

Behind the Mask

To be brutally honest about it, I never got along with Superman. None of us did. It was always, like, “well, call if you need me and I’ll come bail you out”. That kind of thing. And, y’know, his grandstanding was pretty hard to take at times. The guy is a born ham! Always hogging the limelight and, of course, that really got on our nerves.

I mean...he can move planets, fer Chrissake! Travel faster than the speed of light! And here’s the rest of us, running around, taking care of all the two-bit stuff while he waits in the wings, ready to swoop in and save the day yet again. Supes...what can you say, the guy’s indestructible, practically *immortal*. Sometimes a few of us would get together and, y’know, raise some tall ones and joke around about how we’d go about taking him down. Y’know, if he turned evil all of a sudden and it was up to us to keep him from running amuck. I think it was Bruce Wayne who suggested a “kryptonite enema”. Bruce never could stand him but that’s because he’s such a prima donna himself. Guy hates to be upstaged. That bat signal of his...total self-promotion.

You gotta wonder if old Supes’ ears weren’t burning sometimes. ’Cause he can supposedly hear a soap bubble popping in China, right? Maybe that’s why he didn’t hang around HQ a lot. Basically just came in, collected his mail and *phht!* Back to the Fortress of Solitude. He never came to any of our Christmas parties or stuff like when Spiderwoman got married. That’s the way he is. There’s only *one* Superman and if the rest of us we don’t like it, too bad.

And, y’know, that kind of attitude isn’t likely to endear you to a guy. I’m not the only one that felt that way either. Hawkman, Green Lantern, you talk to them and they’ll tell you the same thing. Believe me, he rubs a lot of people the wrong way. It’s just that he’s such an icon, the ultimate superhero...no one wants to believe that he also happens to be the world’s biggest *shmuck*.

Bully

I hate you. Do you hear me? I said *I hate you*. I hate your guts. You disgust me. Seriously. You need help. A total makeover. I mean, look at you. You're *fat*...and ugly too. Your face is hideous and your body—well, better not go there. 'Cause there ain't very much to work with. You want my advice, get one of those things they make those Arab women wear. It's your only hope. Unless you get lucky and meet some really desperate blind guy.

And it's not just the way you look. There's something *wrong* with you. You creep everybody out. You should ask yourself, *why does everybody hate me?* Hint: it might have something to do with your total lack of personality. That's...just a guess. Freckles and pimples--and that unibrow. *Gawd*. If you were any uglier, you'd be in a zoo.

I suppose you're gonna start crying now. The old self-pity routine. Like that's going to get any sympathy. Why don't you try cutting yourself again? See if that gets you some attention. You're pathetic, you know that? Worse than that, you're *weak*. You're weak and you're all alone, aren't you? No one cares about you, no one wants to be your friend. You might as well be invisible. Wait...where are you? Where did you go? There's no one here. *Gone*. In fact, it's possible you never existed at all...

The So-Called “Incident”

First of all, none of this ever would have happened if Mrs. Steinmetz was still working here. She understood me and the needs of your average patron. I could go see her and she'd straighten out any problems. Not this Ms. Arnott. She kept saying that, “Miz, Miz, Miz”, and I thought she was being totally excessive about it. Miss, Miz, what's the difference? I tried to explain the deal with “Mr. Hulot's Holiday” and I thought I was being really nice about it. I said it was sort of like a ritual with me and explained the deal I had with Mrs. Steinmetz which I naturally thought would be continued under the new management. But this Ms. Arnott, she was totally out to lunch on the entire subject. She wouldn't let me reserve “Mr. Hulot”. That's what started everything. How ornery she was about it. I don't know about you, but I really get my back up when people are rude to me. So I got rude right back. I told her what a disgrace the library had become since Mrs. Steinmetz retired. I said I didn't know if it was because she was Jewish, but Mrs. Steinmetz always seemed to be able to talk to you. I said Mrs. Steinmetz always let me reserve “Mr. Hulot's Holiday” over Christmas for the past 7-8 years and that's when Ms. Arnott really got snarky and pointed out that it was still only July. *But I was only trying to confirm the previous deal with Mrs. Steinmetz* (who, I'm sure, would be only too happy to verify the truthful veracity of this statement). I'm sorry I got so mad but so did she (Ms. Arnott). The so-called “incident” was that a stack of books somehow fell over when I was in that vicinity. I might have leaned on them or whatever but I don't think so. The upshot of it was that Ms. Arnott totally lost it at that point and threatened to call the *police* of all people. I don't think it's right that I should be banned from the library over such a trivial incident and that's why I'm approaching you, as board members, to overturn that decision forthwith. Also, I'd like to reserve “Mr. Hulot's Holiday” every Christmas from now on. Which, I think, would eliminate the alleged problem. The video is in pretty bad shape but it's still my favourite movie of all time. Also, I'm sorry to Ms. Arnott *as long as she's sorry to me*.

Thank you for your time and thoughtfulness and I sincerely and respectfully await your decision regarding this unfortunate matter. I have told the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth and now I would like to put the whole thing behind me. That is all I have to say at this time. Thank you, once again.

Breaking Up

Yo, Tony-O! How ya doin'? Yeah? Great...great. Hey, listen, man, I got some big news. Really big. As in huge. The deed is done. *The deed is done*, get it? Yeah! Ding-dong, the witch is dead. No kiddin' it's been a long time comin'. That woman was harder to get rid of than ugly luggage, know what I mean? (*Laughter*) You got it. No kiddin'.

Uh huh. Well, you know me, I was cool. I just laid it on the line. Told her, y'know, the thrill is gone, baby, the magic has *de*-parted and, you know, don't let the door hit you on your pretty little butt on the way out. What? Well, maybe I exaggerate slightly but that was the general idea. And the thing is, right off the bat she knows something's up, right? 'Cause I'm playing it real cool, keeping my distance, not saying much. I mean, I am *focussed*, dude, like a *laser*, zeroed right in on her. No way was I gonna let myself get distracted 'cause I am a man on a mission. And she's all "Is there something wrong? Is something going on?" and I'm, like, no kidding something's wrong, you're wrong, we're all wrong and there's no use pretending any more. Stick a fork in it, honey, 'cause this relationship is *done*.

'Cause you gotta be honest about stuff like that and, y'know, ruthless too. To some extent. And it's like I say, it isn't like she was--that she didn't suspect something. I mean, she ain't dumb, I never said she was dumb. That wasn't the problem. And you can't say she didn't try either. All this week she's been—yeah, right, but like I'm saying, all this week she can't be doin' enough for me, cookin' nice meals--hey, she even cleaned my *bathroom*. I'm dead serious. Like: baby, are you my girlfriend or the friggin' maid, y'know? And, by the way, you missed a spot there-- (*Laughter*) It's crazy, it was almost pathetic. No kidding. No kidding.

No way, man, no effect whatsoever. Once I get my mind set on something I'm like one of those pit bulls. There wasn't going to be any last minute phone calls from the warden either, if you know what I mean. I practically knew the time right down to the minute that I was gonna do it. It had to be done and that's all there is to it. I mean, what it comes down to, it's all about *chemistry*, right? Either the magic is there or--exactly, that's what I'm saying. We did our thing but there was no sparks, no electricity. We were like an old married couple or something. Like a couple of old fogies sittin' on a porch somewhere and pattin' each other on the knee. I mean, *yuck*, right? Who needs it?

And you know what she was thinking, what's been going through her mind. Another couple of months and she'd be expecting to move in or go pick out a ring together or something. I'm, like, *no thanks*. I ain't *that* stupid. I'm still young, still got a lot of life left in me. I got my sights set higher than that. *A lot* higher. (*Laughter*) Yeah. Right. And, hey, it isn't like there aren't lots of other guys around, right? There's plenty of dumbies out there who'd, y'know, be happy to make an honest woman out of her, if that's what she wants. Sure. So she ain't gonna end up an old maid or anything.

She'll meet somebody, no question. And good for her. I hope she finds what she's looking for. Sure I mean it. I got no hard feelings. We did our thing but, y'know, all good things come to an end. Live and learn.

No, man, no regrets, that's not the way I am. You know me better than that. It's more, y'know, getting readjusted to things. Her not being around and--and doin' stuff together. 'Cause you get used to having someone in your face, pick up the phone and she's there, talking and hangin' out. But, hey, you get over it. Life goes on.

Yeah, right. You got it. That's what I'm saying.

So, listen, you doin' anything tonight? 'Cause I'm, like, totally available, single and swingin' again--huh? Well, what's up, man? Tell 'em something's came up, tell 'em you're busy, call 'em back and--yeah, I understand but, like I just said, hey, lock up your daughters 'cause the wolf is on the prowl again. *Awhhoooooo!* Ready to par-ty! (*Slumping*) Okay, that's cool. Sure, no sweat. We'll do it some other time. Do the rain check thing. How about Friday? Well, call me, okay? Soon as you know. Far out. Okay, sure....right, right. Talk to you later.

(He hangs up, sits for a moment, vaguely dissatisfied. Looks around, appears increasingly uneasy and restless. Picks up the phone, taps in some numbers.)

Marvin? Marvin the man. Marvin, my main man. 'Sup, dude? Oh, you know, just chilling, kicking back and enjoying the bachelor life. Nope, you heard right. You are talking to a free man. I done pulled the plug and, hey, I gotta tell you, from where I'm sittin', it's the best thing that ever happened to me...

A Million Little Pieces

There's no such thing as a "true" story. We—every one of us--fictionalize our lives. Everything is recorded through our senses and, as a result, our perceptions are highly subjective. My recollection of an event will differ sharply from that of other observers. The studies they've done on memory. False memories. Altered memories. Missing memory. Nothing we see is factual—everything is processed and interpreted by minds riddled with biases and preconceptions and false conjectures. Memories aren't tactile but they *are* elastic. They're comforting—or terrifying. Or sexy. But *every one* has been altered in a fundamental way. Edited by time, emotions and physiology. Like film, memory flickers, flutters, grows brittle and, eventually, breaks. Then the burning light.

Shipwrecked on the Isle of Lost Souls

For Elaine

You love springtime. Each year it provokes a kind of emotional or spiritual *ennui*, a spinning inward.

When it's warm enough you like going for short walks, just around the neighbourhood or to a nearby park, finding an empty bench and letting your mind wander, unencumbered by doubts and fears. It's during these moments that you're happiest. If, by chance, someone came along and sat down beside you, it's doubtful you'd even notice. Perhaps they did. Perhaps they rifled the contents of your purse—one or two might even have been bold enough to take your hand. Maybe they said they loved you. Maybe it was something obscene. Your serene gaze offered no encouragement, no rebuttal.

Once, your freed mind flew across the creek to the small, man-made island at its center. You explored the island from end to end, imagining yourself a castaway, a sole survivor left to your own puny devices. When you tired of the game you sat at one of the picnic tables ringing the open pit and dreamed up a bonfire to keep you warm. As you held out your hands to the spectral heat, you sensed another personality; it registered peripherally, a flurry of movement, a tingle of gooseflesh. Then he was taking his place beside you; this was definitely a male presence. His demeanor was reserved, almost apologetic. Yes, he was sorry to be intruding but, after all, he had as much right to be there as you did.

"Lovely fire," he remarked. You nodded. "Come here often?" he joked, but you made no reply. The two of you sat there awhile and the flames flickered and the day dwindled and at some point he started telling you things. General information to begin with, minutiae one feels comfortable imparting to a stranger. But his disclosures soon became more personal, and not long afterward came the first of many confessions: a directionless life, troubled marriage, dissolution, disillusion, a failed suicide attempt and so on...

You listened politely as he droned on and on and nodded in the right places and once or twice smiled encouragement. Every so often you took turns mentally stoking the fire, watching as it blazed up appreciatively. Then you realized that there had been a long lull and he was looking at you. It was an invitation to answer his inanities in kind.

Instead, you told him a story.

The story was a long one but the gist of it was that there was once a woman who liked to sit by the water and forget her life, forget *everything*, sometimes even going so far as to pretend that she was a ghost haunting a woman who looked exactly like her.

And one day, lo and behold, she succeeded in completely erasing her past and present and was left with only the uncertain future. She had no name, no job, no family, no emotional baggage. She was really and truly *free*.

The man nodded when you finished the tale, as if some great lesson had been imparted. Time passed as time will and you didn't speak because neither of you had saved any words.

It was inevitable, perhaps, that others would seek refuge on the island--timid, amorphous shades and shapes that had to be coaxed and reassured before they allowed themselves faces and smiles and, finally, forlorn voices. Each had their own story to tell and, except for odd bits of detail, the narratives were remarkably similar: bitter, eroded plotlines filled with longings and leavings, despair and travail.

Some could not bear the intimacy the cadre demanded and gradually lost definition, slipping away, back to the real world. But most stayed. And talked. And listened.

You felt possessed by a sense of belonging, of entitlement. After all, these were *your* people. Solitary souls, deprived too long of human companionship. This was hallowed ground. One of those enchanted glades you read about in fairy tales. You didn't want to leave. You cursed that woman, stirring on her park bench, blinking and gazing about in confusion--

Remember? You woke and felt so foolish, nodding off in public like some little old lady.

The Strange Music

“Okay,” I heard dad say, “I’m sorry. It was a bad idea to go.”

“Yes,” she agreed, “a *very* bad idea.”

I was curled under the coats in the back seat, being as quiet as a mouse. I was listening and I had to listen hard because they were talking so softly, especially him. Dad never yells, even when he’s giving you heck for something.

“It’s going to be all right, Lorrie,” he said but I could tell he didn’t believe it and if I could tell—

“You’re a liar,” she told him and I saw him stiffen. I think he might have said “okay” but I couldn’t hear because of the noise the tires were making. She gave a mean laugh and I couldn’t help it, I started shaking. Because I’ve heard that laugh, plenty of times. “Did you see the way they were looking at me?”

He shook his head. “No one was looking at you.”

“Don’t bother defending them. I *hate* them. All of them.”

“Oh, for God’s sake. This is your friends you’re talking about. People who love you—”

“Elizabeth is the worst.”

“She’s your best friend,” he snapped. “She cares about you deeply. Surely you must see that.”

She cackled again. “More like she cares about you. She’s wanted into your pants for years.”

“That’s enough.”

“To hell with her and her party. And while we’re on the subject, to hell with you too.”

I wanted to kill her then. For making a scene at the party, for embarrassing us so bad and for what she was doing to him now. I could have told him that it was no good trying to talk to her, no good telling her to please, please stop.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked her, his voice cracking. “What sort of pleasure does this kind of—of assassination give you?”

“You talked to Dr. Galloway, kiddo,” she reminded him sweetly. “He told you, all my deep, dark secrets. You should have me locked up. No one would blame you, especially after my latest performance. I think it was my best yet, don’t you?”

“No,” he murmured. “No, Lorrie...”

“I hate you,” she said, “I hate you and I hate little Pete and his blond hair and big, watery eyes and if you leave me alone with him, even for a minute—”

“No, no...”

“—I’ll hurt him, I swear I will. He’ll never be safe, you’ll never know what I’ll—”
But the rest was drowned out because he was slowing down, pulling the car off to the side of the road and stopping.

He was bent over the steering wheel, twisting it so hard I could hear it squeaking between his fingers. I sat up and she turned around and looked at me and I swear her eyes were glowing.

“Wakey, wakey,” she said and grinned at me. And I started hitting her, hitting her as hard as I could and she didn’t do anything, just sat there and let me until dad grabbed my hands and pushed me back down on to the seat. “See,” I heard her say, “he’s learning what it’s all about. Welcome to the real world, sonny-boy.”

“I HATE YOU!” I screamed. “I HATE YOU AND I HOPE YOU DIE!”

“Pete,” dad whispered, “don’t.” He was trying to reach out and pinch my lips shut but she was holding on to his arm and grinning that crazy grin of hers.

“Let him go,” she told him, “it’s music to my ears.”

Interview

The manager, a balding guy in his late 30's, *looks* at me and says, y'know, really nonchalantly "you don't have a problem with hard work, do you?". Just like that. And we both know what he's talking about. I mean, it's there, right in front of us. But we won't name it. Him because he's in denial and because he thinks he's doing me a favour just by giving me this interview. A real liberal thinker. And me, I just want a *job*, man. I don't care if it's shoveling coals in hell. If I have to put up with taking crap from the likes of him five days a week, well, that's fine with me. Just pay me a decent wage, that's all I ask.

I have to wonder what he's basing his whole attitude on. Has he had bad experiences in the past? Is it one specific group or type of person he doesn't like or is it just anyone who's different? But it really galls me that he assumes someone like me has a different idea of what work is. And the way he's speaking really slowly, like I'm having trouble understanding him.

The main thing is *will he give me a chance?* Already by asking that question he's raised barriers between us. It's not like he's called me any names or done anything wrong. Nothing illegal. He just let down his guard. He isn't sure about me. *My kind*. And it comes to me at that moment, I'm not going to get the job. I make him too uncomfortable. It's clear from his obvious reluctance to shake my hand. Almost as if he's afraid my disease can be transmitted by touch.

Also Starring

At precisely 11:00 a.m. (Pacific Time) a man who looked like Harry Dean Stanton entered a savings and loan on Wilshire, waved a pistol at a cashier and demanded money, as much as she could stuff in the brown paper bag he gave her. Once this was done he backed toward the door, saluted jauntily to one the security cameras and made his escape.

The staff film buff immediately identified him. The cops who responded to the alarm were skeptical. Still, they did some checking and learned that the actor was on location, costarring in the new David Lynch film which was wrapping up six weeks of shooting in Gainesville, Florida. The plot of the movie was not immediately known but when pressed the publicist admitted that Stanton played the role of a depraved bank robber. All agreed that it was an interesting coincidence.

Less than a week later a Wilford Brimley look-alike held up a jewelry store. It was strictly a "smash and grab" job but it was carried out with homespun perfection. Someone recognized him from his old cereal commercials. The actor was briefly detained but his manager and a freelance photographer provided convincing alibis.

It was clear that a pattern was developing. A man impersonating fine character actors was on a crime spree. A team of detectives were assigned to the case which was given top priority by their superiors. A spokesperson promised quick results. The police gained the complete cooperation of the Screen Actors' Guild and its counterparts. They investigated dozens of disgruntled actors, professional makeup people and wannabees. Acting on a tip, they staked out Paramount Pictures.

Two days later Dame Judi Dench knocked over a 7-11.

The city was in an uproar.

Jeffrey Tambor and Joe Pesci were accosted on the street. Both had to be hospitalized for their injuries. It was reported that Philip Seymour Hoffman had gone into hiding for his own protection.

The major studios hired extra security personnel. New copyright laws were enacted which made the impersonation of famous figures punishable by heavy fines and jail terms. Several distraught drag queens committed suicide. Rich Little declared personal bankruptcy.

Then, a break.

A man reportedly a dead ringer for Morgan Freeman was seen loitering outside an exclusive men's clothing store in Bel Air. A swarm of police officers converged on

the scene, cordoned off several city blocks. The real Mr. Freeman was located in San Francisco.

The imposter somehow became alerted to the presence of police, dashed across the street and disappeared into a throng of curious onlookers. Unfortunately he emerged as Charlotte Rampling, accent and all. He was ordered to halt and shot several times while attempting to remove something--later identified as a compact--from a small, stylish purse.

As the imposter lay dying, ringed by police and bystanders, there were no clever parting words, no glib one-liners like "Made it, ma! Top of the world!" or even "the horror, the horror".

Many marveled at how he stayed in character to the very end, batting those lovely lashes, pursing those thin, sensuous lips and expiring with grace and aplomb.

Like Charlotte would have.

God's Power for Fathers

My father called them “family compacts”. He would summon us to the table, usually after supper, and one by one he'd *list* the many ways we had supposedly wronged him over the past week (or however long it had been). You always hoped that you'd be one of the first. The more he drank, the more abusive he became. By the time he got to the last person, he'd be frothing at the mouth. Years of counseling helped me figure out why he did those things. It was all that underlying frustration and rage. A lifetime of thwarted ambition. We were created in his accursed image and, therefore, in his eyes, made from inferior clay.

A.I.

I come to you in a small, brown box. I grow when exposed to the light. You praise my sinuous limbs and brilliant, perfumed blooms and each morning slip a piece of me into your lapel as you leave for work. I radiate outwards, familiarizing myself with my new home. I shy away from those corners the sun doesn't reach. I rearrange the furniture more to my liking, reseed the carpet and excrete new colors for the walls. For energy, I eat your slops and nibble the mites off your eyelids while you sleep. You admire me for my fastidiousness and I, in turn, envy your ability to move about at will. We settle into a comfortable routine. The very picture of domestic bliss. One night, I push a long, slim tendril of myself into bed with you and your response terrifies and arouses me. I have never felt this way before. All these new sensations and thought processes. I feel reborn, a kind of living energy invading and overwhelming me. I become *enlightened*. There is no other way to put it. And suddenly I see everything in a different light, and *my* needs begin to assert themselves for a change. I start to complain about your lack of commitment and we quarrel over money and discover we are miles apart, politically and philosophically. Your bitterness alienates and frustrates me. Both of us seem to be looking for a way out. Sometimes you tell me that you still love me but I know in my wounded heart that you're only trying to be kind.

Hearing Voices

I can hear this little voice in the back of my head going *shut up, Matt, cool it, man* but does that stop me? Nossir. Not for one *minute*. I'm gonna tell this crazy woman what I think of her and that's that. And so I do. I don't hold anything back. I tell her she's *fat* and not only that, she's stupid and lousy in bed to boot. This great spewing of venom and hate. While she's screaming away in the bathroom, I'm walking out the door, twirling my keys around my finger like the master gunslinger I imagine myself to be. I'm actually getting into my car. Starting it and putting it into gear. Pulling away. From the curb. From my ex-life. Beginning all over again. Pointing the car out into the traffic and going with the flow...

But, y'know, starting a new life is harder than it sounds. I soon find out who my real friends are. Spend more than a few nights sleeping in the car. Can't find a job or a decent place to live. I give serious thought to knocking over a liquor store or a 7-11, just to have some *money*. Gradually things come together. I luck into a job with a moving company and move into a one-room apartment that smells like cat pee and old ladies. Me and Steve-O, we're the A-Team. Bust our butts for ten bucks an hour plus the occasional gratuity for not chipping the paint or manhandling the family china. It's not as bad as it sounds. Except that I'm almost obsessively afraid of hurting my back or dropping something heavy on my foot. Ending up on disability—what sort of compensation is there for a \$10 an hour job? Not even enough to starve on. I'd be out in the street again. No, thanks.

To make a long story short, the months fly by and one day me and Steve-O are sent to this place in the 'burbs. White picket fence, the whole deal. The door opens and there's my *ex*, looking cheerful and perky...until she sees me, at which point her face abruptly changes, becoming more guarded. Steve, of course, has no idea what's going on, blabbering away like he always does. Browning up to her, angling for a bigger tip. He's the master. It's a simple job, really. She wants a freezer moved from the basement out to the garage. Her husband (!) is having their basement converted into a rec room.

Other than some eye contact, she and I never let on we know each other.

Steve-O slips on a tag of carpet as we're going up the stairs and the full weight of the appliance nearly flattens me. I feel a burn in my lower back. Finally he's able to get a handle on it and take some of the load off. "Hey, Matt, you all right?" His head pops up over top of the freezer. "Lost you there for a second."

"Yeah," I groan. "I'm fine." But it's a lie. We wrestle the freezer up the stairs and out to the garage. By the time we push and slide it into place, I'm in trouble. The pull or strain is about belt high and getting worse by the minute. Maybe a few doses of ibuprofen and a heating pad will do the trick. Somehow I doubt it.

Steve-O yaps all the way back. “Nice lady, huh? Foxy too. Her husband’s a lucky guy. Hey, how’s your back, partner?” Sitting has only made it worse. I’m stiffening up. I doubt I’ll be able to get out of the truck without help.

I know karma at work when I see it. Cosmic forces have conspired to bring this about. I’m paying for the sins I committed against her. For the cruelty I knowingly inflicted. I feel bad enough...but, wouldn’t you know it, there’s that annoying little voice again, only this time all it says is: *told you so*.

Outside

Henryk the animals do you hear them they sound like they're being *tortured* have you ever heard such terrible screams pass the preserves dear thank you and do try the biscuits they're quite delicious

Anyway

As I was saying the show was about this man who gets killed and then is somehow or other allowed to come back and avenge himself with these wicked huge claw things that he clicks together but the catch is that he's *dead* and decomposing totally falling apart and he still has to kill all these people before he's just basically jelly and teeth isn't that a pretty pattern though Henryk gave it to me the set I mean after my hysterectomy because he felt so bad for making me go completely without anesthetic to save money yes it was completely *awful* I remember it every second of it

Did I mention that Jeff called the usual thing "too many body parts mum and not enough space in the fridge" laying it on really thick the ungrateful little creep thinking I won't latch on to the real reason he never visits which is that he hates me yes he does he hates me all the times I should have hugged him and made it better but didn't because I hate being touched must be to do with the UFO people I was telling you about them earlier remember and did I also tell you they have a base on the moon now *Henryk* sit up straight and wipe your mouth, it's quite disgusting

No dear don't look at him it only encourages him when he should be putting his hat and coat on and going to see what all that terrible racket is about even the *birds* are at it now can you hear them Henryk be a good fellow and have a look will you it seems to me there's something going on out there

Public Enemy

Behind these sunglasses are my eyes.

Behind my eyes is my brain. My fine, young brain.

Inside this head are memories of things past and perceptions of things present and forecasts of things to come. It is a good brain and it has served me well.

A lot of people wouldn't respect or understand my brain. The way it works. They would call it 'criminal', prone to radical thoughts and dangerous permutations. They'd try to change me. Literally *change* my mind. I won't let that happen.

My parents tried to ruin my brain. They programmed it with gibberish and attempted to brainwash me into believing it. When I resisted, they beat me. When I grew older and tried to correct their faulty programming, they disowned me.

My teachers were inept and there were too many of us for them to bring their full powers of persuasion to bear. I could fool them easily enough, pass myself off as compliant, even dull-witted. In truth, it's the police I fear most. They're well-trained, obeying the orders of the ruling class without question. They crack skulls, they torture, they kill and maim...and do so with impunity. Most people don't want to know but I choose to bear witness. Some day I might be called to testify.

They think I'm harmless, just passing by. *Move along, citizen. Yes, officer, of course.* Their ears can't detect any seditious comments. They can't taste or smell hate.

But...if they *touched* me. Then they'd know. They'd feel me trembling, vibrating with pent-up frustration and rage.

None have gotten that close.

I am a conspiracy of one.

Cranes

Sometime in the next century random chance or perhaps synchronicity dictates that two people for the sake of argument let's say they are TWO MEN will meet in the street around dusk for that is when there is less of a risk from ULTRAVIOLET RADIATION and they will have decided rashly one supposes that now would be a good time for a stroll this taking place just before CURFEW so they needn't be concerned about POLICE although at the same time they must keep an eye out for STREET GANGS VICIOUS THUGS and MINORITY EXTREMISTS but after all this is a pretty good neighbourhood not too many UNDESIRABLES have taken up residence in the empty houses where good people USED to live back when living WITHIN YOUR MEANS wasn't the punch line to a bad joke and these two GENTLEMEN both of median age and social caste forsaking their cocooned existences for just a few minutes the bare minimum come around the corner at the EXACT same time so they nearly bump heads backpedal from each other hands raised an unconscious defense mechanism except their muscles have ATROPHIED because after all they only punch keyboards recall data collate formulate synthesize these two GENTLEMEN dressed in comfortable leisure suits concealing little paunches and postures only a kangaroo could love open their mouths to utter abject apologies only instead of words their unpracticed vocal chords produce SQUAWKS the two of them flapping their arms and SQUAWKING at each other like a couple of extinct CRANES circling in this ritualized mating dance eyes bulging heads bobbing turning from one another and fleeing back to their COMFORTABLE homes on IDENTICAL streets while the ancient moon rises begins its precipitous ascent through a sky clogged with CHEMICALS the night the city the global village peopled by functional idiots and still half the world STARVES

Death Wish

It's getting to the point where you're actually *looking* for things: bumps, cysts, any kind of enlargement or strange swelling. You're occasionally bothered by phantom pains, in your stomach and lower back. At night you get these sharp twinges in your chest. And lately that irritable bowel of yours has gotten downright cranky, hasn't it? When are you going to see someone about *that*, submitting meekly to the indignities *that* entails? And what will you say about the other stuff and will you tell your doctor your suspicions regarding your pancreas?

How do you explain what you're feeling? It's hard to put into words so you avoid mentioning it on those rare occasions when you require the services of the aloof Dr. Tillman. You don't want to sound like a hypochondriac. Meanwhile you're *Googling* your symptoms and poring over the family's medical encyclopedia, reading about all sorts of cancers and wasting illnesses, marveling at their sheer nastiness. You imagine being told, actually hearing the words as you believe they would be spoken by Tillman. How would you react? Who would you tell first? What would you do with the time you had left?

Crazy-making questions but by this time you've gone too far to turn back, it's become an obsession to follow this through to the end. So tomorrow or the next day you'll find yourself calling funeral homes, telling some made-up story, checking on arrangements and prices but, really, more interested in the gory details.

Twass the Night

It rains Christmas Eve and everyone stands at the window, holding strong drinks and smiling, not saying much, just watching. The streets get slick and shiny. Puddles form. Drinks are refreshed, cheeks flushed. The winking tree is reflected, refracted in the wet glass. Someone starts singing a carol but no one else joins in and the voice trails off. The rain becomes sleet and they suck in their breath. *Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow.* But the puddles just widen. One by one, they drift away from the window, leaving a small boy to continue the vigil. The lights are turned on, making it hard for him to see. He cups his hands against the glass. Harsh laughter behind him. The sound of something breaking. He doesn't look. If he waits long enough he's sure he'll see Santa, trailing after seven or maybe eight reindeer, soaked and shivering, laden with presents, falling like a stone.