up. Some of the flight attendants on Air Dubai and Singapore Air and Swiss Air even greeted me by name, without a glance at their cheat-sheet seat rosters. One of them, on a flight to Hong Kong, welcomed me with an upgrade to first class, from business, and slipped me two chocolate-dipped cherries in cognac, the bittersweet ones that are so addictive you wonder if they're classified by the drug enforcement agencies. Her name, the attendant, was Fatima, a slender Cantonese gal the other attendants nicknamed Fatty, or was it Phatty? Like most Chinese I met in my travels, Fatty was hooked on the stock market, said she read every Melt-Up alert as soon as her airtime was complete and she had de-boarded, scanning her handheld for the latest candied ticker beamed from Strawberry. Me taking a cue from the artist, I tore a tiny piece of a magazine and scribbled her a new one in the cylinder of this jet, a ticker I mean, scrawled the few letters that represented a fledgling but promising copper mine operating in Mali. Pennies a share -- the subs loved those as much as the stories I told about breaking bread and mixing it up with the oversized characters and shady tycoons who popped in and out of our Melt-Up cosmos. See, everyone wanted a slice of the Melt-Up. Even those shorties who had to look over their shoulders when I went public with my thoughts on one of the pieces of their poisoned portfolios. Didn't matter if I was lifting the curtain on a heap of rusty drill rigs in Africa or a one-room front of an office with empty filing cabinets and five guys on the horn 18 hours a day in some Detroit back-alley. I pronounced. The subs bought. And bought. The tabs in NYC one morning, after some \$1 medical device stock caught my fancy and hit the wireless, blared on their biz pages: TICKER SHOCK SOCKS SHORTS. The stock catapulted to \$5 in less than 30 minutes.

It was all rapturous. At the time.

I was parabolic, full of me and fueled by me. Maybe a week before my parabola flattened, a throwaway comment from a Russian merchant banker, as we gallivanted inside a marbled Moscow casino, previewed for me the geometry lesson, complete with needle-sharp compass point, I was about to have drilled into my skull cap. The crowd, I recall, was on Neglinnaya Street in the dead of winter. Dark days. An hour or two of light at midday in that horrific city, and not even that if cloud cover and sky gunk didn't loosen their holds on the sun's cameo appearance. A high-flying Canadian mining tycoon, the most successful of the fast-moving financiers in a commodities market that was melting up in price, was staging a celebration for a reverse stock transfer that had a handful of Moscow's wax-figure billionaires, usually stone faced with hooded eyes and permanent slouches, tipping and goggling and tossing dollar bills and euro notes at a bizarre contortionist act on stage, like they were playing some carnie game. It wasn't really a contortionist, but she came close, this Russian beauty, swinging on a set design that was supposed to look like a jungle, an arctic jungle, frosted like the ice city outside the casino's gilded front doors. Except the frost onstage was white cake frosting, or one hopes so, this being Moscow it easily could have been cocaine or procaine or toxic epoxy that she was licking like a serpent with a swift and impossibly long tongue her make-up artist had painted green, a golden stripe slicked down the middle and all the way into her tonsils it seemed. She was a real ice sculpture in the making, this one. Her arctic scene was sprinkled with gold dust, glitter that represented the new mining venture this financier from Canada and our gala casino host, fellow by name of Freedman, and his Russian partners had established in, of all places, western Siberia.

It was quite a party, and I was there as revered scribe and electronic wise guy, as in front of ticker wisdom, a newsletter lap-topper whose growing band of loyal subscribers gobbled up like manna unleavened the anointed, and highly speculative, stock tips of my Melt-Up, the people's report. Let me say as a proper matter of full disclosure, I was there as mooching revered scribe, my flights and hotels and massages and meals, manicures too, on the comp, courtesy of stock promoters, mining tycoons, corporate treasuries, merchant banks and what I thought was an infinite roster of marketing allowances from companies whose hungry execs forever were looking for ways to make their stocks appetizing to new investors, especially the thousands of little people I counted as my eager beaver Melt-Up audience.

This love fest was not for little people who flew budget airlines, though, and that would be me a year or

two ago before I hit my ticker-rocking stride. No, this Moscow bazaar was for the swingers, most of them sloppy Russians, who had managed to capitalize on their nation's flight from the stone soup of the commune as they set themselves at the table, first sipping politely, then saying to heck with it, grabbing the bowl and guzzling the bird's nest soup of the big egg, the wonderful all mighty buck, euro and pound, while 99.5 percent of the rest of their nation ate cabbage and raisins, or whatever it was the commoners ate in that tundra they called a country. Moscow these days had, heck, has more billionaires, on paper anyway, than any city in the world. Most of them were heathens. No sense of grooming these comrades of industry, polyester pastels from the '60s and not just bad hair, when they have some left, but scalps and follicles rich in oil, just like their petroleum-sopped land bloc, I guess. Half of those rich guys were at the casino that evening, seemed like, goggling the girl on stage and overjoyed they had thrown their rubled lot into this latest commodity quest, a Siberian gold and graphite mine in the portfolio of a manicured financier whose track record of success for his investors was close to 80 percent, an astounding number that meant four of every five people made money with our host that evening, Mr. Freedman, someone I had crossed paths with a dozen or so times, visiting his various properties spotting the planet's surface, hitching a ride on one of his private jets, attending his parties, mixing with his entourage, sharing his bed, his acupuncturist's bed specifically, and me all the while taking notes on the way he entranced his audiences, be they at a casino stage show like this one or mixing at a gala Barcelona barbecue or sitting shoulder to shoulder, all knocked-kneed, inside a humid hotel conference room with a single overhead projector and the financial returns it was projecting for the worthy investors, the ones willing to listen without asking ridiculously pointed questions such as: "When was the last time this region or sub-region definitively yielded mineralized deposits of gold or silver or nickel or copper?" This fellow Freedman hypnotized the world's deep pockets with forecasts of bold geology, in this case Siberian gold and graphite, and on other occasions, platinum, nickel, copper, coal and even diamonds. The fellow was an upper-case Success, able to raise the cash his crews needed so they could drill and dig and scrape and heave and haul dirt that essentially became portable paper, stock market paper, which I knew was worth a lot more than all of the metal bars stacked inside all of the underground bank vaults in the northern hemisphere.

This was the last time I remember seeing Freedman, a whisper-thin man with the chiseled high cheek bones of a Cherokee and a standing requirement to have his feet massaged the moment he checked into whatever five or fifteen-star hotel he happened to be passing through. Several weeks prior, whilst he

was getting a rubdown of his tootsies inside his room at The Peninsula in London, he'd described in a sentence or two what it took to make a million bucks, then 10 million, then 100 million, and keep multiplying by two. "The first unit is the hardest. Once you're there, you take a mental picture of what got you there, then scale it up and you don't look back." A week after that, in a hop across the channel, Freedman gave me more personal advice, what he considered a warning worthy of a seer, which was to beware stock promoters, and one promoter in particular, one Manny Drinkwater, "Uncle Manny and his poxed paper, he'll sink your ship" Freedman, our lord of the skies, pronounced for all of time Manuel the promoter and his attached carpetbag of Manny-handled stock certificates. That was a gazebo moment in a different city, Barcelona, and Freedman was handing out Mongolian silk scarves, blue as blue, whilst a contortionist, a performer that is and not one of the financiers in the crowd, this child of 16 she had to be, this stage act who was quite able to fold herself inside out/upside down, took center stage, at center lawn. She was amazing. I had never seen a girl do on a stage what she was doing with her body. Apparently, very few of the bankers and hedgehogs milling around the stage had either; all eyes were on the girl. Freedman the host was whispering into an ear here and an ear there, and that line about the 'poxed paper' was the thing he whispered into mine. It was a Freedman party for rich people and their agents looking to become richer on the promise of drill bits sunk into the crust of the earth's ice and desert, mountain, mesa and steppeland, copper I think it was during that paella pit party in Spain, yes, copper somewhere in or near Mongolia. Different metal, same stakes. That was, not to mix and match, that was in the town of Barcelona, and that was the seer's cryptic warning, which I ignored, knowing how much all promoters tended to dislike one another, or at least, the idea of some other silk suit with a dusty old mine nipping capital off their bud, and me knowing as well that the better they were, and Freedman was in his prime, in his 50s and primed, the higher they went the more hated they became, and they returned that hate with whispered secrets and asides to journalists and wealthy secretaries, even sotto voces to spouses, with finesse, of course. Drinkwater the Round did not have one of those, a spouse, so for Freedman the Straight, my ear would have to do.

This Moscow evening, as I said, was my final view of this cash-seeking missile, this financier who was acing all of his targets like some lunatic fighter pilot on aspirin, gin and Pall Malls, only this Freedman didn't touch any of that, this financier at the top of his market pyramid, fresh off his streaking Gulfstream V, or IV, or VC, or whatever these sky toys are called these days, this mining 'coon who walked with a slight hobble was feeling his oats, and breaking from personal habit, he was sharing a

glass of wine, sherry it was, with a guest, and this was something, whether it was breaking bread or toasting, that he rarely did with his crowd, with his bait. Share, I mean. Freedman was feeling glamorous, a rarity. That morning he'd seen his picture in one of the London newspapers, not a bad picture, taken in front of the London Stock Exchange building, where he was uncorking an IPO that raised a few hundred million pounds for one of his seven or seventeen mining companies.

As we all watched this busty young lady on the stage in a gymnastics routine worthy of any Olympic champ, but not having a sliver of the bends that chickie in Barcelona had, one of the rich guys, a real whale this one, with those Russian whiskers like black-eyed peas spotting his face from above the eyebrows down through the neck line, and beneath that for all I knew, came up to Freedman. I was noshing on the deviled eggs. "You know," says this large fellow whose name tag labeled him a white-gloved local banker for mightily wealthy clients, his belly full of whatever it was that newbie billionaires and their fiscal servants in Moscow drink, and tipping his champagne flute toward the stage, "this one, she is the Paris Hilton of Russia. For real. Quite a beauty. Nastrovya." The Russian's English was rather quite good, and Freedman, for his part, played true to form, not really acknowledging that he had received anything from this social exchange, but his lips turning slightly upward at the corners of the mouth, just slightly mind you, as a way of at least confirming he had heard the guy.

But me, my mouth full of egg, I did a double take. I got the nastrovya part. But what was that about the Hilton in Paris? The one near the Eiffel Tower on Avenue de Suffren? I squinted at the stage, which now had a vapor effect from hot ice, but what I saw wasn't a hotel, just a Russian goddess in a G-string swinging through an arctic landscape, and the rich guys still showering her with currency as she performed acrobatic movements with her tongue skating across the faux ice.

I had no idea who Paris Hilton was. Toward the end of that evening, when word began to get around that there was an American writer in the room who did not know the story of Paris, Paris Hilton, that is, the Russian banker who labeled the stage performer Russia's version of a wild and crazy rich kid came over to me and whispered, "C'est vrai? You really do not know?"

I knew that Moscow had more billionaires per capita than any other city on the planet. I could quote the

top-20 market caps of the world's largest publicly traded securities. I knew by heart the mineralization levels of a dozen mines on five continents. I knew how reverse transfer equity makeovers worked magic on a penny-ante company's balance sheet. I knew how to spell the first middle and last names of a hundred CEOs. And I knew by heart a thousand tickers, maybe more. But I didn't know who Paris Hilton was, and thus, full of all things, I failed. I was not listening. I either didn't care about anything but my world of levitating stock prices and market melt ups, or I simply was not paying attention. I preferred the second explanation. "On your tombstone," my wife, my ex-wife to be legally accurate, used to tell me often, sweetly but often, "on your stone they're going to put: He Wasn't Paying Attention. I just hope the truck you didn't see makes quick work of it," she'd append. "Cause hospitals smell like soured apple sauce." Freedman, the thin man, when word got around to him about the clueless American writer who did NOT know who Paris Hilton was, raised an eyebrow, like Errol Flynn might have in a sword duel. Freedman knew I was lost, about to become a carcass, knew it weeks before in that Barcelona gazebo, he did. Like all missiles on a mission, the financier who was at the top of his mark knew precisely what he was witnessing, all mapped out it was: this one, this writer, this California boy, he is lost to himself. Throw him out.

In the weeks after my number was up/The reporters like vicious whippets/Looking for the white-collar creep as they camped outside my front door/And the fair-weather fans denouncing me on their Web sites, threatening loathsome actions against me/The blasted fishwrapping heads/Like STOCKS WIZ TICKS OFF FEDS/PROBE MELTS DOWN MARKET TIPSTER/And the attorneys, the securities enforcers, the bad coffee and the waiting-waiting-waiting while my torso shed the pounds of my fiduciary gluttony and I became thin again as a teen/And hurting most of all, my hedgerow of subs spitting my simpatico down the gutter/Now I no longer had a platinum pen/Even the Safeway baggers sniping and smirking as I passed through/The ass-wipes.

I suppose if I had known who Miss Hilton was at that moment in that dreadful Moscow casino, I would have sidestepped my public tumble and disgrace with poise, like a ballet dancer, is that how it goes? Because I would have what, would have been paying attention and not reveling in the life form I wake up to every single day, which was me, me and only me? If I had taken Freedman's advice weeks before and suspended my ties with Manny Drinkwater, I would have what, NOT been pinned to my Strawberry kitchen wall by the federales?

After my fall off the Trojan Ticker, right through the false wooden belly as we were being rolled through the gates, and at the hands of that bright and chipper Fed-Ex delivery gal whose face I can never erase from my memory, but still, as my legal counsel correctly forecast, weeks and neuralgic weeks away from hitting the bottom of my barrel, my ankles anchored deep in my own sweat-soaked suite of a shingled Purgatory; after the authorities had hoovered me into the fishwrapped headlines and I'd collapsed into my own stink-branded sewer, I saw what the feds had really accomplished with a mere two-page notice of inquiry. My life as I knew it had ended. The federales, just doing their securities mongering job from inside some quake-proofed SF tower, those underpaid, freshly scrubbed dot.gov Samaritans had FedEx-ed me out of existence.

I had considered myself, for 20 years, a ripening California lemon-head, hijacking myself from bitterly cold Rochester, New York, just after college, working a decade-long string of small and then big newspapers, marrying, marinating, mortgaging, picking blackberries from the bramble of bushes outside my Strawberry door, just beyond the bushy lemon tree and straddling a rotting redwood fence ... and then discovering a few years ago two things that boosted my metabolic rate and the size of my portfolio: 1. mountain biking and 2. electronic newsletters. Both took me to peaks. The mountain biking was with Pablo, my postman. The newsletters were with tens of thousands of fawning readers, my faithful subs, at the peak of what I called the melt-up, the inexorable flow of cash into paper securities that represent baby-faced little companies, like a lava flow, only flowing uphill, defying gravity.

And so, suffering from my neuralgic nightmare, I am here to index, to spill my insides. What else can I do but split open the wobbly horse I was so abruptly tossed from -- my shrink-wrap says I tossed myself from the stallion, that I snatched defeat, hooves and all, from the jaws of victory, and all because of my crooked pen -- split the four-legged horse open and start sharing the booty? Could there be a few hundred left of my tens of thousands, a handful of supreme subs left, those still hoping, praying I'm not a ticker shark, that me and my Melt-Up didn't pull off what the hound dogging fishwrapper press, what those jackals of all trades/bastards of the universe called, get this, a "calculated fiscal betrayal?"

I am spilling, and I wager there's the piper to pay when the janitor checks in to scrape my kitchen counter. "You were not listening," my shrink-wrap would say later, me sitting in his Marina District armchair, morose, skeletal, seeing double each time I cashiered the courage to glance at a mirror or a passing store window, feeling hollow as that tickered Trojan horse, "You were not listening," my shrink-wrap, my spider-fingered wrapper across the bay, capsulized for me, "so they threw you out."

Fodder X, more about him later, he calls this script of mine penance, but I see it as a catholic extension of what I was supposed to be doing for a living: transferring wealth to the scrum who couldn't fly the silk-lined jets I was flying, me all the while concocting my newsletter with a watchful eye to the cashmere-socked pelicans who stuffed their beaks with baubles of platinum and snifters of brandy, along with their caviar and yeasty vintage Champagnes. Don't get me wrong: I considered my Melt-Up subs as yellow as my beloved Meyer lemons in the front yard. These folks were terrified of making any big-money choice in their lives without a time zone-leaping expert holding their outstretched hands. I envied them, their not having to lift a finger to understand the sublime tickers I was discovering on their behalves. In a way, and this is my Marina District shrink-wrap counseling me as he lotions his long slender fingers and ticks off the side effects of the mood stabilizers he feeds me, in a way, I think my subscribers were as conflicted as I was. The bean counters at Sleepy Pete's Gourmet Coffee, the Safeway baggers, the middle-aged housewives tossing the greasy screened metal baskets of fries at that burger chain just off the 101, they didn't want to work to enter the wealth club, the cowardly lie-ins, yet they coveted the rewards of the chosen tickers, the electronic manna sent from a mere laptop. At the same time, I sometimes, once or twice or three times, maybe more, suffered an omission of faith: I didn't believe my own stuffing to go the distance on some of these stocks, me second-guessing my own subcutaneous research, which is why I hit that plump SELL button once in a while, apparently right in the tidal wave of my audience's BUY pings and without the proper legal DISCLOSURES. I guess. I snatched defeat from the jaws of victory, I failed to tell my subs when and what I was -- oh I despise this legal term -- what I was "dumping," and it felt terrific afterwards, knowing I'd gotten the jump on the stock market, and along for the ride thousands and thousands of my subs, reading my Melt-Ups in garages and sheds and on wireless laptops in cheap coffee shops and library alcoves, them just clawing at me, kicking my tires as they awaited, demanded my steady stream of anointed tickers. I came. I saw.

I bought. I wrote. I transmitted. I sold once in a while, and who would not? And they did too, my submarines, in droves. C'est dang, that gang minted serious money, too. I even had bumper stickers made up: "We Melt Markets."

Find me the guy or gal who doesn't love a good market dump, one that gilds their portfolio, and I'll show you a stupid smelly-bean unworthy of an anointed ticker. A money manager from Dallas once told me there was no such thing as smart money. Or dumb money for that matter. The best he could do was say the money with staying power, the longs, as in holding a stock long, for years and years and years, almost always fared best in the end. Maybe. Maybe not. I met the long-legged fellow at some canteen in Austin, where they were playing bluegrass fiddle and everyone was smoking the fattest, most evil looking cigars. This guy from Texas was also a medical doctor, trained as an anesthesiologist, so his take on money was skewed toward the clinical. And he talked real slow, much like you figure a Texan should, with the sidewinder drawl and all. I was at a conference in Barcelona not long after I met the good doctor and money manager, and lo and behold, there he was at the airport, waiting for a flight to London. The doc was wearing one of those boat-sized cowboy hats, the ostrich skin boots and shiny turquoise belt buckle. When we got to passport control, the hombre at the desk asked him, "So what country are you from, my friend?" The doc clicked his heels together, rolled his tongue across the inside of his cheeks and said slowly, "Well, Texas, I guess." I never saw him again, but I often wonder about the difference between smart money and dumb money. See, I know there's such a thing as stupid money, meaning the folks who look their gift stallions in the mouth and don't sell, maybe because they figure on even more profit down the road, working up a great big appetite for more money on their plates, and committing what I used to call the mortal Melt-Up sin: buying more of a good thing on the way up, otherwise known as averaging up, hoarding more of their anointed ticker at higher and higher prices instead of selling in that split second or two when the going is good and they are fat and sassy. They are, through every fault of their own, stuck on the long and skinny road, waiting for that poor ticker that somehow got buried by bad news or a resignation or just loss of investors' interest to melt up again, something that could take years and years. That's stupid money, or maybe I should call it lost money, or skinny money that ran out of the restaurant without leaving a tip. I reckon the Dallas doc probably disagrees.

So see here: I was and I am no Robin Hood, and neither was I, as my loyal postman put it later, a word-

slinging legend, a righteous defender of pilgrims and noble wealth-equalizer for the less fortunate. These things I was not. Neither was I the sludge at least one newspaper columnist labeled me, swindling the poor to make the rich even richer. No, that assignment these days goes to the top company acrobats getting nailed by the federales for raiding their treasure chests, some of them poster-boarded for stock market fraud and high-wired robbery but most of these silk-scarved executives lining their chateaus with stock market certificates and partying heartily in Nice and Boca Raton and Cape Town. These top hats were supposed to be sharing their, sharing their what, their billions and billions of papered shish-ka-baubles with the tiny stakeholders who sat like shark bait at their boardroom feet. C'est dingue, as the French say. Say. Dang! I was looking out for my subs, I swear it. But the ordinary folks who paid me a few bucks each month for the cherished tickers were so hungry. So famished. Their retirement plans and livelihoods were getting gutted left and right by the CPAs and CFOs and CEOs they worshipped at conferences and shareholder meetings. All I was doing was trying to even the score for the guy who flips burgers, the gal who does nails, even the smart-aleck Safeway clerks. There was a genuine hunger. If they weren't fed, they'd starve. More than once, a sub pinged me on the lappie, e-mailing a tale of fiscal woe, personal tragedy even, the house fire, a crippling car crash, a busted sump pump ... and the bank knocking at the door. I felt like a real stooge, which one I'm not sure, shoveling coal into the furnace, faster and faster and faster, so the Melt-Up assembly line could keep rolling out freshly minted tickers that would change peoples' lives.

Yet here I am in Strawberry, beneath my scotched bed-covers, shielding myself from the searchlight, the subject of a federal probe into the newsletter biz and all its filthy, wonderful secrets. I'm coddled up to this wag-a-tale penance of mine, revising as I scribble and spitting out a story, in the process maybe restoring to their hosanna glory one or two of my sullied tickers for the benefit of all those freshly scrubbed subs who believed every word I wrote and shot to the stars with me and my crowd. Friends are what I'm thinking about, how I don't have many at all. Oh sure, riding high as I was, licking my fork lapdog-clean after each meal, each one more memorable than the next, like the time the stocks promoter and former Canadian butcher Mr. Manny Drinkwater, servicing his crowd of bank managers, spoon-fed us Alsace lamb and pork-belly stew during a horribly windy springtime night in a hollowed out monastery not far from central Paris, well, I thought at the time I had a ton of bosom buddies. A ton of them, I figured, my crowd, all ready to wine and dine me, spa me, serenade me, pick up my hotel bills and pay for the cabs and planes, even my acupuncture, at the drop of a baseball cap. But when I

turtled real bad and hit the gully, it was just Papa and Pam and mostly Pablo waiting, my pot-bellied, 55-year-old Pablo the mail man on his mountain bike, imploring me to join him in three-hour loops across my beloved county's resplendent headlands and thorny open space, those thatches high and low, cross-cut by fire roads and single-track trails, that separate the bay from the beach and were my last, my only refuge. My postal guy Pablo was packing an extra gear.

But the money crowd following me back then didn't ride mountain bikes. These slugs didn't care for pumping their rhino legs and slogging their pompous rear-ends along some dusty, sun-dried single-track trail to a midday summit above the tree line. My hills I guess were below them, and even if they weren't, the recreational trails I pedaled across this rolling county were beyond their aerobic reach. No, this crowd flew over mountains in their sweetly fat-assed personal jets, or bore into mountains and deserts, even glaciers, with their industrial diamond-bit drills. They printed paper and auctioned it, even better, peddled the scrip to the highest bidders, then ran, not biked, to the nearest bank to stash their marca.

This crowd flew me around the world in streamlined Gee-whiz-5s, streaming their Persian gulfs, or reconfigured Boing! (I called them) 757s, even a clutch of high-speed Global Expresses. I could no longer count the 727s and the other mid-size jetliners, their cabins gutted of commercial seating and laid plush with carpet, standing bars, billiards tables, private bedrooms. I dug the extra-terrestrial creature comforts. Entire libraries of DVDs in the cabins, not to mention the liquor cabinets, vials of nano-particled face and hand creams lined up like mini-custards on your own cute cosmetics tray, even a silly shuffle-board court on the jets big enough to cart around their own game rooms. Oh, and along with all the gimmicks that partner up with high-stepping executive travel, there were the real bennies, for the reborn food fetishists like me: the latest pickings from whatever reverse-stock-transfer harvest we'd just kicked off from. This would mean melons and apricots and figs if we were in France during early summer, paper-thin slices of beef when we were lifting off from Osaka, Mongolian lamb in mint jelly rising out of Moscow, Moroccan pigeon pastilla, powdered with confectioner's sugar and an addictive formulation of cinnamon, as we sliced our way across north Africa. A plaintive white bowl of soba noodles with onion and fennel broth leading the brunch menu just after takeoff. Honeyed Yunnan ham, with the bone in, when we were departing from a Beijing or a Shanghai runway. And always, always and always and always, something about the amber hue, or its mainlining sugar, or the way it

aged 50 and 60 years, or how a dessert wine could be the supreme drinking companion of early evening foie-gras, almost always there was on the table that D'yquem, vintage bottles of the miraculous chateau, cases of the Sauterne aboard spotless, sterilized, vintage worthy jets.

Was I flush or flushed? Manuel Drinkwater, Esq., had so much Marca Pola paper on his hands, that mine down in Colombia he was promoting, he pulled me over one night after we'd all had too many goblets of what he and his crowd called Nectar of the Gods -- that yeasty D'yquem again, the 1955 vintage stands out for some reason, though I swear there was a '45 somewhere in the mix, and the chateau's exquisite '67 -- he pulled me off to the side in some spiced-out Moroccan bistro in Marseilles, and he shoved me into les toilettes. "Robbie-hobby, there's a ton more this out there ... I call this stuff the fungus among us," Manny slurred, draining his glass, his tongue flicking bits of the crystallized sugar that a great and antique dessert wine leaves on the glass. "Just keep working that golden pen." Mr. M-Dee was finished with his divine dessert wine, until the next bottle of course, never a substitute for the best, he said, not even that German rarity, Trockenbeereauslese, which is no slouch in the world of fermenting heaven; Man the man extracted a litter of euros from his floppy pockets and flicked 'em into the toilet. I mean, not just dollars, but full-flush euros! "Forty percent more buying power, Rob-roy," he slobbered. Yeah, forty points more money out the pipe that night, into the sewers of Paris. Which was more of a waste: the way Manny doused himself with one of the finest dessert wines ever? Or the destruction of bona-fide, full-fledged, appreciating European currency.

No fairy tale there. I was looking up at the summit, down into a French toilet.

You had to understand my talent, and a few thousand folks, and many more subs at the peak, they "got it." My audience subscribed to that infernal Melt-Up of a newsletter that took me to the top of the rock, and them along with me. I owned the sparks of text that became a flame, searing markets, sizzling portfolios, putting in the lava flow people like Manny Drinkwater, who knew how to slice securities scrip directly onto the receiving end of life's summit goal: what I, what we all have banged into us a thousand times in school, at home, by the press, the movies, even the fine print on the automatic withdrawal envelopes in the church pews: a tap-me-anytime-anywhere-for-any-amount, never-ending, no-amen ATM. All cash, always cash, all the time. That was the goal, is and might always be: the

eternal cash machine, for the weak and for the strong, may there be wealth and joy for all living things. I believed it. There was something else my audience wanted from me: the thrill of being on these jets, dusting up the mines, tipping the dessert wines, spending money, making it, watching us all make it, lots of money. The subs loved it when I filled Melt-Up with portraits of some of the tycoons and promoters and executives, even a famous chef or two. They loved it when I told stories about meeting billionaire sheiks in desert skyscrapers, or tracking down exiled commodities traders who spent most days bored out of their skulls, but rich, rich out of their skulls, in Geneva or the Cayman Islands, wherever the law favored capital and not courage.

Naturally, I loved it when my serfs loved me. The Melt-Up was a tapeworm inside me, consuming me. I was out to put myself and my audience smack-dab in the money flow, no fairy tale there. It wasn't always metal and mines, either, like the platinum dig in the Congo whose stock quintupled, then doubled from there before the government cobras, or whatever they call the machete-toting teens who acted as the law down in DRC, commandeered the camp and scalped the lead geologist in bed, right in his starched white tent, just as the sun's rays were slipping their way through his mosquito netting, and in the process hacking the limbs off of at least one of the Belgian miner's harem of young boys. Then the stock went to zero, or thereabouts, but hey, someone made money, including my subs. And it wasn't always metals and miners I transmitted via the Melt-Up. Sometimes the chosen ticker was nano-technology. Or cancer vaccine developers. Genomic tools. Taiwan semiconductors. Plus, I put my own wallet where my Melt-Up tongue was and bought the tickers right along with my audience of subscribers.

I suppose it's in my blood even now, after what happened, wanting to take folks on a ride, being so into it I never knew I might be taken for a ride. People can say what they will, but my heart was always in the right place, I think. I wanted to share the wealth. I did share the wealth. And you know, I didn't always fly around in private jets. Or eat like a prince. I put in the hours kicking the ticker tires. I had to fly commercial once in a while. I'm proud of that -- flying commercial, sleeping in airports, squeezing into buses filled with diesel fumes on my way to some patch of baked-clay in Mali or Ghana, western Australia or Peru. Eating mealy hamburgers. Hauling around unwashed laundry for a week. This was work. My chosen tickers weren't just a glorified string of letters. I kicked the tires, got in bed with the executives, so to speak. Spent hours on the phone tracking down leads. Slept in huts and tents and even

under the stars with nothing but a table cloth covering me, on some mesa a few hours above Jo'Burg, whilst in the moonlight the tribal ruffians with their tinny rifles were taking potshots at air-conditioned buses cruising along the highway. And guess what? Plenty of folks made a mountain of money, or at least a hillside's worth. Manny-boy's Marca Pola, the Colombian gold mine at the end of the jungle's rainbow, was very good to a lot of people, for instance. Sure, the exploration company hadn't pulled an ounce of metal from the ground. But plenty of companies trade on assays, vertical drill holes, prospects and promises, don't they? Was that magic or fraud or the way of the world?

I always knew my words and my brand of Robby-on-the-spot research were worth more than a journalist's salary/no-match union retirement plan. What I thought and transcribed was worth more than all the hot metal in China. Or Argentina ... or in the case of Señor Drinkwater's freshest X-mark on the money map, Colombia, up there in the thick of El Marmato, a mountain three hours' humpy drive from the city of Medellín, an ore district rich in gold and silver and even richer in banditos, a place where geologists get hopelessly lost for days at a time and punctured bodies occasionally come jaggling down bubbling mountain streams.

This was my state of mind, humming along to the tune of my tickers, right until the morning the whip came down, in the form of my own personal summons from the federales to tell the truth and nothing but. It's a terrible disease, wanting to make money so badly your ears ache. A lovely disease, too, when the lava melts up and the ear aches stop and instead, you hear and hum a sweet and light melody. But it is awful when you get caught in the searchlight, the subject of a federal probe into the newsletter biz and all its base and beautiful secrets. It hurts even more, and makes you feel like a dunce, when you realize, holding a piece of Fed-Ex in your hands like a scarecrow holds a withered broom, when you realize you were given a wake-up call, a gift, even if it did come in a Moscow casino, blurred, hot-ice smoking the stage, and cryptic. Paris who?

"Well hello beefcake," my counsel would tell me later, as we reviewed strategies that might lift me off the butcher's hook. "Honey pie," she says, "you must have been deep into your own beeswax," that last word whistling through the cute gap my attorney had between her two front teeth. "I mean, you even had a Tivo moment, another shot across the bow, baby face. And you still didn't see this coming?"

She was right. My Tivo moment was a rerun of the gift from above, another wake-up call I never picked up, unlike all of the other calls I clamored to answer on hotel lobby phones and mobiles and various sordid handhelds. This one came not inside a casino but sitting at a fancy bar at another of these events, an investment conference just across the bridge at The Palace, a grand old SF hotel the Japanese bought at the height of their Nikkei frenzy in the late '80s and remodeled to compete with the Ritzes of the world. The conference was for small investors, and in between panel discussions on the merits of uranium mines and the improved drill testing and assay reporting standards the metals industry was fast adopting in a wise bid for the dollars of all those Joes and Josephines who read my Melt-Ups, I would slip into Maxfield's Bar just off the lobby and suck down watered down vodka martinis, maybe one every three hours to inoculate myself against the crowds of clawing attendees who felt they deserved the right to corner whoever the hottest stock picker of the day happened to be, and that was me, in exchange for the \$99 fee they paid at the door. Bellied up to the bar, and I never had much of a belly, being an average athlete in high school who was still 25 years later safely in the median for weight and height and body mass for my age and occupation, I'd notice out of the corner of an eye many of the folks who sat like the faithful at my appearances upstairs in the main ballroom, the J & Js who were famished for the tickered loaves and fish I threw to the crowd, trickling to the entrance of Maxfield's to sneak a peek at their sugared daddy, for sure debating whether it was rude to interrupt my cocktail with a request for an autograph, or a scrawled series of letters representing a stock ticker. The market, after all, was still open for another hour, it being only noon California time.

Any self-respecting tourist who'd done their homework, at least read the hotel brochures, would know better than I did, I who lived just across the bay and considered SF my executive lounge on occasional trips into the city, almost always for clandestine dinners with my ticker sources at fusion junkets such as Slanted Door and Asia de Cuba, any clueless Harriet from Helsinki or Vince from Venice, Venice, Florida, that is, any tourist could tell you the glances and peeks into that hotel bar were not for moi, oh no. They were for the Maxfield Parrish mural called "The Pied Piper of Hamelin," a colorful depiction of the fable, one that had recently been restored to its original luster. This was another Paris Hilton moment. I had for a couple of years now considered myself a piper whose wind was in tune with a celestial ticker sphere of melodies, pop tunes that had my sugar-doused subs dancing all the way to the bank. Right in front of me, hanging above that fancy Palace bar, the piper was playing my tune, and the

best I could do was keeping twisting my neck, certain the whoo-pee cushions at the door were hankering for my script. I was not listening. So they threw ... me ... out.

There's fact and there's legend, the postman tells me. The federales when they pinned me onto their to-do lists inside their subpar leased offices 20 stories above downtown SF, they were spot-on in calling me a piper whose tune tens of thousands danced merrily to ... until the piper sold 'em down his tickered path. That's plain fact, fortified by some 1936 or 1938 securities law or congressional act ... and by decades of legal precedent. But the fact (and the farce) always starts with the legend, and there's legend in all of us, even in me, smoking gun of a laptop perched by the kitchen window in my beloved Strawberry cubby. Liberty Valance, the Hollywood arch-villain, was a legend, and lyrical in his menacing way. My faithful, mountain-bike saddling postman, Pablo, quoted that "Liberty Valance" movie as a desk reference for life. "When the legend becomes fact, hombre, you best be printing zee legend," is how Pablo put it, paraphrasing how the wild West documented its heroes at the turn of the 20th century.

On one of our occasional romps that did not include mountain bikes, this time rafting the American River rapids, ripsnorter runs these were in early spring's snow melt, with names attached to certain notorious sections, such as Texas Chainsaw Mama and Guide Slammer, but no pansy guide for the two of us there in the foothills of the California Sierras, Pablo, paddling dutifully into a Class 4 slammer of a gusher as we sucked lip on a waterproofed hashish pipe, he told me he had seen The Movie a hundred times. The film helped Pablo learn English, he said, choking on a hit of sheesh. If we had to catalogue the title of my version of this famous western flick, I suppose it would be: "Liberty Valance, The Man Who." That is because, well see here, I am no slinger capable of shooting a hot toddy like Liberty Valance, and as most of us know, neither was Jimmy Stewart, or whatever the East Coast golly-two-shoes' name was in The Film. But my postman Pablo's well hashed point, and the film's, is that Jimmy Stewart the lawyer, now the speak-easy U.S. senator for those homesteading, cattle-busting plains folk, he was the man who shot Valance, even if his bullet didn't hit its mark. Jimmy-boy was no killer but he really was The Killer. You print zee legend, n'ombre hombre? We have the twisted press, and John Wayne's aim, to thank for the Liberty Valance legend. Still, my favorite line in the movie wasn't about doctoring the facts just outside some saw dusted, shoot-'em-up saloon. It was when The Duke of Stud tells Stewart to stop feeling sorry for himself and do what he does best: Get the girl and go to D.C.

"Hell," Wayne tells him, in that elliptical drawl that was really emphysema, "you taught her to read and write, now ... give ... her ... something ... to read and write about."

That's what I'm doing here, "Me, The Man Who," though like I said I am no hero, just a pied piper who would love to see his thinning audience dance one more time to a tickered tune that makes them a bundle of money. I have my fingers on the flute, the recorder, the laptop, the smoking gun, only instead of a stock tip, and talking in my ticker tongues on the hotel stage of some oily Tel Aviv hotel, across the gray boulevard from those waterside falafel shacks I used to love, this time -- *this* time -- I reckon it is my *story* that gets transmitted to the subs. My ticker fingers are undergoing transference, hopping over to my paragraph factory, my laptop assembly line here in Strawberry, deserting the podium I used to supervise at the ticker factory.

I pray even the federales in that glass tower get a rumble out of the story I tell here; I do I do oh Lord I do. I say this with clarity and with no contractions, sucking no hashish pipe, none at all.

Just how pretzel-stick wretched had I become in the days after securities enforcers entered my life? For one, I was hallucinating. The freeway signs were speaking to me, and this was not even Los Angeles. Paradise Drive just up Highway 101 said to me: "Pariah drive! Drive off the bridge!" each time I drove across or cycled beneath my beloved Richardson Bay and the once redwood and now concrete bridge that gapped Strawberry and points north with the county's heliport, Sausalito's overpriced fish restaurants and the Golden Gate headlands: lair of bobcats, burnt-out Nike missile silos from paranoiac WWII San Francisco and best of all, the fiercest single-track mountain bike trails this side of Seminary Drive, lined in early springtime with wild mustard, a real a yellow-slicked road. Ahem ... I had also lost one of my most prized possessions: the ability to hold water. My entire life I could drink a gallon or more of just about anything and not have to relieve myself. I'm not a big guy but I guess my bladder was up for a gold medal. The 10-hour overnight to London? No problem. These epic three-hour movies nowadays, plus previews? Handled with aplomb. But now, like a firefighter in brushfire season, I was hosing. Urgently and everywhere, even under cover of Strawberry Rec Center's community hot tub and horror of horrors, in the swimming pool itself on the several occasions I could bring myself to swim a lap or two without toying with the notion of taking a dive/the dive, sticking my hands into one of those vents at the bottom and flapping my flesh like a flounder against the plastered surface until I could not

flap any longer. But I wondered how the lifeguard would take it, and worse, the nice guy who cleaned the pool each morning. Besides, I had to wizz again, real bad. I felt like a short-billed dowitcher caught pants down in the Trevi Fountain, a font in the fountain. I was also feeling like these were my last days, my last breaths, before the federales locked me in a cage for 10 years. I prayed more than I'd ever prayed before, reciting like rosaries my pledge to wipe restaurant counters and wash dishes in Pray, Montana, a place I actually visited on our honeymoon, cute little place where the local hot springs posted a sign above its own hot water wading pool, something like "Welcome to Our ool/That's Right/We Left the P Out/Make Sure You Do Too, or sweep the sand off windshields in Dubai, even shovel snow from hotel entrances in Moscow, for the rest of my life I would, if the good Lord would just please oh please keep me out of the pen, I'd never ever put pen-to-laptop-to-stock-market ever ever again.

On one of my twisting Strawberry walks out the front door, along Shuck Drive where the wooded lane cuts through the Golden Gate Baptist Seminary grounds, I searched for spirits to lift my own but flat out broke down instead. Beneath the eucalyptus trees on campus sit the seminary's dormitories, cottages actually, and row houses, for our future thumpers, our next wave of Baptist theologians and ministers and preachers, and their families. On many days, you can see the graduate students reading their books as they sit on the porches of the cottages. In summer, the seminary imports goats from Oregon to chomp down buffet style on the property's numerous hillsides, a strategy for mowing the lawns that seemed ecologically sensible and cheap until last summer, when one of the two rigs hauling the goats on 101 jumped a divider. Half of the goats, more than 200 of them, were killed on the freeway, just a few miles north of their new home in Strawberry. The rig's driver was injured but alive; he was jacked up on Slurpees, giant chocolate macaroons and was just topping it off with a jumbo coffee from his last pit stop, the Safeway in San Rafael, when the cargo's bleating and the smell and who knows, a splash of hot java into his lap, spooked him, after all those miles driving south from the rocky Oregon coast. "Got my goats," the fellow, sporting a kid thee not a goatee on his chin, told a few newspaper reporters from his hospital bed. "Everything was just fine until it wasn't."

Half a year later, on this late winter day, I climbed out of the sweaty sack at 11, dabbed the inside of my cheeks with unsalted heirloom peanut butter and vowed to shed the funk surrounding me as I stewed inside my cottage, thus my attempt, for the first time in

weeks, at resuming my brisk walks through the neighborhood and across the seminary, which was filled with cypress and eucalyptus and slender pine trees that smelled about as close to winter as you were going to get in this California county. On the walk, I found myself staring, eyes glazed over, at the kids' bicycles lined up outside their daddies and mommies' rented porches. Most of the bikes dotting the seminary were much older than the smart-looking youth mountain bikes one usually runs across in Strawberry, a peninsula of modest, I'd call it funky, wealth floating between islands of great oversized riches named Tiburon and Sausalito and across the way, SF. On this property, the seminarians were renters in dorm rooms and leased cottages, in their late-20s, married and poor. Alongside the bikes I could see Weber grills for barbecuing, hopefully not goat meat, and most of those were models that were 10-years old, maybe more, the charcoal versions. Once again, not the county's usual overreaching standards, these grills, which for most patios around these parts would be stainless steel, turbo-fired infra-red grills with computerized rotisserie settings. But the old bikes and the coated Weber grills, for all of their age, were spotless, gleaming as the winter sun that afternoon finally sliced through Strawberry's peninsular fog layer. I don't know why, but that stopped me in my tracks, those shiny grills as the rays warmed my neck a bit, and I started to cry. I couldn't stop crying. I was sobbing to high heaven is what I was. Was it remembering the goats, and lamenting the poor beasts never chose volunteer for an assignment that would splash some of their brothers and sisters and moms and dads across the freeway divide, or was I thinking about my younger years, looking at those campus dormitories and antique but pristine Weber grills, recalling my early years when I was a mere renter, one step or two up from a Safeway bagger? I sat down on a curb, beneath the eucalyptus and cypress trees, and I prayed. I prayed for life, because I wanted it back. Not my life, specifically, but a life, I wanted anyone's life but my own. I'd even take the life of a goat herder ... as long, that is, as we could share it. I mean, I didn't want to be killing no one, not even a goat herder living alone in a trailer park with Gloria Estefan and Julio whatever his name singing 'hace calor bebé' from a pod of \$100 mini-speakers 16 hours a day. That's what a wreck I was.

Chapter Two

My Doc

The shrink-wrappers who study the brain call this kind of negotiating with the Lord, or the federales for that matter, "bargaining." I found myself wiping counters at home with those anti-bacteria wipes you pull from plastic thingies, and putting (what few I had) dishes and drinking glasses and utensils in perfect order, exactly three inches from each other for the plates and bowls, for instance, in the cupboards and drawers of my Strawberry kitchen. In between each placement of a utensil, I'd whisper a Hail Mary or a Lord Jesus Christ, visualizing in my mind how peaceful I could be as a dishwasher who was not about to be indicted for white collar crimes I could not bear to read about in the newspaper or on the Internet. Please make me a dishwasher/I know how to sterilize/Practice makes perfect. Say the prayers enough times and I too could become dishwasher or busboy, my God even far less, Safeway bagger: petty tron with no attachment to the loathsome infamies of the stock market. The meds call what I was experiencing something along the lines of post-traumatic stress. The telemers at the tippy ends of my DNA were shortening in length, according to the lab-lingo given me by Langley Porterized shrink-wrap -- translation: THE SHOCK OF GOV AGENTS MASSACRING MY BRAIN CELLS. "Such stress you don't deserve, sweetie," is how my kick-bum (yeh, she was a kick-boxer, of all things) lawyer put it a bit later. Such stress manifests itself in the most curious ways, mostly, I'm told, never having served my country during war, to soldiers in trenches that double as latrines and perpetual cemeteries. My trench was lined with (real) stock certificates and (in the carnival mirror of my conscience) sewer sludge, rotting fish heads, pigeon poop and intrusive nightmares about serving the next (pick one) two years, five years, eight, cooped inside Lompoc or some other federal pen, picking my nose in the kipsie, like father like son. The nightmares/Yeh and the nightmares. My brilliant and expensive, my hyphenated shrink-wrap, Dr. Shrink-Wrap working the talk therapy in his creaky old Marina District office, later would tell me, as I sat in his deep-leather armchair with the little notepad and free pens distributed by the pharmaceutical companies by my side, "The nightmare becomes laughter when it is understood." Nightmare Becomes Laughter? Was doc insane? How many milligrams of paroxa-whatever it was called, how many anti-depressants would it take for me to have his prescribed brand of shrunk-wrapped sunshine warming my shingled and shot nerves? My shrink-wrap, he who counseled the armchair, told me he used to spend time in Indonesia, on one island or

another, where the locals, the older ones, anyway, when they saw the water at beachside suck out to sea, "they'd run for the mountain." Maybe it was Bali. "Don't be a tourist when a tsunami is coming, Robbie," doc counseled. "Don't just," and here, the wrapper rubs in a bit of that hand cream he always has around, here he shifts from tale-telling traveler to professional shrink-wrap, acronyms no extra charge, "don't just stand there is the point. You suffered classic shock after a traumatic event. P-T-S-D by the book. Now you know better. The next time you see it coming, run for the highest point on the island "

The tsunami parable happened later. For now, I WAS HOLLOWED ... by a flat cardboard envelope with official dot-gov language inside it. My trauma arrived via post, but no way was I past it, this disorder. I was in it, doc. I'd just begun to entertain thoughts of a local solution to the bruising I figured I was about to receive from the piercingly perceptive, albeit thinly underpaid, government agents who entered my life via FedEx: I was fantasizing a Kneveled hurtle, mountain bike and all, off the 101 overpass of the Richardson Bay Bridge, just a jog from Strawberry and a half-mile south of Paradise Drive. In this way, with the assistance of some British Columbia bud to steel my nerves, acquired from Pablo the postman's medical and entirely legal stash of maryjane, I would be freed forever from my sneaky fiscal secret and the head-hunting HEADLINES that were flaying me: I was a pied-piping plank head of a fraud. I even was ruminating about the two little Coast Guard trawlers, one named Bodega Bay and the other Golden Gate, parked in that little harbor beneath the SF Bay's big bridge, the GGB, me figuring these were the rescue boats that would fish me out of the water, tangled and mangled and more or less in unity with my bike, the spokes piercing my heart and both me and the two-wheeler dead as doornails and the Coast Guardians wearing their rubber gloves and snickering, "Talk about losers, this bird couldn't even toss himself from the Golden Gate, he had to pick a highway overpass."

But I digress. See, I was the investment world's piper, maybe the best there ever was for the working-stiffs who were my audience, those subterranean subians working their midnight shifts, popping their Jelly Bellies in sugar-doused blitzes just like I now was slapping down the sedatives. When I transmitted, say, "Mongolian copper found at Oyu Tol Goi," thousands, maybe tens of thousands, of Joes and Josephines working inside their donut factories, they plum melted up. They scrambled fast as the jackrabbits Pablo and me sometimes spooked on the mountain, they inhaled the chosen ticker, ran flat out of breath, lunged and latched onto their grandma's safe-deposited heirlooms, armed with the

cash they required to make their pilgrimage to, say, a Copperopolis in the Gobi, one they'd never see with their own eyes but could stake a claim to in that vast steppe land of floating tape known as the stock market. Copper. Tin. Gold. I said "Colombian silver" and my subs ditched the potato-skin fries they had bubbling in some Big Burger vat of grease and bolted straight into EL Marmato, or the Andes, electronically of course, figuratively speaking, via their stock portfolios, and in SIZE, meaning thousands of the subs buying hundreds or thousands of shares, each of them at the same gut moment, when they read my missives. Canadian uranium? These eager cleavers lit up the stock charts. Bolivian tin mines? Tin go bingo. It wasn't just commodities that turned the trick. I did Internet companies. Pharmaceuticals. Multi-online role-playing games in Korea. Life science companies were was a big hit, a biomedicated hypodermic right up the hiney. I scripted anthrax diagnostics, and my crowd powdered those names. Genomic tools? Every wanna-be fat chat and grocery clerk in the country, maybe the world, hard-wired their portfolios to my Deeds N' Actions.

I really believed my own wax, melted up in it, candle always burning as my manna transmitted, my sweet-lemon manna, spitting, drizzling, raining and storming, and the subscribers ate it up. My ticker DNA was the best meringue these folks ever tasted. Like anyone on a roll, I took every opportunity to boast about the power of the Melt-Up. At seminars, I flashed stock charts that were lava flows in reverse. On planes, I jabbered like a jackass, raised my voice in hotel lobbies and in airport queues, even whilst hosing the polished urinals at Le Bristol in Paris ... and I wasn't even drunk, or drugged. I was proud of the wealth I was creating, and I was starting to get jealous that more of the market chiffon wasn't coming into my kitchen cabinets. So you see, up until, well, up until right very now, I never in my life considered myself a fraud, and more than that: everyone else in my life I figured for fraudulent behavior of one type or another. Never once, at the start of it all, did I think all those puckered faces out there would put currency where their transmitters lay ... and buy the chosen tickers I rained down on them. But they did, bolting wholesale from their positions at bubbling vats of grease where they dunked skinny fries for the Big Burger crowd, or bagged groceries at Le Safeway, whenever one of my Melt-Ups circumcised the planet. The subs bought these tickers, I presumed, because they felt they could, what, I guess trust me, right? Why shouldn't they? Most of the time, I did believe, I did believe, I did believe in my investment DNA ... because I was the guy kicking the tires, making the phone calls, swapping raunchy one-liners with South African geologists as we bumped along some dusty Platreef back-road lined with burning tires and peppered with scrawny chickens and goats. I was the guy

sharing the '56 Chateau d'Yquem with the CEO. I was at the center of the hive, why shouldn't I believe my own wax? But what buzzed me, got my goat, what clipped my goatee if I'd had one, was how all of these people, tons and tons of them reading my melt-ups, how they could let my Marconian spark spanning the air -- how could they let that be enough for them? I mean, it wasn't even plain text on letterhead chuted into their street side postal boxes. It was a wireless snippet of electronic mail is all. Sure, my audience saw me as the high priest drinking from the cup, but what I saw was folks who would drink whatever I poured into the chalice. It could be a premier cru Sauterne one day, a blackberry soy smoothie the next, a generic diet cola that probably tasted like diesel fuel the day after that, and salmonella custard for dessert, topped with mold-ringed slices of rancid kiwi even, and they'd gobble regardless. My audience wasn't even worthy of being called market gourmands. They reminded me of those Bobcat mashers prowling the county, mechanically devouring blackberry bramble in the name of planned-unit subdivisions. Where was their common sense and wisdom? Their taste for what was genuine and what was sham in my Melt-Up cosmos? The subs never called me to tire-kick my credentials, never double-checked my sources, never even did a simple comparative analysis of these companies I was pounding the table with. If I watered down the dessert wine, would they just sip it, or more likely, guzzle it and pretend they were still drinking the best of a great year? Could I swap out luscious Oaxacan goat, stewed in that seven-hour mole Negro sauce down there in Mexico, and feed the submarines horse meat instead? Cabrillo mio! These were piglets at a feast of fortune they'd bought into for a few subscriber dollars each month, the same price as those stent-busting burgers and fries sold alongside the freeway.

Thomas Alva Edison, prolific N.J. inventor, refined the science of the stock ticker more than a hundred years ago, but I turned it into an art, and when the market was pistol-hot my watercolors were once-twice-sometimes-thrice daily Melt-Ups, transmitted from my Strawberry kitsch and expressly delivered via Wi-Fi, WiMAX and why not? Once my subs started actually buying -- thousands of them -- I had no choice but to sell. Didn't the priests and rabbis and swamis in the temple do the same when they dipped into their glittering cisterns? Off to market, diddler-dee. You have free will and greed will and both are a contagion, a tidal wave, a tsunami. Greed is a pandemic, it's viral, enters like a virus, too, on oily hands fingering great wealth, then rides the wave to the top, looking for another top and another and another. There are doctors, lawyers, priests, dental hygienists, well-bred county moms even, shepherding their kids to Town Center Mall for the after-school piece of a cheesecake factory, who will

bend and break their own rules of decency and justice, look the other way, wipe their hands clean on a workplace apron, or at home on a hanging dish towel, just so they can feel right about rubbing elbows with the diddler, just this once, just so they can ride the gravy train, the wave of ticker tsunami they see everyone else is riding. Their faces are in the hundreds and thousands and tens of thousands, and they made me do it -- these subs who mostly ate Safeway-branded patty meat made me do whatever it was I did because I was loyal to them. I might not, at the peak of my you-you-you-Robbie-hubris have wanted to be caught inside an elevator with them, or paddle with them in the water, or even be seen eating at the same restaurants, but let's face it, they were dining on the sublime tickers I fed them for the feast. I was picking up the check and tipping way more than 15 percent. I was stock tipping and stock tripping, and I was proud of what I did for a living. These Joes and Josephines, ordinary cids, they all figured they were safe in their submarines: cushioned by the crowded numbers of the stock market, comforted by the big numbers on the dollar bills and rubber-stamped stock certificates from Toronto and New York and Dubai. I was as loyal to them as they were to me. Everything was just fine, the long-haul truck drivers say immediately after the spill, the ones that survive, everything was just fine, until it wasn't. Oh Papa and oh Pam and oh Fodder X, please forgive me.

My shrink-wrap/looks deep inside me/sees the tsunami/knows I'm hyperventilating/My lawyer/shares a joke/about money and priests/ ... and a dead dog .../that really says it all. Thom Edison and I were alike in another way, besides his science of the ticker in that laboratory of his. He was hard of hearing, practically deaf, boxed on the ears by a teacher is the story. Me, I was having a hard time listening to anyone but myself at the peak, my ear drums stretched tight as a drum skin but thick as a sautéed brick.

So my number was about up. But the Richardson Bay bridge toss, my bye-bye-cycled catapult off a freeway launch ramp and into a body of water I associated more with kayakers and with those toothpick-limbed willets and snowy egrets that stalk the salt marshes than with dying ... well, it would have to wait. I was so drenched in shame and guilt after a week of seeing the hit-man headlines, the blaspheming blurbs by the network anchors on the 6-oh-what-a-crock news, I was such a pile of pulp, I couldn't even tumble out of bed without feeling like I was the half-paralyzed victim of some ischemic stroke, let alone plot The End or roll a doob of postman Pablo's medical MJ. You need resolve, and a steady hand to calm rebellious handlebars, if you want to launch into the bay on a full-suspension mountain bike -- even if it was, poetically, in sighting distance of Angel Island, a haven of eucalyptus

and cypress trees whose tippy top runt of a hill you could always count on to stick above the streaks of fog that swept into our Golden Gate and brigadooned their way toward Strawberry and Tiburon. Desperation, that I had dripping and sopping in my loins. But totally M-I-A were the calm, gear-shifting hands and pumping thighs I required to a) brave the concrete bridge, b) race up the steep on-ramp alongside 101's 65-mph traffic and c) launch myself ... recycle myself into sewer cider in that cool clean bay a couple hundred feet below. Thus, I did what all accused white-collar perpetrators seem to do in our day and age. I got away for a few days. I jammed down my shriveled gut some cashew butter, mixed with a scoop of frozen blackberries from my zip-locked stash, and bolted on my bike. I knew I needed to slink away from the regulators and the attorneys, the creepy phone calls and the smarmy winks and nods I spied from the lifelong losers, pudgy little supermarket checkout clerks they were, when I crawled into my local Safeway. They were snickering, I know so, because they never caught me kiwi-handed all those times I'd pop a fuzball down the hatch, skin and all, during my shopping trips. Or gulp a few kumquats on the sly when those citrus spits were in season. Shoplifting, mouth lifting is what it was, that was my insurance against those pudges overcharging me at the checkout stand, like all clerks did. My shrink-wrap once again counseled me that here was that little crooked heart of mine showing itself yet again, exacting tribute and breaking the rules even before I could prove something wasn't kosher in the state of Safeway. Doc said my chisel streak extended to those thousands of mindless subs I just knew were out to sell my precious tickers before I could, pulling the magic Melt-Up carpet out from under me: the very person who led to the cash register these no-names, these selfish Joes and Josephines who printed my daily missiles and read the stuff in their garages and on their exercise bikes, these pokes who made up my overreaching audience of wanna-be neighborhood tycoons just waiting to pickpocket my justly deserved stock-market profits.

I bet they were all shoplifters at heart, my loyal readers. That tomographic shrink-wrap of mine, I'm thinking now, he sure knows his personality disorders. It takes a crook to know a crook, my SF doc told me, after months and months of shlumping down in that wonderful leather beanbag of an armchair that fronted as his \$250-a-session couch. If I didn't loosen up for a few days, get gone on my two-wheeler, I was skunked.

I thought I'd ride my bike, wobbly knees, oxidative stress and all, up through wine country and into Calistoga, the mineral bath capital of northern California. All alone, in search of the mud bath of my

youth. I'd been alone all this time anyway, at my most solitary when I had the monarchs, lords and ladies of the global banquet crowd crowding me in from all sides, eating at my table, listening to my stock tips, coming to my conferences to watch ... to know ... to understand me. Solitary as one of those ethereal egrets along the wetlands bike path. Floating my way up and down the single-track trails, like those nimble mountain goats you see toward the top of pebbly Mount Tam, only alone, saddled nobly on my tricked-out wilderness bike. When I was peaking, I had no connection to make with anyone in this currency-ringed circus, not even eye contact and a simple breakfast. Nothing personal, you understand. But when everything you touch turns to platinum, you prefer the solitude. I zombied everyone in my life. The pig-ass rich crowd, them I pitied worst of all, for listening to and literally buying into my electronic tickers in the wind, and the scrawled ones they begged for at airports, on taxi stands, even like pilgrims at my front condo door when the stock market was going berserk. By the time I reached my blazing summit, flaming and not wanting to share my torch with a single soul, more or less disgusted with anyone who would frolic as I played my pipe, I was secretly pitying myself more than any one person should be permitted. I burned alone.

At the peak of the Melt-Up, I quarantined myself from the kit-and-kaboodle of the population, and that includes the two people in my life who were family, albeit not a big number there because me and the wife, former wife, actually, we had skipped children. Family for me meant her and her droopy-eyed Papa, who was sinking, gracefully I thought, into addled dementia and loving every forgetful amyloid moment of it. "The best thing about a new ailment," Papa tells me for the fiftieth time, tells me as a buddy, even in the wake of his daughter's divorce from yours truly, as we meet regularly for coffee and (pick one) cranberry/carrot/raisin bran muffins at Paradise Boulange, the café, "the best thing about a new ailment is that it helps you forget the old ones." Even Papa and his baby girl/my ex-wife, as I myself melted up, even these innocent and beautiful people I deemed unworthy of my platinum-priced time. The two of them, even after the divorce, the two of them were my only other friends besides Pablo the postman.

Papa was an old mining hand, but not the kind who got grit mud-packed beneath his fingernails. Our Papa used to be a finance guy who ran the books for a mid-sized gold and silver mining company that called SF its headquarters and whose claim to fame was moniker as the oldest-listed company on the New York Stock Exchange, or something like that. Even beloved Papa, who had a heart of gold and

who in his 80s and still playing some kind of Hawaiian slack key piano in late afternoon, for practice, mind you, Papa who would have been the Papa of the children his daughter and I never had, well, Papa had an anecdote or a little saying for each and every occasion ... even the universally loved Papa became, during my hypo/mania, undeserving of my time at the top. He who would go out among the bushes during July and August and September and hand-pick for his son-in-law, his former sonny now but no matter to him, pluck out and deposit in zip-locked bag or two the county's most succulent blackberries. He who gave his daughter's hand to me in matrimony. He who consoled me after my Fed-Ex delivered moment, as I grieved the sign from constellations above, the Paris Hilton omen that should have gotten me off my tickered horse, consoled me with one of his little gems, "Oh Robert, you're not in the clouds just because you didn't know a Hilton from a hangover, I mean, she's so dumb, she has to take off her blouse to count to 12." A member of the USA's fastest growing age group, 80 and uppers, Papa was forgetting more each day, and loving it up, this synaptic shedding of a lifespan of fabrications, stories and expectations. Even he I pushed away, gently, but pushed away much the same, not giving him his full half-hour at the bakery, for instance, withholding eye-to-eye contact, nixing my presence at our traditional Friday evening cocktail hours at Seafood Paddler, the cute little fish place he loved up there near his Greenbrae home. Distance was my middle name. With everyone, I see now. I put a few feet between me and the regulars, for example, whilst I was marinating in the Strawberry Rec Center's hot tub, which when I wasn't gallivanting on other people's spaceships I would visit after the 1 p.m. Pacific time close of the stock market. At my summit, when my stock picks had become self-fulfilling prophecies, I remember now I didn't have a single word, nor a grunt or a nod of the head, for: a) that acupuncturist in Beijing, as I lay stomach down on one of those ultra-king-size hotel beds about 88 stories above China and I wouldn't tell the nice white-haired man with the needles how does it feel 'cause it felt so perfect with the sticks into my back and I wanted the tingling and all the other sensations to be all mine, b) the supermarket clerks and c) the telephone, which I refused to pick up, no matter where I was, and d) the crew at bubbling tub side at my beloved Strawberry Rec Center.

I had my moments at the pool. moments of, what do I call it, understanding, forewarning, clarity? One afternoon at tub side, autumn's first misty day as I recall, there were the usual four or six regulars foaming nicely. True to form, I withheld my greetings, and my eye contact, from all of them. But in the mist that day, after I'd had my chlorinated fill and was toweling dry, I saw two of the soakers rise to leave as well, only they weren't rising. They were a tiny couple, holding hands, I mean real tiny, four

feet flat or less. They just levitated out of the foam, or so it seemed to me. I had one of those moments of clarity, when I could see through the mist and tubby steam, a bit like discovering the next great multiplying stock-ticker for my newsletter audience. In a hot tub, everyone is the same height and weight. All we get to see are the faces. I'd never realized it. Those munchkins had been coming to the tub all summer, and one of them, the fellow, looked awful familiar, but this was the first time I saw them as they really were. Out of the water. I knew there was a moral in this little Rec Center vision, but damned if I could take the time to unravel the fable. Belle & Sebastian, I swear it, were on the radio in the locker room after I got out of the tub, and they were doing the Donovan sing-song they did so well, a soothing, entirely non-threatening pop music that was a step above elevator music I guess. The lyrics were something like, Me and the major don't see eye to eye/Me and the major are from different worlds/ Only I was hearing "midget," not "major." I didn't see eye to eye with the munchkins. They were beautiful tiny people, porcelain dolls, they were in the same hot tub I was in, they were from a different world, by the sound of their northern accents, Canadian, I figured, and the two of them there, so sweet and calm and small, they reminded me of my Melt-Up subs, my yellow submarines: Safeway clerks and burger flippers, small people wanting to get bigger. I know that sounds mean, but that was my frame of mind. I never thought for a second that some people, midgets even, could be happy being just the way they are. Grocery baggers, too. And burger joint lard dippers. I figured the wee folk all wanted something more, which is why they were riding the Melt-Up. That was all the grist I gave to that hot tub session, all the time I could afford. See, I had a conference call on deck with some Canadian geologist who'd claimed to have discovered a new uranium field in Michigan. I had a speech to write for a conference in Vegas, there were 20 or 30 e-mails waiting for answers, some of them legitimate questions from subs, queries for estimated earnings per share for this company or product market share for that company ... and I had another Melt-Up to transmit!. All this, and my first vodka lemon of the day waiting to be plucked from the bush in the front yard.

My shrink-wrapper across the water, over there in SF sitting kitty-corner from my leased armchair, later told me whilst pat-pat-patting Lubriderm over his spidery hands and well groomed forearms, the good doc told me my activity pattern (his phrase) was probably hypo/mania (my slash): a medical term for the productive high and self-delusional sheen you inherit when everything in your life is clicking. Hypo/mania -- as in loving everything about yourself and your life, and shunning most everyone else; getting up at 3 in the morning, for instance, to do 200 laps in a Dubai rooftop pool because you think/

feel/know you have surpassed, vaulted beyond human boundaries in mind/body/soul ... and portfolio. Or at church, which I then attended infrequently, me holding up a couple of hundred-dollar bills to the early morning rays streaming through the stained-glass windows, just as the baskets passed by, not to confirm the C-notes were bona-fide currency, but to make sure everyone else around me knew they were bona-fide and current Benjamins I was dropping into the alms of the church. Hypo/mania, I discovered, is seen by meds as a fuzzy partner of borderline bipolarity. I saw my tumble not in that class of medical terms but instead in the language of the ordinary folks I'd snubbed. For instance, one of the sheep who flocked to these investment conferences and banquets that had me flying high as a kite, one elderly rod, he was looking for my latest platinum ticker to finance the rest of his retirement. All I could give him -- guess what, he was just an inch or two taller than those hot-tubbers I'd shared bubbles with -- all I had for the fellow was the coldest of shoulders. It reminded me of that Old Testament line we studied in college, when I was just off-center enough to become a sacrificial lamb chop and take The Bible As Lit to meet my humanities requirement, not realizing the tremendous load of reading I had before me: "I have set my face like flint/Knowing I shall not be shamed." That was me, flint-face. As I walked away from the chance to autograph his newsletter with a ticker, I caught my reflection off the side of a hotel escalator, and here is what I saw: a smug pod in a blue blazer. Flint face in total deed. I twinged, one of those facial tics that was trying to tell me someone or something was coming for me, sourdough batard that I was. The tiny man in the hotel lobby, he sneered at me, took the giveaway conference pen he'd hoped I'd use to work my ticker karma on a scrap of notepaper, and snapped it in half. "Melt this up yer ass," the fellow spit at me.

So there I was, Strawberry lemonhead who coined "melt-up." When I told my shrink-wrap about that legacy, he raised an eyebrow and pressed his long fingers together, a tad skeptical. Maybe he had no clue what a melt-up was, what my Melt-Up was all about. Why should he? I branded the good doctor "shrink-wrap" because that's what psychiatrists and psycho-pharmacologists do best these days: shrink-wrap your phobias, your hopes, your fears, your tics and tickers, everything about you, until it is packaged to order -- usually in a diagnosis that fits doc's own analytics training, or shaped in layman's English to dog-leg miraculously into those fine-print labels that describe what a drug is best prescribed for, what it's supposed to do for you and what its side-effects are. "You're losing weight, you have a startle reflex every time someone you think is a FedEx carrier knocks at your door, you're experiencing existential thoughts and you're afraid to get out of bed in the morning! Well, this ... is ... fortunate;

there's a neuro-transmitter product that just cleared the FDA and it's perfect for you!" My shrink-wrap had it all down pat, after 35 years of practice. He was exactly 6 feet tall, exactly 170 pounds, and he'd been exactly 170 pounds ever since he got out of the Air Force or the Navy, I forget which, where he served as a medic on an aircraft carrier in Southeast Asia and where besides completing his residency he also studied beta-breathing and personal empowerment techniques whilst docked in the harbors of Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong. Lots of incense and Far-out Eastern food, with a side of meditation, he recalled wistfully. Almost always, the first thing my guy would do when I walked into his second-floor Marina District office, whether it was foggy or one of those extremely rare, overheated SF days, was stoop to light the gas jets in the cute faux fireplace. Then he'd squirt some cream from one of the two or three bottles of Lubriderm he had around his office: sensitive lotion for sensitive skin. When I had the energy or the nerve to say something mildly revealing about myself, for instance the day I waxed on about my hoard of unworn commemorative t-shirts, a chapter-by-chapter chronicle of my recent life -- this Barcelona conference or that Internet promotion from Vegas or Orlando or HK, a Flaming Lips concert or a Wine Country mountain-bike race, even some charity events like the Run for the Seals alongside Fort Cronkhite's crusty beach in the county's headlands fronting the Golden Gate; the tees were one of several hoards I kept shielded from human touch, wrapped in plastic and buried in the makeshift wine-cellar I had rooted down below the Strawberry condo -- shrink-wrap looked for the personality warp, that time seeing an obsession (or was it a compulsion?) in those virginal t-shirts. He shivered, got up from his chair and stuffed what looked like a snake-pillow beneath the little space under the front door of his office. I never knew if he was doing this to keep the cold air out of the room or keep my words and phobias trapped in. My doc said he did this a lot at home, too, not stuffed the pillow beneath door sills, but kept the fireplace going, even when it was toasty outside. So the good doctor wasn't superhuman after all, being on the thin side and subject to these frosty spells when he was counseling his patients whilst lubing his spidery hands. But he had a superhuman practice, that's for sure. Once in a while he'd tell me about this department store tycoon or that casino owner who saw him regularly, and how they all thought, as they aged, that they still could take it all with them when they went. They all had their maladaptive patterns of behavior, one fellow even having custom-built into the back of his Lincoln Town Car, not a DVD player, but a gauche calculator the size of a 30-inch television monitor, one that flashed and burped like a pinball machine whenever the guy decided to punch in his net worth, or how much dough he'd made (or lost) that day. My observation? These scat-cat fat cats wouldn't be taking it all with them, not with the rates their psychiatrist charged for 45

minutes of his time in a posh SF neighborhood, in a plain-vanilla (and somehow comforting, I thought) office, in that deep-leather armchair with the freebie notepad and branded Paxil pen that looked like a missile from outer space. Outside that office, shrink-wrap lived not far from my Strawberry, just a couple of miles farther north along the freeway from my locus of Seminary and Paradise drives, in an estate-lined town of docs and brokers called Kentfield, where the county's majestic Mount Tamalpais, whose trails and fire roads Pablo and I had humped and pumped for years, scrummed for the eye's attention with enormous redwood trees and tottering, precarious eucalyptus.

Hoy hoy, enough of doc's karma-cology and his noble quest to help me understand the conflicts that were lowering my thresholds for anxiety, depression and post-traumatic shock. What I didn't tell shrink-wrap, I did not want him to Post-It an entirely lost case, what I didn't tell him was how the sight of rich food, good wine, especially the nectar of the gods, the d'Yquem, how it practically made me give it up, heave-ho, like that FedEx gal somewhere had dusted the summons envelope with some kind of Clockwork Formula 44, inoculating with anthraxian authority its victim from the pleasures of good, no, very good cuisine and vintage wines. The dessert wines, like I said, the Sauternes, all I had to do was think about the few bottles I still had, buried in the shed out front where the blackberry scrub lay its stinging carpet over half the yard, I'd remember them in there, at night, in bed, alone and ruminating on what could have been, jangled all to pox, and the smell of that sweet chateau's nectar, I swear I could smell the moldy grapes, year by vintage year, blasting me into my stinking toilet, all I had to do was remember and like poor old Alex the droogie, I was vomiting. Post peak, and feeling like some kind of shell-shocked crash victim (your pick: car crash, plane crash, stock-market crash), seeking a salve, some relief, at least a pause from my synaptic twinges, I decided I would mount my beloved full-suspension mountain bike, the kind that cost as much as a car these days, and self-medicate in the Calistoga mud at the tippy-top of wine-soaked Napa land. Now remember, persecuted people in my shape find it difficult merely to get out of bed, let alone unlock the shed, haul out the bike, slip into my clip-ons and throw together some gear for a five-hour ride. I knew this much: I had to do something, get some momentum back into my busted and now shameful life. (Hey, you white-collar perps: When the news cycle is so slow, you're still near the top of the hour on the evening news after a full week's gone by, you'll be praying for a fresh war, a pandemic, maybe another one of those freak sink holes that swallow half the state of Missouri. Anything to get out of the public eye.) I'd street it through Mill Valley, go out the Eldridge Grade on the north side of Mount Tamalpais, then across to Stinson Beach,

and the Bolinas Ridge, up Highway 1 and cut back east somewhere near Petaluma and into wine country. Who'd come with me anyway except Pablo my mountain-biking postman? And he worked mornings. I had to get out of Strawberry, my tiny peninsula in the shadow of the Golden Gate. I thought maybe I could scrape the shame away, scrub my filthy white collar clean with sulfured spring waters and the therapeutic mud... and somehow save myself ...from damaging myself. When I got back, I could only hope the gerbils out there would stop blitzing my home telephone and fax. The newspapers would return to their coverage of the war, the election, the earthquake in Peru or Ecuador or Morocco. Hey had to. Maybe even the legal billings and the shredded Melt-Up newsletters my freshly scrubbed subs were sending back, one of them its e-mailed pages printed out on pink construction paper and sandwiched together with what I assumed without tasting it was a Bible Belt mixture of pigeon (or rabbit) poop and crunchy peanut butter, I hoped and prayed that maybe Pablo, my last compadre and knight in good standing on this planet flipped vertigo-side-up, my Pablo Sir Postal would find it in his heart on his next round through Strawberry to de-tox my smeared postbox and burn anything in a manila envelope addressed to me, his own Hippocratic U.S. Postal Service oath be damned. Mailboxes stink.

I wound up, after what turned into a seven-hour bike ride over trails and on county roads, and along the way giving some thought in my brittle state to bombing one of the steeper downgrades on Tam, sans the IQ-shielding helmet, yeh, why not right on, (and oh yes, audience, there is one, a hill called Suicide just toward the western end of the Dipsea Trail), but I still wasn't ready for that solution, though the brush this winter was so thick if I did catch a header and lose it all, it would be the turkey vultures days later getting to enjoy a rare and presumably tasty treat, a trailside sweetbread I suppose they'd consider it, I wound up making it into the land of drippy vineyards and the prefab palaces where the tourists come to gawk and taste the wines (then proceed to pay more for that wine than they would if they crossed the road to the local Safeway). I and my bike glided past these make-believe Napa monasteries until I got to the end of my road, this place called Dr. Wilkinson's Mud Baths and Calistoga Mineral Springs: Colonics & Rubs. Mind you, this was before I'd finally thrown in my skanky towel and hired my own doctor, a wise man with a doctorate in serotonin reuptake inhibitors. I figured maybe a good stinking mud bath would take me out of myself, back up to speed. Who needed a \$250-an-hour (more like 50-minute) recliner anyway? Years ago, when I had no dreams of turning my small gift for writing and interviewing the money crowd into million-dollar paydays and we shared a trim one-bedroom

apartment on Lake Street in SF, we'd go up there to 'Stoga, my freshly scrubbed wife and me. The only therapy we sought back then was the way the hot mud snaked around our hips and legs, and oozing into the cracks of our bums, as the two of us, we were kids then really, shared a scummed and stained bathtub tended by some lubricated Latino, a kid himself looking just to earn a gratuity rich enough, a few bucks, to buy cornmeal and tomatoes on the way home to his family.

This time around, Dr. Wilkie's establishment had spiffed up, not just new paint but factory-branded porcelain tubs, manicured showers, clouds and clouds and clouds of steam appearing mushroom style everywhere, lots of incense and that cucumber lemony scent you get drifting around the spas in Las Vegas and Sedona. Higher prices, too. But the same 'Spanos working the mud shift. Mine was Caesar, a chubby lad whose job was to make sure I didn't slip and take a header against the edge of the tub as I sink/sank/stunk into the ooze.

The emollient mess did nothing for me, except make me recall the gold dust I'd turned into the crud that was now shaping up as my life. (My lawyer would later put it like this: "You snatched defeat from the jaws of victory.") I was feeling like I had committed the sins of the world, something my seen-it-all lawyer told me was typical at this early stage, when the accused stand ... well, they stand accused for the first time in their life. But by a government agency. Not a wife or an ex-wife. "You'd admit to killing JFK right now," she joked twice or three times. I learned the best lawyers tell the most relevant jokes numerous times, to the same people, over and over. I think it's a test of their clients. Maybe they figure they can triple-bill a fish who smiles at the same jokes all the time. But I couldn't crack a smile in that scene, I was so morose. She was the best securities litigator west of the Rockies, the trade journals said so. She charged just as much as the white-collar lawyers in Boston and New York. But this gal's jokes and joshes sure were goofy, especially intended for someone who felt and was starting to look like he was on the brink. Like all good attorneys, this one was a quick read on psyche (probably a tool for determining whether said client is capable of paying the monthly bill). My legal lady was pushing for the entire skull work-up, forensic psychiatry, lots of Lorazepam and 90 minutes a week of client-protected, shrink-wrapped talk therapy. "Did you know Lorazepam is the most prescribed drug in federal prisons?" Was she joking this time? I wasn't sure.

After Lorazepam and I became old friends, weeks and shrink-wrapped traumatic weeks later, I took to

calling the tiny tranquilizers “Razor-Pams” in honor of my only and former wife, Pamela. Razor Pam became her slug, something I tagged onto her sweet buns just a year or two into marriage, when she insisted, whenever we made love, that my face be newly shaven, I’m talking it had to be minutes before we tumbled onto our Japanese-style futon. Not that my face resembled an ape’s mug. It wasn’t like one of my high-school hangs from years ago, a Sicilian kid moved to Brooklyn named Julio, whose face at the tender age of 18 needed shaving twice a day. Julio anchor-ball-and-chain-smoked himself to facial palsy over the years. I miss him, even if he is still alive. My Razor Pam, bless her, she had her little fetish about getting sandpapered between the sheets, and I always obliged her on the face. Small price to pay. As for the new pams in my medicine cabinet, it didn’t take long before I was doing a Skittles-sized bag of the tranqs each day, and looking into that cabinet mirror, I felt like taking a razor and juicing my jugular. So the name Razor-Pams worked. I guess that’s what they call comic relief.

By the way, somehow I fancy Pam, by requiring the timely stubble shave, was “billing” me for my motor mouth, a trait of mine my audience often complained about: “Just give us the tickers, forget the flowers!” was an email I received at least once a day from my subscribers. The truth is my lips have never been sealed, not even now, as I stand on the brink of being FedExed out of my treacle sweet Strawberry Special existence. My former Pamela, all those years of burying her head under the pillows because I just could not stay silent for any respectable length of time, even at 2 in the morning, she’ll tell you that. I already knew my melt-ups were self-fulfilling prophecies. I wrote something and all the subs piled in, fast as they could phone their broker or press the ENTER key on their wireless laptop. Then I ran it, like a run-on sentence. Hinting where I might be headed with the next melt-up, whether it was Uganda uranium or Colombian gold, platinum in South Africa, even companies outside the world of metals, like one that was developing nicotine tablets in Taiwan for addled sufferers of dementia, just hinting where I was going was the same as handing over the keys to the stock-market vault. Because there was one thing my audience, heck, any audience, wanted more than a chosen and published ticker in my Melt-Up, and that was the hint of a freshly scrubbed, freshly shaved ticker not yet minted in my electronic missive but coming, yes coming with all its hype and flourish, in the next hour, or tomorrow, or next week.

I’m going a bit fast, I know. My counsel, my Laura the Lawyer, says the same thing about my motor mouth, says it’s a way of dealing with the guilt I feel “shnooking,” as she put it, all those nice folks out

there, my audience of subs, who just wanted to become crazy, ticker-pocking rich. "Turns out you're the shnook for trying to keep up with your hyperdrive friends," she told me as we vator pitched up the chute to her toasty suite in the sky, where lawyers live. She figured, in this period when I was at the bottom of my psychic barrel, that if I didn't find a recliner (her name for a shrink) who had the pharmacology down, I'd be slipping out of her SF skyscraper office one afternoon, smiling politely at the paralegal secretary outside the smoke-tinted glassy conference room, and ... doing ... some damage to myself. Her offices were on the 22nd floor, and I just knew the 12-foot high sheets of smoked glass were penetrable, as in disaster movies where the panes shatter when furniture and bodies are heaved into them. My LL, whom I called Elle, she had been here before, once with a client who was accused, falsely it turns out, of bilking the local tavern, it was in Long Island, out of its yearly Super Bowl pool, an amount exceeding \$100k that particular winter, must have been the Cowboys playing that year. Unlucky fellow, now in the inky blotch light of the NYC rags having a headline field day with the crime, he was a recovered alcoholic, and LL figures he convicted himself during a Seagram's and Seven binge one night not long after the newspaper stories appeared. Probably figured he didn't remember stealing the cash, which was taped beneath one of the wooden planks the bartenders walk along when they're serving customers. The morning after his 7&7 all-nighter, the poor sod showed up for his strategy session with my LL, she working at the time 18 stories high in a Manhattan skyscraper on that other coast, and first thing he makes a bee-line for the conference window, holding in his hand some rosary beads and sweating whiskey through his pores. The client made it through. Turns out one of the Catholic nuns who was a regular at the pub stole the cash to help pay for harelip surgery on one of the orphans who never missed catechism lessons at the neighborhood rectory. True story. My Elle, she knew I could use a recliner and some shrinkwrap to fit my head. That was her first piece of advice for a paying client in deep doo like me. "You're going to fight this/fight it at all levels," she sang the first time we met. "Professionally speaking, my dear, I can't afford another busted office window, and besides," she whistled through her gapped front teeth, "you're already paying 500 smacks an hour for legal, what's another 250 to please your head?"

Up there in Calistoga, when Caesar was helping me into this mud-packed tub, I wept. I was remembering the bath my Pam and I shared here years ago. Why couldn't we have abandoned California and gone somewhere, Montana or Wyoming and their big blue skies would do, and worked as school teachers? Or librarians? How did I wind up alone, divorced of everyone, accused of fraud,

about to lose everything I'd schemed so hard to hoard, like any eager lad would do? Worse, everyone in the world now was quoting chap & verse about this episode in my exposed life. I felt like crap, which is what this rich, warm and thick mud looked like. I was about to become a 120-pound shell of a 42-year-old man. The government, as efficient and omnipotent as ever, had used one of its most potent weapons against me: it had me in the slime-light, under the macro-scope of public opinion. The securities-dot-gov enforcers meant to keep me caged on that circus floor for a long, long time, my audience pointing and smirking each time I picked my toes or wiped my tuckus.

At this point, Caesar, young, eager and befuddled, knew something was wrong. I was shivering under a thousand pounds of this steaming hot mud, felt like one of those frozen bananas they roast with flaming fudge at the county fair -- but what was this Calistoga kid going to say that I could half-understand in his Spanish? When he disappeared for a few minutes, I briefly considered emerging my head in the mound, and self-medicating myself into muddy oblivion. But the idea of the mud filling my nostrils, black-holing my vision, pressing into my ear canals, was, as I said, something that would have to wait.

I was feeling as if I had committed the sins of the world, every single one in the encyclopedia of sins, but I was still too chicken-shit to lift a finger against myself. I was a one-person preservation society. I learned there is a comedy about this kind of guilt, fit for the LAUGH channel on the satellite radio. George Carlin already ran this scene for all I know: where once you never ever cared about that crushed and abandoned Starbucks cup in the gutter, now you pick it up and throw it away, even if it is not yours. You actually reach into your pocket and give alms to the palms of the riffraff on Market Street. No more sneaky toss of a black seedless grape or two, or a jelly bean, into your mouth at the supermarket. You're on the up and up, hoping each selfless act will lift you from the same gutter you are sweeping for trash. Secretly, or not so, you are hoping and praying that whoever is keeping celestial score on the Robbie Thom dial is watching. Maybe even government agents. "He picks up trash, Gordie," one dot-gov guy mumbles to the other as they keep surveillance on the white collared criminal from the front seat of a Ford Fiesta, "can't be all bad."

Tiny Caesar lifted me out of the tub, and just like that, it was shower time. As the mud cascaded down my torso and legs, onto the ribbed shower mats, I wept again. "Caesar, oh Caesar, I'm so, wassa-word hombre, so sorry -- I have my mud all over your place." I was crying my face off, for real, because I'd

mudded the flipping mud shower. It looked like spilled lentil soup, but that's what it was supposed to look like. Caesar figured me for a poof-case. Or maybe the mud did freaky hallucinogenic things to people and he was used to it. "Tranquillo hombre," he said, "calma." That was when I knew Ms. Laura Lawyer was right: I did kill JFK, and I did rob the Bank of England. My CV was a lie: I never took economics in graduate school. I was the Robbie Baron. My byline was even clipped. There'd be bouts of bawling to come, some of them in the safety of my Strawberry kitchen, some at church and one in the SF glass tower where I'd face the federales and spill my beans. Crocodile tears, my father used to call them. So yeah, I knew then it was time to go on an SRI, take your pick. "There's so much of the stuff around this part of the world," my laughing lawyer told me, meaning of course California and Californians and their desire to stave off the boo-hoo blues with newfangled molecular compounds, courtesy of our Swiss and British and American pharmaceutical companies, "that it's in the water supply." I chose paroxetine, generic these days for Paxil and \$10 a bottle with my co-pay.

Chapter Three

Manny (and Papa)

In English there are words that mean different things, same word but un-tethered meanings. The etymologists, noses buried up their OEDs, will tell you there's a reason, historical, cultural, linguistic, for multi-player lexicon. Maybe, maybe not. Take the word "dock." My shrink-wrapped doc spent a lot of time at docks in the Far East aboard some gray and white and blue U.S. aircraft carrier. As far as I know he never had to sit in the "dock" like I might have to and explain to a court why I traded like a banshee and made so many people so much money with my colorful company descriptions and anecdotes and laptop fiscal analysis. My doc never got "docked" his pay for bending the rules, and here I was, my transmitters clipped and my entire career docked.

Look at the word "mint." I mean, a mint, a place where they make money, and a mint, a little candy that sends your mouth into a flash dance. What do they have to do with one another? I can tell you without looking in a dictionary: the good life is good, so minting good, when it's good. But never would I say the good times I had reminded me of some cheap little piece of breath candy. Or the four-letter word

cell, as in cell phone. Jail cell. Brain cell. Sell stock. Get on the blasting cell to SELL THAT MARCA POLA, Robbie boy: that was my latest brain bleed, stroking me each and every sweat-stained night in bed, stroking ischemic mind you, on the verge of hemorrhage. Nightmares in my Strawberry cell.

Papa, Pam's Papa that is, holding court at his favorite boulange of a bakery inside Strawberry's cutesy shopping center, was good at pulling quotes from his great bag of gab. "Robert," he tells me, more than once, about his former employer's big digs in the middle of almost literally nowhere, "if God had wanted to give the world an enema, he would have inserted the tip in Wells, Nevada." Once, we were talking about his old days controlling the books at that mother lode mining company he'd retired from 20 years earlier, and I asked him why the company's stock ticker was HUM, and just what the word ticker had to do with heart, clocks and ... stocks. I was consumed by tickers, and you know, I took it personally that my precious alphabet soup of tickers, those lettered representatives of my chosen corporate manna from heaven in the ever-loving stock market, had more than one meaning. No bipolarity for my chosen tickers, if you please. In my haloed stock picks, I wanted exclusivity/zero ambiguity/leave the flip-flops at zee door. Papa nibbled on his bran muffin and told me that hot stocks, when they're ticking, well, they hum. You can hear it, just like a clock ticking or a heart beating. Their tickers get all revved up. I liked his take.

My most memorable Papa story, not that he's floated away from this world because he hasn't, most of him, I think, is still here, my best Papa story, this coming from the guy who called himself, as company controller, the UFO, the Unknown Financial Officer who did the backroom spread sheeting, "like buttering your oatmeal, in a way," Papa the executive minion who painted in the numbers dictated by the CFO, otherwise known as the Crooked Financial Officer, a dandy ladies' man who spent his afternoons figuring how to "nook the books" while searching for his next dinner date among the revolving front-office receptionists and secretaries, as Papa recalled -- my best Papa story was his sparse telling of an annual shareholders meeting, where this historic mining company's top executives and board were sitting on the stage in some rented SF auditorium, fielding questions. Papa loves to tell this story, debuting his little version of a punch and Judy show on the night before I married his baby girl, when we were all hanging out inhaling vodka collins mix through straws dunked into one of those big old jars people in the desert use to make sun tea, a liquefied version of a bong I guess, just four or five of us at his simple ranch-style house with faded carpeting in Greenbrae, a tidy patch of suburban

grass almost directly beneath the beautiful mountain that Pablo and I sliced up regularly on our trail bikes. It's one story he never seems to forget, even when he can't remember the names.

At the time of Papa's shareholders' meeting, the price of gold was in les toilettes, and the HUM had gone out of the mining company's stock. The front office was spending too much money operating century-old mines in South Dakota and California. Said company and employer of Papa was losing money, but the executives felt if they could just hold on, for another year or three, until the gold price came back, well, the company still had assets and some exploration rights in the Nevada desert, and cross your fingers. Besides, these suits, not Papa mind you but the top brass, these skanks were still making \$300k and more a year in salary, and that was a lot of money in the 80s. So. So at the time, a what-you-call a raider, a corporate raider, had set his sights on the company's sites. Assets were still worth something, and the fellow, almost a billionaire, figured the HUM was ready for some picking. He made a big offer for the company, telling all the financial newspapers his proposal, all cash and twice the current price of the stock, was the last boon this sorry company would ever see and it had better support the buyout offer or its shareholders would be throwing mud pies at the annual meeting.

Well, there weren't no mud pies. But there was the chairman of the company, an ancient fellow, delivering his prepared speech to a crowd of maybe 150 stakeholders. He was telling the crowd how "inappropriate" the raider's offer was, how this company was worth a lot more than some number our billionaire financier had pulled out of his coon-skin cap. How it was times like these that stakeholders needed to grin and bear the bad times. **BECAUSE WE CAN DO A LOT BETTER THAN WHAT THIS COWBOY IS OFFERING.** That was the gist of it.

Papa, naturally, was a shareholder, through some employee program or other, and he was sitting in the crowd of that SF auditorium along with everyone else. At that last line, **WE CAN DO BETTER**, almost on cue, Papa raises his hand and the burly chairman, puffed like a penguin in a suit that looked one size too small, pointed out our loyal and longtime employee. Papa had one word for the penguin, and it rang loud and clear: "When?"

And that was the story. "When?" Papa, he of few words and much meaning, Papa already knew the answer to that question. The epilogue was the best part. The company fended off the generous offer.

The stock price never again reached a level that even approached the raider's number-in-a-hat. The chairman departed the stage six months later, waddling like a stuffed penguin on an eastern Caribbean cruise, his third wife in tow, and suffering cardiac arrest just after departing from St. Thomas. The scuttle on the butt-headed chairman was that at the time of death, he had three cases of \$400-a-cork Bordeaux in his stateroom, so approximately four bottles for each night of the cruise. Our Papa, nine months later, came to work one windy spring SF morning with about 20 buttons for the front-office staff, big buttons in gold and black that said: I QUIT. He was still eight years away from retirement age, but being an accountant, and no longer with a wife, a lovely lady who always packed a brush as my Pam used to gush about her mom, a water-color painter of the county's wildflowers, larkspur and wild iris, white milkmaids and yellow buttercups, and a homemaker who'd left the world much too early because of some lymphoma ... thus Papa, being as I said an accountant with disdain for financial risk, he'd swollen his nest egg -- "like watching paint dry," he says about his portfolio of tired old banking and automobile and defense tickers that keep ticking up a penny or two every day, just enough to provide a comfy 10 percent return most years, the perfect amount of capital to keep our noble senior citizen safely retired on his piece of the cul de sac beneath the majestic Tamalpais. Besides, he said, the CFO, he of speckled bowtie and finely manicured thin moustache, "F.O.-faux," Papa called him, was making Papa nervous with those number-nooking requests all the time, twisted straight out of hell, the CFO's figures, all of them a regular Houdini act, tied as they were to levitating asset values of equipment, land in the dusty desert, mining leases and inventoried or projected metals production. Turned out, thanks to an anon. letter to the federales, "F.O.-faux the Financial Officer" (Papa pronounced this foe-foe) some six months after Papa was self-deposited and retired in the Greenbrae capsule where my Pam grew up coddled with the genuine love of her artist Mom and her straight-arrow Papa, who by now sat surrounded by his late wife's dozens and dozens of wildflower watercolors and loving every sunny day he had left in the splendid shadow of the county's folkloric old mountain, foe-foe spent a year explaining, or trying to explain, just about every line-item in every quarterly statement the mining company had released through most of the 1980s. In the end, the fellow, hailing from, where else but Strawberry's posh neighboring kingdom of Tiburon and no longer wearing bow-ties, and his thin stash crooking down and to the left in a kind of precursor to facial palsy or something, our F.O. signed a consent decree that had him neither admitting nor denying guilt for some of the vaulted values he assigned various worthless mining properties, and he personally handed over a bit less than \$800k to the federales in their leased glass tower on Montgomery Street in SF. The mining company meanst-

while handed over three times that much in penalties and was later snapped up for a song by the world's second-largest gold mining company, an outfit in Toronto. Papa read the case of the faulty CFO with interest in the local paper, the details becoming part and parcel of my father-in-law's muffin routine most mornings at the bakery.

“When?” Papa was still a hero, 15 years later, celebrated every time he ran into some fellow/former employee at the bakery or walking along the bike path that led up to the scotch-broomed woodlands behind his house. I read not long ago, some essay by the novelist Milan Kundera, that Pablo, zee artiste and not dee postman, was 26 years old when he started doing his cubist thing. If a 60-year-old or a 70-year-old had done the same thing at the same time Picasso was cubing, well, Kundera figures the old man's art, no matter how original, might have seemed ridiculous. A youth's freedom is a cosmos apart from a senior-cid's freedom, is the idea. The young artist can let it rip. The seasoned artist has to sip. The flip side of that truism is that if a young buck had uttered that plaintive “When?” at Papa's shareholders gathering instead of a late-50s accountant ready to skate into modest retirement, framed each day by his living-room view of that beauty queen of a Tamalpais mountain, the question would have seemed rash and ridiculous. Or at least premature. Only our Papa, cut of the same sky-reaching redwoods that peppered his back yard, only Papa could have stood up for the stockholders who had to endure their tuxedoed chairman and his bow-tied crew of numbers fixer-uppers. That made him, like his late wife, an artist.

Papa, what between his gentle facial tics and that contemplative masticating of his nine-grain-plus muffin, likes to quote Sam Clemens, who once, Papa told me at the bakery, said he had no respect for a man who could spell a word only one way and no other. Papa was a real fan of the great backwater author, “top of the Mark” being his nickname for the American writer. Clemens the Twain, you see, bankrupted his family in the pursuit of wild-eyed financial schemes and inventions. That's pretty much standard biography for the 19th century river pilot and compulsive letter writer. Old whisky Sam Clemens could count on multiple meanings for his rich and seemingly endless vocabulary. He hucked and shucked endless puns and twisty sentences straight from his gut onto America's newspaper pages and into his subscription hard-cover novels and travelogues of cruise ships, frontier justice and Nevada trail wagons. If Sammy boy, when he was peaking at the top of his Mark, salesmen selling his books to freshly settled American subs on the homestead, if Mark Twain didn't give a damn for a man who

could spell a word just one way, I guess I took the flip side and gave not a tick for anything that had more than one meaning. I was the anti-Twain in a court of my own making. I wanted my chosen words to be crystal clear, both on the page and when I was up at those podiums hawking the stocks that were making us all, but mostly me and a small group of drink-waters, slopping rich. I mean, come on, English probably has more words than any language on the planet. Why I wondered do so many of its words need more than one defining moment? Thomas A. Edison might have been formulating the same thing when he perfected the stock ticker. He used electricity, and I used words. I remember when my Dad died, I remembered his old gambling buddies, the guys he played pinochle with all day long at the social club that became his proxy nursing home, I remember a couple of these guys coming into the funeral home not even knowing which room and accompanying coffin held their friend. See, in my Dad's day, in that Baltimore row house neighborhood that to this day gives me the creeps, all the wise guys had a nickname. My Dad's was Simone, after the long-lived actress Simone Simone whom he had adored as a teen-ager. One of Dad's buds, name of Four Stars, slipped into the room where we were having the one-night stand, Catholic style with open coffin, and after kneeling in front of Dad for several moments, came up to me and said, "Sweet Mother of Mary, Robbie, all these years and I didn't even know your Dad's first name! Why don't you be a fine one of your father's and Scotch tape a Post-It with 'Simone,' you know, and tag it to his coffin so's folks know it's him."

I am a chopstick in the suey. A noodle at a fork in the wet road. Still, I had a thought one county morning, an A.M. it was with fluky tines of fog drifting from the headlands into Sausalito, sketching across the low sky a finger painting like the kind we did as kids. I was tending, par ritual, Papa at that overpriced French bakery. As we sipped and morning munched, I thought: linguists as a rule, the language aficionados dang them, are in no way willing to concede that most of their subject's interconnecting paths are hurly burly, rhyme-less and without reason, lacking a tether, as random as the red-winged blackbirds that sometimes swoop down on the marshy bike path near my Strawberry fields and try to swipe the baseball cap right from off yer (my) head ... if you (or I) are stupid enough to go riding without a helmet, that is. Somehow I liked the idea: chaos in the kitchen, too many linguists spoil the boil. But muffin time was over. We digest, I digress. Papa was a real ace and I loved him but it was time to get going. For me then, it was always time to get going, and like I said up top, even Papa got less and less of my time, especially when the market was melting UP. So I skipped out of Le Shopping Center Boulange, just across from Le Safeway, I hummed me a pied-piping tune to Papa's

honorable ticker justice, ran the stop sign at the fork in the road and pumped back, on my all-terrain two-wheeler, to my trusty transmitter, my Strawberry laptop that sat as almost always on the itty kitchen counter of my sacred little studio.

I had reason to skip and hum. Before the government shredded my own ticker factory, all of my capital was aces up. I was minting up a storm. Earlier, before the subpoenas and the shame, before the sinkhole that stalked and eventually swallowed me, earlier, one Manny Drinkwater, talk-a-holic globetrotter and perpetual manual on all things money, a round boy who worked financial miracles with his somersaulting tongue, and made me feel like a million dollars, \$10 million, euros, Swiss francsters and dinar even, wherever I happened to land. I could be sitting in a café in Beirut, slurping curried squash soup, and somehow Manny D., a gourmand who looked a lot like a thick and girded gourd, or one of Manny's fetchers would root me out, via cell phones, fax, text alerts, or his preferred way, in person, his tubby man's blast of my name across some silk-stained hotel lobby.

Or I'd be tapped gently by a maitre'd, a doorman, a waiter. "A 1955 der-KEM, courtesy of a Mr. Manuel Drinkwater," the waiter purrs to me inside a towering hotel restaurant in Dubai. I did not know what to pick up first, the golden nectar on the platter placed atop the coffee table before me ... or the phone that almost always came attached to Manny's gifts of his vintage Sauternes, a collection running from the late 1920s through the '80s and early '90s. I nodded, and took the call.

Or, "Pardon me, Mr. Thomas?" (C'est moi: Robbie Thomas, Robert Thomas to be precise, though my Melt-Up byline I'd snipped to read Robbie Thom.) "Yes, Mr. Thomas? Manuel on Line 1 informs us he has a car waiting for you just outside the restaurant. Mr. Drinkwater informs me you may uncork the Chateau Margaux, I believe he said it was 1988, but please to leave the '66 Sauternes for the drive around Lake Geneva."

I called him Manny, Man D., M-Dee, Manny D. and my all-time favorite, although never to his face: Butch-boy, but the crowd he grew up with almost always called him Rumpus. That's because of his first profession -- a butcher in some Toronto suburb, via a childhood spent on a Greek island, Chios I am pretty sure it was, with German grand-parents. Don't ask the genealogy. Rumpus as far as nicknames go fit Drinkwater, but not solely because of his lard thick ass or the fact he grew up on some

peninsula of a Canadian cul de sac street, which I'm told in French, loosely translated, means bum, or rump, in a bag. Manny was streetwise for sure. Twenty years after chopping meat for a living and Butch-boy (or BB to some of his crowd) still could cull and dissect a piece of meat by its cut, country of origin, grass or grain fed, how fresh it was or wasn't. Yeh, and most important for this M.D: just how prime the fatty tissue was and how that fat worked miracles of taste on the tongue, foremost among them his slab of ridged and vesseled tongue. Man-Dee even claimed he could tell how often some poor pig or calf had gotten up off its rump for a romp in the pen, and how it had been slaughtered, by slammer-hammer between the eyes, or slit across the throat, simply by fingering the beast's skin around its anus.

Manny he was no ass. This Drinkwater was a real charcuterie of chat and in his own book, one cool chat. "Jolly as all hell ain't he?" Papa usually snorgled when the old man was seated next to someone, someone let's say effusive, trying to enjoy that morning muffin in the serenity that befits coffee hour at the bakery. Our Papa, who summed up character and spirit more or less spot on, hadn't even met Mr. D, yet my one-man marching band and former dad-in-law knew all he needed to know just hearing a few words about this Drinkwater gent. "Fluent in French and Greek, and what, a little German? Where'd he pick up a name like Getränkwasser, the gishTAP-oh?" Papa wondered over yet another perfect muffin on yet another perfect morning in his perfect, perfect for him and lots like him, his overachieving suburban county.

See, if anyone I knew qualified as a modern-day, over-reaching Jeremy Diddler, a flat-out vamping chord of riotous noise, it was Manny the Rumpus. Hell was he entertaining. "Look at my hands," he'd say and waggle 'em, and how could you not admire the mano e mano of the man -- they were smooth and plump, each and every finger a rubied merguez sausage link. "Look at 'em. The left hand, you're born, and the right one, here, you're dead, Robbie. Everything in between these hands, Robber man, it is all risk."

I had to hand it to the man, and at some point I did, my paragraphs, my travel sked, my trust. And I never paid a restaurant bill when M-Dee was around. Manny was butch all right, with a boisterous sense for what was taut and what was slack. Rumpus ruled at the dinner table. He knew the tales that

held the attention of his warp-speed/warped-seed crowd just long enough for the final cut, the slice of the story that almost always ended with gold, or silver, or platinum, and he told those tales loudly, for everyone within a 10-table radius to hear. M-Dee butchered plenty of meat in his time, but even when he was under the gun, I never saw him botch a proper story. For this upper-case Rump knew how to turn metal into paper, paper that had those neat little CUSIP numbers on it, certificates light as a Capri summer breeze, more valuable than, heavier man than a bar of bullion. For spinning that magic, the fabled ex-butcher was a living-day Rumpelstiltskin. Only he didn't want or need your first born for spinning precious (and base) metals into stock scrip. Oh no. He wanted you to spread the word, his word. That's how this butcher, he of the belly built like a World's Fair globe, the beautiful, bronzed bald head, the hooked nose that rated as a spherical sculpture of genius, pure sphere, purely gnomonic in its way, that's how this butch-boy got rich. Mr. Drinkwater could take your word to his bank.

Manny Drinkwater was a full-force, run-on, God-forbid-you-take-a-breath-whilst-I'm-talking-to-you ... ellipsis, I guess. I can't think of a better way to describe his fable-flopping. In his way, with that borderline Peter Jennings Canadian drawl that flip tracked most observers into a punctuated coma of jaw-dropping awe and immediately after, a case of the roundtable bends, as in What Am I Doing Sitting This Close To A Major Looney Goon, With Cleaver Blades No Less, this butcher, at table, our BB could sing his way from the cod-packed potato croquettes (first course), into the oxtail soup (second), then aria his pitch straight through the pork-belly stew (third and main course) and pillow down at dessert, still yapping as his favorite dessert, a caramelized brioche smothered in sautéed bananas, was placed post flambeau onto our rented plates. What butch, I knew if it played Carnegie it would SRO Carnegie. They were always superb, Manny's meals. The botchulism, as it will, came later.

M-Dee on a tear: "Robbie-hobby ... this is the real thing ... 33 grams a freaking ton, yes we're talking gold, what you thinking, Roberto? Silver, some copper, yep, and zinc for God's sake! It's there ... in this ... piece a shit ... disseminated mineralization ... everyone gave up for dead ... for dead earth. Colombia. Scummy ... little ... place. Marca, that's what we call it. Marca Pola, she's our gal! Maybe 3 kilometers from that really big mine deal down there ... Rillian Resources ... rhymes with billion, heh heh. Rillian billion. Next flight rainy season or dry, Hobble. Ten points of that, it's mine. My gold

mine. Marca Pola, remember the name. Ten percent. Hey Robbie-hobby, my boy, write it up for me, will ya? Be my Robber Baron, wood-ya?"

Translation: "My boy, if you put a good word in for this entirely speculative gold/silver/copper mining company I'm currently slobbering over in Latin America, by name of Marca Pola, perhaps mention that a group of grizzled Canadian engineers are working the same geography and mineralized zones with the same characteristics as an established and prospering mining operation named Rillian whose stock is already up X-teen percent to the tenth power, well, my boy, you know in your sweet little heart that Manny never forgets the power of your written words, now does he?"

His e-mails were almost as good. "I've been a traveling fiend, Robbie. Ghana, the Congo DRC, Middle East, Sardinia, Capri, Greece for my cuz's wedding, London, Zurich, Frankfurt, London, NYC, Toronto and now here in Vancouver on my way back to NY. ... Business is fantastic! We're in uncharted waters as far as natural resources go. I continue to fund Marca Pola, \$7 million these past 6 months ... the shares have gone from pennies cents to close yesterday at 75 cents on 12 million shares. That's 12 million golden eggs, sweetheart." He was, what to say, Manny was fruity in his excellence.

Or the last bit of wireless M.D. ever sent me, at least I think/thought it was the last one though with Butch Boy who knew, maybe this was his first 'tronic jammer to me in a new life, the round one turning to a new chapter heading after drinking holy water in a holy land, most of his moola crowd rent-a-pals, experiencing that deep sense of loss, wounded no longer have they Manny's knack for spinning capital out of the thread of an idea, never mind the buds-busting fantastic food & bev, those losers of his surely would say, Holy Moley Say It Ain't So, Drinken-wasser! Dan's most recent note to me, coming to me at the end of all this story and penance and wanking tale, or the beginning of some new fable if Manny was to be believed, hey I mean if Manny and I are worthy of belief, it's a tale of two toons after all, his note via lapshot, the wi-maxing wireless, went thus:

"I think of you daily! I visited Nazareth, Capernaum, Jerusalem. I had a lot of time to refract on zee Darkness ... On good, on evil ... Am I really living my brief existence

here on earth the way I should??? Money?? How much? Should I change my life and become a monk? A holy person? Am I living HELL on Earth or Heaven? It's so short... I spent Sunday in Jerusalem and had a vivid dream of YOU. PLAYING THE DAMNED FLUTE. Sometimes God He organizes events in our lives so we can come back down to earth and realize what is truly important. Melt UP and Melt DOWN??? How much is enough?? Have I taken enough time and effort to make a difference? I spent 5 days with the best Israeli brains out there/nanotech/WiMAX/bio-generic massive molecular compounds. Have a look at the press. Robbie, we are going to cure CANCER/STOP STROKES/PROLONG LIFE/POSTPONE DEATH. HOW MUCH PAPER IS THAT WORTH TO YOUR SUBS? Keep healthy and strong! Lots of Love and Light! God bless you! Your friend Manny."

Like I said, this was at the end, when someone out there knew what was real and what was story, but not me. I shot him back, in disbelief, "But Manny, you're not even le juif!" His reply, a spark of Marconi even too fast for today's Internet, I had to blink twice to make sure I was seeing it straight on the screen, his rebounder was, "And you/my friend/are no/altar boy. Take care."

Manuel Drinkwater's nose had a talent for sniffing out mark that was buried deep in mine shafts. "If I were a rich man," he seemed always to be humming, even between bites ... well, the Greek Canadian son-of-a-gun with his luscious mango nose and (always matching) cashmere socks and scarves claimed to be swimming in resources. Like most raconteurs, what he deserved to be described as is a playboy, a roly-poly playful boy with barking-mad charisma. As a jet-setter, Manny proved to be successful in locating other resources, too, whether it was the impossibly rare 99-rated Bordeaux at a café in some caramel-colored suburb of Medellín , or the remaining two spots in a luxury jungle-buddy tent on a five-star Botswana safari ... or the Saint-Tropez-dripping blondes, almost always blondes, this butch-boy managed to bring to the table ... or best of all, delicate thin-crust pizzas adorned with fennel sausage and creamy goat cheese no matter where we or his crowd were in the metro scheme of things, even in the deep of urban Africa, like when we ventured out of the hotel lobby, some colonial Hilton, one unusually cool evening in Nairobi, where Manny, referring to his oversized mobile phone's address book and digital map archive, led us down a slummy alley of stench and rot. Even the architecture was

rank, I'm telling you. The outside of this pizza place looked like it was an abortion clinic. Manny was first in, as always, and in a second the chef, or the owner, or whatever he was, was out of the kitchen and hugging Manny, big belly to big belly, like a couple of pregnant rhinos. The chef was a dark-skinned Sicilian, 5 feet flat, if that, perfect for not having to stoop each time the jolly cook had to monitor a pizza crust in the oven. He ran a clean joint with, you know, the red-checkered table cloths and the big bottles of olives displayed like triumphal columns of a Siracusa temple along the walls and on the tables of his place. We could have been in Greenwich Village. The crust was as thin as could be, the edges puffy in spots and crisp in others, and the rest of the pizza, the sausage and the goat cheese and some African spice I never did quite place, was a pie to die for, not bad for Nairobi. That was all Manny, so Manny. When he got fat at table, digging deep into his crisply pressed khakis and pulling out notes like a flute player, well, everyone got fat.

As for the ladies, well, Mr. M.D. picked 'em in his own image, on the huggable side, I'd say size 10s and 12s. Some of them towered over the boy. Plus, like their candy man, Manny's lady friends had non-stop stories to tell ... and quirks a mad hatter couldn't fabricate. Somehow, Manuel Drinkwater and his women were cut from the same crazy quilt: larger than their table of contents, in love with money and clothing and travel and most of all, quite at home at the head of the table, telling tales, passing the plates, chattering away, hardly ever coming up for a gulp of air. He had this affected way, when he was seated beside one of his leading ladies, of turning their palms up toward the sky and petting them there, stroking the "heart of the palm, Robbie" he told me once as an aside. That handiwork and zee du rigueur French pecks across the cheek were the only physical intimacies I ever noticed with Manny and his portfolio of palms. Oh sure, there were hugs at table, at airports, in hotel lobbies. But that was all. And like I said, these women all seemed mad as hatters to me. There was the countess from Florence who started each day with a six-pack of Oreo cookies, a doppio espresso and a triple-dose of the latest and greatest statin. There was the German marketing executive for Jaguar's Formula 1 racing team whose language was so filthy, she got us booted from a beer hall in Berlin. There was the (all-in-one-package) Russian/Iranian/Saudi orphan who painted her toe-nails with platinum-based polish, fifty euros a toe, I kid thee not. There was one loudmouth lioness who claimed, and had photos to prove it, that she was Hillary's former personal assistant: she even told us with a purr and a wink that she was a closet Republican and heads-over-high-heels in love with the mayor of NYC. I liked most of Manny's ladies, even the loudmouth, and to come clean, sure, I liked Manny, too. Who wouldn't like this fellow,

shaped like a swollen fire hydrant but dressed like a peacock and always making you feel, whoever you were, that you grew up with the guy, maybe even played kick-ball on the same cul de sac? "Ready, set, jet," he shouted in his ritual entrance to an airport, any airport, coming or going, though now I yank my memory cord, well, Danny was never coming, as in coming home. Every time he stepped on a plane he was on his way somewhere, but never home, home meaning the leased flats he had here and there, always tiny but well appointed spots in what I called prohibitive real estate, like Manny's walk-up in a dignified brownstone, just on the edge of London's Mayfair patch of Saudi bankers and cute Lebanese cheeks, if you know what I mean, these are the studios and flats, always stocked with fresh produce and that amber nectar of the vintage gods, our well rounded character slipped into when he needed two or three days of down time.

I have to figger the scouring federales, when they extracted my hard drive from its laptop crotch, examining it for evidence, I have to Fig Newtonian that they were a l-i-t-t-l-e let down, knowing the kind of company I kept and not finding a single piece of cheek, no porn at all in the GIF files, sorry boys. Not that some of the images Manny and one or two others in the crowd used to send me via the wireless belonged in Fodder X's sacristy -- they didn't. But the girls, even the gold digger from NY whose number was written into all of the politicians' little PDAs, even her GIFs had that Victoria's scarlet red dotting her cubes and angling her triangle in perfect geometry. Stylistic math from our loud man. Just enough of the lay of the lamb, as he phrased it, just enough in a photo to get you thinking, Hey, what does this tub of Man have that I don't? And of course, the answer: Manny has it all, has the gift of gab with his gals and the gist of grab with his money crowd, has the wardrobe, the food, the vintages and, I know this sounds weird, most of all Monsieur Man carried around this sweaty aroma, he always seemed to be sweating lightly, droplets across back of neck/polka-dotting dimpled chin/filling moat above nose, between those J-P Belmondo eyes of his, has with him like a perfumed bag lady this scent of curry and lemons and crackling pizza dough baking at 600 degrees, and yes, cooking oil, any cloudy old kind of oil, but with mashed chick peas, a clove or two of garlic and some tahini sizzling on the burner. Not a bad smell.

With the ladies and the money crowd, it was Mr. Drinkwater's gift of gab that turned his trick. His e-mails never did him justice. He was like an old rock act from the '70s, a Southside Johnny for instance; you just had to see him live, the studio work didn't

translate, didn't come close. On the record machine, the video, the phone, you got Johnny and his Flukes -- a watered down Drinkwater. But live on/under the boardwalk, in the nightclub, you got the real thing, Johnny and his Jukes -- firewater straight up. I guess the only feel the federales got for what a gift gab can be when it came to Manny the doctor's caboose full of women, or so he boasted when it came to the opp-sex, and the feel for M.D.'s handle on money, and now I chump chew on this, the butcher's take on life/universe/tutto di tutti, the whole bowl of figs, all the food and the waiters and the thimbelina Asian airline attendants, why, Drinkwater even had a huggable snapshot of ticker-chasing Fatima on the Kowloon waterfront, and even, in a poisoned serpent sense, which was rare for the jolly round one, his venomous take on monarchal arch-enemy No. 1 in that Barcelona gazebo, Freeon the Untouchable Freak, the only brief listen the dot-gov guys got of Manny's exquisitely lubed motor-mouth, their only chance up there in that vacuum-pressed SF skyscraper for witnessing kinetically what this former butcher was all about, the federales' only first-person insight into the work of crazy pumping hear that was Manuel Drinkwater, was a little sound file he sent me once via the wireless, an audio clip Man D. used for his mobile phone answering service. Had to be on my hard drive somewhere, so I figure the federales came across it if they were as thorough as I believed they were. "Hello hello. Is Manny. Manny. Mr. M.D. I got a jumbo egg roll waiting for thee." I never knew what he really meant, I mean, what, Jackie Chan's egg roll? Or maybe a bank roll? With Man-Dee you never really knew, though gourmand that he was he said it was always/always/always about the food. Guaranteed the federales, modestly suited and economically groomed up there in the tower, had no idea what the madman meant. So maybe Manny, oh man, was cooking Chinese that day, who knows? Looking back now I guess I have to believe the food interpretation. The guy never once, in my sight-line anyway, came onto anyone, guy, gal or airline attendant, more than that gentle, gentle but wet, palm oil it was, Manny's little pet of a hand or his reaching up, as he was a short man, his huggy-pudge wrap of the forearm around your shoulders and neck. And with the European ladies, the peck patta peck of the cheek, three times, mostly for show, air kisses I called them. Never once did I see him shut down for the night accompanied by another, as in any other, woman or man. Sure he hunted alone, but what he came back with was meat (and fish) you could

eat, like the time we were all in Honolulu on some layover to Melbourne, and he came back at midnight with two splintered pineapple crates stuffed with what was, for me and the usual crowd of money hangers-on in search of their next winning private placement of a diamond or nickel or gold mine, an exquisitely prepared Hawaiian Walu, dressed with zucchini, some kind of licorice, with foie gras swimming in a Bronx grape vinaigrette. Turns out the zillion-star hotel Manny went looking for in search of a great meal, this great meal, was shutting down for the night, so he who hunted alone, as was his custom in the prowl for superb sustenance, talked the chefs into preparing takeout for the crowd.

Always about the food, this man, and bringing it back to his litter, the hangers-on who genuflected and then knelt a) only when in the presence of a remarkable meal, and b) when they were so close, so very close to enormous sums of capital, usually in the form of a silk-zippered financier, that they were willing to lick the sweet and sour sauce off the money magician's egg roll, some figuratively and some I suppose, me not being one to peek under the covers, as I was a modest scribe when it came to personal matters, a Baltimore row house boy who knew where to draw the line, draw the curtain, at this meteor shower trail of pop-star villas and centillion-star hotels, some of the hangers-on, desperate/always desperate for moola, licking the egg roll for real.

The best Manny Drinkwater stories almost always took place at table. Thus, this Sausalito scene, right up the bike path on the other side of Richardson Bay: my dough boy, in search I say now of pizza pie, one evening brings just about the largest human being I have ever met, a Turk named Oz whom M-Dee called O.D.O., because from what I could zip-read off this giant's maroon leather pouch that was stuffed with papers and candy wrappers and a couple of those German chocolate eggs with the build-it-yourself toy inside, the ottoman's legal name was Ozar D. Ozurien. He was a five-star cruise ship of a foreigner who weighed in at must have been 500 pounds, big-boned tall fellow, with massive orb head shaved mirror sheen. Manny brought O.D.O., sweet-toothed pal and trusted accountant, to dinner one evening at a restaurant not far from my Strawberry, about a mile or two down the freeway in Sausalito, that harbor town just across the Golden Gate and not my kind of trinket village at all, except for the fact you had to bump across its dainty streets for the quickest way to get to the county's bonking bike trails

in the headlands.

Manny and the giant and I, in between snarfing stacked slices of thin-crust pizza at a euro-hash trattoria on the main Sausalito drag of Bridgeway, a place on the town's irresistible waterfront called Poggio just across from the ferry landing, the three of us were discussing Sir Manuel's gold dig down there in Colombia, Manny as always doing most of the talking and O.D.O. doing most of the chomping and lip smacking, the red-pepper flakes flying this way and that, and say, Rob-Roy-boy, how could I help promote this mining project so that a) the stock price would rise, b) the company then could sell more of that higher-priced stock to professional investors in what the biz calls a private placement and c) said mining company then could use the money from said placement to sink more diamond-studded drills into more test holes on some dusty tranquilla mesa in the Marmato mountain range. Of course there was also, d) as in M-Dee, our own Mr. Dee, who then gets to sell some of his own stock, acquired or manufactured for a penny or two a share, Canadian pennies at that, it is Manny Drinkwater who gets to dispatch millions of shares to thin-crust investors at prices multiples higher than a penny or two. This in my world is called binary magic: where the 10-cent stock pops out of the bowler hat like a scared rabbit onstage, then multiplies to a buck, then two bucks then four. Of course, the magic act can end with a Houdini as well, where 10 cents becomes 5, then 3, then 1. For my audience of eager beaver subs, it was more like binary bingo.

O.D.O. I suppose could have been in Oz for all he cared, because like the engine room on a steamship, this engine was fueling up, he was probably the largest munch-munch munch-kin this restaurant had ever served: the Turk was doing pizza, more pizza, a plate of gnocchi, some spit-roasted wild boar Italian style with pine nuts, rosemary and risotto, burnt belly-up black from the roasting ... and for dessert, a mountain range of spumoni ice cream, followed by double espressos twice around, when Mr. Ozurien took out his eggs from the leather pouch, Kinder eggs they're called, and stirred the chocolate egg shells into his tiny cup, then proceeded to assemble the little plastic toys that come inside, one of them a little playground swing and the other an innocent beach scene with baby umbrella and beach towels -- but there was no wine this evening; I think Manny was saving his head, keeping it clear of grape, for a trip he had planned the next day to Beverly Hills and a select roundtable of deep-pocket fundies, as we called professional fund managers, those bushy hedgerows of capital with names like Bawdy Black LLC and Mycenium Partners LLC who backed private placements of stock in risky

ventures such as Colombian gold mines surrounded by shotgun-ripping rebels. Anyway, after all the food, and it is getting late, late for me, anyway, after the feast in wanders a gaggle of Asian tourists, having missed their ferry back to SF. I take them for Filipino, carrying a load of shopping bags stuffed with the usual sewer veneer they sell in Sausalito, like those cute little hooded sweat shirts that shrink to nothing on first wash, and plastic models of the GGB in foggy crystal globes, and ceramic harbor seals, you get the idea. Well, the bus service in these parts is sporadic, especially after 9 in the evening, and it's clear this group is hungry, tired but still happy to be so far away from their string of islands and chattering up their own tsunami lingo. Our Man-Dee, he of the perfectly spherical belly, recognizes a group in need, and before you can say artichoke hearts, he's swapping tagalog with these older folks, most of the islanders in their 60s and 70s, I'd say. Manny calls over our waiter and orders, oh yes this really happened, and orders a dozen more thin-crust pizzas, some with sausage and some with mushrooms and paper-thin garlicky potatoes and some with just plain red sauce and cheese. We all chow down, again, our resident Greek Canadian and our sumo-Turk polishing off at least four or five more of the pies on their very own. O.D.O., with spumoni smears still on his chin from the first go-round, rumbles, "Pizza I take it you agree, Manny, is the perfect food." The Turk's chocolate eggs probably come in a close second in the perfect-food pageant; I mean that was too queer for me, the massive hands assembling eensy-beensy plastic pieces from inside a chocolate egg, at a bayside Italian restaurant. For their part, the Filipinos yip and click and clack their tongues and lips at massive man's pronouncement. About an hour later, Manny pays the bill, rounds up taxis for the group, throws a few 50-dollar bills onto the hacks' dashboards and dispatches the travelers to SF. So wrapped that evening, me with a tummy ache and Manuel Drinkwater and his house of an accountant heading to the airport for a flight to LA. Oz, by the dainty way, places the little swing and the tiny beach scene on the waiter's tip tray when we leave the Italian palace. End of Sausalito scene.

Life, then, was mango sweet for me, mere newsletter writer that I was, four decades into a life that enjoyed tropical fruit on my menu. My evening cocktail, when I was home, was one of those vodka-soaked lemons, sometimes with a sprinkle of cinnamon, precisely at 6 p.m., as I toasted on my laptop the morning's opening of the Hong Kong Stock Exchange halfway across the globe. I was getting rich, feeling like I could do no wrong each time I ventured from my safety-net condominium in northern California and headed toward SFO or Oakland International, on another journey into a high-stepping world of financiers and stock promoters ... and butchers who knew their beef.

Along the way, I'd received, then carelessly misplaced the advice of chatty Pablo, my local and some would say wee loco United States mail carrier. "Hey 'Berto, you no start believing yer own mesquite, claro?" Pablo was from the south, from Colombia. Or maybe his parents were and he was born up here. Pablo was one of California's new third, the 35 percent of the state's population that preferred tortillas with their meat. Pablo was my mail-less mailman, and he was a regular oracle in floppy English. I should have been listening to him, or at least jotting down a Pablo note or two, from Day One.

I didn't have many friends. Any friends at all, really. Drinkwater the globular promoter wasn't a friend, was he? My Pablo, fireplug of a former piano mover, was as close as I could claim to friendship, not counting my family, my ex-family, of two, Papa and Pam. Two years from a mailman's retirement, Pobby as I sometimes called the postman would bark the monthly countdown like the pug-nosed hound he resembled, "Uno, dos, tres mas, three more months," he'd say. The mailman with the massive chest and forearms and the toothpick-sized legs that had walked, he figured, 70,000 miles in his postal career of stuffing boxes along Richardson Bay, in and around our posh Tiburon peninsula and next-door ugly stepsister of unincorporated Strawberry, well, he and I shared a joint once in a while, grunting our 27-speed bikes across county ridges and trails, or guiding our kayaks up and down the bay's brackish slips and inlets, tracing a scented bracelet around Strawberry Point with (his legal account, not mine) medical marijuana smoke. After, that is, launching our yak attacks from that slippery cove under cover of eucalyptus and cypress there at the entrance to Great Circle Drive at the tip of Strawberry, where new moms took their tots to the very cute and tiny park there, they pushing their little ones on the two-swing set just feet from the beach and we pulling from our joints before embarking on our paddle. Though come to think of it, never when Pablo was on duty did I ever see him toke, something he is probably relieved I am noting for the record: if reputation is worth anything, the soon-to-be member of retired government employees keeps his professional reputation smoke free as a representative of our mostly reliable U.S. Postal Service.

Later, Pablo did up and retire as a mail carrier, mostly to spend more time on the mountain, chiseling his stubby tire trails across Tamalpais. Hombre, Pobby could ride. Pablo the postman knew, subcutaneously it seemed to me, every single-track trail in the county. And the fire roads and illegally carved side-outs and switchbacks covered with last year's molting eucalyptus leaves. Oh, and Pob

could make me, Roberto he called me, eat his dust -- me, 15 years his junior and four or five inches longer on the inseam.

(Excellent Pablo story: Out by China Camp one day, just a couple stones' throws from San Quentin Prison, Pablo and I were printing out our usual knobby dirt tracks when the mailman, always in front of me the beautiful bastard, hits his finely callipered disc brakes and stops on a dime, or shall I say, an envelope. A FedEx envelope. With Carlos Santana written on the address label. The famous guitarist lived not far from these rolling little hills by the bay. Pablo shakes the envelope, gives a moment's thought to doing his mailman's sworn duty, then tosses it over his shoulder. "Freaking FedEx, n'ombre. No freaking way, 'Berto.") I guess even a mailman -- Pablo, the one guy in the modern world I know who looks inside his own bachelorized mailbox just once a month, talk about discipline; or is that avoidance? -- has his competitive pride. We both despised FedEx, for different reasons.

Have you ever eaten beans with someone who knows how to eat beans? Pablo our slobbo knew his lunchtime beans. Slowly, cratering the tortillas in the black juice as he circled his plate, wiping the plate almost impossibly, antiseptically clean as he used his tortilla like a mini-chute for the beans, black beans, kidney beans, any beans didn't matter, right into his mouth and not a bean or drop of juice left behind, all poetry aside. Reminded me in a way of my truck-driver Dad, now dead but much earlier, this Robert Senior of mine sponging with a hefty cylinder loaf of sesame-seeded Italian bread the olive oil and garlicked juices from his own ritual, his broccoli rabe, the bitter rapini greens he ate almost every lunch during wicked Baltimore winters. He loved the leaf so much, friends nicked him as Rob-Rob. Neatly done, like a careful gardener, Dad each winter afternoon placed the rabe on its pedestal, a rickety luncheon table on a cobbled old street, a jar of red pepper flakes and fork his only instruments, and he reveled in it, especially the oily juices, the best part of any dish like this, beans or bitter greens, smushed as they were in lard or olive oil or butter. My present-day Pablo, I can't help thinking here, Pablo and my Dad, they both took great pride in this calculated gusto, this ritual of scooping and sponging and ultimately, snarfing. Maybe they both felt they'd earned the privilege of their lunches -- pot-bellied Pablo in a caloric sense with his brisk and honest bike-riding across the county ... and my upper-case Dad, way back then, just for making it through slushy East Coast winters and supporting a wife and two kids not long after spending 18 months in upstate prison for, I kid thee not, trying to load a half-ton combination safe onto his truck in a desperate piece of larceny just when he and my Mom

were getting married. Daddy-oh had an excuse because he was out of work he told the judge, which he repeated for me once, only once in a rare breakfast admission late in his life. Turned out there was nothing in the safe he swiped from the office of our neighborhood undertaker. Didn't matter. My old man, sweetheart Robert he was, had to serve the time, just when Mom was prime for popping out babies and mood stabilizers gratis in the state pen weren't even a gleam in the eye of Phat Pharma. That was the one time, Robert Senior stealing the safe and getting caught slop-handed, that was the one time Dad's crooked little heart got the best of him, I guess. Or so the family story goes. Rob-Rob the nicked name took on yet another meaning for my old man.

My ritual was munching vodka lemons, skin-'n-all, but whether I of the perpetually ticker-tocking heart, whether I, Robert Junior, earned the privilege of enjoying my vice, the alcohol smooth as meringue sliding down my throat each Strawberry afternoon when I was in town, whether I, Robbie Melt-Up, earned the comfort of my ritual just because I was making a bundle in the market, well, different folks have different views, some worthy and some, in particular the scaly stinking headlines, worth little more than fishwrap. In the thick of the nightmares, sopped yet again and why-awake, the name Rob-Rob intruded my frontal lobe, crashing my scant sleep for what turned into months on end: Robbie Thom the Rob-Rob Baron of Strawberry. Why awake? Bugeyed wide awake, at least, unlike Dad back then in the row houses of his Baltimore, I could choose to dive into a reservoir of prescribed serotonin builders and sedatives that were available to shell-shocked vermin like me, thanks to pharmacologically adept shrink-wraps. Those pills, they were generic, a quarter the price of pharma's branded capsules. That was some consolation. In the state I was in, I could not snatch a kiwi or a loose pear from the pharmacy, but I got 75 percent off my anti-freeze, the bio-engineered milligrams that flushed my synapses each morning.

This script/my penance/something I need/to "put behind me"/ is what holy shooter Fodder X up the bike path keeps telling me. Sure, I would love it all to death were I to find the coins those rotten fishwrapper headlines say poured into my Strawberry cupboard. But really now, the reporters were making this crud up. What secret stash? What treasure chest of "ticker booty," as scaly newsprint put it? Chosen tickers floating in my golden chalice? Give me a break, you skunk hounds. Fodder X had a deserving Catholic penance for me, one that suited my penchant for sidestepping what really happened, what transpired in my soul, the good father says in his Broadway baritone. Because I was a writer, and

writing was what got me into trouble, my freshly scrubbed pastor, he of the holy water for dabbing and not drinking, my very own Fodder X, he of the Tiburon hillside church with picture-perfect view of Richardson Bay and beyond, the good father figures I need to “turn the chapter” (his words, not mine), get it up on paper. My very own reuptake on this ticker-pocked little heart of mine. Write for right, was the idea. Watch me melt, up close and personal. The Melt-Up Close.

Chapter Four

Blackberries Hurrah

You see, or maybe some of you do not see at all, but right at the point just a couple of days before Christmas when the government crunched me like a caterpillar in the middle of a rutted mountain-bike switchback, right then, I was actually enlisting for redemption. Somewhere in my conscience, I knew I was trading against my beliefs and principles as a longstanding, straight-up journo. I was commanding the ears and the form-fitting jet-cabin seats of what my comfortably retired father-in-law, or rather my former father-in-law, called then and still calls “captains of industry.”

Seriously. No one believes me now, but amidst the pointless poinsettias of that Strawberry, California, Christmas, when the federales had the nerve to send their freshly starched probe papers via freaky FedEx (no Pablo and his Postal Service in sight here), and on a Saturday, thus adding boo-hoo insult to my traumatic shock, I was pondering a respite. A holiday. I needed a sabbatical from financial deadlines, from the paper ratcheters who victimized me whilst lounging in their satin and silk pajamas at The Bristol or The Peninsula or some white-gloved yacht docked at Marseilles. I was spent from endless weeks of newsletter dread-lines, and the phone work, the air travel, the missiles of electronic mail I had to launch each morning. I was even getting irritated by the rich food at most of these restaurants, with the exception of the escargot at Manny's favorite spot, L'Ami Louis in Paris. How come these guys never ate Thai, or Vietnamese? My world for a fresh spring roll. The stale air at all of the investment conferences, didn't matter if they were in Cape Town, Las Vegas, Singapore, Panama City, was sticking to the roof of my mouth. I'd wake up in the morning, even back in Strawberry, and find my tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth, smelling like some picked-over hotel lobby with dandruff peppering the carpets.

No more lard-ass food. No more alcohol. No more flying. Not even surrounded by “hearts of the palm” goddesses on zone-streaming executive jets. We all have resolutions like that, don’t we? Ones we’re just about, almost, not quite but this freaking close to rotating into action with our hip-pocket socket wrenches, sucking in our bellies and adjusting our made-to-disorder personality slates, although sometime we take that old wrench and whack away? Above all, I vowed, above and beyond, there would be/there will be no more newsletter writing, no more deadlines compulsively combined with catapult stock trading on the Wi-Fi laptop, me sucking down those lemon-vodkas all the while on the tiny terrace of my beloved Strawberry unit.

To make it even more spooky, I had an idea then: a return to my roots. I wanted to write a little piece of make-believe about the place where I lived. (My former wife, Pam, says this was so revisionist of me, time-shifting some of the decisions I made for the sake of “preserving my posterity.” And I the joker replied, “Pam, I love it when you use big words.” But believe me, this fable of mine I was just about resolved to up and quit and start writing wasn’t an afterthought. I swear this is all how it happened. Big sweet heart that my sweat-pea, my former sweat-pea, has beneath that torn and tattered earth-tone wooly sweater she had practically glued to her chest, I remember her adding, “Tres tres cute, anyway, Tommy-boy.”) She called me Tommy-boy, even in divorce land, Mr. Robbie Thom-Tommy-boy. I liked that.

I went through a reading phase when I was just out of college, before I’d decided to do journalism for a living, when I read some of the modern fiction writers’ tomes on how they came up with their brilliant story ideas. The process for most of these cats was pretty simple: get an idea and jot it down. One of these writers was a British children’s author who also wrote some light pornography, chain-smoked, lorded over his wife and kids and died before he reached the age of 60. Inside the tar-and-nicotined shed he used as his word workshop, he would scribble his early-morning ideas, just a phrase or a sentence.

I paraphrase: How about a candy factory run by an opium addict? Or a gap-toothed lawyer who wears braces on her teeth and sings Edith Piaf in cabaret and tells wickedly funny jokes about her closest friends? A marshmallow that might prevent the most horrid of neurological diseases? Just snits of an

idea, really, a few words that might one day become a book.

The little story bobbing inside took hold of my overcapitalized brain one afternoon biking up the old railroad grade on Mt. Tam with Pablo. I caught some gravel and threw a digger into a blackberry bush, its branches November-y spare and almost bereft of berries but its thorns still packing sting, and barbing my forearms and ankles. (Not as lingeringly painful as Pablo's tried-and-he-says-true story of poison oak and peckers, specifically, his. "Leaves of three don't pee near me," was how he folk-lored the episode that left his crotch nearly blistered for three days.)

The hazards of trail riding are so elemental, so dense and physical. Nothing like the clinical persecution one endures in the crosshairs of securities litigators. That autumn afternoon, my taxi-yellow bike helmet spotted with a few spits of berry juice, and rubbing the blood back into my chafed and smeared arms and legs, I thought: you know, I've always loved berries, and my favorite of all berries were blackberries, the roadside and trailside kind, especially in August and September, when you can catch a dose of their perfectly fermented fragrance just about anywhere on the mountain or in the headlands, even on the Tiburon bike path, their wild bramble just below the part of the path that veers up toward even more fiscally remote Belvedere providing cover for the posh-Porsche crowd's bayside tennis club.

So what about a blackberry bush that extended or enhanced life? Or better, a fable that describes a quest for the knowledge, a quest for the solution that senior citizens who eat blackberries in size never, ever, statistically anyway, never contract that neuro disorder whose name I refuse to print upon these pages for fear of bringing down the Synaptic A on my own brain -- after observing over weekly muffins at Boulange my own dear Papa-in-law's early stages of ADdled decline, dang that amyloid-beta42 clumping like wet plaster across his brainiac cells. Not that Papa seemed to mind or even need reminders -- he still knew where he kept his car keys, and I think he was happy to be headed toward this dream state where he got to be anyone he wanted to be and still got to live beneath the mountain in the home he'd coddled himself into for 30 years and counting now. (My shrink-wrap -- he of marvelously linked left and right brains, computing overtime on my paid behalf -- he calls this classic avoidance, this fabricating a new tale to replace the current one. "Blackberries are your placebo," my med-head says one early afternoon as I sit in his SF office, doing the 45-minute-session thing three times a week as I try to cope with the new me: skinny as a starved crow, startled at the drop of a spoon,

or the toss of a morning newspaper onto my mini-patch of Strawberry field, bereft entirely of hope for my stash of dreams and securities, and feeling g-u-i-l-t-y about it all even as shrink-wrap and LL my legal gal and Papa and even Pam were telling me I'd probably made more people more money than any market guru in the past 20 years, definitely more than that Rukie fellow who finally had the good sense to die before one of his investment cruises wound up quarantined off the coast of Madagascar or something, although I have to admit I loved the sober little puns he made all the time. Anyway, maybe my blackberry fable was a placebo, woven around that rogue disease that was plastering the world's senior cids, but I tell you this vision, this story whose outline I present here, it all came to me before I hit the skids, before FedEx entered my life, before the blasted headlines and the smirking supermarket clerks crushed my cube of Strawberry condo and me in it.) I knew one thing for sure, and that's that this story of mine wasn't going to be financial, so maybe it was a placebo. I'm sure Fodder X, and shrink-wrap and LL my lawyer, even Papa and Pablo and Pam, they'll all yawn at this diversionary tactic. MY ROBBIE, WHAT AN IMAGINATION! The peeping fish-wrappers, they will smile wanly during the telling of my blackberry fable: GUILTY AS SUSPECTED/THEY ALL TRY TO CHANGE THE SUBJECT, THESE WHITE COLLAR CROOKS.

Fair enough, mice and men. Scurry past my berry fancy and into the next episode if you like, you with your vanilla plastic rodents, peel away the next few pages if you're reading this scrip between the wagging fingers of your hammy old hands. Don't mind the comma splices. You won't be missing anything if hard nose Fodder X, father confessor of the thick black heels, is right when he says, along one of our short walks there along Richardson low tide Bay this day, on that patch they call Blackie's Pasture for the enormous black horse who grazed the field each day 40 or 45 years ago, he our priest registering with his sling shotting eyes the stripes of upper house soccer teens, Tiburon's best booties I guess, the splendidly long-legged girl kickers anyway, and their sidelining moms, denim coated cherries they were lined up on one side of the field, gabbing and cradling in exquisite, but frosted, hands, frosty for Richardson Bay, 15 mph breezes winding up the peninsula, these ladies savoring their styros of steaming green tea and chai, if Fodder X is correct when he says this blueberries detour of mine -- hey hey Fodder it's BLACKBERRIES -- this blockhead paragraph or two on the subject of the black berries, is merely me, this coming straight from his pink lips, way too pink for a man in his 40s if you ask me, "pissing into the plot." The good father, I did a double take on this one, Fodder X he takes in the scene, absolving himself of guilt over the chest when I swear I hear him say, and this I have to

quote again, "These town ladies blow with the wind but they sure don't ride." Wazza-wazzat Fodder 'bout riding? I ask. "Tiburon's finest, Robert. They play flute like no one's business. Not like the Europeans at all. But they are not riders." I am still in the land of empty on this exchange, and the good father sees it. "Horses," Robert. "Horses. They come in all directions."

The BLACKBERRY placebo, if that's what we must call it, my swaddled narrative, which I'd been developing on napkins and notepads during several hundred hours of business-class air travel, goes thusly: What if we assume -- this was (and still is) my fantasy, my sabbatical strategy for exiting fiscal newsletter-dom, for abandoning the melt-up, and writing my very own fable, beginning, middle and end -- what if we assume there are 6 billion people in the world, and of those, 10 percent or 600 million people, eat blackberries in season, whether they live in Washington state or Chile or Vietnam? Now let's say 10 percent of those, or 60 million people, eat those blackberries at least once a week in season, or maybe twice, and even go out looking for them, as long as a blackberry bush is in the neighborhood, or by the side of the road on their way home from work. They like them a lot, in the summer time. Now, let's say 10 percent of those folks, or 6 million people, like blackberries a heck of a lot. More than most berries. They'll actually seek and pick blackberries in places they don't usually go, just to pick those blackberries. They may decide to wear long pants to avoid getting hacked around the ankles, shins and knees. They may take a 20-minute trip or a 30-minute trip JUST to pick blackberries. Now, let's say 10 percent of those folks, or 600,000 people, have decided there is nothing more delicious in the entire world of wild berries than a big fat ruby-colored blackberry. So they will actually plan their picking, and probably even buy them in the off-season from countries in the opposite hemisphere of the globe. Now, of those, 10 percent, or 60,000 people, actually have what a professional shrink-wrapper would call a mania or a hypo-mania about blackberries, an almost compulsive desire to pick them and enjoy them in a variety of ways -- in cobblers, pies, with ice cream, in exotic savory recipes, on their porridge, in smoothies and juices. Of those, maybe 6,000 folks a year experience a mystical blackberry moment, whether in the fruit itself, or the picking of the fruit. This moment could be meditative. It could be a prick of blood on a fingertip after a brush with a thorny stem -- maybe a glimpse into mortality. Or it could be gustatory -- the sweetest, or tartest, or plumpest, or richest, or mouth-feel poppiness -- of a wonderful blackberry. It could be intense camaraderie with friends picking blackberries, or nursing someone with a blackberry pie. It could even be the scent of blackberries bringing back some wonderful memory, perhaps a roll in the bushes as a lad or a lass. Of those 6,000

people, 600 people are actually aware they have had some kind of intense link with blackberries at that moment, or similar moments. Those 600 people are all around the world any given year, and each of them has ideas about that mystical moment. So they search to replicate that moment. Few of them do, because most of those moments, while epiphany, are also happenstance. A happy accident. Or a pleasant conglomeration of emotions, sweat, blood, adrenaline, peace and blackberries in one brief flash. Still, these 600 people are happy searching for that moment to repeat itself. Who wouldn't be, snarfing blackberries at the crack of dawn, by a campfire, in a cabin, at the picnic table, and so on? The few that manage to replicate that magic moment might number 60 in any given year, and they are able to replicate that moment because they have discovered, perhaps unknowingly, an endowed blackberry patch -- something that for lack of talent I can describe as a magic dust of sorts, like that movie "Cocoon," where the senior folks flop around in a Florida swimming pool that has been impregnated by celestial orbs from another planet. They feel younger, get frisky, spunky, chatty, become more alive. Sort of what is supposed to happen when you use some of these new molecular compounds the drug companies sell from their own pharma patches. Some of them might suspect their rejuvenation springs from the blackberries, or the soil where the blackberry bushes have taken root. They have achieved the ultimate blackberry receptor in their brains, and neurobiological clinicians and researchers are blown away by the ability of the sticky sweet juice to firewall all sorts of gangly disorders and multiple plaque-plagued diseases of the nervous system. Ahh, but see, none of the lucky ones really knows for sure, like in a double-blind clinical trial for some new piece of magic pharma, and few of these 60 can keep the magic going for more than a season, a summer. They can't replicate the happy accident. Then there are the handful, maybe 6 people a year, who absorb it all, more or less for keeps. They didn't just stumble onto the truth of these rare berries, these spare insiders and aficionados who called the best of the patch not berries, but "blackbezzles." These lucky ducks sought the bezzles out, as if they were smelling the must or must-not of some dog in heat.

Or just maybe, for a peppermint plot twist, maybe out of all the people in the world, the patchwork, be it a bramble of fiber-optic, synaptic or serotonic mesh, maybe the patchwork of prized bezzles sought these lucky mucks out? The berries would be in charge, just as a dazzle-heimered victim one day realizes his or her dementia is in charge and so, along with the seltzer water from the top fridge shelf, the ADdled ones -- and more than half of all 80 and uppers, the Papas and the Mamas, were developing the syndrome, which is becoming the USA's fastest-spreading disease among its fastest-growing

population segment -- the poor ADdled ones must each morning pop so may milligrams of the receptor drug memantine if they are to be accepted as on-par with the un-demented whilst their crinkly aging brains paddle the creeks or golf courses or bike paths -- or in Papa's case, the breakfast bakeries -- of their evening years.

I saw ticker symmetry in this tale, too. How could I not, having tickers on the brain seven days a week. See, locating just the right bush in this wide world of bushes reminded me of the search for the ticker that reaches the top of the mark: the one ticker of the 10,000 in the USA alone, and ten times that many publicly traded companies on the planet, that becomes the next behemoth, the next industrial revolution, the next consumer craze, the next ticket to decades of thick, multiplying dividends. After all, in a year I transmitted maybe 100 tickers to my audience, and sure, not all of them worked out, not all of them doubled and tripled and quadrupled, but some did, and others clocked a respectable 20 percent or 30 percent gain over a short period of time. But finding the next, I hate to use names here, finding the next Wal-Mart, and sitting on it forever whilst the ticker, the security, kept doubling and doubling and doubling and doubling, that I had yet to accomplish. I wanted to badly, for myself as much as for my audience, although I had no illusions about my hair-trigger subs holding onto any ticker for more than a day, or a week or a month or a year. I was thinking about the one ticker I could hold forever. For me, the blackberry fable came close to describing the quest, mundo and all. And that, that, that bramble was and is the plot line for my fairy-tailed escape hatch.

As for biological allegory, the references to psycho-motoring Memantine, for those afflicted senior citizen cids who are (unlike Papa who seems to want to fly away like a honking old Canadian goose and gladly, blissfully lose himself) deathly afraid of losing themselves in a neuralgic nightmare, I am referring to the brain-draining syndrome whose capital A I can't bear to spell out in full for fear of jinxing my own senior years, if ever those golden years were to arrive sans a cellblock, even if it were my own imaginary but mindful prison. Still, aside from grand literary themes, the plot line I had in mind for this fable wasn't about dementia or stroke recovery and the various pharmacological solutions that make us believe we are brewing modern therapy for the brain. A witches' brew if you ask me, bubble hubble but modern all the same, these Memantine concoctions trick and treating the addled ones yet doing nothing to ease the disease. So what ever happened to good old, I have to say it, chicken soup?

Or blackberries. I just loved blackberries. Just as I loved tickers. Small story: much later, we are talking prologue here, when Papa was getting speech therapy up in Novato once a week so that his tongue might synch once again with his stricken yet stirring brain, the nice lady therapist would point to an object on her desk or a cartoon from a magazine and ask Papa to give it a go. Say something, in other words. I drove him up there a few times, to the Sutter or Kaiser or whatever it was medical center just next to the huge shopping center with the Costco, the Safeway of all Safeways I guess, but the clerks are fast and don't smirk. Papa, he of few words and much meaning, never really cared for these exercises, he would tell me on the way back home. "Too ... many ... questions," said Papa, who by the way was looking better than ever here in the land of 80 and onward, lean as ever, devil of a smile. Stroke and 80 years of seasoning agreed with him. I saw Pam in Papa every time, or he in Pam, the high cheekbones profiled like a Cherokee, which they were partly, the thick heads of hair. Anyway, the two of us, Papa and I, stopped at that bakery just along Magnolia in Larkspur, a hop skip from his home, to catch a muffin. Like all of the cute boulanges these days, this one had a free computer on one wall, for those looking for an early morning market update or traffic or weather. Online prescriptions maybe, I dunno.

As we awaited our bran muffins and diesel in a cardboard cup, I drifted over to the screen, figuring to get a jump on an airline boarding pass for the next day's flight. Papa drifted over and what do you know, the screen was spilling tickers, that being the coffeehouse thing to do, do an instamatic on your net worth so you would feel better or worse when you returned to the soup kitchen or garage loft, Lard Burger or wherever it was that paid the rent. This particular day, well, week, month and year, was devastating investors. The stock market was finally turning into an earth mover, crushing everything in its path, blackberries, blubes, big pharma, small pharma, financials, everything but big oil. The automobile makers in particular were taking it to the hood and the trunk, hurtling to lows not seen since Ike in the 1950s. GM was up on the browser there, rear ended yet again. I knew it was a favorite stock of Papa's, even if he did drive a 1967 restored Ford Mustang. I saw Papa peaking in and thought to shut down the browser. Who needs a blasted ticker with their muffin anyway? But Papa just shrugged and pointed to the letters GM. "Say goodbye." That was that.

So blackberries and tickers and bears, oh my. My short story, the plot of my story, was seeded with

blackberries. Like so: people who eat blackberries don't get ADDled. People who eat the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ live for eternity. The plot line, theme and takeaway moral for my parable -- a tale I figured could in the writing of it transport me forever away from money seekers and electronic missives, in all their corporeal forms -- the beginning, middle and end of the story was Blackberries, Blackberries with a capital B. The story was going to be about the beauty of the berries, or bezzles as I called these messy miracles of pulp and juice I considered lifelong friends. Those who discovered the rare bush would live forever. Those who stuck with the miracle ticker, the miracle company, would finance their lives, and their families' lives, for generations. Of course, being ticked off about vanishing bushes, especially in the suburbs, I also would address how wild berries fast were being obliterated by cinder blocks and parking lot asphalt, Safeway bearing the mark of shame on that score.

So I'll swear on my byline I had this story outlined on paper, on one of those hip-pocket reporter's notebook pads I used to carry on my planet stomping road trips, months before that voodoo FedEx morning when the white-collar whip came down. I even had a name for the story: "Blackberries Hurrah." A 20-year-old or an 80-year-old trying to tell a parable about Blackberries, I don't think so. But a 40-year-old Strawberry resident, shucking his profitable biz and its ticker-heisting electronic bomb blasts and turning to short stories, well, I figured the tone of the tale would be flat-out rapturous. The good father, my well lubed, well paid shrink-wrap, even her gap-toothedness princess of securities litigation, LL, had a good snort at this fable, like they'd just inhaled via bamboo straw, in one accidental gulp, a cup of green masala from some flashing hot Mumbai pomfret stand. "Entirely not relevant, Robert," said LL. "Just entirely."

Chapter Five

The Good Father

Hurrah. I never got around to much more than the outline. Priestly Fodder X next door in Tiburon later told me, as I bawled my story about getting corralled with my hands in the ticker jar, weeping for the

first time in years as I held the Fed-Ex envelope in my shivering hands, the last time being when Pam my betrothed untied the knot but had the grace to tell me in person and not via courier, Fodder X my walking confessional booth, strolling along the bike path on a floppy, post-subpoena California Christmas Day, of all days, the good father told me that most everyone in the world, after the whip comes down on their cocooned portfolios, seems to believe they were just about to transform, they were just on the cusp of spirituality, when the whip came down. My pastor, I can still picture him on that crystal-clear X-massed day in one of those FLAMING RED hooded sweatshirts that are all the rage these days, the ones that say U.C.L.A., or U.S.C. or in his case, ST. XXX CATHOLIC CHURCH OF TIBURON. My Fodder X, he also was wearing those way-too-shiny black shoes priests always seem to wear, the ones with the thick heels and soles and the tops so polished you can see your reflection in them. Up top, his hood hid a balding pate that, when he was seated at the piano on his church altar, looked like the site of buried treasure, his remaining clutch of hair at the back of his neck forming a neat X-marks-the-spot that branded him, for me anyway, Fodder X. Framed that X-mas day against chameleonic pickle weed that grows just along Richardson Bay, the plant bright in the 2 p.m. shadow of the sun but dull, washed out even when you peek back at the weed's flipside countenance against the mild winter rays, Fodder X struck me as a mannered man's man. His voice transmits in a celestial baritone; he carries musical notes with those tonsils better than any gospel-slinging preacher I know, thanks to half-a-lifetime as a voice and piano student in New York, San Francisco and Rome, according to the little peaks into life's travels that most preachers permit from the pulpit, as they hammer home their points. Like me, Fodder X had just turned 40 or 41. Unlike me, except when he was singing from that great big suburban altar with the pastels and translucent marble or when he was preaching from the pulpit, pounding his parishioners in anything but a style one could call piano-piano, my parish pastor was a man of few words one on one. He was just short of menacing, he was loud, he was smooth and cajoling with his Sunday worshipers ... but sparing, almost reticent mano a mano, whether it was inside the reconciliation booths that were called confessionals when I was, I kid thee not, a Baltimore altar boy, or strolling along this Tiburon bike path that snaked around my jagged Richardson Bay. Our priest was strikingly handsome, and I guess maybe from Italian or Sicilian stock. This being Christmas Day, father had just 20 minutes for me, maybe less. Lots going on at Parish Hall, which was splayed out in bougainvillea and those blood-red poinsettias that I hate to see drained and withered by early January. Fodder X had the 11 o'clock mass just ahead, and besides the liturgy and the preaching and the communion with his dripping-rich parishioners and their flush families on this

gifting day, our musical priest was one-man choir and piano, too, transmitting for his faithful the hymns and carols that make this time of year such a joy, even if our perfectionist pastor was always complaining about the hall's acoustics and how his baritone bounced like crazy against the stained glass and rafters, ultimately landing with the whimper of an infant in swaddling rags, somewhere in the church balcony, measly and forgotten in the pews down below. Pity. I figured a parish this rich could afford to coat the way-high ceiling of this marvelous building with acoustic tile that would enhance Fodder X's vocal gifts, but then, I guess I didn't know just how much money the church was spending on legal bills, defending priests long-ago accused of sexual crimes. Fodder X joked around that crown of thorns at one mass, and I give him credit for even acknowledging how deep a legal sewer the Catholics were in with the hundreds or thousands of charges of abuse that peach-skinned altar boys had lodged over the years. You see, he told his audience with a rare grin, one of our great Popes had just died and gone to heaven, and St. Peter greets him at the gate. Holy Father, what can we do for you now that you are here? Peter asks. The Pope says, You know, I always have wanted to see with my own eyes the original manuscripts that guided our policies regarding the Vatican and our priesthood. Peter smiles and says, Of course, our archives are outstanding. The Pope heads down to the archives and spends a day studying leather-bound books and scrolls. At the end of the day Peter comes down and hears crying and wailing and gnashing of teeth, along the lines of WHY OH WHY, CENTURIES OF SUFFERING FOR ONE DROPPED 'R.' Peter comes to the side of the Holy Father and says, What is wrong, my beloved? What is this about a dropped 'R?' The Pope looks up and sobs, and here I quote, "Oh St. Peter, centuries of suffering, all because one translator dropped an 'R,' and the Holy Father points to a gilt-edged scroll. "Celebrate," he weeps. Celebrate!"

He got a nice laugh out of the crowd from that one, even Sister Marjorie, the parish secretary who was sitting in the front row, tittered and giggled. Any priest that could joke about sex with his parishioners was halfway OK with me. But could he joke about money? "Robert," says the good father as we head back up the hill from the bike path to the church parking lot, "it's not so much about what has happened, or what you convince yourself happened in your life to bring you here. It's what you do today, and tomorrow, and next year, and the year after that that counts. Will you be as selfless in the future after all of this is finished, and you've survived -- and mark my words you will survive, with scars of course -- will you be as humble going forward as you are right here and now, in your fear of the legal system and its consequences? And will you give of yourself and your resources when that day

comes?”

Now you have to remember, I was in post-traumatic shock. My world, in two days, had collapsed, thanks to flipping FedEx. I already could see the lawyers on the horizon ready to suck me dry ... and the media lining up, their blades out for blood as they got to spear one of the little financial fish that served the little lemon sharks that swim in what to these ink-stained drudges appeared to be an untouchable world of bloated commodities and stock-market fury. The snooty journalism hurt the most, maybe because I still considered myself a journalist, even after graduating to my lucrative craft of newsletter writing. Lemon sharks was what they all were, the reporters who pretended in their newspapers and TV spots and Internet pages to know my story backwards and forwards, labeling it GREED like a conveyor belt and off they were to the next white-collar crook, the media were like those lemon sharks in Richardson Bay, circling around Tiburon and off my home surf Strawberry Spit, where Pablo and I in a kayak could see the two-finned bottom feeders in small schools, willing to let any old garbage float into their bellies. I felt as if someone, maybe LL's boxing instructor, had landed a hook to the side of my head, twisting my brain stem and cutting off the oxygen. I was so catatonic that one afternoon, I finally found the energy to look outside my kitchen window, maybe to see if a prick from the press was still standing sentry outside the house. But no, the baby sharks were only there for a day or two and then, as I said, off to the next fiscal no-gooder. Across the way, beyond the lemon tree and the blackberry bushes, on the main road and filling the frame of my window, I saw a cement mixer, its tattooed belly revolving and revolving. The motion waxed me for a second, like when you're in a parking spot at the Safeway and the car next door moves ever so slowly backwards and you think you're moving forward. I was in a spin right then and there, lost in my own kitchen, eyeballs revolving. I was going under, over, under, over, under. Later, shrink-wrap told me this was vertigo. I dry-heaved onto the stove-top.

I hadn't slept since the federales' paperwork arrived. I'd eaten no more than a banana, sucked a few months-old frozen blackberries I squirted into my freezer every September. Even the idea of vodka-injected Meyer lemons with Papa on the front porch no longer spritzed my spirits. I'd shown up for Mass that Christmas morning looking more like Jesus Christ around Easter time. Dotted Blackie's Pasture across from the church was that all-year-round pampas grass, non-native and prolific as it swayed here and there and just about everywhere around the bay. The county's pesky pampas grass

would have made Jesus Christ, and his mule, feel right at home coming into town that telegraphic week just before he gave up his number.

But this was Christmas, not Easter. Some people, priests, philosophers and poets, saints I suppose, can use a word like consequences whilst strolling along a bike path and get away with it. I was terrified of the future, and doubted I'd survive my mess in any sense of the word, financially, spiritually, socially, mentally, maybe even legally. I didn't like the sound of that word, though: consequences. I knew I was a shark before that piece of government paper arrived at my door in scrawny, mellow little Strawberry-next-door-to-Tiburón, which I must mention for my own archival instincts had a splendid tabloid lineage of fiscal crooks, tax-evaders and swindlers. I was kicking myself hard in the bum because I knew I'd wanted out of the newsletter grind, I sensed I'd entered into a fiscal hypo-mania, and now, full-bore in the sites of the securities regulators, I knew it was too late to save myself ... too late to celebrate the manic money I'd made.

Chapter Six

Loaves and Fishes

Tell you, what got me into trouble wasn't the stock picks, or my holier-than-thou who-are-hubris, refusing to make precious eye contact even with the loyal fans flocked around my table at some investment conference, or in some common airport queue -- when I wasn't worthy enough to fly in the silky bosom of a big-bellied private jet, that is. Nope. What got me in deep with the authorities was when I began sprinkling biblical references onto the Melt-Up alerts.

I guess I couldn't leave a good enough thing alone. I mean, I was a walking, talking, alert-transmitting self-fulfilling prophecy. My "Melt-Up" had a few thousands subs, and they hit their buy and sell buttons as soon as my digital missives reached their loathsome laptops. But no. It wasn't enough that I outlined what the pros called "the fundamentals" of a company, or a commodity -- a silver mine in Argentina, perhaps, a promising zone of mineralized gold in Panama, or a small online retailer of music

discs in Taiwan. A neurological compound, containing I kid you not, blackberries, to treat ischemic strokes. Oh no, Lord above, the facts (as I saw them) weren't enough -- I had to start lacing my prose with allusions and quotations from MML&J. Shrink-wrap would say later that the need to embellish my script with biblical authority was a classic byproduct of hypomania. Illusions of grandeur -- well, I call that stink-wrap, Mr. Shrink-wrap. Yet one line the prescribing doc laid on me struck hard because I knew like most of what he said, it rang true: "You had it all, Rob: an audience, an income, a nice pocket of fame. Yet you snatched defeat out of the jaws of victory."

Thus, in one Melt-Up under the heading "Loaves & Fishes," heaven help me it's true, I talked up the prospect of 100-x returns on investment. I believed that in the stocks mania we were seeing at the time, anyone could place a few bets on shares of microscopic companies and have a mackerel-fisherman's shot at pulling in a load of fish on an obscene scale. A 10-cent stock, well lubricated by the power of my prose and accompanied by a rush of buying interest among the Pamelas and Pablos of the investing world, could, I wrote, "... multiply Jesus fashion into a feast of unlimited foccaccia and fish, this is not memantine nor is it manna from heaven, folks, it's capital inflows!!!"

Needless to say, the chosen tickers did multiply in price. Ten cents became a buck, then two-four-six-eight, how did it appreciate! Many of my Melt-Up subs gorged at these feasts. But some of 'em, maybe they were upset that I used the name of the Lord Our God in POP Mode -- Pursuit of Profit. Maybe they didn't jump into the fishing hole at the right time and got caught holding the fish after the multiplication feast was finished. Eight-six-four-two down the filthy flushing loo. The securities enforcers, when I played "Queen" for a day, sitting on their metal-chair throne on the 38th floor of some too ordinary SF skyscraper, and spilled my soul (off the record of course and in the presence of Laura the Lawyer, in despairing hope the government would go easy on my wasted torso), asked me if I knew any of my subs from the heartland. What do you mean, I asked, terrified, bawling, waiting for weeks now for the paroxetine hydrochloride to start re-uptaking the serotonin in my brain, what do you mean heartland? One of the agents -- there were two of these young bucks, educated at George Washington University and sacrificing the early years of their legal careers as investigating attorneys for the government -- said, "You know, the Bible Belt."

So. The thumpers, heh? That was the only clue I received about the identity of my accusers. Probably

some wrinkled high-Christian rollers in Texas or Mississippi, huffy that I'd taken Matthew Mark Luke & John's holy words in vain, even if the vein eventually led to diamonds, platinum, nickel or gold, genuine or on paper.

Write it all up, the priest had told me later, just days after the flaming FedEx bulletin amalgamated my synapses. That's your talent and that's your penance, the good father said. Fodder X spoke from experience. He wasn't always a priest. X had gone through something like a hypomania with his own virtuoso talent, becoming so hooked, he'd said, on everything musical that he ignored his large family of four brothers and four sisters, his Croatian girlfriend, whom he stranded in Rome after two years abroad studying master's level Italian composition, and ultimately, shunned his God, or so he said. When X fell off his polished bench, after flunking mysteriously some vaulted piano competition he'd been gearing up for his entire life, left bereft of his dream in some cobwebby Moscow cathedral where virtuosos go to prove themselves in these organized musical show-and-tells, X vowed to enter seminary and, later, to use his talent as a way of repenting his staccato obsession. Thus, never a Tiburon, California, mass went by without the good father up there on the altar negotiating, pounding at times his 88 keys, or singing, furiously I must say, those Nicene chants the Catholic Church tranquilizes its congregation with, week after week after week. Fodder X, he was a rector's erector, I guess, fortifying his flock with sweet sweet, albeit furious, music.

Pick your numbers: the good father's ivory tray of 88, or my 27 gears, or the millions of dollars the securities enforcers said I gorged on whilst writing and transmitting my melt-ups. On the power of paper, Fodder X said he could relate. The musical priest, turns out, played musical chairs himself before getting frocked: just out of college, a confused kid with too many choices, Fodder took a turn as a stock-broker for a year or two. Says he hated the phone work.

As for pickle weed, Pablo Postman called it pecker-weed, or at least that's what it sounded like rolling off his Colombian tongue, his rustico yet refined Antioquian diction (translation: like country western music exported from that Andean frontier of samba and cosmetic surgeons and first class thin crust pizza pies). I saw the weed, the pickle weed that is and not Pablo's other pickled herb, I saw this weed that tarped across Richardson Bay in wintertime as a signal, a confirmation: an omen. The weed's color changes -- dulls and brightens -- with the light and angle of the sun, or the passing over of a cloud. I

never failed to notice this little kaleidoscope effect on my rides along the bike path that cut through the marsh.

My cloud had come. When I told Pablo I'd have to hire a lawyer to help me sort my mess, my sage, on one of our pee pauses at the side of Bobcat Trail in the headlands, said, "Roberto, a good lawyer knows the law. A very good lawyer knows the judge." I couldn't laugh, couldn't find a speck of humor in my life. I felt for sure it would be years before I could manage to crawl out -- before noon or even later -- from the cover of my bed sheets, which just like a medical cliché of post-traumatic stress syndrome were soaked with sweat halfway through the night. On the bright side, my overactive sweat glands solved a years-old problem of having to go wizz three times a night. Still, I was left each morning damp and pickled as those weeds when winter's rains swept across the bay.

Global travel, mountain biking, a lumpy looking mailman, a dubious but always entertaining stock market promoter, a priest, an ex-wife, lots of blackberry bushes and a condo in Strawberry. Oh, and the newsletters, pin cushion for my hard-tail bottom. Those fleecing newsletters. These were a few of my favorite things.

I suppose I owe it to the rookies, those who say I rooked 'em out of their life savings, to present a newsletter. As historical footnote? As explication and expiation? As part of my penance, 'cause going through the electronic archives on my laptop gives me the shingles, and pain they say is penance. If you never had the pleasure of ingesting the formula of a stock-market writer at top form, the way it prescribes (my own) personally branded dementia of greed and deception, well, black-shoed-'n-vested Fodder X didn't suss out this part of my scriptural penance, but in the process of spinning my numerical narrative, I figure I get to give back a ticker or two, all in the eternally seasonal spirit of Christian giving.

You see, I take pride in the specimens, biblical nonsense and all, that made lots of us rich, and a select few of us meat-dripping, butcher-rat rich. I guess it's the structuralist in me, or the wanting to be considered a real writer in this modern age, able to leap text and time in a single bound, like all of these popular screenplay writers and novelists and lyricists do these days. (Although as I understand it, even Sam Clemens, an idol of mine from college days, double-dipped in the time-shifting area, that Conn.-

artist Yankee who cared about the court of public opinion even as he claimed to ignore it. The Clemens con was his Missouriah drawl, quite a novelty back east in Boston and NYC and Hartford, where he endeavored not to be eclipsed by his writing brethren. See, Twain was America's first massively successful newsletter writer. His letters, hundreds, thousands, made their way into newspapers and books. Clemens sometimes wrote 50 letters a day -- to his kids, his publisher, his sweet wife. As Mark's fame spread, so did his tendency to want to speculate, investing and losing his shirt in hare-brained inventions -- elastic waist bands for men's slacks, for instance, and typeset printing presses -- yet reaping a gentleman's income via box office success as this dwarfish, bush-faced author entranced and bullied theater and lecture hall audiences across the country with his tall low-down tales. Sam Clemens made his mark way back then by latching onto the sub model of selling books. Unlike the country's upper-crust authors, Twain, prince and pauper all in one package, gladly allowed traveling salesman to hawk his thick books to plain-folk subscribers door to door, across the country, thus racking up vast sales and a national reputation in short order. How was I any different? We were the same, he and I. My subs wanted to own the hard-working journalist who not only coined melt-up but sh-toked the fire.)

Chapter Seven

My Lawyer

The Dipsea Café just across the freeway from Strawberry is the place where I almost always did my breakfast meetings, and it had a real fireplace. You turn right just before the Tennessee Valley Road, if you're driving, or on the bike, you steer left from the Strawberry bike path and slop your way about a quarter-mile through this bit of wetlands and salt marsh that most always manages to splash your clipless biking shoes, but you can't be too peeved, pedaling along with all these long-legged birds standing like totem poles here and there, all the way to the door of the restaurant.

The walls of the place are lined with greasy pics of runners, most of them local-locos, some of them in their 70s and 80s and 90s, who take to the Dipsea trail race each June, ratcheting their way up the

mountain of Tamalpais and then down to the Pacific at Stinson Beach, where the guys and gals, young and old, all picnic and drink chardonnay and thank the mountain for not giving them a cardiac on Cardiac, the steepest chug to the peak. Personally, I stick to my bike up there, but they tell me the footrace along some of those nasty single-tracks lumbered with fallen redwoods, sprinkled generously with eucalyptus trees and a pariah's bounty of poison oak, and crawling with wild turkeys and a few bobcats, the Dipsea race has been going for about 100 years. The café, just down the freeway from the start of the trail up that part of the mountain, is insanely popular with the country crowd and renowned for its massive blackberry and blueberry pancakes. In my pre-summons life, before I was FedExed, I always went for the full stack of flapjacks, which amounted to a mountain of its own. I found Laura the Lawyer waiting for me there one morning, reading her daily legal journal as she nursed a cup of hot cocoa and one of those nine-grain scones the café is famous for. Laura was a wise cookie who knew she needed to keep me on track if I was going to survive what I considered 1. the destruction of my reputation, 2. the annihilation of my hoard, including my modest piece of Strawberry shortcake property and my stock holdings, and 3. the end of my career as a financial writer. Pretty lady, too, and yeh, she had braces on her gapped teeth, finally, approaching 40 years and deciding she'd fork over a fiver to wear those clear plastic molds in her mouth for a year or two in her own quest for what, a boyfriend, a husband, more clients? Lawyers in braces, everywhere I turned these days I saw them coming at me, one of my recurring intrusive nightmares as I turned my sweet Strawberry bed into a sweat-stippled stench trench where sleep was the unattainable golden ticket.

I had to give the lady credit. Most lawyers, even the ones getting \$500 an hour, would have me take the 30-minute trip over the Golden Gate and into downtown. Laura was a bit different from the others. She was my same age, early 40s, with impossibly long legs and an even longer portfolio of pet sayings (and lame jokes). Her paralegal staff called her Elle. She was into exercise, exotic stuff, spinning on stationary cycles for one, or the latest: a class called "Bags and Abs" that included stretching, boxing, kicking, crunching your torso whilst sitting on one of those oversized pink squishy balls, and presumably, screaming.

LL was also fond of saying, to most anyone who would listen, "No way am I going to spend the rest of my life making rich assholes richer." Or, "The best fake-out is when you make contact first." Or, "See that poor slob over there?"

Laura the Lawyer could always pin a poor slob in the crowd. At the Dipsea Café this pallid February morning, some two months into my new life as poster boy for white-collar flawed, she flicks her head in the direction of a table at the back of the room, near the fireplace the café kept going in winter and summer, all year long. “Heya, see that poor slob over there? You’re looking like a prince compared to that one.”

I take the bait, looked over my shoulder. And lo and behold I know the slob. He is a massively built young man by the name of Mudder, or more formally, Morgan D. Organowski. Mudder, many months ago, had joined Pablo and me on a few rides across the hump of Mount Tam. Younger by 10 years than me, and 20 years shy of Pablo, he was a big boy, this Mudder who needed a 22-inch titanium bicycle frame and an oversized seat for his saddle. Mudder, whose cycling pals sometimes called Mr. M.D. because of the extremely high quality of the medical maryjane he kept in those itty-bitty pouches under the bike saddle, where the tube repair kits go, Mudder also happened to be on Pablo’s mail route, just on the border of Strawberry and what they call unincorporated Tiburon. Like my Pablo, the large boy was a regular card-carrying member of the northern California medical MJ club, totally legal bud, that was growing faster these days than Disney’s Castaway Club for families on a Caribbean cruise, which I confess here was a goofball vacation idea of mine -- no kids, after all, yet we partying on Dizzy Central through the islands -- a holiday I used to dream up, one I knew would rate a real kick in the pants if my Pam, my former Pam, and I had ever stuck tight long enough in Strawberry to have kids with their Disney hooks sprayed by Peter Pan's pixie dust as we cocktailed our way in and out of port beach Thomas and port beach John and port beach Rico. Though to be honest, I don't recall Mudder's ever being stoned, not on his bike for sure. He never acted like it, anyway, even when he was toking on the mountain. On the bike, the big man was all business, and fast, especially uphill, a direction you'd never figure someone of his size and girth would excel at. I think it's the massive thighs, a bit like Pablo in that respect.

Besides the size of his body, what most folks noticed straight off about Mudder was the enormous tattoo of an ancient whaling scene, Moby and all, chiseled into his right shoulder, down most of his back and presumably, blasted across his rump. I wouldn't know. It was a beauty, though, in full color, designed and stitched into place by a moonlighting Italian painter who lived across the bay in Berkeley.

Melville, the author, would have been impressed. “The peanut gallery at the courthouse calls him GG the Giant Goose. The guy can’t even afford his own counsel,” Laura the Lawyer lisps to me via the gap in her front teeth. “That’s his public defender, a guy I went to school with.” Ellie waves and gives her fellow counsel a bracing smile. The guy nods his head. Mudder, my lawyer tells me, did a bit of poolside life-guarding on the side, a service I could use. He stood accused of draining pay phones, that's right, draining pay phones of loose change with an ingenious little device that resembled Captain Hook's hook-leg, only much, much smaller. Mudder's larger issue was that he stood accused of rounding up some of the kids at one of the local pools and dispatching them around to the different shopping centers. Quite a little network of cream puffs, if it was true, and I didn't believe a word of it. Still don't. Mudder’s case was actually in the local papers a few weeks prior, but I’d barely noticed it. I was marinating in my own muddy pool of sweat and tears. Anyway, the flesh-eaters that are part of the package for those accused of being naughty, the newspapers, TV stations and assorted grocery clerks, they all said that the daily take, all in pay phone quarters and dimes and nickels I guess, reached \$400 at one point. When a few of the kids went to Le Safeway and bought a shopping cart's worth of those monstrous every-flavor-you-can-think-of potato chips, along with four six-packs of premium root beer and chewing-gum chasers, sugar free by the way, and paid for the load all in quarters, well, you get the idea. Even the baggers at Safeway figured it out. For the cops, it was like spearing marshmallows bobbing around in a dainty French bowl of hot chocolate. Mudder was the only guy the cops knew who had a flock of kiddies following him around like a pied-piper.

Mudder was in all his heft an impressive swimmer, and a lifter. Once, after a quickie dawn bike across the headlands, the full moon setting, we took the back way into Tiburon, along the far side of Richardson Bay, buried our cycles under some bushes and slipped into Harbor Point Beach & Tennis Club, just a three-minute pedal up the hill from the public Strawberry pool that was my fourth home, after the condo/the planes/hotels and Pablo's lattice of single-track trails to Fort Cronkhite and his fire roads to the top of Tam and a bit beyond, once we were at the top and lit up, if you catch the drift of the smoke. It was pretty early in the morning still, and a pumpkin of a sun was just crowning the horizon, backlighting a furry SF skyline and starting to light up the designer windows of those pastel palaces that crowd the Strawberry ridge up there, just below the barracks and main hall of that Baptist seminary that is still safe as open space for cypress, eucalyptus, blackberries and munching goats. This being late autumn, tule fog below our knees was smeared here and there, distilling itself just inches above the

surface of the empty pool and a few feet away, blurring the Harbor Point jetty that stuck out into Strawberry Spit. So it was just Mudder and me that morning, my Pablo starting his mailman jig at 7 or so and unable to make the ride.

Mudder wrapped his laps in the empty pool before I did; he slapped away 1 1/2 rounds of butterfly and free for each one of my measured breast, back and crawl laps. As I said, the setting was pleasant, not Kona Coast gorgeous but certainly California rising, a little wind, a little fog. By noon the haze would be dispatched to hell where it belonged and the day would be glorious, 10 degrees warmer in Strawberry than across the way in SF. I still had several laps to go, and I could hear each time I lifted my head to sip some air between every other stroke, I could make out a melody, a polka actually. At the time, I didn't know Mudder was into wind, as in recorders and harmonicas and flutes. He was lying on one of the beach chairs, all stretched out in his vastness and playing some goofy Polish thing, I guess it was, on his black and white recorder. It was a nice way to close our little bike and swim, a folksy serenity mellowing the high from our early workout.

Just before what would have almost surely been my lap finale, I hear a cry from somewhere out there, near the jetty, from the jetty. "Hey, hey, hey ..." it was, a squeaky cry. I didn't think I was still, you know, heh heh, still stoned and having visions, so I lifted myself up and onto the pool deck. Mudder stopped playing his dotty ditty and came over, and we walked together to the edge of the deck, where the bay began beneath the club's patio on stilts. It was low tide, so low most of the first 50 yards out was muddy bay floor, a mosaic of mud. The tides sucked into and out of Richardson Bay faster than almost any place I knew, with the possible exception of Cape Cod and some southern English seaside village whose name I'd forgotten but not the absolutely Queen Mother awful venison stew I'd eaten at some stinking pub trying to disguise itself as a boutique microbrewery. I'll never forget that supper because it was the last time I'd puked. On dry land, that is. The last time until the next time, I guess. The jetty, pieces of leftover concrete from the tennis club's revamp not long ago, along with rocks and giant pieces of timber, was entirely exposed, and sitting at the tip of it, a literal stone's throw from the waterfront back lawns of Strawberry Spit's icy suburb castles, was this fellow yelling "Hey," small fellow he looked, stranded on the rocks, and a windsurfing board and sail nearby, lying on its side like a beached harbor seal.

"Hey, hey," and that was enough to get Mudder over the railing of the wooden deck. He dangled from the deck, then dropped onto the bay floor, Mudder's weight branding toe and heel prints into the crud as he made his way to the wayward wind boarder across what I'd always called the money moat, because it separated the extremely wealthy families out there on the tip of the spit, including a very creative bail-bond prince who'd managed to brand his trade, from the just merely wealthy on the club side of the harbor. First time I tried windsurfing, the wind at the Berkeley Marina kicked up and blew me straight off course, serving me on the rocks, just like this poor guy. That's what happened, I reckoned, watching Mudder lift the man, who was tiny, in one arm and the sailboard in his other tattoo-packing arm and shoulder. Mudder tromped back in and boosted the man to me on the deck, palming the poor chap's bum up into the sky with his expansive palm. I hauled the small man in. He was less than 5 feet in height but still dang heavy, with a devil's goatee on the tip of his Lilliputian chin. He looked awful, awful familiar. One side of the boarder's body was smeared with the bay crud, consistency similar to the Woody's Frozen Yogurt, mocha flavor, we bought year round at Strawberry Town Center. Mudder lifted the sailboard toward the deck, and I grabbed it by the tip of g sail and hauled that in, too. By the time Mudder had gotten back onto the deck, the small guy had grabbed a towel, my towel, actually, and was wiping the mud off his legs and arms. His legs were shaking even though it really wasn't that cold, even with the fog and breeze. "Are you members?" he asked in what sounded like a clipped northern accent, Canada dry for sure. "I'm the pool manager and I don't recognize you." So much for thank-yous, Mudder and I shrugged in unison. "I'm calling security," Mr. Midget puffed, his little head, his little bald head, flashing red like a CHP road flare, and as he headed to the office, Mudder started for the recorder he left lying on the deck chair. The manager stormed toward our gentle goose in what I guess was an attempt to bar Mudder and me further access to the premises. He crashed his chin against Mudder's hip and slipped, landed, well, shmackadabum onto the pool deck, a few feet from the hot tub, which now I remembered was where I think I'd seen mad Napoleon before, only it was just down the road, at the Strawberry Rec Center. Mudder offered to help the guy up from his latest slip-up, but munchkin man was bristling, so Mudder shuffled over to his recorder, picked it up and said, "Let's vamoose."

That was the last time I'd seen Mudder, here at the Dipsea Café.

What was I supposed to say to the man? Especially over pancakes? I couldn't imagine the big guy, this

honking young man who in some way beyond just fluff and feathers resembled a goose, one that had tried to swallow a hoary old cocconut and gotten it stuck in its throat, I could not imagine Mudder mixing it up with kids and targeting pay phones. For petty cash. Mudder was just married as I recalled from some small chat we made on the mountain or riding the headlands. He also helped run some of the ferries out to Angel Island from the Tiburon ferry landing. Not a rich boy. Which was why he had a public defender who didn't cost him a dime. The boy looked as down and out as I did, and his Adam's Apple was poking a peak into his throat, stretching his neck pretty tight, like that old goose I guess . Not even the large stack of blubes, as the café called its whole-grain blueberry pancakes swimming in organic maple syrup, not even those early morning carbohydrates with some Canadian sausage on the side could cheer him ... or me for that matter. I wondered whether Mudder's case and mine were somewhat connected by the common theme of occupational hazards. For him, a life guard, it was being worshipped by younger kids, like a counselor at summer camp often is, unless he's a slave driver, and there's always one or two of those at camp. For me, it was being worshipped by my yellow submarines. Both audiences were marshmallows, willing to get roasted over the campfire and chance being gobbled up, all for the privilege of saying they were part of the crowd, but the crowd was the chosen few, could be the poolside crowd, the slick crowd, the money crowd, didn't matter. And merrier by a factor of two when the piper was making everyone happy, and making everyone money.

Laura Lawyer wasn't here for Mudder, though, or for the scones. My LL had some news ... and yet another palsy joke after I shared with her my return to Mass on Sundays and the occasional Holy Day of Obligation. I was especially looking forward to Ascension Thursday, or whatever they called it these days, praying I think to levitate myself not only out of my legal mess, but above Tam's East peak, which you can actually spy right from inside the cozy Dipsea Café, and ascend my sorry soul above and beyond this life entirely.

Ellie's news was yet another blow to my frame of mind, which was already split like the front-fork half of a substandard hard-tail two-wheeler . See, the securities regulators, after receiving and reviewing my brokerage accounts with their machine-gun roster of BUYS and SELLS, well, the young government turks came across a TRANSFER. The stock in question, said my lady, who didn't need to whisper even though the place was full up because everyone at breakfast had their own person-to-person transactions on the front burner, the STOCK IN QUESTION appeared to be an electronic missive sent from

somewhere overseas, probably Dubai but even these CUSIP-savvy agents were not entirely sure. And whattya-know, its summer-bitching name, cause that was when the transfer took place, in the high noon of summer, was Marca Pola. One million shares of Marca Pola, which at the time of the transfer was a two-penny natural resources company whose stock was listed in Canada.

So this was news to me? I'd already fessed up to LL what a scummy thing I'd done, talking up this microcosmic mining company that was sinking drills into Colombian hillsides, without my really kicking the tires, or more accurately, my going down there to dust off the drill bits to separate the fool from the gold. Too much of Manny Drinkwater's nectar of the gods was my only excuse. Naturally, like everything my Melt-Up alerts touched, shares of Marca Pola went bonks after my newsletter looped the globe's eagerly waiting laptops. Two-four-six-eight, oh my, did it appreciate! In a week, the shares were selling for almost a buck, and whattya-know again, my brokerage statements showed I'd sold Marca Pola for almost \$1 million. Not a bad trade, even if I may not have fully DISCLOSED the sale to my loyal and eager subscribers. Even if I did no even REMEMBER selling the CUSIP-sucking scrip for the love of teat, but there was a lot about buying and selling I didn't remember, me having been in that robo-snot center-stage of manic, all inclusive and OMNIpotent, undeniably hypo and hyper fluxed me, all me, only me in all of my MEness, or so Marina District shrink-wrap was forensic enough to put it, although even he in all of his fingering lubedNESS couldn't really say anything definite about event-driven amnesia; he'd forgotten I guess. Recipe for melt-up success: start with stock worth \$20,000, sell a week later for close to \$1 million, buy lots of wine, do an up-and-back pedal to the West Point Inn on Mt. Tam, catch some solar at Strawberry Recreation Center poolside. Oh yeh, and sleep well.

What I didn't know, what had me ready to burst my blubes, the whole-grain breakfast blubes I'd held in such high regards ever since I discovered the morning magic of the Dipsea, was the fact, said Laura Forever the Lawyer in between bites of her wholesome scone, into which she had now sandwiched a banana that she fished from a jacket pocket, was the plain and legal FACT that the TRANSFERRED shares never really existed. Not in my accounts, anyway. The CUSIP numbers were bogus. The electronic missive from Dubai, or wherever the shuttled shares emanated from, shriveled into a great big whooshing DEBIT. According to federal securities laws that dated back to 1938 or something, not only had I, a financial journalist, received shares from a stock promoter without DISCLOSING the gift,

and not only had I then WRITTEN about the stock, and SOLD the summer-bitching stock without DISCLOSING to my trusting audience that I'd SOLD the stock, but hey, as LL put it in between banana bites, "Sweetie, you sold shares you didn't even own. They were hijacked. Now there's a shtup for you."

So. Not only did my profits evaporate into the hot thin air of the Dubai desert, or wherever the CUSIP shenanigans took place, but after the investing public got wind of the securities probe into my shriveling ass, and my Melt-Up newsletter got electronically handcuffed and shut down, and Marca Pola's Canada-traded shares round-tripped back to two-cents, after all that I was in fact SHORT the shares I'd sold. So I didn't make the million summer-bitching bucks at all. Or if I did somehow profit from this subterfuge, the money really didn't exist because -- back to those 1938-or-something acts of Congress -- you're not supposed to sell shares you don't own unless you borrow them first.

That was the latest from my long-legged greatest, securities pragmatist that she was. LL, polishing off her sconed banana, wondered aloud whether I thought that maybe now, after getting the lowdown on my mining mogul's re-uptake, maybe now I could downgrade my opinion of this guy Manny Drinkwater, who by the way had also disappeared, just like his Trojan stock, maybe now, since I was supposed to be fighting to save my own reputation, my own livelihood and whatever I'd have left in the way of assets after the legal ordeal concluded (would it ever?), maybe now I'd see Drinkwater's elliptical charm as self-serving logorrhea -- and downsize my view of that slab of slime rib to something just below butcher-rat entrails? Would I? And once I'd synthesized and synapsed all of that (summer-bitching) information, dear client Robbie who is paying me 500 American beans an hour, even as we break bread here in the shade of Mt. Tam, was I willing to stop the weeping and the shaking, the sweating and the starvation diet ... and get rim-pounding, ass-bashing ANGRY? Name NAMES? Hand over my Palmed Pontius Pilot? Point FINGERS?

In her gotta-get-the-joke-in conclusion, my Gucci-priced LL, whose face did I mention features a nearly perpetual gap-toothed grin, relates, "Robbie, in honor of your return to the Catholic faith, what is going on there sweetheart? So once upon a time, there's this Catholic priest and one of his loyal and affluent congregation, a banker, and his dog has just died at the ripe-old age of 15. He says to the priest, 'Father, my dog just died and I'm kind of down about it. I'd love to see her get a proper burial. Can you

do that?' The priest is somewhat flabbergasted. 'John,' the padre says, 'you're talking about a dog. She had 15 good years. God bless, and go bury her in the backyard.' Well, that doesn't cheer up John. 'Father,' he says, 'Understood. Perhaps the church up the road might be willing to do a kind of Christian burial for her? What is it, Swedenborgian? You know,' he tells his priest, 'that's what I'll do,' and John heads for his car. 'Maybe I can offer them a special donation,' he says. The priest calls out, 'John, John, wait a second! You never said your dog was Catholic!' ” Lawyers with braces who tell jokes, religious jokes, that was part of my nightmare package: expensive lawyers who lisp advice to me, but yeh, I liked LL the fit to fly spinner, liked her a lot.

On our way out of the Dipsea, LL bouncing into her Mini-Cooper and headed to her SF office, but not before she stuffs her firm's monthly invoice in my knapsack, and me onto my bike and banished to Strawberry, I softball a smile at Mr. Mudder, huddled by the fireplace with his warehouse-priced defender, and I give him a shake of the pinky, something I see Pablo do all the time when he crosses trails with some cycling bud (especially those who might have some bud, our jointed hombre with his med-MJ card keeping him legal but not always supplied with herb, whose asking prices for a mere ounce or two were rising as sharply these days as my anointed tickers used to). “Mudder old man,” I direct at the tattooed man's shell-shocked corpse. “Mr. M.D. Let's get on the mountain sometime. ” That was the best I could do. I get a half-hearted “Hey” out of the big guy, and he calls me over to his table and motions for me to lean in for a whisper, outside the venue of his counsel, I suppose. “My goose isn't flying,” he sotto-voces, “but I have a flute.” Mudder, Mr. Morgan D. Organowski the accused, winks at me, or maybe it is some kind of post-traumatic facial palsy, then gives me a shake of the pinky islands style and a weak smile ... and Ellie and I depart the Dip, the café that is.

Chapter Eight

The Freedman

The best fake, LL tells me, is when you don't fully fake ... when you make light contact in the first move, then smash through in the follow-up. My legal counsel snatched this line from her kick-boxing instructor. When doing a forward-leg, double roundhouse kick, for example, instead of faking the first kick to your opponent's stomach, you lightly hit the target, sting. That makes your victim realize the

confrontation is REAL. Then you whip back with the second roundhouse, pivot and strike again, a little higher, in the chest, and a heck of a lot harder. That's the real hit.

I had some contact faking to do. LL wanted to see me puffing up with anger if I were going to take a shot at striking back at the traveling freak show that cost me such a high price for admission. "These characters are friendly, sure Robbie, and so are the politicians and the brokers and even the priests. But they are not your friends," she kept telling me. My shrink-wrap's parable was the same lesson pitch: don't just stand there when you've already seen how a tsunami bilge-pumps the sea. Scram. Run. Head for the hills. Do something. I wasn't exactly there yet on LL's proposal of full-frontal fury, still licking my wounds. But I had the beginnings of a small plan, and it had to do with the lead freak, Señor Drinkwater. The ruse that was going to save my ashes hung on absolutely the only person I ever saw Manny D., my ticking Buddha, bear a grudge against -- an ever-lasting, old-fashioned, shove-matching, can't-let-it-go grudge. Over food, no less. If I could hold my water long enough without having to take a piss in mid-Rio, I just might call myself a survivor.

So here goes. His name was Freedman, a dead-ringer for the actor Chris Cooper but with swag, like Tommy Lee Jones playing a gun-slinging CEO, only this wired thin man was firing geological surveys and the lure of bold new metal discoveries in unheard of places for his ammo ... and he was coming straight at you from the bully pulpit he commanded in the velvet-lined suite of his latest luxury jet. He was, the financiers in London and Hong Kong said all the time, "the biggest paper maker on the planet," capable of raising tens of millions of dollars or euros during a 90-minute lunch spot with bankers, and far far more money for his mining projects when he kicked into his own special gear, "attitude at altitude," he liked to call it, cruising planet-E on the express jet that was for all purposes his first home. Freedman was just Freedman to anyone who knew him, although he had at least two first names I'd seen on faxes and luggage tags here and there: one was Trevor and the other Tim. Freedman would confirm neither. Still, the story on the no-name first-name, told to me by rival Manny Drinkwater, was that The Man was from East German/Russian stock, and when the family emigrated to the Canadian Rockies, Mother Freedman, whose name was Ruth, found it most impossible to pronounce the theta sound in English. Manny, who knew a bit of German himself, said the thuh sound didn't really come across in German, which produced it as a simple, hard dee or tee. Und so it was that Mama F. spent much of the rest of her life in Canada ashamed to be asked her own name, Ruth, which

came out sounding like Root or Rood. Poor thing. Or so Manny's story goes. Makes me wonder whether Dee-dee's blood didn't have the same tongue-twister challenges when they left Germany for sunny Chios, and then onto their butch suburb of Toronto.

My only corroboration of this back-story on the man called Freedman comes from one hotel scene somewhere in Switzerland or Belgium or Luxembourg, I don't exactly recall. It was the master narrator, rudely interrupted by a cell-phone ditty, launching into what I must describe as logos rhythmic rage. The Man is surrounded by fawning money pros, and he is feeling his oats. "He iz not LIS-nink," Freedman le financier says, gesturing in a faux German growl and pointing to some poor sod whose wife was just then ringing him on the mobile to say the kids all have sore throats and could you please come home early, dear? "He iz not LIS-nink," the enraged Freedman is screaming with his entire being. "Duh-row heem OUT!" (Translation: "He is not listening. Throw him out!") And yes, the poor little sheet in the wind, some up-and-coming, handsome Italian kid looking to score a stud commission or two for his employer's boutique European bank, is led gently but firmly out of the conference room (and sadly for the kid, banished from the brunch to follow, a table featuring scalloped oysters and my personal favorite from that part of the world, breaded artichokes) by Freedman's rented-for-the-day doom squad of local goons.

Yeh, but just as it was in the naming game scaffolded by Manny D., well, Freedman's troupe of money managers, analysts, geologists and hangers-on, Freedman's leeches also had a nicked name for their man: Freeon, like the frigid gas, I guess, because the guy was supposedly cold as the ice that formed on the wings of his latest Gulfstream jet. The only time he warmed up around people, it seemed to me, was when he was close to money, or precious metals, or believed he was close to making money or raising money or hitting some smarmy vein of (fill in the blank) copper or gold or platinum, even tin at one dig in Uruguay. Like a lot of this crowd, Freedman was born in Canada -- Calgary or even higher up the Rockies I seem to recall. Where he came from was never important, as The Man pointed out in all of his conversations; it was where you were and are and most importantly, where you were headed, he says and keeps saying, even when he's sitting on a blue-suited investment panel in a cheesy hotel hall, preaching the gospel of gold to an adoring audience of folks who could be your next-door neighbors. The crowd eats it up, every time, especially the line when The Man spreads his arms above his shoulders, points his impossibly long, pencil-liner fingers to the ugly chandelier in the middle of the

room and more or less screams, “All of this planet’s gold since Adam & Eve, all of the gold discovered in the history of Man, can fit into a room half this size! Think about it.” His latest venture -- because like Drinkwater this Freedman was a financier who measured success in his accountants' books, only he owned not just tickered paper but to his credit real land and equipment, earth-movers, massive drill-rigs with diamond tips for slicing into rock and glacier -- was a dig in Morocco of all places, miles from even some forgotten village in the Atlas mountain range. The place was so remote, even the one excellent cook from that village visited camp only twice a week: to make steamed buckets of lamb tagine for the miners, always lamb spiced with prunes and a whiff, just a whiff of saffron ... and to whip up special for boss man, I'm told by the towering Swedish or Latvian, or maybe they were Estonian, twin towers who were on his payroll (matters not where the two angels were born/they were a hail-Mary-Mary centerfold aboard that airborne carnival), to bake for boss man his all-time favorite: sweet pigeon pastilla with pastry flake so thin, dusted with strikingly pungent cinnamon and powdered sugar that was finer than the locals' hashish resins -- a substance, like wonderful cinnamon, that was pretty much everywhere in those renegade mountains yet one I never saw the big-headed miner partake of (although plenty of his employees were toking, that's for sure). Freedman, in keeping with the mystique he worked just a bit too hard on, usually ate alone. If he was eating pigeon pastilla pies up there in the mountains of Morocco, he was doing it alone, in his private tent, set 20 or 30 meters from the stoner grunts who ran the heavy machinery, sunk the blasted drills into the earth and meticulously lined up the mineral samples, specifying the percentages of gold/silver/copper/cobalt in each rock, where and when the sample was found, depth level and so on. This man broke bread with others only when the numbers made sense. The only meal he regularly shared with guests, including the money managers and the government officials, especially when he was globalizing at 40,000 feet, was in the morning, when he'd pass around berry smoothies, soy based smoothies with blackberries, boysenberries and those Brazilian Açaí berries from the Amazon, the ones with the anti-oxidants he said cleansed his upstairs synapses and his downstairs plumbing. Freedman was big on statins, too, he said. It's like insuring your arteries, he says one morning, 8 miles above The Equator, and The Flying Man pops a few of the plumbers' pills in his mouth, then washes 'em down with a smoothie.

Manny D., on the other hand, never ate alone, Butcher-Boy going all out in his roly-poly way for the best that beverage and meat had to offer and putting it all on the table, so to speak, all of it on the white-table cloth for the “sponges,” as he called the freak show of greased big wheels who cycled and

recycled the world's capital. Ah, but Mr. Manuel Drinkwater, Esq., before setting the table, he did his prowling in solitary. The social animal became a lone wolf when he was on the prowl for the perfect haunt. "I hunt alone," is how the diddler put it whenever he was searching for his restaurant meat. "I hunt alone," he says as he waddles nobly out of the hotel lobby, shunning the Dubai concierge or the Geneva maitre'd in search of the perfect evening table in a perfectly foreign land. To his credit, when Manny the lower-case man found his place setting -- in the basement of some Vietnamese café in Paris one time, or at a pulsating emporium of savory and sweet empanadas in downtown Medellín -- he was on the mobile, bobbing for the current apples of his eye among the traveling circus, which included money managers, other financiers, and me, the rising scribe, to join the feast. All of them were male, but this isn't a commentary on his lifestyle. Freedman's entourage, except for the twins, the pair of identical 6-foot Swedish flight attendants aboard his silk-lined Gulfstreams, were all male as well. It's just the way it was when you played with money ... all boys all the time. Freedman had his twin towers, and my Manuel had his Saint-Tropez crowd of blondes. And not once did I ever see the two of them get more intimate with their perfect young specimens than the double-peck (French) or triple-peck (Dutch version) kisses across the impossibly perfect cheeks.

Both Manny Drinkwater and Freon Freedman, I see now, much later, after the two boys had finished their surgical sniping at one another, usually behind the others' back or from the pulpit of an investment seminar stage, where they each dissed whatever monster metals dig the other had going somewhere on the planet's surface, after the two promoters were pooped and the board game was finished, the two of them were pulling and pushing along their entourages in lockstep, just as they might cajole burdened llamas hauling saddlebags of frankincense and gold across the mountainous (pick one) Andes, or the Ajax, the Altai, the Drakensberg, the Marmato, the Sierra Madre, the Taurus, the Rockies, the list of rocky trails leading the mealy sods along much the same quest for the riches of a thick and imperial porphyry, a story line I'd even seen Freedman quote in a French magazine article in some hard-rock natural resources gazette that hailed from Montreal. Mr. Ice-pop, and I quote, when asked what motivated his steely desire to circumnavigate the globe every two weeks or so in search of metals, what possibly could be worth such a grueling schedule, even with Swedish twins aboard his current luxury liner, told his interviewer, "Trop c'est trop, mais ce ne' est jamais assez."

Mais oui, it's never enough, is it? Not all the manna from heaven, or in the case of both these two, not

all the minerals, the ladled promise of metallic millions and maybe billions, scraped from beneath the surface of Planet Earth, was enough to fill up their tanks. May we? May we please have some more, sir? As luck would have it, I found Freon's source for his French quote inside the wrapper of some very fancy French chocolate delight that the airborne twins served après-après aboard Freedman 1 ... or was it Freedman 2? After a while, the private jets all blurred from the inside out, leaving me with vertigo on the ground whenever I thought about how little different I was from any of these scat-cat fat cats. May I have some more, please? Manny used to joke with me, he was Heavy Man For Everyman, dishing out the food and the stock certs. So what did that make me, Middle Man?

The quote, "Trop c'est trop," was from Yvan Audouard, a French journalist who lived to the ripe old age of 90, telling tales about wild horses and bull fighting in the deep south of France, on a mosquito-pocked peninsula called the Camargue, where Freedman (and I, briefly) spent a short day tire-kicking one of these vast salt retrieval plants that sucked water from the Med and let the Provencal sun then dry out mountains and mountains of the crystals. Freedman at the time was looking to add salt to his portfolio of commodities, which included platinum, gold, nickel, silver, copper, tin and coal. He never bought into the Camargue, for one because I think he was peeved coming away with about a hundred nasty mosquito bites on his face, his neck and his back whilst I, thanks perhaps to the starchy taste of my blood and my self-branded choice of bug lotion (lemon juice and vodka, with a dash of witch hazel). The other turn-off for Freedman in his salt quest was one of those globe-trotting coincidences that happen to frequent high-fliers -- always landing in a place that has some extremely special event going on, a holiday, a ritual, a revolution, and being taken unawares. Kind of like, when you really truly need the hotel maid to come and make up your room, or turn down the sheets and leave the dainty little piece of chocolate on the pillow, well forget it; the timing is off. But put yourself in a situation where you need privacy in that room, or peace and quiet, maybe because you're sleeping, or changing clothes, or totally wiped from le soir hier, or you absolutely must get one more Melt-Up out to the horde and you must have 30 minutes of uninterrupted pied-piping transmitting time, well, that's when the lady is in your room, towels heaped on the bathroom floor, sheets torn off the bed. Freedman's side-trip to the Camargue landed us in some village where the Rhone River widens into a looking glass of wetlands, hundreds of square miles of it, a mud-red carpet entrance to the Mediterranean Sea. So it was that the one day Freedman could spare for his salt hunt happened to be the one day of the year in late May when tens of thousands of European gypsies turn out to salute their patron saint, whose name

is Sara or Sarah or Syrah. The rustic saint in question was some kind of world traveler from Egypt who washed ashore there in southern France, the soles of her feet limed with salt from the Camargue marshes. And those gypsies party and party and party in their trailer camps and trailers, on their motorbikes and inside their old beat-up V-dubs and Renaults. At day's end, the gypsies carry a statue of their saint to the sea while all the while these genuinely wonderful crazy people are singing and clicking their castanets and throwing decorative shawls over shoulders and across roads. I mean, it's a riot of pastels and bangles and wailing violins and tons of garlicky fish drenched and mostly deep fried in mediocre olive oil. Not Freedman's first choice for conducting a tour of salt factories. Even The Boss could not get the attention of anyone worth their salt in terms of authority on that reedy delta, where bleached white horses roam wild and most of the men are watching the celebratory bullfights that hypnotize the entire region for a week or so. Freedman, not one to throw in the towel, eventually gave up his search for salt after six hours of playing the star role of wet stick in the Camargue mud, and he flew us the heck out of there.

Freedman, I knew in the comp-lit lobe of my noggin, lifted Audouard's quote probably from the same place I did: a candy wrapper. And of course, in the Freedman style, he made it his own, failing to give the profiling fishwrap writer up there in Quebec a clue about its source. Can one plagiarize a piece of chocolate wrapper? For my money, though, Audouard's quote about enough is never enough, or however it translates, isn't the best one when it comes to Freedman. It was another one the Frenchman pulled out of thin air. "There are people who clink glasses so that others may drink," the journo-philosopher once wrote. Freedman let nearly everyone sip their bubbly, nibble on their crudite, scoop and dip and devour their oysters, whilst he barely joined in. The frigid one preferred to nod his size-8 head, which looked a bit monstrous now that I think about it on top of that scarecrow-stick of a body he'd regimented there in his mid-life 50s, and then he'd tip his glass in your direction, smile wanly ... and watch. And absorb. And I presume calculate.

Mr. Drinkwater, Monsieur Manny, had a wonderful joke about The Boss that did no one and everyone sweet jissom justice. I note here for the record, Manny rarely slung slag at anyone. His tongue was talented but he used it mostly to promote and not demote. On the subject of Freedman, however, he did choose to crack the wise, one of the surgical tools in the sniping portfolio. Once in a while, after a divine gourmander that was becoming all too du riguer in Manny's world, and mine, after the slain

courses, way after the Long & Bailey suckling pig with Umbrian lentils (at a local place on Richardson Bay, in one of the old cottages that housed, ahem, ladies of flight for men of might an almost-century ago, and after the draughts of pinot noirs and syrahs and whatever it is that complements the piglets on their plate, well, Manny was bound to break down once in a while and let his dignity lapse, tell perchance a joke or a tale that said more about his own desires and his own goals than they did about his subject. And in the great land of slinging shit, there really was only one human being on this planet at whom Manny D. took aim, our Manny being almost always the gracious host and jowl turning saint of the brotherhood of financier hangers-on. He hung serious shit on Freedman, almost always after the hypodermic sugar of the final course, our Sauternes, our just desserts, were at table before us. I mean, not that he slung often, no no. Manny let his dignity, as I said, lapse only every great while. It was probably the combination of a very fine meal, some super saturated kickass wines from Lodi or Paso Robles, and the sugar dousing from Chateau 1962 whatever, along with the morning fish-wrapped headlines about yet another South African or Mongolian or Colombian gold or platinum or nickel or copper strike in the Freedman portfolio of metals subsidiaries. On this late evening, just off downtown Tiburon near my Strawberry hideaway, on a row of arks that seconded as fancy restaurants and jewelry vendors for the Bay Area haves, Manny had to reveal the defining sketch of Freedman before a small lot of six or seven of us trotters in search of tomorrow's platinum ticker. The story goes, said Manny, leaning into the table and arching his eyebrows, the story goes, legend it is even among his own crew, said Manny, that the man lands in his slim ass jet in Nice, on his way to some charity event to raise funds to fight malaria in Ghana, and as he gets off the jet, and heads across the Tarmac, a stunning lady approaches him. She says, 'I just would love to give you a blow job, Monsieur. I have been dreaming about it for weeks.' Her verbatim actually was, "I really want to suck your cock, s'il vous plait." Freedman, yes even he, is momentarily taken back, breaking his stride toward the executive airport terminal and the helicopter just beyond that will whisk the man to Monte Carlo for the evening. He recovers quickly, glances at his piece of the rock down below as he flexes those carrot thin legs of his, considers the transaction and replies, "Sure. But after, what are you going to do for me?"

"Watch out for Uncle Manny," I remember Freedman The Man telling me now, as he hosted a garden party for a small group of money managers looking to increase their exposure to Morocco and South Africa metals. The garden was part of a small Barcelona estate, not far from the beach, one The Man had leased for a week, mostly to impress the European money managers who ran portfolios for sheiks

and heiresses, paper packaging tycoons, princes and former princes and even a greased crook or two. Freedman had me in a little garden gazebo on one of those sultry Spanish nights, when the salt from the sea drifted in a few blocks and seasoned the fish that Freedman's chefs were roasting in a deep paella pit. "Watch our, Ro-bear," he says, bestowing a French frill onto my name. "I have my concerns about your big-Manny eater. His paper chases will reverbate throughout the cosmos forever. Beware of poked paper, Uncle Manny, he's nothing but a rake on tour. See you in Moscow."

The miner's Miner, Freedman wasn't so frigid that he didn't enjoy his little digs of lexicon, his plums he called them, and I suppose most of us sink to the level of a pun when we're slinging dirt. Just like that, he waggles his hands, as I'd seen Manny do a baker's dozen times, and our tin man says, "On the one hand you're born and on the other you die. Everything in between?" Yeh again. I already knew the answer to that one. The question was, Who owned that parable of risk first, the Manny or the Freedman? And who was the plagiarist? Und so, he slips out of the gazebo, The Man Freedman, off to play his own version of racquetball raconteur with the financial professionals who are drooling for the shark, the garlicky lobster and the Med sea bass roasting in the pit. There is Freedman, standing behind a garden fountain statue of Trident, watching the boys eat, twirling a little straw in a champagne flute filled with fizzy water. It is Manny, the gustatory one, our lower-case man, who goes out of his way to bookmark this trademark Freedman behavior, whenever the two are in the same room, or at the same mining conference, or on the same jet, or in the same garden, which isn't often but just enough to drive Mr. Drinkwater, our good-natured bastard of a gourmand, a bit nuts. Manny was, after all, generous and communal down to the dead-end of his cul de sac ... generous and sloppy and lip-smacking drool festive with his food, even scooping and snarfing potato croquettes, chunks of oxtail, sashimi even, from his guests' plates, a fingering trait that in turn drove Freedman, the aloof one, bananas. "Thinks he's an octopus," Freedman mutters barely beneath his breath about our sprawling Manny D. as lower-case M.D. enters the gazebo, smiles at his host with incisors that could rip Freedman's face apart, then grouses to me. "Not even a prawn, he won't even spear a puny prawn and nibble shrimp in the company of his guests," Manny cringes. "Not even a demented little prawn. What a wanker."

Chapter Nine

A Melt-Up

Earlier, in the thick of my mania, before the gazebo scene reminiscent of a consigliere whispering into the ear of his client, weeks or days before the blade of prosaic justice pierces the unseeing back of said client, enters the pumping heart and slices it neatly in two, earlier, the Barcelona gazebo with Freedman and Drinkwater just weeks in advance of my Fed-Exed Xmas gift and Moscow's frosted casino stage show, my Paris Hilton wake-up call that did not wake me up, before all that, well ... it wasn't just the biblical references that got me in hot water with the thumpers. I paraphrased the mystics, too. I guess it was my subconscious way of wise-cracking, always wise-cracking, threading my inside jokes and word perversions and even a universal truth or two into my speech, my work, my life. Looking back now, I realize it's cost me, deflecting my friends, my family, my subs, with my perpetual fact act. My Pam got the worst of it, of course. Later, my sweetheart told me she just couldn't take it any more, knowing the closest she ever was going to get to me, the best snuggle she could achieve with her hub of the universe, was this spin, silly, yabbering spokes, punning and riffing and running away from her feelings, her hopes and her desires, even after s-e-x. I mean, at the peak, and the peak for me lasted at least a good year or 15 months, when the profits were piling up and the unscrubbed subs worshiped everything that was ME, at investment conferences, in hotel lobbies, even online(!), doing Strawberry lap dances on my Toshiba in the only place besides the mountain I could go anymore to escape the money macchina, I didn't need a post-Pam cigarette in bed; all I needed was an audience, in this case an audience of one. She got sick of it and I never saw it coming. The worst for her, she told me much later, was when I started bolting out of bed at 2 in the morning to check the Hong Kong market on the ever-glowing laptop. "Honey," she said once at breakfast, "you're like one of those obsessives who has to keep double and triple-checking the doors and windows are all locked. Do you really (she was one of those classic California kids who pronounced it rally) ... are you rally going to change anything? All the way over there? In wherever you keep your precious stones? Rally, dear."

Well, yeah, that's the point, wasn't it? I could change what happened all the way over there. With one melt-up alert, keyboard magic. Hong Kong, Sydney, the Paris exchange, I loved the idea that my money and my ideas were working whilst I slept (or didn't sleep as I see later) snuggled with my Razor Pam, clean shaven in Strawberry, California. To her credit, Pam left me nearly Pam-less. If she hadn't

thrown in the towel on her CWO, her chief wisecracking officer, if she hadn't called it quits, gently mind you, but still, divorce is divorce no matter how it's done, I guess now I'd have to figure her for a moron, which she most certainly was not. The only pams I had left were the Lorazepam. After, that is, after the federales rattled my bones: on my frail psyche meter their FedEx registered greater than a dozen years of rock-bonking trail biking with Pablo on my beloved mountain and headlands of the county. Only my tranquilizing Pams were left. Oh, and outside the kitchen window, the swaying pampas grass that steadily was crowding out most of my view of Richardson Bay.

Oh yeah, the mystics. I remember one of my melt-ups, one of those manic electronic alerts that so rattle my cage, almost give me the hives, I swear, when I reread 'em, one of those newsletters to my scrubs, I started with a riff on God and gold, high and mighty as all shuck. I am pretty sure now that I got the idea/the inspiration from Papa, in a way. Love that Papa, with and without Pam. Now and forever, A Man. The old man had gotten me a t-shirt for my birthday, one with big block, two-dimensional lettering: IN GOLD WE TRUST. That Papa, if he didn't still have the gold bug in him from all those years and working the books at that seminal mining company seeded in the old American West, my name wasn't Me, The Man Who. Anyway, I was wearing it one night on a red-eye to London, on my way to South Africa, of all places, and one of the thumper crowd, seeing my shirt, I guess, just before I was about to hit the snooze button on my hypo-manic brain, passed me one of those little Christian pamphlets with prayers and advice. I didn't figure the spiritualists and the God fanatics to be riding British Airways business class, but there she was, a plump gal in a jogging suit, smiling peacefully and humming something about being careful not to take our Lord God's name in vain, or was it in vein, as in thickly mineralized gold vein? Anyway, what choice did I have, she placed it in my lap -- an all-denominational, no preference intended, self-help pamphlet that was supposed to set you on the straight and narrow. It had a few prayers, one sweet prayer especially, from a Catholic saint, Saint Teresa, the Carmelite nun from Holy Toledo, Spain. Her prayer, the one that starts, "Holy God, Trinity Whom I adore/Help me to Forget Myself Entirely ..," it stuck with me, dozing, in the black of the night, over the Atlantic somewhere on the way to Heathrow, connecting to Jo'Burg for a look at that platinum dig on the Platreef.

Just before touchdown in London, I scribbled my recreated prayer on a little BA cocktail napkin: "Oh my Gold, metal that I adore/Help me to forget myself entirely/That I may be established in You/As

thickly and as richly as if my soles were already in eternity/May nothing upset my Stash nor force me to leave You, my precious One/But may each moment draw me further into the glint of Your mysteries ..."

You get the idea. Maybe it was upper-casing the precious metal that rattled those pilgrims most. They were listening, listening just enough, mebbe, to place a few puritanical calls to securities.gov in their leased downtown tower. Don't know/won't ever know. But they were listening, sure as shine-ola.

Later, Fodder X would say he didn't have a problem with my lyrical turn. "Sister Tee takes plagiarism as a compliment," my piano-playing priest told me after one of his parish hall sessions with a few die-hard parishioners who liked to hear him sing arias after the 5:30 evening mass. "She is reading your words with great interest." So she's Sister Tee to the good father?" Now Terry dearest, let me tell you, if you're still reading, my FX he could sing, and he could trip the keys, and hombre this fodder could he preach and pout, especially and effectively to the Tiburon rich. (His fiscal results were printed each year in the diocese annual report, if you knew how to parse all the names of parishes and committees, causes celebre and dollar totals for donations and such. Fodder X brought in more dough than any other parish pastor in the top half of the entire state, thanks to his concentrated clientele.) But this time, sharing the fruits of my script -- my penance, remember -- with FX, sitting next to him on this big old piano bench of his, just the two of us, I got the distinct impression my good confessor was a time-traveler, and good at it, too. I mean, Sister Tee? She's reading me? All the way from, what, Spain? So how long has it been since Saint Terry passed from her Avilan shores, 400 years? More? Sister Tee my foot, some, but not me just yet, might say. I wondered right then whether Fodder Confessor got his X-rayed visions whilst he was hoofing it on the Tiburon bike path or across the eucalyptus and cypress-lined campus of Golden Gate Baptist Seminary, which was just down the Strawberry peninsula from my flat, wearing as he always did those heavy, impossibly thick and impossibly black shoes with the little pin-hole design at the tips. Or was he hallucinating? Self delusional? Mad as a bewitched ladder? Was he like Manny and Freedman and anyone else who tried to sell me a story about how they were going to change the world, and get rich in the process, with a new drug, a new mine, a new product or service which just needed one thing to get kick-started: a ticker? Was Fodder X merely a salesman carrying beneath his robes, beneath his hooded sweatshirt, a private and proprietary ledger that would become his cashier receipt when he got to the front of the line? Several folks over the years, including

postman Pablo on his Strawberry rounds, have remarked how brisk and determined a walker our Catholic priest was. Was he running from something or walking rapidly toward it? My visions, on the other hand, came mostly at night, tossing and turning, fielding intrusive thoughts of how the government was about to string me up like I was a high-priced piece of duck sausage, just for tubing around with a jolly Canadian stocks promoter whose first-second-and-third natures were to hoard, hoard and hoard, but always over a good meal, or in between ones. The government -- no hard feelings, by the way, you two regs in the dregs of that rented glass tower, where securities.gov can't even afford bottled water for its 12-hour-a-day investigators -- dot-gov was just looking out for the interests of my loyal, freshly scrubbed, follow-this-tune subs.

That exhortation from Fodder X to script my nightmare was later, After FedEx shmackadabum. I suppose it made sense, penance by letters. I mean, even if the sky guys and gals, the rotten fishwrappers, my hobbled subs and just plain old told-yer-so's and Big Book thumpers, even if they bought into my hard rock tale just to throw it on the pyre, burn it, cinder it, torch the story, well, a fire sale is still a sale. Ka-ching-a-ring. I confess. Ka-ching: one fig neutron on the barb. I don't confess. Ka-ching: two fig neutron on the barb. Confess to what, I'm still working on it. Earlier, in the thick of the ticker chase, when my numbered scrip was a tabernacle of profits for readers, and me maxing out 24 by 7 across several continents, courtesy of those scrumptious and velvety Gulfstream cocoons that were financed by sap-shareholders chasing fiscal dreams, earlier, nearing my personal peak and myself chasing dreams of dinero that soon became nightmares, this what follows is my parallel cosmos. This is what a Melt-Up looked like:

Hello submarines! I'm just back from an investment sojourn across Africa, the Middle East and Europe, where professional money managers are betting on a melt-up in the price of precious and base metals. Sitting across the table from top managers of the Abu Dhabi Global Authority, I heard with my own ears how confident the gold-savvy, turbaned sheiks of the Arabian desert are about bullion. "I think gold will go to \$1,000," said

his honorable Mohammed Him Hummus, an executive director in a trillion-dollar investing authority, one of the planet's most far-reaching sovereign wealth funds. A few hours later, oh flock of my stock, I'm in Luxembourg, where a man of wealth in biblical proportions, and seriously misunderstood to boot, a commodities trader turned financier who navigates the globe from inside a silver-streaked, airborne womb, was seeking to raise capital for what could become one of the world's largest copper-gold-platinum mines in South Africa. The Europeans were there to hear the man who called himself Freedman. To some of the crowd, this Freedman was already The Man, having successfully taken smaller mining ventures in Canada and Morocco and Mongolia and multiplied their net worth by factors of 10 and 20, all with surface geological assays and elegant scripts. He was there to tell the silk-suited crowd, these hotshots with their cashmere socks and 200-euro-dollar cravattes, that China's dragon-ian demand for copper, platinum, nickel, you name it, means manna from heaven for commodity investors. This man who called himself Freedman was doing a good job, so good, the financier managed to raise \$30 million of commitments from the group inside this five-star hotel conference room, all for his newest mecca along a dusty road not far from Johannesburg, where Afrikaaner squatters coated the mesa with tin shacks built out of old automobile parts and sun-baked mud. Just

days after his road trip across Europe and the Middle East, the squatters had overrun Freedman's venture, sifting through dirt for a few specks of gold, or platinum, or whatever they could find to reverse their miserable lives. That does not deter Freedman in this global -- some say divine -- quest for a holy trinity of commodities, cash and more cash. In a side room after his Luxembourg lecture, The Man gathers a small group of the suits who already have placed their capital on Freedman's windswept Platreef and expect to see it multiply like the loaves and fishes, all thanks to the miracle of stock markets in Sydney, Hong Kong and Toronto. "You are a shareholder in this world class discovery," he is telling them, haranguing these money pros even, "absolute proof that THERE IS A GOD."

The next day, Freedman and his flock of fundies are at Zurich's Hotel Baur au Lac. Into this invite-only brunch walked a man, let's leave him unnamed, who turned heads even among this group of stinking-rich money handlers. "In Switzerland, privacy is everything," Freedman whispers to me. The man's network of mega-bucks investors snakes its way from Abu Dhabi, to South Africa, to Morocco, to South Africa, and into the living rooms of tea-sipping Asian aristocracies. Freedman is chronicling the melt-up, and he's having a ball. He's a private collector of Mao Zedong memorabilia, including hundreds of thousands of

Mao badges. The mining financier also likes to eat well ... but rarely in the presence of others, I'm told. "If you have a hungry man," he tells me, "don't feed him a fish. Teach him how to fish."

You catch the drift. So the writing was hokey. Fig Newmans are hokey, but they still taste good. A subject like Freedman, quoting Maimonides proverbs to his road show audiences, was too good to be true for a newsletter writer like me. He was the metals melt-up incarnated, and he had a dealer's dozen choices for the pilgrims looking for new digs, be it the promised land in Morocco, in South Africa, in Myanmar, even jumping-jack gas, the natural kind, in Idaho of all places – complete with glossy photos of those big swinging pumps that slurp oil and gas out of the earth, ding-dong, ding-dong, "an annuity even heaven can't match," the preacher whispers to his converts, though I had to laugh the pumps looked like his version of Big Swinging Ricardos, if you know what I winky dink mean. The upper-case Man cast his net large and rarely came away from any of his side-room conferences without hooking the fundies, these wing-tipped representatives of banks and trusts, most of them buffoons placing their checkbooks where their plates were, lipping their licks when the pastilla was served and the placement papers signed. Besides, Freedman believed his own beeswax and that's what made him so maniacally good at being the best "paper maker" on the planet. Who else (and this is a story I heard not just from Manny D., but from others who'd crossed fiscal paths with The Man), who else would, when overhearing some of his support crew were headed to see an extremely popular rocker in Toronto one night, a rocker whose ticker was The Boss, who else would shoot to the back of the plane and say, without a shred of sarcasm, not knowing anyone else but his own jet-streaming self who dared to consider themselves The Boss, "But I'm right here." His Bruce to my Paris Hilton, I guess. Sweet/sweet oblivion.

My readers ate it all up, little knowing, most of the poor zinks, they were the slain course, paella in the boss pit, sieved as it were in the SIVs, those structured investment vehicles the carpetscumbaggers used to filter in the money and shovel out the worthless CUSIP paper. There was no way my yellow submarines could go one-up on the money pros, who were first in and first out of any private placement with their leased pounds, bucks and euros, their shekels, yen and dirham -- rubles even from the billionaire cow pokes in Russia who were lassoing \$10 million and \$100 million deals like doggies on a

frontier range. Because the crowd tugging Freedman's coattails never left anything on the table for the next ones in, not after Freedman got the bankers to hand over top dollar for proof there really was a God in some blasted stinkhole a hundred or a thousand miles from a disinfected toilet, and the next ones in, after the snarling fat-cats and their clients' inherited and electronic wealth, these FIFOs, first in and first out, the next ones in looking for an easy score were ... oh yes, I stutter now to say ... were my retail subs, yellow-bellied all to heck they'd lose their shirts in the trade but still placing the bet, dreaming they could cash in on commodities the Man promised he would extract from desert, high plains, steppelands and swamps. I was the messenger from the Man and they followed me.

Freedman, sly priest he was, nearly always had his way. Except for once, I'm thinking now, not long after he spritzed the Swiss. He almost always had his way, and this time I'm remembering like it was my wedding day, Freedman still pulled his paper sheets over the sheiks out on the petro prairies of the Middle East. It was on that same air show, it was, our Man touting the nickel and platinum dig he had going in South Africa. The F-word was wending his way through the ME at 500 knots an hour, or however fast his jet skipped, 45,000 feet above the just desserts of Bahrain, Kuwait and especially Dubai and Abu Dhabi with its sheiks' administrative fingers at the electronic helm of trillion-dollar sovereign wealth funds and SIVs, where those same ME sheiks, darths they seemed from some sick sci-fi flick, covered their bankrolls, their cell phones and those little black books they all seemed to scribble into at the oddest hours, covered 'em in ample silk robes that make just about anyone look like a humble Bedouin. Freedman could visualize money at any latitude, and from any altitude, and the Arab emirates had plenty of it.

Chapter Ten

Sheiks

Not that our sly priest didn't slip up once in a while, due to the circumference of his head and his contempt, an elegant fury at times, for those who were not listening. We were on our way back to South Africa from Europe, or maybe it was to Ghana. Anyway, the

stopover was Dubai, and as always, those statuesque twin towers, our airborne hostesses, floated in and out of our Gulfstream vuh- *room* (as Manny Drinkwater tongued it, poking fun at Freedman's Swiss-German-whatever-it-was accent that softened *room* into *womb*, or maybe it was *rhume*). The two Amazons, just wow, they were beaming, always beaming, such a pleasure to have aboard when you're consigned to smell the rank odors of a dozen or so masticating men eating their way across the planet, and the gorgeous sisters were serving Uppercase Man's classic breakfast smoothies packed with Brazilian berries of one type or another to our morning-after collection of said fund managers who were taking yet another freebie trip across Freedman's shine zones. The ground stop in UAE land, Abu Dhabi to be specific, which is Doobie's commercial satellite and just 50 or 60 miles up the freeway at 120 MPH, floating in the back seats of those Daimler diesel jobs, like all the other sheiks and shysters on that immaculate carpet ride of a road, even the taxis there were spotless Daimler tanks tracking at three-figure MPH, the ground stop and our half-day touchdown in that humped and nasty desert was for a midday meeting with the representatives of some Arab investment trust worth, some sovereign fund worth oh who knows, \$100 billion, mebbe more, I kid thee not. Who can calculate anymore with the SIVs and the levers and pulleys and all the other quantum market tools these funds carried on their sheets, their ballast sheets, these days? This was Aboo-oooh, a banking center where all the ME's petro-cash checked in to lubricate, diversify away from oil -- into stuff like real estate, hotels, airlines, Tokyo and Paris amusement parks, exotic paper instruments that sunk their teeth into complex fiscal hedges ... and yeh, metals.

So, we cut to the regal and pillowed chaise that these sheiks all had in their offices and conference rooms, furnished thusly I suppose as a cushion for their enormous rear ends, which even a blind man could sense beneath those flowing silk robes. We're sitting at some monumental glass table in some Abu Dhabi scraper, and Freedman is doing his thing that he does so well, preaching, haranguing, enticing, making these Arabs from Aboo feel like if they don't hit the INVEST NOW BUTTON in the next 15 minutes, they'll have to pay twice as much for the privilege of owning a piece of the rocks the miner was staking in various corners of the world. In Freedman's world, I call this non-

buyer's remorse: his over-arching ability to make ordinarily sage gatekeepers of vast sand dunes of cash suffer remorse, to make these marks believe they would be punished in this life, and in the next, if they passed on the figs and dates the promoting miner was passing around the table. An artist, really.

Freedman, he of burning bush proof there is a God, is powering his point via wireless laptops sitting in front of each of these robed money managers. It's noon, and the sun outside is blazing. So is Freedman inside. Freeon is prospecting, displaying geological surveys and blown-up images showing cylinders of mineralized samples his diamond-head drill bits were resurrecting to the surface of the earth in Ghana, South Africa, Morocco, China, Australia. It's all there: the percentages of copper and gold and nickel and cobalt these hunks of brittle rock contained, the landscape of volcanoclastic terrain, pictures of the vertical drill-holes and various mines' surface outcrops ... even snapshots of gap-toothed miners scraping rock, lugging bizarre contraptions that looked like snow shovels inlaid with shiny ball bearings and tipped, each prong, with barbed wire, but all twisted and thrusting, like a middle finger thrown in your face when you were taking the bus to high school and you had just missed the pick-up, the dunces in back, and these are your locker room pals mind you. they are leering out the window at you as the pipes push diesel into your face, shouting: FASTER YOU FUCKING LOSER! You, of course, beg to differ; the goons shall spend all day at school and you shall skip on home, watch TV, sneak some of Dad's smokes, spit for 79 cents and get one of those root beer slurpsters at the corner convenience shack, maybe even take a nap, a long one.

Und then, it happens. Freedman starts twitching, jerking his neck, raising his voice even louder than his usual over-decibeled levels. One of the sheiks, it seems, has turned away from The Presentation. The large fellow is muttering something, no doubt using the mobile plugged into his ear to place an order of curried camel burgers for this Aboo harem 40 or 50 stories above the desert. Freeon freezes, stops breathing even, then lets out a sigh, and his tin man torso shudders. He inhales deeply, points to the robed one and screams, *He iz not liz-nink! Duh-row heem out!*

Silence. You could have heard a prune pit falling, before it landed on the carpet. The promoter's signature command, one of brief fury, but off the scale fury. HE IS NOT LISTENING. THROW THE BLANKET OUT. Then, the twitching subsides, our presenter's shoulders relax, crimson red face returns to its eternally splendid golden brown tan. One of Freedman's young male assistants -- he's traveling without leased goons today -- rises from the table and walks over to the offending one, the offending sheik who appears to be oblivious to the hubble-bubble and is still whispering into his chest and fingering, I guess, the volume pad on the cell phone he has beneath his robe. Our man's flunky, some MBA intern hoping to learn the rope tricks of Freedman's brand of high finance, he taps the robed one on the shoulder and asks the poor sod to leave the room. There's a kind of commotion, I don't know what to call it, grumbling and gulping in Arabic, several of the other sheiks shifting their rumps in their seats and so on, and the non-listener leaves the conference room, briskly, still fingering his mobile under the robe. Even Manny Drinkwater our butch boy, our own charismatic Rumpus, shifts in his seat. He realizes his arching enema, Mr. Freedman, has crossed the line of decorum with this ejection. Freedman, natch, barely skips a beat in his silk-suited hard-rock case for cash. The high priest of finance continues his pitch, and after some back-room dealing between the chic-less sheiks and Freedman's accountant, the meeting is over. The Aboo-Doobies are in.

Hurtling back toward the airport in a convoy of German sedans, Freedman gets a ring on his mobile. The trustees are inviting us all to dinner back in Dubai. To celebrate their fresh stake in the new enterprise, the Abu Dhabi investors have booked a room at some fabulous Lebanese restaurant. Freedman, he who eats alone, winces. He'd like to hump it back to his G5, using the night to reach to his next stop, a fledgling project in some shanty town deep in the Ghana countryside. But he accepts, having no choice as dealmaker but to toast the deal, praise Allah, B'shmillah and so on.

The restaurant that evening, just along Dubai's man-made marina, is packed with people, many of them in robes and some, like us, in western garb, polo shirts, some of Freedman's hangers-on even wearing golf pants or khaki shorts. Dubai easily could have

been Hawaii for them, or the Caymans. They were making money, it was warm outside and they were about to eat yet another fine meal on the house: Arabic flat breads, some of them as crimson red from the durum wheat they love over there in the ME; a *mezze* of assorted appetizers, like onion pancakes, an artillery of olives, handsomely stuffed grape leaves, eggplant dips and so on; lamb and more lamb and massive fish the size of an emperor, pulled from the Red Sea; and about a ton of pine nuts and apricots, pumpkin seeds and mint leaves and gorgeously sculpted tomatoes. And everything tinged with the sweetest lemons I'd ever tasted. Meringue for the soul.

Besides his support crew of an accountant, a Dutch geologist who studied at the Colorado School of Mines and sported precisely manicured fingertips, two or three interns just out of biz school, a world-weary pilot who usually tagged along to dinner, those lovely twin towers (who usually did not tag along to dinner and don't ask me why), and one or two flunks I never did suss out what they actually did in this circumnavigating carnival, Freedman on this particular air-to-road show had aboard a tiny Chinese man from Hong Kong who ran money for some Kowloon hotel tycoon, an Australian lad from Perth who managed a natural resources fund and said he had never taken a geology course in his life, a couple of portly Brits, one with a thumbnail as long as a surfboard he said he used to pling classical guitar but which he also used for picking his teeth and the other an older Manchester man (almost but not quite a senior sid with breath that smelled like oats mixed with goat cheese), and a gaggle of genuinely upbeat Canadians blessed with perpetual grins, including Manny D., who was riding Freedman's coattails, attempting to hook fresh investors into a couple digs the raconteur Rump had going in South America, first and foremost on the paper marquee, Dee-Dee's Marca Pola in the Colombian Marmato range.

Once again, to cut to the chaise, whose velvet plush is what we again all were sitting on, for the second time in a day, placed as we were on both sides of a long, splendid wooden table, buffed and polished and rubbed down with aromatic oils, so you could almost see yourself in the veneer as you wolfed down this super supper: We dined cheek to cheek on the restaurant's outdoor balcony, except for Freedman, who in keeping with his

custard nibbled on some pumpkin seeds and toasted his robed hosts with lusciously thick red wines from the Stollenbosch in South Africa. We sucked on water pipes. We drank mint tea. We lusted after the belly dancers. We drooled when the baklava dessert was placed before us, all nuts and layered pastry crust, almost floating in a lemon-honey syrup that had me shaking, the smell of it. I'd found yet another nectar of the gods, and it didn't even have vodka in it, or Chateau d'Yquem.

Even the shamed sheik, the poor fellow who'd found his cell phone more interesting than Freeon's power pitch that afternoon, even his ample robe seemed to be growing in size at our tables. He has redeemed himself somehow, he's back in the deal, rump at the table, and he is smiling sweetly.

Late that night, on the jet, after the twin towers had pillowed our heads and blanketed our torsos and we'd lifted off, it starts. A Gulfstream V, I should tell you, has but two bathrooms, one dainty mirrored one at the rear and one tiny one up front, that one for the twin attendants and pilot. One of the Brits starts the run, and within 20 or 30 minutes, we as well could have been on a stinking mackerel fishing boat whipped by 30-knot winds in a Newfoundland tempest. The rear WC has become a trench of stink and stew. The craft's Imodium tablets are gobbled up, to no avail. Moi, between the retching and the diarrhea, I truly believed I would die before we reached Ghana, which was a six-hour or eight-hour flight. Even the pilot goes on automatic for a few hours there and locks himself into the front toilet.

The twin towers, who were in perfectly fine health, try to be helpful, serving bubbly water and Pepsodent, but they were in over their 6-foot-tall heads. I think they gave up on all of us when our Manny bolts to the back, crashes through the WC door and plops down, leaving the door ajar. I heard what I thought was a sonic boom, and I swear the plane lost 20 or 30 feet of altitude. The Rump, our yeasty dough ball of chat, lived up to his name, poor Manuel. Manny was still a major producer, even in the loo. Only one passenger, besides our resident flight attendants, sat back in his leather cocoon and watched it all, even got our twin sisters to whip up a smoothie spiced delicately with

fresh dates and figs. Freedman that iceberg was somehow immune. He ate alone, after all.

Later, Pablo Sir Postal on one of our therapy rides across the mountain, he hears this story and tells me what happened was plain as the rutted fire road we were spoking. Our band of moochers was poisoned, Pobbie says, in that matter of facting way the Latinos have when they say, "Claro you pendejo," with love and a dash of Oaxacan chilies. That much, the poison, I already figured. Payback most putrid for Freedman's rude behavior in Aboo. Even sheiks own some face, right? But Pablo knew more than a postman, as was his custard. He asks if I ever saw Mohammed Sheik Shangra-Lee or whatever his name was whip out his mobile or indicate he was talking to someone else through one of those heebie-jeebie headsets. Well, OK, so not actually, no, no brainless cell phone in sight. So? "Roberto, cell phone? Sheet you guys dink he calling for PEEEE-za? He doing heez Islam thing, praying to heez Allah," Pablo says as we gulp our way up toward the East Peak of Mount Tamalpais. "Nombre hombre, he had beads in heez robes for counting prayers. No cell. He turning to face heez mecca. Seem sala beem, 'Berto."

Yeh, well, if we were muzzled by those Muslims, poisoned by our patrons, it was the lemon sauce on the pastries did it. That or the almonds.

Freedman still got his money. He still ate alone. So what if a few of the hangers-on, including Manny, got intestinally gutted for 48 hours. Freedman's Flying Vomitorium. Every single one of those puked-out peckers, except for Manny, every single one of them was sticking with The Man and his Gulfstreaming winning streak. Stomach flu, food poisoning, the price you pay to fly with Uppercase Man. Oh yeh, and the message to my scrubs ... and I had a globe full of 'em who kept paying their \$10 a month for my own brand of poison: Buy Freedman now -- tickers on request via e-mail please -- and get rich off his metals. I could have added: Or the promise of his metals. The sad truth of it was, all of my loyal Melt-Up midgets out there, they were, each and every hard-up, wide-eyed, faithful subscriber of mine, dey ver LIS-nink ... with their grotesque Mickey Mouse ears. I now carried Imodium wherever I flew, and I couldn't have been happier.

Chapter Eleven

The Aristocrat

"There is nothing so powerful," that whiskered French homme (and dead ringer for Sam Clemens) Victor Hugo once wrote, "not all the armies in the world, as an idea whose time has come." Allow me again to digress. They say, even now, that most of the world isn't paying attention to the boom in hard goods, fueled by a manic China that's famished for copper, platinum, nickel, timber and gold, its leaders residing not in an ancient Beijing hall Mulan-style but instead fingering keypad buttons as they directed the flow of China's state-controlled investment trusts, the sovereign wealth funds used not just to turn a profit but to place the kingdom's cash reserves in strategic spots around the globe, be they refineries, airlines, hotels, ports or banks. That investors, the Pablos and Pams of the world anyway, have no stake in what the fundies call natural resources. That the hustlers and promoters and financiers saw the boom in building materials, the melt-up, coming years ago and placed their bets accordingly. All that was left for common folk -- the mailmen and ex-wives and Montana dish scrubbers -- was scrap metal. Oh yeh, and even the scraps, and your basic tin and steel and coal, they were all 3X and 5X their prices of a few short years ago.

They say metals prices especially are so celestial these days, a copper penny is worth more as a sliver of copper than it is as a monetary unit. Not to bore us all to tears, but my job, and yeh, I still considered myself a professional who'd taken an unspoken oath to educate and enrich his audience even when I was supposedly ripping off the scrubs, which I now know in my heart I was not, my job was to show the poor sods out there what they were missing from their dingy little sheds where they hoarded their investments, their portfolios. A classic melt-Up instance of this was when China's government began letting the fanatic speculators from Shanghai and Shenzhen slowly trickle their yuan from China's newbie stock exchanges into the big show over there in Hong Kong. HK is part of China, but not. The port is still freedom sauce, a porcelain vase of ideas and money for the hairy crabs on the mainland who crowded into smoky brokerage halls and scribbled their stock orders onto tear sheets of pink paper. My

job was to somehow let my subs know how to make money from the day when China's bureaucrats cut the ribbon and let the tens of millions balls-out, dragon-slaying small people encased by their great wall into the electronic world of capitalism taking place on that smorgasbord of islands at the mainland's southern tip. And I did. Most of the world didn't care, but I knew that once a hundred million stock orders started coming into Hong Kong from the mainland, the yuan would go to the headline HK-traded stocks: the property companies and Internet wonders, the hot names of the day. All my subs had to do was own a modest basket of those stocks BEFORE the renminbi hit the fan. That's how newsletters work best, by keeping subs ahead of the crowd, but not too far ahead that their money sits around doing nothing for months and months. Just a few days ahead, sometimes a few hours, are plenty.

The newsletter biz has a short history, starting perhaps in the mid-1950s or so in America with old farts in lower Manhattan and their rusty typewriters. They were all thwarted novelists and poets, that crowd, and their market advice was the pits. But they could write up a storm. When I started my Melt-Up report, I swapped ink with one of the grand old fathers of the financial newsletter business. The fellow was in his late 70s, lived in Sausalito, across Richardson Bay from Strawberry and Tiburon and home to some of my county's newest mansions, and more than a few houseboats dotting the harbor that had seen better days. This guy considered himself a time-honored believer in gold, and he'd gotten his message across at the right time when private ownership of gold became legal in the USA during the 1970s, I think it was. We'd met at the Strawberry Recreation Center, in the hot tub, next to the munchkins in fact, all these talking heads bobbing in the tub. The two tiny ones had noticed the newsletter patriarch's Aston Martin in the parking lot, all 550 horsepower of it, and were asking the old man how it felt to drive such a powerful car.

"Well," he said between bubbles, "I guess I feel like Ian Fleming after a few martinis and a pack of cigarettes. Zero to 60 in 3.6"

Over the course of a year or so, this gentleman, I don't know what else to call him, he was always so polite, from a different era, I suppose, impossibly tall and thin, with a sophisticate's eye for excellent language and for some reason, outdoors photography -- safari scenes, Alaskan vistas, wildflowers across the Canadian Rockies, those sorts of things -- this fellow and I would mingle in the tub, sharing

bubbles on what makes a market newsletter good, what makes one very good, what makes one great. Tell you, pools and hot tubs are great places, for me they were, just great places to learn a little more about life, to reflect. My challenge, as I prepared for a lap swim or a small dive off the chipped and ever so slightly warped slice of fiberboard plank the Rec center called a board, was reflecting on more than just my Adonis silhouette floating there on the surface of the pool. Once in a while, I got inspiration that made me, even if it was just for a moment, made me mull more than just the moi of me. For instance, most people probably would agree that you can't help but watch people and wonder why they do what they do at pools. The grown-ups mostly. This is universal stuff. A kid runs across a pool deck and the lifeguard, along with mom or dad or auntie, will shout, HEY NO RUNNING! So okay, maybe that's for the good, so kiddie does not slip and somersault, breaking ankle, arm or neck. It's good non-concussive advice, right? But what do kids want to do most at a pool but run, run for the pool, run for the ice machine, run for the slide. Maybe a better example, also universal, is when the lane lines are strung across a pool so grown-ups and the swim team can do their laps. Well, the six-year-olds in the middle lane, the ones getting the early afternoon group swimming lesson, they are all hanging on the lane line, pushing it three or four inches beneath the surface of the water. The lifeguard, like a clockwork melon but just doing his or her job, having red in his or her Red Cross training book never to let children hang on the hard plastic lane lines because their fingers could get stuck and they could get an owie, yelps, NO HANGING ON THE LANE LINES! Excuse us all, but what do six-year-olds, every kid on the entire planet, want to do when they see a lane line in a pool? Why, hang on it, naturally. What possible harm can come from hanging on lane lines, I ask, except maybe a crinkled finger?

How about pool locker rooms? In summer, our Strawberry pool has a boatload of kiddies getting swim lessons, or hanging out with their moms, who generally are packing an aisle-full of organic produce, mostly cherries and apricots, watermelons and grapes, all in those zipped plastic bags that have become a carpet of litter across America and Europe. The kids, as all kids will, love to take very, very long showers when it's time to go home. I can't even put a number on the minutes the kiddies spend in the shower, girls and boys. I once saw a 5-year-old stand in the shower, his back to the steaming water, for 15 minutes, and after I'd left to wring out my swimsuit, get a drink of water and fold up my towel on the pool deck, I came back to grab my swim bag and the lad was still there, looking like he was in a coma, not even blinking, just standing in the shower as if it were a magic waterfall. After about minute

umph-teen or something of this, of course, mom will come knocking on the locker room door and shout into the room, "Benjamin, it's time to go. How much longer are you going to be?" Benjie-boy almost always replies, "But Mom, I just got in!" That usually gets a raised eyebrow from the one or two older guys in the locker room, which is tiny and only has three showers and one toilette. Five minutes later, Benjie-mom is back, peeking in the door, "Are you ready yet, Benjamin? Because we're going. We have to pick up the burritos and get Dad at the ferry!" Benjie, who now could do a cameo as a prune, a 5-year-old prune, is still in the shower. Most moms at this point go ballistic. I think it has something to do with the time of day, dinner time, and maybe the summer heat, though it rarely goes above 85 in Strawberry. Or maybe it has to do with the fact that because they are moms they cannot enter the sanctuary of the men's shower. Which does not stop some of the moms, the ones who are really pissed off at poor Benjie, as they back their way in from the swinging locker room door, peeking around as they're walking backwards, hoping to grab little Benjamin but not catch sight of some daddy-sized shlong who also might be in the shower or happen to be getting dressed. That scene always cracks me up. I mean, come on, moms the world over risking extreme embarrassment because their little Benjies want to stay in the shower as long as they possibly can? Maybe one day mom will let her boy shower to his heart's content, or his skin's litmus point, and then, and only then, will little Benjie have gotten the endless shower thing out of his system. Am I right?

Anyway, our gentleman in the hot tub there, no munchkin he but still skip-dancing his own yellow-bricked road, he had turned his own letter, he called it *The Letter*, into a narrative of sorts, once a month and only available by regular old mail, not the electronic or facsimiled versions. (You are, I hope, listening, my Strawberry hoofing mailman Pablo, who in a lifetime of stuffing suburban boxes will have walked about 80,000 miles.) One of the things that set apart this patriarch from the hundreds of other stock-market touts, including moi, was his literary bent, a deep-seated desire for turning a phrase, quoting a master, visiting some archival library in some dusty sheet-hole in Antioquia or Ghana or deep Mexico just so he could drop that hummer of a sentence into his "BUY" recommendations, the hummer that made his audience feel as if they were tramping through the exotic ferns in the tropics, smelling the mercury-laced and cyanide-strepped creeks and streams that the campesinos used to amalgamate their precious gram or three of sifted ore. Our gold buff was the kind of writer who could, and did, tell you that throughout history, many commodities were more valuable than gold or silver. Salt in Africa. Honey to spread like butter on the locusts in the Middle East. The thousands of insects pounded

into the cochineal paste that produced that crimson red dye the Zapotec, or was it the Aztec, used for ceremonial garments in Mexico's state of Oaxaca. Thus, The Letter had managed to elevate itself above the mercenary toil of boosting, or promoting, stocks. Its audience, mostly older folks who liked to waltz and had a lifetime of money to put to work, could feel like they were hobbling around the museum, receiving an education from this wise man, viewing The Impressionists or The Cubists hanging on the walls as they walked through their stock portfolios with their wives and their hubs and their grown children and their grand-children. Before their own brand of AD-dled dementia set in.

His letters -- always mailed and never e-mailed -- always started with an obscure quotation. "The slow and the hasty meet at the ferry. -- Arab proverb. That sort of thing. In a year of newsletters he'd quote everyone from Aquinas to Coward to Longfellow to De Montesquieu ("The Spirit of the Laws, VII"). Lyrics too -- Miles Davis Jr., for example. Neil Young ("This note's for you.")

Sitting there in the tub, I wondered at the time if this Sausalito stylist, if our brilliant baron had found the perfect formula for his audience: an elegant and literary bait-and-switch, organized and presented lyrically, with each section header leading with a quote from Tolstoy, or Chaucer, Rabelais, even Rocky & Bullwinkle he pulled out of hat in one issue. I mean, sure, I'd tried in a leering, over-reaching way to allegorize my own Melt-Up narratives, most recently and toxically with lines from The Bible and the mystics. But that was mere manna banana compared to the sublime pamphlets, 15 to 20 pages each, that this newsletter icon was distributing via the Pablos of the world, straight into the mailboxes of wanna-be investors with wealth in size. Our tall and thin patriarch had panned himself a concentrated subscriber base of real wealth, maybe 500 couples, or singles, not unlike in terms of net worth our own aging Papa, these folks who had \$5 million to throw at the hot commodity of the month if they were so enticed. Papa wasn't, by the way. Enticed, I mean. My Papa-in-law was content with his weekly carrot bran muffin, blissfully forgetting at times that his little girl and I had split up for good and for bad but not for ugly, not with the lady I still foolishly adored after all the years of smooth-shaved loving and shoving. Anyway, Papa was having trouble remembering where he kept the keys to the vault, never mind the brokerage account numbers and passwords that were serving him well in retirement. But there were plenty of Papas and Mamas out there, and On the Dime and its erudite editor had nailed these senior sids to the stucco walls of his pretty Belvedere mansion. The aristocrat charged \$300 a month for his wisdom. So maybe his take from subscribers, was \$150k a month. That was a

stackful against my, what, 3,000 scrubbers at \$10 a month. And then, there was the original gold buff's trading on the side. His uranium tickers especially were radioactive, just brilliant. The well sluiced bon homme was minting.

My own route to newsletter influence and success had been more catholic, as in mass audiences, that big audience of electronically massaged morons, sprinkled nicely with the heavy hitters in Dubai and Geneva and Sydney and London and the Cayman Islands who saw the writing on the wall before the paint had even dried, maybe heard me rambling in some airport lobby or plotted my visits to specific properties and companies, and they, these million-dollar and million-euro and God-zillion shekel traders, were first in, first out, FIFO, as they say in the stocks biz, buying faster and cheaper than most of the next-door sods in my audience and selling the next day, sometimes the next hour. Securities.gov calculated this behavior pattern as patently unfair to my paying audience, hinting to LL my wise-cracking counsel that such a repeated exercise on my part amounted to tipping off the big water guns before the squirts managed to invest in my Melt-Up picks. I did not exactly agree, me being pragmatic, hailing from the poor boy school of Baltimore row house knocks: goose gets gander/early bird eats worm. But I see their point. The fast money got fast after years and years of honing its lightning-speed reflexes. The sheiks and tycoons who placed their bets after getting my e-mails hit their trade buttons WITHOUT RESERVATION. The others, the midges in the tub, they hemmed and hawed, called their spouses, went looking for other scraps of information before they'd put a few grand into Robbie Thom's golden dragon of the day. You have to understand, and by now you all probably do, I had thousands and thousands of subs, and most of them paid their \$10 a month. Others got the Melt-Up gratis, forwarded on by a paying sub. No matter, the more the merrier -- they were all buying once they read these Strawberry launched missiles and that was all the big buckaroos, the silk suited financiers, hoped for when they were promoting a gold mine or a uranium dig.

At any rate, our ripened aristocrat one gloriously bright spring day, après the spa soak, decided it was time to take said young roo out to the Buckeye Roadhouse for lunch, just down the freeway there on the outskirts of Sausalito ... and this vintage newsletter vet was very interested in my new product. Later, after a splendid meal of what they call comfort food, stuff like baby-back spare ribs and onion rings, that sort of thing, followed by a bubbling tower of hazelnut chocolate sin that had both of our tongues working overtime, he proposed a toast, his choice of mazel tov being, I kid you not, a frosty

glass of 100 percent, non-skim milk. "Sonny," our mannered man says, "there are only three things a newsletter needs to do, just three. Remember them and you'll always have an audience sucking and slurping its way to your mailbox. Educate. Entertain. Enrich. Three Es. Paste those words to your typewriter."

The aristocrat, though, wasn't here to give a newsletter workshop. The legendary one's proposal, and let's face it, the gentleman was a regular gingerly bred man, no dope of mine or anyone else's, he knew exactly where he was going and how to get there, and he knew how the newsletter biz worked to a TEE -- the tall man's proposal was pretty straightforward: "Robert, do keep me posted on what you're thinking when you send out your reports," he says, all white-lipped from his frosty galleon of milk, and that boat-sized chocolate concoction the waiter had just set before him.

I sidetrack here with this episode to illustrate how collaborative the financial newsletter biz is. Once you get the mother-loding bug and see how powerful your words become, whether your script is transmitted electronically or by your government's toiling Pablo postals, you want more than just a few hundred-K or a few million of subscriber revenue ... you want it all ... you want to own the names that you put up in lights before anyone else does. And one way of doing that is by collaborating, or sharing information with your fellow newsletter writers. In essence, 10 writers heralding the promise of some gold mine down under is a lot better than one writer staking his or her claim to the chosen ticker. This is how many an editor in his day, and they were, except for a set of sisters down in Guatemala and some Aussie chick living in Perth, they were all men, this is how an ink-soaked ED in his day got steaming minting rich, 10x and 20x returns on eensy-weensy stocks that grew their johnsons in serious size in a mere day, sometimes in a trader's minute, as The Hoard piled into The Featured Stock of The Day. Sir Gold Buff, when he said that, didn't have to wink to get his meaning across. You help me and a few weeks or months from now, after we've multiplied the loaves and fishes, I'll return the favor. But he did wink. Then he called for the bill, paid it with a stack of ATM twenties, and we parted, he in a vintage Aston Martin that even the valet nodded approvingly at, and me, where else but onto my mountain bike, for an early afternoon rendezvous with my special postman. I never saw the old man again, not even in the Strawberry hot tub. Our aristocrat didn't really need me, but I think somewhere inside his old bones he felt he needed to check out the Internet competition.

Sir Buff was an untouchable, living up there in the clouds. He'd tapped his own kimberlitic pipe in the shape of well endowed senior subs throwing their portfolio cash at his elegant stock picks. About three weeks before the feds Fed-Exed me almost out of existence, the elder statesman expired. So the story goes. He was in Brazil at the time -- that's all I know. A helicopter was involved, I was told. A boat. Diamonds too, I'm told. One of his sons, his name was Maxwell, sent me a nice note via Pablo the mailman. Said there was no truth to rumors the old gent, Daddy, had committed suicide by hurling himself into one of those diamondiferous pipes, falling and falling and falling forever, a 180-flop of Lucy in the Sky. One piece of fishwrap from down Latin way headlined, "Noose-Letter Claims Gold Mug For Victim." Try that in Portuguese. Supposedly they never found the old man's body. "Daddy enjoyed the lunch, and for that you have my warm regards," Maxwell Garden, the old man's son, wrote me. The obit in the newspaper called our aristocrat the gold standard for financial newsletters. The munchkins in the hot tub, those cuties, wondered whether the Aston Martin was still parked at the airport, waiting for the Aristocrat's return.

So time on this planet had closed trading for the day for the classic fellow. V. Hugo the French mench - - I actually wrote his "idea-whose-time-had-come" line into one Melt-Up as an intro to a ticker alert, inspired by the newsletter granddaddy of 'em all -- Hugo my sturdy French wrench had given me inspiration for my own idea: how I was going to wrap up the mess I was in, and maybe find the peace to discover once again the simple pleasures of eight hours' interrupted sleep, a blackberry smoothie and a soak in the hot tub after one of Pablo's bone-bonking trail rides. OK, so my plan wasn't as powerful as all the armies in the world, but who needed guns when I had LL, shrink-wrap, Pablo, Papa, Fodder X, a dwindling network of still-loyal subs ... and my ex-Pam, who'd lately had to find work as a driver, delivering packages for UPS so she could punch her meal ticket with the grocery checkers at Le Safeway, so I ask you: Who needed artillery when I had this crew on my side?

Chapter Twelve

A Final Melt-Up

Well, OK, I did. Needed some help, I mean. My idea's time had come, it's here, but sure, I still

welcomed a cameo appearance from any old smackdown-powerful army willing to pitch a hand my way ... especially when I knew the tsunami was coming, again, and I was just now crawling out of my Strawberry trench.

At this point, I must say that shrink-wrap, he of the spidery and well lotioned hands, my doc figured out the end of this story before I did. He did trench duty. Shrink-wrap sat across from me and counseled me (after the good part of a year with me sitting shriveled and punctured in that old slouchy armchair) about how my little story wasn't about blackberries, and it wasn't about mountain biking and in a way, it wasn't even about financial fraud. I was, my shrink-wrap explained, beating around the blackberry bushes with my motor-mouth and my motor pen when I should have been, excuse his cliché, looking within myself. "Finishing your story, Robbie, and achieving a new equilibrium, they're one and the same," my SF doc told me, and I knew, even before he told me a little story about one of his clients, I knew he was right on the money.

My shrink-wrap had this fellow, well-to-do, single and middle-aged and in a very intense relationship with a young professional woman who had it all: the looks, the SF condo, the crowd, all the right restaurants, the wardrobe. She was also a literary agent, a high-powered one who represented these inspirational, self-help authors who often made more money on stage than they did in the bookstore. The guy was a writer, but strictly on contract, mostly travel writing, some ghost-work for CEOs, that sort of thing. The relationship fell apart after a very good year of skiing and flying down to Cabo for the weekend and nibbling on mango slices wrapped in prosciutto at cocktail parties in the lobbies of museums and Pacific Heights embassies. The guy is devastated, had no idea the end of the link was coming. She had other places to go, men to see, books to get published. She moved to NYC. He spent the next six or nine months with shrink-wrap, almost in shock, if you can believe it. Shrink-wrap prescribed the usual sedatives and mood stabilizers and serotonin enhancers, but the reversal didn't come until his client started a kind of mini-memoir of this awful period. Shrink-wrap told me his transformation from the grief and the anxiety ripping a big hole in the chap's tummy, like them earth mudder dirt movers that shrapnel/slice/obliterate Strawberry's few remaining blackberry bushes, the way home didn't begin until the writer had reached that point in the story where he needed to pin the donkey so to speak, devise an end to the tale. "One and the same, the story and the new equilibrium," doc put it again to me. "Now he had a plot to piss in, a story to wrap." Funny how shrink-wrap, a gentle

soul when you stripped away the Marina office and the vanilla cream Lubriderm and the pills and the ancient armchair, cozy enough for King Tut, funny how he sounded a scary bit like hard shnozzing Fodder X. Anyway, turns out shrink-wrap's client, he found a literary agent, another SF lady looking for a fresh face in the world of inspirational authors, and she got the book published to better-than-average reviews. Shrink-wrap's success story now has a little web site, plotopissin.com, I swear, and a small speaking service devoted to wealthy middle-aged men (and women) jilted by their partners. He rose from the bramble, dusted himself off and carried on, and here I am still beating around the blackberry bushes, and as much as I cherish blackberries, I'm starting to realize I need to hack my way out of the thicket before I become part and parcel of the whole mess once again, as doc put it, snatching defeat out of the jaws of victory.

My idea, whose time had come, was simple: write the final chapter(s) of this story, settle up with the federales and get back on the mountain to do what any middle-aged guy or gal in this county should be doing with their free time: ride the trails, maybe get me one of those new carbon-fiber frames, if I had any money left after all this was over. Oh, and let's not forget, not that I could forget, I had to try to get hold of Manny Drinkwater, maybe pull a rabbit out of a hat and sort out in my own pre-addled brain just why he needed to play magician and do a disappearing act with those Marca Pola stock certificates and his roly-poly corpus. I have to admit, that smarted. Maybe I was a child to think a globetrotter like Manny could be something like a friend. Although I must admit, I missed his (free) meals, and yes, I enjoyed the bragging. I enjoyed Manny's non-stop chattering, the promoting, the fancy hotel rooms, the five-star rooftop swimming pools. There, I said it. So I'm a child. Shmackadabum. My bum.

Oh, one more thing I must not forget, my little promise to make it up to my audience with one last ticker idea, or a theme anyway that could add a few pennies to their portfolios. A real gold mine. My plan was hot tub simple, and I believed it had merit, at least until the facts went their own way, as they tend to do.

See, I'd have to lure Manny D., who had vanished after news of my predicament broke, I'd have to lure Uncle Manny into a setting where I could, I dunno, confront him, I guess, the lug. He swindled me, LL my gap-toothed lawyer kept telling me, and I needed to get, to feel, to be angry if I were to get to the bottom of the disappearing stock certificates that the federales had zeroed in on. I owed it to myself --

to my audience even -- to find out why Manny D. Promoter, my table mate, had Manny-handled me, wrapped me around his finger, gotten me to hype his Marca Pola mine in my newsletter, given me certs that made me wealthy, then turned around and somehow back-doored my stock out of existence, out of my reach ... and, my LL counseled me, I had to realize he was selling the cache of stock all the way up the price ladder, as my Melt-Ups glamorized his Colombian claptrap. For his own account, not mine. "Geez, Robbie," LL said after a half-day strategy session at the skyscraper in SF. We were in the parking garage beneath the building, she on her way to work out at some new spinner gym in the East Bay and me headed back across the GGB, to my vodka martini of Lorazepam jangled with a handful of blackberries off the front-yard bushes, and then quick, before I got the urge to do something, such as hop on the m-bike or check the mailbox that stood ghoulish guard before my coven Strawberry cottage, tinny, rancid and lock-free for Pablo to stuff each morning, tranquillo and fully tranq-en-steined, I was free to dive between the sheets of my salty little bed and die for a few hours.

"So when Robbie?" she said, blipping open the door to her catchy little Audi convertible. "You know, you getting angry makes my job easier."

"How's that, counselor?" I mumbled, already tasting the sweet little pill of my blackberry cocktail.

"Makes me want to believe in you," she said.

Back in the land of shrink-wrap, doc already had convinced me that my subs had gotten a good ride on the Melt-Up express, that I was being too hard on myself, taking the blame for any stocks that might not have worked out, along with assuming guilt for the assassinations of JFK, RFK and a Gandhi or two. The legal and moral issues here were more or less in the same tsunami ballpark: what happened to the Marca Pola certificates that did their electronic disappearing act? Did the Colombian mine deserve the ticker praise I bestowed upon it in my newsletter? Did I need to go down there myself and try to find Mr. M. D., confront him like the rebels down there assault anyone who tramples on their million-dollar patches of coca leaves? Could I forgive myself for my own disappearing act, me, the magician who snatched defeat from the jaws of victory whilst shoving aside anyone and everyone who cared about him, with the possible exception of Pablo the postman, and me even passing on Pablo's recent invitations to let loose and ride the mountain?

So I had the psychotherapist and the legal counsel in my corner, and why shouldn't they be with the fees I was paying? As for my priest, well, Fodder X kept himself at arm's length with this sinner, or that's how it seemed to me. Maybe it was just that he was the pastor of a large parish, and he'd been around the block a few times. Sure, he held my hand on the bike path, so to speak. Sure, I was still attending mass when I could, although not on Mondays and Wednesdays and Fridays anymore, just the occasional Sunday when I could rouse myself for the 10 a.m. children's mass. (For some reason, seeing all the families there made me feel human, if only briefly when we were chanting along with the good father.) But I got the feeling Fodder X had his mind on other things, like how to repair the church hall's acoustics so that his hosanna-arias got the star power they deserved. I'd seen him cringe more than several times on the altar as his rich baritone withered into a measly little tinkle of squeaks up there in the balcony. Didn't seem fair for the head priest of one of the richest Catholic parishes in the state, now did it?

In the legal arena, LL's approach was straight-up, no penance required: show the federales I'd fallen victim to a fast-moving mining tycoon who performed origami tricks with embossed stock certificates. Her technique, probably honed during thousands of hours of kick-boxing and heart-bursting spin cycling, was to identify another culprit, preferably not her client, who would take the blame, even if he never again intended to step foot in the USA. For her part, LL was just doing her job, and counseling me as she should have, ruthlessly, but peppered with her side jokes about priests and dogs and sinners and missing bodies.

Her approach was quite a landscape removed from that of shrink-wrap, who wasn't interested in plot or even character development, outside of my own, that is. He of the tsunami-coming-you-better-run school of psychotherapy instead kept telling me the conclusion of this story, this sad chapter of my life, was actually a joyous occasion. I would discover who I was, where I was going and what a scoundrel I had been: not to my audience, who shrink-wrap said almost certainly made oodles of money reading the Melt-Ups, but to myself. I no longer could go on grasping defeat out of the jaws of victory, following in the footsteps of my failed and jailed and now long gone father. I had to stop being a scoundrel to myself. You know, it was reliable advice, dosed as it was with pharmacology, mainly the 30-count container of 30-milligram generic Paxil I got each month from Le Safeway pharmacy and

which I was taking to ward off further depression and stop myself from hurtling headlong, mountain bike and all, from the Richardson Bay overpass into the rocky bay below. The local bicycle brigade, the activist cyclers who stuck their middle fingers out in front of any vehicle that crossed their white-lined bike lanes, actually made this scenario easier for me. The coalition of county bikers, of whom Mudder, accused kiddie-gang leader and pilferer of pay phones, was a member, petitioned and won the right to ride bicycles over the busy bay overpass, which cut about 20 minutes off the northbound or southbound bike path and where just a sliver of a lane separated two-wheelers from, on one side, the steep drop into the bay below, and on the other, 65-mph traffic on the 101, along with shards of glass, smoking slices of shredded Michelin tires and the occasional lost Fed-Ex package and debris. I'd never taken the overpass with my two-wheeler. Mudder, though, I had seen take that hairy shortcut a year or so ago after one of our trail rides across the headlands; he was in a rush to get somewhere north. His goose had flown, I guess. The Mudder was such a large fellow, the trucks and SUVs seemed like they were close to flicking his fleshy shoulders as he was pedaling up the ramp. Poor giant. I still couldn't picture the big man rounding up a bunch of school kids to pump quarters out of pay phones, that's for sure. But hey, I was so lost in my own story, drenched in it, I didn't even know that Paris Hilton was a person and not a hotel chain, so what did I really know?

Maybe just this. Now that I was waking up to the tsunami before me, I was feeling a bit more in control of my destiny. Not angry. I mean, do ostriches get angry? Stuck in the sand, sure, I still was terrified of life in general and Fed-Ex trucks in particular, newspaper headlines too. Even the sports headlines, GIANTS SLAMMED, A's ACE ANGELS, triggered Fed-Ex flashbacks and a wicked response, like a drill-bit boring its way into the center of my forehead. But there was hope. I was what you might call formulating. I was actually formulating. If I could scheme, even if it was at times a plan to cut short my wretched life, though not a suicide scheme now thanks to shrink-wrap's cracked and creased armchair and months and months of tsunami coaching, if I could plot a series of actions, well, there was hope for me yet. I had actually written my goodbye to the Melt-Up subs who made up my audience, in that clappy style of mine. "Flash! Forgive me my tickers!" That sort of tone. The idea to bid an electronic farewell came to me in the Strawberry Rec Center's hot tub. The midgets weren't there this time, but I didn't need them to realize all of us are created equal, regardless of size of body or portfolio. I was all alone in the tub and it was one of those rare and rainy late spring days in the county. The bubbles, for once, were pelting against my thighs and bum and helping me to reflect calmly upon my immediate

worries: where was I going to get the money to pay my legal fees? How much of my life and my thinning bank account would I wind up owing the federales when they were finished with their inquiry? Would I ever confront Manny D.? Would the garroting gourmand even read my Melt-Up farewell, or was he lording it up somewhere with a new gang of wanna-be tycoons and pretty girls sporting bizarre habits, sitting at the head of the table nibbling on tapas somewhere in Peru or Argentina or Uruguay? And what was it again I did, what was so Fed-Exable, so horrid, that I deserved the stabbing stares of even those ragtag Safeway clerks? Chlorinating there in the warm bubbles, I also was feeling human, longing for the routines -- muffins with Papa, for instance, or swapping a vodka lemon smoothie for one of Pablo's post-trail sticks of medical maryjane -- that might show some of the people around me I still cared about them. I had shrunk so far into my shell-shocked Strawberry shell, I hadn't even opened my mailbox in a couple of weeks, mailbox on a rotting stick, let alone hauled my bike out of the shed for a headlands romp with Pablo.

My farewell bulletin, to follow, was transmitted against the advice of LL, who said she shuddered to sketch on her pad of yellow what the federales might think of any statement that hinted at remorse. LL, by the way, delivered this sage counsel to me on her cell phone, and I could hear her gasping through her gapped front teeth as she neared the end of her manic spinning class at the gymnasium where she worked out her Spandexed frame amidst rows and rows of stationary cycles.

Hello submarines! I've been submerged, sorry to say, holed up in my shack here in Strawberry, where I live not far from the Baptist seminary up the hill, and the bike path that snakes around Richardson Bay. Hey, it seems like forever long ago that I was writing about those turbaned sheiks of the Arabian desert investing in gold mines. And making money from it all, too. Well, you probably read I'm the subject of an inquiry by securities regulators. Very few of the headlines have been kind, that's for sure! But I wanted to send you one more Melt-Up, one last transmission, saying I'm sorry if any ticker idea I sent out wasn't a winner for you personally, or for your family or friends. I mean that from the center of my shrinking heart. I hope the loaves and fishes are still multiplying for all of you! My legal counsel doesn't want me to say much else, not until everything in the world of the federales is settled up. Let me say, though, that I miss writing for my audience, which is you. Sometimes I might have seemed a bit aloof ... oh

heck, I was cold and a prig, especially at conferences and in airport lobbies, and I might at times have been a little too enthusiastic about the companies I wrote about, but I know for sure one thing in this whole mess has been clear to me from the beginning: I always believed/I was listening/I did not deserve to be thrown out. Even when I was writing parables about loaves and fishes and blackberry bushes, I always believed. And I put my own money where my ideas were, even if I did hit the sell button faster than a two-wheeler on a 30 percent grade. So I might not have followed the exact letters of securities law when it came to ... well, scratch that ... I may not have been, might not have been entirely thankful for the support you my subs gave me over the years. Well, there is precedent out there you know: did Brando thank his audience ever? Errol Flynn? Mark Twain? (Er, well, yes on that last nombre -- Clemens was a graceful man.) I just want to say thanks and good-bye. I'm finished with ticker ideas ... just about ... although I have to admit the whole wireless Internet thing, especially from the equipment side of the business, you know, stuff like antennas and relay boxes and WiMAX networks that can provide blanket coverage for cities, regions and even countries like Ghana that don't want to lay cable beneath swaths of swamp and jungle and slums, intrigues me. There's a company in Florida that OEMs this technology to a big Canadian telecom ... darn it ... I digress. Apologies. Listen, one more thing: if you ever come across a small round guy with a huge head and a kick-bum wardrobe, the cashmere socks are a dead giveaway, and he's telling you about his latest mining property in South America, down there in Colombia, huffing and puffing up El Marmato, tip-toeing around the mule poop, and he loves thin-crust pizzas and very fine aged dessert wines, and he just may be accompanied by a quarter-ton ottoman named Ozar who is carrying a satchel of papers in a leather pouch, well, get his email address for me, would you? Or at least a Medellín hotel room number?

That I figured for my final Melt-Up.

Chapter Thirteen

Queen For A Day

The truth of the matter was I really didn't have much of a plan at all, did I? Just writing that little note to my subs took the wind out of my sails. I was still feeling like a victim of chronic fatigue syndrome. Even a soak in the hot tub exhausted me these days, and on the schedule was an inevitable date with the Fed-Exers. My counsel LL, doing her duty in between spinning sessions at the gym, had lined up an informational session with the federales in their leased glass tower in downtown SF. After two hours of questioning, I was drenched with sweat, although I must point out it was the hottest day of the spring thus far, in the high-80s, which is baking when it comes to the city there on the Golden Gate. One hour more of inquiry and it was over. The regulators had one big issue for me to wrap my head around: how could I promote a stock, then trade it, when I never even owned it, or appeared not to own the shares ... even though I know I saw them transmitted into one of my brokerage accounts or other. The whole Gold Marca thing was what got their goat, and I'll tell you, it was a mystery to me where those shares went, along with the Manny who bequeathed them to me. The weird thing was, Gold Marca shares were trading even higher now than where I supposedly sold them, and any of my subs who bought them way down there at a few pennies were sitting on some serious money. Seems Esquire Drinkwater's drill holes were bringing back not just gold dust, but thick traces of copper, and get this, a bit of uranium, too, and some of the mining journals were writing about the assay results from the dig.

Maybe the regulators just wanted a line into some of these mining tycoons and financiers. Or maybe the federales wanted to learn more about how promoters of all things paper work with newsletter writers to enhance the price of tickers, and thus stock certificates, and thus companies, and thus portfolios and bank accounts. What did I know about motives, anyway? I was still figuring out my own. Besides, I had neither the mental nor physical energy to mount my mountain bike. I was absenting myself more frequently from muffin and cocktail time with Papa. I had stopped calling Pam for small talk. I saw Pablo making his tracks not on the mountain, or across the fog-swept headlands beneath the big bridge, but on his Strawberry and Tiburon mail routes. I was still drained of desire; how could I possibly find the oomph to examine the reasons why I of all newsletter writers in the world was Fed-Exable.

The inquiry I was heading into that sweaty spring day was called, according to my LL, Queen For a

Day. That's where the federales roll out the red carpet, you come in and answer questions, but it's not a legal deposition. No stenographer. The subject, me, volunteers his time in an effort to clear his name, perhaps by providing background information, setting the scene, modulating the tone of the affair. The government agents can take notes and use whatever you tell them in advancing their inquiry ... and maybe even use it against you if you happen to change your story down the road. The subject, that would be me, sits on his throne and spills his guts; that's the idea, anyway. In my case, the two gentlemen, young bucks they were but quite polite, even if they couldn't even offer me a bottle of water -- crimped budget all around these days, they said sort of in a huff -- the two regulators asked a ton of questions about various securities mentioned from time to time in my reports. And they had some pointed questions about Drinkwater and one or two about Freedman and some others whose names I could hardly recall, but to tell you the truth, there was nothing the hard-rockers, as the miners liked to think of themselves, had done wrong as far as anyone could see, not legally in the USA, anyway. Dubai or Colombia or somewhere else, I don't know. Not my jurisdiction. Or the federales'. As for me, I was just the guy left holding the electronic bag with no stock in it and crying my eyes out, crocodile tears my Dad used to call them, fat droplets that I swear splotted the ink on LL's yellow legal pad. I was scared, terrified these two well groomed suits were the gatekeepers pointing me toward Lompoc or whatever the federal prison was for the state of California. At the very least, I was sure I was on my way to losing that little patch of mortgaged turf in Strawberry, and that upset me the most. I was starting to realize, sitting there with the salt from my tears seasoning my lips, I realized I was in danger of losing the bubble I'd worked so hard to sculpt since leaving Baltimore all those years ago. The condo, the view of the bay, the lemon tree and the blackberries and the prettiest county with the finest mountain and dirt trails I'd ever had the pleasure of pumping on, they meant a lot to me. Yet with all the remorse and the 200 percent fear factor filling my gut, and still, even now, sitting here in front of the Fed-Exers, I had no idea what it was I had done wrong except believe every single word that came from the mile-a-minute mouth of a former butcher named Manny Drinkwater. I sure didn't feel like royalty sitting in that tight little room, and I think the two fellows there took pity on me. One of them left the room and came back with a wad of paper towels. No tissue boxes around, the federales' budget squeeze again, but the wipes were good enough to swab the streaks on my face.

I was QFD. Royalty at last.

When I was riding regularly, in between research trips to Africa and points beyond, there was, and still is, a burrito place Pablo and I stopped by after our Tamalpais romps on the fire roads, called Grilly's in Mill Valley, right on that cottage stretch of Miller Avenue after we got down the mountain in one piece, or two. That's what I thought of sitting on the coals in that room getting barbecued: Grilly's. Not the Thai-style burrito wraps Grilly's is famous for, although all the questioning flamed my appetite for the first time in months. Not the fact that the little hole in the wall Grilly's almost got consumed by the expanding Safeway next door before the town fathers put brakes on the supermarket's endless parking lot. No, I thought simply, stupidly, of the name Grilly's. Here's how my Grilly's went down, the tone of the session. I describe the tone and not the substance of the inquisition because if I gave specifics, my Laura the Lawyer would spin straight off her stationary cycle to the moon. The federales, she says, are touchy about these off-the-record discussions, mainly LL tells me because no government agent wants to evaporate the mystique that surrounds the tools of his or her trade. LL also didn't want me contradicting myself in print. "You writers are all the same when you get in trouble," she told me in one of our first meetings, "always manufacturing evidence against yourself." I thought her point, about immunizing myself from blame, was valid, but I also wanted to understand what happened to me, how a simple Fed-Ex could so shatter me, that I needed therapy, meds, tranquilizers, a priest and a lawyer, not to mention a Jamba Juice IV to avoid disappearing entirely from the planet. I guess I wanted to hang onto my long-lost subs as my audience, the folks who one day would redeem me, pat me on the shoulder, tell me to go suck a vodka-drenched lemon and take a soak in the tub. That by blathering chapter after chapter on notepad and paper, avoiding entirely the laptop Queen of Toshiba that got me into this mess in the first place, I would learn something about myself, as shrink-wrap counseled me. Besides, regardless of whom I thought my audience was, this here document, this wad of scrawl, is, if you recall, Fodder X's penance prescription, meant for my soul and for God's eyes, I guess, and no one else. Unless of course someone ranks this script of mine compelling enough to actually want to publish it one day, maybe after I've two-wheeled it off that freeway bridge and am long, long submerged, hopefully forgotten, not even worthy of a fish-wrapping obit. My estate can handle the manuscript in that case, Papa and Pam sharing administrative honors as executors.

But I am zigging the zag again. This confession, in my scrip, is a warped little diary that gives me shingles every sentence I scratch on these old reporter notepads, and I would not be doing it if a) Fodder X had not mentioned it as a fitting penance for a wayward newsletter writer and b) my shrink-

wrap was not expecting me to align the final chapters with meaningful personal discoveries about my personality, my state of mind and my future path, which he as my psycho-therapist prayed was not that (fitting I thought) two-wheeled catapult off the Richardson Bay freeway overpass. On that hot spring morning that made me Queen For A Day, what with all my sobbing and stammering, it was the tone of the royal interrogation in that tight little room with the tinny chairs and the clutch of paper towels that was a lot more interesting than the blow by blow. What, after all, is more interesting to most people when it comes, say, to boutique burritos: a list of the ingredients of a Thai-style wrap from Grilly's or the character of the mouth-feel of its mesquite-grilled tortillas, always nirvana for me because they are pasted on the inside with that spicy peanut sauce and pungent Asian slaw? It comes down to the difference between substance (which I shall, LL will be relieved to know, avoid entirely in this brief description of that three-hour grilling) and tone. Ahh, but describing mouth-feel is an art, like rating wines or judging apple pies at the county fair. That's how it is with tone. The best I can probably do is tell you that when we walked in, the two young agents greeted LL like they'd known her for years, even chatting about old professors and former classmates. LL was wearing her law school class ring from that powerhouse university across the bay there in Berkeley, and both of the federales noticed right away, because they also went to law school at Bolted Hall's dot.gov breeding ground and were wearing their bronzed class rings, probably, like LL, never took those rings off.

Them: Mr. Thomas, Did you know that as a newsletter writer, accepting stock from a promoter is illegal if you don't disclose it to your audience?

Me: I thought ... I only needed to tell them ... I owned it.

Them: Did you also know that under federal securities laws, your newsletter means you have to follow the same rules as a registered investment adviser?

Me: No sir, I mean sirs (between sobs, heaving streaming honking I am such a loser sobs), I ... did ... not.

Them: Did you realize when you were selling shares of Marca Pola, that those shares were never in the account, that they were unregistered shares that automatically expired from your brokerage account?

And that you were selling shares you did not own?

Me: No sirs, I did not, not at the time ... I ... (sotto voce YOU ISCARIOT RUMPUS MANNY D.) ... had ... (BASTARDO LADRONE DRINKWATER) ... no ... (CHOKE ON YOUR SERPENT TONGUE BUTCHY-BOY MANUEL) ... no idea. Sirs.

Them: That ... will be all, Mr. Thomas. Oh, one last thing. If you please. What's that egg roll thing your guy had going on?

Me: Egg roll? My guy?

LL: Uhhh, time we best go, Robert.

That's how it went. Canada Dry as all heck except for the whispered parts jangling in my brain. And of course Manny's deep-fried voicemail. I got an eensy sniggle out of hearing that. Still, I felt a bit like road kill, the victim of my occupational hazard, trying to make too many people, including myself, too much money in the stock market. Betrayed by my roly-poly pill bug whom I finally, after all this time, just now in this queenie depo, felt like squishing until his thin-crust skin cracked and his insides burst and squirted rerurg-gourmando slop all over his white table cloth, the table cloth he happened to be dining at this exact moment whilst I beat myself to a sobbing heaving pulp. Mr. Drinkwater, an insect. A horse's ass. A vulture. I knew I was worked up, mixing metaphors like that. You know, don't you, they say metaphors can't kill, but they can occupy the page, enter the line of sight, wrap around the mind. Like vultures. About two or three years ago, swooping down Railroad Grade above Mill Valley, maybe a mile or two below that old inn they have up there, the one where we all, Papa, Pam and I, used to hike to for pancake breakfasts on second Sundays of the month in the good old married days, well, I'm hurling down the mountain, and in a mad dash or flop or whoosh, I don't know it happened so quickly, a turkey vulture flaps its enormous wingspread in front of my bug-eyed face. Just for an instant, I thought I was dead meat, turtled and left for dead by one vulture to the head. But I didn't get hit. Came pretty close to, and even braked and stopped, looked at my helmet, my lemon-colored bike cap, for feathers. Did it really happen? Can vultures evolve and learn to kill? Did Drinkwater really happen? I was still a messed up boy, but at least I was a boy who was feeling like a victim and not a

perp for once, and LL, who gauged the power of what Papa might call "righteous indignation" and what my legal gal called "fat ugly justice," she could see it in my crazed and vessel-shot eyes.

Scripture flashed my memory, that old Bible Lit Class again. "For though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again," I recalled, and for the first time in a lemon meringue moon, I could call this proverb my own. Just maybe the ticker tapeworm that had eaten my guts inside out, just maybe it had gorged itself. I was feeling, if not as if I were ready to leap back into the saddle, at least as if I could climb back onto the horse and hobble my way, ease myself ever so gingerly, back into or onto the (pick one) hot tub, mountain bike, jet stream. I was feeling righteous, but still, the rest of that old scripture, it concluded my reverie, ". . . but the wicked are brought down by calamity." I knew that was not really true, could not be true, not as long as there were promoters, midget honking fat ones and long lean thin ones, circling the globe, feasting, immune from lightning strikes, sipping Sauternes and spooning blackbezzled smoothies, removed as the elite were from everyday sneering Safeway clerks and FedEx torpedoes. But the part about rising again, I liked that part I did.

After the session, I was parched, and starving, all tickered out, so to speak, so LL took me to lunch, her treat, at that sushi place back across the bay in Sausalito, the one with the little Japanese fountain in the courtyard that looks to me a lot like a slender young ballet dancer sacrificing her arms to the sky in some final, last-ditch prayer for shelter from a coming storm. We got a window table, and I had a California roll, the one stuffed with avocado and paper-thin slices of crab, which I smothered in that hot stuff, wasabi, and for my main course a plate of salmon teriyaki. LL had some hot miso soup, on such a hot day as this even, and a whole pot of steaming green tea. She told me, between slurps, "Nice jobbo, Robbo, I think they see you as a genuine human being. But no way I wanted us to touch that, what in the name of sweet and sour justice was that, that egg roll thing." I shrugged. No sense going there. My wonderful, entirely competent and buffed Elle continued in her streaming verbal review, with the occasional whistle on ess-sounds escaping from between her two frontals, "Hey, were those real tears? That was more like a princess on her wedding day than a queen, don't you think? I thought the only overkill was when you said you 'fessed up to freeloading kiwis at the Safeway. Oh yeh, and that you knew where Hoffa was buried." At that she guffawed through her gapped front teeth and gulped down

the rest of her soup, straight from the bowl. "But tell me the truth, Robbie, really. When the nice one asked what you'd learned from all of this, whether any light bulbs went off in your head when you were with these flamingoes you were seeing at various loci across the planet, especially now that your every action, every stock trade is being scrutinized, well, were you telling him the truth?" My answer was in two parts: "Now which one was the nice one, Elle? She said, "That would be the one on your left." "Elle," I said, "weren't they both on my left? And to be honest, I don't even remember the question." I knew I was royalty in that room for a day, but forget this queenie for a day thing. They call it that because once you walk into that room and drink their tap water, you are royally shtupped in every legal sense of the FedExing flunking system. LL, picking at the gap in her teeth with a pair of chopsticks, said, "You told them your biggest light bulb moment, now that the press is hounding you and the Safeway clerks are sneering at you and your fans are sending you smell bombs, is that you think twice now before peeing in the Strawberry lap pool and hot tub. I think they actually believed you."

I had to hand it to my LL, she was consistent.

By the restaurant window there, I saw a UPS truck, one of the big brown jobs, pull up across the way on Caledonia Street, which is a kind of side avenue for little Sausalito on the bay, a stretch of six or so blocks where the locals do their eating and shopping and strolling whilst the tourists who disembark in droves from the ferry landing on the main drag steer clear and instead do their browsing at the trinket shops and cotton-candy emporiums. Anyway, who should pop out of the delivery truck, in a nifty little brown uniform, thigh-hugging shorts and all, but my Razor Pam. Pablo was right on the money. My former and still adorable Pam was now in the parcel business, one of 400,000 United Parcelites in 200 countries, and not a bad company stock to own if you needed to pack a few irons for retirement down the road. Back a bit, when we separated and later divorced, Pam never asked for a penny of alimony. The way she was tilting her head back and forth on this day, Pam was probably humming a tune on her rounds, just like her. She did that when she was golfing, which she played almost religiously with several girlfriends at the 9-hole course up the freeway in Mill Valley, and she did it when she was unclogging the sink disposal, the humming I mean. Pam was lugging what looked like Amazon boxes of books and CDs into one of those cottages sandwiched between the yoga studio and the nail salon across from my sushi palace. It felt good, picking at my teriyaki and knowing something was progressing smoothly for someone close to me, or once close to me. Pam had a route with a view:

Sausalito on the sculpted hill by the bay. And I heard the company's 401(k) was to die for. For a split second, I thought about getting up and out there to flag her down, my one and only QFD, maybe break the ice by asking for her advice on how to clip an employment application, but the urge passed and I let Pam be. She sure looked happy, and I knew then we were headed down separate paths and divorce was all it was cracked down as, friendly sometimes but final almost always. Besides, UPS wasn't Fed-Ex, and that was okay with me. UPS was okay. QFD did not feel half so bad either, now that I could quit the falsetto.

Chapter Fourteen

Dream walking

Why do you wonder are writers almost always jamming some kind of dream sequence into their stories? I mean, for hundreds and hundreds of years they've been doing it, in every language. Hell, Alighieri in Italian, Goethe in German, Harpo in Marx, Bertolt in Brecht, Kinky in Friedman. I think it's because most writers, poets included, can't figure out a sublime way to weave all of their tire treads so that they make tracks at the end of the story or poem or play. So they stick a dream in, usually somewhere near the end. That more or less mollifies the critics in waiting who harvest the plot with their needlepoint rakes.

I'd love to say I had a dream, one that made sense, wrapped up the loose ends tangling my synapses and catching my tail each time I look back at this little mess I started, a dream maybe that led me to the river that ended in the waterfall where floated the dead and bloated and let m repeat dead body of Manny Drinkwater, maybe holding a scrap of paper with a confession that removed me from the federales' meat hook. But me being a financial writer, I rarely dreamed in images. I mean, somehow, when I could remember my dreams, the ones I could remember, they were laid out like lines on a page, text and subtext. Words and more words. Transmissions, most of them elliptical. And a little music. I

was a failed garage band bass player. The only ones who made in it the music biz from my neighborhood, hey from all of Baltimore when I was growing up, were the drummers, far as I knew. If I had a Picasso inside me somewhere, in the tangle upstairs, it was not going to be in oil or pastel or acrylic or Technicolor. Dolby maybe, sure. I could keep a tune. Not more than a few weeks ago I woke up humming "All God's Chillin Got Rhythm." That was an atypical dawn for me, not crawling back under the covers in my slick of salt and tears. It occurred to me, by the time I reached the 'frig and a smear of cashew butter across my tongue, doc's orders, that the tune was connected to a dream, and sure enough, I remembered, pulled out of the barn so to speak, the very picture of Harpo dancing like the devil and singing "Who Dat Man?" That was a musical dream, although I guess one could argue it was a regular motion picture on my personal dreamplayer, pitchfork and all. But as I said, most of the dreams I could recall vividly, before they evaporated like the tule fog outside the kitchen window, most of them were and are a chapter in a book, the leaf of a magazine article.

So it comes as what, NO SURPRISE, a phrase by the way that is so overused in writing today, especially in big city newspapers; I mean, if it comes that NO SURPRISE that Hillary was doing this on the trail or it comes as NO SURPRISE that more poor sods kill themselves when they are taking anti-depressants than when they are not, why then oh why should I read the story? It's NO FREAKING SURPRISE. Yet there it is, that catchphrase, usually in the third paragraph, placed by the writer to introduce the news, which IS NOT NEWS if it comes as NO SURPRISE. Go figure. I think it must be the writer's way of building a foundation, giving the words he or she is writing some kind of authority, some semblance of accepted fact that the editor who checks the facts and scales the fishwrap, the editor says, 'Why of course, this belongs in the paper 'cause it's part of the package, central to the gestalt.' No surprise there that most of the alphabet in the daily and weekly fishwrap is rotten, stale, decaying, dead.

So it comes as no surprise TO ME, but I hope not to YOU, that my dream sequence, my dream that put me on the comeback trail, boosted my engines, made me feel as if I could fight back for my reputation, my independence, at the least if I could make it in and out of Le Safeway without catching the stings and darts of the smirking shits who helmed the cashiers and bagging lines, the 2 a.m. club dream that convinced me I could make a difference in my own wasted life came to me in the form of a Q&A, a question and answer, with a face or two inset into the paragraphs, my mug being one of them. I know it's a stretch to believe I could remember, verbatim, a question and answer interview with myself, but

this I can prove. See, I wrote it down that morning, squinting and peeking my way through rapid-movement eyelids. I scripted the dream into a cashew butter-smear sheet of computer printing paper I had there on the nightstand, the family heirloom piece of furniture my Pam brought into our flat the week after we married, saying it belonged to her Mom, sat on her Mom's side of the bed for years. These days, X-ed out of Pam, I found myself drifting over to that side of the queen-size bed I once shared with Papa's little girl. Anyway, later that day I mailed the dream notes back to myself, to prove more to myself than anyone else I'd had the dream. Pablo delivered the greasy envelope back next day, stamps canceled, notes intact. Now I open it. Now I see this is what it said, my dream, the Q&A, for real. It could have been lifted from a magazine. Of course, I edit and re-edit the notes for clarity. Who wouldn't? Besides, my LL, she of gap-toothed legal advice, she would have it no other way.

It starts with Sharpo, that's his name, just Sharpo, clown of a guy ... big bush of hair ... and a horn on a stick ... honking ... each time he asks me a question ... honking, wrapping one of his thighs in my sweaty palm, how does he do that anyway? ... and I can see the interview as it unfolds ... in type ... like peering into one of those video readers they used to use for broadcast when I was good enough to be interviewed for TV. The two of us, we're just sitting casual, in those black director chairs, canvas backs, facing each other, no lights or make-up, I can't even see a cam or the mike.

Sharpo: Hey, honkers. The last time we saw Robbie Thom was in the newspaper, right there on the front -- honk! honk! -- page. Rob, so good to have you on the show. I think. So tell us, since I don't think we've ever had an out-an-out fraud, a regular celebrity at that, here in the studio. I mean, we usually do the sleazy sacks of crap on the remote. Most of 'em live in Malibu. A few in Boca Raton. But here you are, in the flesh, the man they say betrayed his audience of hardworking mums and pops.

Me: Here I am, Mr. Sharpo. I only just live across the bay here.

Sharpo: Yes you do, Rob. Says here Strawberry. Sweet?

Me: Yes, it's a little unincorporated area of the county just next to Tiburon.

Him: Tiburon Tiburon hey I know my Mexican? Tiburon as in sharko right? Honk!

Me: Yuppo Sharpo, sharko in Spanish.

Him: Hey kid, let me be the funny one OK? Honk!

Me: Sure. I didn't even figure you talked, what with the horn. So hey man, what's with the leg?

Him: Leg? My leg? You tell me. It's in your hand. Honk!

And so it went.

Chapter Fifteen

All God's Chillin Got Gold

I'd like to say, or have you read in some piece of 25-cent fish-wrap, that all of my groaning and moaning, my legal woes and foes, the whole poop-storm I'd started and was standing in, drenched and smeared with no umbrella to speak of, that all of it ended as a dream would. That I'd gone off to sleep one evening, maybe one two many Meyer lemons laced with vodka and shrink-wrap's prescribed chemistry, and the coroner was there in the morning, or three days later, to pick up the pieces.

Or that some noir as night Hollyfooled ending had Fodder X blessing our venture by the Tiburon bike path ("Pedal, my sons, in peace.") as Mudder the coins thief and I make a mad dash for the border, both of us heavily stoned on hash and lemon vodkas. Mudder, always the giant, heaving me along by the collar as his tattooed bulk rumbles past Tijuana border agents. "Our goose is good down here, Rob. Pablo has some bikes waiting for us. And a safe house." We've smeared our faces with blackberry juice that Papa collected for us in a farewell, so we look like blackface Harpo in that stable scene, singing "All God's Chillin." Now we're safe from the federales forever, and I send postcards to Pam wishing she were here and hoping, but never saying, she should come down and start over with me. Pablo retires from the mailman gig, and we ride into the sunrise each morning, peppery and well supplied with huevos rancheros and fresh avocados for breakfast and sometimes lunch, too. We're a hit with the campesinos, too. I do my Picasso scrawl thing sometimes on a piece of paper to pay for dinner and shots of aguardiente and rum, the old ticker trick it is. Thanks to Internet cafés and satellite dishes, even the Latinos way south, in mountains, at the beach and on endless mesas, have access to the stockie mercado. And denying the wisdom of Elle, trusted counselor, I never do get angry at anyone.

No such luck. It's, I don't know, truer than that, twisted with truth. But ripe as well. Ripe with real, with real, is the best I can put it: a scarred and misshapen papaya, ugly for such a luscious fruit, but perfectly delicious, an exquisite papaya just before it begins to turn soft and squishy and gutted. Shrink-wrap, that image is all yours; take it and Lubriderm to yer heart's content.

OK. So remember that case a few years ago where the tavern owner was running the big Super Bowl sweepstakes on Long Island? Where you pick the little blocks and put down \$100, and if the points for the quarter come in right, you win part of the pool? Well, this guy's Super Bowl pool after years and years of sopped New York football slobs throwing their good money at random squares, it had grown huge. Like hundreds of thousands of dollars. The guy was stashing the money under the bar's floorboards until game day. This fellow was honest as a cucumber. Never pickled or in one either. Recovering alcoholic. Story sound familiar? It should. Didn't even drink with his customers, but everyone still loved him. He ran a good game.

Until one Super Sunday, when the poor sod decided there was just a bit too much cash under the boards, even for a cash business such as his. So he went, where else, to his sixth-grade teacher, a nun at the Catholic school and convent in his parish. Sister Mary Something or Other seemed filled with the bliss of the Lord when the guy showed up on her doorstep. She took the cash and wrapped it in a few of those nunnery habits the sisters of the poor used to wear on their heads all the time, then stashed it "in a place where it will be safe from all wandering eyes," she told him. Yeah yeah yeah. Turns out she turned around and took half of it right off the top, hundreds and hundreds of hundred dollar bills, and Fed-X'd it straight out of Long Island. To Africa somewhere, Botswana if you want the details. Some stench of a crap hole the unfortunate souls there called a village. Sister Mary Two Face had interned there years and years ago. In a way, she was being a real saint. The village got a flash trickle-up infusion of prosperity. Fresh watermelon. New water bottles. Even a decent community toilet. Most of the rest she used to help pay for harelip surgery on one of the orphans who never missed catechism lessons at her rectory.

The bar owner, when he had to pay off the pool, was at his wits' end. The sister had disappeared and Fed-X'd the remaining football booty, a pittance, back to the bar owner, the hundred dollar bills all wrapped in one of her habits. The poor guy committed suicide. They eventually located the nun in

some backyard shack in Northport, also on Long Island. She served a wee bit of time in the county jail. LL, my lawyer, actually represented the luckless tavern owner, his reputation sullied, when all this went down a few years ago, represented him all too briefly when she was working in NYC. Remember? I tell the story, a true one, because it is a little like what happened to me and the missing Marca Pola stock certificates.

So there I am, wallowing as usual in self pity. No different than where we started this story: deflated, a villain I (and the media) painted myself in the eyes of my beloved submarines. Drained. Thin as a bamboo shaft. Subsisting on a handful of blackberries and some cashew butter each morning. Not even returning calls from Pam or Papa. Ignoring Pablo's requests to ride the mountain. Shunning the Strawberry Rec District hot tub. Refusing even to go to the blasted mailbox I once honored with Pam's purple haze nail polish by giving it a case of the measles, splotch here and splotch there and voila, zee artist he is done, or to wander down to El Safeway and play the old game of trying to stare down the counter clerks as they tsk-tsked the kiwis and kumquats I smuggled past my lips.

I am at that point, dear subs who have stuck it out with me this far, where I am ready to hop into the saddle, ride up the ramp of the Richardson Bay Bridge, the one that forms part of the 24-hour Malibu Beach whoosh of traffic, the 101 route that caps our little Strawberry field here on the Tiburon peninsula, and hurl myself into the water, jamming so hard on my front disc pinpoint perfect bike brakes that my bronco has no choice but to toss me over the rail and to my, hopefully, spine-shattering watery and unconscious death below.

Instead, Pablo, playing the part of a pot-bellied and thunder-thighed Jimmy Stewart in his own Colombian or Guatemalan or wherever he's from (I can never remember) swollen version of the kindly lawyer/our hero from "Liberty Valance," rattles my ribs one last time. One last ride across the mountain, Tamalpais welcoming me one final time I figured with its scrub oak and eucalyptus, its madrone, pyracantha and solitary sticks of pampas grass making this part of the county look more like outback than what it really was: the foothills of the richest docs and lawyers and bankers in the state of Cala Forn Aye A.

We had stopped for a long pee -- he not me -- just above the old West Point Inn there, maybe a few

minutes from the very top of the mountain's east peak. Pablo could stand in front of a bush for 60 seconds, sometimes 70 but who's counting, recycling all that Gatorade and whatever else it is he uses to keep himself hydrated and whole on his mountain bike. He says, "Robbie n'ombre, I don't like the way you look I mean even more shit skinny than last time I see you. Hombre n'ombre. I mean how you even make it up here, you float?"

I roll my eyes. My lips are parched. A real scene from a Western I guess. I mean who cares, Pob?

"Rob, leez-end, I going to break my prom-eez for first time een my life. You know we take this oath, el correo. We try don't peak into bedrooms and bathrooms when we delivering the mail. We nice to dogs. Don't pick dee lemons. And never nunca nunca look into people's mail, sab-bay?" he says, zipping up below.

I roll my eyes again. At least I think I do. Left ear she goes in, right ear out and I want to go home, wait for night and make that one last ride to the top of the freeway bridge. Do myself the Durban Deep, bury myself so far under Durbs, or wherever, that when the price of gold hits \$3,000 they'll start digging that deep and extract my mineralized dust from the rock and sand and sludge.

"But you know," says my Pablo, "I have to tell you. All this here, eez not bad." Pablo the mailman, my mailman, is waving a thick forearm, gesturing to the county below us. "OK so eez not Moscow or Mexico City or Rio. But could be. Could be anywhere you want eez so clean and beautiful." Pablo had this Latino way of saying that word, beautiful, you'd know it because every Hispanic waiter in the county said it the same way. "Anyway, 'bout a week now you get a manila envelope, real special like, lot of stamps and wax, wax seal on it. Muy fancy, you know, just like dee old days. Definitely overseas. Lots of stamps, n'ombre. Maybe Canada. Colombia? I don't remember. Not too thick, not too thin. Robbie you freaking mailbox so full I having trouble getting it all in."

No reaction from me. It was a small, sad box, tenuous on its rotten stick, and I had given up on the box saving me from myself and my legal and financial pickle many weeks ago. About the same time I stopped reading the lousy fish-wrap each morning and going to the pool and riding my bike and seeing Papa for muffins. I wasn't even seeing \$300-an-hour shrink-wrap anymore, my mailman wants me to

go check the mail?

Back on the bikes now, we take the three-minute or so ride up to the tippy top and look out over Corte Madera, with the little puff of steam coming from the paper factory by the freeway; look over Kentfield with the richest non-famous folks in the state, including probably my shrink-wrap, and their gorgeous manicures, their gardens, as if you were living the dream in Cape Town or Buenos Aires or Sydney; look over San Rafael and those canals lined by tenements of all the poor Hispanic gardeners who tend those high-fiber, top-lettuce gardens; look beyond to the East Bay and Berkeley. The whole ball of wax in other words. My ball of wax. I can even spot the Strawberry Pool from up here, but not the midget-sized hot tub, from where we stop, pulling on what I figure is one last doob with Pablo as we straddle The Bikes, 2,000 or so feet high at the top of Tam, the attitude of this altitude; that's what they call a mountain in this stratospheric county.

"So yesterday I stuff the usual junk into your box, you know," Pablo says, inhaling deep, a real Durban Deep on that doob, "and all that freaking sheet in your box, eez still there. But not the nice yellow envelope. I don't know what it means. You take it out or something?"

My turn for a drag on this wonderful beautiful doob on such a very fine day on the mountain, lilies and larkspur and those tiny violet buttons everywhere across springtime Tam, and I have no idea what it means either. I don't even know what the hell day it is let alone what Pob is going on about. "Take what, man?"

"Dee 'lope, n'ombre. The big yellow envelope. I got a feeling about that thing," Pablo, he says, and one last puff and he extinguishes el doob on the tip of his tongue and sticks it into the funny little fanny pack under his seat saddle. "Maybe Carlos Santana sent you something or something."

The ride down the mountain via the old railroad grade is swift and leaves you right there in Mill Valley, on the square where all the squares sip their coffee drinks at one of three bakery boutiques. I scan for Papa maybe munching a muffin but no such, no such. Pablo goes his way and I go mine, headed back across the 101 to Strawberry just 10 minutes away. Crossing over the freeway there on the intersection where Mill Valley becomes unincorporated Strawberry and then Tiburon, I glance south for a second,

past El Safeway and the Porsche dealership next door and longingly take in my small bed of bay, Richardson Bay, already buffing my memories of these Pablo rides with nostalgia, the sweet and sticky kind, a wet and bloody knee scab perhaps: wanting so bad to know my end is near, that they find my bike submerged and my body broken in two; that I did it right, with thanks to the bike brigadiers who lobbied successfully for us cycle rats, for our right to take that one freeway exit across the bridge on speeding 101. For the love of God, I was even starting to think in semi-colons -- me of all streamers.

But it's not yet time; night would be better. And should not I be writing a note to Pam, one to Papa, one to Pablo even? Back at the studio, the blackberry bramble is looking ever thicker and untended. The lemon bush in front is starting to sag; I'm just not sucking 'en down like I used to. Oh yeh, and the mailbox is stuffed, overflowing with first-class fan crap I had to figure, but just as Pablo said. Freaking full. What was that about Santana, Carlos?

I lean my stallion against the side of the cottage, remove my clip-ons and enter the kitchen, looking for a legal pad, even some Post-Its, but finding nothing in the way of clean paper. Once a laptopper always, is the way that goes. But I have not been on the Internet in weeks. The mailbox is good for some paper, for sure, if Pablo is right, and of course he is. It's stuffed. I am something of a picky, some would say finicky, shopper. And it's the same with my mail. I see coupon packets, a few bills, business envelopes with handwritten ROBERT THOMAS and ROBBIE THOM on them that almost surely must be hate mail, but nothing stuffed with peanut butter or bird poop this time. There is a perfumed greeting card envelope with no stamp, lavender in color and with the smell of lavender, one of Pam's favorites and a feature of the county's well tended gardens, the ones that pay the Mexicans and Guatemalans and Colombians in San Rafael just enough per hour to out lard and frijoles and sour cream, but not much else, on the table. Sure enough, the envelope is Pam's handwriting. I can use the back of the envelope for my suicide note, for sure.

I snap the box back shut. Stuck onto the little red flag that pops up for the postman is one more piece of paper, a jumbo-sized Post-It, which as I recall now always has been one of Papa's prime means of communicating time/place for our muffin meetings. You know, like: 8 AM/BOULANGE. But this one is no muffin date. Instead, Papa's note has a few sentences squeezed onto both sides. It reads thusly:

Strangest thing. Walked past that priest inside the seminary grounds up there. (They let Catholics onto Baptist property? Heh heh.) Rob my boy, he looked a mess, peanut butter and crap all over. When he saw me, he looked startled, disappeared behind that blackberry patch up there. I found an empty envelope with your name on it, left it under the mat. Love, Papa.

And sure enough, it is the missing manila envelope. 8 by 10, empty. Most of my name typed neatly on its face. Torn wax seal at the back. The sender is one Manuel Drinkwater, Esquire. Medellín, Colombia.

My butch boy.

Chapter Sixteen

El Marmato

The story, my story, our story, closes quickly, rapid as the steep grade down the railroad grade into Mill Valley. What else is there to say? I don't even know if it all deserves an epilogue.

So Fodder X, smooth pulpit-eer, father confessor of the thick black heels, is the crook. From what the federales can put together, that is. I mean, he's long gone. Like that Long Island nun, he taketh what others giveth. Difference was, no one knew what exactly he taketh and how much it was worth-it. The feds figured Manny had sent me a type of bearer certificate for stock in the Marmato gold mine, the Marca Pola down there in Colombia.

The authorities deduced that after running an electronic tracer on my stock account transactions. Sure enough (I am liking that expression more and more these days), hundreds of thousands of shares of Marca Pola had arrived into my account, wired in and weeks later, transformed into paper certs and somehow withdrawn by hand from the local Schwab office in Corte Madera. Just up the freeway next to the new PF Chang's restaurant with the noble plaster steed by the entrance. (Best hot sauce in the county, by the way, the waiters there call it The Rim of Fire.) Anyway, yeh, withdrawn by hand and who knows how I do not and neither did the federales. The certs were signed for in a script that read

my name, Robbie Thom, but was not even a passing likeness for my handwriting. Pablo my beloved postman was debriefed and actually gave a legal deposition to the feds up in that SF skyscraper. That must have been a scream. Nombre hombre? LL represented him. "Yeh I poot dee envelope in dee box, eeez my job." Something along those lines.

So yeh, the gold mine down there was/is real. The certs were worth a freaking fortune, multiplying by the day even without my Melt-Up reports to push the price to parabola-land in the heavens. Fodder X, baritone asswipe, had gotten a piece of that action, had scripted his own twist, depositing, we are told in great detail, the CUSIP'd paper straight into, straight into where? Where do you think? Into his parish treasury. The Fodder, X-father now, he used the church's sprawling bank account to process the stock booty. What's another million or so dollars in a Tiburon, California, parish that has real estate and assets, most of it parishioner cash, coins and checks, worth \$20 million or more? First, for safe keeping, he stashes the stock certificates right inside the velvet-lined sacristy, right there where Vatican archeologists are meant to deposit relics, where priests are meant to store the body and blood of their Lord (Jesus Christ!), if my altar boy memory serves me correctly. Those federales put in the hours getting it all down, got to give them credit. They found, right in the sacristy with the certs, they found the crumpled clutches of my penance, all these chapters -- these chapters here! -- the groveling and second guessing and remorse that X-Fodder had tasked me to get down on paper, or on hard drive as the case may be, in that XMAS DAY confession on the Tiburon bike path. My numbered account, my scrip, right there along with the body and blood of their Lord. Jesus Christ that must have the thumpers shivering in their sheets. And dang if the priest did not get it straight off my hard drive either, my hard drive. (If it is any consolation, I lock the front door these days. Oh yeh, plus I use computer passwords with Black Sabbath lyrics written backwards.)

Unlike the nun in Long Island, who actually served time for her Super Sunday felony, Fodder X'd is probably still out there, his goose stewing and not yet cooked. Last my two federales knew from Passport Control, the good crooner turned cad was in Eastern Europe somewhere, maybe pinging piano keys in Croatia and making Catholic babies, reunited with his Croatian ex-girlfriend. No hard feelings (I think) but if X Fodder wanted to throw himself onto the spiked spires of some medieval monastery, commit his self to the Lord ultra-Gothic like, I gladly would supply a funeral dirge for the post-show.

There were a few things I needed to do to make to bring my life back full swing and all. More make-up rides across the headlands and onto the mountain with Pablo, for one. Maybe a trip down to the Santa Cruz boardwalk with Pam, for old time's sake. A muffin date with Papa at the old Boulange there in Strawberry. Suck some vodka lemons with the old man in the early evening. Find those dang midgets in the hot tub and thank 'em, for what I have no idea. Send LL some flowers, or better, a pair of psychedelic cycling briefs. Pay dear shrink-wrap in arrears for a month's worth of Marina sessions. I'd cry thinking about his hourly (45-minutes, actually) fees, but on 80 milligrams of generic paroxetine, crying is a real, heh heh, a real challenge..

Finally, there was the trip south. To Medellín and then three hours dusty drive to EL Marmato, to the mountain my Manny Drinkwater believed in so much, he gave up his, his what, his certs? I loved the lout more than ever at that moment, the butch boy, but somehow I knew, by now, that if the loud and rambunctious one, he of steak-dripping, pizza snarfing all-night at-tables, if MD had not registered on my Wicket Scale, via lapping e-mail, cell phone or even the old post box out front, well ... NOT HEARING from Mr. D. was ominous. Silence in the case of our slick stump of babble was ... in ... no ... way ... golden.

At the international-to-domestic switchover in Miami, walking those long airport corridors lined with Jamba Juices and Starbucks, a bit of the old Melt-Up magic returned. At Passport Control who should I run into but pretty little Phatty, Cantonese flight attendant and still loyal submarine. She pecked me on the cheek and told me she was doing Miami to Buenos Aires runs. It was a nice change from Hong Kong, she said, and Fatima passed me one of those First Class chocolates with the amaretto in them. Leave it to a Fatima to show me some of my Melt-Up audience had kept the faith through it all. She said she kept an eye on her Blackberry, her handheld, hoping one day I would show up again in her box/her mailbox. Sweet as a berry crumble, that one.

In Medellín, a driver from Marca Pola picked me up, and after a quick freshener on the geology of Marmato, done for my benefit at the company's small office in El Poblado, a bushy neighborhood of former drug barons who fancied themselves daring creators of fusion-style restaurants just beyond the Centro part of this luscious city, we Range Roved our way three hours' dusty drive south to the mountain.

Greetings with the staff of geologists, college-trained Colombian kids in their 20s, hoping to strike it big right here on the equator, in mountains filled with bananas and coffee beans, mango, papaya, native pine and they prayed each night before bed, gold. None of these kids remember a round and jolly man named Manny. But who would when their heads are so crammed with dreams of gold. Lots of gold.

More numbers and maps are thrown at me. That's what geologists do, I guess, how they flush right and flush left, justify their world. Inside the company barracks, the geos tell me they calculate 2.6 million ounces of gold for the mountain's upper half. The evidence comes from nine diamond-tipped drills boring into 12,000 meters of the mountain. The numbers travel to the lower half of El Marmato, too, but I am all numbered out to care.

That afternoon, on a physical tour of the property, in a steamy back room of one of the wildcat mills on the small mountain, where vaqueros and other poachers brought their day's canvas sack stuffed with mineralized rock, to be crushed and deconstructed with a refreshing mix of cyanide and water, some mujer named Maya is sifting out the phony pyrite from the real ore, then weighing the tiny piles and pouring 15 grams at a slide into those little plastic film canisters you used to see all the time before digital cameras made the scene, right there in her little stinking office, just above the middle-aged woman's metal desk and tacked onto the wall next to a campaign poster of the village mayor, who happens to own the mill, I come to the end of the expedition. It's a fuzzy photo hanging on the wall, a blurry shot of Manny posing in front of one of the makeshift mines dotting the mountain. At his feet, you can see the rickety sluice boxes the locals use to "grab" gold as it flows downhill along with the water they constantly spray across the steep hillsides.

As almost always, Man the Man in el foto, he is smiling. He is wearing one of those jungle juice hats you see in the movies, you know, Michael Douglas slicing his way avec machete through the Colombian jungle. The reality is that everyone on the mountain, heck, everywhere, wears baseball caps these days. But Manny Drinkwater was never one for what was real.

I point to the photo and ask, "¿El Señor, le conoce por favor?" She shrugs, way too busy weighing the dust, and I can't blame her. "No sabe," she says. "But the mayor might. Is his photo."

So I head to the village plaza, maybe a few hundred yards from the mill, up a long flight of railroad ties, terraced steps that are stuck onto the side of one of the mountain's fire roads, for the 95 percent of the village who are pedestrians. But the plaza is hardly there. The City Hall and the hospital and the school are buried in rubble and drying mud. A scrawny dog is pooping off in one of the plaza's nooks. Years and years of water sluicing, the wildcat miners using gravity to sift the mountain's apparently abundant ore, have taken their toll. The senior geologist from the company, Santana (I swear that was his name), of 31 years of age, tells me there have been three major landslides in two years. The most recent one, maybe two months ago, about the time Manny went quiet and not long after I was almost Fed-X'd out of existence, buried the entire square. It happened at 2 in the morning, the boom of tons and tons of rubble crashing onto the buildings as jarring as the rocks themselves. What is left of City Hall and everything else is cerrado. Totalmente cerrado, Santana says. The mayor's office is five miles away now but he's in Bogotá on business.

Santana is on a lunch break. He works for Marca Pola, or one of its Colombian subsidiaries. Good looking kid, chewing on a ham sandwich and sipping a Coca-Cola. He is wearing a baseball cap and sitting in the shade. "Three people died that night," he says. "Maybe four people, maybe a gringo, no sabe. I was not here, eez just what they say."

So that's it, really. On my way out of Medellín very early the next day, to catch the flight to Miami, the company jeep on his way to the airport passes a few of the serious cyclists who use the morning hours to get their training runs in. The posters around the city all say, "Medellín tiene todo," and it's true. It has orchids and emeralds. The city has beautiful hard-working people, respectable hotel hot tubs and outstanding food, especially the thin-crust pizzas topped with gorgonzola sauces and red-ripe tripe gravies.

The city also tiene a ton of traffic. So if you're training for the national bike team, way early morning is about the only time you can work out. Holy chicharone!

I look at the cyclists. The ride to the airport is 25 minutes from the Intercontinental where the company put me up, right there, again, in that very fine El Poblado area where most of the estates have watchdogs or guards with rifles sitting in itty bitty kiosks. The bikers make me think of Pablo. It is good to be heading back to my own little mountain. But somehow, I think, I know I will be back here, eating the beans and platano with the sour cream, noshing on the thin crust at 1969 Pizza in El Poblado. Searching for something I can not sketch in words, for once. Ciao Manny.

Epilogue

Turns out a lot of that decaying mail in my Strawberry box was get-well wishes from the subs. There was even a cute and funny card from the clerks at El Safeway, with an in-store camera shot of me all furtive and stuff, gnawing a kiwi skin and all in the produce section.

Pam's lavender note to me was sweet, she writing even before Fodder X was exposed for the X Fod putz he was and presumably still is that she knew in her heart I was no crook. "What would Papa my muffin do with you in the slammer?" she wrote. Now that I spend most of my time down here in Colombia, she and I are making plans to meet in Cartagena for a beach holiday. Pam gets four weeks off a year at UPS, and the lady truck driver has yet to finish her first year on the Sausalito rounds. What a company, hey? Heck of a lot better, I am told, than Fed Freaking X.

Pablo, now a retired mailman and happy as a clam on the mountain and in the headlands, still wed to the mountain, still pumping across the county on his two-wheeler, Pablo is going to join us for the second half of Cartagena. We'll get two cabañas I figure, one for

him and one for us.

Pam's Papa, my Papa in former law, had that mild stroke one glorious morning, put-putting home from the bakery. He drove himself to Kaiser in Terra Linda and was back home a few weeks later, looking fitter than ever. Wise Papa has some rattling of synapses upstairs, apparently, and that partial speech loss I already mentioned, and a lip quiver ... and he is loving it. "Sneer like Brando," he tells me on a catch-up visit I made back to the county last month to see my three Ps in their pads. With each brain cell that evaporates, Papa says, comes a new episode, a new character, a new life. "Say hello," he tells me, an inside ticker joke of sorts. Papa says it is better than watching TV or going to the movies. He says he is sucking vodka lemons in the evening for old time's sake.

Freedman, he of towering ego and first-rate aircraft, keeps getting richer. The Toronto fish-wrap says he's approaching \$2 billion. His platinum and nickel project on the Platreef in SA finally hit pay dirt. Now the master miner just needs to get 3,000 or so homesteaders on the property relocated off the mesa, which as I recall is speckled with scrawny chickens, lots of cherubic black toddlers and a few dozen hollowed-out automobiles and trucks doubling as play structures and homes. Hollywood is making a movie about Freedman's life, and yep, Chris Cooper is playing The Part. Manny would have steam coming out his ears on that plot twist, for sure. (I mean, who plays Manny, Danny Freaking DeVito? Jesus, I mean, nothing against short folks who smoke cigars, but Hollywood can do better than a cartoon character for our late Drinkwater.) Oh, by the way, the Freedman's Twin Towers, the air attendants whom I always adored in secret Gulfstream longing, they are actually playing themselves in the film, which is scheduled for a Cannes release in 2011. Those statues of sorority deserve a shot at the big time, for sure.

The Aristocrat, original gold plugger, he is still dead, presumably. Impossible snoot, impossibly lean, tall and bright. Dang good writer for a newsletter ed. Impossible to believe the old man from Belvedere is dead, dead in where was it, Brazil? Hard to believe.

The media, the rotten fish-wrappers, never reported the happy end of my story: the federales dropping most of the claims and requiring me instead to pay \$18,000 to cover dot-gov's wasted efforts to clean up the financial newsletter business. Hopefully, those poor guys can get a proper refrigerator up in their

tower and stock it with Crystal Geysers and Calistogas. The flocking fish-wrappers never report the end of the story, just the beginning and the middle. Still, those guys, two of them breathing the stale air of that SF leased tower, they worked for that 18k. It would have taken me years to find out all that stuff about X Fod, the sacristy, his swipe of the certs and lamming it to Europe.

Elle, LL my legal counsel, is still spinning and spinning. She looks terrific now with no braces, and Laura no longer practices law, tired she says "of making rich a-holes even richer." LL works for some nonprofit agency in Berkeley and is pro-bono-ing for some senator's presidential campaign.

Shrink-wrap, he of multiple Lubriderm, him I keep in touch with by regular mail. I paid my final bill and could only wish its size had been shrunk wrapped. What can I say? I'm still on the paroxetine but am now shrinking it down/down/down to 40 milligrams a day. The Pax is a great lifestyle drug but I do not miss my visits to the Marina. No way. Don't get me wrong. Doc did what shrink-wraps are paid, paid large, to do. "Hey," he told me once, when I was complaining yet again about his 45-minute fee structure, "I bet your lawyer gets twice that." Good one, Doc. But does that mean I have to miss the professor? Do I miss The Fat Man? Complicated, but yeh I miss Monsieur Drinkwater. My lawyer Elle? Do I miss her? Sure. A fair bit. OK, yes, if she is buying lunch. Definitely. The Aristocrat? Well, the thin man was a legend and the original gold bug with 12 cylinders, plenty of gas and some terrific war stories. Pablo? Well, duh! Cierito, hombre. Pam and Papa? Working on those, working on that pair, love that sweet pair. Of course I do. But Doc? He of Lubriderm and funky Marina chill? Shrink-wrapper? He of pharma-magical prescribing and stinking fat fees to match? Truth is guy gives me the creepy crawlies. So no, not one bit.

At my current latitude, being down here, or mid here, being mid planet here, I have learned the equator is definitely not kind to the bramble. Blackberries need high and low seasons, heat and frost, to bud and pop. The berries they sell in the mamasita little mercados here all come from Chile.

I am thus far resisting the urge to Melt Up. I mean, sure, once in a while I slip into one of these spindly Internet cafés that share space with laundry mats and kitchen appliance wholesalers, and I send a personal stock market thought or two to old pals out there, personal mind you, if you darling federales still have me on your screens, Fatima servicing the aisles of her jets being one of those pals, Caesar that

Calistoga, California, mud attendant another worthy one who tracked me down asking for my ticker talking advice. However, the other day I received an e-mail forwarded by LL; Vanity Fair, the magazine, had contacted her, looking for me. Some editor wants me to write an article on Medellín , how the city is shredding its narcotics legacy and now ranks as one of the planet's looming hot spots for beautiful women and men with taffy (money). Fair enough. The word was getting out anyway. Great pizza will do that for a city.

This is the start of what I think will be a shot at the piece. No guarantees the magpies will accept it, but hey, they called me:

MEDELLIN , Colombia -- There are no enhanced images, no staged shots in this story. Not even the signature photo of the buried and battered boots just below. The wildcat mills and rock-hauling vaqueros and the careful mujer weighing the gold dust that scores of families sift and water-slucide off the mountain each and every day, these are the things that testify to the potency of El Marmato.

But why start here, three hours' humpy ride from the city? It is the city that just might ignite, once again and after decades of violence and poverty, apathy and narcotics, that might spark a run on the mountains and valleys of inland Colombia. Because it is **THE CITY THAT HAS IT ALL** that first must lure new flesh with its pastels, its hearty meals, its stunning Antioquian women and men, its orchids, and yeh, OK, even its cosmetic surgeons.

Colombia moves me.

The city of Medellín , a place of about 3 million, not counting the squatters from the countryside, is where billboards proclaim: "Medellín el tiene todo," and it's true. Medellín does have it all. The flowers. Samba. Luscious fruit and the sidestreets abundant with native pine and non-native eucalyptus and sweet green grass and ... well, dang, a lot of cosmetic surgery clinics. Medellín has it all: the Antioquian restaurants, clappy with courtyards and wicker where is served sweet fried platano with frijoles and sour cream; the Botero swollen art; the dawn-to-dusk work ethic that sets this city apart from many of its sister cities across Latin America; the wide and spotless boulevards that resemble those in Madrid or Buenos Aires. Great pizza, too.

Medellín has it all. It has the traffic, for sure. The Poblado and other lush neighborhoods. The lore of that other Pablo, Señor Escobar el narco who for all of the myths out there deserves supreme credit for giving the world one of the great and years-long chase scenes in the annals of crime and commerce.

Medellín also has plenty of fresh air these days. The air is well scrubbed, a lot fresher than I remember it from the early 1980s. Cleansed I suppose by the afternoon thundershowers. Being up in the mountains helps, for sure.

So do the cleaner fuels Latin America is using these days as compared with 20 years ago.

OK, so you get the idea. LL says I should keep the sentences short. I'm so trying to.

Right now, I am sitting at 1969 Pizza in Medellín's El Poblado, waiting for my gorgonzola pie and writing this on my new laptop, an Apple, which is a big change for PC me. A pizza joint that tops most pizza joints. The chef does a thin crust with tripe in a white sauce, that's right, a white sauce, gorgonzola. Cow innards el blanco, so who would have thought? White tripe pizza, thin crust por favor, it has a cult following in this town. So too does this joint in this tidy Poblado of boutiques and cosmetic surgeons. When it rains in late afternoon, drops of warm water sweep right into the trattoria; the entire seating area of 1969 Pizza fronts the open street.

The chef at the oven is a big guy with tattoos across the back of his neck. He is Colombian, for sure, light skinned through and through in this mango-sweet province of Antioquia, of which rain swept Medellín, our sun gentle city pocketed in the equatorial and equal opportunity Andes, is the capital. Our pizza chef is wearing a surgical mask, which is the latest thing in this equatorial city that has it all, including the traffic -- car traffic that is. And this part I swear is true because I cannot make this stuff up: on breaks the big man takes off the mask and plays a ... well, no, not a flute. A recorder, a cheap plastic pitch perfect recorder. Right now, he is playing that Flaming Lips tune from the Yoshimi disc, the single that got covered into Spanglish by a band of high-schoolers from Venezuela and is on all the radio stations here, with a samba beat:

¿Usted le realiza/tener/la cara/más hermosa? /Do you realize/we're floating in space?

The big chef, he reminds me of The Mudder, our Big Goose whose first two trials upstairs north there in the county of my crisis and recovery ended in a hung jury. They do not know if a third trial on aiding

and abetting and corrupting minors in search of lucre will make it to the docket, but if it does LL says she will come out of retirement and represent Mudder and the alleged Kiddy Coin Bandits (fish-wrapper headline) for free.

The pizza chef is a one-man operation at 1969 Pizza in this fully romantic neighborhood of plazas and trees and sweet breezes; the fellow used to employ a married couple, two extremely tiny Ecuadorans, to wait the tables, but our big man at some point figured out he could wait tables himself in a cozy joint like this. He motions me over for the pizza trippa, warm and pungent, and I reach for pesos inside a pocket. But the big guy shakes a pinky on his left hand. "N'ombre hombre. No dinero. Geev to me a number instead," he says, and places a scrap of paper and a pencil next to my order.

A number? "You mean a name, sí? A ticker, verdad?" I reply.

"Sí, Señor Thom. Un teletipo por favor."

OK, hombre. Why not? "So like, usted sabe NASDAQ?" I ask him, wondering what type of dessert wines a place like this might possibly have in stock. "NASDAQ eez OK?"

THE END

NOTES . . .

Real people almost surely inspired the characters who live in these chapters, but who is to know and how? The achievements of these characters, real and pretend, are due r-e-s-

p-e-c-t, spelled slowly and occasionally dressed with reverence and with mockery. Their motivations and methods, after all, might be s-u-s-p-e-c-t, but their achievements, their dreams, are due respect.

Our three Ps in their pads? Pablo and Papa and Pam? Well, they shine 168 hours a week in this book. Pablo, for example, might be the only person on the planet who cannot see the little arrow embedded into the new FedEx logos, the subliminal dart that is supposed to conjure up speed in the minds of anyone sending messages and packages these days. He just cannot see the arrow, just the letters that form around the little bugger. Maybe this is why he is immune from the devastating influence of freaking FedEx. Papa, he is safely immune from reality. And daughter Pam is just plain immune. Never ever ill, that peach.

Other points maybe worth mentioning about these chapters: there was an effort to get children, bless them all, into these chapters. Not just the flock of champ-change gooslings, Big Goose's scraps of sweetmeat. But more kids, all kids. The effort failed to make the mark on these pages. Kids sometimes just don't fit in with endless sentences such as these. So maybe this is why we saw tiny people, adult tots, making cameos in hot tubs and such?

Happily happily, there is a dish called Pablo's Pollo Loco at Cindy's Backstreet Kitchen in St. Helena, close by the hot springs town of Calistoga in Napa County, California. The chef, Pablo Jacinto, created the chicken dish. Pablo Jacinto uses bricks, very heavy bricks, to flatten the chickens when they are in the skillet frying for 10 or 12 minutes, before he places them in the oven. This way, the chickens cook evenly and finish up with crispy skin. This living and breathing Pablo serves the dish with a stuffed piquillo pepper and some avocado salsa. Pablo man of letters in these previous pages probably enjoys his brick chicken lunches with a side of platano, refried frijole and some sour cream ... as he almost always would and does.

Guess what? There really is a gold mine at El Marmato in Colombia. Furthermore,

brothers and sisters in garage lofts across the planet, there is a technology called WiMAX for remote computing purposes.

There is a public pool in Strawberry. Hot tub, too. Wonderful place. Midgets and tall thin aristocrats. Sucky locker rooms though.

There is a Catholic church in Tiburon with a killer Jesus view of Richardson Bay, Tiburon's peninsula and beyond to Sausalito and an interplanetary flash of orange from the GGB. Plus there is a Baptist seminary in Strawberry with loquats you eat right off trees and nondenominational goats for hire that mow the grounds in summer.

Richardson Bay sucks its tidal belly in and out to the tune of next-door SF Bay. On ocean side in the county at negative two-point-ones, great hoary and mighty tasty mussels to serve with linguini/garlic/and a sprinkle of saffron can be picked here and there from rocks just out a ways from shore at Muir and Tennessee and mother of them all Stinson beaches. There is a bike path that runs from Mill Valley all the way to Tiburon's ferry landing, where folks with gardens landscaped by Colombians and Salvadorans and Mexicans capture boats to SF and Angel Island.

There is definitely a freeway bridge spanning Richardson Bay and the cycle desperadoes lobbied successfully to have its thin strip shoulder open to bikers who jut out their chin at the prospect of insane automobile and truck drivers on one side and the bay on the other side and just a toss over the rail, bikers who want to shave 15 minutes from their north-south pumps and go for the shortcut. Or maybe they just want to die in the saddle.

There is a place in the USA (and in the UK, maybe even in Canada) that sells groceries and is called Safeway and its clerks deserve better than they receive from some huff and puff shoppers.

There is a neurobiological compound called Memantine for those in the throes of Alzheimer's Disease. The drug is not a cure for dementia.

There is a plant called pickleweed, or is it pickle weed? Pablo might know.

There is a Mount Tamalpais in Marin County and its trails just might have dirt-paved the way for the birth of mountain biking in the mid-1970s. The bicycles in these chapters are a brand called Marin Bikes headquartered in the northern part of the county at the old offices of the band The Grateful Dead.

There is a Dipsea Café in Mill Valley and it serves blubes for breakfast, whole wheat blube pancakes. Good value for great grease.

The sushi at that place in Sausalito off the main drag is almost surely among the finest and freshest in the western USA ... and yet some customers say the waiting staff leaves them feeling a bit frosty. Not the kind of place Pablo would take his bike.

Shrinks are and are not worth every cent they charge for their 45-minute sessions.

Lawyers who train on spinning cycles and kick box in the AM work hard in their offices in the PM.

There is a 1969 Pizza in Medellín and the pies there are fabulous.

Meyer lemons at their ripest are the color orange and squishy soft. Blackberries have their own stories to tell.

There are many people to thank for these chapters but for the life of us all who of them will say they are thankful for having helped? My three Ps, of course they will. Others might not. This is okay. So here is what happens: these chapters are dedicated to everyone. Every person on the planet thusly can say they have a book dedicated to them, and especially the spouses out there, maybe one in particular, a wife, she of striking face sculpted by bold Cherokee cheekbones. A real peach.

